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Introduction

Bombs and Israeli threats may have burned Palestinians alive; reduced their houses to ashes; wiped out their generation on the face of the earth; and stripped them of their humanity. But surely, one thing remains steadfast, that is, the Palestinians' call to self-determination and sovereignty. This call never stopped and continues to this day through an artistic expression- the Palestinian theatre.

Ever since, theatre was a dominant piece of Palestinian life. It has its history referred to story tellers wandering in different places, sharing, singing and refreshing people of their culture. Newspapers during the early times announced local theatrical productions to inform citizens.

The Palestinian theatre survived years under the Israeli occupancy. It thrived in the midst of a very limiting and strict censorship. Theatre becomes the vehicle for expression; the medium to letting the world know the plight of the homeless Palestinians who are prisoners and refugees in their own land. Theatre provided alternative to those seeking change and reforms. Rather than resorting to a revolutionary and armed struggle, theatre was the best option to stimulate Palestinians of their human rights and identity.

Palestinians living under occupation struggle to keep their identity. The Israeli forces tried to obliterate their identity by burning their books, their cultural sites and historical land marks. Palestinian theatre developed into a means for cultural revival. It became glue that pieces historical events together. It connected the once-glorious Palestinian past to the present

situation. It has served as a form of entertainment to keep Palestinians sane and in touch with their heritage.

However, questions rose critiquing the authenticity of Palestinian theatre. No documentation was made regarding this art prior to 1948. Early productions reflected those done outside the Palestine. Later, major theatrical groups, such as *al-Balalin*, would scramble and face the reality that there are not enough materials to draw upon.

The 1948 catastrophe tragically ended the budding Palestinian theatre. Fore-runners and intellectuals were cut-off and the development of Palestinian theatre hinged on wars and suffering as post World War II events turned the history of Palestine upside down. Slowly, theatre groups began emerging and Palestinian theatre was shaped throughout the years.

During the British Mandate era, political messages on plays were censored.¹ The Israeli occupation strictly monitored and censored each creative activity, mainly theatre. Trespassers were severely punished. Yet, theatrical performances flourished. Palestinian theatre survived. Some theatrical groups are now performing in various places in the world. And as they continue to champion the cause of their own people, many still die today from violence and human right abuses.

This paper aims to trace the development of Palestinian theatre under Israeli occupation by stating highlights and events. The paper is not a blow-by-blow account; neither a historical one.

To deeply understand how Palestinian theatre has evolved throughout the years, it is very significant to recall the context to which it has thrived. Palestinian theatre was honed by deep struggles for freedom and life under the Israeli occupation. The unending Palestinian-Israeli conflict greatly influenced it.

1 Hala Nassar, ' Stories from Under Occupation', Theatre Journal, 58 (2006) 15-37

Historical and Political Context ²

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a battle over land issue. The Israelites back then were scattered globally. The Palestinians were under Ottoman Empire but the British took and given mandate over the land. The Arabs hoped for an independent state as promised by Britain. However, in 1917, Lord Arthur Balfour, a British Foreign Minister, announced the intention to create a ' Jewish national home in the Palestine'. World War II saw the influx of Jewish immigration. In 1947, the UN General Assembly partitioned the Palestine into two states- Arab and Jewish. Fighting started over the issue of UN partition.

On May 15, 1948, the state of Israel was declared. Shortly afterwards, the ' Catastrophe' of 1948 (*Nakba*) occurred, killing and displacing thousands of Arab residents. Again a war broke out in 1967. Israel won, captured and occupied the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and Golan Heights from Syria. Early on, a movement called the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was established in 1964 by the Arab League with Yasser Arafat as leader.

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An uprising in December 1987, known as the first *intifada* mobilised hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to clash against the Israeli rule through demonstrations, boycott, graffiti, stone throwing, refusal to pay taxes, and strikes. The 1993 Oslo Accord ended the first *intifada*, which prompted Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, Jericho and West Bank. A second *intifada* transpired in 2000 and was bloodier than the first. Up to this date, the conflict ensues.

The Development of Palestinian Theatre

Palestinian theatre lacks scholarly documentation from 1850 until 1948.

Local theatre, however, was active during the British mandate years from 1920-1948. In the 1930s,

2 Joel Beinin & Lisa Hajjar, 'Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, A Primer' [accessed 31 January 2008] political stance was reflected in local productions. Most playwrights wrote about drama and the texts or ideas were imitated outside Palestine. The 1948 catastrophe spelled hibernation for Palestinian theatre as its creators and audiences became refugees and Palestinian intellectuals moved out. The need to come up with a cohesive force in order to keep the Palestinians' identity intact was realized after the 1967 war. The reunification of West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli occupation awakened Palestinian culture. ³

After the 1967 war, there were amateur groups formed such as al-Mashra al-Nahid (Rising Theatre), Masrah al-Ghirbak (Sieve Theatre), and al-Dababis (The Pins), among others during 1960-1970. These troupes increased

Palestinians interest in theatre. Slowly, in early 1970s, the Palestinian theatre started to gain its wings. ⁴

A professional theatre, Al-Balalin, was born and became the first national theatre group. It was founded by Francois Abu Salem, of Palestinian-French descent, after his education in Paris. It advocated the use of the vernacular in their presentations. Performing theatre in the vernacular helped the group to effectively convey its message to the local audience for nation building.

Al-Balalin performed in different venues, with diverse audiences in the occupied territories. It was described as ‘ Palestinian theatre, by Palestinian people, serving a Palestinian cause before Palestinian audience’. The group performed the play *Qit’at Hayat* (Slice of Life) in 1972 with much success. Snir wrote that even Jewish leftist-intellectuals were drawn to its plays and appreciated the group’s contribution, considering it as a breakthrough in Palestinian’s culture. ⁵

3 Nassar, p. 3

4 Reuven Snir, ‘ The Emergence of Palestinian Professional Theatre After 1967: Al Balalin Self-Referential Play Al-Atma (The Darkness), Theatre Survey (2005) 46: 1

5 Snir, p. 14

Al-Balalin produced more plays such as *Ta’ala, Uhaddithka, ya Sahibi* (Come, Let Me Tell You, My Friend), *Nashrat Ahwal al-Jaww* (The Weather Forecast),

Thawb al-Imbaratur (The Emperor's Cloak) and the musical, *al-Kanz* (The Treasure). Its most famous production was entitled *Al-Atma* (The Darkness). The troupe also came up with folkloristic shows with dancing and singing.

Al-Atma, as a self-referential play was very unique in treatment. The cast worked on the script collaboratively and used their real names during the actual performance. The story circled on the hardships faced by individual members vis-a-vis the group's difficulty in raising Palestinian theatre to the next level. The play encouraged audience interaction and participation by intentionally irking them. The whole play was creatively designed to agitate the audience through switching off lights; having cast seat in the house to further react during the presentation; and by using personal experiences and allegories to punch the message straight to the audience's hearts.

Unfortunately, Al-Balalin ceased in 1967 due to ideological and personal differences within the group members. Salem went on to establish the al-Hakawati Theatre in 1977, joining with him were some of his colleagues from Al-Balalin. *Al-Hakawati* means *The Storyteller* in Arabic. The troupe has performed throughout Israel, has travelled to Europe and North Africa, and was granted a 100,000 US Dollars grant from Ford Foundation. *Al-Hakawati* came out with five original stories, notably: *Ali the Galilean*, *1001 Nights of A Stone Thrower* and *Baggage*. *Al-Hakawati*'s plays hoped to aim political consciousness, achieving a national identity suppressed under the Israeli occupation.

In an interview, Salem recalled Palestinian theatre based on his observation. According to him, theatre seemed not to interest Palestinian in 1967. Theatre was just one means of learning the English language. He acknowledged the basic mode of self-expression in bodily form and voice and was at first found it strange to create plays based on their own culture. He stressed on their national cause-the Palestinian cause. He stated that his group has ‘disturbed’ and made noise among his audiences, and the Palestinians were proud and very participative in their performance. He emphasized the value of women in his play and culture by saying:

‘ Women are the only ones who have preserved anything in village society, who are actually constructing and not just pretending to construct. She’s productive economically, cares for the children and home-she has to carry with her the entire past. My idea was to try to show her on a throne, where she really is, because in villages an elder women does get this kind of respect.’⁶

The group’s 2003 play, entitled *Baggage*, was written by Fateh Azzam. It was treated as a monologue, a drama with different voice-overs to accentuate the stories.⁷ Unlike *Al-Atma*, *Baggage* was interpreted by one actor alone who is known as the Traveller. The setting of the play was set in an airport where the Traveller carries four bags, symbolising the highly-mobile character of the Palestinians due to evacuation or simply by running for their lives.

As the traveller tries his best to decide which among the four bags he would bring with him, he was greatly troubled. Each bag represents a person and the memories they shared together in the past. He realized that letting go of the bags would mean stripping himself of his identity. Compared to the *Al-Atma* which presented the day-to-day plight of Palestinians under occupation, *Baggage* aimed to spread its message universally. There are people, too, in different nations experiencing the same forced migration and cultural loss as the Palestinians.

6 Ilana DeBare, Lisa Blum & Francois Abu-Salem, 1985 'Palestinian Culture Takes Root' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14(2): 230-234

7 Nicholas Pagan, 'Inside Fateh Azzam's Baggage: Monologue and Forced Migration', *Theatre Research International* 32 (2006) 16-31

Noteworthy of plays produced by *al-Balalin* and *al-Hakawati* include story telling. Palestine's theatrical roots originated from the traditional story teller, who enters different places to share myths and folklore stories. Story telling is linked with Palestinian culture since Palestinians are oral people. Stories were used to recount the glorious past and to remind the Palestinians of their roots and cultural heritage. The solo artist performed with a few props, interacted with the audience, and drew from his imagination to make his message cut across. The storyteller, as Slyomovics put it, takes command of the state affairs he cannot change through comedy, children's puppet theatre and traditional epic singing.⁸

Traditionally, in the Arab world, most story tellers were males while in Palestine, women do the story telling. In a 1999 interview by Nassar, it was found out that Palestinian women performing onstage generate positive and symbolical effects. The effect may have emanated from the woman's role as the 'pillar of society, the bearer of the tragedy and the preserver of cultural tradition'. Sadly, theatre makers lamented the lack of women thespians in Palestine. Women are discouraged by their families, and for security reasons, they have to stay home.

The art of story telling by a man generated comic or crazy characters based on different novels and scripts. One Palestinian actor, Muhammad Bakri, took the role of Saeed in the play *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, a novel by Emily Habiby (1985). Bakri played an idiot whose character hang on somewhere between the pessimist and the optimist. Saeed's disasters were set during the early years of Israel's existence. He delivered his monologues well at 'rapid fire speed or with the sing-song insistence of a village idiot'.

8 Susan Slymovics, 'To Put One's Fingers in the Bleeding Wound: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship' *The Drama Review* 35: 2 (2005) 18-38

An actor, Saqer Salaymeh, from the al-Jawwal theatre group (The Wayfarer) had the role of a fool in *Lazim adwi* (I Must Have Light) which premiered in 1989.⁹ Most of those who attended the opening night were the freshly wounded from a recent attack by the Israeli forces. Another story written by the *Al-Hakawati* is the *Mahjoub*, *Mahjoub* portrayed by Adnan Tarabsheh, *Mahjoub* used allegories to depict the different characters extracted from

diverse stereotypes such as pop icons, heroes, antiheroes, and cultural figures, *Al-Hakawati* produced another play, *Ali the Galilean*, played by Edward Mu'allim.

Ali is Galilean who sought work in Tel Aviv. He adopted the Hebrew name Eli and due to his bilingual character and identity confusion, he resorted to madness. Another playwright, Karim Al-Rawi wrote the *Promised Land* (1988) which depicted a Palestinian who learned to 'bend' in every circumstance. Radi, the main character, tried to conform in every situation to the point of stripping his identity and losing his wife. The play was shown in London and received accolades. Nevertheless, the press remained silent about it. It was branded as a communist play but it went on reaping the praises and indignation of the public.¹⁰

Palestinian theatre in the past was not only confined to the artistic adults. Children, who are much affected and engaged in the conflict, turned to theatre for expression and cultivation of their talents. In Aida Refugee Camp, *Al-Rowwad* (The Pioneers) Children's Theatre was established by Abdelfattah Abu-Srouf in 1998. The theatre group is composed of children aged ten to seventeen years. *Al-Rowwad* is a community centre near Betlehem. It has two rooms with a capacity of 150 children. It provides services for the youth. It offers art activities such theatre and puppet theatre as well as computer lessons. The centre is a safe place for the children. Parents bring their children in the centre for fear that an Israeli

9 Slymovics, p. 26

10 Mahmoud El Lozy, ' Identity and Geography in Karim Alrawi's Promised Land' *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 20 (2000) 184-210

soldier might shoot them. During the *intifada*, children caught throwing stone at Israeli forces or structures were shot to death.

Al-Rowwad came up with a theatrical performance, *We Are the Children of the Camp*, which it presented in Sweden and Denmark in August 2000. The troupe had the chance to perform it in the New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Vermont, and Kentucky in 2005. The play is a rolled-in-one *dabka* dance and puppet show. *We Are the Children of the Camp* has twelve scenes showing the poverty, deprivation, humiliation, aspirations and dreams of Palestinian children.

Another organisation works to bring theatre and drama to children in Gaza and Hebron. Theatre Day Productions was a brainchild of Jan Willems, a Dutch theatre-maker. The group conducts plays for schoolchildren and encourages them to react or participate after each play. Willems' group hired teachers to train six to eight people in three years. These trainees were then motivated to initiate their own projects within the refugee camps.

According to Willems, theatre is one way for people to forget their abject poverty and the constant Israeli incursions. He stated:

' The violence that comes with the Israeli occupation is devastating. It's making people crazy. I don't have to tell you about people blowing

themselves up. Humanity is being lost, and I think only culture can help Palestinians re-discover that humanity'.¹¹

One group which was previously active in the 1970s resurfaced and renamed itself as Masrah Ashtar (Ashtar Theatre). Ashtar has programs for school children in Ramallah. It has also created theatre programs for high school students to encourage female participation.

11 Eric Beauchemin, 'Theatre in the Rubble', [accessed 31 January 2008]

The above-mentioned theatrical groups fashioned today's modern Palestine theatre, which, made it distinct from Arab plays.

Conclusion

The Israeli State enforced strict censorship on plays and other materials. Public live performances were deemed dangerous as they could provoke the audience. The State knew the power of art in igniting latent emotions. Theatrical performances must have permits before they could be staged.

The scripts must gain the approval of censorship committees of Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education and the Military Government. Individual local governors may disapprove the staging of the play even if it was cleared from other ministries. Obtaining a permit was like passing through a needle's eye. As one commented: 'No theatre group has ever performed without having one or two of its members in jail.' Certain leaders were arrested and detained days before the play. The military even ordered the closing of theatrical venues.

Prominent troupe members detained included Walid Abd al-Salam, a director; Mahmud Jubayl and Sami Rafidi, members of Dababis Troupe. Mustafa al-Kurd of *Al-Balalin* was deported.

The Israeli forces suspected cultural activities, newspaper and even magazines and categorized them as threat to the State's security. By 1987, a total of 1, 570 books were banned.

As the censorship pushed on, so were different theatre activities inside Palestine. People can be creative and resourceful when it comes to theatrical presentation. Even prison cells were transformed into stages as playwrights, activists, artists and intellectuals were imprisoned together. Even crowded hotel rooms played hosts to banned scripts. Artists made props from available materials and collaborated on plays. Playwrights and actors were arrested and jailed, even with just a suspicion. The censorship committee were determined to block movements and restricted freedom of expression.

The prison walls, however, did not deter the groups from pursuing more theatrical productions. The tribulations and sufferings fuelled more scripts, plays and actors. The sustainability of theatre troupes was as strong as ever, amidst funding problems and brain drain (as result of imprisonment).

Censorship never crushed the instrument used significantly in arousing people's sense of nationalism and patriotism. Theatre was not suppressed and the artists' imaginations and passion didn't die down. The flame for liberation, sovereignty and justice is burning alive as ever.

Theatre groups survived out of sheer will, determination and truth. They remain formidable in their desire to loosen the chains of oppression in their land, and at the same time, campaign for collective awakening and action. These troupes, especially *Al-Hakawati*, paved the way for nationalism. *Al-Hakawati* is still considered as the dominant influence in leading and sustaining Palestinian theatre in war-ravaged Palestine. Snir wrote that it was 'so successful and its performances so effective that it has been considered a national Palestine theatre, eclipsing all other, local theatrical, troupes.'¹²

Theatre, from Palestinian experience, is risky and unrewarding in terms of finances and movement. Yet, it survives in its own persecuted oil. And slowly, it is influencing scattered Palestinians outside the Occupied Territories. Someday, it will change how the world perceives the Palestinians. Palestinian theatre is influencing the world, one stage play at a time.

¹² Snir, p. 24

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