

The Popular Art Centre

Thirty Years of Community Involvement



By Osama Daher

If you happen to pass by Al-Bireh Municipality in the afternoon, you may notice the flock of children and young adults coming out of a building near the municipality, laughing, sharing experiences, and even performing a few *dabka* steps. This happens to be the building that is home to the Popular Art Centre (PAC).

Founded in 1987, PAC not only offers opportunities for arts and cultural activities to Palestine's population and institutions, but more importantly, it has created a proud generation of confident young adults who identify with their almost-forgotten folk music and dance, appreciate their culture, and are committed to the preservation of their artistic history and folklore. During thirty-plus years of dedication and perseverance, PAC has managed to implement a wide range of programs and activities that positively impact the community and its awareness of and interest in the arts. PAC's programs and efforts contribute to Palestinian resilience and resistance against the illegal occupiers by protecting Palestinian identity, specifically cultural identity. Ms. Iman Hammouri, the director of PAC, recounts a bit of history: "When we first started, use of the word Palestine was prohibited, and to dance in the name of Palestinian heritage was severely penalized. But through the efforts of Palestinian cultural centers, including PAC, we now not only dance in the name of Palestine, but we also share these dances and tunes with the rest of the world, a right that we will never relinquish."

PAC has always been proud to play an important role in contributing to social change; for example, choosing to include young girls in all the activities that PAC implements, especially at community centers in marginalized localities where programs had previously only targeted boys. Now, these centers proudly include children and youth from both genders. Another noteworthy achievement happened



Palestine International Festival, 2018. Photo courtesy of José Farinha.

around the time of the second Intifada in 2000, when PAC initiated an arts program that aimed to alleviate the psychological stress of children due to long days of bombardment and siege during the Israeli invasion, especially in disadvantaged cities and villages. "Art for everybody" is a program initiated in 1990 that aims to enhance children's appreciation for the arts and reveal their potential for creativity and innovation. Children are exposed to music, dance, puppet-making, theater, and excursions.

PAC initiated a research and preservation project in 1994 to protect Palestinian folk song heritage, and

the center houses a huge, unique collection of Palestinian traditional tunes from various parts of Palestine. The project not only preserves this rich Palestinian heritage and protects it from damage and theft at the hands of the Israelis but also prevents it from being lost and buried along with the older generations who have been the guardians of these treasures. At least 220 hours of recordings for various social occasions have been classified and kept on DAT and CDs in PAC's audio library, which serves not only the center but researchers, other NGOs, artists, musicologists, and other groups as well.

PAC is the first NGO to provide training in Palestinian traditional dance – *dabka* – which began in 1991. The dance school program developed a structured *dabka* program and offers other creative and modern dance courses, such as ballet and salsa, which are offered all year round and attract hundreds of children from 5 to 16 years old.

The outreach program provides *dabka* and other forms of dance for children and youth in the Al-Bireh area, where the center is located, and throughout occupied Palestine, including the hard-to-reach Gaza Strip. In fact, PAC was one of the first artistic cultural centers to have travelled to marginalized sites to provide services

annually attracts more than 15,000 persons from all parts of Palestinian society. What began as a local festival that hosted only local groups, the Palestine International Festival has become a genuinely international event, in which artists from all over the world are invited to participate. Every autumn, an event is held to celebrate

PAC dedicates a whole evening to their graduation ceremony. If you attend, you will see young people who are proud of their identity and who have a fiery passion for what they perform. You will even see a parent and child performing on the same stage.



Teaching children to dance at the Popular Art Centre.



A PAC-trained dance group from Gaza performing at the Palestine International Festival 2018.



Palestine International Festival 2018, photo by Ameen Saeb.

that counter the effects of the apartheid wall and the barriers erected by the occupation. PAC founded many of the *dabka* groups that have become involved in local and international festivals, and believes in building partnerships rather than branches. Accordingly, it implements outreach by partnering with grassroots and community-based organizations in remote locations. PAC has become a reference in the arts and culture sector, having helped to establish a number of centers that now work on their own and are active in their respective communities and well-connected to the local reality.

The Palestine International Festival, an outstanding and well-attended festival, was initiated by PAC, and in 2018, marked its nineteenth anniversary. The festival

Heritage Day and to provide a platform for all emerging youth groups that have been trained or established by PAC to showcase their achievements.

All year round, the children you may have spotted in front of the PAC building perform in various places, including homes for the elderly, children's festivals, and orphanages. At the Palestine International Festival,

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