

We Are Not Producing Artists, We Are Creating Leaders in Society



By Mustafa Sheta

These inspiring words of Juliano Mer-Khamis, the charismatic founder of The Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp in Palestine, are coming true, despite his brutal assassination seven years ago. Having confronted various challenges over the years, The Freedom Theatre, a beacon of creativity, hard work, and vision, recently celebrated its twelfth anniversary. Known for its freedom fighters and conservatism, Jenin Refugee Camp, where over 17,000 people live in an area that covers one square kilometer, is increasingly known – locally and worldwide – for its art as well.

Opened in 2006, The Freedom Theatre aims to use culture as a form of resistance against oppression and occupation. It was founded by a freedom fighter, an actor, and a nurse, but the inspiration for its creation started many years before, with a woman named Arna Mer-Khamis.

Arna was one of the few Israelis to actively fight the occupation of Palestine. And in the late 1980s, during the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising), she went to Jenin, a city in the northern West Bank whose name had become infamous after being subjected to some of the most brutal and vicious attacks by the Israeli army. Arna entered the refugee camp, where schools were closed due to the ongoing unrest, and began alternative education with the help of a group of local women. Together they eventually built the Stone Theatre. Juliano, Arna's son was a well-known actor in Israel and decided to come to the camp to see his mother's work. He was inspired and began to lead acting workshops with some of the children while filming his mother's story – which eventually became the widely and critically acclaimed documentary *Arna's Children*.



In 1995, Arna died of cancer and Juliano left the refugee camp. Shortly after the start of the second Intifada, he decided to go back. Juliano found the Stone Theatre in ruins, the central parts of Jenin Refugee Camp demolished, and out of his ten former acting students, only a few remained. One of them was Zakaria Zubeidi, by then a grown man who was leading the armed resistance in the camp. Zakaria had been on the run for seven years, and he and his

Juliano Mer-Khamis performing during the opening of The Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp, 2006.





The Freedom Theatre defies its environment of apparent despair and makes a substantial difference in Jenin Refugee Camp and beyond. It aims to create a political and artistic movement of theater and filmmakers who fight oppression and inequality through art and use cultural resistance as a tool for achieving justice. The theater building has come under attack, its members have been interrogated and imprisoned, and in 2011, its artistic director, Juliano Mer-Khamis, was murdered. Despite these tragedies, The Freedom Theatre has toured internationally and presented many productions in Jenin Refugee Camp where it is based.

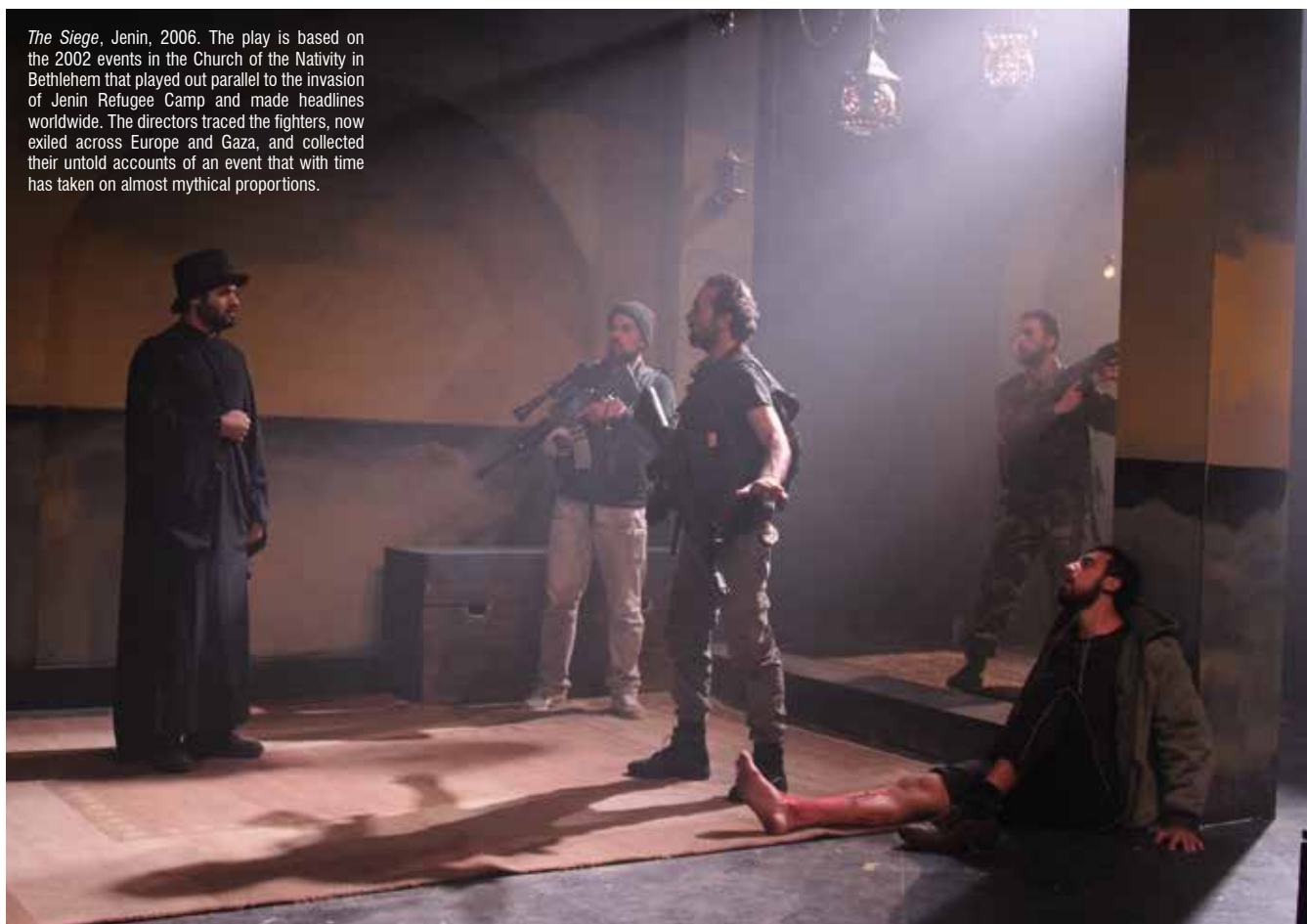
Juliano Mer-Khamis was born in Nazareth in 1958. He was the son of Palestinian writer, journalist, and activist Saliba Khamis and Jewish revolutionary Arna Mer. Juliano was a prominent actor in local and international films, television, and theater plays. He directed a number of films, including the internationally awarded documentary *Arna's Children*, about the work of his mother Arna in Jenin Refugee Camp. In 2006, Juliano co-founded The Freedom Theatre with Zakaria Zubeidi, Jonatan Stanczak, and Dror Feiler, with the aim of using the creative process to bring about social change and to participate in the struggle for a free Palestine through artistic expression. In April 2011, Juliano was brutally assassinated outside The Freedom Theatre by an unknown enemy of culture and freedom.



family had been targeted on several occasions; his mother and brother had been killed, and his home was destroyed. Zakaria was determined to continue the fight for freedom, and on meeting Juliano, Zakaria explained: "These weapons that we are using, if they are not backed with values and politics and real honest leadership, liberation leadership, then I do not want to fight anymore. We must build this leadership from scratch, and the best way to start is through an artistic venue."

Thus in 2006, Zakaria and Juliano, together with Jonatan Stanczak, a Swedish-Jewish nurse, founded The Freedom Theatre. The theater was to be a place where young people, in particular, could create, imagine, and reflect. People who had been condemned as terrorists began to share their perspectives through theater productions – joining Palestine's first acting school of its kind – documentaries, magazines, films, and photographs. Through this creative venue, the Palestinian narrative was told in a new, imaginative light, and increasingly, the world was paying attention. The purpose was not art for the sake of art, it was art for

The Siege, Jenin, 2006. The play is based on the 2002 events in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem that played out parallel to the invasion of Jenin Refugee Camp and made headlines worldwide. The directors traced the fighters, now exiled across Europe and Gaza, and collected their untold accounts of an event that with time has taken on almost mythical proportions.



The arts have always been a powerful tool for liberation of the oppressed. For Palestinians, artistic expression is an integral part of our quest for justice, equality, and freedom. The Freedom Theatre is part of a cultural resistance movement at the core of our vision for a free and critical Palestinian society; it aims to raise a new generation that is capable of challenging all forms of oppression. “Our theater work is not a substitute or an alternative to the Palestinian struggle for liberation; just the opposite. ... We are part of the Palestinian resistance and struggle for liberation, which is our liberation struggle. ... We are freedom fighters.” Juliano Mer-Khamis



Students at the professional theater school, The Freedom Theatre, 2013.

the sake of life. As Ahmed, a teenager from the refugee camp, said in an early Freedom Theatre documentary: “We used to dream of nothing but dying as martyrs. Now, we want to live a normal life, and die a normal death.” Ahmed is now a lead technician at The Freedom Theatre.

One of the first plays produced in Jenin was George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. It came to define what was later referred to as the spirit of The Freedom Theatre’s work: cultural resistance. The Freedom Theatre’s version of *Animal Farm* dealt with the limits imposed within Palestinian society and the corruption of the Palestinian leadership. The Palestinian leadership were depicted as collaborators, as a new class of oppressors replacing the old. While it was well-received and shown to packed audiences, it was also highly criticized, and this proved that the theater was having an impact on the critical discourse that was sweeping the city and the camp.

Mer Khamis urged his acting students to pursue a cultural Intifada, warning that the occupation of the mind was more dangerous than the occupation of the body. Unlike many charming leaders, Mer Khamis established an institution and built a movement – one that still exists today. Following

Juliano’s untimely and unsolved murder in 2011 – he was shot sitting in his car just outside the theater, with his infant son on his lap – the devastated theater soldiered on, a living testament to the powerful impact of his teaching and vision. It wasn’t easy; The Freedom Theatre’s productions were outspoken. Verbal threats were made, the building was subject to attacks, and female actors were harassed on the street. But the theater continued to bloom and audiences grew. Volunteers and guests continued to visit this cultural institution that was built on the ruins of the second Intifada.

Shortly after Juliano’s murder, The Freedom Theatre produced a play titled *Suicide Note from Palestine*. It embodies the key mission of The Freedom Theatre: to shed new light on reality, to question, to critique, to provoke thought and reflection in an incredibly fractured society where there is very little control over one’s own life.

Since its conception, The Freedom Theatre has produced over 25 plays that have been performed to audiences all over the West Bank and toured in several countries in Europe. One of the more recent plays, *The Siege*, brings to life on stage the incident in 2002 during the second Intifada when

armed Palestinian fighters along with some two hundred Palestinian civilians escaped the onslaught of Israeli gunfire and tanks by taking refuge in Bethlehem’s renowned Church of the Nativity. The Freedom Theatre was invited to perform *The Siege* in the United Kingdom and later in the United States. Despite several setbacks, including the artistic director being denied entry to the UK and the initial tour in the US being cancelled for various political reasons, the show was finally staged and has become a beacon of hope for future tours in the West.

Mustafa Sheta, director of The Freedom Theatre, has many years of experience in the Palestinian civil sector as a researcher, journalist, and coordinator for various organizations and projects. Mustafa has a BA in journalism and political science from Birzeit University and an MA in conflict resolution and development from the Arab American University in Jenin. He has been a member of The Freedom Theatre’s board of directors since 2014, its general secretary since June 2016, and its director since January 2018.

Some of The Freedom Theatre’s accomplishments since opening its doors in 2006

- 120,000+ spectators, participants, visitors, and volunteers
- 27 in-house productions
- performances and events in 18 countries
- activities in 30+ Palestinian communities
- 2,500+ participants in storytelling workshops and performances for children
- 10+ photography exhibitions
- 20+ short films
- 4 books, 10+ issues of a youth magazine
- 3 Freedom Rides, reaching marginalized communities in Area C
- 1 Playback Theatre ensemble, giving performances across the West Bank, Egypt, and Jordan
- 18 Theatre School graduates
- 1 Theatre School graduate starring in an Oscar-nominated film (*Omar*)
- 1 Theatre School graduate pursuing further theater studies in London
- 3 Theatre School graduates have taught at The Freedom Theatre School
- 8 teachers trained in drama in education
- 13 mental health workers graduated from the Trauma Response Training Program