Scholar Graham Usher lists the most popular games among Palestinian children during the first intifada (1987–1993): ‘soldiers and sha-bab,’ where confrontations are staged and sticks and Coca-Cola cans are magically transformed into guns and tear-gas canisters. Or ‘funeral,’ where girls are carried wreathed in black plastic bags on the back of their peers’ (1991:10).

The Occupation of the West Bank not only affects every aspect of children’s daily lives, but of their imaginations as well. And children under 18 make up roughly half the population of the occupied Palestinian territories. Given these realities, it is not surprising that three of the most important theatres in the West Bank — The Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp (outside the city of Jenin), Alrowwad in the Aida refugee camp (outside Bethlehem), and ASHTAR in Ramallah — create theatre by and for children and young adults as well as adult audiences.

Theatre scholar Hala Khamis Nassar notes, “Palestinian theatre artists constantly question the role of their work. They do so, however, not on the basis of whether it is original or authentic, but rather in terms of what is effective in countering the cultural annihilation under the present Occupation” (2006:16). While there are other theatres in the West Bank (including El Hakawati, Al-Kasaba, ShiberHur, Y es Theatre, and Al Harah Theater3), The Freedom Theatre, Alrowwad, and ASHTAR devote themselves specifically to what The Freedom Theatre calls a “cultural intifada,” and Alrowwad calls “beautiful resistance.” All three theatres address a wide range of current political issues within Palestinian society, and provide a safe haven for children to “play” and learn. They attempt to give children a sense of normalcy without normalizing the Occupation, and they foster critical and creative thinking among children and young adults, preparing them for a post-Occupation society.


2. In the West Bank, 39.4% of the population is under the age of 14 (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, in PASSIA 2011:367), and 7.9% of children suffer from chronic malnutrition (PASSIA 2011:367). Children living in refugee camps such as those in Jenin and Aida make up 37.2% of all children in the West Bank (PASSIA 2011:367). In the Jenin refugee camp, 58% of the population is under the age of 18 (Mer Khamis 2011b); in the Aida refugee camp, roughly 66% of the population is under the age of 18, and about 45% are under the age of 15 (Abusrour 2011).


Erin B. Mee is author of The Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage (Seagull, 2009), and coeditor of Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage (Oxford University Press, 2011). Her articles have appeared in TDR, Theater Journal, Performing Arts Journal, and several edited books. She has directed at numerous theatres including New York Theatre Workshop, The Public Theatre, the Magic Theatre, and in India with Kavalam Narayana Panikkar’s company Sopanam. erinmee1@gmail.com
The Freedom Theatre

The Jenin Refugee Camp has a population of 16,000 people who were expelled from their homes in and around Haifa during the 1948 Nakba (in Arabic, “catastrophe”) and in 1967 after the Six-Day War. In the camp, 70% of the population is unemployed (Mer Khamis 2011b). During the 2002 Battle of Jenin, 1,400 homes were destroyed or partially demolished, 1 out of 3 people were rendered homeless (again), curfews were imposed, and homes were invaded by Israeli soldiers. Poverty, lack of secure housing, high unemployment, and rampant malnutrition are the conditions under which Juliano Mer Khamis and his colleagues Jonatan Staniczak and Zakaria Zubeidi opened The Freedom Theatre in 2006. “The Freedom Theatre,” declared Mer Khamis, who ran the theatre until he was assassinated on 4 April 2011, “is a venue to join the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation with poetry, music, theatre, cameras. The Israelis succeeded to destroy our identity [and] our social structures, [both] political [and] economical. Our duty as artists is to rebuild or reconstruct this destruction. Who we are, why we are, where we are going, who we want to be” (TFT 2010). “We believe that the third intifada, the coming intifada, should be cultural, with poetry, music, theatre, cameras, and magazines,” said Mer Khamis. His goal was for The Freedom Theatre to create an artistic movement dedicated to eradicating discrimination and violence (TFT 2010). To this end, The Freedom Theatre teaches courses in film, photography, creative writing, and theatre.

4. The Nakba (al-Nakba, the catastrophe) refers to the displacement of an estimated 700,000 Palestinians who were forced from their homes or fled in the 1948 Palestine War as 540 villages were depopulated and destroyed. These Palestinians and their descendants are now divided between Jordan, Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and numerous other countries around the world. Israel has barred these refugees from returning to their homes or reclaiming their property.

5. The Six-Day War refers to the war begun by Israel on 5 June 1967 in which Israel took control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula (which had belonged to Egypt), the West Bank and East Jerusalem (which had belonged to Jordan), and the Golan Heights (which had belonged to Syria). The war ended on 10 June with thousands of casualties.

6. The Battle of Jenin, part of Operation Defensive Shield, began on 1 April 2002 when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) invaded Jenin with tanks, infantry, commando forces, and assault helicopters to wipe out “terrorists” who had been operating from within the camp. It officially ended on 11 April, although troops did not begin to withdraw until 18 April. The death toll is disputed, because bodies were removed from the camp by both Israelis and Palestinians; many bodies were buried in mass graves.

7. [For more on The Freedom Theatre and the murder of Mer Khamis, see Mee 2011 — Ed.]
At the same time, Mer Khamis was determined to empower the youth of Jenin. *Captured: Photography by Young Girls in Jenin*, a published collection of photographs by 15–18 year olds who studied photography under Mustafa Staite at The Freedom Theatre, opens with a statement by 16-year-old Dina Arqawi about the political power of the camera:

As we passed by a military checkpoint [on a photojournalism trip to Bil'in] I was playing with my camera and the flash went off at a soldier. He thought that I was taking a photograph of him and the rest of the soldiers. He panicked, opened the window and grabbed the camera from me. [...] He ordered me to get down from the bus and started to ask me questions. He was very angry. He asked who the camera belonged to and lots of other questions. I told him I hadn’t photographed him; I’d just been testing out the camera and taking pictures of my friends. He wasn’t convinced until he had searched the camera and found there was no photograph of him in it.

At that moment I understood how powerful the camera is, and how much Israeli soldiers fear it! I had thought that soldiers were the most powerful people in the world because of their weapons. But now I realize that they are also scared of me and my camera. (TFT 2011a:3)

Like the *Captured* photo anthology, *[refuge]* — a 2007 collection of short stories and photo essays by children who took writing and photography workshops at The Freedom Theatre — reflects the strength and endurance of people in the refugee camp. These books are a published record of life in Palestine as seen through the eyes of Palestinian children and teenagers, and they provide a much more nuanced portrayal of Palestinians than the image projected in international media. They are a means for young adults in Jenin to tell—and therefore control—their stories.

TFT has a three-year training program in theatre, and has performed adaptations of the famous Palestinian writer Ghassan Khanafani’s *Men in the Sun* (2010),8 George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (2009), and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2011), which I saw on 17 March 2011.9 TFT’s production of *Alice* frames Lewis Carroll’s familiar figures within the story of an arranged marriage: Alice’s father insists that she marry Ahmad, and when she protests, he slaps her. Left alone, Alice tries on bright red lipstick at her dressing table and dances around fantasizing about love. Her dream-time comes to an abrupt end when her mother violently yanks Alice’s hair into a tight ponytail for the engagement party, demonstrating that women can be and often are part of enforcing traditions that subjugate them and their daughters.

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8. *Men in the Sun*, directed by Josh Perlstein, opened on 7 September 2010, marking the anniversary of the assassination of Palestinian writer, artist, intellectual, and politician Ghassan Khanafani by the Mossad, the Israeli Intelligence Service.

9. For video clips of these productions, visit www.thefreedomtheatre.org and click on “watch it.”
At the party, Alice, the only woman not wearing a hijab, is given a ring. But as the engagement is about to take place, a White Rabbit (Rabe’a Turkman) takes Alice to Wonderland. Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole is disorienting: she is spun around and around on a revolving stage by the Rabbit until she lands in front of a writhing, hissing, black-clad punk-rock Caterpillar (Mo’men Switat) who reveals her destiny: she will free Wonderland from the Red Queen (Maryam Abu Khaled) with her engagement ring and restore the White Queen (Micaela Miranda) to power. Alice refuses; she urges the inhabitants of Wonderland to free themselves. Wonderland rebels, but since they do not have a leader to replace the Red Queen, their revolution fails. The Red Queen’s power and personality are so overwhelming that she literally takes over the entire stage as she lip-synchs the Blondie song “One Way or Another / I’m gonna find ya / I’m gonna get-cha getcha getcha getcha!” Eventually the White Queen, who embodies the subconscious desire for a messianic leader and has spent most of the play in a cocoon-like web of gauze, emerges, takes shape, and accepts the leadership role that Alice has refused. Alice returns to reality and confronts Ahmad, telling him she will not marry him: in the last line of the play, Alice tells Ahmad that her engagement ring freed Wonderland from the Oppressor, and Wonderland freed her from the ring.

The Mad Hatter’s tea party exemplifies what is so important about The Freedom Theatre’s work. The Mad Hatter (Eyad Hourani)—in red-and-white-striped tights, red leather gloves, a cape, and sparkling Boy George–style pants—struts, vogues, and cat-walks his way across the table to the tune of Freddy Mercury’s “I Want to Break Free.” He kicks teacups out of the way in a campy dance that celebrates some of the more overt stereotypes of homosexuality, such as flamboyance: clearly the Mad Hatter wants to break free from the restrictions of heteronormativity that are prevalent in Jenin, one of the more conservative cities in the occupied territories. Alice joins him on the tabletop, and they tango seductively together, expanding their rebellion to include the prohibitions against contact between unmarried men and women: this was the first time that a boy and a girl had danced together on the stage in Jenin; it was the first time a boy and a girl had touched onstage in Jenin; and it was the first time a boy and a girl had used their bodies sexually and suggestively onstage in Jenin. Alice is community theatre in the true sense of the term: it provides a political and artistic education for the actors, a platform for them to express themselves, a showcase for their work, and employment. For the residents of the refugee camp TFT provides much-needed entertainment, and it asks residents to question some of their deeply held assumptions about gender, sexuality, the role of women in society, and the strategies of the current Palestinian leadership, often as a means of generating conversation within the camp.

Before Alice began, Mer Khamis gave a curtain speech telling the audience that this was not a wedding or a TV show: no eating pumpkin seeds and no explaining the play to the person next to you while the show is going on. “To create an audience is harder than to create actors” he told me later.

It took us a year to be able to dim the lights; it took us three years to get people not to talk through the show. We’ve spent five years explaining to the audience what their role in live theatre is. [...] This is because they haven’t seen theatre—even today [17 March 2011] there were many people who had never seen live theatre before. It’s because of the Occupation. The Occupation. People don’t see theatre not because we are assholes, but because of the Occupation. It’s a bloody system. I’m not a conspiracy freak, but it’s a system in which the Israelis deliberately keep us ignorant. It’s cultural ethnic cleansing. (Mer Khamis 2011a)

The Freedom Theatre, then, is an attempt to reverse cultural ethnic cleansing and the deculturation of people living in the Jenin Refugee Camp. Like Alrowwad and ASHTAR, The Freedom Theatre works to “de-colonize the mind” of its actors and audience members.
Alrowwad Cultural and Theatre Society

The Aida refugee camp outside Bethlehem has a population of about 5,000 people who come from 41 of the 534 different villages that were destroyed or occupied in 1948 and 1967. Most of them are from the Jerusalem and Hebron areas, although some are from the north and from Gaza. Roughly 77% of people in the Aida camp are unemployed; of those with jobs, the average household income is US$550–700 per month (Abusrour 2011). Abdelfattah Abusrour, who founded Alrowwad (which means “the pioneers”) Cultural and Theatre Society in Aida in 1998, writes: “We do not have the luxury of despair, but the steadfast hope that we can make a change for our children and the generations to come that all of us can be proud of.” Alrowwad’s mission is:

1. Empowerment of the community and building national capacities in Beautiful and Non-violent Resistance.

2. Promotion of human values and respect of human rights through arts and education as ways of beautiful and non-violent means of self-expression and resistance against the ugliness of occupation and its violence. (Alrowwad-acts.ps)

Alrowwad envisions “An empowered Palestinian Society on educational and artistic level, free of violence, respectful of human rights and values, (with special focus on children and women) based on the spirit of social entrepreneurship and innovation in self-expression and respect of human values” (Alrowwad-acts.ps). Abusrour practices what he calls “beautiful resistance” against the Israeli Occupation and against patriarchy by offering after-school courses in dance, music, and theatre twice a week for middle- and elementary-school age children, as well as courses in video and photography, which Abusrour describes as a way to show “Palestine through Palestinian eyes.” Alrowwad also began the first fitness program for women and the first soccer team for girls in a Palestinian refugee camp.

On 19 March 2011, I saw a group of Alrowwad’s students perform traditional Palestinian dances, including dabka. Alrowwad uses dabka as a form of, and forum for, cultural resistance and cultural memory. Several of the dances are harvest dances, while others tell the story of the Nakba: all of them embody Palestinian culture, and performing them enculturates the dancer.

After the dances, I saw a studio production of The Doll—shown without full sets, lights, or costumes, as a demonstration of Alrowwad’s work. Students in the theatre program—several of whom have been taking classes for five years—together with their teacher Issa Abusrour devised The Doll through improvisation exercises. They created the piece in 2010, and the students have done seven performances in different theatres, including the Cultural Palace in Ramallah, The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, and Bethlehem University (Abusrour 2011). The Doll was performed by seven girls: Abeer Abusrour, age 14; Iman Abusrour, age 12; Farah Abusrour, age 9; Aisha Karaka, age 13; Lina Abuaker, age 11; Tamara Abuaker, age 10; and Bara’a Abuhamida, age 11.

Figure 3. Students of Alrowwad Cultural and Theatre Society perform The Doll, directed by Issa Abusrour. (Courtesy of Alrowwad Cultural and Theatre Society)
A small girl entered, dancing gently with her doll, enjoying her time to daydream. An older girl, hefty, muscular, tough, marched onstage, grabbed the doll, threw it to the ground, stomped on it, and kicked the doll offstage. Then she glared at the audience. Her stare was intense, full of rage. Her body language was militaristic and fierce. She established herself as the one in charge, the Oppressor. Since her act was simultaneously so real and so representative, it seemed as though this scene was simultaneously about a playground bully stomping on someone else’s toy, and about an adult killing someone else’s child. The scene made me think about how the two behaviors are connected, about the ways in which violence is perpetuated, and about the ways in which a playground bully becomes an aggressive adult.

One by one, the girls (all dressed in neutral black) stepped forward and told the audience their dreams and wishes: one said she wanted freedom; one wanted education; one wanted justice; another wanted the wall to fall; still another said she wanted to play, and the last said she wanted to study. But everything they tried to do was destroyed by the Oppressor: if they tried to read a newspaper, the Oppressor ripped it up; if they tried to play, she broke up the game. At one point the Oppressor seemed to be able to control their minds: in slow motion she waved her arm back and forth, making the other girls sway and undulate as though they were her puppets, as though their movement could be controlled by her hand.

One of the girls managed to break away, and she recited a Mahmoud Darwish poem:

Write, I am an Arab
A name without a title
Patient in a country where everything pushes to anger […]10

The Oppressor stomped on the doll again, but eventually the girls managed to conquer her. As the Oppressor lay on the floor, they lifted her up to join them: instead of killing her, they transformed her, and she joined them. Alrowwad is not teaching revenge, but transformation.

The Doll has a similar effect as another play that is still in Alrowwad’s repertoire. We Are The Children of the Camp (2000) begins by por-

10. Translation by Abdelfattah Abusrour.
traying major events of the Nakba and continues to present day Aida camp. It plays to several audiences: it is designed to tell the story of the children of Aida to the outside world, but it is also designed to make sure that the children growing up in Aida know and remember the story of how they came to be there. As Hala Khamis Nassar notes:

*We Are The Children of the Camp* does not, in the end, focus on the children’s desire for better playgrounds or ideal schools; rather, it deals with the entire history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Children are transformed into politically aware adults, much like their own parents. (2006:34)

Alrowwad’s next theatre piece will be based on the famous cartoon character Handala by Naji al-Ali. Abusrour describes Handala as a figure who shows us the world through the eyes of a Palestinian refugee: “Handala, the refugee child who is present in every cartoon, remains a potent symbol of the struggle of the Palestinian people for justice and self-determination” (Abusrour 2011).

**ASHTAR for Theatre Productions and Training**

Founded in 1991, ASHTAR’s mission is “to promote creativity and commitment for change through a novel combination of specific training and acting programs and services and professional theatre performances. If [a] marginalized audience is unable to come to our main location in Ramallah, we move our stage to these often remote areas to include everyone” (www.ashtar-theatre.org). ASHTAR focuses on Augusto Boal-style Forum Theatre, which they describe as a means of promoting “a more active dialogue and commitment for change within the society. This theatre form engages the audience to interact onstage with essential social and political issues, transforming a commonly passive audience into pro-active and involved participants.” Thus ASHTAR “stands as an agent of change in Palestine” (www.ashtar-theatre.org). Artistic Director Iman Aoun describes the work of the group:

ASHTAR has staged eighteen Forum productions covering [...] early marriage, incest, [...] living with disability, child labor, health, violence in schools, [...] honor crimes, and other hot issues. Forum productions that touched upon issues of water were produced twice: once in 1998, highlighting the violations of settlements towards the land and water in the villages in the West Bank; and [again] in 2007 [focusing on] the lack of water in the villages, due to the Israeli policy of separating the villages [from their water sources] with the Wall and the check points. (2011)

In 1999 they staged a Forum theatre piece dealing with expired food: Jewish settlements in the West Bank were collecting expired canned food and dairy products, repackaging them with new labels, and selling the expired food to neighboring Palestinian villages. According to Aoun, “many Palestinians were poisoned, and some have even died [as a result of] these actions” (2011).

ASHTAR organizes an annual Forum Theatre festival that in 2011 ran from 17–31 March in Ramallah and featured eight Palestinian and international theatre companies. The festival's theme was: “Yes to Positivity, No to Passivity.” ASHTAR’s piece, titled “Your Health Concerns Us!” directed by Muhammad Eid, dealt with health care in the West Bank. Because doctors are not

11. The productions were: *Us and Them*, performed by David Diamond from Vancouver, Canada; *The Moon*, performed by TeaterReAgera from Malmo, Sweden; *Abu Al Raad*, performed by Yes Theatre from Hebron, Palestine; *The Glass House*, performed by Ringve School from Trondheim, Norway; *Girls Are a Burden until Their Death?*, performed by Al Harah Theatre from Bethlehem, Palestine; *Your Health Concerns Us!*, performed by ashtar Theatre from Ramallah, Palestine; *Memories of Amal*, performed by Al-Ahram Theatre from Mi’ilya Village, Palestine; *The Gaza Mono-Logues*, performed by Oyoun Theatre from Magdal Shams, Syria. Funding for this festival came from Foundation for the Future, Save the Children (UK), Welfare Association, the A.M. Quattan Foundation, and several private donors.

given permits to attend international meetings, because of the lack of medical equipment, and because of social prohibitions against discussing certain medical problems, many patients are incorrectly diagnosed or given the wrong medication. In this piece, ASHTAR creates a forum in which to debate these issues and find solutions. The question they raise in their program is: “what [can we] do to create a better health care system for all of us” (Ashtar 2011).

In 2010 Aoun initiated a project called The Gaza Mono-Logues, a series of monologues written by teenagers in Gaza that Aoun calls an “international campaign to bring the voices of Gaza’s children to the world” (www.ashtar-theatre.org). The impetus for this project emerged from the fact that, as Aoun states:

[W]e all became statistics of casualties in the media. More so, the war on the ground somewhat ended but the war in the heads of the people never did and its reflection into their psychology and mental being was very deep. Therefore I wanted the youth first and foremost to spill out the frustration, anger and destruction that embodied them [...] I then thought that these voices should be heard by other youth around the world, so this will not happen again. I wanted an act of solidarity between the young people since youth of today are leaders of tomorrow. (2011)

The monologues are extraordinarily moving depictions of the effects of war on children. Thirty-three productions of The Gaza Mono-Logues, involving roughly 1,500 teenagers in 33 countries, opened on the same day: 17 October 2010. On 29 November 2010 a select group of teenage actors representing 30 of these groups performed the monologues at the United Nations in New York City. On 23 September 2011, I directed a production of The Gaza Mono-Logues with a group of students at the United Nations International School in New York City, which was designed to coincide with the UN debate on Palestinian statehood and to initiate dialogue about the Palestinian situation.¹³

The Art of Resistance

On Monday, 4 April 2011, Juliano Mer Khamis was shot five times by an as-yet-identified gunman and killed.

The Freedom Theatre did not respond to violence with violence, but with a new production, While Waiting (2011), a remaking of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot directed by Udi Aloni, a long-time associate of the theatre. “Palestinians suffer from a lot of discrimination,” the audience is informed in the stand-up routine by Adi Khalefa that opens the show.

Not only at the checkpoints. Most people arrive at the airport three hours before their flight. But we, the Freedom Theatre, when we booked our flight we booked 15 days in New York, and 3 nights at the airport. The airport stay

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13. [See also the article by Kimberly Jannarone in this issue—Ed.]
was like a spa: it was hot, I was naked, and I got a special Security massage...
And then, when we got on the flight, I saw that the bathroom said “Occupied.” Occupied! You have been occupying my bathroom for 63 years! (TFT 2011b)

This monologue specifically locates the production in occupied Palestine, centering the production as a whole on what Didi (Maryam Abu Khaled) and Gogo (Batoul Taleb) do while waiting for freedom, while waiting for a state. This play asks who and what one becomes while waiting, how to behave toward those who share the wait, and how to live a semblance of a normal life without normalizing the Occupation, without giving in to it or giving up on the notion of freedom.

While Waiting asks what happens to the humanity of those who are waiting. It examines the ways in which Didi and Gogo fill their time with endless acts of creativity in order to survive; in this sense it is also about the power of theatre. Freedom seems like it will never appear: a young girl (played by Milay Mar, Mer Khamis’s daughter) seems to know Godot is out there somewhere, but she has never met him directly, and has no information to offer about what he is like. Freedom, like Godot, is a remote and vague concept, more rumor than reality.

Didi and Gogo are both played by women. Gogo is not tortured by stones in his boots but by her high heels: by socially determined notions of beauty, and normative definitions of appropriate behavior for women. For her Godot also represents freedom from gender discrimination.

I saw While Waiting at Columbia University’s Miller Theatre on 17 October 2011. In a post-performance discussion the actors talked about what the play means to them. For Abu Khaled the drama is about her personal situation after Mer Khamis’s death: “We are waiting for Godot, waiting for something, waiting for our future.” For Taleb, Beckett’s tragicomedy is about “waiting for freedom.” Eyad Hourani, who played Lucky, said: “I’m waiting for all of us to be human.” For Mustafa Staiti, who created the video clips used in the production, “it’s not only about sitting and waiting, it’s about doing something, and start[ing] to take responsibility, because all the Palestinian people have been waiting for a leader. It’s about: stop waiting and start doing something.”
These actors belong to the first group of students to graduate from TFT’s training program. Their plan is to move to Ramallah and open an arts center with a café, a small stage, a cinema for screening films, and a library. But their focus will be on creating theatre. As Mustafa Staiti says,

We are young cool theatre artists in Ramallah, and we’re going to talk about the corruption of the PA [Palestinian Authority], we’re going to talk about the Occupation by the Israelis, we’re going to talk about the oppression of women, we’re going to talk about all taboos, all dangerous stuff, everything people are afraid to talk about—we’re going to put it on stage. And we’re going to have fun. (Staiti 2011)

Meanwhile, several new initiatives are under way in Jenin. Nabeel al-Raee, the current artistic director of The Freedom Theatre, is launching a mobile theatre that will use actors from cities and villages all over the West Bank to create productions that tour to places where there is no theatre. The theatre itself is currently focused on Playback Theatre, an interactive theatre approach used in over 50 countries as a tool for community building, public dialogue, trauma recovery, social activism, and popular education. In a Playback event, audience members share thoughts, feelings, memories and autobiographical accounts, and watch as a team of actors and musicians instantly transform these experiences into improvised theatre pieces. (TFT 2012)

TFT has enacted stories around the West Bank, and among Bedouin communities; in Amman, Jordan, they enacted stories of the Arab Spring; in April 2012 they traveled to Egypt to bring to life accounts of the revolution in Tahrir Square.

From 23 September to 1 October 2012, TFT will organize a Freedom Bus ride through the West Bank. According to TFT actor Faisal Abu Al-Heija:

The Freedom Bus will utilize Playback Theatre as a response to the fundamental human need to share one’s story and have it heard, acknowledged and honored. The use of Playback Theatre will also build solidarity, as members from different West Bank communities join the ride to share stories, knowledge and experiences. Communication between towns, villages, refugee camps, community groups, Bedouin encampments and popular committees will help overcome the social fragmentation and alienation...
that results from colonization and military occupation. (TFT 2012)

As Judith Butler writes in her endorsement of the Freedom Ride:

The freedom ride represents the aspirations of the Palestinian people to be freed from an illegal occupation, to exercise rights of self-determination, and to demand justice after decades of oppression. The freedom ride represents as well the freedom of movement and a movement for freedom. Those who ride for and with Palestinians answer the call for global solidarity, and demand a free Palestine. We all must heed that call. (in TFT 2012)

The cultural intifada continues...

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A Sucker Punch of Horror

The Oyoun Theatre’s Gaza Mono-Logues

Kimberly Jannarone

Somewhere in the Druze village of Majdal Shams, in Israel-occupied Golan Heights, a young man is waking up nightly to the sounds of his wife’s sobs. It’s early 2010, and she’s watching YouTube videos of children in the wartime Gaza Strip. Later that year, this young couple and their troupe of five actors (ages 14 to 17 years old) perform a charming theatrical work in response to such harrowing scenes: The Gaza Mono-Logues. In December 2010, a few dozen performance studies scholars saw the troupe’s sole touring performance. The Oyoun Theatre had performed the piece once in Majdal Shams in October, and Professor Atay Citron invited them to perform it a second time at the week-long “RS/PS: Richard Schechner and Performance Studies” conference, hosted by the University of Haifa.1

Lights flash inside a little black box theatre, illuminating bare scaffolding perched over empty space. A handful of children scatter into view amidst the sound of explosions. Dry ice wafts thickly from the rear wall. A 15-year-old girl, exuberant and awkward, runs toward the audience, pigtails bouncing, and draws us into an interactive game of counting and remembering. Smiling and dancing to her own rhythm, she tells us how long her father waited in a queue, then asks us: how many hours? We yell out the answer she’d supplied: “Six!” She claps and laughs and congratulates us on getting it right. How many loaves of bread did he get? We play along: “One!” In the same merry pedagogical tone, she describes a bomb dropping on a house. How many corpses were on the bed? Drawn into the rhythm of her delivery, we answer—“Four...,” our voices faltering. Here is the tone of the entire production: youthful lightheartedness with a sucker punch of horror.

This is poor theatre, and it’s the best answer we’ve encountered all week to the question “What is to be done?” Asked in nearly every panel at the RS/PS conference—and argued in a particularly heated seminar immediately before the performance—the question of theatrical efficacy within the Israeli/Palestinian “situation” remained, by day five, far from answered. And then these Druze children provided a theatrical testimony by proxy that hit us with more force than any theoretical argument. None of us knew at the time that their “by proxy” status would have changed by the time I wrote this—their village’s relative peace broken less than six months later.

The Oyoun Theatre, under the helm of the sleepless couple from Majdal Shams—Amal Kais (the director) and Eyas Natour (set design, lighting, music)—took two weeks to stage eight monologues written by children living in the Gaza Strip. They were part of the larger Gaza Mono-Logues project, conceived by the ASHTAR Theatre in Ramallah.2 Inspired by Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues (whose ongo-

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1. The RS/PS: Richard Schechner and Performance Studies conference was an international conference of scholars and artists honoring Richard Schechner for his 76th birthday, from 19–23 December 2010, at the University of Haifa.

2. [See Erin B. Mee’s article on “The Cultural Intifada” in this issue of TDR for more information on some other iterations of the Gaza Mono-Logues.—Ed.]

Kimberly Jannarone is Professor of Theater Arts at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of Artaud and His Doubles (University of Michigan Press, 2010). She is also a director and dramaturge with an emphasis in experimental performance. She has won a Camargo Fellowship, the Gerald Kahan Scholar’s Prize, and honorable mention for the 2009 ASTR Essay Prize. Her next books are The Crowd in the Theater and the edited volume Vanguards of the Right (forthcoming, University of Michigan Press). kmj@ucsc.edu
ing international performances raise money for rape awareness), ASHTAR commissioned 33 first-person pieces written by children about their experiences during the three-week-long 2008 war in Gaza. ASHTAR invited amateur troupes in different cities to stage simultaneous low-budget productions in October 2010, hoping to raise understanding and awareness of the situation. ASHTAR’s website chronicles the project (www.thegazamonologues.com), but it doesn’t document the Oyoun Theatre’s performance, which adapted several monologues into a dynamic theatrical whole, with simple but sophisticated staging.

The children from Majdal Shams danced, jumped, and sang in an enviable feat of ensemble acting. For each monologue, one actor would take most of the text, while the others provided the scenery, sound effects, and choruses. The set consisted of exposed lights, simple wooden ladders and planks, make-shift supertitles, and sheets that waved between poles or served as props — an unassuming theatricality reminiscent of Ariane Mnouchkine, yet the differences are instructive. Where the Théâtre du Soleil is refined, the Druze children were ingenuous. Their young bodies had an unfeignable gawky grace. Their performances straddled maturity and innocence, swinging between strength and vulnerability, confidence and fragility. In spite of the traumatic stories they recounted — hiding from bombs under cars, holding their loved ones’ bleeding bodies, raiding trash for cooking items — the piece was, improbably, fun. The children’s natural élan broke through the terror, ran past the flashing lights and booming sound effects, and seized us.

A can flies up out of a trash bin stage right. Then another — this one is a tin of vegetables. The projectiles clank loudly when they hit the floor. A little boy’s voice calls out of the bin: “Beans, chickpeas, corn, cucumbers.” Another can pops up, this time with the boy’s head next to it. He smiles and describes how the war made everyone voracious eaters, how they ate “a hundred times a day,” how “the occupation was leading a war on us on earth and sky, and we had declared a vicious war on food.” They ate so many tinned meals (he tells us from his bin) that kids wounded their legs on the sharp edges of open, empty cans. The young actor delivers a comical tale of gluttony, flying cans marking time with his words, and he himself behaves like a merry Oscar the Grouch. “My mum asked me to bring baked bread. The queue at the oven stretched from Gaza to the West Bank.” The queue is bombed; people die. He manages to run home. His mum yells at him for coming home with no bread, but

![Figure 1. The Gaza Mono-Logues, 17 October 2010. Oyoun Theatre, Majdal Shams. Performers: Amal Kais (director, center back); Walaa Abu Saa’d’a, Fadi Daab’bous, Eba Monder, Yara Halabi, Ragad Samara. (Photo courtesy of Moataz Abu Saleh)](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/DRAM_a_00194)
fish ran away...but people were not able to.” The children delivered such choruses with beguiling musicality. One scene opened with the happy repetition: “I have a bed to myself! A bed to myself!” This recurrent announcement from our storyteller soon morphed into another one: “A rocket fell on the car. A rocket fell on the car.” The child has a bed to himself, it turns out, because his brother was just killed, his brother with whom he “used to sleep one on top of the other, legs on top of heads, sometimes I didn’t know where my ends were.” The imagery in Kais’s arrangement entangles the fun of childhood with the fragmented limbs of the dead.

“What is to be done?”

There is no one answer, but this performance energized the RS/PS audience. A mass of theatre professors rushed the little troupe after a lengthy (and for some spectators, tearful) standing ovation. The desire to do something was palpable—the show should be seen, it should travel. Cards were pressed into hands. The piece made an impact. Why? Comparisons to our conference sessions were revealing. The children of the Oyoun Theatre were not weighted down by learned discourse: they did not know who had already spoken about the situation, in what way, and with what consequences. They crafted their piece in response to a call from other children living 150 untraversable miles south of their village. They vaulted into it with an innocence and energy impossible to find in the professional, academic, adult world—certainly, at least, in the fraught seminar room we had just left. For one moment, then, in the gangly bodies of young Druze on an impromptu stage choked with dry ice, theatre trumped its own subject, giving us an unreasonable rush of hope.

Unreasonable because here was the desire to help, and the intractable problem of bow. The Druze children lived in an occupied land surrounded by barbed wire; they themselves were members of a sect that routinely faced persecution. Which of us had the ability to bring five of them, their directors, and their show, from the Golan Heights to the United States? Probably none. A roomful of professionals wanted to promote the material, and other Gaza Mono-Logues had toured, but, really, would anyone else ever see this show from Majdal Shams? Oyoun’s Gaza Mono-Logues, coached by adults but written and performed by children, provided a moment of hope, beauty, and simplicity—restricted, ultimately, to a limited space patrolled by forces more powerful than ours. The production and its reception, in other words, constitute a microcosm of the entire “situation.”

Border Town Crossings

After thinking about how it fit into the larger situation in the Middle East, I contacted Moataz Abu Saleh for more information on the production. Trying to piece together the troupe’s history from just my memory of the talk-back was tough, and Oyoun had adapted their pieces from the original Gaza Mono-Logues texts much more substantively than I’d anticipated. I asked for their edited monologues, a complete cast list, some information about the theatre, and a photo. After a month and two promptings—also enlisting the help of Atay Citron—I got this:
Subject: re: Gaza Monologues
From: Moataz Abu Saleh <moataz.wahbi@gmail.com>

Dear Kimberly,

sorry for the delay, I had bad circumstances last month but any way I will send you what you need very soon

thanks for your efforts
sincerely,
moataz

And then, for months, nothing more. I realize, I remarked to Richard Schechner as we brainstormed, that the troupe has more pressing things on their minds than a review in TDR, but, still, I would have liked to write about them more fully.

Frustrated with my incomplete history of the group and my rapidly receding memory of the show’s dialogue, I started casting around beyond what I already had to aid my memory (the Gaza Mono-Logues website, my scrawled diagrams and notes, and conversations with other RS/PS participants) and saw this in a May 2011 New York Times article: “Majdal Shams: Four people were killed here when Israeli troops opened fire in the border area, shattering a calm of more than three decades and putting an international spotlight on this usually sleepy town” (Kershner 2011).

More pressing things, indeed. As I write, another headline on my screen announces: “Golan: Israel Troops Fire on Pro-Palestinian Protesters.” The story reads:

Israeli troops have fired on pro-Palestinian protesters in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, with Syrian state TV saying 20 are dead.

The protesters defied razor-wire fences and ditches along the Syrian border in Golan to mark the 44th anniversary of the 1967 Middle East war.

The US state department said it was “troubled” by the “loss of life.” (BBC News 2011)

The “playfulness” that I had written about and witnessed in Haifa zoomed into perspective. The connection that I had found a bit frivolous when a young performer explained how she related to the kids in Gaza—“I feel their desire to be free, I connect to it from my desire to be an actress”—now appeared heartbreakingly artless.

Figure 3. The Gaza Mono-Logues, 17 October 2010. Oyoun Theatre, Majdal Shams. Performers: Walaa Abu Saa’da, Eba Monder, Yara Halabi, Ragad Samara. (Courtesy of Moataz Abu Saleh)
In June, still reading about the border violence in Majdal Shams, I finally heard from Moataz, who gave me most of the information I asked for. “Sorry for that I am too lazy,” he wrote. Lazy? After the violence, Atay told me, Majdal Shams had apparently been disconnected from the internet.

The eighth and final scene of Oyoun’s Gaza Mono-Logues begins with the performers taking a rope that crosses the stage and tying it around their stomachs and hands, binding them together as they face us with a new seriousness. “Our future in Gaza is obscure and unknown... As if we’re on a boat without a captain in the midst of a raging sea... no one knows where to lean.” They sway against the ropes, the lights playing soft blues and purples across their youthful faces now touched with sadness. “Gaza’s children are forgotten and outside the picture...” The middle girl, who is speaking, pauses: “Yes, outside. And I want to say it...” The other four encourage her in unison: “Say it.” She does: “Gaza has no tenderness and no childhood. A boy is born a man here and a girl is born a bride.” The actors continue this pattern—“I want to say it” / “Say it”—throughout the monologue, making their way through the gravity, pushing themselves to speak like adults. A moment of hope fiercely forces itself through: “I feel like breaking all the borders” / “Break it.”

May and June 2011 saw the first violence in Majdal Shams since 1967. The situation of the actors has thus changed since their 2010 production—the young Druze, sadly, have more in common than they did before with their Gaza counterparts. What is to be done? Now, like Amal Kais earlier this year, I am watching videos of the conflict and weeping in the early morning. Kais’s production may not change the big picture, but it has changed the small. The performance ends with five children clad in cotton T-shirts and overalls leaning against ropes into the future and allowing—forcing—themselves to hope.

My dream is to live in a safe country even in a small village, in a distant land at the end of the world.

Hail for the distant land. Hail for the dream.

References
