

History in the Making

A Network of Performers



By Yousef Nazzal

The performing arts, along with all forms of art, offer society new ways of self-expression, realization of ideas, and steadfastness in thought and belief. Above all, performing arts resonate creativity.

A society with a creative voice that is cultivated and encouraged spearheads appreciation for culture, language, history, and identity. Creativity through performing arts strikes a universal chord that suggests that we are not alone in our experience of despair, grief, or relief. Through the performing arts, we experience emotional and physical creativity on stage that allows us to understand viewpoints that we might not otherwise comprehend. The performing arts allow us to broaden our perspective on life and can expand our personal space, transport us to a place in our mind that we might only have dreamed of, and allow us to escape our problems – if only for brief moments!

Palestinian performing arts allow us to admire a performer's ingenuity in his/her portrayal of a character, be mesmerized by the sound of a *kamanja* (violin), gasp at the graceful physical

movements of a *dabka* dancer, and be consumed into the world of a circus acrobat. These emotions, feelings, and sensations truly define the direct encounter of one human being with another. There is no substitute for this type of communication, which is why the performing arts are important to society; they can provide a mechanism for change.

In Palestine, our dance or *dabka*, music, theater, and circus echo resilient artistic shades of Palestine's performing arts scene woven into a cultural sector that strives to withstand occupation, uprooting, and eradication. This Palestinian reality is not confined to the arts and culture scene but continuously infringes on intrinsic rights of a people with a proud history, culture, and identity. Strengthening Palestinian intangible cultural heritage cements Palestinian cultural and national identity. The need to protect and safeguard Palestinian cultural identity, create social change, and ensure access to the performing arts rendered the establishment of a Palestinian Performing Arts Network or PPAN necessary and essential.



The growth and maturation of the network emerged through countless collective discussions among some of the active and historically influential Palestinian performing arts organizations and their respective cultural practitioners. The desire and need were evident; however, the mechanisms and strategic direction were still unclear. The performing arts scene has always been equipped with strong individual voices represented by artists in the fields of music, dance, theater, and circus; nonetheless, a unifying voice was absent. Collectively, though, these voices were adamant that civil society institutions and services provided to the Palestinian people were necessary and essential.

From the 2016 Palestine Circus Festival, Al-Istiqlal Park, El-Bireh.



due to the deteriorating political and socio-economic conditions. Moreover, Palestinian NGOs that work in the fields of culture and performing arts share a strong belief that their activities contribute to the long-term goal and dream of a free Palestine.

On February 12, 2015, a network was born that emphasized creativity, innovation, and free expression in its unwavering effort to end the Israeli occupation. Cultivating sacrifices and building on stumbling blocks, the network emerged from the combined experience and reality of the performing arts institutions in the field. The network represents an effective body that unites these institutions in coordination and follow-up, as well as in joint and collaborative areas of creativity.

Yalla Yalla
Street
Festival,
Al-Harah
Theater.



The Palestinian Performing Arts Network brings together Palestinian artists in a defined space, place, and identity, and reunites the geographic artistic landscape of Palestine – from the foot of the rugged northernmost hills or from Jabal Nablus, which Jenin overlooks, to the city of Al-Bireh or the Well of the Palace, which hugs the central ridge of the West Bank, to the towering walls of one of the oldest cities in the world, Al-Quds, to Ghazzah on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and finally to the south, Al-Khalil, nestled in the southern mountains.

Contemporary, Middle Eastern, and classical music ooze through the gates and windows of Al-Kamandjati,



Al-Kamandjati Festival – Spiritual Journey, Gaza.

Magnificat, and the Edward Said Conservatory of Music; the beats of folkloric steps radiate from the walls of the Popular Art Centre and El-Funoun and Wishah dance troupes; audiences are awestruck at the rebirth of characters and history on the theater stages of Al-Harah, Ashtar, Freedom, Yes, Popular, and Theatre Day; and children stay glued to their seats as they gaze in anticipation and eagerness inside the circus tent in Birzeit.

Imagining a geographic Palestine through the lens of art could not be much easier. Of course, the cohesiveness of this artistic conglomeration would only be deemed successful if the direction and focus of its work were impactful. Advocacy and lobbying have come to represent the basis for conceptualizing the network's objective. The network believes that the general role of art is to address societal and national issues and create open dialogue. Influencing policy on core issues at the national and sectoral levels, international conferences and showcases, widening the dialogue

audience, and increasing official and public interest in the performing arts have been emphasized to reaffirm that the arts are a societal necessity and not a privilege.

The Palestinian Performing Arts Network is adamant about freedom of opinion and expression and emphasizes the importance of creating accessibility to performing arts through community and national engagement. Joint activities are considered essential in the process of sharing the wealth of network members' creativity. Joint activities aim to transfer various forms of art to culturally deprived locations and audiences. By partnering with community-based organizations, entire communities are mobilized, target audiences are diversified, and activities have a greater reach and impact. These activities are part and parcel of the network's vision, enhancing the value of knowledge and culture, respect, equality, and freedom of expression to all geographic and demographic communities.



The network is committed to supporting artists, artistic organizations, and the sector in general; inept organizations would consequently weaken the process of transferring creativity. The PPAN Initiative Program, for example, takes center stage here and truly defines the essence of creating partnerships. The program aims to support artists and promote artistic production in performing arts throughout Palestine.

At the artistic and technical levels, the PPAN Capacity Building Program facilitates the response to an immediate need in the cultural sector. Targeting network members and artistic institutions in general, the program and its activities address gaps at various administrative, technical, and artistic levels. Focus is placed on strengthening human capital, as it represents the delivery agents of creativity.

The desire to ascertain and share information is pivotal to PPAN. Reports, assessments, impact studies, and research serving the sector and its actors are all avenues and processes that contribute to the exploration of the national and local policies that facilitate the availability of and accessibility to various fields of performing arts, and the use of art to help cultivate and expand an audience for performing arts in Palestine.

A history in the making, the Palestinian Performing Arts Network and its members will continue to encourage creativity. Only through expressing creativity and displaying the talents of individuals who live in Palestine can culture continue to move forward.

Article photos courtesy of the author.

Yusef Nazzal holds a master's degree in international relations and a bachelor's degree in political science and history. He has over twelve years of experience in institutional and program management, managing donor-funded programs, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, and public relations in the private and NGO sectors. Yusef has held management positions with some of the most influential Palestinian NGOs, including A.M. Qattan Foundation. He is currently managing the Palestinian Performing Arts Network, a Palestinian NGO that has created a unique and one-of-a-kind union of cultural organizations that serve the overall interest of the Palestinian cultural sector.



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