

Palestinian Theater Defies Ordinary Logic



By Samer Al-Saber

For a population that does not currently exceed thirteen million at home and in the diaspora, Palestinians have established an exceptional repertoire of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, particularly in the theatrical arena. Where and when must our story of their theater begin? Can it find roots in the cultures and inscriptions of pre-Abrahamic religions and shared Semitic tribal heritage? Perhaps a syncretic relationship between the god Dushara and the Greek god of theater, Dionysus, may prove to be a fruitful avenue through the culture of pre-Islamic Arabs, extending from Yemen to the Levant. Should the story begin with the Roman theaters that were built in the Palestinian province soon after the birth of Christ or earlier with the Hellenic traveling troupes known historically as the Artists of Dionysus? How about the performances of Christian Orthodox rituals of Byzantium in Jerusalem? Might we find clues in the architecture of the theater of Caesarea or the ruins of the Neapolis amphitheater at the foot of Mount Gerizim in Nablus? Is Palestinian theater an Arab theater or a theater of Greater Syria, whose performance tradition may have begun in the courts of the Abbasid Empire, the Ottoman legal system of laws that set clear guidelines for intellectual copyrights for “acted novels,” or the key moment of Marun Al-Naqqash’s production of Molière’s *The Miser* in Lebanon in 1848? Perhaps all of these are fair beginnings for a beautiful story, but not today. My intention here is not to be historically comprehensive but to suggest that today’s Palestinian theater has remarkable breadth and presence.



The walls of El-Hakawati tell the story of a diverse Palestinian theater.

Most often, our story of contemporary Palestinian theater begins sometime in the twentieth century with accounts of productions, which travelled to Palestine from Egypt and Syria, the work of the playwright Jamil Al-Bahri in Haifa, and the distinguished work of the Jerusalemite Al-Jozy brothers on stage and on the radio of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation, all prior to 1948. We can easily point to the theatrical productions of missionary schools as grounds for proliferating theater as a necessary activity within larger extra-curricular programs. After 1948, there were key moments of significance, such as community productions called *At The Cross* performed on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem’s old city during Christian holidays, the emergence of Al-Masrah an-Nahed in the Galilee, and West Bank unionized workers’ productions included in their annual celebrations. Certainly, efforts during the Jordanian rule of the West Bank included school community festivals in addition to a yearly production by the Teachers’ College in Ramallah. There is no doubt that the period of 1948 to 1967 set the stage for audiences to appreciate theater because of the strong connection of theatrical events to schools and universities, as well as

community-based institutions. Most relevant to the story of Palestinian theater is the reality that it has always existed in Palestine in some shape or form.

Yet, the amount of evidence of theatrical activity in the aforementioned periods pales when compared to Palestinian theater from the 1970s until the present, particularly in the Jerusalem/Ramallah/Bethlehem area. In the seventies, we see a rise in the number of theater groups, including recognizable names such as Dababis, Balalin, Bila-lin, Sunduq al-Ajab, Al-Warsheh al-Faniyyeh, and Al-Masrah al-Falastini. In an atmosphere of



From a rehearsal of El-Hakawati’s *In the Name of the Father, the Mother, and the Son*. From left to right: Edward Muallem, Mohammed Mahameed, François Abu Salem and Jackie Lubeck. Photo from the archives of El-Hakawati, provided by Jackie Lubeck.



Al-Kasaba's *Stories Under Occupation*, 2002.

rigorous discussion, competition, and political commitment, Palestinians manifested what they called “a theatrical situation” or a “movement.” Most faced censorship by Israeli military governors, who required them to apply for performance permits, as well as by the Israeli civil censorship board for performances in Jerusalem. Despite the struggles of groups and individuals under occupation, it was this vibrant period of the 1970s that led to the establishment of truly dedicated Palestinian theater spaces, such as El-Hakawati (1984), Al-Kasaba (1989), and Sanabel (1992) in the Jerusalem area. Before long, theater institutions flourished in major cities, including Ashtar (Jerusalem/Ramallah/Gaza, 1991); Al-Midan (Haifa, 1994); Al-Rowwad (Aida Camp, 1998); Inad (Beit Jala, 1987); Theatre Day Productions (Gaza/Hebron/Jerusalem, 1994), Al-Harah (Beit Jala, 2005); The Freedom Theatre (Jenin, 2006), and Yes Theatre (Hebron, 2008).

I have come to see contemporary Palestinian theater as a series of encounters that defy ordinary logic but also become far greater than the sum of their parts. It is the meeting of young Palestinians in the Galilee that became Al-Masrah an-Nahed in the early 1960s; the encounter of Francois Abu Salem with a group of youth in Ramallah that led to the creation of Balalin in 1971; the moment a group of Palestinian students at Hebrew University decided to hire Abu Salem to create a student production on campus, eventually becoming a theater company called El-Hakawati in 1977; the decision of Ahmad Abu Saloum, Hussam Abu Esheh, and like-minded actors to inaugurate Masrah Sanabel in 1984 and build a theater in Al-Thawry fifteen years later; the meeting of the late Juliano Mer Khamis with “Arna’s Children” that sowed the seeds for the establishment of the Freedom Theatre; the relationship between Theatre Day Productions and

young men from Hebron that led emerging actors to establish Yes Theatre and become one of the most active theater companies in Palestine; and the encounters that led to the breakup of El-Hakawati, steering former members such

as Radi Shehadeh, Adnan Tarabsheh, Amer Khalil, Edward Muallem, Iman Aoun, Ibrahim Khalileh, Mohammad Mahamid, Jackie Lubeck, and Francois Abu Salem to establish their own individual practices or institutions throughout Palestine.

In the rich history of Palestinian theater, there are indispensable moments that defy expectations and exceed the limits of human potential. Such incredible moments suggest an indefatigable spirit that simultaneously belongs to an extraordinary heritage of world theater and a local culture of individual and collective building. Who could have imagined that after Francois Abu Salem and El-Hakawati entered a burned cinema in 1983, and re-constructed it into a stunning world-class theater, it would become a landmark of Jerusalem’s urban plan and the institution known today as the Palestinian National Theater? In no imaginable circumstance, could anyone have suggested that Al-Kasaba Ensemble’s *Stories Under Occupation* would tour the world, telling the story of the second Intifada with rigor and humanity, day in and day out, on several tours. How could any observer foresee that the young actor Amer Hlehel from the Galilee would become a renowned performer, no less than a cultural ambassador, touring the world, in his impersonation of the poet Taha Mohammad Ali in *Taha*? Under the direction of the unparalleled Amir Nizar

Al-Harah’s *Shakespeare’s Sisters*, 2016. Photo courtesy of Al-Harah Theatre.



