

Subject: MIRIAM MARGOLYES INTERVIEW IN JEWISH CHRONICLE

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Margolyes's new drama

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By Jenni Frazer

Voice-over queen Miriam Margolyes once narrated a cinematic paean to Israel. That was then.

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Jews," says Miriam Margolyes, forcefully, "never listen. That's the problem." Then she gathers herself with a laugh and says that many of her friends in the world of Jewish genealogy, of which she is a passionate devotee, "are just embarrassed by me. They love the warm Jewish side of me, but they don't like the political side. They wish I would just shut up."

But Margolyes, by her own acknowledgment, is incapable of shutting up. The actress, the queen of the world of voice-overs and the current star of the hit musical show, *Wicked!*, is about to court still more controversy by spearheading a campaign sponsored by a host of anti-Israel groups. The "Enough" coalition is tying a series of events to this year's 40th anniversary of the Six Day War, culminating in a national demonstration and concert on Saturday, June 9. Next week, the Enough campaign launches with a Westminster press conference, fronted by Margolyes. As if one prominent Jew were not enough to make mainstream British Jewry wriggle, the coalition has secured the support of writer and director Mike Leigh, and writer and actor Stephen Fry.

She was not, she says, "in at the beginning of the campaign. They asked me to be involved because I have some visibility, because I'm an actress. I'm not a particularly political animal: I'm a loudmouth, and I say what I think — about everything, really." She agreed to become a spokesperson for Enough because of a "passionate" belief that "a terrible mistake is being made, which in the long run is going to harm the whole Middle East and everybody in it. That distresses me: and although I'm unprepared, and not knowledgeable, I feel that if I feel about something as passionately as I do this, I should do something about it."

Her own views on Israel are, she thinks, "well-known", but she is not too sure about what Mike Leigh and Stephen Fry have to say. Interestingly, Margolyes rejects any suggestion that the three of them, prominent Jews in the creative arts, are being used by a cynical coalition of anti-Zionist campaigners, which includes the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, War on Want, the Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee and the Friends of Bir Zeit. Additionally, the campaign is backed by Jews for Justice for Palestinians and the Jewish Socialists' Group. Rather, Margolyes thinks she, Leigh and Fry have been recruited because they are well-known faces, and any campaign needs press attention.

Once upon a time, it was rather different. Margolyes, an actress in worldwide demand for her voice-over work, was involved in the narration of several films made by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Museum of Tolerance, including one film, *The Long Way Home*, which told the story of the birth of the modern state of Israel as the European survivors of the Holocaust emerged from post-war refugee camps.

She is, she says rather oddly, "completely Jewish, and have always been a member of a synagogue — in fact, I'm a member of two synagogues, one in America (Beth Ohr, in Hollywood's Studio City) and one in England (Streatham United). I'm sort of an observant Jew in the way that English Jews are — I don't eat pork, and I never have, but I don't go to shul on Shabbes. But if anyone said to me, 'Are you Jewish?' — yes, 100 per cent. I'm someone who is passionately concerned with being Jewish, with what it means to be Jewish, I want everyone to know that I'm Jewish... Any Arabs or Palestinians that I meet, I always tell them, I'm Jewish. I wear that label with pride. I think it's absolutely vital that Jews are able to criticize Israel without being branded as traitors and God knows what else."

So where, one wonders, did it all change for Margolyes? She has visited Israel four or five times, the last occasion in 1994, when she took her one-woman show, *Dickens' Women*, to the Jerusalem Festival. It is difficult to unpick what happened next.

She decided to visit the Gaza Strip during this stay and was, she says, "interrogated" by officials at Ben-Gurion Airport when she left the country, asking "very aggressive and scary" questions about the visit. "I didn't expect to be interrogated. Perhaps that was naive of me," she says. "It left me with a very sour taste." She has not been back to Israel since, believing that any such visit would imply that she supported the policies of the Israeli government, of which she profoundly disapproves.

Nonetheless, Margolyes is well aware that the government of 1994 was that of Yitzhak Rabin, the Labour leader, and that its policies were very different from those of subsequent Likud and Kadimah administrations. So it is unclear why she felt unable to return to Israel while the Oslo process was still a viable reality, and her answers do not provide much more clarity.

"Yes, the government was different, and I felt that it was perfectly...well, I wanted to see [Gaza] for myself, and I went. I didn't really want to repeat the experience [of being questioned]." Yet later, she speaks wistfully — "we were that close to peace. It is the greatest tragedy of modern times that some foolish Jew shot Rabin."

Part of the attraction of joining this campaign, Margolyes makes clear, is her belief that "at this moment, things [for the Palestinians] have never been worse, and I think that the word 'enough' is the proper word to use. I'm weary of this war, and I think that an awful lot of people are, but unfortunately it seems that not enough are weary."

Margolyes is sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge that her position on Israel — "deeply anti-Israel" — is "a painful one. People could perfectly easily say, just leave it alone, shut up and get on with your life. But I'm not gifted with the sort of personality that can let something go, and I really believe that Israel's government is making an appalling mistake, and what's more, about 40 per cent of Israel agrees with me. I think that the fact that there is opposition to Israeli government policies from within Israel is something that the English Jewish community doesn't accept. The English Jewish community are scaredy-guts — not a brave community, and not a liberal community. It seems to me that they don't ever want to rock the boat."

Her wish, she declares, is to change people's attitudes towards Arabs. "Maybe if I speak out and try and change people's minds, try and make people see that if they treat Arabs in the way that they're treating them it is not going to have any result except more suicide bombings. I want to get North London Jews to see Arabs as human beings, and I think they've forgotten how to do that. They only see them as murderous bastards." Of course, Margolyes acknowledges, "there are murderous bastards among the Palestinians, but there will be more unless we change the way we treat Arabs. "Bombing hospitals, putting up a wall, stopping the money coming in[to the Palestinian areas], trying to bring down Hamas, which is a democratically elected political party... it's just a desperate situation, and we, the Jews, have become the villains."

Her position on Israel has caused "a grave disagreement" with her good friend, actress Maureen Lipman, which Margolyes appears to regret, because Lipman is someone whom she "loves and respects". But she does not recant her opinions: "I still say what I say: unless Arabs see us as people, they will go on killing us — and I can't blame them for that. I do not know what else they can do, what other way they can achieve any sort of political viability as a nation. "

Margolyes's emphasis is, plainly, on the human side of the conflict. But she patently has a follow-through problem when she is asked whether she is in favour of boycotts of Israel: "When I was campaigning against apartheid, I really believed in the boycott, but it seems to me that sometimes boycotts harden minds. My hope is to ask moderate Israelis and Jews here to stop and think. If a boycott doesn't make that happen, then a boycott's no good."

She says: "We are losing the propaganda war, and I say it's because we're in the wrong. People are always willing to be antisemitic, and now they have a real reason to be so. I'm not antisemitic, I'm deeply anti-Israel, this government, and Sharon."

Miriam Margolyes in brief

Born: Oxford, 1941, Cambridge exhibitioner; appeared on University Challenge for Newnham College in 1963.

Awarded: OBE in 2002 for services to drama;

Bafta best-supporting actress, 1993, for *The Age of Innocence*; Best Supporting Actress, LA Critics Circle,

1989, for Little Dorrit; Sony Radio Award for Best Actress on Radio, 1993.

WORK: The voice of Fly the dog in Babe (1995); major roles in Yentl, Little Shop of Horrors, Professor Sprout in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2002). Innumerable TV credits. Currently starring as Madame Morrible in the London production of Wicked!