



The First Steps



Photo courtesy of Edward Said National Conservatory of Music.

By **Anas Abu Aon**



Yousef had no idea that his decision to stay in Palestine and not return to the United States would be the most important decision he would take in terms of his participation in Palestine's art and culture scene, which he only recently became a part of.

Nor did Rula think that she would play such an important role until she realized that she woke up every morning to go to a job that filled her with passion. She was part of a project that was shaping the art and cultural scenes in Palestine.

In 2012, the Consulate General of Sweden gathered into one network and under one umbrella all the institutions that had previously received its support, and selected the A.M. Qattan Foundation to manage a program called The Palestinian Performing Arts Network. Its large administrative department hosts debate and dialogue to identify the features and expected impact of this new program. The project partners with institutions that assist in determining the shape, form, and long-term effect of such a network.

In the midst of the beautiful gardens of the A.M. Qattan Foundation, I met with Yousef Nazzal, manager of the Performing Arts Network Program, and Rula Rizeq, the program's assistant coordinator. Both were fully prepared to talk about the goals, vision, policies, administration, and whatever else the visitor could find on the network's newly launched website. All the discussions within the program meetings and retreats were but a small part of the establishment process that enveloped eleven performing arts organizations from Gaza to Jenin. These organizations work in the arts and cultural arenas and

seek to bring about change. When asked about the kind of change that these institutions sought but couldn't accomplish on their own, the answer was freedom, independence, progress, and openness.

The Palestinian Performing Arts Network was registered with the Palestinian Ministry of Interior on February 12, 2015. The launch ceremony was celebrated on June 16, 2015. The network believes that its role and *raison d'être* is to bring together these institutions to strengthen their collective impact and to broaden their mission to include not only art production but also development, training, and performances. The network also aims to make its work more visible through performing arts, to strengthen the cultural scene by involving children, women, and young adults in art work, and making the performing arts more accessible to various areas that struggle on a daily basis to preserve their cultural identity.

There were many stages that preceded the launching of the network, including meetings and dialogue; however, the collective presentation, which took place in 2013 at the Palestine Technical University, in Khadouri, Tulkarem, was the catalyst in the emergence of joint actions of the members of the network

with the public and the presentation of their vision on the ground. For a full day, members of the network, within the program's framework, held seminars, conferences, and technical presentations at the university, with many in attendance, including university students, children, directors of schools, and civil and governmental institutions. The participants took part in a joint activity that turned into a discussion on the shared vision of the network.

The joint activity of 2014 was canceled due to the war on Gaza, and the money allocated to this activity was transferred to the program partners in Gaza. During that time, and in a debate that lasted more than three hours about the role of art and culture in the struggle, the network established a policy that clearly stated that its work with the community in performing arts, and in all other forms of art, is part of the liberation process of Palestine.

The network facilitates the regulatory process of assembly for the various member institutions. It is a body that will advocate and lobby for laws and procedures, and enhance the capacities of the network's members. Moreover, the network works towards the expansion of the partnership concept between institutions through joint activities and projects. It also presents new knowledge on the cultural



Photo by Al Hara Theatre.

level through the preparation of a study on the cultural field in Palestine in general, which is yet to be published. The network does not aim to expand and take more space than it deserves, but as Yousef and Rula explain, it is a network to serve and manage the participating institutions.

The network includes the following institutions: The Freedom Theatre, A.M. Qattan Foundation, Al Harah Theater, Theatre Day Productions, Yes Theatre, Ashtar Theater, Al-Kamandjati Association, The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, Popular Arts Center, Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe, Palestinian Circus School, and the Magnificat Institute.

Such a program is significant in bringing together these organizations to increase their capacity and create positive change in Palestine and beyond. These previously agreed upon goals of freedom, pluralism, independence, and freedom of expression, in addition to the common goal of making the performing arts more accessible to members of the public and including it

in school curricula in particular and the educational system in general, highlights the importance of recognizing that change within people. What changes people at the core is not the result of politics, the economy, or political movements, but of culture in all its forms: literature, art, and society. The Performing Arts Network aims to open its membership to any performing arts organizations that shares its vision and adheres to its political and national framework.

This network is still in its growing stages, but within a few years, it will become a collective power that will not be ignored during policy making, and will help to build a society that portrays art as more than a mere event to enjoy.

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Art is the beauty of looking at something and being moved by it. It's the beauty in colors of paintings around you that touch your heart when you see them. I strongly believe that our culture is fading bit by bit since we tend to care more about the Westernized cultural aspects, beliefs, and ideas than our own.

Jawaher Ashqar, Ramallah