

Al-Harah Theater

Creativity with an Impact



By Douglas Dicks

In the heart of Beit Jala, not far from the center of Bethlehem, resides Al-Harah Theater. It was founded in 2005 as a nonprofit organization that is committed to the principles of pluralism and multiculturalism. By producing and promoting theater arts in Palestine, Al-Harah participates in building and maintaining a civil society that emphasizes human rights, democracy, and freedom of expression as key components of a dynamic society. So why name a theater "Al-Harah" (the neighborhood)?

"We wanted something close to the community, and that is why we chose the name. Stories, conflicts, relationships, and histories come from the neighborhood, and all of these are components that can be used in theater," says Marina Barham, the general director. "We want a theater that is part of the community and not just for the elite. Being close to the community doesn't mean that we only produce community theater," Marina explained, "we produce highly artistic, quality theater."

The mission from the beginning was to bring compelling stories, in one of the most uncensored spaces, to audiences throughout Palestine, the Arab world, and beyond, through producing and presenting high-quality theater performances, and through educational training programs that create new theater practitioners who believe that theater has great potential to implement positive change.

Al-Harah produces theater for children, young people, and adults. The productions address a variety of issues that concern the Palestinian community and society as a whole, including issues related to women, people with disabilities, and global issues, such as refugees and immigration.

Al-Harah Theater hopes to afford children the opportunity to be children and enjoy their childhood – despite the daily oppression under Israeli military occupation – through performances that are geared towards children and that tell a story with an educational message. A mother who attended the Christmas play entitled *The Feast with Farid* recounted that since she and her five-year-old daughter saw the performance, the girl has not stopped talking about it or singing the songs from the play."

Al Harah's productions are always based on an idea that has been researched beforehand, involving the target audience, and then developed into the text of a play that is devised by the director. Through creating theater that can travel the world and tell the story of Palestine, Al-Harah attempts to address social, political, or other issues that arise within the community.

A man from Gaza who saw the play *Maramieh* (Sage) in Ramallah was touched to the core: "I have lived through three wars against Gaza and have not cried since 2014; today, you made me cry as I watched the play, seeing our life under the conditions of war that forced us to leave."



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Yalla Yalla Festival, 2016, in Bethlehem.





Miramieh, directed by Mirna Sakhleh, with actors Nicola Zreineh and Faten Khoury, 2017.

Al-Harah Theater is a touring company that reaches villages, cities, refugee camps, and marginalized areas locally, regionally, and internationally, performing in various Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, and several European countries such as Sweden, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany, as well as in Japan. Al-Harah is part of a very strong network of civil-society organizations, schools, and community-based organizations all over the West Bank and Jerusalem, as well as throughout the Middle East region, and has numerous local, regional, and international partners.

Al-Harah Theater team has created unique projects, such as Yalla Yalla Street Festival, which has been

organized on a yearly basis in the streets of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and this year, Ramallah. The festival brings together approximately 250 young artists from various cities and performing arts fields, and includes giant puppets, wings, costumes, and colorful clowns who parade through the streets followed by families. The final-performance audience reaches about 5,000 persons. Yalla Yalla has been invited to open nearly all other Palestinian festivals, for example, the Rozana Festival in Birzeit, the Nuwwar Nisan Festival, and the Wein Ala Ramallah Festival, among others.

Al Harah's experience with the street festival has led to the creation of the Palestine International Theater Festival

Hetalieh by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, directed by Daniel Arbaczewski, with actors Rizeq Ibrahim, Christin Hodali, Shebli Albau.



for Children and Youth, which is held every two years. Preparations are presently under way for the third such festival in 2019, in Bethlehem and other cities. In 2020, Al-Harah will host a special edition of this festival for the celebration of Bethlehem Arab Capital of Culture.

The third project that is also unique to the work of Al-Harah is the establishment of the first performing arts training center (PARC) in 2014, to offer training in sound, light, scenography, costumes, and production management for the performing arts. PARC's two-year training program for young people from 18 to 30 years old contributes to

A fourth project is Creative Labs and Performances in Palestine (CLAP!), which is funded by the European Union to build the capacity of the performing arts and public sectors to prepare for the celebration of Bethlehem as the Arab Capital of Culture in the year 2020.

Al-Harah Theater uses drama to train groups of children and young people on a regular basis, aiming to empower these young people and help them to develop self-esteem and confidence. In addition to these groups, Al-Harah creates customized training programs and Training-of-the-Trainers programs to respond to various needs, using theater and drama as a tool.



As the Sun Fell, directed by Bashar Murkus, with actors Mahmoud Awad, Nicola Zreineh, Mirna Sakhleh, Mohammed Basha, produced in 2017.

providing the performing arts sector in Palestine with qualified technicians. PARC was created to tackle the high unemployment rate in Palestine; job possibilities for young people who are not interested in studying at university or in traditional vocational fields are very limited. PARC offers youth innovative, creative, and necessary vocational training opportunities for careers that have never before existed in Palestine. During the last four years, PARC has graduated 35 young people from various areas of the West Bank and Jerusalem.

With its small team of 9 full-time staff and about 20 freelance teachers, actors, and trainers, Al-Harah Theater has reached almost 600,000 people since 2005, created more than 60 plays, implemented more than 2,000 performances throughout Palestine and in other countries, trained more than 1,250 children and youth, and participated in over 150 festivals locally, regionally, and internationally.

Al-Harah has received several awards over the past thirteen years: Best Performance Award at the Children's



Yalla Yalla Festival, 2016, in Bethlehem.

Theater Festival in Romania in 2005, for *Longing to the Sea*, directed by Raeda Ghazaleh; Best Performance Award in 2006, for *A Key and a Life*, directed by Sami Metwasi and Mohammed Awwad at the Arab University Theater Festival in Jordan, performed by trainees from Phoenix Center and Al-Harah Theater; the first THAW Scholarships Award by New York's Theater Against War

light on the living stones – the people who live under Israeli occupation; *Metamorphosis*, a play written by Franz Kafka; and *Shakespeare's Sisters*, a play about the role of single women over 30 in Palestine, and the issues they deal with in society. All were unique, artistic experiences that presented the lives of Palestinians from a global point of view.



Graduation of Al-Harah Theater Performing Arts Training Center, PARC.



Long-term drama training program, 2016.

in recognition of Al-Harah's work and activities during the Gaza war in 2007; and the Special Festival Award for the Best Professional Play, *Face Hook?!*, performed by Al-Harah trainees at the Philadelphia 10th Festival for Arabic Universities Theater in 2012. Al-Harah was one of two finalists nominated for the Creativity Award by the Welfare Association for 2017, 2018, and again in 2019.

I have personally enjoyed attending several plays over the years, including *Born in Bethlehem*, which presents a unique insight into Bethlehem, shedding

Having lived in the Middle East for almost twenty years, I can say that, in spite of the political instability and the lack of a viable peace process, arts, culture, dance, music, and yes, even theater, not only survive, but thrive, and the Palestinian voice is represented in the most important festivals and venues throughout the world.

Douglas Dicks is an associate for Ecumenical Partnerships with Presbyterian World Mission, assisting in the life and liturgy of St. Andrew's Scots Memorial Church in Jerusalem.



Beit Jala International Festival for Peace

Beit Jala, Home for All!

September 13 - 15, 2018



A FOLKLORE NIGHT

Thursday, September 13

 The Municipal Community Center of Beit Jala

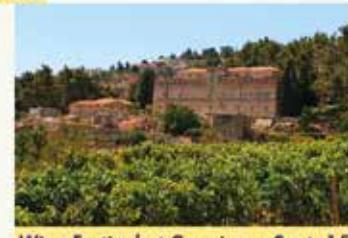
A Folklore Night - Sept. 13



ALTERNATIVE MUSIC NIGHT

Friday, September 14

 The Arab Orthodox Sport Club Beit Jala



WINE FESTIVAL

Saturday, September 15

 Cremisan Winery and Monastery

Wine Festival at Cremisan - Sept. 15

OTHER ACTIVITIES

OPEN DAY FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

September 14, from 10:00 to 19:00
Municipal Community Center and Public Park of Beit Jala

OLD CITY TOURISTIC TRAIL OPENING CEREMONY

September 15, at 16:00
Al-Manshiyah Square
Old City of Beit Jala

In Partnership with



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 Beit Jala International Festival for Peace 2018