

Permission To Perform: Palestinian Theatre in Jerusalem (1967-1993)

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Abstract

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In the period of 1967 to 1993, Palestinian theatre became a major platform for the expression of the Palestinian identity. This dissertation asks the following question: Why and how did Palestinian theatre thrive in Jerusalem during this period?

I begin this study by outlining all the laws and regulations that influenced the development of Palestinian theatre practices since the Ottoman period. Then I focus on the practices and aesthetics of the theatre troupes which successfully established theatre buildings in Jerusalem. In surveying both the state-imposed laws and the grassroots theatrical practices, I document examples of the interactions between the theatre artists and the Israeli authorities. Since Palestinian theatre artists had to apply for the permission to perform from the civilian censorship council in West Jerusalem and the military governors of various regions in the Occupied territories, the Palestinians developed various strategies and tactics in order to assert their identity and maintain their livelihood under occupation. By documenting examples of Palestinian theatre in

Jerusalem, I argue that the permission to perform shaped the way theatre flourished and eventually declined in the city.

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## Personal Preface

On 22 March 2013, I defended this dissertation at the University of Washington. The committee suggested a minor editorial review and a short note on my position as a researcher.

I am a Palestinian scholar. I was born to Palestinian parents from Jaffa and grew up in exile. My interest in Palestinian theatre began in 2008, when I watched a film called *Arna's Children*. Impressed and Inspired by the work of Arna Mer and her son Juliano Mer Khamis in the Jenin refugee camp, I decided to explore the possibility of researching Palestinian theatre for my dissertation. In 2009, I took my first research trip to Palestine and to Jordan. I began my exploration by teaching performance workshops at the Palestinian National Theatre (formerly An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre) and the Gaza Refugee Camp (Jerash Camp) in Jordan. I also met with and interviewed a number of theatre artists to explore the terrain of this broad topic. Since then, I had the pleasure of visiting and working with Palestinian theatre makers on a regular basis. I was invited to direct William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Al-Kasaba Theatre Academy in 2011 and Arthur Milner's *Facts* at Al-Rowwad Theatre in 2012. The process of researching the topic and working as a Palestinian theatre artist taught me that fieldwork and personal experience are indispensable to the study of a living art, such as contemporary theatre. Under the guidance of my supervisor Thomas Postlewait, I made every effort to maintain a historical objectivity in a descriptive voice; however, I have no doubt that my personal and professional experience informed the writing of this history.

## Introduction

When I began my research into Palestinian theatre, I quickly learned that the city of East Jerusalem played a central role in Palestinian cultural production. Several reasons have been outlined for this phenomenon. East Jerusalem plays a symbolic role in the Palestinian national struggle. Especially in the aftermath of the 1967 occupation, this symbolic, spiritual, and cultural status prompted Palestinians to focus on building institutions in the city to preserve their national identity. In East Jerusalem, Palestinians in the West Bank established printing houses, trade unions, newspapers, and universities. Uninterrupted religious tourism kept the city in a constant state of renewal and commercial activity. Centrally located, the city continued to be a major population center, despite the ongoing political turmoil. Historically, the existence of international private and missionary schools led to the emergence of a highly productive educated elite in the city. Despite its internationally recognized status as an occupied city, East Jerusalem has been governed by the civil laws of the West Jerusalem Municipality. This “colonial civil rule” has attracted Palestinians to disseminate cultural production in East Jerusalem because the civil censorship of West Jerusalem’s Israeli Ministry of the Interior proved to be far more negotiable than the military censorship of the occupation.<sup>1</sup>

From the 1967 occupation of the Palestinian Territories until the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, Palestinian theatre flourished in East Jerusalem as part of a Palestinian cultural spring. Based on their geographic proximity and historic connection, the two cities of East Jerusalem and Ramallah functioned as a joint cultural center, connected by

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<sup>1</sup> On the centrality of Jerusalem to Palestinian culture, see Mohammad Mahamid (p. 86) and Hala Khamis Nassar (p. 63). Scholar Hala Khamis Nassar used the phrase “Colonial Civil Rule” to describe the administration of East Jerusalem by the West Jerusalem Municipality as of the 1967 occupation. I describe the legal status of East Jerusalem in chapter one of this dissertation. A general note for this dissertation: I may refer to East Jerusalem simply as Jerusalem.

the social, professional, and familial relationships among their residents. In this critical period of the late sixties and early seventies, the majority of the pioneering Palestinian theatre artists of the West Bank lived and worked in Jerusalem, Ramallah, or both.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, the nascent theatre movement gained momentum, which led to the creation of three dedicated theatrical spaces in East Jerusalem. In 1984, El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe founded An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre building. In 1989, George Ibrahim founded Al-Kasaba Theatre, which moved to Ramallah in the year 2000. In 1998, Sanabel People's Theatre founded its own theatrical space.

In this study, I endeavor to tell the story of Palestinian theatre in East Jerusalem from 1967 to 1993. To this end, I document the key theatrical events, troupes, plays, authors, and players who contributed to the establishment of a vibrant theatre culture in this period. By documentation, I mean the establishment of a chronological narrative based primarily on verifiable Palestinian sources. Due to the variety of troupes and the large scope of Jerusalemite theatre, I began my research by identifying the established theatre buildings: El-Hakawati, Sanabel, and Al-Kasaba. Then, I traced the origins of these theatrical troupes. El-Hakawati theatre originated in the liberal and leftist collective creation troupes of the early 1970s. Sanabel's roots may be traced to its Marxist predecessors: The Palestinian Theatre Troupe, The Palestinian People's Theatre, and to a great extent, Dababis Theatre Troupe. In 1970, Al-Kasaba Theatre originated with the

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<sup>2</sup> Since they are fifteen miles apart, Palestinian residents of both cities behaved as if they lived in the same city. In interviews, this relationship was explicitly stated by most theatre artists including Adel Al-Tarteer (Ramallah), Emile Ashrawi (Ramallah-Jerusalem), Kamel El-Basha (Jerusalem), Majid Al-Mani (Jerusalem), and George Ibrahim (Jerusalem-Ramallah). Today, a clear distinction is often noted between Jerusalemite artists and West Bank artists due to the forced separation created by the Wall and the Qalandia Checkpoint, which now prevents West Bank artists with Palestinian Authority I.D.s from traveling to Jerusalem. This separation began with the Oslo Peace Agreements in 1993.

individual efforts of the leftist theatre artist George Ibrahim. Until the present day, the theatre continues to thrive as a liberal-humanist establishment. Under the banner of the Palestinian left and the notion of the Theatrical Front, these three typologies of Jerusalemite theatre form the foundation of this history.

This study conveys a history of the “center” rather than the periphery. Spanning a period of twenty-six years, I focus on the most active theatre artists and troupes based on their continuity, frequency of production, audience reach locally and internationally, and eventual ability to establish their own theatrical space in East Jerusalem. Due to the geographical focus on Arab Jerusalem, this study does not cover the powerful legacy of the four major Palestinian actors who worked in both Israeli and Palestinian theatres: Makram Khoury, Mohammad Al-Bakri, Salim Daw, and Youssef Abu Wardeh. Similarly, I touch upon the work of the famous directors from the Galilee – Antoine Saleh, Mazin Ghattas, and Riad Massarweh – only in relation to Jerusalemite productions. Because they discontinued their operations, I’ve excluded significant Jerusalemite troupes such as Firqat Al-Amal Al-Sha‘bi (People’s Hope Troupe), Al-Jawwal Troupe (The Touring Theatre), and Al-Kashkul Troupe (The Notebook). Most notably, some of the most active Palestinian theatres today such as Theatre Day Productions, Bethlehem’s Al-Rowwad, Ramallah’s Ashtar Theatre, Jenin’s Freedom Theatre, Hebron’s Yes Theatre, and Beit Jala’s Al-Hara Theatre are outside the scope of this study due to their date of founding post-Oslo, their location, or both.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I state these absences to indicate a dire need for focused research on specific regions, troupes, cities, and artist biographies. A general note on transliteration: I used the symbol ‘ to indicate the Arabic letter ayne and an apostrophe for the hamza; discrepancies in spelling are often the result of disagreements between sources or the problem of transliterating colloquial and classical Arabic; and where possible, I used existing English language spellings of names, places, and titles.

To preserve a segment of the oral history of Palestinian theatre, I narrate undocumented stories based on anecdotes often repeated among the artists. In the framework of a people's history, I enfold personal accounts and encounters into a developmental narrative that encompasses the circumstances of the creation of theatre troupes and the mounting of theatrical productions. Since the majority of the scripts adapted and created by Palestinian theatre artists remain unpublished, I've provided plot summaries along with my textual analysis. I've also combined multiple accounts of key events into a single narrative in order to provide the fullest possible memorial reconstructions. For example, in my reconstruction of a performance of El-Hakawati's *The Story of the Kufur Shamma*, I combined the accounts of several witnesses, newspaper reports, and my own experience as a witness to a video record of the event.

Because the narratives on the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have often overshadowed Palestinian everyday life, I attempted to revisit the civic dialogues of the conflict within this history from below. Despite the generally positive connotation of the word "dialogue" in political debates and conflicts, the documented dialogues in this study range from extremely violent to exceptionally civil. In lieu of the familiar tropes of guerrilla suicide operations and state-sponsored terrorism, I report and document the details of exemplary legal battles between theatre makers and the Israeli Ministry of the Interior's office of censorship. Perhaps the clearest example of this civic dialogue is the case of El-Hakawati's *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, which was banned but the troupe's lawyers successfully appealed the decision. I recount anecdotes of the informal dialogues between the Palestinian citizens of Israel (colloquially known as the Forty-Eighters) and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. For example, Mohammad Al-Batrawi tells the

story of the secret communications between Palestinians in Israel, the Occupied Territories and exile. In analyzing international journalistic representations of controversial Palestinian productions, I show how these civic dialogues played out internationally in the cancellation of El-Hakawati's *The Story of Kufur Shamma* and the attempted cancellation of Sanabel People's Theatre's *Natrin Faraj (Awaiting Salvation)*.

#### Jerusalem, Permission to Perform and the Theatrical Front

Based on the extensive record of controversial encounters between the Israeli authorities and Palestinian theatre artists, two organizing themes underlie this people's history. The first is the permission to perform, which serves as a reminder of the disparity in power between the occupier and the occupied throughout this historical narrative. In the context of this study, the phrase indicates that a legal structure such as institutionalized censorship can prevent artists from physically expressing their chosen message.<sup>4</sup> In its 1992 report on Israeli censorship in the Occupied Territories, the London-based human rights organization ARTICLE 19 accounted for extensive Israeli controls over the dissemination of Palestinian culture in the press and human rights violations concerning academic freedom and artistic expression. In the section entitled "Attacks On Artistic Freedom," the report states:

Plays, art exhibitions and public dance and music performances have been restricted and censored. Many have been banned on the grounds that the military censor considered that they might incite rebellion, that they posed a threat to peace and order, or that they threatened the security of Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1984, Edward Said wrote his seminal essay "Permission to Narrate," which suggested that "balanced" news reporting on Israeli issues in American news media suppressed the Palestinian narrative. He argued that the criteria of presenting the Palestinian story opposite the Israeli one created false symmetry and served as a form of censorship. Similarly, in the presence of a vast power disparity, I suggest that a state can use legal means and military influence to suppress performed narratives.

Palestinian artists who refused to comply with regulations have been arrested and detained or have been banned from performing or travelling.<sup>5</sup>

In reconstructing the performance conditions throughout this study, it became clear that the antagonistic relationship between theatre artists and the Israeli authorities played a significant role in the development and in some cases, the de-development of Palestinian theatrical production.<sup>6</sup>

In my historical study, I do not make the reductive claim that Palestinian theatre in Jerusalem functioned exclusively as a mechanism to combat the occupation. However, I juxtapose the agency of the theatre artists – in their determination to perform the Palestinian identity against immense challenges – with the power of the Israeli authorities to grant or deny the permission to perform theatrical productions. This inherent power disparity appears not only when permissions are denied or suddenly revoked, but also when the Israeli security forces close the theatres or ban productions. Although the theatre makers contributed to the national struggle as active political agents, the need for the occupier's script approval placed the emerging theatrical movement under the microscope of several powerful institutions, including the military governor's office, the office of the censorship, the secret service, the Israeli municipalities, and in some cases, the local police. The historical documentation and narration of multiple direct confrontations between the theatre makers and the various authorities show how Jerusalemite troupes circumvented this system and at times legally negotiated the closures in order to survive.

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<sup>5</sup> ARTICLE 19, Country Report, "Cry for Change: Israeli Censorship in the Occupied Territories," October 1992, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of de-development in the Occupied Territories, especially in Gaza, see Sara Roy.



The second organizing theme in this history is the idea of the Theatrical Resistance Front, which can be extended to other Palestinian geographies, most notably the Palestinian theatre of the Galilee and the contemporary activist theatre of the West Bank. East Jerusalem's Theatrical Resistance Front can best be defined as a complex coalition of Palestinian artists, theatrical troupes, and supporters, who directly contributed to the creation of Arabic language productions and the emergence of theatrical institutions in East Jerusalem from the early days of the occupation until the advent of the Oslo Accords (1993). Initially, this front developed informally as various communities coalesced to produce amateur and educational theatre. By the end of the 1970s, the front formally coalesced as theatre artists created various institutions in the form of theatre buildings, working committees and leagues. Under the shared struggle of the "Permission to Perform," this coalition played an active role as a political agent through its promotion of the Palestinian narrative and the preservation of oral history in popular theatrical productions.

Since the early 1970s, Palestinian theatre artists self-identified as a movement.<sup>7</sup> Although resistance was not their sole function, the theatre makers contributed significantly to an active Cultural Resistance Front throughout Israel and the Palestinian Territories (Gaza and the West Bank).<sup>8</sup> Especially in the 1970s, East Jerusalem became the center of Palestinian cultural resistance and the intermediary space between Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories. In the absence of local radio,

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the books by Anis and Mahamid. Both authors refer to the "movement" in the title.

<sup>8</sup> The Palestinian intellectual Mohammad Al-Batrawi articulated the presence of this Cultural Front during the Intifada of 1987. See Chapter One of this dissertation for a review of leftist cultural activities, which indicate the presence of this activist cultural resistance front. The chapter also includes a discussion of Jerusalem's Theatrical Front and the relationship between Palestinian cultural resistance in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

television, and uncensored journalism, theatre production rapidly expanded to become the leading form of artistic expression in Palestine. In the seventies, theatre artists created a broad range of plays and productions that articulated versions of the Palestinian identity, critiqued social norms, celebrated and extended the Palestinian cultural values, and challenged the power disparity created by the Occupation. For a brief period, theatre became the leading form of cultural resistance in the West Bank, particularly in Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

As a historical lens, the inclusive notion of a Theatrical Front suggests that the various historical trajectories in Palestinian theatre are separate, self-contradictory, equal, and in conversation.<sup>10</sup> Similar to a political popular front, the Theatrical Front can be Marxist and liberal, proletariat and bourgeois, leftist and centrist, and most recently, religious and secular. Since it developed as one alternative to armed struggle in the aftermath of the occupation, the history of the Theatrical Front paralleled the political history of the Palestinian national movement. Until Oslo, a sense of loyal nationalism, a spirit of volunteerism, mass mobilization, and a shared objective of personal and national liberation characterized the Palestinian struggle. After Oslo, the spirit of the struggle has been replaced with social fragmentation, emphasis on individual development, and dependence on foreign aid. Today, the fragmentation of the Theatrical Front is emblematic of the state of Palestinian theatre in general and the failures of East Jerusalemite theatre in particular.

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<sup>9</sup> Both Hanan Ashrawi (1976) and Mahmoud Shqair (*Shu'un Filastiniyah* 1975) describe the quick rise and the potency of Palestinian theatre in the East Jerusalem-Ramallah Area.

<sup>10</sup> The troupes were rarely insular. For example, actors Hussam Abu Eisheh and Ahmad Abu Saloum acted for George Ibrahim. George Ibrahim once acted for El-Hakawati. François Abu Salem directed for The Palestinian Theatre Troupe. Although they may have disagreed in their vision of the Palestinian struggle, they remained part of the same movement at the same cultural front.

As of 1984, An-Nuzha Hakawati Theatre building became the formal address of the Theatrical Front and more generally, the performance site of choice for the Cultural Front.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, the mobile nature of the theatre movement forced the occupation to arrest and interrogate individuals to frustrate their political and cultural activism. Since its establishment, An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre became the primary site of front line confrontations between the theatre artists and political activists on one hand, and state censorship and the security apparatus on the other. In 1986, commanding popular support, El-Hakawati Theatre troupe celebrated the two-year anniversary of the theatre building with a marching parade of several thousand people from Damascus Gate through Salah Ed-Din Street, past the Israeli high court, to the theatre. In the period of the Intifada of 1987 until Oslo, the theatre became a popular cultural center that hosted both cultural and political events. In the state-building period leading to Oslo, political factions rented the theatre for their yearly conferences and celebrations, which were designed to foster national sentiment and stimulate the political struggle. Jerusalemites used this theatre as a site for conglomeration, planning, political activism, rallies, and demonstrations. The building became a symbol of the potential Palestinian state.

In this history, the theatre makers represent the city of Jerusalem. Their activist agency inspired the Theatrical Front as a coalition and a site of resistance. The restrictions imposed by the Permission to Perform governed the actions of the theatre makers, who became a front line of cultural resistance in Jerusalem. Similarly, a system of legal and military structures governed East Jerusalem, which symbolically and geographically represents a frontline of resistance for the Palestinians. As the primary

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter One for a brief account of the building of the theatre and the debates that led to the fragmentation of El-Hakawati troupe.

front in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, Jerusalem plays the dual role of being the nonnegotiable object of both Israeli and Palestinian nationalism on the one hand, and the permeable battle front in its embracing pluralism as the quintessential international multi-religious city.

The Jerusalemite Theatrical Front played a similar role throughout the seventies and eighties as it embraced activist theatre makers and supporters on both sides of the political divide. For example, An-Nuzha-Hakawati theatre became symptomatic of a porous front, where the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories, the Palestinians citizens of Israel, and a small number of activist Jewish Israelis (particularly leftists) supported the theatre as a means to resist the occupation. In the 1980s, El-Hakawati performed in Tel Aviv. In a powerful symbolic gesture, few supportive Jewish Israeli performance artists participated in the two-year celebration of the theatre's opening. Israeli journalism reported on productions by all three trajectories represented in this history. This inclusive front remained active until the failure of the Oslo Peace Process and the segregation of East Jerusalem from the West Bank behind the Wall.

### Methodology and Sources

Traditional political narratives of the Israel/Palestine conflict have often overshadowed Palestinian cultural production, which constitutes literature, poetry, music, theatre, art, film, and in recent years, performance. In news media reports on the conflict, the saturation of violence presents compelling reasons for immediate inquiry into ongoing political crises in place of the documentation of art and culture. By definition, the historiography of the "conflict" presupposes familiar binaries: peace and war; military

forces and civilians; before and after 1948; Zionism and Palestinian nationalism; and so on. Thus, very often, Palestinian cultural narratives are not only juxtaposed against political histories of the Palestinians, but also to the conflict. Although existing conflict narratives provide a natural home for an emerging field of study such as Palestinian theatre, this dissertation presents an independent chronological history, best described as “a history from below.”

By consciously avoiding the conflict’s master narratives in secondary sources and relying predominantly on primary sources – ethnography, archives, and period journalism – this study documents and synthesizes the accounts remembered, argued, and reinforced among Palestinian theatre artists, whose collective knowledge remains the most comprehensive source on Palestinian theatre today. To this end, I conducted interviews with living artists in a series of unstructured interviews, collecting witness accounts of Palestinian theatre and documenting living experiences on and off the Palestinian stage. The interviews generated a large number of autobiographical information as well as corroborating evidence for gossip and urban legends. Although this ethnography yielded a large number of recorded and unrecorded interviews, a plethora of informal field notes, and long reflections on personal conversations, I rarely quoted directly from this evidence. Instead, I synthesized the ethnographic evidence to frame the study, contextualize the theatrical events, and narrate the spirited enthusiasm of the period. With each interview, each theatre artist presented an alternative viewpoint, thus building the historical record. During the period of fieldwork, I used the ethnographic evidence to further generate archival materials and adapt my research questions to new givens.

Due to the absence of a Palestinian state, Palestinian theatre history has not been collected into a centralized archive. During the material collection phase of my fieldwork, I used three types of archives. First, the personal archives of Palestinian theatre artists proved to be the most useful. Often, these materials included: period journalism concerning the artists' personal work, such as reviews of plays and interviews with newspapers and magazines; original posters, photographs, and brochures of period productions; actor copies of play-scripts; and at times, archival video recordings of original productions. Second, the most comprehensive journalistic records existed in institutionalized archives, namely the archive of El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe. In the possession of actor Edwar Muallem at Ashtar Theatre, this organized archive includes a large record of the history of El-Hakawati in the form of scripts, posters, photographs, videos, and professionally collected and labeled period journalism. During the period of field work, Actor Amer Khalil possessed a similarly comprehensive archive in the form of the estate of the late director and El-Hakawati founder François Abu Salem. Third, the Ministry of the Interior's censorship records included files on the plays evaluated for the permission to perform. Obtained from the Israel State Archive under the title of each play, a standard file included: application for the permit, two evaluations by two different censors; a copy of the submitted script; miscellaneous materials such as related newspaper articles; and a copy of the granted permit. Complex cases of censorship contained related internal correspondences.

In manuscript form, the unpublished plays of Jerusalemite theatre are the richest record of the history of the troupes and the literary value of Palestinian theatre. Unpublished are the entire repertoire of El-Hakawati Theatre, the majority of the plays of

Balalin, the large majority of the plays of Mohammad Al-Thaher, the entirety of George Ibrahim's repertoire of children's plays, and the full oeuvre of Dababis theatre except for one published play, *Al-Hashra*. In many cases, the originally composed music became a significant component of the script. In such cases, some artists provided the music. For example, George Ibrahim provided samples of music for a selection of his children's plays. Based on the archival video of the production, the originally composed music of the legendary Egyptian singer and composer Al-Sheikh Imam played a significant role in underscoring the mood and stage aesthetic of El-Hakawati's *Story of Kufur of Shamma*. As primary sources, the scripts reveal the technical abilities of the artists, the choices of topics, the techniques employed to avoid censorship, and to some degree, the effectiveness of the artists at communicating their grievances to the public.

Period journalism provides an official record for most theatre related events. Although in some instances newspaper articles are considered secondary sources, I've used them as primary sources. Most often, I employed newspaper accounts to establish basic information such dates, names, and locations. I also used them to corroborate ethnographic evidence. In some instances, I cited quotations based on transcribed interviews or excerpts relayed by journalists. Many articles included photographs, which informed the resulting historical account in this study. In some cases, I reported on the debates established in the media, which became a primary contributor to the growth of the Theatrical Front.

## Chapter Breakdown

In the first chapter, I ask the question: How did theatre flourish in East Jerusalem

from 1967 to Oslo? By surveying the legal and military power structures that influenced the aesthetic direction and the geographic location of Palestinian theatrical production throughout the twentieth century, I suggest that theatre artists often struggled to create theatre under state-imposed restrictions. Thus, the practices and aesthetics of Palestinian theatre developed partly in reaction to a number of legal and military structures, imposed by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967. From 1967 to 1993, Palestinian theatre can be characterized as a grassroots response to Israel's geographical expansion into the West Bank and its complex legal frameworks, which led theatre to flourish in East Jerusalem and to remain under-developed throughout the Occupied Territories. I begin this chapter with a concise historical overview of Palestinian theatre, followed by a survey of the associated laws of censorship from 1850 to the present. Then, I review the artist networks, which developed in the post 1967 period and coalesced into what I refer to as Jerusalem's Theatrical Resistance Front.

In chapters two to five, I present the histories of various theatre groups as they attempted to function under the existing legal and military structures. In the second chapter, I chronologically review the history of Dababis Theatre, The Palestinian Theatre, The Palestinian People's Theatre, and Sanabel People's Theatre, their major theatrical productions, their struggles to obtain the permission to perform, and their tactics to overcome the challenges of performance in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. Sharing an intellectual affinity to the politics of factions such as the Communist Party and the leftist politics of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, these troupes shared the goal of creating a theatre of resistance for the masses. In plays such as *A House of Cards*



(1974), *When Necessary* (1976), *Man is a cause* (1980), *General Sir* (1984), and *Awaiting Salvation* (1987), they debated issues of statehood, the limits of the national struggle, Arab nationalism, and religious sectarianism. In addition to criticism of traditional systems of education, land ownership, and family values, their plays focused on issues of human rights such as worker's rights, children's rights, and women's rights. Most importantly, all three troupes created popular theatre that predominantly employed Marxist theory to critique the occupation on the one hand and the choices of the Palestinian people under occupation on the other.<sup>12</sup> Located in East Jerusalem's Abu Tor neighborhood, Sanabel People's Theatre stands today as a tangible physical manifestation of this historical trajectory in Palestinian theatre.

Chapter Three tells the story of three theatre troupes: Balalin, Bila-Lin, and Sunduq Al-'ajab. These troupes were the first to employ the collective creation model in Palestinian theatre production. In the absence of established playwrights and a tradition of literary play texts, director François Abu Salem introduced the collective creation techniques that became an essential characteristic of Palestinian theatre. The chapter surveys the origins, activities and major plays of these theatre troupes, which are often credited with professionalizing the Palestinian stage.<sup>13</sup> Never alone, Abu Salem, his partners and co-founders in these troupes promoted a liberal environment, in which they freely debated and challenged the social norms of gender roles, sexuality, religion, and

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<sup>12</sup> Although they are not covered in this dissertation, many troupes from the period fit under this category, such as: Al-Kashkul, Al-Jawwal, Al-Rowa, and Al-Amal Al-Sha'bi. Especially in the years of the Intifada, An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre was closed when the premises were rented for political functions. Subsequent to Oslo, the Israeli authorities often cited the involvement/sponsorship of the Palestinian Authority as the rationale for the closure orders.

<sup>13</sup> On the topic of this chapter, see Nassar (p. 65-104), Snir (p. 104-130), Anis (p. 20-23 and p. 225-228), and Mahamid (p. 29-54). These scholars agree on the significance of Balalin and Sunduq Al-'ajab as important steps in the full professionalization of the Palestinian stage.

politics. Plays, such as *The Darkness* (1971), *Weather Forecast* (1973), *When We Went Crazy* (1976), typically addressed pressing contemporary issues such as the role of women in society, the moral bankruptcy of traditional religious institutions, and the relationship between capitalism and oppression. Most importantly, the plays critically examined the role of popular struggle against the occupation. They also promoted self-liberation from local societal oppression as a significant step in the ongoing resistance against the occupation. To avoid military censorship, they depicted contemporary events and conditions using indirect language and coded situations.

Chapter Four follows the story of El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe, which became Jerusalem's most significant troupe. El-Hakawati introduced many original ideas to Palestinian theatre. For example, they were the first to obtain foreign funding for local productions. From 1977 to 1990, they produced the longest running local and international tours for adult audiences, established the first dedicated multi-purpose theatrical space in Palestine, institutionalized El-Hakawati by establishing a system of shares within the ensemble, and created an extensive system of internal bylaws. For the first time in Palestine, the Jerusalemite troupe paid the actors monthly salaries as part of a permanent ensemble. El-Hakawati's battles with the office of censorship of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior provide multiple examples of the challenging relationship between Palestinian theatre artists and the Israeli authorities. In plays such as *In the Name of the Father, the Mother and the Son* (1977), *Mahjoob Mahjoob* (1980), *Ali the Galilean* (1982), *One Thousand and One Nights of the Stone Thrower* (1982 and 1984), *The Story of the Eye and the Tooth* (1986) and *The Story of the Kufur Shamma* (1987), El-Hakawati presented a range of politically relevant topics that centered on the mechanisms

Palestinians employ to survive rigid local traditions and draconian state-sponsored oppression under occupation.

Chapter Five presents the exceptional individual journey of theatre artist and manager George Ibrahim, who established Al-Kasaba Theatre. Unlike other theatre companies, the history of Al-Kasaba Theatre is intertwined with the personal choices of its founder. Thus, the chapter relates the biography of Ibrahim as an actor, director, manager, writer, and adapter of adult and children plays from the Western canon. Since 1968, Ibrahim has been one of the most controversial figures in Palestinian theatre. As a freelance artist, he presented various programs in the Arabic divisions of Israeli radio and television. Ibrahim operated under several troupe names: Firqat Al-Funoun Al-Masrahiyah (The Theatrical Artistic Group, 1970); Al-Shawk Theatre (The Spikes Theatre, 1984); and Masrah Al-Warsheh Al-Fanniyeh (The Artistic Workshop Theatre, 1986). In 1989, he established the second dedicated theatrical space in East Jerusalem under the name Al-Kasaba (The Market Place). Some of his children's theatre productions include musical adaptations of *Little Red Riding Hood* (1980), and *The Happy Shoemaker* (1973). His repertoire for adults includes adaptations of Camus' *Caligula* (1986), Marivaux's *The Game of Love and Chance* (1971), and Sartre's *Men Without Shadows* (1988). This dissertation does not include Al-Kasaba's rich history after Oslo. But it is worth mentioning that the theatre moved its headquarters to Ramallah in the year 2000 and became Palestine's largest theatrical and cinematic operation.

## Chapter One

### The Permission To Perform

“If the Left could employ the wind, couldn’t it mobilize a people?”  
 Mohammad Al-Batrawi, 24 October 2010

The practices and aesthetics of Palestinian theatre developed primarily in reaction to a number of legal and military structures, imposed by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967. From 1967 to 1993, Palestinian theatre can be characterized as a grassroots response to Israel’s geographical expansion into the West Bank and its complex legal frameworks, which led theatre to flourish in Jerusalem. I begin this chapter with a concise historical overview of Palestinian theatre, followed by a survey of the associated laws of censorship from 1850 to the present. Then, I review the artist networks, which developed in the post-1967 period and coalesced into what I refer to as East Jerusalem’s Theatrical Resistance Front.

#### A Concise Overview of Palestinian Theatre: 1850-Present

In the second half of the nineteenth century, theatrical activities in Palestine were part of the larger trends of cultural production in Greater Syria and they included the theatrical productions of established European missionary and private schools, the visiting productions of Egyptian and Syrian theatrical troupes, and the emergent interest in performance in Palestinian clubs and institutions of civil society.<sup>14</sup> Theatre artist Nasri Al-Jozy’s personal account of his childhood interest in theatre provides memorial evidence on this period. He notes, for example, a conversation with his teacher Khalil

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<sup>14</sup> Nasri Al-Jozy’s excellent introduction outlines these factors as influential from 19C until 1948. See also Hala Khamis Nassar’s section on “The Roots of Palestinian Theatre” in her dissertation, p. 11-17. For an excellent summary of Nassar’s excellent historical narrative, see her article on Palestinian theatre in *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*, p. 1029-1035. The following concise overview overlaps with and draws on Nassar’s and Snir’s work.

Beidas, who had mentioned a tradition of school productions in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. And in a separate conversation with another teacher, Al Jozy recalls a description of theatrical activities for girls in a Greek Orthodox school in Jerusalem during the same period. The latter teacher remembered: “Of course, we used to do two shows a year, the first on the occasion of Christmas and the other at the end of the school year.”<sup>15</sup> In his memoirs, Khalil Al-Sakakini (1878-1953) referred to the existence of church initiatives that included theatrical activities as early as 1908.<sup>16</sup> In 1912, a reference by the Jerusalemite Mohammad Ruhi Al-Khalidi showed his strong familiarity with the theatre in his description of an adaptation of a European novel to the “Ottoman tongue” and its performance in the suburbs of Istanbul. Noting that the acting “was not bad,” he insisted “if care were taken to encourage this project with the power of money and effort of men, it would have doubtlessly succeeded in Turkish and Arabic.”<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the Ottoman rule in 1917/1918, after World War One, and the advent of the British occupation and its mandate in 1920, Palestine experienced a major cultural revival. Hala Khamis Nassar noted:

Cultural life in general, and Palestinian theatre activities in particular, flourished during the British Mandate, stimulated by opening Palestinian national schools and educational institutions, the reactivation of the missionary schools, public libraries, cultural clubs and societies, Christian parish activities, publishing houses, radio stations, newspapers and periodicals, and literary organizations and salons.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Al-Jozy, p. 11-13.

<sup>16</sup> Find original quotes by Al-Sakakini in Arabic in Al-Mallah, p. 77. See Nassar, p. 17. Note that Nassar and Al-Mallah have a similar narrative and their periodization begins in 1850.

<sup>17</sup> Qtd in Al-Mallah. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise. Researchers will always be indebted to Al-Malah, who wrote the earliest scholarly study on Palestinian theatre in his master’s thesis in 1976. He compiled a list of the earliest references to theatrical activities and troupe names.

<sup>18</sup> *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*, p. 1030.

In the 1920s and 1930s, most of the productions performed throughout Palestine were adapted from classics by European playwrights such as Molière, Shakespeare, Racine, and Corneille. Well-known Arab poets such as Khalil Al-Yazijee, Ahmad Shawqi, Anton Al-Jamil, and Father Antoine Rabbat were theatrically produced in this period. Locally, the best-known Palestinian theatre artists were playwright Jamil Al-Bahri in Haifa and Al-Jozy brothers in Jerusalem. In 1936, The Palestine Broadcasting Station was established and became a venue for the production of radio plays.<sup>19</sup>

In 1948, the war and expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland annihilated the infrastructure and cohesion of Palestinian politics, society and culture. For the first time, an Arab Palestinian Diaspora came into existence. The exiled Palestinian elites were located in multiple areas, including the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. This fate also afflicted active theatre artists. For example, members of Al-Jozy family ended up in Damascus and Amman, Asma' Toubi in Beirut, Father Estafan Salem in Latakia, and Mohammad Hasan Ala' Al-Din in Amman.<sup>20</sup> In 1966, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) founded the Association of Palestinian Theatre in Damascus, the first known Palestinian theatre organization in the diaspora. Ghassan Kanafani—playwright, novelist, journalist, and spokesman for the Popular Front for the

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<sup>19</sup> On the period of 1918-1948, see Al-Jozy, who provides a survey of the most influential theatre artists, playwrights and companies in the major Palestinian cultural centers, particularly Jerusalem, Haifa, and to a much lesser extent Jaffa. See also his book on the history of Palestinian radio

<sup>20</sup> See Nasri Al-Jozy's various sections on the fate and work of these personalities. They had various levels of contributions. Al-Jozy labels them, among others, as some of the pioneers of Palestinian theatre. The biographical portions in his book show the noted cities as places of residence.

Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—began to produce his novels and plays in the sixties as well.<sup>21</sup>

In the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians were subject to the censorship and governance of Hashemite and Egyptian regimes, which limited the emergence of Palestinian cultural production in general and theatre in particular.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, conditions in the West Bank became favorable for the creation of theatre under the banner of education within the Hashemite Kingdom. This effort resulted in extracurricular school activities, some radio dramas, and the works of few playwrights who attempted to fill the immense vacuum in theatre production.<sup>23</sup>

When David Ben-Gurion declared the State of Israel in 1948, Palestinians experienced harsh new realities within the United Nations' Partition Line, also known as the Green Line. Snir Reuven describes:

The years of severe economic hardship that followed, the disruption of all cultural life, but not least the silent hand of the Israeli secret service that made itself felt everywhere, made it impossible for artists, writers, poets and dramatists to work freely.<sup>24</sup>

Under the Israeli military rule, Palestinians found refuge in the Communist Party, the only political institution in which they could voice their demands for basic rights; however, the party influenced literature, poetry and journalism more effectively than it benefitted theatrical production. From the 1950s to the early 1960s, the Israeli authorities, along with the Histadrut (General Federation of Laborers), sponsored the creation of “positive” cultural activities in Arabic to align the indigenous population with

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<sup>21</sup> See Nassar p. 43 and Snir, p. 77-81.

<sup>22</sup> Nassar in *Columbia Encyclopedia*, p. 1032.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Mallah, p. 96-120. Nassar, “Cultural Activities Within Palestine,” p. 40-43.

<sup>24</sup> Snir, Reuven, p. 51. See his excellent chapter entitled “Annihilation and Re-Emergence” in his book *Palestinian Theatre*, p. 45-84. See also Nassar's chapter entitled “From 1948 to the War of 1967: The Palestinian Uprooting, Decline, Isolation and New Beginning,” p. 39- 46.

the newly created political establishment. For instance, one play entitled *The Development of the Arab Village in Israel in Ten Years*, crafted in Palestinian dialect, follows two Palestinians who return to their village after a 10-year willful absence and discover the modernizing influence of the Israeli government.<sup>25</sup>

By November 1966, Israel ceased the military rule that governed Palestinians within the Green Line. Then in 1967, its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip “re-united” Palestinians who remained within their historic homeland. Masrah An-Nahid (The Rising Theatre) was established in Haifa in 1967 and continued until 1977, forming the foundation of professional theatre in the Galilee region.<sup>26</sup> In the West Bank, the East Jerusalem-Ramallah area became a hub for emerging theatrical troupes including Balalin (The Balloons, 1970), the troupe often credited for inspiring the flourishing of a theatrical movement throughout the seventies. Other important West Bank troupes from this period include Dababis (The Pins, 1973), El-Warsheh El-Fanniyeh (Theatre Workshop, 1970), Sunduq Al-‘ajab (Box of Wonder, 1976) and Al-Masrah Al-Falastini (The Palestinian Theatre, 1973).<sup>27</sup> The Palestinian National Theatre Troupe, which succeeded the aforementioned Association of Palestinian Theatre in Syria, officially represented the PLO in exile. In the 1970s, both the Palestinian National Theatre Troupe and the

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<sup>25</sup> Snir provides a critical and historical assessment of “positive” activities, as well as an excerpt of the aforementioned play in both Arabic and English. He concludes that the play is “pure propaganda,” p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> For theatre in the Galilee, see Haddad.

<sup>27</sup> For theatre in the Occupied Territories see Al-Mallah and Mahamid. For a scholarly/contextual narrative of these periods, see Snir’s chapters “The Emergence of Professional Theatre” and Nassar’s chapter “Reunification and the Augmentation of Professional Theatre after the 1967 War.”



Egyptian National Theatre in Cairo produced Mu‘in Bseiso’s plays, which were all written in exile.<sup>28</sup>

Between 1967 and 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed, Palestinian theatre continued to increase in number in both the homeland and exile. At home, the most significant development during this period was the foundation of El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe in 1977. It succeeded in establishing the first theatre building in East Jerusalem in 1984. While maintaining active presence in Jerusalem, the troupe toured in Europe and the United States. Their most lasting contributions remain the creation of An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre and a number of original unpublished scripts that represented complex aspects of the Palestinian identity in the homeland and abroad.<sup>29</sup>

The period of the Intifada, which started in late 1987, initially witnessed a decline in theatrical activity due to the increase in curfews and violence; however, several theatre institutions were founded or transformed in the lead up to the Oslo Accords and in recent years. For example, El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe disbanded and their theatre became known as the Palestinian National Theatre in 1991.<sup>30</sup> Al-Kasaba theatre established a branch in Ramallah in 2000. Since the Intifada, Palestinians established a number of new theatrical spaces, including Al-Midan Theatre in Haifa (1995), Sanabel People’s Theatre in Jerusalem (1998), Al-Rowwad Theatre in Bethlehem (1998), Masrah Al-Hara in Beit Jala (2005), Freedom Theatre in Jenin (2006), and Yes Theatre in Hebron (2007). In addition, Ashtar Theatre set up in two locations: in Jerusalem (1991) and then in Ramallah (1996).

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<sup>28</sup> For a concise account of activities in the diaspora see Faysal Darraj’s article on Palestinian Theatre in the *World Encyclopedia of Theatre*, edited by Don Rubin, p. 186-197.

<sup>29</sup> See Snir’s chapter “Al-Hakawati Theatre Troupe,” p. 131-166.

<sup>30</sup> See Nassar’s chapter “Palestinian Theatre during the Intifada until the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” p. 105-174.

## Unregulated to Illegal: All Laws Lead to Jerusalem

Although Palestinian theatre can be divided into multiple periods and geographies, its history often intersects with the city of Jerusalem due to the city's symbolic significance within Historic Palestine's Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Legal factors intentionally suppressed the theatrical movement before the 1967 occupation and unintentionally supported the flourishing of theatre in East Jerusalem in the seventies and eighties. Given that theatrical activity and live performances are often deeply affected by the laws that govern the movement of people, the freedom to assemble, and the ability of artists to publicize their events in print, the changing legal status of cultural production in the city from the Ottoman era until the present demonstrates the progressive transformation of Palestinian theatre from an unregulated civil art form to an illegal act of resistance under military occupation. I will survey a series of Ottoman, British Mandatory, Jordanian, and Israeli laws that heavily controlled theatrical activity and forced Palestinian theatre makers to develop their own strategies and aesthetics to circumvent censorship. By 1967, these laws formed the basis for the emergence of East Jerusalem as the uncontested theatrical capital for the Palestinian people. This survey presents an alternative history of Palestinian theatre as a popular cultural practice that is motivated by efforts "from below," but extensively controlled by legal and political structures "from above."

In the late nineteenth century, Palestine operated under Ottoman rule. Jerusalem was the administrative center of a *sanjak* (district) that sent representatives to the Ottoman Parliament. In that period, theatre was recognized under the law of copyright of 1328H (1910 C.E.) as a way to disseminate original cultural production. In the third term

of the law, it stated that copyright included the adaptation of the authored materials in “acted form.” The law made a distinction between printing rights and performance rights of “acted novels and opera [which] cannot be performed partly or wholly on stage without the permission of the author.” However, dramas and operas performed without financial gain or mounted at educational institutions were exempt. The use of the expression “acted novel” suggests that the word for theatre, in the western sense, was not in common usage; however, the law undoubtedly addressed the performance of plays because the text clearly noted that a stage performance without a permit constituted an infraction.<sup>31</sup>

In the laws of Mandatory Palestine, theatre was identified both as a site and an activity. One of the earliest legal references to the theatre took place in 1922 under the *Intoxicating Liquors and Public Entertainments Ordinance*, which referred to it as a possible site for the consumption of alcohol. Public entertainments meant “any entertainments the audience is permitted to watch for the payment of an entrance fee” including live performances, cinema, horse shows, circus, musical concerts, and dance.<sup>32</sup> To obtain the license to commercially use a theatre or a cinema, the fees ranged from eight to thirty Pounds. The fees were based on the number of seats in the house, the type of the establishment and the class of the seats.

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<sup>31</sup> An earlier version of this law was written in 1289H (1872 C.E.). All laws related to Palestine were collected at Birzeit University. See <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu/> (Last accessed on March 22, 2011). All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

<sup>32</sup> See Arabic language version at <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu/>. This definition is provided almost verbatim on the first page.

Subsequent laws governing the cultural production in the West Bank and East Jerusalem referred to the British Mandate and on rare occasions to Ottoman laws.<sup>33</sup> The most significant law in this period was the *Public Performance (Censorship) Ordinance* of 1927, which specifically applied to theatrical content rather than theatre as a public building or a site. This law drew its definitions from a number of earlier laws including the Imperial Law of Copyright of 1911 (extended to Palestine in the year 1924), the aforementioned law on liquor and entertainments, and most importantly, the *Cinematograph Films Ordinance* of 1927. To censor cinema, the Mandate government formed a censorship committee that operated in Jerusalem. It required the committee to include the governor of Jerusalem as its chair, and other persons appointed by the mandate's High Commissioner on the condition that at least one was a woman and another an employee of the mandatory government. The same committee would soon after become responsible for the review of theatrical performances.

In the case of theatre, the law under the mandate explicitly demanded that no play or circus act should take place without a permit. The process of censorship required the author or producer to apply for a performance license. The committee could ask for additional materials to make a decision, including the script, the program of the event, or a live performance presented before any or all committee members. All those who managed, participated in, or assisted in the performance without prior permission were accountable under the law. The announcement or publicity of such entertainments without prior permission was illegal. Likewise, the addition of new acts to an approved performance cancelled existing permits. By 1933, the law was amended to allow the

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<sup>33</sup> Jordanian laws, Occupation orders, and Palestinian Authority laws did not create original sets of laws. Often, they revised the laws of the British Mandate and the Ottoman Empire.

secretary of the committee to send out notifications for the cancellation of previously approved permits.

Most notable, these two laws, which emerged in 1927, ten years after the creation of the Mandate, were administered by the governor of Jerusalem. The tensions and frustrations of this period culminated in the Buraq Revolt/Wailing Wall Riots of 1929.<sup>34</sup> The censorship laws not only complicated the process of showing plays and films, but also ensured that any member of the committee, high ranking police officer, governor, or approved employee could enter a performance space, evaluate a performance and affect an arrest if necessary. The committee members could also issue an arrest order should they have deemed it necessary to reinforce the law. Finally, the punishment for breaking the censorship laws included a month in jail, a fine of fifty pounds, or both. In addition, the mandate government reserved the right to further try an individual for producing content that negatively affected public security or morality, as defined by the government.

The 1930s brought forth heightened fears among Palestinians of the impending Zionist threat to Palestinian national aspirations. These fears were manifested in the Palestinian General Strike (1936), the Great Arab revolt (1936-1939), and the institution of emergency laws (1937). The *Criminal Code Ordinance* of 1936 set in motion a series of draconian laws intended to criminalize all aspects of rebellion, protest, political opposition, and by extension, nationalistic cultural production. In combination with the censorship laws on print, radio, film and performance, the criminal code potentially ensured that Palestinian cultural production and dissemination would remain fully under the control of the government. The ordinance stated that the British Authorities aimed at

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<sup>34</sup> On the significance of the Buraq Revolt, see Barakat.

keeping the peace within Palestine and ensuring continuous commercial and political relations internationally. However, in effect, they were demanding that Palestinians continue uninterrupted servitude to the Empire without any form of public protest or opposition. The law contained a broad definition of treason. Any assembly or meeting, or even the discussion of holding such meetings, could be identified as political and thus a treasonous act. The law also extended this definition of treason to the incitement of police and military personnel to rebel against the mandate government. The punishment for treason was life in prison. A British police or military officer could prevent the assembly of any three or more individuals by firing a warning shot or blowing a horn. If the assembly did not separate, the individuals risked up to five years in prison. With the passing of the *Palestine (Defence) Order in Council* of 1937 followed by a domino of emergency laws and regulations, the country was effectively placed under martial law.

The *Defence (Emergency) Regulations* of 1939 and 1945 spelled out a number of definitions that literally prevented indigenous theatre makers from safely representing political topics on stage and even announcing or publicizing their plays in newspapers. In the section on propaganda, which also refers to publicity, newspapers were prevented from publishing any materials that could affect public opinion or influence the mandatory government's security. Since they were required to have permits to be established, the office of censorship closely scrutinized all newspapers. Before publication, Newspaper copies were required to be sent for censorship. According to its definition within the law, political propaganda could also be disseminated in the playing of cinematic tapes, audio and video, as well as the printing of photos, therefore, these mediums were all censored. Outside of approved content, references to the government were banned in all the

aforementioned mediums. For example, suits or uniforms of particular political significance were banned if wearing them might affect the public negatively in any site where crowds (audiences) may be present. Thus, as these series of oppressive measures multiplied throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, it became progressively more difficult to produce Palestinian culture unless it was created within approved institutions such as the Palestine Broadcast Corporation.<sup>35</sup>

Under Jordanian law from 1948 to 1967, the simplified regulations of theatrical content reflected the Hashemite government's inexperience with this art form. After 1948, the theatre was nearly absent from public life in the West Bank. According to the Jordanian laws of the period, the lawmakers initially perceived the institution of the theatre as an endeavor for the government to nurture rather than as a medium for potentially dangerous messages against the kingdom. The *Education Law* of 1955 expressed the importance of the fine arts in and outside schools and suggested that educational institutions must encourage the study of acting and music (chapter 1, article 4). Under the *Ministry of Social Affairs Law* of 1956, the ministry was entrusted to supervise and "direct" cultural institutions such as theatres, cinemas, festivals and other sites of entertainment in a "socially positive manner" (article 4), an early reference to governmental attempts to direct and control artistic content. The *Law of the Municipality of Bethlehem* (1951 and 1956), and similar laws in other municipalities, regulated public entertainments including the selling of tickets and the collection of fees due for each seat in cinemas and "acting houses." Cinema houses were given special attention because there were thirty-three in the Kingdom, fourteen of them were in Nablus, Ramallah, Al-

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<sup>35</sup> Arabic language copies of these laws are archived in <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu/>. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise. For further information on radio during the Palestine Mandate, see the dissertation of Andrea Stanton, Columbia University, 2007.

bireh, Bethlehem, Jericho, Jenin and Jerusalem. Classifications by level of service were assigned to these cinema houses and fees were regulated by 1956 throughout the Kingdom. In a 1958 amendment to the regulation, Jerusalem's Al-Nuzha cinema was reclassified from a second-class to a third class house, a significant fact in the history of El-Hakawati theatre in the 1970s.<sup>36</sup>

Although the laws of the municipalities did not mention theatre apart from the regulation of public entertainments, the Hashemite government gave its municipalities the permission to establish new institutions to promote culture and sports such as museums, libraries, schools, and clubs, which included music and sports. Along with establishing new buildings for these institutions, the municipalities were permitted to form committees and hire individuals to manage and control (censor) these efforts.<sup>37</sup> In spite of the presence of censorship language in the aforementioned laws, the government was committed to constructing theatre buildings. Overall, the fine arts offered opportunities for development. The *Ministry of Information Regulations* of 1966 articulated the kingdom's goals for cultural development to be a national building project directed at the Jordanian citizen. The tools of the ministry included radio, print publication, the fine arts and television. Article three of the law stated that "The aims of the ministry of information is to plan and execute the process of media, cultural, intellectual, and artistic awareness assigned to the state in Jordan." The ministry specifically noted the goal to develop national sentiment in the Jordanian and Arab citizen. The *Press and Publication Law* of 1967 documented some of the measures taken

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<sup>36</sup> See Arabic language version of all these laws at <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu/>. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

<sup>37</sup> As an example of this see chapter 11, articles 105-108 in *El-Bireh Municipal Bylaws* of 1957. <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu>



by the Ministry to control the message to the public. Two copies of all printed materials were sent to the Ministry of Information and the minister reserved the right to confiscate the publication if it were deemed harmful to the public. This law cancelled any previous Palestinian press or print laws.<sup>38</sup>

The Hashemite government struggled in its attempts to define Jerusalem's identity in relation to Jordan's political capital, Amman. The lack of freedom in print and in the press proved to be a challenge for Palestinians who wanted to assert their national identity and the unique status of their religious and political capital. On this period (1948-1967), Hanan Ashrawi states that "only the regime's mouthpieces or writers of trashy third-rate literature succeeded in getting their works published, while underground literature remained scarce and did not reach a significant audience."<sup>39</sup> Another factor that deeply affected cultural development in Jerusalem was the Hashemite Kingdom's active opposition to and suppression of the Communist Party, the most significant supporter of Palestinian cultural production at the time. The *Resistance of Communism Law*, signed by the king in 1953, defined communism as the call to replace the constitution of the kingdom with the communist system that aimed at the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat. It punished all those who promoted, supported, or participated in the communist cause by any means including direct financial aid, photography, publication, speeches, or the sale of communist materials.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, Palestinians in Israel continued to be governed by the emergency laws of 1945, which kept the Arabic speaking population under martial law until November of

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<sup>38</sup> See also the previous version of this law, the Press Law of 1955, which was enforced by the Ministry of the Interior.

<sup>39</sup> p. 3 (1976).

<sup>40</sup> An earlier version of the *Resistance to Communism Law* was passed in 1948.

1966. As a legally recognized party, the Communist Party of Israel became the only legal political venue for the Palestinians to demand equal rights and to combat the military government's extensive network of collaborators.<sup>41</sup> The legality of the Communist Party in Israel allowed Palestinian poets and writers in the Galilee to publish their work through Party venues such as the Arabic language newspaper *Al-Itihad*. By contrast during this period, in addition to its active suppression of the Palestinian identity, the Jordanian government actively outlawed all communist cultural activities and publications. This legal and ideological distinction explains the existence of activist Palestinian cultural production in the press, poetry and literature in Israel but not in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

After the occupation of 1967, the laws governing the West Bank underwent a series of restrictions. For example, the responsibilities previously held by the Jordanian ministries and municipalities were transferred to the military commander and individuals appointed by him. On August 21 of 1967, under Military Order 101, theatrical activities became illegal from a logistical standpoint because groups of ten or more people were no longer allowed to assemble. Consequently, the permission to perform became the responsibility of the military commander, who created his own guidelines and appointed his own personnel for censorship as he saw fit. According to this order, it was illegal to perform a wide range of activities without the military's permission, including processions, assemblies or vigils. Also forbidden were acts of holding, waving, displaying or affixing flags or political symbols; and the printing or publicizing of

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<sup>41</sup> Note that the Palestinian Christian and Muslim populations were the only ones within Israel to be governed by the 1945 emergency laws during the period of 1948 to 1966. See Hillel Cohen's chapter "Communists vs the Military Government, Collaborators vs Communists" in his book *Good Arabs: the Israeli security agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967*.

notices, posters, photos, pamphlets, or other documents containing material having political significance. Likewise, the military forbade public speaking or any attempt to influence public opinion in the region in a manner that might be liable to harm public safety or public order.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, “A military commander and any person delegated by him for this purpose shall have all the powers given to the censor under the Defense (Emergency) Regulations, 1945.”<sup>43</sup> Any of these offenses was punishable by ten years of imprisonment, a fine of two thousand liras, or both.

On 12 May 1974, the military governor Aryeh Shalev ordered a modification of the *Public Performance (Censorship) Ordinance* of 1927. This revival of the mandatory law responded to the increasing demands of an emerging theatrical community in Palestine; however, the modifications were intended to censor rather than permit the production of public performances. First, the order amended the former mandatory law, which originally functioned under a civil authority, to include it within the jurisdiction of a military appointed committee. Second, the order required the presentation of the performance before the committee as part of the application process for the permit.<sup>44</sup> The third adjustment raised the application fee from 500 mils to 30 liras, a much higher financial burden. Finally, punishment for breaking this law was increased from one to three months in prison and from 50 pounds to 500 liras, or both punishments combined. The combination of Order 101 and Order 549 effectively rendered Palestinian theatrical

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<sup>42</sup> See Arabic and Hebrew original on <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu>. See English language translation: [http://www.btselem.org/download/19670827\\_order\\_regarding\\_prohibition\\_of\\_incitement\\_and\\_hostile\\_propaganda.pdf](http://www.btselem.org/download/19670827_order_regarding_prohibition_of_incitement_and_hostile_propaganda.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> B'tselem translation.

<sup>44</sup> The phrasing of the amendment appears to be grammatically incorrect when the new phrase is merged into the original 1927 text: “...unless he obtains a certificate from the council that gives him permission to do it, *if it was actually required of him to present the novel, play, or part of it before the censorship committee on novels and plays*” (Order 549, Amendment 4).

activity in the West Bank illegal, impossible to achieve within legal means except for productions devoid of contemporary relevance.

Parallel to the process of “outlawing” the performance of the Palestinian identity in public places and within the theatre, the Israeli government began the process of separating East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank in what Ian Lustick referred to as an “occupation through municipal expansion.” For the theatrical community, the most significant of this process was the publication of the “Jerusalem Declaration” by the interior minister on 28 June 1967, which resulted in the expansion of “the municipal boundaries of Yerushalayim to include Al-Quds and a freshly demarcated, oddly shaped swath of the West Bank containing lands from 28 Arab villages.”<sup>45</sup> While the rest of the West Bank remained under military law, an “expanded” East Jerusalem was both occupied by military forces and functioned under the same civil administration of the Israeli municipality of West Jerusalem. For theatre makers, and more generally for cultural producers in the rest of the West Bank, occupied East Jerusalem became the city where Palestinian culture was a legally attainable endeavor in spite of the oppressive and inconsistent civilian censorship of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior.

#### Armed Struggle Abroad and Cultural Resistance at Home

The 1967 occupation marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination. The dream of unified pan-Arab armies liberating Palestine was recognized as a delusion. Israel had asserted its power over the entirety of mandatory Palestine. The Palestinian political leadership lost access to the homeland.

The struggle entered a new phase:

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<sup>45</sup> Lustic, p. 286 and p. 288, respectively.

The center of gravity in Palestinian nationalism moved into exile and with it the locus of political and social activity, military command, decision-making, and institution-building. Strategies of civilian resistance and mass mobilization in the occupied territories were obscured, marginalizing the local political activists and social forces in Palestinian decision-making. The balance was not to shift significantly until the eruption of the intifada in December 1987, twenty years later.<sup>46</sup>

From 1967 to 1972, in what became known as the Palestinian revolution, with both Fateh and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) at the helm, the PLO led the Palestinian armed struggle in the diaspora. From airplane hijackings to bombings against civilian and military targets, the guerilla operations brought the Palestinian revolution to the forefront of Western and Arab media. In great measure, however, the news reports associated the cause with terrorist attacks, which undermined modest successes against the Israeli military. In 1970/1971, the Palestinian guerrilla revolution suffered military, financial, and political setbacks in the events of Black September and the ensuing exile of the PLO from Jordan to Lebanon, a prelude to a series of complex events that eventually led to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the expulsion of the PLO to Tunis in 1982.<sup>47</sup>

Within the West Bank, Palestinians functioned on an entirely different plane. They filled the absence of an Arab governing body by “strengthening existing Arab institutions and showing *sumud* (steadfastness) in the face of occupation while hoping for liberation from the outside.”<sup>48</sup> Raja Shehadeh articulated the concept of *sumud* as an act “practiced by every man woman and child here struggling on his or her own to learn to cope with, and resist, the pressures of living as a member of a conquered people.”<sup>49</sup> He suggested that perhaps, between submission and hate, a third option might be to remain

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<sup>46</sup> Yazid Sayigh, p. 173.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed history of Palestinian armed resistance see Yezid Sayigh’s *Armed Struggle and the Search for a State*.

<sup>48</sup> Qumsiyeh, p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> Shehadeh, p. viii.

steadfast in choosing to stay present and living. In this alternative shared popular space, which also exists between surrender to the occupation and armed resistance against it, a long tradition of Palestinian popular peaceful resistance ensured that the struggle remained alive at home.

While *sumud* provided the minimum and most prevalent form of popular resistance, other forms began to take root in the West Bank, particularly in the Ramallah-Jerusalem area, the hub of an emerging intellectual and political elite. In the tradition of the mass non-violent protests of the 1920s and 1930s in Mandatory Palestine and the Palestinian cultural resistance of the 1950s and 1960s in Israel, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories began a process of mass popular organizing that eventually formed the basis for the Intifada of 1987. In the early days after the occupation, the communists led the way in arguing for nonviolent struggle through the formation of grass roots organizations and solidifying relationships with labor unions, and other factions eventually followed in their footsteps. The Palestinian Left, which included such factions as the underground communists, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), is credited with the organizing of voluntary work committees and the establishing of the nucleus for the eventual institutionalization of Palestinian civil society by the late seventies.<sup>50</sup>

Post-1967, Palestinian cultural producers embraced this atmosphere of *sumud* and volunteerism, which emphasized the need to build the community from the grassroots. The proliferation of voluntary work camps in schools and universities set the stage for the development of mass popular and cultural resistance. The communist cultural critic, life

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<sup>50</sup> For details on Palestinian peaceful resistance in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, see *A Quiet Revolution* by Mary Elizabeth King and *Popular Resistance in Palestine* by Mazin Qumsiyeh.

companion of the period's most prolific Palestinian theatre makers, and former editor of several Palestinian leftist newspapers – including *Al-Itihad* (before 1948), *Al-Fajr* (post 1967), and *Al-Bayader* (post 1967) – Mohammad Al-Batrawi, considered the Israeli suppression of the Palestinian identity to be “an indicator of the extent of the depth of Palestinian cultural resistance and the extent of the originality and sumud of this second front.” He believed that nationalistic cultural production formed the foundation of the Palestinian spirit:

In the stage of national liberation for a people, as it is in our case, the culture of the masses becomes a spiritual connector and an embracing fabric to all categories and classes of this people. So it becomes a front of struggle and resistance of more depth and influence than any other form of resistance.<sup>51</sup>

Reflecting on the emergence of a theatre of resistance in this period, Emile Ashrawi stated: “It was as if all the threads were coalescing for this leap that happened in the seventies.”<sup>52</sup> In an interview with the leftist newspaper *Al-Hadaf*, François Abu Salem described the implicit connection between theatre and armed struggle:

September of 1970 was the spark that opened up many fields of resistance. When our people felt that armed struggle was struck down in Jordan in 1970, they had to create the conditions to assist resistance in all its forms. The theatrical movement was a facet of resistance, and an affirmation of the Palestinian national character.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Samid Al-Iqtisadi*, v. 10, no. 74, Oct./Nov./Dec. 1988, p. 157.

<sup>52</sup> Emile Ashrawi, personal interview, 11 January 2011. He refers to a theatrical leap, spring, or emergence. Since they were conducted in Arabic, all quotes from interviews are my translations.

<sup>53</sup> *Al-Hadaf*, Feb 6, 1982.

A Cultural Front:<sup>54</sup> Leftists Share Knowledge Across the Green Line

A few days after the occupation of 1967, Al-Batrawi saw a car sporting Israeli license plates stop in front of his house, located near the Ramallah prison, which after the Oslo Accords became the center of the Palestinian Authority government, Al-Muqata'a. Respecting the military curfew, Al Batrawi stayed in the house and attempted to recognize the middle-aged man, who walked out of the car, passed the veranda, and towards the main door. The man said, "You're still alive?" Recognizing the Palestinian literary and political figure Emile Habibi, a former colleague at *Al-Itihad* and a communist comrade, Al-Batrawi exclaimed, "You gained weight, Emile!" The former Israeli Knesset member replied sarcastically, "We've expanded!"<sup>55</sup>

This exemplary encounter across the Green Line invokes the spirit of a time often described as a period of reunification. This description of the period may falsely credit the occupation for the encounters of the Palestinian people within the homeland after a nineteen-year separation. In reality, when the two men spoke, Habibi expressed his surprise at Al-Batrawi's extensive knowledge of Palestinian politics and cultural production in Israel. Al-Batrawi's explanation reveals how some Palestinian intellectuals creatively overcame this seeming isolation:

One of the remaining communications of the Palestinian Left was by way of the Palestinian communists in Israel, who threw from the train, near the Tulkarem area, the newspaper *Al-Itihad*. The wind, the air, would carry it into the Arab area. Shepherds, of cows and livestock, would bring it over. If the Left could employ the wind, couldn't it mobilize a people? He

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<sup>54</sup> I borrow this idea from Michael Denning's excellent book *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. A comparison of the politics and aesthetics of cultural production between the United States and Palestine during this period yields striking similarities. It is also very telling of the influence of Marxist thought on Palestinian cultural producers at the time.

<sup>55</sup> Mohammad Al-Batrawi, personal interview, 24 October 2010. Since they were conducted in Arabic, all quotes from interviews are my translations.



would bring it, so we would get *Al-Itihad* newspaper, full of coal soot and oil from the train. We'd celebrate its arrival and start reading, *Al-Itihad*.<sup>56</sup>

According to Al-Batrawi, the educated Palestinian elite never missed an issue of the paper. He told Habibi about his slow and methodical collection of the works of Palestinian resistance poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih Al-Qassem, and Tawfiq Zayyad, as well as his contact with the exiled fellow leftist author, journalist and future PFLP spokesman Ghassan Kanafani, who wrote the landmark literary study *Palestinian Literature of Resistance Under Occupation 1948-1968*. Then, believing that the occupation was soon to end, Habibi browsed through Al-Batrawi's large collection of Arabic Language books and borrowed as many as he could fit in his car.

In his book, *Six Stories for the Six Day War* (1969), Habibi chronicled the re-encounter of Palestinians across the Green Line, from the Galilee to Jerusalem and Ramallah. Equally important was exiled writer Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* (1970), which told the story of the reverse journey from Ramallah to Haifa in the same post-1967 moment. Although the movement across the Green Line became possible, a reversal had taken place: within less than a year, Palestinians in Israel had emerged from the oppressive martial law, while Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were placed under the occupation government's military laws and regulations. In 1968, Kanafani expressed the meaning of this reversal:

The literature of resistance in occupied Palestine is characterized by its deep vision, which is why it fights on multiple fronts. It'll be truly marvelous for the scholar to see in the literary production of the occupied land, the early recognition - through poetry, story and drama - of the givens of the situation, which Arab literary producers discovered or are about to discover in various Arab countries in general after the 5 June 1967.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mohammad Al-Batrawi, personal interview, 24 October 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Kanafani, p. 45.

This literal translation deserves detailed explanation. By “occupied land,” Kanafani referred to present-day Israel, unrecognized as a state in the Nakba generation’s literature. In his 1968 analysis of cultural resistance, Kanafani predicted that the literature of the 1948-occupied Palestinians (written between 1948-1967) presented a prophetic historical account of the unknown future of the 1967-occupied Arab areas: West Bank, Golan Heights, Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula. He understood that Palestinians in Israel had created a model of cultural resistance from 1948 to 1967. After 1967, he suggested, this model of resistance could be adapted in the struggle against the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.

According to Kanafani, who played a role in shaping the PFLP’s political philosophy, cultural resistance played a significant role in framing the struggle. He believed that cultural production was necessary “to understand the land on which the rifles of armed struggle stand.”<sup>58</sup> Habibi, Kanafani, Al-Batrawi, Samih Al-Qassem, Mahmoud Darwish, and the major cultural producers of the period may not have agreed on the exact methods or rhetoric of resistance. But their shared affinity and commitment to the underprivileged classes, end goal of mass popular mobilization, declared leftist politics, and belief in the leading role of cultural production in inspiring the liberation of Palestine, reflected the sentiment and practice of most experienced and emerging cultural producers in the 1967-occupied territories.

The extensive underground network of leftist-leaning intellectuals set the stage for the mass production of Palestinian culture in the post-1967 era. Their activities in this

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<sup>58</sup> See Kanafani’s introduction, p. 9. As a member of the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*, Kanafani embraced both armed struggle and cultural resistance, together and separately.

period can be described most accurately as a cultural front in the battle against the occupation. The experience of *Al-Itihad* newspaper served Jerusalemites as Mattia Nassar, who previously managed the printing and production of the paper in Haifa, provided technical printing expertise in his work for *Al-Fajr* newspaper in East Jerusalem. Communist Palestinian citizens of Israel Elias Nasrallah, Daoud Khouri and Tawfiq Abu Rahmeh had moved from the North to Jerusalem and founded Salah Ed-Din publishing house with the technical and production help of Mattia Nassar, whose clothing store *Diana* was converted for this enterprise.<sup>59</sup> Salah Ed-Din, the most significant publisher in the West Bank at that time, published new and existing works by leading Palestinian communists such as Emile Touma, Tawfiq Zayyad, and Emile Habibi. It also encouraged emerging leftist writers of the West Bank such as Mahmoud Shqair, Hussein Al-Barghouthi, Abdel-Latif Aqel, and As‘ad Al-As‘ad. The near-hegemonic influence of the Left on Palestinian print production may have been most evident in the contributions of East Jerusalem’s leftist-leaning editors, journalists, and contributors such as Bashir Al-Barghouthi, Mahmoud Shqair, Mohammad Al-Batrawi, As‘ad Al-As‘ad, Elias Nassrallah, and Adel Samara. Their efforts to produce culturally relevant newspapers and magazines such as *Al-Bayadir* and *Al-Katib* continued well into the late 1980s.<sup>60</sup>

In the press, as in the mass mobilization and organization of people on the ground, the Left led the way until the late seventies. But leftist leadership faltered by the early eighties, when the Fateh-led PLO coopted emerging institutions. This shift in leadership can be seen in the creation of the initially leftist oppositional newspaper *Al-Fajr*, which

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<sup>59</sup> See article by Elias Nasrallah, <http://www.palpeople.org/atemplate.php?id=2631> (last accessed on April 2, 2012). Al-Batrawi and Adel Samara echoed much of this information in personal interviews. Hanan Ashrawi also noted the influence of leftist literature, particularly communist, in her 1976 study.

<sup>60</sup> See Abdallah’s detailed account of the Palestinian press from 1967-1987.

was absorbed by the PLO in the late 1970s.<sup>61</sup> From 1974, the PLO began to establish strong presence in workers' unions and grassroots institutions through various members such as the PFLP and DFLP. By the late seventies, the PLO had won "the war of the institutions" in the West Bank by winning over the unions. From that time forward, the communist influence forever dwindled.<sup>62</sup> This far-reaching influence of the PLO was also seen in the cultural arena with the co-opting of Palestine's leading poet Mahmoud Darwish, a previously known communist and former editor of *Al-Itihad*.<sup>63</sup>

#### A Front of Resistance: The Rise of a Theatrical Movement in East Jerusalem

In the existing Arabic language books and in daily speak among Palestinian artists, the theatre in Palestine is often referred to as *Al-Haraka Al-Masrahiya* (The Theatrical Movement).<sup>64</sup> François Abu Salem explained,

I call it a movement because it was a phenomenon that emerged from a need then crystallized until it became groups who were organized politically. And a movement comes spontaneously and strongly in the beginning then transforms to entrenched and crystallized groups. It studies aspects and issues of politics and art, developing and nurturing them.<sup>65</sup>

In the Palestinian political sphere and to a great extent the Arab one, the reference to a certain activity as a *Haraka*, a movement, implies an energetic motion towards a particular goal. For example, *Fateh* was initially referred to as a movement, as was

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<sup>61</sup> Frisch notes that the paper did not become associated with the PLO until later, nonetheless, communist editors like Mohammad Al-Batrabi and Bashir Al-Barghouthi maintained its direction on some level. See also Rugh, William A. *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004. Print. p. 61-63.

<sup>62</sup> See Mary King's explanation on how Fateh won over the unions by 1981, p. 74-75.

<sup>63</sup> Much of Al-Batrabi's evaluation on the role of the Palestinian Left in this period was supported in a personal interview with Adel Samara, 16 October 2012.

<sup>64</sup> See Mahamid's book, *The Journey of the Theatre Movement in the West Bank 67-87* and the anthology of Mohammad Anis, *The Theatrical Movement in the Occupied Areas*.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

*Hamas* during its period of activist resistance against the occupation and before its involvement in electoral politics in 2006. The term is also used to describe efforts associated with a cause such as the civil rights movement in the United States.

In most cases, the idea of a political movement presupposes a number of characteristics: a movement is not an existing party, faction or institution, does not have a recognized set of guidelines, springs from ad-hoc grassroots action, reacts to a static or absent condition, and seeks to arrive at a particular destination. The aforementioned political resistance movements were primarily motivated by liberation through armed struggle in combination with relief programs that insured long term survival. Given the implicit comparison between cultural resistance and armed struggle, what qualifies Palestinian theatre makers to constitute a movement? How and why did disparate artistic experiences coalesce loosely or formally into a single seemingly monolithic group?

In 1979, when Mohammad Anis edited the anthology *The Theatrical Movement in the Occupied Territories*, the term accurately described theatrical activities in the Jerusalem-Ramallah-Birzeit area, the main geographical focus of his book. The theatre Anis documented constituted a movement through its activism for Palestine, antagonism towards the occupation and its censorship, and reaction to the absence of Palestinian theatrical institutions. Throughout the seventies and eighties, the theatrical movement in East Jerusalem was dynamic until it came to a halt before springing into action again, as it did for example in the early 1980s. By constantly ending and re-emerging by choice or force, the movement was self-sacrificial, which allowed for a constant stream of new companies and artists to emerge. To a great extent its inherent nihilism over the divisiveness of the troupes became a characteristic condition of its continuance and

progress.<sup>66</sup> These aspects of the movement were most evident in the quick rise and fall of theatre artists and companies on one level, but also in the willing dismantling of theatre companies in order to create new ones. Most of the continuously operating theatre companies underwent several divisions and reincarnations by the time they institutionalized their operational standards.

In East Jerusalem, this movement began with a fertile vigor that characterized its young pioneers. In 1976, Hanan Ashrawi noted, “the most noticeable literary-cultural phenomenon, mainly in the West Bank Jerusalem-Ramallah area, [was] the emergence of theater groups.”<sup>67</sup> By 1978, fifteen theatre groups had been functioning in the Jerusalem-Ramallah-Birzeit area, of which eight groups were in Jerusalem. By the Intifada in 1987, approximately thirteen groups had produced plays in Jerusalem and eight in the Ramallah-Birzeit area. From 1967 to 1987, an astonishing number of twenty theatre groups were founded to serve a population of less than two hundred thousand in the East Jerusalem-Ramallah area alone, constituting the overwhelming majority of theatrical activity in the whole of the Occupied Territories.<sup>68</sup> The level of activity and popularity of these groups depended on their leadership, their success in circumventing the laws of censorship, and their ability to be financially independent. In 1989, Mahamid reported: “The troupes actively working today are concentrated in Jerusalem. They are Al-Hakawati Theatre, Palestinian Theatre Troupe, the Theatrical Artistic Group, and Sanabel

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<sup>66</sup> For a general discussion of what constitutes a “movement,” see Renato Poggioli’s review of the term in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 25-27. On the phenomenon of division, see chapters 2-4 in this dissertation.

<sup>67</sup> p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> See Schedule 1 in Mahamid. For various breakdowns of theatrical activities in the Occupied Territories see his comprehensive study.

Troupe.”<sup>69</sup> In this assessment, Mahamid identified the leading founding members of Palestinian theatre in Jerusalem in the post-1967 period and to some extent the major theatre artists, who continued to be productive into the Oslo period and afterwards.<sup>70</sup>

The product of these major trajectories in East Jerusalem’s theatre can be seen in their still existing theatre buildings: An-Nuzha Hakawati Theatre, Sanabel People’s Theatre, and Al-Kasaba Theatre. The latter was established in Jerusalem but moved to Ramallah. El-Hakawati theatre was the brainchild of François Abu Salem, who was also a founding member of several other theatre companies, including Balalin, Bila-Lin, and Sunduq Al-‘ajab. The Palestinian Theatre Troupe and the Sanabel Theatre Troupe emerged from the work of a number of labor class advocates and explicitly leftist theatre artists such as Mohammad Al-Thaher, Ahmad Abu Saloum and Hussam Abu Eishah, among many others. The Theatrical Artistic Group emerged to represent the work of George Ibrahim, who excelled at the adaptation of European classics and the development of children’s theatre for schools.

But the accomplishment of the theatrical movement can be measured by more than the development of new theatrical spaces over a period of two decades. Despite its occasional dysfunction within itself, the movement manifested its status as a functioning resistance front by creating a series of effective joint efforts throughout the seventies and eighties. In 1975, Mahmoud Shqair singled out this movement as the most influential cultural producer in the West Bank:

After the occupation, obvious disparities occurred in the artistic and cultural movement in the occupied land. While a tangible decline appeared in some of the literary and artistic activities, which were

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<sup>69</sup> p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> See Chapters Two to Five of this dissertation for a detailed account on the activities of each of these troupes.

comparatively flourishing before June of 1967, the theatrical movement was characterized by growth and maturity to the point that it became the most conspicuous artistic phenomenon on our occupied land. None of the other arts matched it in drawing and influencing the audiences.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the increase in the number of the troupes during this early period, Shqair explained that increased splintering and divisiveness between theatre makers led to audience disillusionment, which prompted the troupes to coordinate their efforts.

Reflecting on these coordination efforts, Adel Samara explained:

A number of attempts were made to organize and re-organize local theatre, in order to avoid some deficiencies on the one hand and to create a state of cooperation on the other. Worth noting here is that each organizational form for local theatre matched the level of theatrical activity in its cohesion and efficacy. For the weak organizational forms, which accompanied limited theatrical activity, there were the active organizational forms during the launch years.<sup>72</sup>

In August of 1974, artists in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area founded the earliest serious attempt at coordinating and institutionalizing cultural production in Palestine. Under the name *The Association for Work and Development for the Arts*, this formalized voluntary work committee included representatives of the visual arts, *dabkah* dance troupes, and folklore artists, in addition to a support system of writers, intellectuals and journalists. Within the association, theatre artists formed the first working committee, which became the largest effort to organize Palestinian theatre during this early period. In February of 1975, the leading active theatre troupes in the association, Al-Kashkul (The Notebook), Balalin, Dababis, the Palestinian Theatre, and Bila-lin, collaborated to create the first Jerusalem theatre festival. Performed in the theatre of Al-Omariyyeh School, two hundred theatre workers, musicians, dancers, visual artists, poets, and

<sup>71</sup> Mahmoud Shqair, p. 239. *Shu'un Filastiniyah*, issue 47, July 1975.

<sup>72</sup> Samara, Adel. "The Theatre of the Occupied Territories and the Horizon of Transformation from a Theatre of Resistance to a National Theatre." The proceedings of *The First National Festival of Palestinian Literature*. Da'irat Al-Kitab, 1981, p. 83.



folklorists participated in plays, sketches, dances and musical numbers. Recalling the energetic atmosphere of the festival and the multiple contributions of various theatre artists, actor Ahmad Abu Saloum stated: “Despite the cold weather and the snow fall, the shows in the festival continued for a week. Overcoming the cold weather, the audience eagerly followed the plays. It was the first time I participated as an actor, director, and festival organizer.” Samara remembered: “...audiences from different parts of the Occupied Territories attended, exceeding the expectations of the organizers.” Shortly after this highly successful festival, the association and its theatre committee ceased operations.<sup>73</sup>

In December of 1975, the theatre movement began another major joint project to establish a unified direction: the publication of a fifty-page periodical entitled *Al-Masrah* (The Theatre) and subtitled “An Artistic, Literary Cultural, Monthly and Comprehensive Magazine.” As the editor-in-chief, Yehya Abd Rabbo applied for and obtained the publication permit. Although the mailing address of the magazine situated its activity in Ramallah, it was printed in Jerusalem’s Shu‘fat neighborhood at The East Cooperative Press. The first issue exemplified the altruistic principles of an idealistic theatre movement. The editor’s word was signed “The Editorial Family.” In many of the articles, some of which were translations, the authors were not identified. In the inaugural issue, the opening essay asked in the title, “Our Theatrical Troupes: Where to?” Signed “The Editor,” the article critiqued the theatrical movement’s divisiveness, suggesting that all operate “as if they don’t work in the same field,” which weakened this

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<sup>73</sup> Ashrawi provides the date and translation of the name of this collective, p. 8. The description is based on Samara’s excellent critical review of Palestinian theatre (1981). He noted the association began in 1975. Abu Saloum was quoted in *Aswat Maqdisiya* (Jerusalemite Voices), p. 18.

artistic community. The editor stressed “Al-Maslaha Al-‘amma” (the public good or public interest) and encouraged the sharing of expertise, performances, and actors in order to present higher quality productions and operational standards. The editor stated:

But the opportunity has not passed yet! We only issued *Al-Masrah* Magazine to be of assistance to all our theatrical troupes, providing them with all their needs of direction and instruction. It will be like a library where everyone gathers at the table to nourish their souls.<sup>74</sup>

Aiming to instruct, critique, and archive, the first issue included articles bearing the following titles: Amateur Theatrical Direction; The Constituents of Playwriting; Audience Psychology; Theatrical Definitions; The Art of Comedy; Theatrical Sets; The Problem of Dialogue; and The Movement of the Stage. Other contributions included an interview with the Egyptian Playwright Tawfiq Al-Hakim, an article on the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, a biography of the Egyptian actor Mohammad Tawfiq, and a full Arabic translation of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Exception and the Rule*. Although the magazine failed to deliver on its promise of monthly publication, the second issue was published in February 1976.

Under the announced co-editorship of Ibrahim Jbail of Dababis and Mohammad Anis of Sunduq Al-‘ajab, the third and fourth issues were printed at Al-Nasser Press in Jerusalem. After the long hiatus between the second and third issue, the editorial team expanded the scope of the magazine to include television and the visual arts to appease reader requests. When *Al-Masrah* ceased its operations in the spring of 1977, it had met a number of its declared goals: Reviews of Palestinian theatrical productions by its “mobile critic,” descriptive snapshots of Palestinian theatre in its behind the scene accounts, biographies of young theatre artists, a historical account of Palestinian theatre, and the

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<sup>74</sup> *Al-Masrah*, issue 1, p. 4.

exposure of local artists to theatre practices abroad. In the last two issues, *Al-Masrah* published the remainder of a detailed interview with Tawfiq Al-Hakim, critical articles on Brecht and Ibsen, and translations of one-act plays by Anton Chekhov. It had also matured from its beginning as a primarily instructional theatre magazine into a pan-Arab theatre and entertainment variety magazine. According to published letters to the editors, from the yet unknown theatre makers Radi Shehadeh in Al-Mghar and Fouad Awad in Nazareth, the magazine had found a reading audience outside Jerusalem. A representative of The Center of Middle East and African Studies in Tel Aviv University (Ramat Aviv) sent in a letter stating, “We examined the first issue of your magazine and we liked what’s in it. We decided to add it to our library, therefore, we ask you to consider us permanent subscribers and to send us issues successively as you publish them.”<sup>75</sup>

In 1979, four theatre troupes, Dababis, Sunduq Al-‘ajab, El-Hakawati, and Palestinian People’s Theatre, revived the theatre committee of The Association for Work and Development for the Arts. They produced a twenty two-page booklet, summarizing the history of the modern theatrical movement in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. Written in a local Palestinian dialect, their informal narrative told the story of the formation of Balalin, Sunduq Al-‘ajab, Dababis, and El-Hakawati. They also explained the reasons behind the latest division in the Palestinian Theatre Troupe. Emphasizing the continuous desire to unify Palestinian theatre under one organized institutional umbrella, the document declared the theatrical movement as an integral participant in resisting the 1967 occupation. Accordingly, theatre makers produced political theatre because it was a collective action, an encounter point for an occupied people, a way to force people to

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<sup>75</sup> *Al-Masrah*, issue 3, p. 43.

leave their homes, and an alternative to the widespread influence of television.

Concluding as a manifesto for future collaboration, they promised an inclusive modus operandi:

Dialogue...cooperation...coordination, joint resources, working programs for the troupes, for the association, and a candid invitation for the unification of the theatrical movement. We expect a theatre season that is rich in productions characterized by quality and commitment.<sup>76</sup>

Unlike the original committee of 1975, this revival failed to produce any tangible outcomes after the publication of this booklet.

In 1981, in the most significant attempt to create an organized theatrical institution, a number of individual theatre artists joined forces to create a Palestinian Theatre League. *Al-Bayader* published a detailed interview with the founding members of this initiative: Ibrahim Jbail, Ahmad Abu Saloum, Adel Al-Tarteer, Youssef Amin, Anis Mahmoud, Abdel-Aziz Al-Rajabi, and Imad Mizero. Ibrahim Jbail explained, “the league is a comprehensive prospect, where there is space for each committed theatre artist. It isn’t exclusive to a group that facilitates profits, if any existed, because the existence of a Palestinian theatre is a national responsibility rather than a whim, a product, or a business.”<sup>77</sup> In the interview, the artists recalled the failure of previous efforts to unify the movement. Abu Saloum suggested that these collective efforts often occur in moments of crisis. Al-Rajabi noted that the geographic distance played a significant role in preventing the creation of a comprehensive unifying framework for Palestinian theatre. Al-Tarteer explained that previous efforts failed in part because of disagreements between working and non-working artists, crediting the league for

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<sup>76</sup> Booklet of the theatre committee of *The Association for Work and Development for the Arts*, p. 22.

<sup>77</sup> *Al-Bayader*, February/March issue, 1981, p. 49.

including active theatre makers. Indirectly explaining the absence of El-Hakawati members in the new league, the artists critiqued the touring of El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe in Europe. They suggested that the theatrical movement must choose the topics and the individuals representing Palestine abroad.

The founders authored a detailed system of bylaws to govern the league. In the initial three of nine articles, the bylaws stated its official name as *The League of Palestinian Theatre Artists*, declared Jerusalem as its primary location of operations, and detailed its aims, goals, and functions. It aimed to provide assistance to current troupes and clubs in the region by supporting performances, holding festivals, providing rehearsal space, and collaborating with national institutions. Second, the members wished to elevate the standards of theatrical activities in the Occupied Territories primarily through finding or writing quality theatrical texts for production, attracting inactive artists at home and abroad, building an inventory of technical equipment, increasing awareness of theatre as an art form, providing opportunities for continuing education, and building a library for the arts including theatre. Third, they committed to entrench productive relationships with visual artists, writers, journalists, folklorists, popular poetry, and institutions of education. Fourth, they declared a commitment to develop a comprehensive theatre troupe capable of representing Palestinians as their national theatre. Fifth, the league would preserve Palestinian theatrical heritage by building an archive to document theatre activities. Sixth, it would find financial and moral support for the theatrical movement. Seventh, the founding members intended to create a system for developing and rewarding artistic excellence through full time work opportunities, granting financial rewards, promoting theatre as a positive profession, and finding

educational opportunities for theatre artists abroad. Eighth, the document outlined their plan to create relationships with Arab and “Progressive” theatres abroad. Finally, they hoped to organize the relationship between the theatre movement and the audiences through the formation of “friends of the theatre” committee.

In the remaining articles of the bylaws, the founders outlined the function of the league, the need of a public board, and the regulations for membership. This comprehensive system of bylaws and rules clearly reflected the ongoing sensitivities among theatre artists in this period. For example, the league reserved the right to officially represent the theatrical movement. By then, El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe had pioneered touring in Europe, a de facto representation of Palestine and its theatres abroad. Their two initial tours caused intense debates among the artists, especially since most troupe members were considered to be foreigners to the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. The league also stipulated the condition that members should not be “connected to” or “serve” the institutions of the authorities including radio, theatre, television and cinema. This condition specifically excluded many theatre artists such as Mohammad Al-Bakri, Makram Khouri, and George Ibrahim, a group of highly successful Palestinian actors appearing on Israeli media. The league reserved the right to combat any theatrical works that harmed the national cause and to withdraw support from works that harmed the theatrical profession. To expose the sensitive issue of monetary funding, they would not accept financial support from “suspect” sources, which meant the Israeli government, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Jerusalem Foundation, and institutions with a known Zionist

political agenda. Until today, this sensitivity to funding sources remains a thorny subject among Palestinians.<sup>78</sup>

The league did not survive the difficult period of 1980-1984. Reflecting on this period, theatre artists reported a decline in theatrical activity in Jerusalem due to the arrest and imprisonment of a number of active theatre makers. This period also witnessed a vigorous campaign by the authorities to prevent the presentation of Arabic plays in schools, particularly in East Jerusalem.<sup>79</sup> Since 1967, the movement established a standard touring circuit in Jerusalem's private and religious Christian and Muslim schools, particularly El-Omariyyeh, El-Frère, and El-Mutran. Mohammad Al-Thaher recalled,

1980 to 1984 was an arid period for nearly the whole theatrical movement... The Israeli Authorities threatened the schools, El-Mutran, Frère, and others, to not give out their spaces to theatre artists... These school headmasters, of course, want to survive, so they stopped renting out. Things froze... no halls to perform in. Some attempts took place at worker's unions to build spaces, taking matters in our own hands, but it was too difficult.

In 1982, accusing the military of terrorizing their audience, El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe told the Tunisian newspaper *Al-Sabah*: "Israeli Army Patrols attack us at every performance." In addition to their accounts of encounters with the army, the troupe corroborated often-repeated stories of headmasters being threatened. On the informal prevention of performances, members of El-Hakawati cryptically explained to *Al-Sabah* newspaper: "...they used other ways. For example, they pressured hall owners and

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<sup>78</sup> This discussion is drawn directly from the first draft of the original initiative of the *League of Palestinian Theatre Artists*, obtained from Ibrahim Jbail. Worth noting: the present league is an entirely different institution, which was founded in 1989.

<sup>79</sup> Based on a combination of field notes from my informal discussions and recorded interviews with Mohammad Al-Thaher (26 January 2011), Ahmad Abu Saloum (7 December 2010), and Hussam Abu Eisheh (20 November 2011).

schools, who used to assist us to find places for the performances.” Reflecting a heightened security atmosphere, the article concluded with El-Hakawati’s concerned statement: “There are many theatrical activities, but the current state of affairs does not permit them (the artists) to state that they have theatrical troupes.”<sup>80</sup>

El-Hakawati’s struggles with performance venues forced the troupe to consider building a permanent home. Repeated bouts with military censorship over performances in the West Bank suggested that a permanent cultural center would attract audiences to Jerusalem, especially for productions banned in the Occupied Territories. In 1983, François Abu Salem began negotiations to transform Jerusalem’s An-Nuzha Cinema into the first dedicated modern multi-purpose theatre in Palestine. El-Hakawati troupe had been rehearsing in churches, clubs, universities, and alternative open spaces for six years. Since religious fanatics burned it down ten years earlier for playing erotic films, An-Nuzha Cinema had lain unused and became notorious as a suspect site. Technical director Imad Samara remembered,

Before El-Hakawati, this place was deserted. At night, you didn’t walk near it...It used to be a spot for drug dealers. The majority of the space around the theatre was basically a public toilet. It was one of the infested spots in Jerusalem.<sup>81</sup>

During El-Hakawati negotiations, the owner of the building received an offer from the American organization “Here’s Life” to re-open the cinema.<sup>82</sup> Founded by the evangelical “Campus Crusade for Christ,” the organization wished to present an around-the-clock screening of the 1979 *Jesus* film, produced by Inspirational Films and The

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<sup>80</sup> *Al-Sabah*, 28 July 1982. See chapters Two to Four in this dissertation for accounts of the heavy-handed influence of military and civil censorship on theatre troupes in rehearsal and in performance.

<sup>81</sup> Imad Samara, personal Interview, 13 November 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Jackie Lubeck, personal interview, 10 September 2012 and 8 October 2012.



Genesis Project. According to Lubeck, the competition for An-Nuzha Cinema raised the rental price dramatically. On 30 October 1984, El-Hakawati signed a long-term rental agreement for the building. The *Jesus* film distributors found a theatre in Bethlehem. *Al-Fajr* reported that the film opened to an audience of Bethlehem's dignitaries in February of 1984. The audience was shown local hospitality: "During the intermission, Arab viewers were given tea, coffee and cookies with a napkin with 'Enjoy It' written on it in Hebrew." Mayor Elias Freij complained "he was unaware of the literature being used to promote the film before seeing it." A booklet distributed at the screening depicted the film's original poster, which was modified to include the sentences: "ISRAEL IS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE" and "JESUS is a LIFE CHANGING experience." The film played four times daily. Bethlehem residents explained they were not against a Christian film depicting the life of Jesus, but they opposed the propaganda surrounding it.<sup>83</sup>

Between October 1983 and May 1984, El-Hakawati members labored continuously to transform the space into a world-class theatre, as Jackie Lubeck recalled:

The company stood strong together. We rented the old burned-out shell of the Nuzha Cinema after difficult negotiations. The company of actors became a company of builders, and as people passed by the building site, the most common comment was, "impossible..." El-Hakawati Theatre Company handbuilt the theatre that opened under the name of the Nuzha/El-Hakawati Theatre.<sup>84</sup>

*Al-Awdah* magazine described the spirit of the improvised construction process:

Aided by an architect and engineer who donated their time, armed with a 'How to Build it' book purchased at a local store, and supplied with more than modest share of wholly unrealistic, wildly optimistic ideas of what is

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<sup>83</sup> The account of the film, the opening, and the direct quotes are drawn from *Al-Fajr* (English), 15 February 1984. See also *Al-Fajr* (English), 4 November 1983. Quotes on the poster included capital letters as relayed here. See [www.inspirationalfilms.com](http://www.inspirationalfilms.com) for further information on the film.

<sup>84</sup> Tribute by Jackie Lubeck, "On François," in *This Week in Palestine*, Issue No. 163, November 2011. Note: The ellipsis (...) indicates my own editorial cut.

possible, seven professional actors donned scruffy, tattered work clothes, raised axes, shovels, drills, and embarked on a project which any sane man in the street wouldn't attempt for the memory of his departed mother.<sup>85</sup>

The company gutted the old building, turning it into a shell. Then they methodically proceeded to even out the floor by digging as far as two meters into the ground. They divided the audience hall into a main theatre and a small backspace that also functioned as an exhibition and rehearsal space. After an acoustic evaluation deemed the theatre unfit for performance, they raised the ceiling and installed new acoustic boards over a period of several weeks. The building was entirely redesigned to include a costume shop, a carpentry shop, a box office, dressing rooms, an entirely new electric system, and an inviting lobby with a café. They installed a new raked auditorium and a stage with a “working floor.” El-Hakawati also equipped their new theatre with the latest audio and lighting equipment. Although the troupe members performed the re-construction nearly in its entirety, they acquired support from community volunteers on occasion.<sup>86</sup>

On 9 May 1984, the An-Nuzha-Hakawati theatre opened its doors to the public, effectively establishing a home for El-Hakawati as its founding resident company. The festive opening celebrations included a Bedouin tent experience by Al-Farafir theatre troupe, an exhibition by Kamal Boulata, and a musical concert by Mustapha Al-Kurd. El-Hakawati presented an original choreographed sketch, depicting the story of the building's acquisition and their competition with the *Jesus* film as a Palestinian wedding. *Al-Fajr* reported,

Actors, dancers, and scouts posing as a groom marched to a stand where another actor was posing as the bride's father (the theatre owner) and

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<sup>85</sup> *Al-Awdah*, 12 April 1984.

<sup>86</sup> *Al-Sha'b*, 04 June 1984, reported on nine different days, when Jerusalemite youth committees assisted in clean up, removal of rubble, and pouring cement to build the auditorium.

asked for the hand of his daughter, Nuzha. The request was granted only to be interrupted by a rich American who tried to bribe the father.<sup>87</sup>

After a battle between the local artist and the wealthy foreigner, the story ended with a traditional celebratory *dabkah* dance that included the spectators. The weeklong celebration also included performances by Al-Farafir Troupe, the Friends School for Girls, and an evening of poetry by Samih Al-Qassem. Starting on 10 May 1984, El-Hakawati presented a remount of its production *One Thousand and One Nights of the Stone Thrower*, an aptly chosen spectacle demonstrating the technical capacities of the theatre.<sup>88</sup> Within two years of its opening, the theatre hosted thirty-six different productions by local troupes, nine exhibitions, fifteen lectures, thirty-six festivals, forty one films, and several workshops. It had also become the rental site of choice by political organizations and unions for their celebrations and meetings.<sup>89</sup>

With the establishment of a dedicated theatre building in Jerusalem, the theatrical movement believed it had found a home as well. Surrounding the period of construction and the opening, a question arose about the ownership of the building and its potential users. In their idealism and inclusive vision, El-Hakawati members replied that the theatre would be available for use by the theatrical movement, to which El-Hakawati Troupe belonged.<sup>90</sup> By 1986, a debate raged in the Palestinian public sphere. Said al-Ghazali of *Al-Fajr* noted: “It is not yet clear whether Hakawati is a private or public center, an argument which intensified as the Hakawati troupe celebrated last May its

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<sup>87</sup> *Al-Fajr* (English), 12 May 1984.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* For the program of the opening month, see Al-Sha’b, 29 April 1987.

<sup>89</sup> The number of these events was reported by *Al-Fajr* (English), 4 July 1986 and *Al-Bayader Al-Siyasi*, 30 November 1985.

<sup>90</sup> See for example an interview with the troupe on 30 January 1984, where troupe members encourage the theatrical movement’s participation in the opening celebrations and state that the theatre is meant to serve everyone.

second anniversary.” After promoting El-Hakawati since its foundation in 1977, the Palestinian English and Arabic press gave voice to this public debate in articles entitled such: “Originally constructed to serve all the artistic groups... Has this slogan come true?” “El-Hakawati and its politics,” and “Is Hakawati Living Up To Its Goal?”<sup>91</sup> By the end of 1989, the theatrical movement and its supporters on An-Nuzha-Hakawati board of directors forced the troupe to leave their theatre. Claiming victory over the monopolizing ownership of El-Hakawati, the theatrical movement and its supporters intended to transform the theatre into a publicly-run enterprise, available to all Palestinian cultural producers. Since 1990, the theatre became known as the Palestinian National Theatre. In theory, the building would be considered the home of the theatre movement and the front-line institution in Palestinian cultural resistance to Israeli hegemony in Jerusalem.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

From 1967 to the present, Palestinian theatre artists in Jerusalem functioned together and separately as a resistance front against the Israeli occupation. The theatrical movement operated under similar conditions, which produced joint efforts to self-organize as a cultural institution. Most of these efforts at institution building failed due to the influence of the occupation, the absence of stable sources of funding, and internal disagreements within the movement. An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre provided the most

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<sup>91</sup> See *Al-Fajr* (English), 4 July 1986, *Al-Nahar*, 7 November 1987, and *Al-Sha'b*, 17 October 1987. See also a comprehensive review of El-Hakawati's position in *Al-Bayader Al-Siyasi*, 30 November 1985.

<sup>92</sup> Due to its complexity and large scope, the thorny subject of El-Hakawati's departure and the ensuing development of the Palestinian National Theatre at An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre will not be discussed in this dissertation.

successful framework to unify the movement; however, the theatre artist's desire for unrestricted access and the national aspirations of the board of directors were manifested in public debates that resulted in the exile and eventually the disintegration of El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe. Despite its dysfunction, Jerusalem's theatrical front succeeded in producing culture for twenty-six years, from 1967-1993. In chapters two to five, I survey the contributions of the major artists and theatre troupes.

## Chapter Two

### The Marxist Approach: Local Popular Theatre

“People used to say we were Popular Front  
and the Israeli Army accused us of being Popular Front”  
Hussam Abu Eisheh, 20 November 2011

In this chapter, I present the history of Dababis Theatre, The Palestinian Theatre, The Palestinian People’s Theatre, and Sanabel People’s Theatre. While Dababis led its own independent existence from 1973-1976, it shared the Marxist approach of the other theatre troupes in this historical trajectory, which led to the foundation of Sanabel People’s Theatre space in East Jerusalem’s Abu Tor neighborhood in 1998. Marxist theory can be seen in the troupe’s focus on producing theatre for the masses and establishing labor as a primary issue of concern in their productions. While the troupes officially remained independent of political factions, leading members espoused a leftist philosophy in their political sympathies and professional aesthetic on stage. Their known intellectual affinity to leftist political parties, such as the Communist Party of Palestine and the Popular Front for the liberation of Palestine, influenced their ability to obtain the permission to perform. Simultaneously, their political approach increased their audiences in various like-minded communities.

#### Dababis Theatre Troupe

After its quick rise and fall from 1973 to 1977, Dababis attained a legendary status in Palestinian theatre as a unique theatre of resistance. When artists speak of confrontations with the Israeli military, this troupe continues to be discussed as one of the most extreme examples of direct antagonism and mass arrests. The troupe’s primary

creative force – writer and director Ibrahim Jbail – and the core members were often reputed to be associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Although the story of the troupe may begin with the personal journey of one individual, its development and growth can be attributed to the volunteer and community efforts of its large membership.

During the 1967 invasion, Jbail's father sent him to Amman, where he organized a theatrical troupe in the youth center of Al-Wehdat refugee camp. In 1969, he successfully produced and directed one play entitled *Revolution of the Dead*, which addressed the challenges of families of martyrs in the camps. The play became much more significant a few months later with the eruption of the bloody events of Black September (1970), which resulted in many Palestinians losing a friend or a family member in the battles between the Jordanian Army and the Palestinian guerrilla army.<sup>93</sup> When he returned to Ramallah in 1972, Jbail had been deeply influenced by a violent guerrilla war and the class-conscious ideas of Dr. George Habash, the intellectual leader and commander of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Upon arrival, he connected with the union of construction workers in Ramallah. By working within the framework of a union, he could avoid the complex legalities of the military laws imposed on all cultural activities. The union referred to their cultural projects as “parties” or “events,” but Jbail insisted that his first project with them should be called “a show.” He developed the production with a team that combined workers and non-workers in what became his first play, *Al-Turshan (The Deaf Ones)*.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See Yazid Sayigh, p. 271. He estimates the death toll to be over three thousand lives.

<sup>94</sup> Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011.

Written by Ibrahim Jbail, *Al-Turshan* played in Ramallah in 1973 and set in motion his aesthetic program of Marxist theatre, which was dedicated to representing the struggle of the labor class and unmasking the ideological claims of the occupation. To a great degree, the play initiated the short, yet significant, journey of Dababis. The play adapted a historical event from the Ottoman era to challenge the present-day occupation and the class disparities between landowners and peasants. In the story, Sulaiman Bek attempts to take over a peasant's land and love interest, Aisha. She runs away to avoid the Bek and gather support for a revolution against his authority. In the production, she hides in the audience, blurring the line between theatre and everyday life. When she accuses the audience of deafness and paralysis, Aisha demands action from her fellow Palestinians. The battle transfers from the stage, which represents the authority of a foreigner to the audience hall, the site of the struggle of an occupied people. In the end of the performance, choral voices in the audience declare that the people will survive, will never leave their homeland or their political struggle, and Aisha will return to her village and love interest. Throughout, the play drew on folklore to present a uniquely Palestinian aesthetic, with the Palestinian village, tradition, and morality playing central roles in the main conflict. The play also drew on traditional Palestinian dance, *dabkah*, and well-known local songs to promote the historical Palestinian village atmosphere.<sup>95</sup>

Along with the main event, the company created a performative two-scene companion piece entitled, *Da'irat Al-Khawf Al-Dababiyya (The Foggy Fear Circle)*, which relies primarily on the theme of exploitation. The first scene follows an invalid as he forces himself upon the daily life of a bourgeois writer. The invalid attempts to share

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<sup>95</sup> Combined sources: Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011, and author submission of a handwritten description of his plays.



the writer's space, sustenance, and clothing. When the committed socialist writer is fed up with the intrusion, he becomes the enemy of the lower classes in an act of self-preservation. Written in symbolic mode, the choreography of the second scene assigned the idea of time to a male actor and the Palestinian cause to a female actor. In this production, Dababis warned that the passage of time diluted the Palestinian cause and suggested it may cause the demise of the struggle.<sup>96</sup>

As the main event of the union's annual celebration, the double bill appropriately problematized existing power structures by examining the relationship between dominant figures such as the feudal lord, the bourgeois intellectual, and the stereotypical male, in relation to the oppressed classes represented by the peasant, the homeless, and the traditional female. Jbail noted,

*The Deaf Ones* is a realistic play that deals with the idea of the land and the peasants. The *Foggy Circle of Fear* deals with intellectualism and opportunism in practice. An intellectual thinker and theorist faces problems... Is it possible to practice ideas in actuality or are they just theoretical...? Overall, the play is a historical treatment of the Palestinian cause. It represented the cause as a woman who is oppressed by history and raped by some elements in this history.<sup>97</sup>

In his expansive description, Jbail sees the Palestinian cause as a battle on several social and political fronts. Can the peasants revolt against land confiscations? Is it possible for the intellectual to enact his theoretical principles? Can Palestine survive its "historical rape?" The questions evoked the challenges of a population under occupation. Dababis promoted a Marxist critical discourse in a realistic through-line in *Al-Turshan* and an overly interpretive style in *The Foggy Fear Circle*. Jbail confirmed that the audience

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<sup>96</sup> Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011.

reacted much more positively to the class-based conflict in the first play than to the unrealistic dance, movement, music, and set in the second play.

The successful performance with the union members prompted Jbail and a number of performers to establish a theatre troupe. Through the Israeli military's civil administration, they applied for a permit to establish a theatre company called Firqat Dababis Lil-Funoun Al-Masrahiya, (The Pins Troupe for Theatrical Arts). Located in the Ramallah area, but also operating in Jerusalem, the troupe defined itself as an interventionist theatre company,

The pin stings, awakens the sleeping, arouses the dull, reveals and blasts the pain, and unearths the root of the problem. Nonetheless, our pin is unusual. It thinks, has a point of view, and puts this point forth to the people. It is ready to cooperate positively with others.<sup>98</sup>

Jbail recalls being summoned by the military governor for interrogation several times during the application process, "They literally asked: who are you going to poke?" A rumor had erupted in the theatrical community that Dababis had formed to poke Balalin (*The Balloons*). Jbail remembered fondly, "Dababis wanted to protect *Balalin* from any other pokes." After several months, the Israelis permitted the establishment of the troupe on the condition that Jbail would not be a member. Instead, he took on a supportive role as an "independent" writer and director.<sup>99</sup>

In the same year, the troupe established its own site of operation in El-Sharafeh area near Ramallah. The troupe built a small stage, which on occasion hosted intimate events such as book readings, musical recitals, film discussions, and public lectures. The site also became a rehearsal space, a meeting room, and an office. The original mixed

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<sup>98</sup> *The Association for Work and Development for the Arts, Theatre Committee*. Booklet, 1979, p 20-21.

<sup>99</sup> It is possible to conclude that Jbail's known association with the PFLP was a likely cause of Israel's refusal to allow him official membership in the company.

membership of the unionized construction workers and amateur performers began to develop into a more stable membership of theatre aficionados. In a sense, Dababis grew into the organization that supported its existence as “new members entered the troupe and it began to look like a trade union organization or a type of artistic social club.”<sup>100</sup> Jbail remembers that becoming part of the troupe was more complicated than membership in political factions: “You had to join us as part of the ‘friends circle’ for a year before you applied for official membership.” The troupe demanded public service from its membership in the form of “raising awareness of culture and the arts.” Informally, he declared their function to be “resistance to the occupation.”<sup>101</sup>

The production of *Al-Haq 'al-Haq (Blame The Truth)*, addressed the absence of municipal services under occupation, most importantly, the absence of fire stations in the Ramallah area. The play opens with a report of a fire at the house of a young woman living alone in a refugee camp because her husband works in Kuwait. In their reaction to the tragic event, the characters represent their social and economic classes such as the peasant who was expelled from his land in 1948 and currently works as a trade laborer, a petit-bourgeois who uses higher education as a medium to challenge the power structure, and a bourgeois merchant, landowner or Municipal mayor, who can afford to live outside the refugee camps. Throughout the play, a drunkard critiques the various characters in what became a stock character in the company’s repertory. In the climax of the play, the characters hear the horns of a fire truck. Excited to receive the firefighters, the camp residents head to the entrance of the camp only to watch the truck as it passes them by.

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<sup>100</sup> Anis, p. 76.

<sup>101</sup> Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011.

According to Jbail, the play was directed at the Ramallah and El-Bireh municipality heads: Karim Hanna Khalaf and Ibrahim Al-Tawil, respectively. The troupe wished to provoke them to improve social services. Jbail constructed the production's framework and wrote the script. Before every performance in a refugee camp, a village or a major city like Jerusalem, the character names were changed to identify public personalities in the audience. Each audience behaved based on their existing relationship with the individuals named on the stage. For example, in Al-Jalazone refugee camp, the audience physically attacked the actor playing the despicable character of Al-Mukhtar (the Mayor). In Al-Issawiyyeh village, now a neighborhood of East Jerusalem, one elder's objection to his portrayal on stage during the performance prompted the intervention of audience and troupe members. According to Jbail, he was removed from the hall.<sup>102</sup>

By 1975, the troupe had established name recognition and a regular audience. According to a statement by the theatre committee of The Association for Work and the Development of the Arts, Dababis had "surpassed its previous works and solidified its reputation in the public's mind. It developed its own audience, before which it became responsible to continue."<sup>103</sup> In 1975, the committee invited Dababis to participate in its first Palestinian Theatre Festival, which took place in Jerusalem at El-Omariyyeh School. They entered the competition with a play entitled *Al-Intithar (Waiting)*. A winner of the second best play of the festival, the play presented a number of archetypes of social classes including the laborer, the peasant, the employee, and the educated intellectual,

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<sup>102</sup> Memorial reconstruction. Ibrahim Jbail, Personal interview, 24 January 2011. In his summary statement, Jbail noted that soon after the production, fire stations were established in both Ramallah and El-Bireh.

<sup>103</sup> p. 7.

which was played by a female. As the play begins, the audience finds these characters in an unspecified site awaiting an unidentified character, which represents an absence in their own lives. Based on religious teachings, they believe in the necessity of a “rescuer, savior, reformer, or leader.”<sup>104</sup> Yet in the absence or death of a sheikh (religious figure), a drunkard comes along to speak the truth about social and economic disparities. The play stages the battle between blind faith and theoretical ideology. The failure of both options prompts a search for an answer, a truth, in the audience. The play concludes as the audience and the characters await an uncertain, yet inevitable future.<sup>105</sup>

In 1976, with the eruption of discussions on the establishment of a Palestinian state in the 1967 Occupied Territories, the troupe produced a highly controversial production called *Khawaziq (Shafts)*. In Arabic, the title referred to the holes that adorned the hats of the Jordanian police before 1967, but colloquially connoted “being screwed” or “getting shafted.” After the Israeli military governor explicitly refused to permit the showing of the play, the troupe changed the title to *‘imara Min Waraq (A Paper Building)* and showed it exclusively in Jerusalem. The stylized production represented the enemy of Palestinians in the shape of a three-headed monster: “the triad” of Zionism, Imperialism and Arab reactionism. Primarily through choreography, the play tells the stories of the catastrophe of 1948, the emergence of the Palestinian revolution and guerilla war of liberation, the opposing forces of the triad, and the proposal of the two-state solution. According to the theatre community, it left a lasting impression and a set of unanswered questions on the future of the troupe:

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<sup>104</sup> Jbail’s written summary statement, received 25 January 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. He noted that the play was presented in 1974, but the festival took place in February of 1975. It is likely that the play was rehearsed in late 1974.

*A Paper Building*...dealt with the subject of the state and raised its pros and cons for discussion. It caused a stir in the hall and on the stage. It was like a people's referendum on the establishment of the state. The play left an impact on the troupe for some gave it a particular spin, which shook up the troupe.<sup>106</sup>

Anis also remarked that during “this work, differences appeared obvious in the viewpoints concerning the proposed subject, which were reflected in production and on the stage.”<sup>107</sup>

The play posed a controversial question: Should the Palestinians settle for a state along the 1967 border or continue the guerilla struggle to liberate the entirety of Historic Palestine? Although the playwright and director of the project Ibrahim Jbail clearly objected to the two-state solution, the cast was unable to settle the question in rehearsal. Those who rejected the two-state solution believed that a state under the conditions of the occupation was a house of cards, whereas those who supported this plan believed in its immediate necessity. These internal political differences became public when the question was posed on stage and the choreography of the bodies moved to spell the word “no” in Arabic. In their own act of protest, a number of performers broke the formation, a microcosmic event that captured the conditions and divisions of the time. Militant about staying on message and performing the rehearsed choreography, the senior membership of Dababis evaluated this public objection to the troupe's stance and suspended the dissenters from further participation in the production. Jbail remembered: “At the time, they were tried and suspended for the charge of not adhering to the script.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *The Association for Work and Development for the Arts, Theatre Committee*. Booklet, 1979, p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> Anis, p. 76.

<sup>108</sup> Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011.

In 1977, Dababis members had several encounters with the forces of the occupation. During a rehearsal of *Al-Nab‘ Al-‘ali (The High Spring)*, the military invaded the rehearsal hall at the Ramallah municipality, confiscated the scripts, collected the actor’s personal identity cards, and required the members to report to the military headquarters in Al-Muqata‘a. Shortly thereafter, the military invaded the troupe’s site of operation, arrested several actors, and confiscated of all equipment such as typewriters. Consequently, the performers experienced difficulty in continuing to rehearse. According to Jbail, Dababis “was drained of all its contents and members.” Its site of operations was damaged. “Therefore, a state of horror was created. The site symbolized a state of fear. Nobody came to it.”<sup>109</sup> The Israeli army had arrested the members for belonging to an enemy Palestinian resistance organization, most significantly, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).<sup>110</sup> Although he acknowledged some members’ political activism, Jbail insisted that the troupe maintained its independence from all political factions. Believing in the troupe’s revolutionary consciousness-raising theatre, he stated: “We were accused of Dababis... They considered the troupe part of the political reality of the time, so they had to diminish it.”<sup>111</sup> Whether the cause was their theatrical activities or various members’ association with the PFLP, the troupe was not only diminished, it ceased all stage productions in 1977. *Al-Nab‘ Al-‘ali* was never performed.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibrahim Jbail, personal interview, 24 January 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Anis explicitly states that troupe members were arrested for belonging to the PFLP.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

### Al-Masrah Al-Falastini (The Palestinian Theatre Troupe)

The Palestinian Theatre Troupe (1973-1996) along with the two splinter troupes of Palestinian People's Theatre (1979-1983) and Sanabel People's Theatre (1983-present) probably produced the highest quantity of performances in Palestine since their inception in 1973, yet their productions have not been documented with sufficient detail. With the addition of their children's theatre repertoire in the schools, their combined performances number several thousand. The original Palestinian Theatre Troupe produced nineteen productions and presented two hundred and twenty adult performances in their first fourteen years of operations.<sup>112</sup> The majority of their productions occurred from 1974 to 1979. In Jerusalem, this repertory of adult theatre remains unmatched in its variety of productions until today.

Emerging from intensive discussions among a number of its founding members, the troupe often produced a theatre of everyday life, adopting realism on stage and emphasizing local issues. In their mandate, the company committed to research the contemporary situation, examine it in rehearsal, and reflect it to the audience on stage. Simultaneously, they hoped to produce relevant theatre, and high artistic standards of production. They also believed in their productions' potential as documentary evidence and oral history of Palestinian culture. In a shared trend among many theatre companies in this period, the troupe functioned as a cultural club and required its members to pay fees. After evaluating membership applications, the troupe issued identification cards that stated the member's position as director, actor, playwright, or technician. The troupe funded itself through an ongoing stream of new members, the opening of two new branches in Beit-Sahour and Beit-Jala, internal donations, ticket sales, and cooperation

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<sup>112</sup> Statistics reported by Mahamid, p. 55.



with nationalistic institutions.<sup>113</sup> Similar to Dababis, the troupe was defined philosophically and operationally by the work of one playwright, Mohammad Al-Thaher, who wrote the majority of the plays.

The troupe's inaugural production *Al-Raqqasseen (The Dancers)* targeted a topic that remained one of Al-Thaher's interests until the present day, the role of journalism in Palestinian culture, particularly the abundant presence of tabloid journalism. In 1974, as Palestinian newspapers and magazines were emerging as a significant voice of resistance, the play promoted a public discussion on the value of local news in the absence of national communications tools such as radio and television. Given the topic of the play and its title, Al-Thaher seemed to suggest that the journalists of the period behaved like entertainers. He demanded a principled public stance from local newspapers in the face of occupation. He also promoted the elimination of tabloid journalism. The play opens with the character of the Maharaja, who reads aloud the tabloid news of the day. At the end of the play, the same character enters with the same tabloids and makes them disappear in a concluding magic trick.<sup>114</sup> Directed by François Abu Salem, the play was performed before nearly sold out audiences. The play opened on the stage of El-Omariyyeh School and the East Jerusalem YMCA. Abu Salem's stylized approach in the avant-garde set presented a stark contrast to Al-Thaher's comedic realism in the text, a difference in aesthetic that continued throughout their careers.

From late 1974 to the end of 1975, the troupe focused its efforts on national themes and the promotion of national unity under the banner of the PLO. For example, they collectively created and directed the play *Hareeq Al-Jaheem (The Fire of Hell)*,

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<sup>113</sup> Mohammad Al-Thaher, personal interview, 26 January 2011.

<sup>114</sup> *Aswat Maqdisiya*. Interview with Ahmad Abu Saloum. Mohammad Al-Thaher, personal interview, 26 January 2011.

which portrayed shared political and personal catastrophes as the foundation of the Palestinian nation. Based on the idea of the poet of the Old City, Fawzi Al-Bakri, the actors improvised the show representing the political and ideological battles between the various factions of the Palestinian armed struggle. Then the company staged *Majma' Al-Qabadayat (Gang Of Toughs)*, which promoted the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In turn, Ahmad Abu Saloum's play, *Marakez Taftesh (Search Centers or Checkpoints)*, exposed the humiliation of Palestinians at checkpoints and border crossings. During this period, the productions implicitly reflected the troupe's alignment with the PLO's mandate for armed struggle. But most often, the themes and discussions in the plays depicted Marxist critical discourse, which consciously and explicitly privileged the base over the superstructure in popular cultural resistance against Israeli hegemony.<sup>115</sup>

At the end of 1975, the production of another original play, *ind El-Luzoom (When Necessary)*, launched the Palestinian Theatre into unprecedented popularity as the troupe presented a challenging dilemma: What must a loyal Palestinian do when a family member jeopardizes the national cause? The play tells the story of a brother and a sister who open their family's home as a hotel on the night when three freedom fighters escape from prison. The radio announces a reward of a hundred thousand dinars for anyone who assists the military's efforts to catch them. Declaring her appreciation for these heroes, Siham challenges the ingratitude that her brother Wadi' displays towards those who suffer for the freedom of their people. For Wadi', the prospects of saving their home from bankruptcy and gaining comfortable living far exceeds an attempt at saving the

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<sup>115</sup> Mohammad Al-Thaher, personal interview, 26 January 2011. The Actor Ahmad Abu Saloum wrote *Marakez Taftesh*.

escapees. Throughout the hotel's inaugural night in business, three men rent separate rooms. Mistaken identities provide comic relief, as the audience knows the full story, while various characters remain in the dark about each other's presence in the hotel and the treasonous intentions of the brother. The first act ends as Wadi' overhears the conversation between the escapees about the failure of one of their comrades to remain steadfast against torture. Hamid, the hero of the play, states, "If I forgive you, the cause will not." In the second act, Siham learns of her brother's intention to inform the military of the escapee's location. She attempts to sway him from collaborating with the enemy. Upon his refusal to change his mind, she decides that she must kill him.<sup>116</sup>

Actor Ahmad Abu Saloum played the role of the resistance leader. Over twenty years later, he remembered:

The production continued to play tens of times with wide distribution. Many nationals watched it at the time as the nationalist movement took control of municipal seats in the West Bank and the [Gaza] Strip elections. On the stage of the Teacher's College in Ramallah, I remember the wreath of Jasmine that decorated my neck when the director of the college stood up and adorned me with it in recognition of the idea of the play and the quality of the ensemble's performance.<sup>117</sup>

The initial production was performed thirty times, one of the longest first runs in modern Palestinian theatre. It spoke to the anxieties of the period, particularly on the issue of suspected collaboration with the Israelis and the importance of a unified front in the armed struggle. According to Al-Thaher, the play discussed "the necessity for the public to overcome private concerns and to sacrifice all that is dear and precious for the sake of

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<sup>116</sup> Unpublished script obtained from the Mohammad Al-Thaher. Ahmad Abu Saloum described the play as one of the most significant productions in the 1970s (personal interview, 13 January 2011).

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in *Aswat Maqdisiya*, p. 19.

public interest.”<sup>118</sup> The play’s financial success allowed the troupe to buy the basic sound and lighting equipment necessary to tour the production across the West Bank. The play was officially revived with different casts in 1978, 1984, and 1987. It was also remounted consistently throughout the 1990s.

In 1980, Al-Thaher crystalized his vision for a predominantly working class theatre in the publication of two plays: *Lawhat Mawlid Thair (Painting of Revolutionary Birth)* under the title *Al-Mawlid (The Birth)*, and *Al-Lu’ba (The Toy)*. The two plays promote worker solidarity and the revolutionary struggle not only against the occupation, but also against the capitalists who profit from it. Both plays show the interaction between a bourgeois class and a laboring base. *The Toy* follows the story of a young man who pursues a relationship with a highly educated rich woman. She uses this worker as a “toy” in her tumultuous love affair with a doctor of her own class. During the early phase of the relationship, the worker begins to gain access to the aristocracy. He is promoted at work and tastes a life of leisure. When the novelty of dating a worker wears off, she chooses to return to her high-class fiancé. The play concludes with a violent dance between the bourgeois characters, who wear masks of various animals such as a tiger, a lion, a spider, a hyena and a serpent. In this surreal scene, the young man attempts to regain power in his relationship with his love interest and her band of aristocrats. When he is rejected and unable to gain dominance in the bourgeoisie, he marches towards his fellow workers in a final image of unity with the laboring class as “L’internationale” blares in the background.

*Al-Mawlid* begins by painting an image of backwardness. The world of the play

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<sup>118</sup> From a Statement by Mohammad Al-Thaher received on 27 January 2011. It chronicles the history of the Palestinian Theatre.

is presented as a lost battleground where ideology is prevalent, the revolution is dead, the laboring class has retreated, and words have lost their meaning. A priest-like figure sporting a long beard and a free-flowing liturgical robe begins the play with the statement, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth the flies,” which sarcastically evokes the biblical hymn/verse, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men.” Underscored with the sound of drums and contrasted with modern dance by a youthful man and woman, the play establishes institutionalized religious messages as a cause for rebellion. The youth express that the old regime nurtures a population of parrots, who repeat messages based on the practices of traditional old men. The youth report that language has been co-opted by corrupt authority. They also declare, “I refuse,” in an act of civil protest likened in the play to a canon bolt shot from “the throats of the revolutionaries.”

As they await the end of an era of submission and the birth of a new culture of protest, the young people are confronted by two images: the statue of liberty and the worker, who enters with a rope around his neck. This hanged man symbolically narrates the plight of the worker, who is executed because his education and words allowed him to resist oppression and to be steadfast in “the face of enslavement.” By refusing to eat the crumbs on the rich man’s table, to suffocate in coal mines, and to sell his life’s labor at the pleasure of the master owners, he pays the price of being hanged. Another hanged man recalls his suffering at the hands of his prison warden and lasher. He tells of his resistance in the form of educating his child. He refused to accept the restrictions of shackles, lawlessness, and humiliation. Despite the worker’s belief in the goodness of humanity, the “pirate” hanged him, a sign of imperialism’s inhuman practices.

The image of the capitalist as the pirate recurs throughout the play. In the image of slaves rowing the ships of the Delian League in antiquity, Western civilization is represented as pirating human labor. The play depicts worker exploitation in live re-enactments of construction workers building skyscrapers, and modern laborers operating the machinery of Western Modernity. Similar kinds of stark images recur in verse and in staged tableaux, which contrast with the Statue of Liberty in the background. The characters hear the screams of “the tortured” in America, Africa, the Third World, and occupied Palestine. They declare these injustices as a stain on humanity:

Youthful Man: A stain of dishonor on the forehead of Europe  
 Youthful Woman: The forehead of the pirate  
 Youthful Man: On your forehead  
 Youthful Woman: Mine... What did I say?  
 Youthful Man: Because you are deaf.<sup>119</sup>

The dialogue maintains an accusation against Europe and the United States, whose Statue of Liberty is stained by the injustices against the working class and whose pirate figure stands proudly in the background smoking a Havana cigar.

The play presents the solution to economic and political slavery in the form of the earthquake of “our time,” the birth of the revolutionary. From the bodies of the dead victims of capitalism rises a choreographed flower formation, which opens to reveal a woman carrying a baby. The tableau of leadership born of the labor movement is accompanied by quiet revolutionary music, which then becomes Christian music as the stage is emptied of all its contents except the stained Statue of Liberty and a crucified worker. The juxtaposition of the Jesus figure and the Statue of Liberty lead the young woman to express her regret that “we have regressed two thousand years.”<sup>120</sup> In an overt

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<sup>119</sup> Al-Thaher, p. 95.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

critique of religious ideology, the old priest returns to offer his words of wisdom, which amount to a sermon: Do not interfere! Keep things as they are! Follow blindly! When the boy attempts to fight against these teachings he is tried in court for attempting to think or forge his own path. Given the pressures of the political and religious traditions, he fails but declares that a seed of change has been planted. The mobilization of the masses provides the impetus for the youth to throw the first stone of symbolic resistance. The oppressed laborers join in the battle. They use the work tools at their disposal: their own bodies, hoes, and stones. The boy celebrates as the “Statue of Hope” replaces the Statue of Liberty. The final image of the play shows the youth and his comrades marching in the same direction, rising to free the crucified.

In 1979, El-Hakawati, Sunduq Al-‘ajab, Dababis and a newly founded troupe called The Palestinian People’s Theatre revived the theatre committee of the Association for Work and the Development of the Arts. Despite their concurrent theatrical activities in Jerusalem, Mohammad Al-Thaher and The Palestinian Theatre Troupe were noticeably absent from the committee. The committee reported that a permanent division in The Palestinian Theatre Troupe was inevitable after the “phenomenon of division and coups in the troupe became periodical and exceeded the number of performances.”<sup>121</sup> The description implies that despite the Palestinian Theatre Troupe’s expansion and frequency of performances from 1973 to 1979, a number of members disagreed with the process and the leadership. In the thick of the crisis, the division was public and at times articulated in negative ways. The “separated” actors cited a number of reasons such as

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<sup>121</sup> Booklet of the theatre committee of the *The Association for Work and Development for the Arts*, p. 17.

“dictatorship,” lack of a cooperative environment, absence of freedom of speech, absence of political “commitment,” and the lack of a forum to express personal points of view.

#### Al-Masrah Al-Sha‘bi Al-Falastini (The Palestinian People’s Theatre)

Sympathizers with the politics of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were unable to reconcile their theatrical creations with the communist politics of the Palestinian Theatre Troupe. Although all members leaned to left-wing politics, focused on the class struggle, and supported the women’s movements, their intellectual affinity to two different political schools of thought created major rifts in the rehearsal process and in the production of the texts. Disenchanted actors demanded “commitment” and the inclusion of their point of view in order to be “responsible” for their own artistic products. Actor Hussam Abu Eishah believed that the ideological differences within the company derived from the way members viewed the struggle for the liberation of Palestine.<sup>122</sup> The Palestine Communist Party explicitly rejected armed struggle and focused on grassroots mass mobilization, worker solidarity, education, and cultural production. The equally Marxist PFLP endorsed and participated in armed struggle as part of a larger social and political program, especially in the 1970s.

These fundamental political differences appeared in these troupes’ choices of plays during the period of the division. In 1979, the Palestinian Theatre produced *Improvisational Concert for the Sake of the Workers*, which focused entirely on factional politics, class struggle and the necessity of powerful unions in the market place. By contrast, the newly-formed Palestinian People’s Theatre developed a major staged

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<sup>122</sup> Hussam Abu Eishah as interviewed by Mahamid. Al-Thaher, Abu Saloum and Abu Eishah all expressed admiration for each other’s work. Abu Eishah and Al-Thaher suggested that personal and political reasons played a role in the division. Mohammad Al-Thaher, personal Interview, 26 January 2011. Hussam Abu Eishah, personal interview, 20 November 2011.



adaptation of Ghassan Kanafani's 1972 novel *Returning To Haifa*, which not only explicitly represents the wars of 1948 and 1967, but also endorses armed struggle. The prolific novelist and playwright Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1974) was also known as the spokesperson of the PFLP. The novel told the story of "Said S." and his wife Safiyya, who drive to Haifa after the 1967 occupation in search for the child they left behind in 1948. On the drive, the novel shows Said and Safiyya's intimate connection to Occupied Palestine (now renamed Israel) and their specific knowledge of their own home city, Haifa. Kanafani interweaves the horrific events of the war with the journey to their house, expertly recounting the names of the streets and reimagining the Haifa of 1948.

On the drive, Said S. and Safiyya discuss the stories of the Palestinians who travelled from the West Bank and Gaza to see their original homes, which were then inhabited by Israeli immigrants. Said S. tells the story of how a young man from Jaffa's Ajami neighborhood knocks on the door of his family home. Expecting to encounter a Jewish family, he was shocked when they spoke to him in Arabic. They explained that they chose to live in the house to protect it. At the end of their encounter, Firas El-Libdeh asks to take the photograph of his martyred brother, which still adorned the wall of the living room. When he removes it, it leaves behind a mark showing the difference of old and new paint on the wall. He drives away, only to return shortly thereafter with the feeling that the frame should remain in Jaffa. The resident of the house takes the photograph back, then states:

I felt a horrifying emptiness when I looked at that rectangle left on the wall. My wife cried and my children were in shock. I regretted permitting you to take the photograph back, because ultimately, this man is ours. We lived with him, he with us, and became part of us. At night, I told my wife that if you wanted him back, you must earn back this house, Jaffa, and us.

The photograph won't solve your problems, but it is your bridge to us, our bridge to you.<sup>123</sup>

Said S. and Safiyya arrive at their house where new Jewish settlers, who are also Holocaust survivors, live with their son Dov. The Palestinian parents re-encounter their home, intimate belongings, and objects of memorial significance. The story is interspersed with flashbacks and exposition that tell the story of how Miriam and Iphrat, the current residents, came to live at the house that included an Arab child the agency asked them to adopt. Having always known the inevitability of this day, Miriam indicates that upon his arrival Dov should decide between his Palestinian and Israeli parents. The young man arrives in Israeli army fatigues. In the ensuing argument between father and son, the Zionist narrative collides with the Palestinian one. Dov claimed that his parents deserted him in his crib and for nineteen years thereafter did not attempt to get him back. Understanding the futility of his cause, Said S. explains that Dov's first encounter as part of the Israeli army might be with his son Khalid, a Palestinian freedom fighter. Before they leave the house to return to the West Bank, he states, "You may stay temporarily in our house, for that's something that needs a war to settle."<sup>124</sup>

On 3 April 1980, the Palestinian People's Theatre's adaptation, entitled *Man is a Cause*, opened with two back-to-back performances at the largest theatre house in Jerusalem, Al-Hambra Cinema, which seated eight hundred to one thousand audience members. The performances were sold out and the aisles were full as audience members exceeded the number of seats. In the upstage area was the contested house, in all the details described by Ghassan Kanafani: a window adorned with curtains, a living room

<sup>123</sup> Kanafani (2008), p. 57. For another translation see Harlow, p. 128, in *Palestine's Children*.

<sup>124</sup> Kanafani (2008), p. 76. For another translation see Harlow, p. 138, in *Palestine's Children*.

set with a rug, a kitchen, and five feathers in a wooden vase. The downstage area was used for the outdoor scenes, the site Abu Eishah described for the scene of the 1948 Nakba, which visually represented the war and expulsion. Approximately thirty volunteers played the roles of expelled Palestinians, carrying their belongings and walking towards exile in a circular formation. He stated, “The scene was comic!” The comedy emerged from the radio messages playing on the theatre’s audio system, which included the mundane domestic concerns of refugees in communication with family in “occupied Palestine” such as “son where are you, be sure to feed the goat. She knows where to go. Just put her in front of the house, and follow her. On the way back, be sure to tie her well, and she’ll be full, tired and won’t be able to walk.”<sup>125</sup> The tragedy and bitterness of these simple details produced intense laughter in the audience members, who still remembered both the 1967 occupation and the 1948 expulsion. The production avoided the common narrative of refugees holding onto the keys to their homes and deeds to their lands. Abu Eishah explained the rationale: “[The Nakba] had only happened yesterday!” The immediate concerns were urgent matters such as food, clothing, missing family members, harvests and animals. The messages implied that all refugees believed they were returning home, which starkly contrasted with the realities the audience continued to experience.

From the visual and auditory experience of Nakba, the production took up the details of Kanafani’s novel. On stage the audience sees the life of Said S. and Saffiyya prior to their visit to Haifa. To make their journey to the house, the parents enter from the back of the audience heading towards the house. The overflowing aisles forced young men in the audience to clear the way by holding hands, standing side by side and

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<sup>125</sup> Hussam Abu Eishah, personal interview, 20 November 2011.

creating a long human corridor. Focused on areas of dramatic and visual conflict, Ahmad Abu Saloum's direction and adaptation followed the novel's dialogue, which represented the provocative discussion between the Israeli soldier and his biological Palestinian father. Kanafani's dialogue in the production emphasized armed struggle by presenting an irresolvable and irreversible situation, in which Zionist Holocaust survivors believed in their cause and wholeheartedly embraced the Israeli narrative of cowardly Palestinians, who left their homes by choice. In multiple ways, the dialogue establishes that only war will resolve the loss of home and homeland. Kanafani presents examples of characters such as Firas Al-Libdeh and Khalid S., who chose armed struggle with the intention to liberate the entirety of historic Palestine.

The original performances at Al-Hambra Cinema occurred in a tense atmosphere. Since the theatre was located the well-protected high court in East Jerusalem, Israeli forces watched the arrival and departure of the large crowds. Abu Saloum remembered:

There were clashes, aside from the demonstration atmosphere inside the theatre...the chanting... I still hear its noise until today. There was a very strong reaction. And outside, all you have to do is cross the street to clash with a Zionist institution. There was some friction, especially since hundreds were waiting in line for the following performance.<sup>126</sup>

According to Abu Eisheh, any street altercations were probably caused by audience members or passersby. The troupe avoided all confrontations for the sake of the performances. "If you raised one flag, the show was over and you would have wasted three months' work!"<sup>127</sup> Abu Eisheh remembered that buses had come from across the West Bank and Israel for the show, lining the street from the cinema to Herod's Gate. With such confluence of people, which theatre maker and technician Imad Mitwalli

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<sup>126</sup> Abu Saloum, personal interview, 13 January 2011.

<sup>127</sup> Hussam Abu Eisheh, personal interview, 20 November 2011.

referred to as “a river of people,” both Israeli forces and the Palestinian public would likely be on high alert.<sup>128</sup>

The accusation of membership in the PFLP followed the troupe on tour to a number of villages in the Triangle Area and the Galilee. In the Galilean village of Kabul, an inciting Israeli newspaper article prompted the police to arrest four actors, which delayed the performance by two hours as a thousand audience members chanted their demands for the show to be performed. In the village of Sakhnin, the police reviewed the troupe members’ identification cards and interrogated them before the performance. On this occasion, they were asked to report to a courthouse in the city of Akka shortly thereafter.<sup>129</sup> The Israeli authorities were aware of the troupe’s capacity to attract large crowds to politically-charged work, such as Ghassan Kanafani’s *Return to Haifa*. Convinced that the production was the primary cause of the repeated harassment, Abu Saloum stated: “In the interrogation in both El-Mascobiyyeh [Jerusalem] and even in the court in Akka, they asked about Ghassan Kanafani, stating that he was involved in an extremist terrorist organization...”<sup>130</sup> After a performance in Um Al-Fahem, Israeli police stopped the troupe’s bus, arrested everyone and confiscated set pieces, but only kept Abu Saloum and Hamdi Farraj overnight.

Only a few years after the Mossad had assassinated Kanafani in Lebanon and the PFLP had caught world attention with a number of airplane hijacking operations, the presentation of *Returning to Haifa* as the first major production of the *Palestinian People’s Theatre* declared a clear political stance in spite of its undeclared connection to

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<sup>128</sup> Imad Mitwalli, personal interview, 12 January 2011.

<sup>129</sup> As reported by Jamil Al-Salhout in *Al-Katib*, p. 90 (Obtained from Abu Saloum). Abu Saloum also confirmed these accounts in personal interview, 13 January 2011.

<sup>130</sup> Abu Saloum, personal interview, 13 January 2011.

the PFLP.<sup>131</sup> In personal interviews, Ahmad Abu Saloum did not disclose or discuss membership or association with any organized factions, including the Popular Front.<sup>132</sup> Hussam Abu Eishah explained, “People used to say we were Popular Front and the Israeli Army accused us of being Popular Front.”<sup>133</sup> Although it is difficult to confirm or deny this connection, their reputation gained the troupe widespread support among PFLP crowds and the watchful eye of the Israeli security apparatus. One local newspaper reported,

Yesterday, after a four-day delay, Israeli newspapers published the news of the arrest of four young men from the city of Arab Jerusalem and they are the colleague Ahmad Abu Saloum, *Al-Sha‘b Newspaper* sports editor, the lawyer Omar Yassin, the young man Abed Dandis, and the young man Hussam Abu Eishah. They were arrested for the offense of belonging to an enemy organization to Israel.<sup>134</sup>

All the men were involved with the *Palestinian People’s Theatre* in some capacity. The article also reported Dandis’ previous arrest for raising a Palestinian flag in a voluntary work camp in Nazareth, a ten-day extension of jail time for the first three and a fifteen-day extension for Abu Eishah.<sup>135</sup>

From 1980 to 1984, the troupe did not survive the multiple arrests. Its main members went on a forced hiatus as Palestinian cultural production suffered immensely during the 1980 Hebron Daboya Operation, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and their

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<sup>131</sup> The assassination took place on 8 July 1972. See Nasr’s chapter “Black September vs Mossad,” p. 58-76, for an account of this period and a report on Kanafani’s assassination (p.65-67) in *Arab and Israeli Terrorism: The Causes and Effects of Political Violence, 1936-1993*.

<sup>132</sup> Ahmad Abu Saloum, personal interview, 13 January 2011 and 07 December 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Hussam Abu Eishah, personal interview, 20-November-2011.

<sup>134</sup> Scrap of a newspaper article found in Ahmad Abu Saloum’s personal archive. Likely in reference to the 1980 arrests, this published article was not dated, but it mentions the name of the actors and includes a picture of Abu Saloum. I suspect this arrest was the initial cause of the troupe’s four-year hiatus in 1980. Abu Saloum noted that the arrest of troupe members took place in July of 1980, shortly after the production (personal interview, 13 January 2011).

<sup>135</sup> See Jamil Al-Salhout’s article in *Al-Katib*, p. 90. As a side note, Abu Eishah is known for his sharp sarcasm and impeccable comic timing, which may explain his additional jail time on this particular arrest.

aftermath.<sup>136</sup> Israeli authorities pressured the schools that comprised the theatre touring circuit to stop renting out their stages for cultural events. Mohammad Al-Thaher explained that both private and municipality schools could not withstand the threat of legal recourse. During this period, theatre troupes attempted to create their own spaces at worker's unions and one, Al-Amal Al-Sha'bi, tried to rent out a commercial space across the street from Damascus Gate, but could not sustain their efforts. In 1984, El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe renovated An-Nuzha Theatre, which set an example for the rest of the troupes and provided an independent performance space for the theatre movement.<sup>137</sup>

### Sanabel People's Theatre

1984 marked the reemergence of the core members of the Palestinian People's Theatre as Sanabel People's Theatre. Opening in March of 1985, their first play, *Al-Mahrajan (The Festival)* addressed political differences among Arab countries. Author Ahmad Abu Saloum set the play in a school. He also acted in the production. He recalled:

I played the role of the well-loved custodian. Everyone wants to participate in preparing a graduation celebration. The school is in the center of several villages. Reflecting our weakness as Palestinians and Arabs, I called the villages Tuna and Sardine, suggesting they are so easily

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<sup>136</sup> Al-Ka'bi, *Aswat Maqdisiya*, as stated by Ahmad Abu Saloum on p. 9-24. On this period, Abu Saloum said that whenever possible, the troupe's activities thrived underground. For example, they performed an adaptation of Ghassan Kanafani's *Um Sad* at the home of troupe member Ibrahim 'Iaywat. Ahmad Abu Saloum, personal interview, 13 January 2011.

<sup>137</sup> See Chapter One of this dissertation for further details on this period. In Al-Thaher's words, "The Israeli Authorities threatened the schools, El-Mutran, Frère, and others, to not give out their spaces to theatre artists... These school headmasters, of course, want to survive, so they stopped renting out. Things froze... no halls to perform in. Some attempts took place at worker's unions to build spaces, taking matters in our own hands, but it was too difficult." I learned about the efforts of Al-Amal Al-Sha'bi Troupe (People's Hope) in a personal interview with Rajai Sundoka, 13 November 2011.

consume. The participants in the festival argue over minor details, such as who will sit in the first row, so eventually the whole event falls apart.<sup>138</sup>

Overtly critiquing the Arab League, the play represented Arab conferences as inefficient and driven by the personal interests of authoritarian regimes. It challenged Arab neighbors to place priority on their involvement in the Palestinian cause. Referring to Palestine as the prelude to future losses, the play famously stated: “He who gives up the rooster, gives up the cow. And he who accepts minor losses, certainly accepts major ones.”<sup>139</sup> The play expressed disenchantment with the state of Arab Nationalism and suggested that Palestinians must affirm their national rights of independence and self-determination. The troupe presented fifteen performances of *Al-Mahrajan* in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Beit Sahour.

In the same year, the troupe followed *Al-Mahrajan* with a production by director Hayyan Ya‘coub entitled *Sayyidi Al-General (General Sir)*, which was inspired by and adapted from three plays: *The General* by the Iranian playwright Gholam Hussein Sa‘idi, *The Dictator* by the Lebanese playwright ‘issam Mahfouz, and *Blood Song* by Mustapha Mahmoud. The troupe depicted the concepts of “peace, war, and the way of military coups in the countries of the third world.”<sup>140</sup> The satirical take on the never-ending cycle of military coups reflected the troupe’s identification with the oppressed classes in the formerly colonized nations of “the third world.” The play presents a conversation between a General and a Sergeant. The insane General oppresses his underling in unreasonable ways, explaining that reaching positions of power requires the willingness

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<sup>138</sup> Ahmad Abu Saloum, personal interview, 13 January 2011. To paraphrase, Abu Saloum ridicules the state of Arabs. They are so strong when they argue for the front row seat, but in reality, they are eaten alive by colonial powers, including the Israeli occupation.

<sup>139</sup> See Jamil Al-Salhout’s article on Sanabel People’s Theatre, *Al-Katib*, p. 86.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*



to kill. By the end of the play, the General learns that his office is his prison and the Sergeant is his jailer. The play ends with a reversal showing the collapse of the General as the Sergeant walks out of the room.

On behalf of Sanabel People's Theatre, director Hayyan Ya'coub applied to the Israeli censorship board for a permission to perform. He sent in a partial text made up primarily of the Mustapha Mahmoud script, rather than the complete adaptation. The censor evaluated the work as "very banal...a completely childish attempt without content and without message."<sup>141</sup> Although internal censorship policy stipulated a requirement for two evaluations of each script, a hand-written note in the file indicated that only one Arabic-speaking reviewer was available. The brief evaluation demonstrates a lack of interest in critically evaluating the play or possibly a difficulty in analyzing the subtext. A deeper evaluation might have revealed that the play offered a Palestinian call to Arab dictators to review their priorities and to Arab soldiers to challenge their superiors. For example, the General demands a meeting with all his personnel only to find out they all went on a trip. The ensuing comical interplay suggests the soldiers were at a club or on vacation, an allusion to partying Egyptian pilots on the eve of the 1967 war. The brevity of the script may have misled the censorship officer as Ya'coub only sent in part of the source materials for the production and not the final script, a tact that theatre makers often used during this period.<sup>142</sup>

In 1987, Sanabel People's Theatre created and mounted *Natrin Faraj* (*Awaiting Salvation*), their most significant production since *Returning to Haifa*. Inspired by the South African play *Woza Albert!*, the play told the story of two laymen who are arrested

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<sup>141</sup> Israel State Archive, see file on the Sanabel production of *The General Sir*.

<sup>142</sup> See Chapter Four in this dissertation for further details on this strategy, which was employed often by *El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe*.

by the authorities. After a humiliating process of body search and personal interrogation, they are imprisoned. While in custody, the peaceful soft-spoken one tells the other of the news of the coming Messiah. The play explores the perception of various characters on the coming salvation as a journalist interviews tradesmen and merchants about their wishes from the miracle-performing Messiah. When the Messiah is finally spotted walking on the surface of the sea, the government identifies him as a foreign object and nukes him.

The Sanabel production kept the frame of *Woza Albert!*, but increased the number of actors in the play from two to four and drew on the local experience of the occupation. Although the original play was inspired by Apartheid South Africa, the company of Palestinian actors discovered that the frame story and plot structure fit the Palestinian experience. “We not only shared aspects of it, it was as if the situation was the same in Palestine and South Africa. There was the idea of identity. Blacks lived in ghettos they couldn’t leave without permits, etc., and it was the same [in Palestine] and it continues to be: Blue IDs, Green IDs, Orange IDs, and permits.”<sup>143</sup> Under the direction of Hayyan Ya‘coub Al-Ju‘beh, for a period of three months, the company improvised the situations in the play to produce an original Palestinian production. They asked: Since the Muslims, Christians and Jews all had been awaiting the Messiah, what would happen if he appeared in 1987 in occupied East Jerusalem?

A few months before the Intifada of 1987, the Sanabel People’s Theatre started rehearsals at the house of actor Hussam Abu Eisheh in Al-Sa‘diyeh neighborhood of the Old City, the home of Sanabel at that time. Focusing their attention on three main topics: salvation, prison life, and exploitation of Palestinian labor, they performed their

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<sup>143</sup> Hussam Abu Eisheh, personal interview, 20 November 2011.

fieldwork at two different sites not far from the walls of the Old City, Al-Musrara and Damascus Gate. For ten days, they followed the routine of Palestinian laborers, who worked on Israeli projects to feed their families. They woke up before dawn, headed to one of the labor pick up sites and participated in the process of impressing Israeli employers. Upon the arrival of an employer vehicle, two common scenarios occurred. If chosen, from tens of thousands of workers in this muscle market, the Palestinian would earn a day's living working on a settlement or a labor-intensive project in Israeli territories. If the worker failed to impress the potential employer, he waited for the next vehicle and repeated the process until he gave up and returned home. This experience set the tone for the play as a labor-class satire about the poor and the oppressed as they await salvation on a daily basis in the form of the bourgeois employer, freedom from administrative detention, or the end of the occupation.<sup>144</sup>

The company interwove their research from fieldwork, personal stories in Israeli prisons, and the Palestinian desire for salvation from a seemingly never-ending cycle of oppression. They established a critical distance by undoing the theatrical illusion from the first moment of the play as the production began with a satirical representation of the laborer's muscle market, where each actor displays his muscles like a wrestler or a body builder; then they identify themselves by their real names, tell Sanabel's history as a theatre company, and situate their production in its South African context. They state, "We liked the play because it depends principally on two colors, black and white. The events you'll see today, you've seen before, and got used to it..."<sup>145</sup> By revealing the

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<sup>144</sup> Hussam Abu Eisheh, personal interview, 20 November 2011.

<sup>145</sup> Video Recording, *Natrin Faraj*, 1988.

theatrical apparatus, the actors invite their audience to question their own behavior under occupation and their desire for salvation by an external force.

The play and the production prevent the audience from accepting the theatrical illusion, which is typically achieved by using traditional acting and staging techniques. The four actors collectively played over fifty characters that change from one instant to the next. The suggestive set functioned as a train, a prison cell, a helicopter, a barbershop, and various outdoor street scenes. Throughout, the satirical representation of the Israeli and Jordanian media along with constant references to the audience's reactions, including an accusation of boredom, kept the audience engaged as the actors fulfilled their promise to present events that the audience were habituated to. For example, when workers are asked about their wishes from the soon-arriving Messiah, their stereotypical wishes include the preservation of Palestinian ownership in the Jerusalemite Electric Company, dinner for one night with family members in the diaspora, the gathering of brothers in one prison to facilitate family visitations, protection from settler attacks and house demolitions, and the refugee right of return. These familiar demands were followed by the more satirical challenge for the Messiah to save his own life from the occupation or to obtain a permit to build a church.<sup>146</sup>

Director Hayyan Ya'coub and the company of actors understood the fine line between situation comedy and sacrilegious satire. In the scene depicting the arrival of the Messiah at Ben Gurion Airport, he is described as he descends the stairs, lands on the ground, and begins his conversation with an eager journalist. The depiction of a prophet, dressed in seemingly ancient attire and appearing not only to a predominantly Muslim Sunni majority, but also before a significant religious Christian minority of various sects,

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<sup>146</sup> Video Recording, *Natrin Faraj*, 1988.

presents a potentially dangerous conflict for a Palestinian audience. Just as the faithful audience is about to say, “Stop this ridicule,” the scene reveals the identity of the individual as a new immigrant who is mostly interested in visiting his aunt Rachel in Tel Aviv. In his reflection on the production, Ya‘coub admired the audience’s sense of humor and their ability to play along.<sup>147</sup> However, the censors, who banned the play shortly after its initial opening, did not share the Palestinian audience’s enthusiastic reception.

Although incomplete scripts usually misled the censors, Ya‘coub’s public admission to a journalist that the censor-approved script and the public performance were vastly different prompted a new confrontation between the censors and the Sanabel People’s Theatre. After three initial performances, the Israeli authorities shut down the production, citing controversy and insensitivity to Christians as the primary reason.<sup>148</sup> The well-known Israeli Jewish lawyer Leah Tsemel took on the case of freeing the production by citing a loophole in the censorship law. She argued that the law typically allowed for a number of experimental performances before “official” theatrical openings.<sup>149</sup> Private communications between the censorship office and the ministry of religious affairs showed that a fundamental difference in Palestinian and Israeli viewership probably played a major role in the decision-making process. An official at the ministry of religious affairs explained in his evaluation that there are two types of Christians in Jerusalem. The liberal-minded thoughtful Christian type would see the play as an enlightening artistic reflection on the role of religion and the Messiah in our lives. The second type of Christian in the Holy Land, the average or conservative one, is the

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<sup>147</sup> Jacob, *Al-Sharara*, 30 October 1987.

<sup>148</sup> Israel State Archive, see file on *Natrin Faraj*. Also see article in *Tariq Al-Sharara* on 13 November 1987 (Title: *The prevention of the play Awaiting Salvation from Showing*).

<sup>149</sup> Hussam Abu Eisheh, personal interview, 20 November 2011.

narrow-minded fundamentalist, who would likely be offended by the play's lack of reverence to Jesus and his impotence to help people in crisis. The official noted: "Most of the Christians in this country in my opinion belong to the second category I mentioned above." On the same evaluation a second handwritten note confirms the first opinion and opposes giving a permit due to the high sensitivity issues in a religious community.<sup>150</sup>

The show's popularity earned the troupe a United States tour organized by Palestinian students and supported by the Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC-New York Chapter). Officially endorsing the tour, the executive committee of the CALC sent a letter to the U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem facilitating the visa process. The CALC stated: "Knowledge about the peoples of the Middle East and familiarity with their cultures is essential to creating an environment conducive to peace. A U.S. tour of Assanabil Troupe would, we feel, be a positive step in that direction."<sup>151</sup> The letter cited thirteen performances in thirteen cities across the United States for a period of one month. After the troupe's arrival to New York in July of 1988, the tour grew to twenty performances in sixteen States. Controversy followed the production on the tour to the California State University in Sacramento (CSUS), where the Jewish Community Relations Council complained that the show was anti-Semitic: "These groups always say that they will be putting on a cultural show, but the message of the show is always anti-

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<sup>150</sup> Israel State Archive, *Natrin Faraj*. Quoted directly from the letter (dated Nov 2, 1987) by Daniel Rossing, director of the Department of Christian Communities (sects) in the Ministry of Religious affairs. Rossing was also the founder of the Jerusalem Center on Jewish Christian Relations. Amal Egeiq, PhD Candidate, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Washington provided assistance for quoted translations from Hebrew.

<sup>151</sup> CALC July 18, 1988. Assanabil is a transliteration of the Arabic name for Sanabel Theatre.

Semitic, and you can be sure that the hate literature will be out in the lobby.”<sup>152</sup> Dennis Bates of the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco stated:

It is a very fine and usually invisible line that divides something that is anti-Israeli, something that is anti-zionistic, and something that is anti-Semitic. For the audience drawn to this type of show they all mean the same thing.<sup>153</sup>

According to the student newspaper, *The State Hornet*, Jewish community leaders complained that nearly \$5000 of student money was being spent on a “blatantly one-sided political play that helps incite anti-Israeli feelings.”<sup>154</sup> On 17 September 1988, CSUS University Theatre hosted the event, which also included several nationalistic songs by the actor Ahmad Abu Saloum.

At the conclusion of the tour, director Hayyan Ya‘coub stated to the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* that the tour was successful on two accounts. First, *Sanabel People’s Theatre* established that Palestinian theatre “developed its own methods and has come of age.” Second, the troupe wanted to show that “the real Palestinian problem is in the fact that the US government supports Israeli occupation.” Author Pat McDonnell summarized Sanabel’s American tour:

If the troupe returns to the United States for future tours, and translates its script into English so that Americans are made aware of the humor and bravery of the Palestinian people, it is likely that non-Arabic speaking Americans would turn out to give the same warm welcome Sanabel received this time by the Arab-American community.<sup>155</sup>

On 17 May 1999, four days after Bethlehem’s Al-Ro‘at TV station aired a video recorded version of the production, the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of the Interior

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<sup>152</sup> Quoted in *The State Hornet*, 16 September 1988.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Pat McDonnell, “Eerily Prescient Play Tours US.” Apr 5, 1982 (Vol. 1, no. 1) - Dec 31, 1989 (Vol. VIII, no. 8).

shut down the station. One representative explained that the Ministry of the Interior understood clearly the dangers of provoking sectarian sentiments and claimed that a team from the Ministry watched and evaluated the play, deeming it offensive to the Lord Jesus Christ. Another representative denied the Palestinian Authority's involvement. In spite of the mixed messages, the order submitted to the director of the station Hamdi Farraj, the director of the station, cited President Yasser Arafat as the source. The closure caused a stir in the religious community and the theatrical movement. According to actor and troupe co-founder Hussam Abu Eishah, Sanabel People's Theatre and Al-Ro'at station met with heads of the churches in the Latin monastery, watched the play together, and answered their questions. Shortly thereafter, churches and institutions of civil society in the district of Bethlehem sent President Arafat messages demanding the reopening of the station and reprimanding the use of Christian sentiments as an excuse for the ministry's actions.<sup>156</sup>

## Conclusion

Emphasis on local issues, grassroots activism, and often, direct representation of Palestinian issues characterize the journey of Dababis, The Palestinian Theatre, The Palestinian People's Theatre, and Sanabel People's Theatre. These troupes' focus on producing political theatre earned them a number of direct and indirect confrontations with the Israeli authorities. In 1999, the censorship of *Natrin Faraj* and the subsequent closure of Al-Ro'at TV by the Palestinian Authority suggested that Palestinian theatre

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<sup>156</sup> For a report on the incident see *Media in Palestine: Between the hammer of the Authority and the Anvil of Self-Censorship*. <http://www.phrmg.org/arabic/monitor1999/oct1999-4.htm> (Last Accessed May 25, 2012). Website Name: The Palestinian Human Rights Monitory Group. Abu Eishah discussed the meeting with heads of the churches in the personal interview.



artists' mandate for cultural resistance continued after the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords.

Although they retreated from producing similar large-scale productions for adult audiences, Sanabel Theatre produces long running plays for children today. Almost daily, they continue to present their productions “in school yards, classrooms, and under trees” in the East Jerusalem-Ramallah area.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Hussam Abu Eisheh, personal interview, 20 November 2011.

### Chapter Three

#### From Balalin to El-Hakawati: Collective Creation Trajectory

I am not weak, I can do something big, I can commit suicide, and the whole country will shake to the news. The way to fame is an open window from the fourth floor.

(*Al-'atma*, The Darkness, 1972)

On 1 October 2011, forty years after François Abu Salem uttered those words on stage in one of Modern Palestine's earliest fully produced theatrical experiences, he committed suicide by jumping from the tenth floor of an unfinished building in Ramallah's Al-Tireh neighborhood. On the evening of his death, phone calls spread the news from artist to artist and person-to-person until most of the people, who treasured, hated, attacked, opposed, denied, inspired, and loved Abu Salem, learned about the incident. For many, the heart wrenching news indicated the end of an era. For others, it was a tragic end for a brilliant, complex and difficult, if not troubled, human being. But a historically concerned memory credits Abu Salem with more than a final act of suicide.<sup>158</sup>

#### Balalin

The story of *Balalin* begins with two groups of young people who loved culture and theatre, one residing in Ramallah and the other living in Jerusalem. Calling themselves Usrat Al-Masrah (The Theatre Family), the Ramallah group began rehearsing the Poet Samih Al-Qassem's play *Qaraqash* with the American director Herbert Kenneth Carmichael. From 1962 to 1972, "Carmichael and his wife were commissioned by the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations (COEMAR) of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. as consultants in communications to the Middle East and

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<sup>158</sup> For a brief biographical review of Abu Salem's career, see Jackie Lubeck's article in *This Week in Palestine*, November 2011, Issue 163, and Rania Jawad's article in *Jadaliyya*, 20 October 2011.

Africa.”<sup>159</sup> Carmichael staged readings with a minimum of production elements at the YMCA in both Jerusalem and Ramallah.<sup>160</sup> He also regularly staged a production entitled “Eyes Upon the Cross,” which actor George Ibrahim worked on in 1965.

The Theatre Family rehearsed at Ramallah’s Lutheran Church, in a multipurpose hall that lay empty aside from the columns. Having been approached by the members of a young troupe, Carmichael cast the play and rehearsed it mostly in the afternoons. The young Palestinians had initially considered the project as an interesting youth activity, but when the staging was completed they decided to apply for a performance permit from the military government. Upon receiving the troupe’s formal application in 1971, the office of the military governor asked the troupe to return a month later. Then, the request for the permission to perform was denied. The troupe debated the available options. First, they could present the play without a permit. Second, they could accept the production as an interesting community building educational experience that gracefully ended. The majority of the troupe voted to avoid troubles with the military, so the play was never performed and they began to search for ways to continue their theatrical efforts without having to obtain permits.

They learned that community activities at the YMCA in Ramallah did not require a performance permit, so they embarked on a new project suggested by Sameh Abboushey. Having studied in Turkey, he was familiar with the popular Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet. In his search for a theatrical poem, he found an Arabic translation of a poem called *Younis and the Almond Tree*. Based on his proposal, The Theatre Family

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<sup>159</sup> McKim, LindaJo H. *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 62.

<sup>160</sup> According to Sameh Abboushey, the Palestinians working with Carmichael at the time included Rima Nasser Tarazi and Tanya Nasser. Today, the hall has now developed to host parties and receptions but at the time it basically was an empty room.

decided to produce an evening of poetry at the YMCA in Ramallah as their first public performance in 1971. The evening had the nucleus of an emerging theatrical company: they appropriately cast the characters, rehearsed the staging in advance, and underscored the performance with the music. In one of the YMCA's empty rooms, the cast spread among the spectators, who either sat on the floor or on low café chairs. Within this simple, private and familial environment, they read their parts.

After the performance, the troupe remained for a personal gathering. François Gaspar, a Frenchman who spoke and behaved like a Palestinian, along with the brothers Emile and Ibrahim Ashrawi, stayed to speak with the troupe. Breaking bread over *Zeit* and *Za'tar*, Abboushey recalled, “[François] showed us a play called *Slice of Life*, which he had been working on. He had it typed and could make copies.”<sup>161</sup> He proposed collaboration between his friends in Jerusalem and the Theatre Family in Ramallah. Rehearsals would take place at a location in Jerusalem. “We thought about it. Why not!”<sup>162</sup>

During the formative years of the troupe, the revolutionary protests of French students in 1968 and the hippie movement heavily influenced the initiators of the joint project. Some members were previously exposed to Western theatre throughout their education in the private schools of the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. The core group from Ramallah included Sameh Abboushey, Nadia Mikhail, Vera Tamari, who respectively had studied architecture, music, and visual art. The core group from Jerusalem included François Gaspar, who had just returned from a brief stint with Arianne Mnouchkine's Théâtre de Soleil, and the brothers Emile and Ibrahim Ashrawi, who had formed their

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<sup>161</sup> Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

<sup>162</sup> All details aside from information on Carmichael are from my interview with Sameh Abboushey on 11 January 2011.

own rock band, Al-Bara‘em.<sup>163</sup> Simultaneously, Palestinian resistance literature and poetry, as well as the emerging genre of Palestinian political song, which developed through the music of Mustapha Al-Kurd and the dabkah choreography of Zakaria Shahin, played a significant role in inspiring a movement towards local cultural production. Finally, voluntary work committees and grassroots community activism played a central role in maintaining the cohesion of Palestinian society in the absence of national institutions and the onset of the occupation.<sup>164</sup>

Guided by a utopian ideal of a collective artistic and social life, they rehearsed mostly in François’ family home, located in East Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. The house functioned as a space for communal living, an intellectual center for the group to bond and share ideas, and a place for actors to sleep.<sup>165</sup> The tradition-free atmosphere was characterized by personal and social freedom. The commune-like environment encouraged a sense of cohabitation, eating and working together for a common goal.<sup>166</sup> As the troupe rehearsed *A Slice of Life* in Jerusalem, additional members joined this work-in-progress. News of this developing project spread in the East Jerusalem-Ramallah area. Local intellectuals and journalists such as Mohammad Al-Batrawi, Fawzi Al-Bakri, and Mahmoud Shqair closely followed the troupe’s progress. While taking *oud* lessons in Jerusalem’s Old City, the Ramallah resident Adel Al-Tarteer heard of the ongoing rehearsals from the troupe members Ali

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<sup>163</sup> It may be difficult to name all the participants in Balalin because the troupe grew quickly, especially after the 1973 festival. According Abboushey (personal interview, 11 January 2011), the Ramallah group included Sameh Abboushey, Nadia Mikail, Saheer Abdel Hadi, Adel El Tarteer, Walid Abdel Salam, and Jabr Al-Zubaidi. The early Jerusalem group included François, Emile Ashrawi, Ibrahim Ashrawi, Milad Kidan, and Ali Hijjawi.

<sup>164</sup> Combined account from two sources: Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011; and Emile Ashrawi, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

<sup>165</sup> According to interview with Emile Ashrawi 11 January 2011.

<sup>166</sup> Majid Al-Mani, personal interview, 13 October 2010.

Al-Hijjawi and Hani Abu Shanab. Arriving at the ground-level villa, which was surrounded by a large grove of grape vines, and fig, nut, and almond trees, he participated in the day's improvisational rehearsal and shared the company's sense of commitment and passion for the theatre.<sup>167</sup>

On 22 January 1972, *A Slice of Life* opened in the theatre of Al-Omariyyeh school in Jerusalem's Old City. The major characters in the play included a dictatorial bourgeois man, who lived in a palace surrounded by a garden, stable and horses. He employed a cook, gardener and peasant servants. The conflicts in the play addressed the class gap between the servants and the bourgeois class as well as the power struggle between the husband and wife. Emphasizing the philosophical differences between the bourgeois owners and the laboring peasants, the play challenged traditions and class structures, which exerted influence on Palestinian everyday life. In traditional societal conventions, a woman's desire to become a musician dishonors a family. Laborers must not dream of better lives. By paying a worker, the capitalist may mistreat him and still demand appreciation for the demeaning employment opportunity.<sup>168</sup>

When the production moved to Ramallah and Bethlehem, the troupe performed it without a permit. In this case they were successful, for the Israeli military either ignored or was unaware of the performances. Abboushey explained, "We treated it like an educational activity at a school. We believed that if we didn't give it importance, neither would [the military]."<sup>169</sup> *A Slice of Life* garnered the attention and support of the community, as one reviewer stated: "It was a very successful production. The subject has

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<sup>167</sup> Adel Al-Tarteer, personal interview, 24 October 2010.

<sup>168</sup> I have been unable to obtain a copy of *A Slice of Life*. This description is a reconstruction based on brief mentions in interviews by Adel Al-Tarteer, Emile Ashrawi, and Sameh Abboushey as well as an e-mail exchange with Al-Tarteer on 22 June 2012.

<sup>169</sup> Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

been done, but it is never boring because it is always new: the working poor... their thoughts... imagination... and the authoritarian rich, their thoughts...philosophy... interests...<sup>170</sup>

The production began some traditions that remained with the troupe. For example, an actor entered at the beginning of every performance with a bunch of balloons that were released to celebrate the end of the evening. On the tickets, various lines from the dialogue were printed to promote the original text such as: “Life without renewal isn’t good or fun, and it loses all taste,” “Can’t we dream? Go dream by yourself!” or “Music? What music! You want to destroy our family’s honor? Shut up!” The play also became an opportunity for the troupe to discover their working methods. They improvised to solve staging problems and created discussion sessions to negotiate differences in opinion. They also used improvisation to expand the rough original script and elaborate François Abu Salem’s directorial framework.<sup>171</sup>

Balalin’s following play, *Al-‘atma (The Darkness, 1972)*, became the troupe’s most memorable production. The play portrays the challenges of a young troupe as it attempts to perform an original play. After technical difficulties with the curtains and an unresponsive technician (Milad), François performs a well-crafted monologue on death and suicide. Then the lighting system shuts down, leaving the audience and the actors in the dark. The company struggles to fulfill the promise of the evening and to perform the product of seven months of rehearsals. They begin by asking the audience to fix the

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<sup>170</sup> *Al-Anba'*, January 1972.

<sup>171</sup> Combined account from several sources: Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011; and Emile Ashrawi, personal interview, 11 January 2011; Majid Al-Mani, personal interview, 13 October 2010; and Adel Al-Tarteer, personal interview, 24 October 2010. Note: Adel Al-Tarteer framed and hung the tickets and posters in the center of Sunduq Al-‘ajab in the Ramallah, Old City.

lighting board. The spectators participate by complaining about the darkness and the waste of their money on tickets. One volunteer, the carpenter Adel, enthusiastically emerges to help but lacks the necessary skills to repair it. A western-educated school teacher gives a lecture on the history of electricity and theatre to help the audience to better understand the situation. In the candle scene, the actors give one candle to each spectator, who must take responsibility for maintaining it. The experiment fails because some members don't believe in the significance of their personal contribution to the overall goal of lighting the room. A female electric engineer volunteers to fix the board, but traditional social norms and her fiancé's pride prevent her from freely participating until she asserts her right to work. The climax of the play depicts insurmountable conflicts between not only the actors, but also members of the audience. Suddenly, the lights switch on; then everyone celebrates, and takes credit. Eventually, they realize that the carpenter Adel died in his ceaseless successful effort to fix the lighting board. The actors collectively carry him on their shoulders and exit the hall.<sup>172</sup>

Without a doubt, *Al-'atma* was Balalin's most successful production. The play's idea emerged from Sameh Abboushey's frequent visits to East Jerusalem's old cinema houses. As an architect and art enthusiast, he knew about the modernist avant-garde movements, including the "Happenings" in the United States. Lacking directorial, technical and playwriting expertise, he approached François Abu Salem with the idea of a play within a play that happens in total darkness. In this theatrical event, the audience and the actors would share the efforts to emerge from the crisis. Abu Salem and Abboushey structured the idea into a series of scenes. Their original draft was composed

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<sup>172</sup> For an alternative discussion and analysis of the play, see Snir, p. 108-116 and Nassar, p. 91-104.



of scene titles, situations, and a time frame, as well as a general idea for the staging. Then, they worked with the ensemble to create the script through improvisations and rehearsal exercises. Abboushey explained, “Most of the scenes developed from the actors. We gave the situation and observed what happened.”<sup>173</sup> In the rehearsals, the troupe collectively improvised while Abboushey and Abu Salem edited the scenes, reorganized the play, and documented it.

In 1972, the production premiered at Al-Omariyyeh School in East Jerusalem.<sup>174</sup> On the stage, the company set up two platforms. On the first, the troupe presented the main through-line of the play in real time. From the beginning of the play, the actors freely moved between this platform and the audience. Some characters doubled as audience members. In this time frame, the actors strategize to solve their lighting problem, which represents the dark age of the occupation and the struggles of Palestinians in their war of liberation. These realistic scenes represented the internal power disparities in Palestinian society. They demonstrated a large gap between the educated and uneducated, rich and poor, and men and women. On the second platform, the troupe presented surreal flashbacks and dream sequences, which revealed the reasons for the failure to fix everyday problems. For example, one scene presented the female engineer inside a plastic bag as her male oppressor describes her using only the measurements of her body, turning her into a sexual object. The party scene depicts dancing, drinking, and expensive gifts, suggesting a gathering of the upper class. Acted mostly in slow motion, the café scene shows men wasting their time playing

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<sup>173</sup> Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

<sup>174</sup> According to a poster advertising a Ramadan evening performance on 21 October 1972, the production was initially performed five times in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Qalandia.

backgammon and participating in endless discussions about political issues, but never taking responsibility for their opinions or engaging in positive action.

The play functioned on two distinct, but simultaneous levels. First, it dramatized an immediate problem: the need to repair the lighting for the sake of the performance. On this level, the play realistically illustrates dysfunctional daily life when a community struggles against great odds. The play demonstrated how disagreements, complaints, and personal interests prevent members of the community from achieving their common goals. As the problem of the darkness plays out in real time, the audience shares the common objective of repairing the lighting board. How will the troupe overcome this obstacle? Will the play happen? The moment-to-moment engagement with the theatrical event tricks the spectators into becoming participants.

On the symbolic level, the struggle to end the darkness and perform the play represents the Palestinian struggle to end the occupation. Community mobilization against the occupation appears as the overriding political theme in the play. The troupe presents collective action as the remedy to the imposed darkness. In the candle scene, the spectators are given candles to carry and maintain lit until the darkness ends. Milad states, “If we don’t hold the candles, another audience from the outside will not come to hold them for us, and we could remain in the dark forever. Take care of the candle. It’s your responsibility...”<sup>175</sup> In the midst of the chaos, François explains: “I have a remedy, here! This young man works and doesn’t talk. The remedy’s work.”<sup>176</sup> The character of François, played by Abu Salem, explicitly calls on the characters to emulate the work ethic of the productive young man, Adel. Implicitly, the play demonstrates the power of

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<sup>175</sup> For the Arabic script, see Anis, p. 41. For an English language translation, see Al-Jayyusi, p. 196. This quotation combines both.

<sup>176</sup> Al-Jayyusi, p. 211.

mass mobilization. When the Adel dies at the lighting board, the worker becomes not only a symbol of resistance, but also a martyr for the cause. In a stark parallel to the armed struggle of the late sixties and early seventies, the cast collectively carries the dead worker on their shoulders in the way Palestinian martyrs are carried to their resting place. Emile Ashrawi explained, “It was truly a call for an uprising, but using symbols.”<sup>177</sup>

In their performances in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Beit Sahour, Bethlehem, and Birzeit, audiences showed their appreciation by large turnouts and enthusiastic participation. Since most audience members were unaware of the production’s plot, they attempted to help the actors with the lighting. On occasion, professional electricians eagerly walked onto the main platform to offer their services, demanding an opportunity to fix the lighting system. Actors would eventually whisper an explanation in their ear, politely asking them to return to their seats. The audience often delightfully clapped or responded in shock as voices seemed to emerge from anywhere in the performance hall. Abboushey remembered, “I think they were scared in the beginning... ‘God save us, is this a trap?’”<sup>178</sup> The audience responded positively to the troupe’s critique of the Palestinian society and demand for reform. The underlying revolutionary messages in the play reached the audiences. Spectators often asked, “Which faction or political organization does the troupe really belong to?” The troupe answered: “Balalin!”<sup>179</sup>

Theatre artists continued to be the nucleus of the Balalin troupe, but new members brought expertise in music, singing and dancing. The well-known communist Ilias Nasrallah suggested to the emerging revolutionary singer Mustapha Al-Kurd that Balalin might benefit from his services. Al-Kurd brought his friend Zakaria Shahin who trained

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<sup>177</sup> Emile Ashrawi, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

<sup>178</sup> Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Adel Al-Tarteer, personal interview, 24 October 2010.

and maintained his own dabkah dance troupe. The two had been comrades in the union of painters and iron workers in the late sixties. In the first half of 1973, the expanded Balalin troupe opened an outdoor performance of Nazim Hikmet's *The Almond Tree and Younis the Cripple* at the grove of their center in Sheikh Jarrah.<sup>180</sup> The variety performance featured music by Mustapha Al-Kurd and expressive frozen tableaux as an integral part of the stage picture. Zakaria Shahin choreographed the dance numbers.

In the spring of 1973, after the company remounted this variety show as a small festival of song and theatre in Al-Bireh Municipality, the military authorities called in the majority of the core troupe members for questioning about their activities.<sup>181</sup> The troupe had consciously been manipulating the occupation's legal system by performing "privately" in churches, municipality halls and clubs in the Ramallah and Bethlehem areas. To avoid the military, they also performed in Jerusalem. Adel Al-Tarteer remembered: "We were allowed to perform in Jerusalem, but not in Ramallah. Therefore, we performed in Jerusalem and our audience came to us from Ramallah, Beit Hanina, and other areas..."<sup>182</sup> The popularity of *Al-'atma*, the increasing size of the troupe, the expanding repertory of plays, and the frequency of events caught the attention of the military governor. When he asked them to explain why Balalin performed without a permit, they feigned ignorance or claimed to be producing amateur theatre.<sup>183</sup> But when posters appeared in the streets of Ramallah to advertise the opening of *The Palestinian Theatre and Folklore Month* in August of 1973, all signs suggested that the troupe was creating highly influential popular theatre. For example, the Balalin Festival

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<sup>180</sup> Mahmoud Shqair, *Shu'un Filastiniyah*, July 1975, issue 47.

<sup>181</sup> As reported by Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

<sup>182</sup> Adel Al-Tarteer, personal interview, 24 Oct 2010.

<sup>183</sup> As explained by both Al-Tarteer and Abboushey.

Committee had released a document, entitled *Our Country's Theatre*, announcing the troupe's intention to create an original Palestinian theatre and to introduce the Palestinian audience to plays from the "world stage." This manifesto explained their collaborative methodology and commitment to respond to the reviews of the critics and the audiences. Pledging a commitment to the presentation of popular Palestinian culture, the committee also announced the addition of new folklore artists, but does not mention their names.<sup>184</sup>

To create excitement, Balalin distributed mysterious colorful posters depicting a question mark with the words "Balalin," "Month of August," and "In Ramallah." Advertising the event without announcing the program, these teaser posters suggested that Balalin was actively promoting an upcoming event, but the question mark could be placed after the date, the name of the company or the name of the city. Black and white posters advertised a three-week program of dance, Palestinian folklore, remounted productions of *Al-'atma* and *Qit'at Hayat*, and three new plays: *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw* (*Weather Forecast*), *Thawb Al-Imbrator* (*The Emperor's New Clothes*), and a musical sketch entitled *Al-Kinz* (*The Treasure*). Events ran four evenings a week starting at seven thirty. The Ramallah Bus Company agreed to run from the hall in the Ramallah Municipality building to Jerusalem every night after the performance. Tickets were sold at the *Sharbain* bookshop in both Ramallah and Jerusalem, *Ramsis* novelty store in Jerusalem's Old City, and other sites in Nablus and Bethlehem.<sup>185</sup>

In the absence of a dedicated theatre at the municipality building, the company transformed the basement into a performance hall. In the sixties, the Jordanian

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<sup>184</sup> From the personal archive of Adel Al-Tarteer. The "manifesto" was entitled *Masrah Baladna*. Worth noting, the company did not survive long enough to achieve all its goals.

<sup>185</sup> Al-Tarteer framed and hung those posters in the current location of *Sunduq Al-'ajab*. The only manuscript I gained access to is *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw*, which remains unpublished. Further research is needed on all other plays by Balalin.

government had earmarked the location to be a theatre to promote community and educational theatre, but the project never materialized. The space remained a hazardous construction zone full of sand, bricks, cement and stones. The walls were unfinished. The troupe worked together to clean it up, level the ground, and enlarge the existing performance area. They painted the walls and purchased curtains to create backstage areas. They manufactured simple “par can” lighting instruments from empty cans of Nido dry milk and in some cases from original materials crafted by a tinker. They also brought chairs in to establish the audience space, turning the hall into a flexible theatre, in which the space could be transformed based on each performance. For example, *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw* required multiple platforms, whereas folkloric music and dance were performed mostly on the main stage.<sup>186</sup>

During this period of preparation, construction and rehearsals, the military raided the hall, collected the identity cards of the artists, and sent official requests for the cast to report to the military governor. Some actors were summoned during the run of the festival. Adel Al-Tarteer described his questioning at the Israeli military headquarters in Ramallah as brimming with an “atmosphere of terror.” The military governor met him personally. He began with casual conversation and offered him coffee. He questioned him about his activities and personal life: Why do you do theatre? Why don’t you settle down and get married or travel abroad? How about you study at the Hebrew University? During the interview, Al-Tarteer got the distinct impression that he was being offered the opportunity to work as an informant, a feeling several artists mentioned about these encounters. At the end of the interview, he was asked to leave with the warning,

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<sup>186</sup> Combined from three personal interviews: Majid Al-Mani, 13 October 2010; Adel Al-Tarteer, 24 October 2010; and Emile Ashrawi, 11 January 2011.

“Beware because we are watching you.”<sup>187</sup> Feeling intimidated by the potential legal consequences, the troupe applied for a performance permit. “We didn’t know whether we were going to get it. The tickets were sold and posters were hung. The permit arrived on the opening night of the festival.”<sup>188</sup>

The newest major full-length production in the festival was *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw*. The play tells the story of a fictional nation called Nitsalaf in a period in the distant past, when the world was polytheistic.<sup>189</sup> A dragon rules the land by destroying neighboring nations. A group of magicians control worship in casinos and communicate with the Gods: the Great God Shamandoor, the God of Currency, and the God of Catastrophes. Under the dictatorship of the dragon, magicians control the people’s level of knowledge. In the school system, they teach children to stop asking questions. By using the concept of eternal punishment or pleasure, the parents rely on the magicians to control the curious minds of the children. The magicians maintain a system of religious factions or sects and discourage inter-sectarian marriage. When citizens living outside Nitsalaf transfer money to family members, the funds run through the magicians, who take commissions. The casinos of worship operate on olive oil, which is donated by the people. In this patriarchal system, law and tradition privilege men over women. Old folks homes and hospitals are overcrowded and poorly run. The magicians and dragon maintain strong relationships with wealthy land agents and owners, who control the economy. When peasants and workers complain of poverty and the absence of services, the magicians advise them to pray to the Great God Shamandour. When problems in

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<sup>187</sup> Adel Al-Tarteer, personal interview, 24 October 2010.

<sup>188</sup> Reported by Abboushey, Ashrawi, Al-Tarteer, and Al-Kurd in personal interviews.

<sup>189</sup> Nitsalaf is a transliteration of Arabic. When reversed the letters spell out the word Falastin, meaning Palestine. The equivalent reversal in English would be the Enitselap.

Nitsalaf rise to unacceptable proportions, the dragon and the magicians agree to begin a great construction project to keep the population occupied. They introduce a new entertaining device called *The Talabizion* (Television), which is sold throughout the land. New entertainments emerge including gambling, ethnic dances, spirits, and wrestling. Then, drought spreads through the land and the economy crashes. The magicians begin ritualistic prayers, but year after year, the people's interest in prayer dwindles. The drought is followed with flood and destruction. The people rise up against tyranny, but the magicians and the dragon succeed in dividing the revolutionaries by nurturing and advertising their sectarian differences, increasing the presence of the God of Currency by printing more money, and scandalizing the image of the educated leadership. The magicians squash the revolution and the people return to their old lives.

After the play ends, an audience member stands up and proposes an alternate ending. Demanding a return to an earlier point in the play, he states, "Let's see now how the people organized themselves in the struggle against those in power."<sup>190</sup> Returning to the flood scene, the people resolve the issue of the flood by using the raw materials from the land to build a dam. They claim ownership of the factories because they built them using their own labor. They discover that the dragon's flames were an illusion created by their own oil donations. Unable to accept the new realities, the dragon commits suicide. In their final celebration, the people demand that the magicians entertain them by performing a humiliating striptease, effectively turning the secret society of dictators into a public spectacle.

In addition to the main stage, this collectively created three-hour epic drama was staged on three platforms. The audience was distributed throughout the hall. The

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<sup>190</sup> Unpublished script, p. 60, obtained from actor Adel Al-Tarteer.



production used Brechtian distancing techniques, which drew attention to theatrical methods of performance to prevent the audience from identifying with the characters. It was also reminiscent of Théâtre de Soleil's landmark production *1789*, which placed several stages in the midst of the audience. Before the play began, some actors consciously spoke with the audience to achieve critical distance. For example, they freely moved on the various stages in costume, but not in character. At times posing as audience members, the actors used the aisles throughout the performance. Visible lighting instruments played an important role in directing the audience's focus. The actors set up each scene on the appropriate platform and waited for the spotlight to signal the beginning of the new scene. A narrator began the play by presenting the backstory and announcing the start of the performance. At the end of the play, he created the false ending by announcing the end of the play, prompting the "audience" to demand a new ending. Each character transformed the props as needed throughout the play. For example, functioning like a projected slide, the white blanket from the senior's home scene became the sign that depicted the word hospital in another scene. Pantomime was used to suggest the presence of a radio. The narrator shut it off and turned it on as required in front of the audience. The arrangement and movement of the bodies of the actors shaped the staging to portray the religious classroom, the ritualistic prayer hall, and natural landscapes in the destructive winter scenes.

By renaming or "coding" the place, the gods, the people, and the religious problems, Balalin directly critiqued the difficult issues that plagued Palestinian society.<sup>191</sup>

Avoiding the wrath of specific members of the community, the premise of these coded

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<sup>191</sup> This idea of renaming or coding subjects and objects remained as an integral part of Abu Salem's artistic career and became a way to avoid censorship. See Chapter Four in this dissertation for further detail.

characters was to unmask the conspiratorial relationship between the institutions of religion and capitalism under the leadership of a fascist dictatorship. The play condemned the divisiveness between Palestinian Muslims and Christians, challenging the hegemony of religious ideologues. It claimed that sectarianism only benefitted the dragon, who already owned all the firepower and the means to suppress the people. Using juxtaposed images, the play exposed contradictions in the social formation. For example, it represents a religious figure as he objectifies the female body during worship. In a state of complete drought the magicians ate until they were completely satisfied. Immediately after prayer, a woman smoked a cigarette. While a young man attempted to build his own business, a religious figure sabotaged the project by stealing his money.

By presenting coded snapshots of the contradictions in Palestinian society and culture, Balalin called for self-liberation in order to achieve freedom from a foreign power, whose influence permeated every aspect of daily life. A mix of foreign and indigenous accents suggested distinctions between the locals and the outsiders. In the hospital scene, speaking in broken Arabic, the nurses botched the birth of a local baby, leading to its death. Using materials from their own land, the people built a massive residential tower that reached the sky, but they were not allowed to live in it. When the people were close to successfully overturning the oppressive forces, the local collaborating land agent provided the insider knowledge to suppress revolutionary sentiments by using a combination of counterfeit money and a plethora of advertising for entertainments and “modern” products. To ascertain mind control, radio announcements polluted the airwaves and newspapers flooded the land, which created a culture of news

addiction. In this dangerously conspiratorial and hopeless situation, Balalin presented a dark ending, then proposed a change of direction.

Like *Al-‘atma*, *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw* (Weather Forecast) called for mass mobilization and the organization of all efforts towards personal and public liberation; however, it wasn't as popular. *Al-‘atma* told the story of the troupe using their own lives as the primary source. They told the story of their own struggle to create and present the play in a few months despite their personal differences and against the overwhelming odds. Clearly, the play's struggle was analogous to the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Furthermore, on some level, all the actors played themselves. For example, the enthusiastic actor and craftsman Adel Al-Tarteer played the role of the eager carpenter. Emile Ashrawi played the role of the intellectual. Nadia Mikhail played the role of the educated female intent on offering a major contribution to society. François Abu Salem played the leading actor who drives the production forward.

In contrast to *Al-‘atma*'s clarity in plot, structure, and characterization of the Palestinian identity, *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw* presented multiple storylines and characters that were sometimes difficult to follow. Abboushey admitted, “When we started rehearsing it, nobody knew where we were going...the connections were weak and the play was too fragmented.”<sup>192</sup> Although the audience clearly understood the symbolism, the overly coded play presented too many alienating names and characters. In performance, the majority of the production was taken up to establish the world of the play and to present situations that the audience was already familiar with. In the very end, the late inciting incident of the drought suddenly moves the production from exposition into a conflict between the people and the magicians. While *Al-‘atma* offered

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<sup>192</sup> Sameh Abboushey, personal interview, 11 January 2011.

a clear chronological plot structure in its constant motion from occupation to liberation, *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw* failed to present a story for the audience to follow. Its heavy-handed symbolism permeated the entire script. Despite the lukewarm audience reception to *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw*, the festival's success was unprecedented.

Although Balalin's popularity rose to new heights, personal differences caused irreparable rifts within the company. Perhaps the fragmentation of *Nashrat Ahwal Al-Jaw* as a production and as a play-script signaled the emerging disunity in the collective. In spite of the broadly leftist direction of most Balalin members, the collective creation of plays in the shadow of differing political and intellectual orientations increased conflicts in open discussion sessions. Encouraged by recent successes, some members grew more egotistical and individualistic. Others attempted to direct productions towards their own factional, political, or nationalistic goals. Ironically, the troupe members critiqued division, self-interest, institutional corruption, and division within Palestinian society, but failed to remedy these issues within their own ranks.

By the end of 1973, Balalin had grown to over thirty-five members, but the core members continued to be overloaded with the most of the work. The expansion of activities into folkloric music and dance diluted the company's focus on creating original Palestinian theatre. When the troupe ceased operating in 1975, it had created only three new small-scale productions.<sup>193</sup> At the time Balalin fully disbanded, financial problems became irreparable. Many of its members had left the country. Some members were arrested and imprisoned for long periods. Ideological and intellectual differences had

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<sup>193</sup> Former member Mohammad Anis reported all these reasons. See p. 22-23.

emerged in full force. And the collective creation spirit had been lost as some members reportedly attempted to take an authoritarian role.<sup>194</sup>

Despite these well-documented reasons, one explanation remains understated as “ideological differences” and often unreported. In the absence of Palestinian television and radio in the Occupied Territories, political parties had become aware of the power of theatre to influence public opinion and promote their agenda in both armed and peaceful struggle. The far-reaching influence of *Al-‘atma* and the month-long festival proved Balalin’s potential to become a significant platform for the promotion of factional politics. Given Balalin’s permeable and inclusive membership, it embraced individuals affiliated with Fateh, PFLP, the Communist Party, the Democratic Front, and the emerging National Front, which attempted to be multi-factional. One performer explained that various factions encouraged their members to participate in Balalin in order to influence its direction from the inside. As a result, the community atmosphere of the early formative period was replaced by the ideological and philosophical wars that plagued the Palestinian political struggle.

In the post-festival period, a major conflict erupted between the majority of the company and François Abu Salem, the initiator of the entire Balalin enterprise.<sup>195</sup> Given the scarcity of Palestinian plays at the time, he presented and promoted an idealized vision of the collective creation model, which the initial company members understood as self-erasure in the service of the greater good; they chose to credit the collective for their

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<sup>194</sup> As reported by Mahamid, who interviewed several company members including Emile Ashrawi and Walid Abdel Salam. See p. 32-33.

<sup>195</sup> Reported in several interviews.

own individual contributions.<sup>196</sup> Although the Balalin literature proclaimed the collective ideal, Abu Salem actually played a directorial and editorial role for the majority of the productions. In this, his role was similar in some ways to that of Ariane Mnouchkine, the celebrated director of Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. After the festival, François' vision challenged the wishes of the majority of the troupe. Believing in the value of shocking the audience, he wished to break taboos of language, religious values, and conventional physical behavior.<sup>197</sup> The performers were often unconvinced by the aesthetic or dramatic rationales behind his suggestions. Based on increasingly irreconcilable artistic and personal differences, François left the troupe and formed a splinter theatre troupe. He called it Bila-Lin (Without Leniency).

#### Bila-Lin<sup>198</sup>

Bila-Lin only existed in 1974 and 1975 as a vehicle for former Balalin members. In 1974, the troupe produced Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule*. Carrying on the spirit of its mother company, it produced two collective creations in 1975: *Al-'ibra (The Moral)* and *Musara'a Hurra (Free Wrestling)*, which became its most memorable production.

*Musara'a Hurra* opened with a symbolic song on the beauty of an unnamed land. A war dance between two opposing teams represented the ongoing battle over it. In the staging, a character named Octopus separated the warring teams "like children," then all parties met in a satirical conference resembling the 1973 Geneva Conference on the

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<sup>196</sup> For example, Sameh Abboushey played a significant authorial role in the writing of *Al-'atma* and Adel Al-Tarteer's skills as a carpenter contributed significantly to the renovation of the Municipality hall for the 1973 festival. Many individual contributions remain unidentified.

<sup>197</sup> According to my informal discussions with his contemporaries, Abu Salem appears to have been influenced in the early seventies by Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and the French Avant-Garde.

<sup>198</sup> Mahamid discusses the troupe very briefly but does not provide specific details, p. 35.

Arab-Israeli conflict. In overt mockery of international efforts to resolve the conflict after the 1973 October War, the actors represented the warring parties as they violently discussed issues related to the Middle East. These conference delegates played cards, physically fought, and negotiated geopolitical issues such as “ separation, the Suez Canal, reconstruction, withdrawal...”<sup>199</sup> In the midst of increasing laughter, they began to agree, opened a champagne bottle, and proceeded to drink champagne and shower in it. When the characters left the wrestling ring, a villager yelled to fellow peasants: “They agreed...”

After this initial introduction, the atmosphere erupted with the sound of drums of war. Six wrestlers prepared themselves for a grueling match: the imperialist petrol guzzling Octopus, the fake oiled regressive Arab, the shiny bourgeois Palestinian Hyena, the anonymous Angel of the working class with his wife, and the crucified Palestinian from the Galilee. An objective referee judged the match. Other characters in the play included the Donkey Rider and Peasants. The wrestling match portrayed the battle between the anonymous working class Angel against the Palestinian Hyena, who was protected by the regressive Arabs and the petrol-guzzling Octopus. The battle led to the complete disenchantment of the laborers and ended with a revolution against the entire capitalist system. The peasants repossessed their land, imprisoned the managers of oppressive capitalist institutions in a box, and freed the crucified Palestinian of the Galilee. Finally, they established a government composed of the rightful owners of the land, the peasants.

In the battle for the liberation, the play did not differentiate between the Israeli occupation and the greater capitalist enterprise represented by the Octopus. Staying true

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<sup>199</sup> Anis, p. 170.

to its name, Bila-lin presented an uncompromising vision of the road map towards liberation. The production staged the overthrowing of the local bourgeois class, who represented the interests of the capitalist system. Then, the peasants established grassroots localized governing committees. In their revolt against the Palestinian Hyena, the peasants shut down all institutions of oppression including education, health, and utility companies.

Donkey Rider:           What happened? What did you do? Everything is topsy-turvy in the town. Was it you who removed all the electricity poles?

All:                        Of course! Who else?

Donkey Rider:           Was it you who took apart all the street lamps... By god, the whole town went dark...

All:                        Of course! Who else? Now, our lives have lit up!

Donkey Rider:           And the director of the public hospital, was it you who kidnapped him?

All:                        Of course! Who else?! And now we're sitting on top of him (All point to the box).

Donkey Rider:           And the director of the school, the director of the electric company and the director of the water company???

All:                        Of course! Of course! Here they all are, imprisoned in the box like monkeys, but don't you worry: We are feeding them and quenching their thirst until we learn from them, then god may have his way with them.

Donkey Rider:           All good! And now I will inform the other villages to spread the movement.<sup>200</sup>

In their enacted revolution, the people dismantled all systems of control, reducing the authorities' access to the people. They established that the rights of the refugees and the rights of the crucified Galilean were aligned in their attachment to the land. They declared that land merchants and collaborating agents were traitors. In their rebuilding phase, they discovered the lack of necessary tools, equipment and educated personnel. The characters reported the confiscation of the tools and equipment of the rich, and the

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<sup>200</sup> Anis 219-220



reclamation of their own educated experts working abroad, ending decades of brain drain. Finally, the female peasant announced that she learned to read and write. In the last moment of the play, she erased a black board and “like a child,” she wrote slowly in a peasant Palestinian accent: “We are the peasant public. The Government!”

*Musara' a Hurra* signaled a leap in Palestinian theatre in terms of the clarity of its message, dramatic structure, and staging methods. The company demonstrated its “no compromise” policy in the production, which required the audience to make decisions upon entering the performance hall. Suspended signs asked the audience to determine their position within the class system, thus sitting with their own class and supporting the appropriate wrestler. The familiar confrontational free wrestling atmosphere of the seventies provided the riotous environment necessary for the involvement of an otherwise inexperienced theatre audience. The script specifically demanded a village-like familial environment. As the drummer accompanied the action of the play, the caricature costumes and stock popular wrestling physical behavior suggested a comedic overtone in the wrestling matches. However, the shadow of the crucified Palestinian loomed from the distance and festered underneath the circus-like atmosphere of the wrestling match. The dramatic structure mirrored the form of the play. The class-based rising action in the ring paralleled the class-conscious seating in the audience. Throughout the play, audience members were forced to re-evaluate their sense of identity, class and community, but also affirmed the shared state of oppression under occupation. This critical position formed the basis for the vocal audience participation in the mob revolutionary action at the end of the play.

### Sunduq Al-‘ajab (Box of Wonder)

By the end of 1975, after the theatre committee of the Association for Work and the Development of the Arts mounted the first Jerusalem Theatre Festival, both Balalin and Bila-Lin ceased their operations. Committed members from both ensembles agreed to discuss the prospect of a professional theatre collective. They were: Adel Al-Tarteer, Mohammad Anis, Mustapha Al-Kurd and François Abu Salem. In the formative stage, they retreated to Anis’s home village of ‘aboud to explore the nature of the collective and negotiate the process of creation.<sup>201</sup> Al-Tarteer explained, “Although we had previously worked together, we tried to build shared experiences. We lived together.” During this retreat, several names were suggested for the troupe including Al-Hakawati (The Storyteller), but they decided to call it Sunduq Al-‘ajab (Box of Wonders) because some members had more vivid memories of this folkloric tradition from their childhood in Palestine. After the initial retreat, they travelled to Greece as a troupe, further developing their working manifesto and thinking about their first original creation. Al-Tarteer remembered that the trip was characterized by intense experiences and plenty of arguments. “Yes, we fought, wrestled, and reconciled. It was necessary for us to live these bittersweet experiences in the founding moments of Sunduq Al-‘ajab.”<sup>202</sup>

According to most Palestinian theatre artists, this collective attempted the first significant effort to fully professionalize Palestinian theatre in the Occupied Territories. Following Balalin’s legacy of collective creation, the troupe rehearsed on a full-time basis, six days per week. They rehearsed mostly in Jerusalem in community centers, churches, and occasionally in private homes or warehouses. They agreed to share all

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<sup>201</sup> Al-Tarteer reported that Al-Kurd joined the retreat at a later stage. Jackie Lubeck worked as a technician on the troupe’s first show.

<sup>202</sup> Adel Al-Tarteer, personal interview, 24 October 2010.

administrative, management and technical responsibilities in order to avoid the concentration of workload and decision making in any single member. Motivated by the desire to create a popular touring theatre, they planned their touring itinerary in advance, reduced their production costs, and minimized their design elements. Since all members completely abandoned their other sources of income, they borrowed money from various sources to free themselves for rehearsals. At the end of 1975, within a six-week period, the original ensemble of Sunduq Al-‘ajab had created its first and only full-length play, *Lamma Injanina (When We Went Crazy!)*.

*Lamma Injanina* follows the transformation of two young men from hopeful dreamers to insane social rejects, who fail to find the right medicine for their social and physical illnesses. The play begins with a juxtaposition between ‘Antar’s happy dream in the first scene and the laborer’s muscle market in the second scene. Like body builders, both ‘Antar and Abu Al-Janazir display their muscles and physical skills to perspective bourgeois employers. As the potential employer examines them like livestock, a worker likens himself to a mule and another describes his labor as inventory for sale. At the end of the scene, the boss exits riding his chosen worker. Aside from the difficult life of material labor, the two young men express interest in politics on the radio and in newspapers, football, drinking, and women. They struggle to comprehend the complex politics surrounding them and they battle against their society’s norms on sexuality, especially pre-marital sex. They are exposed to the fake intellectual, the exploitative merchant, the occupier’s physical abuse, and unlawful imprisonment. As these forces accumulate, ‘Antar descends into mental instability, his work suffers, his substance abuse increases, and his physical health deteriorates. Eventually, he loses the ability to speak,

understand, or interact with others around him. Abu Al-Janazir takes him to different professionals to heal him, such as the magician, the doctor, and the poet; however, they only exacerbate the situation. Finally, 'Antar and Abu Al-Janazir become insane when they lose their handle on reality and inhabit an alternate world of conspiracy, spies, informants, collaborators and wars.

Methodologically and artistically, this highly successful actor-driven original production fulfilled the promise of the company. For touring purposes, the staging required basic lighting and transportable sets. To indicate distinct public and private spaces that converge into one larger public sphere, they painted circles on the stage suggesting different acting areas. The circles collectively created one large circle symbolizing the character's never ending cycle of insanity and violence. The company demonstrated the multiple settings of the scenes using physical acting. They mimed carts, tools, weapons, equipment and various public spaces such as a store, street, doctor's office, and market. Lighting played an important role in isolating characters and signaling the change from one physical space to another. At times, they used a chair or a box to create levels. For example, one scene indicated that the two characters spoke from two different floors of one building. Each in his spotlight, one squatted looking up and the other stood on a box, looking down. The production was visually enriched by the powerful presence of newspapers, which characters consumed (ate) onstage to literally exhibit two evils: poverty and news obsession. The sound of the transistor radio, as played, spoken and manipulated by the actors, suggested a culture of news addiction, leading to an unhealthy conspiratorial social formation.

According to the original poster, the initial run was booked and advertised from 22-25 of January 1976. The image on the poster depicted a promising troupe of young men. Sitting on boxes, sporting long hair in various styles, costumed in suits, and accessorized with hats or moustaches, they appeared confident in their performance and their characterizations. As with many posters from the seventies, the advertising image, name of the troupe and the title of the play were printed in ink, while the dates and location of the performances were hand-written, suggesting that posters were printed for multiple uses. After a successful opening at Al-Omariyyah Theatre in the Old City, the production was temporarily shut down when Mustapha Al-Kurd was arrested. He attributed his arrest to his “theatrical, cultural, and artistic activities.”<sup>203</sup> After a few days in custody, he was released, giving hope to the production’s continuation; however, soon thereafter, he was arrested again and imprisoned administratively for the majority of 1976.

Although the outcome may be similar, Al-Kurd described a clear distinction between being invited for an interrogation or a “conversation” versus being arrested. In the first instance, the police or the military sent a written request to the artist requiring their presence at a particular time in a state controlled establishment. Most Palestinian artists in the seventies received and fulfilled these requests at one time or another. Many left the meetings with the military with a warning, a sense of intimidation, and the requirement to submit an application for a permission to perform. Others suffered greater consequences. For example, in the case of the Dababis troupe in the seventies, the

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<sup>203</sup> Mustapha Al-Kurd, personal interview, 24 January 2011. I challenged the idea that cultural production was a reasonable cause for being arrested. He stated: “I acted and sang. We did *Lamma Injanina*... Those who were active got arrested...” During this period, it was not unusual for theatre artists to be arrested, detained, questioned, or interrogated by the military authorities in the West Bank or the police in Jerusalem.

invitations to converse eventually led to the arrest of the majority of the troupe and the elimination of their entire theatrical enterprise. In the case of an arrest, as Al-Kurd described the harrowing process, the military officers used a theatrical demonstration that constituted their performance of power:

...They come at night, 2am, with a military force like a terror operation... They wait until your head rested on your pillow to perform this terror show... Then people start trading stories: ‘When they arrested him...the stairs...on the roof...through the windows...crossing the streets...’<sup>204</sup>

His first arrest happened at two in the morning after a performance of *Lamma Injanina*. On his second arrest, he was brought face to face with an informer who claimed Al-Kurd attempted to recruit him for a resistance cell. When Al-Kurd didn’t confirm or confess to the charge, he was imprisoned as an “administrative detainee.”<sup>205</sup> Several lawyers took on his case including the Jewish Israeli human rights lawyers Felicia Langar and Lea Tsemel, as well as the Palestinian lawyers Walid Al-Fahoom, Mohammad Kiwan, and Ali Rafe’. At the end of 1976, given the choice of renewable administrative detention or exile, he left Jerusalem on a journey that took him to Jordan, Lebanon, Germany, and several other countries, where he continued to play his music.<sup>206</sup> He did not return home until 1984, when he performed a concert at the opening of An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Mustapha Al-Kurd, personal interview, 26 January 2011. Similar performances of military power were seen in recent years at the Freedom Theatre in the Jenin Refugee Camp.

<sup>205</sup> Based on the mandate’s emergency laws, administrative detention is an arrest without evidence or trial. The 2012 Palestinian prisoner’s hunger strike protested administrative detention and prison conditions.

<sup>206</sup> The circumstances of Al-Kurd’s release and departure, deportation or exile remain undocumented in the public record.

<sup>207</sup> Al-Kurd succeeded in obtaining his residency back with the help of a lawyer.

Sunduq Al-‘ajab hired the actor Jaber Al-Zubaidi to replace Al-Kurd in the play. The production toured from the Jerusalem-Ramallah area to Nazareth, the Galilee, Um Al-Fahem, and the Triangle, presenting the play a total of eighteen performances. Although the production was critically successful and the tour received popular support, Al-Kurd’s departure and poor financial revenues paralyzed the troupe. Since troupe members frequently disagreed with François Abu Salem’s personal and production choices, he was asked to leave. By the end of 1976, the production of *Lamma Injanina* closed down, ending the activities of the original ensemble.

In May of 1979, actors Adel Al-Tarteer and Mohammad Anis Al-Barghouthi of the original founding members revived the troupe by mounting a new work entitled *Taghribat Sa‘id Ben Fadel Allah (The exile of Said son of Fadel Allah)*. The production toured in the Ramallah area and to Jordan in 1981. In 1980, under the banner of Sunduq Al-‘ajab, Adel Al-Tarteer opened the original production *Ras Roos (One head, Many Heads)*. The impressive one-person show told the story of a socially withdrawn worker, who creates and interacts with his own ensemble of puppets. The production premiered before a thousand audience members at Sirriyat Ramallah. Since then, Adel Al-Tarteer became the sole representative of Sunduq Al-‘ajab. He mounted productions of *The Blind and the Deaf* (1986) and *The Hat and the Prophet* (1990) based on the work of Ghassan Kanafani. In more recent years, Sunduq Al-‘ajab has focused the majority of its efforts on children’s plays, especially intimate story telling events that take place in its unique center in Ramallah’s Old City. Until today, Al-Tarteer continues to operate under

the name Sunduq Al-‘ajab, but after the inaugural production the troupe no longer became representative of the collective creation trajectory that originated with Balalin.<sup>208</sup>

### Conclusion

In the period of 1971 to 1976, the ensembles of Balalin, Bila-Lin, and Sunduq Al-‘ajab quickly coalesced and separated. The history of these troupes reflects how division became a characteristic pattern in the theatre movement. Theatre artists fondly now recall this period as a brief, but vibrant age of intellectual and artistic vigor. In this period, they built the foundations for the golden age of Palestinian theatre in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. They created original Palestinian productions in the vernacular, prioritized the issue of the occupation on stage, embraced the spirit of voluntarism to create theatrical collectives, and demanded local reform in the areas of education, women’s rights, and religious freedom. The plays from the period explicitly promoted class-consciousness and privileged the working peasants, perceiving them as the base of popular resistance against the occupation. Finally, the collective creation troupes promoted self-liberation as significant step towards liberation from colonialism. After his departure from Sunduq Al-‘ajab, François Abu Salem refined these experiences into a new experiment: El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe, Jerusalem’s best-known theatrical troupe.

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<sup>208</sup> See Mahamid and Al-Barghouthi for their take on the company and more details on its transformation from its origins as a collective creation troupe.



## Chapter Four

### International Pioneers: El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe

“We have a just cause, it’s true, but as people we’re just completely normal”  
François Abu Salem, October 1989

In 1977, a group of Palestinian students at the Hebrew University, supported by the Arab Student Union, decided to create their own play as part of a yearly Arabic language cultural event. A number of these students pursued degrees in geography and history while taking classes in the department of theatre. After exploring the possibility of collaborating with the well-known theatre makers Ahmad Abu Saloum, Mohammad Al-Thaher, and François Abu Salem, they selected Abu Salem to lead the development of a play on the topic of freedom of expression. The Palestinian community at the Hebrew University received the short play, *Awwal Manshur (First Leaflet)*, with accolades, which prompted François and the students to discuss the possibility of producing a play outside the auspices of the Hebrew University.

Already working with his American partner Jackie Lubeck, Abu Salem proposed the foundation of a theatre troupe; which included two students from the Galilee, Edwar Muallem and Adnan Tarabsheh, and the two Jerusalemites, Talal Hammad and Jamil Eid. During the troupe’s formative period, Muhammad Mahamid from Um Al-Fahem replaced Eid. As with the foundation of most of Palestine’s theatre collectives, no single person can take full credit for creating or “forming” the troupe.<sup>209</sup> Although they all had participated in theatrical activities through churches, schools, or community centers, the

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<sup>209</sup> The six founding members were Abu Salem, Lubeck, Muallem, Tarabsheh, Hammad and Mahamid. Abu Salem retained the right to use El-Hakawati name as his own until his death. Upon leaving the troupe, all the members who belonged to El-Hakawati at any given time stopped using the name. In 1990, the original troupe officially disbanded after the unsuccessful production *In Search of Omar Al-Khayyam*.

majority of the troupe members were amateur. Muallem remembered, “I hadn’t planned to pursue acting. I wanted to complete a master’s degree in geography... But sometimes one encounter changes your whole life.”<sup>210</sup> Although Abu Salem was known for his difficult personality, many Palestinian artists expressed their first encounter with him as transformative. Since 1970, Abu Salem had been a leading founding member of East Jerusalem’s most significant troupes.<sup>211</sup>

For the first time in his theatrical career, Abu Salem launched a troupe that recognized his leadership. El-Hakawati’s articles of incorporation named him the director and the sole supervisor of “every theatrical work undertaken by the troupe.”<sup>212</sup> In addition to the “normal rights and authority a director commonly enjoys with respect to the play he produces,” the internal bylaws accorded him the privileges of a full founding member, and the responsibility to break a tie in voting proceedings as well as to appoint a new director if necessary. In the case of group dissolution, the bylaws stated: “The name EL-HAKAWATI and the publication rights of the texts of the plays shall be the property of the original Director François (ABU SALEM) GASPARD...” Since its foundation in 1977, through its official incorporation in 1983, and during its golden period in the mid eighties, the troupe accepted his creative leadership. Starting in 1986,

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<sup>210</sup> Edwar Muallem, personal interview, 26 October 2010.

<sup>211</sup> Based on personal interviews or e-mail exchanges with a number of artists including Jackie Lubeck (8 October 2012 and on Skype 30 July 2012), Adnan Tarabsheh (11 December 2010) and Edwar Muallem (26 October 2010). Jamil Eid did not re-join the troupe after his release. On the first production, Wassef Dandis helped with set building.

<sup>212</sup> As a prelude to the opening of An-Nuzha-Hakawati theatre in 1984, the bylaws were written and the troupe was officially incorporated.

some members wrote and directed their own productions, leading to the fragmentation of the troupe.<sup>213</sup>

In a period characterized by political factionalism in everyday life, the troupe perceived the theatre as a pluralistic space for the exchange of ideas. The members identified themselves as the natural extension of Balalin, Bila-lin, Sunduq Al-‘ajab, and various education-based theatrical efforts. In one of their informational brochures they stated, “El-Hakawati favors the choice of topics, situations, and characters that clearly signify, without compromise, the Palestinian realities as they are presently under the occupation.”<sup>214</sup> The troupe attempted to carve out “an unfamiliar path” in a period they described as “frozen according to stereotypes” and “often divided in black and white, heroes and villains.”<sup>215</sup> In an opinion editorial, Edwar Muallem noted that El-Hakawati resorted to theatricality, sarcasm, ridicule, stylization, and specificity in lieu of formulaic speeches, tears, complaints, cramming, and description. To promote diligence, research, and analysis, they avoided the troupe’s identification with any specific political factions on and off stage. In their exaggerated stylized characterizations, comedy played a significant role “to combat injustice and oppression.” They also adopted the role of the narrator to ensure a clear dramatic structure.<sup>216</sup> Abu Salem explained how they eschewed popular slogans and representations of heroic characters:

The minute you create heroes within a national movement, you start to deviate slightly toward national chauvinism and racism. It makes you feel

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<sup>213</sup> All quotes on the articles of incorporation are drawn from Ziad Hamdan’s M.A. Thesis: *The Development of Palestinian Theatre: The Al-Hakawati Theatre Group*. 1989. University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Communications and Theatre, p. 82-92. See Appendix B.

<sup>214</sup> El-Hakawati Archive. Obtained from Edwar Muallem.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> *Al-Nahar*, April 1, 1989. “A reading into El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe” by Edwar Muallem.

superior to others, more moral and just than others. But it's not true. We have a just cause, it's true, but as people we're just completely normal.<sup>217</sup>

Most significantly, they insisted on asking questions and de-familiarizing everyday situations, without providing answers or promoting a clear plan of action.<sup>218</sup>

Heavily influenced by Grotowski's Poor Theatre, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre and Arienne Mnouchkine's Le Theatre Du Soleil, they developed their own creative process, which resulted in a series of original plays. Similar to many collective-creation based ensembles, the actors improvised on specific themes and situations, while the director conceptualized a through-line, chose the appropriate scenes, and guided the development of the play.<sup>219</sup> Usually, each actor played multiple roles and participated in building the set, props, and costumes. According to Abu Salem, the troupe embraced its identity as a popular Palestinian theatre in language and aesthetic, choosing to present their messages in easily communicated stage pictures rather than expansive dialogue. When present, the dialogue adopted a Palestinian dialect and economical everyday vocabulary because their main Palestinian audience resided in the villages and colloquial was the spoken language.<sup>220</sup> During the troupe's most stable period of existence from 1977 to 1987, they would typically tour their plays for Palestinian audiences in villages,

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<sup>217</sup> "Palestinian Theatre Takes Route," by Ilana DeBare and Lisa Blum, *In These Times*, 17-23, October, 1989. Republished in the *Journal Palestine Studies*, 14.2 (1985), p. 230-234.

<sup>218</sup> Echoed in interviews with Edwar Muallem (26 October 2010), Adnan Tarabsheh (11 December 2010), Iman Aoun (29 January 2011), Jackie Lubeck (8 October 2012) and my own field notes from informal discussions with theatre artists. See another description of the main characteristics of El-Hakawati troupe in Mahamid, p. 42-43.

<sup>219</sup> Emphasizing the troupe's focus on play development, Jackie Lubeck stated, "The plays were created by François and the company provided him with loads and loads of improvisations" (e-mail 31 July 2012). For the troupe, play development was the priority.

<sup>220</sup> See the interview with François Abu Salem in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Paris, 4 March 1986. "Our experience is distant from the Arab Experience. Our theatre is a Palestinian Cultural Center in Jerusalem." See also Mahamid p. 40-54.

followed by a secondary tour to Europe or the United States for both Arab and Western audiences abroad.

From October 1977 to April 1978, the newly found troupe rehearsed *B'ism Al-Ab, w Al-Um, w Al-Ibn* (*In the Name of the Father, the Mother, and the Son*, 1977).<sup>221</sup> Abu Salem had already scripted the play; therefore, the actors developed their characters and scenes in a relatively short period. Rehearsing a few nights a week in Jerusalem at Al-Mutran School, Al-Frere School, or the YMCA, the young troupe discovered their chemistry during the improvisations. In rehearsal, their different personal backgrounds served them in representing the plurality of Palestine in their narratives. Geographically, Muallem, Tarabsheh, Hammad, and Mahamid represented Palestinians from cities and villages in both the Occupied Territories and Israel. Politically, some members may have espoused the theoretical platforms of the Communist Party, the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine, or the Abna' Al-Balad movement, while others self-identified as leftist liberals. These different leftist schools of thought inspired their focus on educating the masses in a secular atmosphere. One member stated that it was “unnecessary to define such interesting people and company by the religious affiliation of its members.” Another noted, “Each of us had his own personal affiliation, but we never became associated as a troupe with any particular faction.” In addition to the indigenous voices, Lubeck provided a necessary female voice, expertise in theatre making and design, and English-language copywriting.<sup>222</sup> Abu Salem’s French heritage and Palestinian

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<sup>221</sup> Dates are based on company brochure in El-Hakawati Archive in the possession of Edwar Muallem.

<sup>222</sup> Quotes drawn from personal interviews with multiple troupe members and Skype interview with Jackie Lubeck on 30 July 2012. Based on my own field notes from formal and informal discussions, almost all Palestinian theatre artists stated their intellectual sympathy with various political factions, but they insisted that their creative work remained independent.

upbringing contributed significantly to the internationalization of the troupe, while preserving its core values as a popular theatre of resistance.

*B'ism Al-Ab, w Al-Um, w Al-Ibn* tells the story of the male Atrash (Deaf) and the female Kharsa (Mute) as they navigate through their lives between the traditions of the Tamer and the colonial manipulations of the Stranger. Under the supervision of Tamer, Atrash declares his wish to marry Kharsa, who must deny her secret feelings for another male. Atrash tests the skills of his potential wife by asking her to perform menial tasks and demanding a virginity test. After the honeymoon period, the marriage progressively deteriorates as Atrash enslaves his wife to prove his masculinity. The couple plays stereotypical roles as Atrash works everyday for an abusive boss and Kharsa stays at home, abused by her husband. When they have a son, they name him Mutee' (Obedient). When their child's exploratory instincts overwhelm them, the parents physically beat him. Meanwhile, the Stranger entrenches himself in the land, builds a colony, and kidnaps the son then the father, torturing them in his military camp. When released, Atrash becomes paranoid and conspiratorial, accusing his wife of infidelity and his son of plotting his assassination. The Stranger takes advantage of the divided ranks within the family and the weakness of the Tamer, who represents the patriarchal guardianship of this primitive social formation. He buys their home and expands his authority over their land. He then proceeds to brainwash them into believing his own historical narrative. The play ends with the announcement that Arab women procreate at a fast rate. After undergoing a medical procedure to prevent her from procreating, Kharsa revolts against all the men in the play.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> I obtained this text from Edwar Muallem. He preserved the play by recording it in writing. All summaries and analysis of plays in this chapter are based on El-Hakawati's unpublished scripts,

Based on a plot summary, the play may appear didactic, but El-Hakawati plays often contained extensive playful stage directions and short entertaining dialogue, particularly in the early years. The troupe depended on embodied visual elements rather than the spoken word. The production opened with two vocalists emerging from the audience, asking them to wake up from darkness and chaos. They announced the time had come to tell the story and reveal the truth. Lights rose to reveal the organizing principle of the world of the play: The market place! In the market's hustle and bustle, merchants display their goods. Owners exploit laborers. Merchants hoard inventory to raise stock prices. Lies and manipulation prevail in interpersonal relationships. As the head capitalist, the Tamer monopolizes the market by removing all the petit bourgeois merchants and establishing his own commercial enterprise; which is a circus act composed of three players: the Father, the Mother and the Son. Like animals, he locks them up in three cages and tames them with a whip and a yell. He speaks in verse, identifying himself as a crafty capable magician who turns wild creatures into servile machines.

Following the aesthetic of a circus, the Tamer initially functions as the Master of Ceremonies or the narrator of the event, while the humans perform as caged animals, presenting tricks to the audience on demand. The characters rehearse the pattern of the tricks by depicting animals as they jump through a ring of fire and Tamer as he rewards them with "a little bit of food." This pattern of rewarding service and punishing free thought "tames" their basic human instincts and curiosity until they visually behave like

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period journalism, or video records. In 1987, Dov Shinar's book *Palestinian Voices* provided snippets of information on El-Hakawati plays based on a brochure. See also Snir and Nassar, who cited Shinar as their main source on the plays.

unthinking subservient gorillas on the stage. For example, the Tamer punishes Kharsa for falling in love with a stranger and rewards Atrash for abusing his family.

El-Hakawati's living portrait depicted the male head-capitalist as the manager of a traditional social formation. The Tamer displays Kharsa as a superior commodity, announcing her measurements, describing her face, identifying her servile qualities, and proclaiming her virginity. He sets the standards of the ideal female and names her price. Accepting these norms, the young Atrash purchases Kharsa in a wedding ritual that satirizes the commercial aspects of traditional Palestinian marriages. In presenting a grotesque image of a victorious Atrash showing a bloodied handkerchief in the midst of celebratory approval, the play rebukes extremist emphasis on female virginity. The Tamer coaches Atrash on proper male behavior, thus marriage becomes a rite of passage for Atrash to become the tamer of his own social formation, perpetuating the elders' rule of law. Atrash learns to prefer sons to daughters and his wife's servitude to her independence. Before long, a cycle of abuse is established. A bourgeois boss abuses the father, who in turn abuses the mother. Then, the mother and the father abuse the son. In the absence of positive role models in his immediate environment, the son becomes the father.

The Stranger penetrates this unjust but stable social structure disguised as a lecturer, who explains the close resemblance of Atrash and Kharsa to wild monkeys. He describes their appearance as beastly, thought process as limited, and skin color as filthy. By contrast, his own white skin indicates modernization, cleanliness and nobility. Having brainwashed the couple, he presents the solution as cosmetic products and procedures. He invites them to strive for beauty and to "taste civilization." He



introduces television, which presents the weather forecast primarily in areas of concern such as Judea and Samaria, the East Bank, and the South of Lebanon. It also shows “civilized” British programming and greeting shows, where families send letters to be read over the air. The Stranger begins oil (petrol) exploration projects throughout the country. In the process, he searches for archaeological artifacts. He speaks in Hebrew, “We are very small but we must grow.” He eventually marches into the audience, expels them from their seats, and sets up a military camp, where he tortures and brainwashes the locals.

An unequal alliance develops between the Stranger and the Tamer through a system of services and bribery. Thus, the powerful Palestinian bourgeois traditionalist becomes a petit bourgeois in the presence of the Israeli capitalist. After initially objecting to modern technologies and cosmetics, the Tamer accepts bribes and compromises his traditional values by allowing the Stranger’s goods to flood his market. Over time, the Tamer loses control over his population and his influence diminishes on his own land and with his own population. Kharsa and Atrash forget their traditional songs and begin to sing Western nursery rhymes to their newborn. Torn between the intrusions of the Stranger and the traditionalism of the Tamer, Kharsa and Atrash attempt to please all parties. They observe their values within their community but they pretend to be Ashkenazi Jews outside it. Accepting their Arabic heritage as a liability among Israelis, Atrash coaches his wife to speak and behave like a Jewish Israeli. In one of the most comical scenes of the play, they test their newly created personas in public:

Abu Mutee‘: ...Now let’s take the bus to the market. But in  
Jewish!  
(They mime taking the bus. This scene is in Hebrew)  
Shalom Shoshana.

Um Mutee': Shalom Moshe.  
 Abu Mutee': Where are we going Shoshana?  
 Um Mutee': We are going to the market.  
 Abu Mutee': What are we going to do in the market?  
 Um Mutee': I want to buy you avocados.<sup>224</sup>

Playing the scene in whiteface, El-Hakawati established the Israeli-Palestinian relationship as reminiscent of the American enslavement of black Africans. Satirizing the behavior of Ashkenazi Jews, the characters use stereotypical Jewish names and ridicule the purchase of a non-indigenous fruit. The overwhelming changes throughout the social formation prompts the Tamer to retreat. He becomes more religious and more subservient to the Stranger, while demanding more of his patriarchal values inside the family unit and within his community.

In this play, El-Hakawati established its rehearsal process and methods for content development. Abu Salem chose the theme, conceptualized the production, and plotted the structure of the script, while the team elaborated the key concepts in discussions and collectively created the play through improvisation. Thematically, they focused on issues of personal liberation and resistance to Israeli occupation, while continuing to critique Israeli colonial expansion inside and outside the green line. The play ends with Kharsa as she leads an uprising against Israeli colonialism and Palestinian traditionalism. In the play, El-Hakawati incited an uprising beginning with women, which reflected action on the ground as Palestinian women's committees led numerous volunteer initiatives and formed a leading front in the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Whether El-Hakawati's production reflected this existing phenomenon or incited it in its mass viewership may be impossible to determine with any certainty. However, the production demonstrated the

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<sup>224</sup> Based on original text in manuscript form.

troupe's vision of a Palestinian uprising, which began with self-liberation from the Israeli capitalist expansion and from the patriarchy of traditional Palestinian society.

In the early months of 1977, Abu Salem initiated the play to satisfy an invitation by the Nancy Theatre Festival in France. The team was composed of a cast from the Galilee, including the actress Bushra Karaman, who played the role of Kharsa. The festival sent a representative to observe the play in rehearsal. Based on the representative's assessment, the invitation was withdrawn. Likely, the festival did not wish to offend Jewish audiences.<sup>225</sup> Three years later, in 1980, the play toured several European countries including the Nancy Festival. On tour, the troupe struggled with issues of representation. They self-identified as a Palestinian troupe, however, several incidents demonstrated that the majority of their host countries, cities, or organizations took issue with this identity. For example, they sold out their entire run in Montpellier, only to discover on opening night that the audience did not attend. An organization or an individual had purchased all the tickets to prevent local audiences from attending. Their posters were often removed from the streets or vandalized. Most commonly, the words Palestine or East Jerusalem were replaced by Israel. After the opening night at the Nancy Festival, unknown vandals slashed the tires of their rented vehicle.<sup>226</sup>

From May 1978 to May 1979, the play toured the Galilee, the Triangle, and the East Jerusalem-Ramallah area. Most villages considered El-Hakawati's visit a cause for celebration and an opportunity for civic service. Tarabsheh remembered the atmosphere,

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<sup>225</sup> According to Lubeck, the invitation was withdrawn for "political reasons." The official reason the festival provided concerned the quality of the play. Abu Salem revived the play with the future El-Hakawati members at the end of 1977. Skype interview, 30 July 2012 and personal interview, 8 October 2012.

<sup>226</sup> A memorial reconstruction based on interviews with Edward Muallem (26 October 2010) and Adnan Tarabsheh (11 December 2010) as well as several exchanges with Jackie Lubeck (Skype/email in July-August 2012 and personal interview 8 October 2012).

“It used to be physically taxing. We would get tired building the stage and mounting the set. Performing used to be the fun part. In the day, you worked really hard because the performance was the relaxing part.”<sup>227</sup> In some outdoor performances in the villages, audiences numbered a few hundred and sometimes a few thousand per performance. The locals assisted with setting up and striking the stage and performance areas. Local organizers sold the tickets. Due to the large audiences, the difficulty of controlling public access to large performance areas, and the troupe’s mandate to create theatre for the masses, many audience members attended El-Hakawati performances at no cost.<sup>228</sup>

In 1979, they began their rehearsals on *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, which challenged the Palestinian image of heroic characters. In the play, “six characters, in their own spaces on stage and after their own purposes, had been isolated from the world and thus developed their own habits and traditions.”<sup>229</sup> The central character in the play Mahjoob is a Palestinian anti-hero who struggles with keeping his own traditions and nationalistic goals in the face of his desire to survive under occupation. The word “mahjoob” indicates a person who is covered up, concealed, obscured or veiled. The title of the play suggests that Mahjoob has been isolated or veiled from reality. Although his naiveté causes him trouble on occasion, he attempts to survive by avoiding conflict. The play begins by introducing each major character in its specific area on stage: The bureaucrat Abu Hmayd stamps empty papers, the teacher dreams of creating his own newspaper as he sits behind a make-shift typewriter made of garbage, the merchant Abu Ali cleans his store and shouts for customers to buy cans of goods, Mahjoob cleans a table at his café and attempts to kill flies, Um Mustapha works her land as she reminisces about her home

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<sup>227</sup> Adnan Tarabsheh, personal interview, 11 December 2010.

<sup>228</sup> Memorial reconstruction. See footnote 17.

<sup>229</sup> Unpublished script, p. 1. Obtained from Edwar Muallem.

in Jaffa, and the young woman Lily Asfour stands on a ladder drawing on a large blackboard. In the opening of the play, the characters intrude on each other by throwing their garbage in each other's working space, thus causing immense disorganization. Meanwhile, a dejected Lily Asfour works diligently to depict "the Palestinian reality" on her blackboard. Breaking the monotony of everyday life, the characters call a meeting to solve the historical problems facing their people. They begin with a ritual election in which Abu Hmayd wins 99% of the vote for leadership. To protest the unproductive meeting, Mahjoob decides to die.<sup>230</sup> In the ensuing funeral, the characters place his body in a casket, from which he listens to their account of his personal history.

In the remainder of the play, each scene depicts Mahjoob's struggle to survive as a Palestinian. Accompanied by the sound of an owl, he was born at midnight on the cursed day of February 29. He also died on the same date. Since he was dropped on his head as a child, he developed an abnormal walk with his head swaying to the right. After asking too many questions in school, he argued with his teacher. As a result, he called his teacher a "donkey" and dropped out of school. To sustain his lower class living, he attempted to sell water, but failed. He also worked in his uncle's shop. As a young adult, he demonstrated his love to a girl by unskillfully knitting her a scarf. She accepted to marry him because nobody refused a request by his patron Im Mustapha, the neighborhood's matriarch. His first struggle against the authorities occurred in Jerusalem before 1967 when he refused to stand for the Jordanian national anthem. The Jordanian police attempted to arrest him, but like Tarazan he beat them up to the sound of admiration from the audience in the cinema. During the 1967 war, Mahjoob cheered to the successes of the Arab armies on the radio, only to learn that the Arab victory was an

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<sup>230</sup> An action that signals the absurdity of both the meeting and the character of Mahjoob.

elaborate lie. A few days later, as Israeli soldiers demanded his identification in a commuter taxi, none of his fellow Palestinians assisted him. Needing sustenance, he worked at an Israeli factory, but was fired because the police interpreted his attire as a depiction of the Palestinian flag. He immigrated to America and worked menial jobs. After he married an American to obtain a Green Card, he returned home victorious.

During the Jerusalem municipality elections, Mahjoob received leaflets from various political factions. He joined the Histadrut (General Federation of Laborers in Israel), but left when fellow Palestinians called him an apostate and a traitor for participating in Israeli politics. Soon after, based on a condition of employment in the Jerusalem municipality, his friend Abu Hmayd paid him five liras to vote in secret on his behalf. As the only Palestinian in the voting booth, Israeli television filmed the event, which constituted character suicide among the residents of East Jerusalem. With cameras rolling, he pretended to be a janitor, a believable function for an Arab in an Israeli establishment. A series of oppressive events led Mahjoob to resist the occupation in unusual ways: He is arrested and imprisoned for attempting to help an activist, and then he is accused of carrying “suspicious packages.” To retaliate against this accusation of terrorism, Mahjoob ridiculed the police by planting “suspicious” packages throughout the city, which was represented in the production as the audience hall. Towards the end of the play, he met president Anwar Al-Sadat during Sadat’s trip to speak before the Knesset in 1977. They discussed the problem of normalization with Israel and the negative image of the Egyptian president among the Palestinians. When Mahjoob spoke earnestly of the struggles under occupation, Al-Sadat left him behind. Finally, the cast of characters remembered Mahjoob’s feeble attempt to become a police officer, which

caused more traffic problems. When the characters complete their overview of Mahjoob's history, he exits the casket, faces their perceptions of his character, and challenges their own shortcomings. Together, they decide to resist oppression and to exit the casket, which represented both the occupation and their own failures. In the last image of the play, the cast leaves Abu Hmayd behind as he carries on his usual pointless meeting.<sup>231</sup>

Local critics responded to the simplicity of the production, which depended primarily on a set composed of chairs, a casket, a ladder and two platforms. In the familiar directorial strategy of *Al-'atma*, Abu Salem staged the events of the present on the first platform and the flashback stories on the second. Selective lighting and appropriate accompanying sound effects defined the space for each character. Characters changed costumes throughout the play. Jackie Lubeck designed and wore the most elaborate costume as an American girl, standing tall in a direct allusion to the Statue of Liberty. In overt satire of popular American culture, she carried a torch and wore a costume inspired by the American flag, roller skates, and large sunglasses.

On 7 December 1980, based on an application for a performance permit by Jackie Lubeck, the Israeli censorship committee approved the play.<sup>232</sup> In the file an official's explanatory note indicated that Lubeck provided an English-language summary of the play and suggested that a group of Hebrew University students were to perform it at the YMCA in English. Although the summary followed the events of the play almost

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<sup>231</sup> I obtained the text of *Mahjoob Mahjoob* from Edwar Muallem. He preserved the play by recording it in writing. According to Jackie Lubeck, the production ended with Lily assisting Mahjoob, who blows himself up out of the coffin, and the rest of the characters return to the scene in bandages as they play musical instruments.

<sup>232</sup> Censorship file on *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, Israel State Archive. The committee signed off on the approval in a meeting dated 15 December 1980.

verbatim, it intelligently presented a depoliticized text. For example, Mahjoob's retaliation to incessant police searches by placing suspicious packages throughout the theatre is described as "Mahjoob has a difficult time throwing out his garbage. In response, he leaves garbage all over town." The play's critique against participating in the West Jerusalem Municipality elections is described as, "Mahjoob goes to vote and is surprised when he is interviewed by television." Mahjoob's fight against the Jordanian police is described as a fistfight with ushers. His argument over his identity with the Israeli army became, "he cunningly proves that he is who he is by pointing out to his height and the color of his eyes." His interrogation over wearing what resembles the colors of the Palestinian flag became, "Mahjoob is questioned about the outfit he wears to work one day." She summarizes the meeting with Al-Sadat as, "Mahjoob is flabbergasted when Sadat visits him at work (he worked as a cleaner in a hotel) when Sadat asked him what he can do for him, Mahjoob asks him to get Im Mustafa's wool out of customs." Lubeck's summary also codes the ending of the play by concealing its subtext. She describes:

The play ends with some of the characters demanding a meeting to discuss if Mahjoob is alive or dead, while other characters refuse to join the meeting, and start pulling people out of [their] seats, and asking them to leave the hall.

On stage, the ending inspired revolutionary resistance as the characters provoked the audience to break through the casket of occupation.

Opening in December 1980, the production of *Mahjoob Mahjoob* launched the troupe to local fame. After opening at the YMCA, the troupe toured to the villages of the Galilee. In his critical review, Talal Abu Afifeh stated, "the play *Mahjoob Mahjoob* posed many issues people have lived for many years before or after 1967 under the Israeli



occupation. The play showed people's suffering in the street, in school, at work, and at home."<sup>233</sup> However, their successes were short lived. A few hours before their performance in Nazareth on 16 January 1981, the Nazareth police delivered an order from the Israeli Ministry of the Interior to cease all performances because the troupe did not adhere to the text of the play. *Al-Itihad* Newspaper reported:

The audience of Nazareth, which came to watch the play, transformed the performance into a popular meeting of protest, in which a decision was made confirming that banning the play continues and escalates the policies of suppression in the Occupied Territories, the stalking of male and female students, and political assassinations.<sup>234</sup>

Both the theatrical director and head of the Municipal Cultural Center of Nazareth, Riad Massarweh, and the former Knesset member and prolific Palestinian author Emile Habibi condemned the ban, expressing anger at the double standards of "Israeli democracy."<sup>235</sup>

In his word to the crowd, Habibi stated:

Actually, the decision to ban the performance surprised us, not because we are naïve, but because we did not realize that the hostility towards democracy had reached this level. To reach the point of banning the performance of a play, a progressive one but still a play, indicates that the deterioration in Israel reached an unimaginable limit.<sup>236</sup>

To appease the crowds' demands for a performance, the troupe improvised a new scene alluding to the suppression of the censorship. They sat on stage, physically tied to their

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<sup>233</sup> On 27 December 1980, *Al-Fajr* newspaper reported briefly on a performance in Me'lia, the hometown of Edwar Muallem. They also published a critical review by Talal Abu Afifeh entitled "Al-Hakawati's play *Mahjoob Mahjoob*."

<sup>234</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 20 January 1981, "After the Official Permit to Show the Play *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, Authorities Return to Suppress and Stop its Showing Arbitrarily." See also, *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 January 1981, "Censors ban performance by Israeli-W. Bank troupe."

<sup>235</sup> For a journalistic account of the evening, see *Al-Itihad*, 20 January 1981. Article entitled, "After the official permit to perform *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, the oppressive authorities return and stop its performance arbitrarily." Habibi served in the Knesset from 1951-1959 and 1961-1972.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*

chairs with their mouths taped shut.<sup>237</sup> Under Habibi's editorship, *Al-Itihad* pronounced that El-Hakawati's alternate scene "served as the funeral of Israeli democracy, which could not handle the play."<sup>238</sup>

A letter dated 6 January 1981 caused the shocking events. Presumably sent by the Ministry of the Interior's censorship office, an official secretly reported on El-Hakawati's performance in the village of I'bilin. He analyzed the play in eleven bullet points, each entitled according to the site or his perception of the action in the scene: Checkpoints, Freedom, Colors, House Confiscation, Immigration to the United States, Municipality Elections, Campaign Episode, Coffee Shop, Explosive Materials, Sadat, and Shekels. The description of the production appears sensitive to events concerning issues of oppression, the desire for freedom, the colors of the Palestinian flag, the allusions to soldiers and police, satire of security procedures, and all events concerning political matters such as elections and President Anwar Al-Sadat. Although Israel was not explicitly mentioned, this "critic" reported an intention to "disgrace the state." He also noted that the play empowers, incites, and provokes the Arab Minority towards hatred and division in the State of Israel through expressions or words, which provoke "uprising." He provides exemplary lines from the play: "here, forbidden to ask questions," and the radio announcement of "we won, we want freedom." After his summary, he states: "In my opinion, there was no justification to give the organizers a permit for this kind of plays."<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Edwar Muallem, personal interview, 26 October 2010.

<sup>238</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 20 January 1981.

<sup>239</sup> Censorship file on *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, Israel State Archive. This letter and all subsequent letters are found in the censorship records in the Israel State Archive. For all the direct quotations from Hebrew, PhD Candidate Amal Equeiq, University of Washington Department of Comparative Literature, assisted in providing initial literal translations from the original Hebrew.

A series of internal correspondences in the censorship committee suggest that the letter prompted an internal investigation to determine how the troupe was permitted to perform *Mahjoob Mahjoob*. On 5 January 1981, the responsible committee decided to censor the play citing a significant difference between the English language summary and the performed text. Believing they were misled by the application, they questioned the initial premise that a group of Hebrew University students were to perform the play at the YMCA. One letter noted that the “secret service agent,” who wrote the initial report, indicated that the play is full of hatred towards the State of Israel. The events also prompted further investigation of troupe member Jackie Lubeck and her partner “François Gaspar,” who had been reported to be the author of the play. The investigation produced a magazine article by *Al-Yassar Al-Arabi (The Arab Left)*, in which Abu Salem discusses the theatre in Palestine as an integral participant in Palestinian resistance against occupation. Providing an excerpt in Hebrew translation, this investigative report explained that the Beirut-issued weekly magazine is funded by “the terrorist organization of George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh,” referencing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Based on the article, a member of the council provided his personal opinion that François Gaspar and his wife Jackie, both described as “the motor” behind this company, obtained the permit under false pretenses. By playing in Arab villages, the production realizes “the goals of terrorist organizations” that seek “to undermine the existence of the state.”<sup>240</sup>

According to a Hebrew language newspaper article included in the file, the troupe requested a “decree nisi” against the censorship decision and provided the council with a

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid. The article in question was published in issue 29 in March 1981 of *La Gauche Arabe (Al-Yassar Al-Arabi)*, p. 20-22. Journalist Ahmad Youssef attributes the function of the theatrical movement to resisting the occupation.

Hebrew language translation of the text for further evaluation.<sup>241</sup> Upon review, a council member determined that the text underwent a special process in order to “look naïve.” Noting omitted elements and phrases from the performance in I‘bilin, the member also questioned the continuity in the dialogue and “illogical leaps” between topics. He summarized the case as a “sophisticated act of fraud” and recommended continued censorship of the play. In a statement dated 26 January 1981, a second member of the council suggested that the full three-hour Arabic language production contained implicit “incitement” and “ridicule” of freedom in Israel and the state’s military. He agreed to permit only the Hebrew text, which El-Hakawati had provided as part of their appeal. By the end of January, *Al-Fajr* and the *Jerusalem Post* reported the lifting of the ban and the council’s condition for the troupe to follow the approved text without further changes.<sup>242</sup>

With the ban overturned, the troupe performed the play thirty-six times in twenty-six villages and cities in the West Bank, the Galilee and the Triangle area.<sup>243</sup> Despite the permission to perform, the troupe continued to encounter further interruptions and threats of closure by the police, the secret service, or local municipalities in various towns such as Al-Lyd and Majd al-Kroom.<sup>244</sup> By the end of 1981, they had followed the initial run of the play with a European tour that included sixty-one performances in England, Poland,

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<sup>241</sup> Censorship file on *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, Israel State Archive. The date and source of the newspaper article were not identified in the file.

<sup>242</sup> *Al-Fajr*, 27 January 1981, “The play Mahjoob Mahjoob: The Censorship Committee for Plays and Cinematic Films Lifts the Ban on it.” *Jerusalem Post*, 30 January 1981, “Ban Lifted on Israeli West Bank Play.”

<sup>243</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, 17 December 1981, “Palestinian El-Hakawati Troupe to Radio Monte Carlo.” Also See *Al-Hadaf*, 30 December 1982, “The Play Mahjoob Mahjoob: El-Hakawati Troupe Penetrates the Zionist Siege.”

<sup>244</sup> *Al-Fajr* (English), 17-23 May 1981.

Belgium, West Germany, Holland, Sweden, Norway, and France.<sup>245</sup> In London, Ned Chaillet of the *Times* reported the uniqueness and purpose of the troupe, “*Mahjoob, Mahjoob* is a new exception, the work of a Palestinian company called El-Hakawati, a group subject to Israel and Israeli censorship but clearly intent on speaking of that country’s occupation of Palestine.”<sup>246</sup> The *Jewish Chronicle* reported “a significant police presence outside the theatre.”<sup>247</sup> Rosalind Carne of the *Financial Times* explicitly outlined the anxiety underlying the troupe’s presentation of their play in Europe:

The Riverside Studios, mindful of Jewish backers, has reportedly stated that *Mahjoob Mahjoob* is not anti-Israel. This is bunkum. Nobody mentions the PLO-but their spirit lurks behind the entire production. Mahjoob personifies a population crushed; his two failed attempts to escape from his coffin and his ultimate success can have only one interpretation.<sup>248</sup>

Although interviews with troupe members suggest that the PLO, then synonymous with terrorism in Western media, was aware of El-Hakawati’s activities; the troupe insisted on maintaining its financial and political independence during this period. Since the Palestinians and their cause had been unrecognized in international news, El-Hakawati’s artistic message caused a crisis for Western journalists. *City Limits* captioned one photograph, “*From Jerusalem come The Palestinians of El-Hakawati in Mahjoob, Mahjoob,*” a then radically positive equation of Palestine, Palestinians and the city of Jerusalem. Positively reviewing the play, Jonathan Keates of *The Guardian* touted the troupe’s performance as vigorous and “sinisterly charming.” He described: “Put together

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<sup>245</sup> *Al-Fajr*, 1 January 1982, “El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe Returns to Jerusalem.” Also see *Al-Fajr*, 15-21 January 1982, “El-Hakawati’s 61 Performances: Palestinian Theatre Successful in Europe.”

<sup>246</sup> *The Times*, 23 September 1981, Ned Chaillet, “Mahjoob, Mahjoob.” Note: Chaillet opens his article with a question on the idea of representation in Islam and suggests that El-Hakawati’s artistic representation runs contrary to the traditional Islamic ban against representation.

<sup>247</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 25 September 1981, “Arab Actors in London.”

<sup>248</sup> *Financial Times*, 24 September 1981, Rosalind Carne, “Mahjoob Mahjoob.”

by the 10 actors, the play blends circus, fable and polemic in the archetypal story of plucky scapegrace Mahjoob giving two fingers to the brasshats, bureaucrats and demagogues before going under.”<sup>249</sup> On this tour, El-Hakawati delivered a new image of the Palestinians. They were oppressed but peaceful, poor but creative, and most significantly, occupied but alive.

The *Mahjoob Mahjoob* experience solidified El-Hakawati’s position as Palestine’s leading theatre company.<sup>250</sup> The banning of the performance in Nazareth and the ensuing censorship battle increased the troupe’s popularity among Palestinian audiences and forced the Israeli news media and theatrical institutions to take notice of Palestine’s cultural scene. For example, on 22 February 1983, El-Hakawati performed the play in Tel Aviv in a performance coordinated by the Birzeit Solidarity Committee and the Israeli theatre Tsafta. The Arabic press referred to the event as the first occasion of a Palestinian theatrical troupe performing “directly in front of the Israeli audiences.”<sup>251</sup> The event presented the troupe with an unavoidable political question: Should Jerusalemites perform before their occupiers? For El-Hakawati, their mission comprised an educational dimension of “introducing this audience to the truth of Palestinian civilization and culture as comparable to other sophisticated civilizations.”<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> *The Guardian*, 26 September 1981, Jonathan Keates, “Mahjoob Mahjoob.”

<sup>250</sup> In personal interviews and informal conversations, many Jerusalemite theatre artists considered El-Hakawati the leading Palestinian theatre troupe. For example, George Ibrahim stated: “I competed with El-Hakawati, not with anybody else, because they were good... Every time I saw a good production, I wanted to do better” (personal interview, 23 October 2010).

<sup>251</sup> *Al-Fajr* (Arabic), 19 February 1983, “El-Hakawati Prepares to Perform Mahjoob Mahjoob in Tel Aviv.”

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.* See also, *Al-Quds*, 19 February 1983, “Mahjoob Mahjoob Performed Next Tuesday in Tel Aviv.” Worth noting: Before the Oslo agreements and the building of the Wall, the movement against normalization and for cultural boycott were not yet defined or exercised en masse within Palestine. Although provocative in this period, playing in Israeli theatres was a break through.

Building on their local and international successes, El-Hakawati significantly increased their production from 1982 to 1984. They created two new original plays: *The One Thousand and One Nights of the Stone Thrower* and *Ali The Galilean*. In the first play, also known as *One Thousand and One Nights in the Meat Market*, the troupe represented the increasing occurrence of kids throwing stones at the Israeli military in the early 1980s. By the 1987 Intifada, this phenomenon had become the quintessential mode of Palestinian resistance to the occupation. The play begins with a satire on the classic folk tales of *The Arabian Nights*. In an unusual military-themed fantasy, actor Radi Shehadeh portrayed King Shahrayar as the violent military governor, who built his throne on top of the indigenous village. His Shahrazad is represented as the wise lady of the village, the older Im Mustapha, who attempts to protect her grandson, the young stone thrower Nassour. As neon lights spell out the word “Shalom,” the opening shows the military governor as he steals the magic lamp from Nassour and takes the throne.<sup>253</sup> Nassour retaliates by throwing a stone at the military governor’s forehead, setting in motion a David vs Goliath chronicle.<sup>254</sup> The governor orders a curfew to shut down the whole village. Will the mighty military find the young stone thrower? Im Mustapha tells fantastical stories to distract the governor from his search. Finally, when the youth is caught, the governor sentences him to death. In a satirical representation of an action

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<sup>253</sup> *Filastin Al-Thawra*, 07 July 1984.

<sup>254</sup> For more details, see Allyn Fisher’s Associated Press Article (not dated) in El-Hakawati press archive in the possession of Edwar Muallem, Dov, Shinar’s summary, and *Al-Itihad*’s detailed critical review on 04 August 1983. Actors in the play: Radi Shehadeh, Edwar Muallem, Jackie Lubeck, Adnan Tarabsheh, Ibrahim Khalayleh, Daoud Kuttub, Saqr Al-Salaymeh, Munira Shehadeh, Kamal Shahin, and Samir Shahin. Music by Mustapha Al-Kurd. Costumes by Jackie Lubeck. Set by Francine Gaspar. A review in *Al-Itihad*, 4 February 1983, reported the productions credits.

hero, Nassour's grandfather, riding on an Arabian horse, saves him from execution in the last possible moment.

Invited by the French director Jérôme Savary, co-produced with *Le Grande Magic Circus*, and supported by the artistic director of Théâtre de l'Olivier Jean-Pierre Comis, the troupe rehearsed and premiered the play on 11 June 1982 at l'Olivier in Istres, France.<sup>255</sup> Based on the objection of the mayor of Montpellier Georges Frêche, El-Hakawati was refused permission to play in the festival “Rencontres Nord/Sud de la culture” that summer. According to journalist Philippe Dauma, less than a year before the Montpellier Municipality elections, Frêche and other notables considered the word “Palestinian” to be politically damaging. Shortly thereafter, El-Hakawati left France to tour in West Germany, Denmark and Tunis. Reporting on the success of the tour and the complexity of the production, Jerusalem's literary monthly magazine *Al-Bayader* and *Al-Fajr* newspaper conveyed the assessment of the play by the Danish daily newspaper *Politiken* as “an inaccessible play about the most accessible of all dreams: the dream of throwing off the saddle and becoming master of one's own country.”<sup>256</sup> Despite the resounding success, long run, and audience appreciation of the production's sophisticated visual amalgam of orientalism and harsh reality of the occupation, reviewers nearly unanimously expressed some confusion at the mix of genres and styles, which included circus, musical theatre, tragicomedy, Brechtian alienation, and popular folk culture. Most

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<sup>255</sup> *Le Provençal* (Istres), 9 June 1982. *La Marseillaise* 8 June 1982.

<sup>256</sup> *Al-Fajr* (English) Sept 3-9 1983 (This article includes a complete English language translation of the *Politiken* review). *Al-Fajr* (Arabic) 21 August 1982. *Al-Watan Al-Arabi* 4-10 June 1982, issue 277. *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*'s report on the Montpellier incident is short and does not mention George Frêche by name. For a clear statement on Frêche's position and involvement, see a French language article dated July 1982 by Philippe Dauma in Al-Hakawati Archive (the name of the publication is not legible). Note: Georges Frêche (1938-2010) governed Montpellier for 27 years and regularly announced his unwavering support for the State of Israel and close public friendships with Israeli officials, including heads of state.



reviewers noted the clash of cultures in the pastiche of authentic Palestinian heritage, European experimental avant-garde, and satirical orientalist fantasy.<sup>257</sup>

On 20 July 1982, the troupe's lawyer Jonathan Kuttab submitted to the Ministry of the Interior for the permission to perform the play. Using *One Thousand and One Nights in the Meat Market* as the primary title, Kuttab sent in a thirty-six page hand-written script that resembles the final script. Although the final production ran for three hours in duration, this shorter underdeveloped censorship copy depicted a class struggle between the people of the village and a non-descript lord or governor, who buys weapons and maintains his own security forces. This hand-written copy of the script reduces the significance of key scenes in the production, including the stone thrower conflict, the stealing of the magic lamp, the establishment of a foreign power overseeing the village, the political satire in the imitation of Egyptian film style acting, and the ruthless self-critique in the representation of the Arab hero. Given El-Hakawati's history with the authorities in *Mahjoob Mahjoob*, the internal evaluation indicated the censors' awareness of the play's potential to cause incitement. In one censor's opinion, some isolated incidents emphasized nationalism and the need to maintain high morale, but stylistically, the playwright failed to adapt the classic folktales to contemporary events. Failing to foresee El-Hakawati's forthcoming local tour and the intent to perform the play before large audiences, he cited his opinion that the play would not be performed "more than once," and thus recommended granting the permit.<sup>258</sup> The military censorship authorities

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<sup>257</sup> For example, see reviews by Antwan Shalhat in *Al-Itihad*, 4 Feb 1983, Ghassan Abdallah in the December issue of *Al-Fajr Al-Adabi*, and Edward Grossman in the *Jerusalem Post*, 24 Dec 1982.

<sup>258</sup> As per the censorship file held at the Israel State Archive. According to the evaluation form, the main censor evaluated the play on 5 September 1982. The permit was printed on September 28, 1982. The script reasonably represented the plot, but not the politics.

did not respond to a parallel application for the permission to perform in the West Bank.<sup>259</sup>

Upon their return home, the troupe decided to perform the play in large open-air venues because the set was too large for most existing stages in Palestine. In Jerusalem, the play was scheduled to run at the outdoor terrain of the Ahly Club in Wadi Al-Joz neighborhood on 24-26 September 1982, the secondary school auditorium in Sakhnin from 15-17 October 1982, the Gan Eden cinema in Acre on the 9-10 December 1982, as well as the Triangle area and Nazareth.<sup>260</sup> In reviewing a performance in Acre, the *Jerusalem Post*'s Edward Grossman suggested that El-Hakawati might tour to Jewish-Israeli majority areas to perform for Hebrew speaking audiences. He explained:

If, however, the negotiations end well, and if Abu Salem and his actors, actresses and musicians decided that to invade Tel Aviv or Haifa is worthwhile, Jewish audiences will have a chance to see some theatre which should be seen.<sup>261</sup>

From 28 June to 3 July 1983, Hebrew speakers seized the opportunity in Tel Aviv during the Palestinian Art Week, a cultural festival held for the first time at the Neve Tsedek Theatre. El-Hakawati performed two plays: *The One Thousand and One Nights of a Stone Thrower* on 28-29 of June and their newly developed play *Jalilee Ya Ali (Ali The Galilean)* on 1-2 July 1983.<sup>262</sup> The festival exhibited a collection of banned books published in the West Bank and the works of visual artists such as Suleiman Mansour and Nabil Anani. It also included lectures by Palestinian writers such as the short story writer

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<sup>259</sup> As reported by both *Al-Quds* and *Al-Fajr* (Arabic) on 18 June 1983.

<sup>260</sup> According to Lubeck the set was transported in an eighteen-wheel truck and required two days to set up (Interview). For the report on these performances see *Al-Bayader*, 20 July-20 October 1982, *Al-Itihad* 3 Dec 1982, and *Jerusalem Post* 24 Dec 1982. The Sakhnin performances were reported in a short article in one of the Arabic language newspapers (Hakawati press archive, no date or publication name).

<sup>261</sup> *Jerusalem Post* 24 Dec 1982.

<sup>262</sup> *Al-Fajr* 23 June 1983.

Akram Haniya and the Journalist Daoud Kuttab, who was then a member of the ensemble. For the performing arts, El-Hakawati performed four out of six evenings and al-Bireh youth club presented an evening of *dabkah* dancing.<sup>263</sup> The Israel Broadcast Authority objected to television coverage of El-Hakawati's performance of *One Thousand and One Nights of a Stone Thrower* because "the news report 'provided encouragement to the rocketthrowers to continue and increase' their rocketthrowing."<sup>264</sup>

In *Ali The Galilean*, a traditional father from the Galilee disowns his young son, who runs away to Tel Aviv. Once in the big city, Ali must interact directly with Jewish Israelis. At a bar, a Jewish patron teaches Ali to call himself by the Hebrew name Eli. The bartender instructs him to order alcohol, rather than tea with mint leaves. He falls in love with the Jewish Tel-Avivian Eliza, humorously mispronounced 'aleeza. Launched in a sexually adventurous moment in a park, their relationship becomes the foundation of his newly established life in Tel Aviv as a non-Palestinian. After performing menial jobs, he becomes a rising star as the operator of a falafel kiosk. When his Arab identity is discovered, he becomes a fugitive, fights for his life, and gets arrested by the Israeli police. He is then tortured in a mental institution. In the final moment of the play, a psychiatrist fails to perform his state-delegated responsibility to erase Ali's identity. Instead, a bomb explodes, destroying the whole establishment.<sup>265</sup>

Similar to the story of the Jerusalemite Mahjoob, *Ali The Galilean* presented a character study of a Palestinian anti-hero figure. Performed as a series of snapshots closely following his life chronology, the play narrated and analyzed the struggles of a Palestinian citizen of Israel, who attempts to deny his heritage in order to fit into a

<sup>263</sup> *Al-Fajr* (English) 08 July 1983. *Jerusalem Post* 28 June 1983.

<sup>264</sup> *Jerusalem Post* 5 July 1983. The article quoted Authority chairman Reuven Yaron.

<sup>265</sup> For another brief description of the play, see Mahamid, p. 49.

hegemonic Jewish-Israeli culture. He only finds success by adapting his name and selling falafel. When exposed as an Arab, his identity costs him his business, relationship, and freedom. His bitter end at a mental institution echoes the ending of the troupe's previous play, *In The Name of The Father, The Mother and The Son*, in which a state-sponsored establishment attempts to solve the Palestinian "problem" through an undisclosed surgical operation. In Ali's case, the doctor refuses to complete the experiment, causing a destructive explosion in the process.

On 1 June 1983, Abu Salem applied for the performance permit. Dated 2 June 1983, the internal censorship correspondences and evaluation forms indicate a repeated concern that the script left a large leeway for improvisation. Although the script did not offend the evaluators, they were alarmed by open-ended moments such as the MC's improvised interactions with the actors and audiences. For example, early in the play the MC states: "We hope, dear audience, that you understood the mystery of the theatrical movement without talking or explanation," suggesting that choreography played a more significant role than the text. On 8 July 1983, in their final approval of the play, the council objected to the absence of a final script, but approved a production that would not stray far from the submitted version. An official letter to the troupe warned to invoke section three of article four of the censorship law, which indicates that any additions to an approved performance may revoke the permit.<sup>266</sup> During a special performance for Hebrew University students at An-Nuzha-Hakawati theatre, the council sent a team of examiners to review the production of *Ali the Galilean* to ascertain the troupe's

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<sup>266</sup> Censorship file on *Ali the Galilean*, Israeli State Archive. The title of the play used in the submission was *Ali*. This quote is a translation based on the censorship script submitted by the troupe.

compliance. Heavily coded with Palestinian humor and indirect references, the censors were unable to revoke the permit or to recommend any cuts to the script.<sup>267</sup>

To run the production in the West Bank, the troupe also applied for a permission to perform from the military government. In the process, they supplied the occupation authorities with the text of the play, a videotape recording of the production, and a schedule of performances. After an eighteen-month delay, “the troupe decided to confront the *de facto* ban by scheduling a West Bank performance.”<sup>268</sup> Taking advantage of the presence of a French television crew, El-Hakawati members prepared a performance at the Jericho Cinema while the troupe’s lawyers pressured the Jericho military governor and the Israeli military government headquarters in Beit El to provide a final approval. One hour before the performance, “the permission was finally given verbally by the legal advisor to the military governor in Beit El and relayed to the theatre troupe’s lawyer.”<sup>269</sup> The press and several company members reported that the governor presented the one-performance permit in person. Troupe member Jackie Lubeck remembered the military governor’s objection, “We prefer bombs to your intellectual theatre-making because we know how to deal with bombs.”<sup>270</sup> According to *Al-Fajr* newspaper, the presence of the foreign television crew may have facilitated the process of obtaining this permit.<sup>271</sup>

El-Hakawati’s following play, *The Story of the Eye and the Tooth*, alluded to traditional customs and biblical stories to critique the political conflict in Palestine. At an

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<sup>267</sup> Personal interviews with Jackie Lubeck (8 October 2012 and Skype, 30 July 2012) and Edwar Muallem (26 October 2010).

<sup>268</sup> *Al-Fajr* 21 December 1984. The article describes both the application to the military government, the presence of the French film crew, and the outcome of the event.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> Jackie Lubeck, personal interview, 8 October 2012.

<sup>271</sup> On this Jericho event, see also *Al-Itihad* 18 December 1984 and *Al-Quds* 14 December 1984.

ancient water spring, two women wash clothes, when they both have contractions and give birth to a pair of twins. At birth, the families arrange for the future marriage of the boys to the girls. Fifteen years later, neither boy accepts to marry the ugly girl, Afifeh, setting in motion a family feud. As per tradition, the village council begins a process of reconciliation, which ends with forcing Khaldun to marry Afifeh in order to keep the peace. During the wedding, a stranger named Youssef Salameh arrives, claiming to have inherited the land from his forefathers. Well-armed, Salameh terrorizes the families until they are physically unable to move. Forty years later, the original forefathers remain frozen on stage in the form of human size puppets as two groups fight a bitter war over the land, one led by Salameh and the other by Abu Rustom. Dissatisfied with the blood bath, the wives and children of the leaders object to the war. The children, Sarah and Tanza', fall in love upon their first meeting. They ask the frozen forefathers for assistance, but receive none. They decide to marry, leading to a temporary stop in the bloodshed. During the wedding, the war restarts, prompting Salameh to kill Tanza' and his own wife Leila in error. In the last moments in the play, both leaders Salameh and Abu Rustom collapse as the war rages on.<sup>272</sup>

On 26 February 1985, troupe member Radi Shehadeh applied for the performance permit. The seven-page script presented a very similar dialogue to the production version, but it omitted the majority of the production's stage directions and any references to Zionism or indications that some characters were Jewish. For example, the production version of the first act indicated the following stage directions:

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<sup>272</sup> I obtained this text from Edwar Muallem. He preserved the play by recording it in writing. For a similar concise scene-by-scene summary, see *Al-'alam* weekly magazine (Arabic), issue 100.

Youssef Salameh takes out a gun... fires in the air... the dancers get scared... they transform to dummies... they retreat to the back... they congregate center stage... they sit to the sound of bullets... they sit frozen... Youssef Salameh starts to sing a Zionist song... His voice disappears slowly with the blackout... announcing the end of the first act.

By contrast, the censor's copy read as follows:

The storyteller transforms to a dancing dummy and hears the sound of Yarghul.<sup>273</sup> Enter the rest of the characters as dummies, dancing to the sound of the Yarghul. Then the dance ends as they transform into statues sitting on chairs in center stage. Blackout.

These careful modifications throughout the script resulted in the inoculation of the play from any possible censorship critique. The censor described the play as a critique of an old Arab custom, whereby the families arrange a marriage by promising a particular boy to a specific girl from birth. He saw the play as a chronicle of the complications that ensue from the refusal to consummate the agreement. On 4 March 1985, within one week of the application, the Ministry of the Interior officially permitted the performance of the play.<sup>274</sup>

Authored by Jackie Lubeck and François Abu Salem, El-Hakawati's following original play, *The Story of Kufur of Shamma (The Story of the Village of Shamma)*, proved to be the troupe's longest running production and perhaps, its most controversial. The play tells the story of a fictional village, a stand in for the Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948. After the death of the village mayor and an undisclosed catastrophe, the narrator of the story, Walid, returns from his studies abroad to find Ka'wash, the village fool. Ka'wash describes the desertion of the village as a strange race in all directions. Walid convinces Ka'wash to join him on a journey to find the people of Kufur Shamma and to bring them home. On their search, a cast of characters joins them.

<sup>273</sup> Traditional Palestinian musical instrument like the flute.

<sup>274</sup> Israel State Archive: File on *The Story of the Eye and the Tooth*.

They are: Nijmeh (star), the fifteen-year-old girl originally from a village near Yafa; Karim, an eighteen-year-old Palestinian fighter from a refugee camp in Lebanon; Hijleh, a divorced matchmaker from Yafa; Abed, a merchant and poet originally from Nablus but residing in the Gulf. Upon seeing the Palestinians dressed in traditional Arabian Gulf attire, the group determines that many Palestinians in the Gulf States may have lost their sense of belonging. In America, the people of Kufur Shamma cannot or will not necessarily return home, but preserve their traditions in exile. Finally, Walid and his company return to the village, only to discover that it has been completely erased. The grave of the mukhtar (mayor), a tree and a stone remain as the only reminders of the pre-1948 village. Ka'wash suggests that Walid's story must not disappear like Kufur Shamma. Ka'wash concludes the play by saying: "Tell them."<sup>275</sup>

On 1 March 1987, the censorship office approved Jackie Lubeck's application for the permit to perform the play. In his evaluation on 1 February 1987, the censor summarized the play as a boring and unsuccessful attempt inspired by *Roots*, invoking the saga of the 1977 American television miniseries about the African diaspora. He described the play as a take on the story of Palestinian Arabs, who have reached as far as the United States and still preserve their traditions. He approved the play because in his opinion, it was as long as "exile" and a form of "punishment" in and of itself. In a sarcastic tone, he proposed to permit the play to increase Palestinian/Israeli misunderstanding. He expected the audience to receive it by "clapping their feet," suggesting they were likely to leave early.<sup>276</sup> The production proved to be El-Hakawati's

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<sup>275</sup> Original text in manuscript form provided by Jackie Lubeck. See also a summary of the play in *Al-Bayader Al-Siyasi*, 23 May 1987.

<sup>276</sup> Israeli State Archive file on *The Story of Kufur Shamma*.



longest touring production in Europe. It was also the troupe's first production to tour in the United States.

In their presentation in the Acre Fringe Festival, referred to in Arabic news outlets as "The Other Theatre" or "Theatre of the Other," El-Hakawati faced their most aggressive encounter with the Israeli government and right wing extremists. On 6 October 1987, *Al-Itihad* newspaper reported on a series of pronouncements by the Herut Party's Acre representatives, calling on the ban of three anti-Israeli plays and the cancellation of El-Hakawati's performance of *Kufur Shamma*.<sup>277</sup> On 9 October 1987, the *Jerusalem Post* reported: "Police reinforcements are expected to help supervise a demonstration by Herut supporters at the opening of the Acre fringe theatre festival tomorrow night."<sup>278</sup> The police had approved the protest in advance while members of the Citizen's Rights Movement announced their intention to hold a counter-demonstration. Failing to ban the three Israeli scripts, previously approved by the censorship board, "the Herut councilmen subsequently shifted the focus of their attention to the East Jerusalem theatre troupe, which refused to perform with Israeli flags flying in the background when the group last appeared at the festival two years ago."<sup>279</sup> Herut councilman David Bar-Lev expected the Herut demonstrators would raise the Israeli flag,

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<sup>277</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 6 October 1987.

<sup>278</sup> *Jerusalem Post*, 9 October 1987.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.* Al-Fajr (English) 4 October 1985 reported El-Hakawati's original refusal to perform *Ali the Galilean* until the Israeli flag was removed before an audience of 1200 spectators. It also reported actor Ibrahim Khalayleh's ingenious publicity stunt of attaching a poster to the back of a roaming donkey in Acre. The poster read: "I am not going to see the Palestinian el-Hakawati Theatre Troupe because I am a donkey." In objection to the word "Palestinian," the police held the donkey momentarily. According to gossip from 1985, the police freed the donkey to end the ridiculous situation. According to Al-Fajr, the story was also reported by the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*.

but did not expect them to cause trouble.<sup>280</sup> Palestinian and Jewish supporters demanded the cancellation of the demonstration's permit on the grounds that it provoked racial hatred in a mixed city. The three Arab councilmen in the Acre municipality officially objected to the demonstration as well.<sup>281</sup>

On 10 October 1987, the initial demonstration at the festival's opening passed without incident. Under the banner of Arab-Jewish co-existence, *Al-Itihad* reported a carnival atmosphere within Acre's old city walls.<sup>282</sup> On 12 October 1987, the day of El-Hakawati's performance, a number of right-wing groups including Likud activists and Kach/Kahane Chai extremists, showed strong presence outside Acre's Auditorium theatre. Well-armed and prepared to control potential disorder, large numbers of local police and border guards searched audience members as they entered the theatre through metal detectors.<sup>283</sup> Despite El-Hakawati's agreement with the festival that they would not perform under Israeli flags, flags were raised outside the hall, but not inside the auditorium. Ten minutes before the performance, the head of the Acre municipality and a Likud member entered the hall and raised two flags on each side of the stage. When troupe members objected to playing before the Israeli flags, the head of the municipality asked them to choose between respecting the flag and preventing hundreds of audience members from seeing the play.<sup>284</sup> In their tradition of collective decision-making, the

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid. According to novelist and playwright Salman Natour, the Likud party representative in Acre announced this vendetta of the flag on Israeli television. See *Al-Itihad* 9 October 1987.

<sup>281</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 6 October 1987.

<sup>282</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 12 October 1987.

<sup>283</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 14 October 1987. For more information on the Kahane Chai movement and its spiritual leader, the Brooklyn-born Rabbi Meir Kahane, see *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, Second Edition, Edited by Gus Martin, p. 321-324.

<sup>284</sup> Interview with Edwar Muallem in *Al-Raya*, 16 October 1987.

troupe deliberated to evaluate their options. Entering stage left, François Abu Salem responded to the crisis with the following announcement in English:

You are most welcome. We have decided after a long talk between each other that we are going to perform *The Story of Kufur Shamma*, despite very heated atmosphere and some very unfortunate and childish provocations that have fallen upon us all day long.

Then he repeated the announcement in Arabic with slight variations:

Welcome! We decided to show the play of Kufur Shamma despite the anxious atmosphere and the build up of childish provocations that we faced all day long. But in spite of it, we felt that maybe you came here to see a play and our connection is primarily with you as our audience. We hope that you'll share our sentiment that we made the right decision.<sup>285</sup>

To the audience's rhythmic applause, the actors began the performance. In the dark, technical director Imad Mitwalli removed the flags. Nine minutes thereafter, a band of unknown individuals stood up in the front row, opened their shirts to reveal the Kahane Chai emblem, raised an Israeli flag, and chanted racial slurs, "Arabs Out!" and "Death to Arabs." An unidentified source shouted in Arabic, "You Shit!" Shocked, confused, and unable to see into the dark auditorium, the actors stopped the performance. While observing events, Actor Amer Khalil exited stage left, actress Iman Aoun moved upstage, Jackie Lubeck and Imad Mizero observed from stage left. Actors attempted to see into the darkness to evaluate the source of the interruption. Mitwalli raised the house lights as the majority of the audience stood up and young Palestinians engaged the intruders in a physical fight. Amidst screams and murmurs, the audience united its response by rhythmically applauding and collectively chanting a traditional leftist slogan in Hebrew: "Fascism Won't Pass." According to *Al-Itihad*, the "Arab-Jewish audience" beat up the "hooligans" until the police and the border guards "saved" them:

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<sup>285</sup> I transcribed and translated the speech from a video recording in the possession of Edwar Muallem. Unless cited otherwise, the description is my observation as a viewer of this recording.

Voices were raised to protest the actions of the police and the border guards. They demanded the punishment of those responsible for the entrance of Kahane's riffraff to the performance hall. The protesters asserted that the police had the first and last responsibility for what happened. The voices insisted to continue watching the show...<sup>286</sup>

Armed with light machine guns, border guards re-entered the hall along with the audience members who participated in the altercation. After a short discussion, the actors returned to their positions on stage to the sound of applause and whistles in the audience, who shouted encouraging words such "We're here!" to pledge the actors' safety. At the end of the second act, forty minutes into the performance, a high-ranking police officer took the stage to announce a ten-minute break and an order to evacuate the auditorium. The audience complied. An anonymous caller had informed the police of the presence of hidden explosives in the theatre. The police and border guards physically searched the premises, but did not succeed in finding the bomb. After the actors and the audience returned to the theatre, the performance continued without interruptions. When they departed the theatre, the troupe members found the tires of their vehicle were slashed.<sup>287</sup>

In 1989, El-Hakawati completed its first tour in the United States with an English language production of *The Story of Kufur Shamma*. Represented in North America by John I. Patches of International Arts Consultants, the troupe booked performances in Lexington, V.A.; Woodstock, N.Y.; Vancouver, B.C.; Seattle, W.A.; Pittsburgh, P.A.; Atlanta, G.A.; and New York, N.Y.<sup>288</sup> On 30 June 1989, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*

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<sup>286</sup> Quoted from *Al-Itihad*, 14 October 2013. Haartz (Hebrew), 13 October 1987, reported that six of these Kach members were detained for questioning after the incident over the flags. *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Hebrew), 13 October 1987, also identified the individuals as Kahana Chai (Kach) members.

<sup>287</sup> As per the report of *Al-Itihad*, 14 October 2013. My account of the events in Acre is a combined memorial reconstruction from interviews with Edwar Muallem, Jackie Lubeck, Iman Aoun, Imad Mitwalli, and Amer Khalil.

<sup>288</sup> *New York Times*, 15 July 1989.

reported that Joseph Papp cancelled El-Hakawati's booking at the Public Theatre. The article related that Papp discussed the issue with his rabbi, who expected the play would incite strong feelings in the Jewish community. In a phone interview Papp stated:

I was thinking that we do have an enormous number of supporters who are very sympathetic to Israel...Jews constitute a high proportion of the theater audience in any city, but especially in New York. I didn't want to offend those people. They're my people and they're part of my audience.<sup>289</sup>

Relaying his discussion with Papp, the troupe's U.S. representative John Patches stated:

I knew that he had come under pressure from individuals in the Jewish community. He said something to the effect that he'd never been in a position where he had to cancel something he had agreed to do. He said he felt very bad about it because he had heard so much about El-Hakawati, but he could not jeopardize the institution that he represented.<sup>290</sup>

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Papp insisted that his board of directors did not pressure him to make the decision: "Papp said he began rethinking the engagement upon receipt of a letter from a 74-year-old Jewish woman who had lost relatives in Israel's long conflict with its Arab neighbors."<sup>291</sup> The woman criticized him for booking El-Hakawati. In the American press, Papp's argument became more elaborate over time. He provided several reasons for the cancellation. Since he had never addressed the Arab-Israeli conflict in his theatre, he did not wish to make a political statement. If he had programmed an Israeli play to perform in the same season, he would not have cancelled the booking. Upon seeing El-Hakawati's production, Papp feared his audience would misconstrue the Palestinian political position as his own. He also stated that El-Hakawati failed to provide their portion of the financial agreement, thus no

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<sup>289</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 30 June 1989.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid

<sup>291</sup> Ibid

contract was signed. But most often, the press primarily reported that the cancellation stemmed from his desire to present a balanced representation of the conflict.<sup>292</sup>

On the evening of 1 July 1989, the troupe made their American debut at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia.<sup>293</sup> In his review, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* theatre critic William B. Collins commented on the unusual circumstances surrounding the production:

This is not an ordinary show checking into a downtown theater. It is an event of political as well as theatrical implications. We see it through eyes blinkered by years of conditioning against the Arabs. We go knowing ahead of time that already one door has been slammed in the face of these Middle Eastern visitors. A tentative booking at New York's prestigious Public Theater fell through when producer Joseph Papp backed out, saying he did not want to offend Jewish theatergoers.<sup>294</sup>

The Painted Bride Art Center received one letter of complaint regarding the booking.<sup>295</sup>

While his review clearly outlined the political implications of the production, his critique of the performance merely mentioned the use of diverse production elements, such as masks on refugees and a mix of live and taped music. He also described Palestinian actor's English as heavily accented and the writing as flat and self-conscious.<sup>296</sup>

Wondering "where offense might be taken," Collins described the play as non-

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<sup>292</sup> Based on reports in several articles. For example, see *Seattle Times*, 30 June 1989; *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 1989; and *New York Times*, 25 July 1989 and 28 July 1989. See also the *New York Times's* attempt at balanced reporting on 15 July 1989 in two separate articles, one by Andrew L. Yarrow and one by Alisa Solomon, who exclaimed: "Why can't we see a Palestinian play?" On the issue of balance in the reporting of the conflict see Edward Said's article, "Permission to Narrate."

<sup>293</sup> *Seattle Times*, 30 June 1989.

<sup>294</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 July 1989.

<sup>295</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 30 June 1989.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid*

confrontational and non-belligerent. He suggested it was “political only in the inevitable sense of being told from the perspective of the Arab side rather than the Israeli.”<sup>297</sup>

Determined to present the play in New York, Patches arranged for a run of the play from 26 July to 1 August 1989 at Dance Theater Workshop. As a contributing financial sponsor through its Suitcase Fund, the theatre had been involved peripherally in the United States’ tour.<sup>298</sup> The Papp cancellation prompted DTW to book El-Hakawati in its theatre in Lower Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood. Although he suggested the play required “serious editing,” *New York Times*’ Wilborn Hampton positively reviewed the performance:

The physical production, however, is a small marvel, especially considering that the company is on tour. Set and costume changes are woven seamlessly together, using a few doors, curtains and rugs, robes and scarves and some old jerrycans, and fit the workshop’s space as if they had been tailored for it.<sup>299</sup>

Unlike Collins of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, this reviewer did not shy away from declaring the underlying source of the Papp controversy. Hampton stated:

Of course, one would have to be more of an idiot than Ka’wash not to know that someone flew the planes and fired the guns that dispersed nearly a million Palestinians. But “The Story of Kufur Shamma” is about those refugees, not the armies that put them to flight, and El-Hakawati tells it with humor and skill. One should be grateful to Dance Theater Workshop for giving them a stage from which to tell their story.<sup>300</sup>

In his account of the New York opening, John Simon of *New York Magazine* concluded by describing the spirit of El-Hakawati: “Above all, there is no hate in the play, and the Israelis are barely touched upon. There is sadness and sorrowing, but rather more

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<sup>297</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 July 1989.

<sup>298</sup> “The Suitcase Fund is New York Live Arts’ international artist and cultural worker exchange program.” See funding programs on [www.newyorklivearts.org](http://www.newyorklivearts.org) (last accessed 9 February 2013).

<sup>299</sup> *New York Times*, 28 July 1989.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

endurance, childlike humor, stoicism, fortitude, and hope.”<sup>301</sup> He continued: “As for Joseph Papp, though I did not see him applaud, he was there in the opening night audience.”<sup>302</sup>

## Conclusion

*The Story of Kufur Shamma* became El-Hakawati’s last successful production. In 1989, the troupe agreed on a settlement to abdicate their rights to An-Nuzha Hakawati theatre building.<sup>303</sup> By then, the troupe had already experienced division within its ranks. Of the founding members of An-Nuzha Hakawati theatre, Radi Shehadeh and Ibrahim Khalayleh had begun to produce their own separate productions in 1986.<sup>304</sup> After *Mahjoob Mahjoob* (1980-1982), Daoud Kuttab had dedicated the majority of his time to his career as a journalist. He published in *Al-Fajr* (English), *Al-Quds*, and the *Jerusalem Post* throughout the 1980s.<sup>305</sup> In 1990, Abu Salem, Lubeck, and Muallem, along with members Amer Khalil (member since 1982) and Iman Aoun (member since 1985), rehearsed *The Search for Omar Al-Khayyam*. The troupe rehearsed the play in Basel,

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<sup>301</sup> *The New York Magazine*, “East Village/West Bank,” p.45

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.* For further reports on El-Hakawati’s North American tour, see *Al-Quds*, 26 July 1989; *Al-Horriya*, 27 August 1989 (No. 334); *Al-Itihad*, 20 November 1989. See also *The New Yorker*, 28 August 1989, “Comment,” p. 23; *The New York Magazine*, “East Village/West Bank,” p.45; *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs*, October 1989, p.47; and *Seattle Times*, 18 August 1989.

<sup>303</sup> Edwar Muallem mentions that the agreement had occurred in his review of the United States’ tour of *Kufur Shamma*, *Al-Itihad*, 30 November 1989. For further information on the construction of the building and the “exit” of El-Hakawati, see Chapter One of this dissertation. Worth noting, the history of the building, its internal politics, the influence of external forces, the board’s takeover process, the involvement of the theatre movement, and the complicit role of the press are too complex to discuss tangentially in this dissertation.

<sup>304</sup> Their productions included *‘Antar Fi Al-Saha Khayyal* (*‘Antar the Court Knight*), *Sharshouh*, and *The Birds*.

<sup>305</sup> Kuttab’s experience in journalism may have contributed to El-Hakawati’s prominent presence in Palestinian media. Since El-Hakawati, Kuttab has become a recognized journalist and political commentator in Jerusalem, Jordan, and the United States.



Switzerland. Failing to rise to the quality of previous productions, the play caused the end of Lubeck and Muallem's involvement with El-Hakawati.<sup>306</sup> Abu Salem continued to use the name El-Hakawati and El-Hakawati Al-Jadid (New Hakawati) for the remainder of his life; however, he failed to reproduce his previous local and international successes.

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<sup>306</sup> In the aftermath of this production, François Abu Salem and Jackie Lubeck broke their professional partnership and ended their marriage.

## Chapter Five

## Al-Kasaba and the Personal Journey of George Ibrahim

“Individuals create culture... When Al-Kasaba was in Jerusalem, and we as a group were there, there was a cultural life, a notable cultural situation. We created it.”

George Ibrahim, 13 October 2010

The history of Al-Kasaba Theatre and Cinematheque is inseparable from the personal life and professional journey of its founder – the actor, director, writer, and former television star George Ibrahim. Since its inception in 1970, Al-Kasaba functioned as an independent non-governmental organization under several operating names and in various statuses as a legal entity. For over forty years, George Ibrahim remained the only continuous member of this company. When asked about the members of the troupes he led, he stated: “Actually, I prefer to abolish the troupe system. I believe it is better to choose the appropriate personalities based on the work.”<sup>307</sup> In order to understand the history of Al-Kasaba Theatre, it is necessary to appreciate George Ibrahim’s personal history of conflict, controversy, and individual achievement. The story of Al-Kasaba is unique in its dependence on the efforts and career of one individual. But it is also representative of a complex Palestinian condition, which is characterized by the contradictory daily realities of resistance to occupation and negotiation with the authorities.

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<sup>307</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 9 July 1989.

## The Story of a Refugee: Al-Ramleh to Amman to Jerusalem

George Ibrahim Habash was born in 1945 in Al-Ramleh, Palestine.<sup>308</sup> In 1948, his family became refugees and settled in Amman after a series of relocations to Al-Latrun, Ramallah, and Al-Salt. The Israelis had imprisoned most of his uncles. By the mid 1950s, his first cousin Dr. George Habash – the founder of the Arab National Movement and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – became a fugitive in Jordan, where King Hussein banned all political organization and invoked martial law.<sup>309</sup> Despite the Habash family’s extensive experience with war, politics, and imprisonment, George Ibrahim’s parents raised him and his siblings in an apolitical environment. Dr. George Habash had been his family’s doctor and a regular visitor to the family home, but news of his expanding political activities remained unspoken.<sup>310</sup> Remembering his parent’s difficult choices after the Nakba of 1948, Ibrahim recalled: “They concerned themselves with raising us. They didn’t tell us what happened... And the schools didn’t focus on our Palestinian identity.”<sup>311</sup> In Amman, George Ibrahim studied the Jordanian curriculum and sang the Hashemite Kingdom’s national anthem every morning in school. As a fifteen year-old high school student in the early sixties, he began to learn his Palestinian history from rogue Palestinian teachers and knowledgeable peers.

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<sup>308</sup> From here on, I refer to George Ibrahim Habash (the artist) as George Ibrahim or simply Ibrahim. I refer to George Habash (the political leader) as Dr. George Habash.

<sup>309</sup> During this period, Jordan feared the existence of a plot to overthrow the King. For a concise biography of Dr. George Habash, see *Bernard Reich’s Political Leaders of the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa: A Biographical Dictionary*, p. 213-220. See also the entry on Dr. George Habash in *The Encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Political, Social, and Military History*, p. 409-410.

<sup>310</sup> George Ibrahim stated: “If anything, his influence was that my family tried to distance us from politics. Life was difficult. The ideas of George Habash influenced me only after I grew up. He sometimes visited us but all I knew was that he was a doctor and my family were treated by him.” George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

<sup>311</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010.

As a teenager and young adult, he held a number of jobs that served him as a future theatre manager and director. While still in school, he worked as a carpenter for his uncle. After graduating high school in 1964, he served as a clerk in a small accounting firm in Amman. Then he earned a certificate in business administration from a local college. He also participated as an amateur actor in a community production of the satirical comedy *Al-Beit Al-Sakheb (The Turbulent House)*, by the Syrian playwright Walid Marfa's. Most of the participants, including the director, were aspiring Palestinian youth. He described the crew: "We were young guys, just starting out. There was Hisham Yanis, Hisham El-Hneidi, Nabil Al-Mshini, Musa Ayyoush, and Mohammad Al-Abbadi."<sup>312</sup>

In late 1964, he accepted the position of assistant manager of warehousing at a British phosphate company in the Jordanian desert. Within a few months of employment, he was fired for damaging a company truck and driving it without a driver's license. When he returned to the family home in Amman, he claimed that the company no longer required his services. Shortly thereafter, his father met the new provost of Jerusalem's Lutheran Church during one of his visits to Amman. Provost Hansgeorg Köhler had just started his new post, which lasted from 1965 to 1971. Mr. Habash asked Köhler for help with his mischievous son. George Ibrahim remembered:

[Provost Köhler] asked me what I studied. I said I have a business administration diploma and I speak English well. He said, 'alright, come to Jerusalem.' So, I worked in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem as his assistant and manager of the church hostel. I learned some German, answered the phone and assisted the principal accountant with teacher salaries.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

During this time, Bishop Haddad of the Lutheran Church became his mentor. The Palestinian bishop gifted him the English-language copies of the works of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. He asked Ibrahim to read classics from the Western repertoire, which produced his enduring fascination with the Euro-American civilization. Ibrahim remembered: “He taught me the meaning of culture.”<sup>314</sup>

Since 1965, Ibrahim participated in the religious dramas directed by Herbert Kenneth Carmichael, who later worked with members of Ramallah’s Theatre Family in 1970 at the YMCA. Carmichael held a Masters of Arts (M.A.) in Speech from the University of Wisconsin (1930) and a Ph.D. in Theatre from the University of Minnesota (1941). Sent by the Presbyterian Church for a ten-year development mission in the Middle East and North Africa from 1962 to 1972, Carmichael focused his efforts on creating Christian dramas in churches and affiliated institutions.<sup>315</sup> Ibrahim remembered Carmichael as one of his earliest theatre teachers:

Carmichael, a director from America, used to direct a Via Dolorosa play called ‘At The Cross.’ He came to do scenes of the crucifixion of Christ... Here was the beginning in 1965. I observed the man and how he worked... They [the actors] were all amateur, but I took it seriously. They took it as a religious project. For me it was theatrical and artistic. I observed him. I learned make-up... This man had surgical adhesives and created mustaches and beards...

For a few years, Ibrahim used the work with Carmichael as a laboratory. He observed the experienced director as he worked with large numbers of actors, selecting costumes and staging the play in various churches in Jerusalem. Carmichael instructed his volunteer actors in the basics of voice and movement. Ibrahim recalled: “For them, it was a strictly

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid. Note: The church had two bishops, one Palestinian and one German. George Ibrahim saw Bishop Haddad as a father figure and considered the bishop’s family as his own.

<sup>315</sup> McKim, LindaJo H. *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p 62.

religious project. They spent a lot of money on the production. That's where I learned that if you want to make beautiful theatre, you must spend the money."<sup>316</sup>

From 1965 to 1967, as he began his new life in Jerusalem, Ibrahim regularly travelled back to Amman to act professionally in radio dramas. The Jordanian radio had just begun to institute radio drama for its regular programming. He played small roles in a few short-length dramas, but the brief experience became foundational to his future career as a radio and television actor. He stated: "They used to record the drama. The form caught my attention because it was new to me. When you act for radio, you learn a new skill, the way to interact with the microphone."<sup>317</sup> In 1967, he attempted to mount a production of *Ahl Al-Kahf (The People of the Cave)*, by the Egyptian playwright Tawfiq Al-Hakim.<sup>318</sup> He found interested actors from the regular visitors at the Lutheran Church. They rehearsed for two months in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, but discontinued the project due to the eruption of the 1967 war.<sup>319</sup>

#### War, Jerusalem, and the Meaning of Home

When the war began on 5 June 1967, a curfew forced George Ibrahim to stay in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. He said,

I found myself in a first rate theatrical atmosphere...curfew, use of light is forbidden, doors closed... I wore my pajamas and robe... the firing began. Speakers announced the Jordanian army occupied Jabal Al-Mukabber, which was then under the control of the United Nations. On the radio, I heard Ahmad Said in Cairo, 'eat them alive... we knocked down fifteen airplanes...' We were so happy!<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011.

<sup>317</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

<sup>318</sup> For a translation of the play see Hutchins. Ḥakīm, Tawfīq, and William M. Hutchins. *Plays, Prefaces & Postscripts of Tawfiq Al-Hakim*. Washington, D.C: Three Continents Press, 1981.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

Pleased with the news, Ibrahim climbed the spiral stairwell to the bell tower of the church in order to watch the battles. On the ground, he witnessed an entirely different set of events:

I had no sense of fear, as if I was watching a film. I saw the airplane bombardments and the occupation of Augusta Victoria. I saw the Israeli occupation of Jabal Al-Mukabber with two tanks. After a few days, I got tired of the curfew. I wore a black suit with a black tie. I walked out of the church door. There was no sound! No gunshots! Nothing... a deserted old city!<sup>321</sup>

He encountered an Israeli soldier for the first time. With a gun pointed to his chest, he claimed that he left the church in search of food for some children. As he returned to the church, he saw that soldiers had unbolted the shop of Nasr Al-Din, near the church, and were eating. He recalled: “That’s when I knew, the Israelis were inside the city.”<sup>322</sup> In these early days of the occupation, he saw the white flags adorning Palestinian homes in the Old City, heard the curfew announcements on loudspeakers, saw the bodies of dead soldiers before they were removed, and experienced the awful smell of the spoiled meat in the Khan Al-Zeit market.<sup>323</sup> He had heard of the Nakba of 1948 from his family and his uncles. In 1967, he experienced the pain of war:

The country is yours, then suddenly, not! The Israelis are searching you... “get out of the car”... and “raise your hands!” I hadn’t understood 1948 because I didn’t really live it. My father and grandfather lived it. When we got occupied, I saw the 1948 story all over again. The Israelis counted us and gave us the census paper.<sup>324</sup>

For the remainder of his life, George Ibrahim officially became a Jerusalemite, carrying the same identification number from the initial post-war census.

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid

<sup>323</sup> In 1967, Khan Al-Zeit had a large concentration of meat sellers. After a few days with no electricity, the meat rotted, producing a health hazard.

<sup>324</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010.

In the formative post-war period, George Ibrahim experienced the vacuum that occurs in the absence of a state. As an aspiring actor, his dreams of professional training ended. For nearly a year, he attempted to establish a personal or professional direction for his life, but Jerusalem had lost the stability of its cultural and political institutions. A few weeks after the war, he visited his family in Amman, where he felt like a foreigner. Upon returning to Jerusalem, he confronted the new realities of his chosen home: “At that time, the Israelis humiliated us, especially those my age. Israelis would show up in trucks, mocking us with insulting gestures. It was heartbreaking.”<sup>325</sup> As a young man, he felt paralyzed: “It was painful, especially when civilians, by the bus loads, started to visit the city they conquered, some gesturing obscenities at you.”<sup>326</sup> To consider potential options abroad, he travelled with a friend through Turkey and Eastern Europe. Sitting in a small theatre in Prague, he understood the challenge of being an artist away from his own culture and language. He thought: “If you want to be an artist or an actor, do it in your country, not in other people’s countries.”<sup>327</sup> He returned to Jerusalem, determined to work as an actor.

“Just Don’t Conquer My Soul.”<sup>328</sup> Radio, Television, and Controversy

In 1968, George Ibrahim responded to a newspaper advertisement for an actor position in the Arabic division of Israeli radio. Since 1958, the Voice of Israel had

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

<sup>327</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010.

<sup>328</sup> *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 24 August 1973.



initiated an Arabic language radio station, run by Oriental Jews.<sup>329</sup> Crossing Al-Musrara neighborhood, past the formerly dividing line at Mandelbaum Gate to Queen Melisande Lane (Heleni HaMalka), Ibrahim arrived to the old building of the British Mandate's Palestine Broadcasting Station in West Jerusalem.<sup>330</sup> When he arrived at the station, he experienced a strange contradiction.

I am not sure I can explain how I felt exactly. It was strange... a strange position. When they spoke Arabic, I felt some closeness. There were an Egyptian man, Abu Fareed, and three or four Iraqis. There also was a An Egyptian woman, Leila...<sup>331</sup>

They were Arabs! They asked him to present a performance in Arabic. He performed a poem, which he had memorized, by the Egyptian poet Kamel El-Shinnawi. The five-minute audition included a microphone test, which he passed with flying colors due to his brief experience at the Jordanian radio.

According to Ibrahim, the radio dramas seemed to reference innocuous apolitical daily events. Thus, he perceived his work as both educational and entertaining to Palestinian audiences. He refused to present news-related programing. Considering the potential risks inherent in cultural production, he insisted on freelancing and received five to six Jordanian dinars per recording: "I was free. Whenever I wished, I could leave. If I didn't want to do something, I didn't... When I was asked to present political programs

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<sup>329</sup> Jamal, Amal. *The Arab Public Sphere in Israel: Media Space and Cultural Resistance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. See chapter on media and the Arab minority in Israel, P. 39-60.

<sup>330</sup> For a scholarly history of the PBS during the British Mandate, see Andrea L. Stanton's dissertation, *A Little Radio is a Dangerous Thing* (2007) or book, *Jerusalem Calling: State Radio In Mandate Palestine* (Expected October 2013). For a personal account of the history of the station, see *A Lifetime in Jerusalem: The Memoirs of the Second Viscount Samuel*, by Edwin Samuel, or Nasri Al-Jozy's history of Palestine Radio: *Jawzī, Naṣrī. Tārīkh Al-Idhā'ah Al-Filasṭīnīyah: Hunā Al-Quds, 1936-1948*. Dimashq: Manshūrāt al-Hay'ah al-Āmmah al-Sūrīyah lil-Kitāb, 2010.

<sup>331</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

or talk shows, I refused... In drama, I was in control of the dialogue and its message.”<sup>332</sup>

The radio dramas avoided Palestinian subjects and characters. His obsession with Egyptian cinema throughout his childhood served him as he acted in Egyptian accent, the most common dialect in Voice of Israel’s Arabic radio dramas in that period.

The radio job was his first opportunity to learn from professionals. He remembered: “During this radio period, I learned a lot as a theatrical worker.”<sup>333</sup> When Abu Fareed was asked to write a drama in Palestinian dialect, he asked Ibrahim for help. The experience of adapting plays to Palestinian culture taught him new skills. For example, he learned how to analyze and construct dramatic scripts, which required him to expand his vocabulary and to attune his ear to the nuances of the Palestinian dialect. Then he learned to direct for radio, underscore dramatic dialogue, and create musical transitions between scenes. The library of the radio station became an important source of his education on classical and contemporary Western music, as well as the musical scores of Western cinema. By the early months of 1969, he was manually editing audio on quarter-inch tape, thus completing the learning process of radio creation, which included acting, writing, directing and technical production.

While editing a radio series in a Haifa studio, he received a phone call from the communist Palestinian director Antoine Saleh, who had just accepted the position as the director of a new children’s TV program called *Sami and Susu*.<sup>334</sup> Saleh asked Ibrahim to

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<sup>332</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> From Nazareth, Antoine Saleh was known as a leading Palestinian director at the time. According to George Ibrahim, Saleh studied in La Sorbonne. By the early 1970s, he had directed several productions for Al-Masrah Al-Nahid (The Rising Theatre), including Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters*, Strindberg’s *The Father*, and Suhail Abu Nuwwara’s original production of *Zaghrudat Al-Ard (The Ululation of the Land)*. After George Ibrahim operated his own theatre

audition for the role of Sami, the presenter of the show. After a successful audition, Saleh offered him the role. At the same time, Ibrahim had developed a romantic relationship with a Kiwi woman by the name of Marjorie Noel Galvin from Darwin, Northern Australia.<sup>335</sup> An Australian newspaper reported Ibrahim and Galvin's love affair, which started in the early months of the occupation. It also reported the difficulties she faced in securing a travel visa for "her fiancé," George Habash.<sup>336</sup> Having rejected the prospect of permanent exile in Australia, Ibrahim explained: "I decided to stay here. I postponed... I'm still postponing."<sup>337</sup>

George Ibrahim referred to *Sami and Susu* as a long-term artistic laboratory. He credited Antoine Saleh as his first professional mentor. He remembered: "Israeli television had just launched. They dedicated one hour to Arabic programming and the rest to Hebrew... Antoine helped me a lot. He taught me a lot, by force... yelling and nervousness."<sup>338</sup> From 1969 to 1977, he worked as an actor opposite the puppet Susu, played behind the scenes by the Nazarene actress Labiba Darini. Over the program's eight-year run, the core Palestinian team remained unchanged; however, different translators worked on various episodes, including Mahmoud Abbasi and one of Palestine's notable writers, Anton Shamma.<sup>339</sup> Jewish Israelis produced the program in

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company, he asked Saleh to direct many of his productions. In the 1990s, Saleh emigrated to Australia, where he passed away.

<sup>335</sup> The only present public record I could find on Galvin is her 1982 M.A. thesis in political science, *New Zealand and the UN Partition of Palestine 1947-49*, at the University of Canterbury.

<sup>336</sup> The article entitled, *Man "without identity" hopes to come to Darwin: A girl who loves him works on immigration*, was found in the personal archive of George Ibrahim. The 1968 article identified the date as his birthday.

<sup>337</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011.

<sup>338</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 8 January 2011.

<sup>339</sup> At the writing of this dissertation, Shamma held a post as professor of comparative literature, Near Eastern Studies, and Modern Middle East Literature at the University of Michigan. He is

all its facets, including script writing, technical production, content development, editing, music, animation, lighting, make up, set, props, and sound.<sup>340</sup>

The half-hour program often followed a standard format that revolved around educating children on the topic of the day, such as flight, television production, dance, music, and the sea. The opening song depicted a child friendly animation of marching musicians, a flying child, a car in the shape of carriage, a bird carrying a letter, and young women. As Sami and Susu sing of the folkloric *Sunduq Al-‘ajab* (Box of Wonder), a boy appears inside the window of the carriage. He pulls down the curtain on the window, which bears the name of the program. The song concludes with the program’s motif of education and discovery: “We’ll raise the curtain on the box of wonder.” The program emphasized child education using story telling, music, staged theatrical plays, film, animation, and singing.

In one of the extant episodes, the show teaches the process of flight. It begins as Susu chastises Sami for throwing papers in the room. Sami explains that he is throwing paper airplanes, then proceeds to show Susu and the children at home how to manufacture the paper airplanes. They discuss Susu’s dreams of flight. Then Sami states, “Children, let’s all go to the airport.” An educational video appears on the screen. It depicts an airport, followed by an explanation of the process of airplane construction, and concludes with an airplane taking off and landing. Throughout the film, Sami and Susu comment on the images: “You see how the airplane is taking off?” After the film, as animation and photographs play in the background, Sami teaches Susu the history of

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known for translations from English to Arabic and Hebrew, as well as between Arabic and Hebrew. He also produced his own creative works as a writer and poet.

<sup>340</sup> According to the credits of four existing episodes in the personal archive of George Ibrahim. During the period of fieldwork, Israel’s Channel One did not respond to my request for archival material on this show.

flight from humans wearing wings to balloons to the invention of airplanes by the brothers Wright and the creation of rockets for space travel. Following an upbeat song about flying, Sami reads Susu a story about a prince and his invisible cloak, then they watch an animated short film about a youth's attempt to construct a space rocket. The program concludes with an announcement of the names of contest winners, three Jews and three Arabs, from the following cities and villages: Baqa Al-Gharbiyyeh, Karmiel, Haifa, Gaza, Urshalim/Al-Quds, and Tel Aviv.<sup>341</sup>

Two key themes dominated the reporting on this popular program: artistic coexistence and cultural colonialism. Often referenced as a successful example of an idealized Palestinian-Israeli co-existence, the top-rated weekly program garnered the attention of Jewish Israelis as well as Christian, Druze, and Muslim Palestinians. Subtitled in Hebrew and spoken entirely in Arabic, it played to a captive audience at six thirty on Friday evenings, a holiday evening. Aside from Israeli television, only Jordanian television existed at the time. Among Jewish Israelis, adults and children, the show became an instant hit. According to one opinion, it may have succeeded among Israelis because “there were no good children’s shows in Hebrew.”<sup>342</sup> *Al-Itihad* newspaper reported unconfirmed rumors that King Hussein of Jordan watched the show in the 1970s.<sup>343</sup> It also noted that the show was one of the first to consider the issue of

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<sup>341</sup> This description is based on my analysis of several episodes in George Ibrahim’s personal archive. To provide a model of the structure, I described the entirety of one full episode.

<sup>342</sup> According to Swedenburg, in Armbrust’s *Mass Mediations*, p. 108. Swedenburg correctly describes the show as a “cross between Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers;” however, in his paragraph on the show, he incorrectly relays that Ibrahim lost his job during the Intifada “when he started to express his political views openly.” Ibrahim resigned in 1977 by choice. I discuss his reasons in this chapter.

<sup>343</sup> *Al-Itihad*, press clipping found in George Ibrahim’s personal archive. Date was not indicated on the article.

“co-existence between the two peoples.”<sup>344</sup> Noting *Sami and Susu* as evidence, Scholar Reuven Snir claimed that the Arab section of Israeli television “played a major role in encouraging Arabic-speaking theatrical activities for children.”<sup>345</sup> Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories viewed Israel’s Arabic language programming with distrust. In describing the Israeli government’s early efforts to reach the Palestinian minority through television, historian Ilan Pappé explained the complex context of *Sami and Susu*:

The Israeli television network opened an Arab section after the inauguration of Israeli television in 1968. While it would soon be seen as a collaborationist arm of the government by many in the community, in the early days it had the opportunity and the means to produce a different visual (if nothing more) reality, which it deserted later on. Particularly impressive was the children’s programme *Sami and Susu*, a bilingual Arab-Jewish comic dialogue that had fans in both communities and addressed an audience on the verge of forming negative images of each other.<sup>346</sup>

Among Palestinians, the show generated controversy. For some, it was seen as the occupier’s tool to dominate Palestinians through cultural production. Although *Sami and Susu* transformed George Ibrahim into a household name among both Arabic and Hebrew speakers, this stardom was accompanied by great admiration and cautious distrust. Simultaneously, he was questioned about his career choices and asked for his autograph. Within the Palestinian community, Ibrahim described his television and radio work as purely educational, children oriented, and apolitical. He believed he could separate his professional work from his political principles, but the Palestinian audiences

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Snir in Dan Urian’s edited volume, *Palestinians and Israelis in the Theatre*, p. 35.

<sup>346</sup> Ilan Pappé, *The Forgotten Palestinians: A History of the Palestinians in Israel*, p. 103. Pappé describes this program (and the initiative of the Arab section in Israeli Television) as “an attempt from above,” meaning a state level initiative.

believed the two were indistinguishable.<sup>347</sup> When asked about his politics in Israeli media, his daring commentaries earned him a reputation as a fundamentalist.<sup>348</sup>

In 1973, the prizewinning Israeli broadcaster Edna Pe'er asked him to express his identity crisis on her Hebrew language radio program, *It matters Me*. Identifying himself as both a Palestinian and “an Arab you conquered in 1967,” Ibrahim stated: “To the Jews I am an Arab. That is obvious. But to the Arabs I am not a Jew; I’m an Arab whom they suspect and distrust.”<sup>349</sup> While his capital rose within Israeli society for playing one of the most beloved characters on television, his social capital dwindled among Palestinian theatre artists and East Jerusalemite society. In the 1970s, when a group of Jerusalemite artists joined forces in working committees for the development of theatre, he was excluded because of his “involvement” with the Israeli establishment. Ibrahim remembered: “The same people, who worked in the post office, the electric company, even the police, blamed me for appearing on television. It was a chaotic period artistically, socially, and politically.”<sup>350</sup>

In the early 1970s, George Ibrahim had built his own community of supporters among members of the Communist Party in Haifa. He never became a member, nor was he asked to be. Upon hearing a radio interview with him, the Palestinian resistance poet Samih Al-Qassem called him on the phone: “How do you get the courage to make such daring political commentary on Israeli Radio?” Ibrahim responded: “That’s who I am.”<sup>351</sup> During that period, prominent members of the party, Palestine’s leading cultural producers, embraced him. He recalls: “The only ones who understood, even the

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<sup>347</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010.

<sup>348</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011.

<sup>349</sup> *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 24 August 1973.

<sup>350</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010.

<sup>351</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011 and 23 October 2010.

politicians among them, were the Palestinians of the Galilee. I became a personal friend of Samih Al-Qassem, Emile Habibi, Tawfiq Zayyad... such a close friendship... and Saliba Khamis, God bless his soul.”<sup>352</sup> In addition, he gained support among leading West Bank communists such as Mohammad Al-Batrawi and the former head of the Communist Party, Bashir Al-Barghouthi. These Marxist thinkers viewed his work as consciousness-raising and immensely beneficial in preserving Arab language and culture under occupation.

George Ibrahim’s popularity led to further offers of employment in Arabic language television programming and Israeli film. He told Edna Te’er: “It’s true that I am perhaps the best-known Arab in Israel... I am seen as a children’s entertainer – Sami.”<sup>353</sup> When he overcame this perception, he was only offered politically offensive Palestinian characters. “There is one thing I refuse to do. I will not play the part of an Arab... An Arab terrorist – naturally!”<sup>354</sup> By the mid-seventies, he had presented game shows and talk shows such as *2 X 2* and *Nujoom Al-Ghad* (Stars of Tomorrow). He discovered that apolitical programming did not exist on Israeli television: “Television and radio are Israeli media devices concerned with executing their own objectives.”<sup>355</sup> In his work on *2 X 2*, he saw the increasing influence of the producers, who attempted to include “political propaganda” in the program. “This event was a wake up call, though it came late.”<sup>356</sup> He found himself in a difficult position: “I worked for the children... but a

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid. George Ibrahim names the foremost leaders of the Communist Party in that period. Worth Noting: Saliba Khamis is the father of the recently-assassinated theatre director Juliano Mer Khamis (1958-2011).

<sup>353</sup> *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 24 August 1973.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Personal Archive, George Ibrahim, scrap of a newspaper dated, 9 July 1989.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.



popular show draws audiences to the television, which is ideologically directed.”<sup>357</sup>

Believing that his high ratings built a captive audience for Israeli political messages, he ceased to accept offers for programs intended for Israeli television in 1977.<sup>358</sup> Three months later, his wife Jackie Ayyoub left her position as a television anchor for the same reason. The Israeli public fought to prevent the show from ending. The most spectacular attempt to convince Ibrahim to return occurred in the form of a Balloon flown in Tel Aviv. It stated: “Bring Back *Sami and Susu*.”<sup>359</sup> He never returned and neither did the show.

#### Theatrical Repertoire for Children

In the early seventies, during the eight-year run of *Sami and Susu*, George Ibrahim noted a number of fundamental observations on the state of Palestinian cultural production in general, and theatre production in particular. First, the audience was too small to sustain long runs of plays. Most plays were presented in East Jerusalem for a few performances, and then they were closed. Second, professional children’s theatre was nearly absent in Palestinian culture. Third, a theatrical profession can be established in Jerusalem and throughout Palestine only if actors were regularly paid a fair wage. Fourth, a commercially viable play must be presented frequently to non-traditional audiences in nontheatrical settings. Fifth, to increase future theatre audiences, Palestinians must be taught theatrical values and conventions from a young age. Sixth, children do not respond to political slogans. Seventh, successful children’s theatre

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<sup>357</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010.

<sup>358</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011.

<sup>359</sup> *ibid.*

contained simple plots, folklore, and music. Eighth, children appreciated fully staged productions, which included both storytelling and modern technology.<sup>360</sup> He explained:

I took it as my responsibility to start from the beginning, to work with the children... I would rent the theatre of El-Omariyyeh School in the Old City for a month or two... I would bring all the schools of East Jerusalem to El-Omariyyeh. I rented buses and reserved with the headmasters of the schools. At the end of the performance, I was given the shekels in bags... I carried around bags of shekels. At the time, the actors were nearly professionals. They were all paid, but they weren't earning their living exclusively from acting yet.<sup>361</sup>

To achieve his goal of reaching Palestinian children, he typically presented twenty-five to thirty performances in El-Omariyyeh School. Then, he followed the Jerusalem run with tens (in some cases hundreds) of performances across Palestine.

In 1973, the Theatrical Artistic Group produced two children's productions. *Adventure in Jerusalem*, by George Ibrahim, was a mobile puppet production, which he toured with actress Christina Abboud throughout the city of Jerusalem.<sup>362</sup> The musical *The Happy Shoemaker*, written by Jackie Ayyoub and composed by Mustapha Al-Kurd, depicted the story of a poor shoemaker who experiences sudden riches and learns the value of modesty.<sup>363</sup> The fully produced musical received a positive review in *Al-Quds* newspaper, which described it as "a fully integrated musical that introduced the operetta

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<sup>360</sup> This list is compiled from several sources: Informal discussions with George Ibrahim and personal interviews with him on 23 October 2010, 18 Nov 2010, 8 January 2011, and 18 January 2011. In addition, Mohammad Al-Batrawi informally explained that George Ibrahim's "beautiful work with the children" had a significant impact on Jerusalemite theatre and gave him a similar credit in a personal interview, 24 October 2010.

<sup>361</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 23 October 2010. George Ibrahim insisted on charging each child at least one shekel per performance to teach from an early age to buy tickets for the theatrical experience. In a personal interview, 26 January 2011, Mohammad Al-Thaher stated that George Ibrahim started his theatrical career as a professional and paid his actors.

<sup>362</sup> *30 Years: Al-Kasaba Theatre 1970-2000*, published in the year 2000, p. 37.

<sup>363</sup> *Al-Quds*, 4 April 1977. Unpublished manuscript in the Personal Archive of George Ibrahim.

to our country.”<sup>364</sup> The production relied on pre-recorded audio for the songs, thus the actors lip-synched the music. The set successfully represented two locations: the home of the shoemaker and the castle of the rich merchant. When the lustrous court of the castle was revealed, the set change produced “amazement in the audience”. Although the reviewer complained of an imperfect transition of one technical cue, he was inspired by the selective isolation of lighting, which successfully revealed the terrifying features of the devil.<sup>365</sup> In 1975, the musical *The City of Dreams* (1975) followed the two initial productions.

After the end of *Sami and Susu*, theatre production became George Ibrahim’s primary source of income. His productions in the children’s repertoire became more frequent. He wrote, directed and acted in a number of long-running children’s musicals: *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* (1979); *The Moon of the Princess* (1979); *Little Red Riding Hood* (1980); *The Dwarf and the Miller’s Daughter* (1981); *The Sultan’s Son* (1982); *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1987); and *The King Went to Sleep* (1989). He also wrote and directed several children’s plays: *Uncle Suleiman’s Shop* (1981); *My Grandfather Is Not Old* (1982); and *Haroun Al-Rasheed and the Shoemaker* (1985). The children’s repertoire was characterized by original adaptations of *Arabian Nights* stories, classic Western fairy tales, and tales from Arabian folklore. Although he relied on a select number of actors to perform the plays, Ibrahim exerted complete control over the creative process in the majority of the productions.

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<sup>364</sup> *Al-Quds*, 4 April 1977.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

## Theatrical Repertoire For Adults

George Ibrahim's adult repertoire began with the foundation of his own theatrical enterprise, Firqat Al-Funoun Al-Masrahiyah (The Theatrical Artistic Group, TAG).<sup>366</sup> In 1971, the TAG produced four productions: *The Turbulent House*, by the Syrian playwright Walid Madfa'i; *The Game of Love and Chance*, by French playwright Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux; *The Executor and the Condemned* and *Thorns of Peace* by the Egyptian playwright Tawfiq Al-Hakim. From its early days, George Ibrahim set the tone of his theatrical body of work with a series of choices. In all four productions, he adapted the dialogue to the Palestinian dialect, Antoine Saleh directed, and the majority of the acting team were Palestinian citizens of Israel or Jerusalemites. During the initial period of development, the recurring ensemble of actors included George Ibrahim, Makram Khouri, Jackie Ayyoub, Bassam Zumot, Youssef Farah, and Marlin Bajali. As the productions grew in frequency and actors moved, retired, or changed careers, his regular selection of actors included Ahmad Abu Saloum, Mohammad Bakri, Mahmoud Awad, Jamal Iseed, Hussam Abu Eisheh, and Kamel El-Basha.

George Ibrahim chose published plays, which frequently allowed him to receive the permission to perform from the Israeli censorship. From 1971 until the Oslo Accords (1993), he produced published scripts from the Arab and Western repertoire. When asked to fulfill the censorship requirements, he sent the original published scripts by Jean-Paul Sartre, Marivaux, Moliere, Max Frisch, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Albert Camus, or Alfred Farag. He explained, "I used to adapt the plays. I didn't send in my Palestinian

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<sup>366</sup> *30 Years: Al-Kasaba Theatre 1970-2000*, published in the year 2000, p. 5.

adaptations... Because it was already available in print, they approved it.”<sup>367</sup> Without a doubt, the majority of his early productions would have passed the censorship. Directed by Antoine Saleh, some of the early productions of Tawfiq Al-Hakim had been produced for Israeli Television at the same time.<sup>368</sup> Despite addressing issues of the petit bourgeoisie, the marriage plays of Marivaux and Molière did not fit the censor’s watch list of originally-created Palestinian plays. In production, particularly in the seventies, the Theatrical Artistic Group focused primarily on entertainment value and declared philosophy of “art for art’s sake.”

By the eighties, George Ibrahim’s choices of adult repertoire expressed his desire to produce politically engaged theatre. In 1986, he established Masrah El-Warsheh El-Fanniyeh (The Artistic Workshop Theatre), which reflected his transition from traditional well-made plays into more experimental scripts and adaptations. In 1986, Max Frisch’s *The Fire Raisers* told the story of arsonists who destroy the homes of unsuspecting citizens. Originally produced in the aftermath of World War Two, the play presented the actions of the arsonist occupiers as a metaphor for Fascism. In the same year, he adapted and directed Albert Camus’ *Caligula*, which told the story of the Roman Emperor’s revolt against the natural order. The play depicted the ultimate failure of immoral revolution and absolute freedom. Presented on the stage of An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre, *The Fire Raisers* and *Caligula* critically analyzed the relationship between individual choice and absolute power. In Jerusalemite theatre, these two productions signaled a new departure for George Ibrahim and El-Warsheh El-Fanniyeh.

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<sup>367</sup> George Ibrahim, personal interview, 18 January 2011.

<sup>368</sup> Personal Archive, George Ibrahim, scrap of a newspaper dated, 9 July 1989.

In 1988, Jean Paul Sartre's *Men Without Shadows* became El-Warsheh El-Fanniyeh's most memorable production. Directed and adapted by the director Mazen Ghattas (1954-2005), the production indirectly, but clearly, constructed a parallel between the occupation of France in World War Two and the occupation of the Palestinian Territories in 1967: "The events occur on the eve of the end of the German occupation of France, when one of the French Resistance groups falls in the hands of the Germans. Its members face brutality and death for their cause, freeing France."<sup>369</sup> Staged during the period of the first Intifada (1987-1993), the audience received the production as a representation of ongoing events. For example, theatre critic Ghassan Abdallah contextualized the performance as an event occurring "in the shadow of hundreds of fallen martyrs and thousands of injured individuals."<sup>370</sup> He described the crux of the production: "What is death? Do we die to live or the opposite? Do we draw life from our own death?"<sup>371</sup>

On 1 September 1988, George Ibrahim applied to the Ministry of the Interior for the permission to perform. The process of evaluation began on 7 September 1988. On 16 September 1988, the first evaluator approved the production. A second evaluator approved it two days later. On 22 September 1988, the final permit was printed.<sup>372</sup> Mazen Ghattas' concept was absent from the application. Ghattas focused his production on depicting the torture of the resistance fighters at the hands of the Germans.<sup>373</sup> Ibrahim played the role of Clochet, whose sadistic interrogation techniques were expressly drawn

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<sup>369</sup> *30 Years: Al-Kasaba Theatre 1970-2000*, published in the year 2000, p. 31.

<sup>370</sup> Mazen Kamal Ghattas, published by Mazen's Family and Al-Laz Theatre, Acre: 2006, p. 25.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Israel State Archive. File on *Men Without Shadows* (in Arabic: *Mawta Bila Quboor*) by Jean Paul Sartre.

<sup>373</sup> Based on viewing and analysis of an archival video of the production at Al-Kasaba Theatre, Ramallah.

from the oral accounts of Palestinian prisoners. To indicate the parallel between the French and Palestinian resistance, the French prisoners spoke in Palestinian accents. The German interrogators spoke in accented classical Arabic, the dialect sometimes used to depict Hebrew speakers on the Palestinian stage. In the set design, scarecrows standing throughout the stage represented the occupation as a dominant figure, always watching but hollow. In his review of the production, Carl Vitale of *Al-Fajr* newspaper described the success of the adaptation: “The situation is all too real for the Palestinians in the occupied territories, right down to the army taking over schools and turning them into military posts.”<sup>374</sup>

#### Building Jerusalem’s Al-Kasaba Theatre

In 1989, after a series of highly successful long-running productions for children and adults, especially the critically acclaimed *Men Without Shadows*, George Ibrahim saw a need for his own theatrical space for rehearsals and performances. An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre had become a hub for Jerusalem’s theatrical community and a growing number of patrons, proving the presence of previously untapped audiences. An-Nuzha-Hakawati comprised a single rehearsal space and one large theatre with over 350 seats, which was too large for small productions. As an alternative to the heavily-used and occasionally unavailable Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre, Ibrahim believed “it was necessary to establish new performance halls to accommodate the increasing growth of national culture.”<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> *Al-Fajr* (English), 21 November 1988.

<sup>375</sup> *Al-Quds*, 1 August 1991.

After officially renaming his company to Al-Kasaba Theatre in 1989, he rented a deserted location near An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre. With the support of hired employees and regular company actors, he led the process of transforming the burned down basement into a small theatre and entertainment complex. On 1 May 1991, the newly opened theatre contained three halls. The main hall functioned as a fully equipped ninety-five to one hundred seat theatre, which comprised a raked auditorium and a raised stage. The second hall functioned as a front lobby and a permanent exhibition hall for the visual arts. The third hall was designed as a meeting space for artists. It contained a cafeteria, which became one of the most commercially-successful spaces in the theatre. Auxiliary areas included a business office, dressing rooms, control booth, workshop, a kitchen, and bathrooms.<sup>376</sup> In describing the opening of the theatre, the resistance poet Samih Al-Qassem stated, “Al-Kasaba Theatre... is a new kind of social and cultural frame.”<sup>377</sup> He expressed admiration for the integration of the visual arts, the theatre, and fine dining. He was particularly impressed by the ability of the Palestinian people to create such a civilized space during the violence of the Intifada.

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> *Al-Itihad*, 19 July 1991.



## Conclusion

The period between 1967-1993 witnessed the development of modern theatre as an integral element of Palestinian culture. In this period, the legacy of Jerusalemite theatre artists lives in the still functioning theatres of An-Nuzha Hakawati, Sanabel Theatre, and Al-Kasaba Theatre, which moved to Ramallah in the year 2000. This study documents the story of three historical trajectories: Collective Creation (Balalin to El-Hakawati); Marxist Theatre (The Palestinian Theatre to Sanabel); and the personal journey of the artist and theatre manager George Ibrahim. In the process, this history shows how the leading Palestinian theatres and artists resisted the censorship's requirement of the permission to perform and coalesced into a resistance front in the East Jerusalem-Ramallah area.

Particularly in the 1970s, modern Palestinian theatre in the Jerusalem-Ramallah-area emerged as a sustainable grassroots action. With the exception of the work of George Ibrahim, Palestinian theatre began as a volunteer effort among a youth disenchanted by the occupation (1967) and influenced by the human and political losses of the events of Black September (1970). It relied on ticket sales, volunteer labor, community effort, and popular audience support to survive. In the absence of Palestinian institutions of mass media, theatre provided a vital affirmation of the Palestinian identity. Theatre played a role in the dissemination of Palestine's oral history in memorable productions such as Balalin's *Al-'atma*, Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*, and El-Hakawati's *Mahjoob Mahjoob*. It also promoted the preservation of Arabic language and culture in the children's repertoire in the various production companies of George Ibrahim.

In the years leading up to Oslo, a radical transformation occurred. With the generous funding of foreign organizations such as The Ford Foundation and The Welfare Association, Palestinian theatre became a viable long-term profession. Theatrical troupes became established institutions that effectively secured annual funding. The majority of the artists were paid for their production work. International touring became more frequent. With increased funding and experience among the artists, the number of professional theatre and emerging semi-professional troupes increased. For example, El-Hakawati Theatre Troupe splintered into a number of successful theatrical organizations, such as Theatre Day Productions (Gaza), Ashtar Theatre (Jerusalem and Ramallah), Qafila Theatre (Jerusalem), and As-Seera Theatre (Al-Mghar).

Yet, after Oslo, despite the growth of the number of theatre companies and the increase of available foreign funding, Palestinian theatre in Jerusalem declined dramatically. Palestinian cultural production moved to Ramallah. For example, Ashtar Theatre established its highly successful center for theatre of the oppressed in Ramallah in 1996. Al-Kasaba Theatre and Cinematheque was established in Ramallah in 2000. While Al-Kasaba in Jerusalem was destined to become an acting school, George Ibrahim failed to maintain the costs of the location and closed its doors in 2007. Although An-Nuzha-Hakawati theatre in Jerusalem became known as the Palestinian National Theatre, audiences from the West Bank and Gaza were prevented from reaching it due to the emergence of the Wall and the checkpoints, both of which separate East Jerusalem from Palestinian audiences.

Particularly since Oslo, the geographic and demographic separation of East Jerusalem from the West Bank has led to a steady decline in Palestinian cultural

production in the city. Perhaps, the best illustration of this decline occurred in 2009, during the Arab League's initiative to celebrate Jerusalem as the Capital of Arab Culture. The planned activities failed due to the absence of large audiences within East Jerusalem and the lack of Palestinian access to the city from the Occupied Territories. Providing the association of the celebrations with the Palestinian Authority as pretext, the Israeli police shut down events throughout 2009. For example, ten minutes before the unveiling of the winner of the celebrations' logo contest at An-Nuzha-Hakawati Theatre, the police closed the premises by the order of the Israeli Minister of Public Security:

After being informed that the Hakawati Theatre meeting in Jerusalem is being planned under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority without a permit, I have ordered for this meeting to be stopped and all those present dispersed.<sup>378</sup>

Since its beginnings, the struggle for the permission to perform characterized the Palestinian endeavor to publicly represent the Palestinian identity. From 1967 to 1993, this struggle led theatre artists to perform in East Jerusalem, where the censorship laws proved to be more negotiable than in the rest of the Occupied Territories. Since 1993, a shift has taken place. Under the rule of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, Palestinians may create culture without the explicit need for Israel's permission to perform. Thus, theatre has thrived in areas such as Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Jenin. Due to the occupation's continued exertion of political and military power over East Jerusalem, the city transformed from an accessible thriving cultural center in the seventies and eighties to a besieged city in the present time.

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<sup>378</sup> Quoted in Amjad Samhan's article "Jerusalem: Arab Cultural Capital of 2009?" in *Jerusalem Quarterly* 48, p. 11, by the institute of Jerusalem Studies.

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