

The Popular Theater Society of the Poor

Courtesy of The Popular Theater Society

Drama and theater must respect pluralism, democracy, and equality, and be open to world cultures and artistic schools in order to enable men, women, and children to explore their talents, express themselves, safeguard their heritage, and communicate with the rest of the world.

The vision articulated above has guided the Popular Theater Society (PTS) since its foundation in Ramallah in 1991. The PTS aims to develop the talents of youth and children through annual theatrical-arts training programs. The efforts of the society have concentrated on producing and promoting drama, including plays for adults and children, puppet shows, radio and television shows, movies, songs, Ramadan and cultural festivals, and a storytelling program, *Al-Hakawati*.

The PTS has established connections with many cultural institutions, universities, festivals, and theatrical and artistic groups at home and abroad, and has participated in dozens of festivals, symposiums, and cultural conferences. It has won several theater awards and is an active member in federations and organizations involved in cultural activities and artistic networks, such as the Arab Authority for Theater, the Palestinian Performing Arts Network, the Artists Union, the League of Dramatists, the National Heritage Committee, and other artist leagues and federations. Through performing plays in Palestinian towns, villages, and refugee camps, the Popular Theater Society contributes to enriching cultural life and enabling marginalized communities to enjoy theater and culture.

Influencing and being influenced

The PTS consists of thirty volunteer members – an equal number of men and women – who take part in all programs and activities. Members have a wide range of experience and come from diverse backgrounds, which greatly enriches the work. Some members come from the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan; others come from West Bank towns, the Gaza Strip, and Galilee. This diversity at the personal as well as social, political, and cultural levels creates a dynamism and vitality that result in innovative cultural dialogue and breadth of vision.

Art is a humanitarian necessity for creative artists and audiences alike. It enlightens paths and expands the mind's capacity for knowledge, exploration, imagination, helping to build a future where love, justice, freedom, and equality dominate.

Theater and art, on the whole, are worthless if they have no effective impact; they are worthless if they do not stimulate the mind, touch the heart, create a sense of fraternity among people, and expose tyranny, corruption, and falsehood.

During the past three years, the PTS has produced ten plays, including Arabic plays, international plays, and plays for children, with performances by professional actors and amateurs. Theatrical production obviously needs human resources as well as physical resources. PTS plays provoke questions and shed light on the problems within Palestinian society as well as on the universal problems of a world in turmoil.

Steal Less, Please, by Italian playwright Dario Fo, is about political and social corruption and the government's involvement in corruption rather than its fight against it.

A performance of Abu Al-Khayzaran Tours.





Steal Less, Please, by Italian writer Dario Fo.

The House of Bernarda Alba is a play by the Spanish dramatist Federico García Lorca that deals with the conservative rural society that deprives children, especially girls, of the right to freedom, choice, and participation in life, which is similar to the reality in Palestinian rural communities.

Tin Neighborhood (*Haay al-tanak*) is a play about the neighborhoods and refugee camps located on the outskirts of towns where justice and dignity are missing. These neighborhoods become chaotic and lawless, places of corruption where gangs and arms and drug dealers thrive, and where authorities are unable to protect vulnerable people, ensure justice, or fight poverty.

Abu Alkhayzaran Tours (*Rahalat Abu Alkhayzaran*) is a play about the hard times that innocent people endure during wars orchestrated by tyrants and religious extremists, and how innocent people escape war but fall into the hands of human traffickers or drown in the sea. The *nakba* of Al-Yarmouk Refugee Camp is no less devastating than the 1948 *Nakba*.

Stories from the Times of White Horses was produced in partnership with *Wishah* Folklore Dance Troupe.

It is based on a novel by Ibrahim Nasrallah. The play sheds light on the forgotten era of history when Palestine and the Levant were under Ottoman rule, which led to ignorance, poverty, and suffering.

There on the Beach is a play about migrants in search of a better future. It shows the heavy toll that migration takes on families, tearing them apart and leaving children to search for their identities.

These productions, as well as children's plays and puppet shows, were performed throughout the West Bank for audiences – young and old – in the thousands.

Relationship with the audience

The experience of PTS has led to an understanding of audience preferences. There are those who enjoy sophistication and good taste, and those who enjoy the entertainment of ordinary theatrical shows. And there are those who rarely go to the theater, such as the people who live in remote rural areas. These people need encouragement in order to learn to enjoy theater. Audience reactions – excitement and other powerful emotions – inform the

director's and actors' decisions about how to perform the play. Theater must always be one step ahead of audience perception to allow for the exploration of new ideas. One task of the theater is to touch the hearts and minds of the audience through the artistic exploration of unfamiliar human behavior, mutual relationships, and contradictions among people.

The time it takes to consider and review the contents and dramatic structure of each play is no less than the time needed for rehearsals. The audiences (the society in general) are in constant flux, influenced by events, achievements, failures, and disappointments. What was acceptable in the past may no longer be acceptable and good today. For instance, although there was much skepticism regarding the credibility of the Oslo Accords, the enthusiasm and optimism of the politicians and a large part of the society greatly influenced public opinion. Many dramatists surprisingly expressed their optimism through producing plays about coexistence, the end of war and animosity, and the good life that people would enjoy in an independent state.

Theaters are like people: they are born, they get old, and they die. This is normal regardless of the causes. To remain in the heart of a living theater is to remain in the heart of life. We look at the dynamic reality around us in order to see things clearly. Theater cannot be separated from life's dynamism. Audiences do not go to the theater just to watch and listen, they are there to create theater with the performers. Theater would die if the audience were passive. It has the power to reveal its magic only through the mutuality shared between the performers and audience. The audience must feel as though they are part of the whole, part of a broad social reality. Theater has the potential to bring people and communities together in unity, especially when the plays that are written, chosen, and produced deal with the history of the people.

Children's theater is among the main priorities of PTS, and we know that children do not usually differentiate between the reality of a work of art and real life. They can easily become confused since young children are often unable to see obscure things. They see what happens around them

Steal Less, Please, by Italian writer Dario Fo.





Stories from the Time of White Horses.

and know what is intuitive. PTS aims to offer age-appropriate, simplified shows for children that respect their stages of development and experience. PTS believes that performing for children is as important as performing for adults. Children give us their hearts and minds, therefore, they deserve our best.

Production

Over the past 25 years, the PTS has been confronted with numerous challenges in the production process. Many plays were abandoned because of the lack of financial resources to produce them. More than half of the plays had no budget. Typically, we write a script in order to respond to a specific issue that has been identified and that needs to be addressed. Afterwards the search for funds begins. If nothing is found, then alternative funding possibilities are explored – partnerships, donations from friends and theater members, etc. To cut costs, we even recycle things to be used in the show, and the people involved often offer to give up part or all of their compensation. Funding usually comes after the performance, covering expenses and allowing for further development. The PTS is a nonprofit institution that has

only limited ability to pay salaries and fees. Production and promotion costs consume most of any available budget.

The theater functions like an open workshop and a big family of professional people who come together for administrative and theater-related work. Some members of this big family have their own paid jobs, but the theater is their place of belonging where they come to explore ideas and dreams and replenish their physical and spiritual energy. Diverse generations and experiences interact and communicate freely. The theater brings people together through its objectives, stimulates them through its challenges, excites them through its discoveries, and entertains them through its achievements.

Efforts unite when a new production starts, but not for the sake of a trip or money; the various players unite to enjoy theater – to explore new worlds and new experiences, to discover what the body can and cannot do. As members of a traveling theater, this “family” comes together – regardless of each person’s specific role – to take down the set and get ready for a new show in a new place. Needless to say, this is one of the main reasons

that production costs are kept to a minimum. The atmosphere created by the show reflects the vitality and enthusiasm of the actors and staff.

This “theater of the poor” functions differently when it has to produce a new play that requires expensive props, costumes, and music equipment, especially when funding for the production is found. Expensive stage props are needed for historical plays and children’s plays that rely heavily on colorful decorations, singing, and dancing.

office to pay for a performance. The theater, in short, is for a specific group of people who can afford it. Therefore, national theater groups rarely perform in Nablus or Birzeit or at the Cultural Palace. Why are municipalities and universities unable to pay half the cost of theater? Do they consider theater to be a luxury rather than a necessity?

Theater and the performing arts are not generally considered to be part of school or university life, but PTS believes that they should become an integral part of the educational system



Tin Neighborhood.

Old new obstacles

So, why can’t the field of theater find the same support and resources as the fields of music and dance? Why can’t performance arts attract the attention that football gets? Why are there more cafés or places of worship than theaters? The answer is political, of course, but politicians are keeping their mouths shut.

The lack of cultural venues hinders our work and the work of the entire cultural sector. The four existing theaters in Ramallah need twice the income generated through the box

and extracurricular activities. Until now, no Palestinian university teaches performing arts or theater. Shouldn’t the public budget contain at least a one percent allocation for a budget and funding for culture, art, and artist sponsorship?

The Palestinian political scene is divided and fragmented, deteriorating more and more every year. However, artists, educated citizens, and nongovernmental organizations are capable of bringing people together and offering hope to overcome this unfortunate situation.