

# Gaza Women, Their Stories, and Theatre

## Bringing *The Sound of Ah* to Ramallah

By Tania Murtaja



*“Trees started to die in Gaza. Tree after tree. The women of Gaza are like its trees.”* (From *The Sound of Ah* – a play by Theatre Day Productions)

It was a cold December evening in Ramallah. Or was it we who were cold after a long and tiring trip from Gaza to Ramallah?

Until the last minute, there was no certainty that we would all pass through the Erez Crossing. Was fortune smiling on us that day, or was it weeks of coordination that worked this time? After seemingly endless checkpoints and humiliating search procedures, we stepped out on “the other” side of the terminal. For many of us, it was the first trip to the West Bank. We greedily looked out the windows of our fast-moving van, trying to absorb the images of the

*See, they're all looking at me! TDP's Sound of Ah, Ramallah, December 2015. Photo by Cindy Thai.*



life on the opposite side of the border that separates Gaza from the world. We were eager to see and remember as much as possible. Who knows when and if we would be here again?

Finally we check in to the hotel in Ramallah. We are here.

Eight actresses, our director and technician, and I, from Theatre Day Productions (TDP) are in Ramallah to perform – for one night only – the play *The Sound of Ah*. We have only this evening to rehearse, so from the hotel we head to Al-Kasaba Theatre to set up and do a technical run. We are excited. We also have stage fright. We have been waiting a long time to share this play with our brothers and sisters in the West Bank. This is the first time that any play of TDP Gaza will be performed in the West Bank. And here we are. How will we be received? How will the audience react?

*The Sound of Ah* is the newest project in a series of storytelling events that came about when TDP started this women's program. Why storytelling? Telling stories is inherent to being human. It holds a particularly important place in the Arabic cultural tradition. *Al-Hakawati* (the storyteller) has been revered and loved throughout the Arab world. In Palestine, suppressed over decades of occupation, the cultural tradition of storytelling is being reinvented and revived – in TDP from a theatrical perspective. The secret is in the magic of the stories and their empowering energy. Stories move us to feel, and stories move us to act for change.

*Yes we will! TDP's Sound of Ah in Ramallah, December 2015. Photo by Cindy Thai.*



TDP has its own unique approach to storytelling. In our storytelling performances and forums, women take the lead. The strategy sparked after the war on Gaza in November 2012. We were showing a youth play called *The Mothers*. The reactions of the adult women (teachers/mothers who watched the play with the kids) were something different: an unbelievable female-community-voice told us that there was plenty more to be heard, and many other plays to be made about mothers and women. Wow. A storytelling pilot project began in 2013. Twenty-five TDP women storytellers went out, visiting the entire Gaza Strip, gathering stories from 120 women from across 4 generations. Our storytellers created a first event. All 120 women were invited to the theatre to hear their own stories retold on the stage. A big success! We could continue! The stories were told in the way of a forum, a theatre performance with audience and actresses together on the stage, shaped as a very large *diwan*. In this comforting environment, the audiences of women experienced a sense of relief, a sense of being heard and understood. And this, of course, was one of the aims of TDP. We wanted to give them the possibility of regaining hope and strength to go on. These first stories were about war and daily life during the bombardments.



A story tree in TDP's *The Sound of Ah*. Photo by Jan Willems.

Women in Gaza tell their stories as theater is made! Theatre Day Productions, UNESCO, and UN Women join forces to give mothers and young women the time and opportunity to share their stories with each other and with the bigger us.

*The Sound of Ah*, a play based on stories of Gazan women made for women audiences, has been performed 50 times to women in theaters and shelters throughout Gaza. In December 2015, one performance was offered in Ramallah.



Joyful debate in TDP's *Sound of Ah* Ramallah, December 2015. Photo by Cindy Thai.

They were told, however, with strong voices that recounted the ridiculous and sometimes dangerous but funny ways that Gaza women dealt with tragic situations. They were stories of women's strength, humor, and creativity, needed for survival in times of chaos.

For TDP, this innovative pilot project became a tool in our theater school. Soon, training and community outreach programs for women became part of TDP's annual operation with a new Strategy for Women's Leadership of Cultural Projects. TDP's storytellers started visiting community organizations where women gathered. They worked in these centers and made storytelling presentations that broke the silence and barriers of shame and shyness faced by many of the women. And these women shared their stories in a wonderful collective way, generating solidarity and bringing about feelings of safety while being open. People in Gaza started talking about the new TDP Women's Group and their community leadership.

TDP also continued its regular daily work of youth theater, drama, and free expression. In 2014, rehearsals began on *The Sound of Ah*. With the theme of love and longing, the women's storytelling and playmaking came together in TDP's first performance for a mixed adult audience. The reactions of both women and men came in a roaring applause, followed by discussions reflecting praise, pride, tears, bravery, honesty, strength, humor, talent, and amazement with this new kind of contemporary storytelling. A great start for the new play. And then – 51 bloody days followed during the summer of 2014.

In January 2015, our storytellers were back on stage with *The Sound of Ah* for Gaza's female students – adults and children. And again we found the electrifying atmosphere of recognition, solidarity, tears, and laughter. Just as before, each performance was set up

like a forum, with extensive discussions following the show. Many women intervened and told their own stories, sharing feelings and experiences that clogged their souls.

In the UNESCO-TDP mutual project "Sharing Stories, Changing Lives," funded by the Government of Norway, the members of the TDP women's storytelling team, in their role as community leaders, visited women in 10 UNRWA Collective Centers that were still offering shelter to homeless families, new Gaza-internal refugees after the 2014 war. At first hesitantly, but then in small and protected meetings, the women were able to talk about events that were locked away in their hearts. The meetings turned into events of liberation through expression. They said: "You came and gave us the feeling that we are important, that still there are people who listen, who hear us." And: "I want to come to your theater, stand in the middle of the stage, and talk, talk, talk until the entire world hears me." Our storytellers gathered many new stories. Some of them were added to *The Sound of Ah*.

And they came! For most of them, the trip to the theater was the first time that they had been out of the centers since the end of the war. We brought ten groups of women to the theater, giving them half a day "off." They were the center of attention. Their lives filled the space and stage, and we could feel and hear a collective "ah" from the groups. It took all this in order to reach Ramallah on December 10, 2015.

The campaign of "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" was on. UNESCO, UN Women, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs joined efforts in bringing TDP's *The Sound of Ah* to Ramallah.

The show started. The audience was warm and friendly. They were living each story of the play. We were one!

Our experience in Ramallah proved yet again that there is great value to storytelling and its potential as a tool for



*No means No! Khitam Abu Kweik in TDP's Sound of Ah. Ramallah, December 2015. Photo by Cindy Thai.*

protection and advocacy for women's rights, for the empowerment of women, and for women's role in community leadership. One of TDP's storytellers says, "Our performance in Ramallah was a new experience for me. It was an honor and a big act of responsibility. We did very important work. People in Gaza are separated from the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the entire world. Our performance was a chance for people in Ramallah to know about how women in Gaza think and live. The way the Ramallah audience met us encouraged us to think about and plan how we can

bring new plays to more audiences."

*The Sound of Ah* is a TDP production directed by Mohammed El Hissi. The actresses are Hana Amer, Khitam Abu Kweik, Wessam Al Dirawi, Randa Abu Maghasib, Hanaa Al Ghoul, Maryam Al Ostaz, and Heba Shihada. Reem Anbar plays the *oud*. Technician: Ahmad Qadada. © All rights reserved.

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*Storyteller Maryam Al Ustaz in TDP's The Sound of Ah. Photo by Jan Willems.*