

# The magic world of theater

## INTO THE HEART OF PALESTINE.

When I accompanied the Alrowwad Cultural Center theatre group from the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem on its French tour in 2011, I knew little about theatre. I assumed that one needed a stage, props, lighting, etc. in order to present a piece. Yet these eleven Palestinians carried only their suitcases. As soon as they arrived at the scene of their first performance, the troupe immediately set to work examining the space, laying out their equipment and appropriating the tables, chairs, and bits and pieces which they would transform into a representation of their Palestinian world. The performance went off with hardly a hitch. It was hard to believe that 36 hours before, the troupe was just getting off the plane. I was astounded. For the next two weeks I saw the same phenomenon repeat itself half a dozen times.

I saw the same phenomenon again when I accompanied *Yes Theatre* from Hebron on their French tours in 2012 and 2014. It made little difference if they were in an actual theatre, a social center, or a gymnasium. Magic is the only way to describe it, and I have since learned that it is part of what makes theatre, theatre.

But there is more to it than that with Palestinians. For their lives are lived as theatre. As if they lived in a play, they are in a real life but false situation, forced to carry out the tasks of everyday life in a theatre of war and occupation. They are exiles in their own land, homeless in their homeland. They must construct – or more accurately re-construct their society in spite of the fact that it has existed in the same place for centuries. Palestinians who live in the refugee camps are in the most difficult and complex situations of all. They are considered to be people without a land, but the camps they live in have been built on Palestinian land, often within sight of ancestral family property.

How to live such an impossible reality ? How to be at once in and out, legal and illegal, citizen and “nationality unknown,” at home and homeless ? The only solution is to see one’s life as a theatre piece, to be played as if one were constantly on stage, a real person playing an unreal person. Life as total preparation for theatre; no wonder Palestinians are so good at it.

## **The purpose of this book is to introduce the contemporary Palestinian version of that magical world of theatre.**

It will do this by presenting a broad range of Palestinian theatres<sup>1</sup> in two ways :

- providing a view of the life and complexity of Palestinian theatre as an artistic and cultural phenomenon through the words of the individuals associated with that theatre.<sup>2</sup>
- providing essential factual information about a particular theatre or individual. The theatres are presented by city, in alphabetical order.

This is not a history of Palestinian theatre, although historians may find it a useful resource. Nor is it a literary analysis of Palestinian playwriting, although analysts may find clues as to why and how certain pieces were written and produced. It is above

all a collection of personal artistic accounts about how and why Palestinian theatre is done. It is a presentation of the ideas and feelings of Palestinians in their own words.

Interspersed with personal histories and reflections on acting, four themes emerged from the interviews: the specific problems of doing theatre in the Occupied territories of Palestine ; the nature of theatre and its place in society ; the impact of theatre on individuals, particularly youth; and the role of theatre as an alternative to violence as a reaction to and resistance to the Israeli occupation.

<sup>1</sup> *My original intention was to present all Palestinian theatres. It became evident early on that it would not be possible to include all those who could legitimately be considered to be a part of the Palestinian theatre community. The ever-changing kaleidoscope of Palestinian theatre is too complex and extensive to allow for an all-inclusive study. While I believe that I have included most of the major theatres and troupes, some are not here. In that respect this is an arbitrary collection, limited by time, resources and the impossibility of coordinating busy schedules. My sincere apologies go to all those individuals whose presence in this book is certainly merited, but whom I was simply not able to interview.*

<sup>2</sup> *In the beginning, I believed that a theatre consisted of a building, administration, and artists. In fact, few groups in Palestine have all three of these components. Often a theatre is really a single actor, writer, or small group who have constituted a legal entity for funding purposes. But whether an individual or a theatre company, the process for arriving at a production is the same. The author of a play will seek funding independently or may respond to an NGO funding proposal. If funds are obtained, a theatre will be located, actors will be employed, materials obtained, and production can begin. Often, because of the spirit of solidarity and self-help of the network of Palestinian artists, preparations begin on a volunteer level before any funds are available. (See page x, Introduction to Theatres.)*

BETWEEN THE THEATER AS

*a form of art*

AND THEATER AS

*social work*

## DOING THEATRE UNDER OCCUPATION

The Occupation has affected Palestinian theatre in several ways. Least invasive are the practical problems of functioning within an unstable economic and political situation. Palestinians live in a country where movement is unpredictably restricted, especially between cities. Spontaneous road blocks and checkpoint closings, tightened “security,” or simply the bad humor of a young Israeli soldier can turn a normally half-hour long trip into a half-day excursion through the mountains, or worse, can make the trip impossible. The presence of actors and actresses at rehearsals and performances is never a sure thing. Nor is the delivery of materials and the availability of such basic items as costumes, lighting, and props.

What is true for the performers is also true for the audience. Twice I was present at scheduled performances for children during the day, which had to be cancelled because the schools were closed at mid-day due to clashes between the Israeli army and

Palestinians, and the resulting restricted movement. However, as difficult as these “material” obstacles are, they do not, in and of themselves, alter the nature of Palestinian theatre.

That alteration begins to be felt as a result of the unstable economic situation imposed by the Occupation, which leads to serious problems of funding. The Palestinian economy is mostly “false” in the sense that it is not self-sufficient. Because of the Occupation’s economic and trade restrictions, and its control of natural resources, the private sector is simply not able to generate enough economic activity to support a state. To support its government and public service sectors, Palestine depends on outside funding, mostly from the United Nations, a small circle of concerned governments, and a host of international non-governmental organizations. And since most families in Palestine do not have enough disposable income to support culture, sectors such as the theatre depend heavily on outside international funding agencies. While this funding allows theatres to function in Palestine, the negative impact is double.

To begin with, NGOs, especially those which function on a world-wide basis, have their own agendas and priorities, which often do not correspond either to the orientation of a particular theatre or to Palestinian needs. To qualify for needed funds, theatres and artists are often obliged to adapt some of their productions to deal with subjects related to NGO priorities and not to the artistic

inspirations of Palestinian playwrights nor to topics of priority to Palestinian society. Theatre is partially transformed from an artistic enterprise into a social services program.

For many theatres the only way out of this dilemma is to juggle budgets and proposals so that some of the money which is provided for socially oriented NGO friendly productions also supports the costs of purely artistic creations. For example, an administrative assistant who is supported for a program of school-related productions will also work on the theatre's latest artistic creation by economizing the time spent of NGO work or by working overtime without additional pay. The stress created by these balancing acts can divert a theatre's attention from its essential business of play production.

Because of these pressures, the question, "What is theatre; a social activity or an artistic creation?" becomes a daily concern, and not just a theoretical problem. As explained above, theatre professionals find that they are forced to devote an inordinate amount of time at the "social activity" end of the spectrum as opposed to the artistic, creative end. In addition, because resistance to the Israeli occupation is such a part of the daily routine, especially in the refugee camps, it is inevitable that any artistic activity, including theatre takes on a militant aspect. Audiences, both domestic and international expect that Palestinian artists will be activists and will produce activist works, and the artists themselves consciously and unconsciously

tend to produce at least some works with militant themes. As a result, Palestinian plays can appear to be "artificial" in that they are born of political and not creative impulses.

Finally, with outside funding – which sees theatre in Palestine as essentially a pedagogical project, performances, especially those for children in schools, are often free to the public. This makes the development of a theatre "culture" very difficult. Theatre is seen as just another aspect of the humanitarian efforts which Western NGOs provide, and not always with the best interests of Palestinians in mind. The development of a viable tradition of theatre as an independent socio-cultural activity worthy of private or public support has been slow and difficult.

Several interviewees commented that while the practical problems which Palestinian theatre faces have made life difficult, there are "positive" aspects of functioning under such heavy constraints. Artists must deal directly with society, keeping them from retreating into creative obscurity, and the search for solutions to practical and aesthetic problems forces new ideas to emerge. It is within this daily struggle to exist as theatres that the dialectic between theatre as art and theatre as social activity plays itself out in Palestine. This may be the most significant manner in which the Israeli occupation has had an impact on the nature of Palestinian theatre. Working with youth is an example of this transformative impact of the Occupation.



## BUILDING *The foundations* OF A FUTURE *of freedom*

### THE IMPACT OF THEATRE ON YOUTH

Because Palestinian theatres have worked over the years within NGO humanitarian objectives of working with young people, they have developed theatre as a tool for personal self-development to counter the devastating psychological effects of the 70 year Occupation on young people who have little or no sense of a useful future, and to try to build the foundations for a future of freedom. For many young people theatre training is an alternative to the desperate and almost always ineffective acts of violence into which Palestinian youth often throw themselves.

Palestinian actors and actresses spend considerable time working with youth, training them to channel their anger and frustrations into theatrical presence and force, and working to help youth to avoid the psychological trap of defining themselves

as victims under the influence of the Occupation <sup>3</sup>. This training helps to develop that Palestinian mentality which has the capacity to see problems as challenges and opportunities, not as obstacles to progress and a justification for anger and bitterness. No one complains about this. On the contrary there is great pride in working with young people to build a theatre and a nation. Many times, people had tears in their eyes as they recounted stories of youth whose lives were changed through theatre.

VIOLENCE *destroys*  
WHILE  
CULTURE *builds*

### THEATRE AS A NON-VIOLENT ALTERNATIVE

Palestinian theatre is able to do this because it is embedded in the non-violent nature of Palestinian culture and society. Time and time again I was told by people in and out of the theatre that violence destroys while culture builds, and that culture is necessary for maintaining a society and constructing a future. Palestinians active in theatre see the

<sup>3</sup> *A major reason why Palestinians remain essentially non-violent is due to the fact that even as Palestinian society and culture suffer enormously from the Israeli Occupation, individuals refuse to define themselves as victims. Palestinians and Palestinian society exist on their own terms and not in relation to what others do to them or even think of them.*

<sup>4</sup> *See Appendix 1*

theatre as a powerful non-violent option in resisting the Occupation and its attempts to dominate Palestinian culture and society <sup>4</sup>.

Theatre functions to this end on two levels: the process of doing theatre as a means of personal development and as a tool for changing minds and for encouraging self-realization; and the content of theatre as a forum for educating society by raising and presenting difficult topics in a manner which invites reflection and analysis.

Even so, much of Palestinian theatre, being devoted to a social agenda, is open to the criticism of not being “legitimate” theatre, that is, a purely artistic activity. Most of my interlocutors responded to this criticism by pointing out that Palestinian theatre, being imbedded as it is in the everyday lives of Palestinians, is very much in the tradition of political or activist theatre, going back to Shakespeare and Molière, many of whose works dealt with contemporary social issues. They see in the evolution of Palestinian theatre from one of simple protest to a more sophisticated, multi-dimensional presentation of Palestinian society, with its own problems and contradictions, as proof of a maturing art form in its own right.

Today a “third generation” of actors, actresses, and directors is now working in Palestinian theatre, having done most of their training with the “second generation”; actors and directors who themselves were trained by the founders of contemporary Palestinian theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, and who are passing on the flame. These young actors, directors, and trainers are proof that theatre can indeed change people’s lives, and in turn have an impact on society. Many of them were “saved” by youth training programs developed by groups such as Theatre Day Productions and ASHTAR Theatre. After an “awakening” experience such as seeing a play in school or being enrolled in a summer theatre activity program, they would go on to a training program and eventually graduate with a certificate recognized by the Palestinian Authority. This is certainly one of the major reasons for the increased acceptance of theatre in Palestinian society as an educational tool and, increasingly, as an art form.

*Each actor*  
IS A  
*co-author*  
OF THIS BOOK

## INTERVIEWS, HANDLING AND EDITING OF THE TEXTS

The texts presented in this book are based on a series of 37 interviews with 51 people over a period of 2 years.

During each of the interviews I attempted to cover the following seven questions.

- What motivated you to do theatre ?
- Are you an artist whose art is by nature militant, or are you an activist who uses theatre as a tool for expressing your beliefs ?
- What are the constraints and limits to doing theatre in Palestine ?
- What is the place of women in Palestinian theatre ?
- What is the role of theatre in Palestine, and in particular why do you work with children ?
- How is theatre funded and what are the financial problems ?
- What is the future of theatre in Palestine ?

The interviews were recorded in their entirety, transcribed and sent to the interviewee for approval. Excerpts were chosen from the approved transcriptions, edited for inclusion in the book, and sent again to the interviewee for approval. (For the French edition the edited texts were translated into French and then re-edited to conform to French linguistic usage.)

During this process two problems presented themselves.

First, because I do not speak Arabic, all of the interviews were conducted in English. A half-dozen spoke no English and the interviews were done with interpreters. Although a few of the interviewees spoke excellent English, most did not, and their responses were often grammatically incorrect and contained inappropriate vocabulary.

Secondly, I began each interview with the first question and within ten or fifteen minutes the interviews turned into conversations. They became increasingly complex and disjointed as we jumped around from topic to topic, often returning to an earlier subject. It was impossible to follow a fixed order, resulting in “verbal jigsaw puzzles.” It is safe to say that the informal and spontaneous nature of our conversations provided a context which encouraged a more thorough and profound discussion than might have been the case in a formal interview.

As a result, the transcribed texts were totally inappropriate for publication without a considerable amount of editing, including transposing paragraphs and sentences and, in extreme cases, even modifying sentences beyond simple grammatical and orthographic corrections. This process added considerably to the time of production as any alterations of the text required the collaboration and approval of the interviewee. However, for the interviewees and for myself, the resulting texts have remained faithful to both the content and the spirit of our conversations, and each actor can say that he/she is a co-author of this book.





*Quds Art*



Jérusalem-Est, HaTsariah HaAdom Street, October 28, 2015



# Quds Art

## NAME & PLACE

**QUDS ART**  
in JÉRUSALEM

## WHO

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[http://www.dailymotion.com/  
quds-art#video=xymw26](http://www.dailymotion.com/quds-art#video=xymw26)

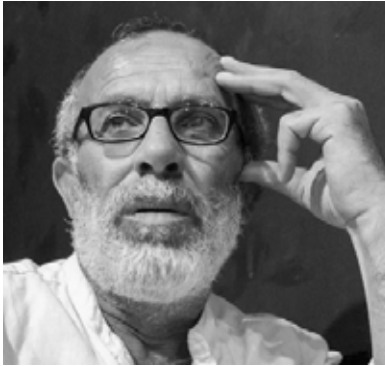


*Quds Art* is **Kamel El-Basha**. And Kamel El-Basha has a long and distinguished career in Palestinian theatre. As an actor, director, playwright and producer, he has been involved with over 100 productions since he first went on stage in 1987 as Sorbier in Sartre's *Morts sans sépulture* with the **All-Hakawati Theatre**. One could say that *Quds Art* is a distillation of contemporary Palestinian theatre; a pure product of the creative and dynamic history of Palestinian theatre both in its manner of functioning and in its creative expression.

## Kamel El-Basha <sup>1</sup> :

“ In theatre you can't be with the same group for a very long time. The longest period I spent with one group was Al-Kasaba Theatre in Ramallah. After three years - from 2000 - 2003, it started to become difficult to work together. We became too familiar with one another, and too repetitive- “I know what you are going to say!” Every day we would improvise, preparing to do a show every two weeks, and after a while we stopped enjoying what we were doing together. So, we broke up and everybody went in his own direction.

<sup>1</sup> Interview of July 29, 2015 in Jerusalem

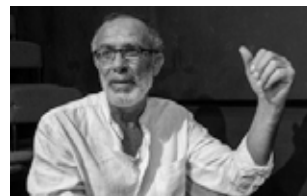


“ This is normal in theatre you cannot work with the same people for a very long time. As an actor or as an individual director you have to work with different people in order to have new experiences. Because in theatre every human being is a treasure by himself. So, you need to move regularly. The exception is if you are a writer and I am a director, and we understand each other, and through this we produce a unique style. Then, on the contrary, we are stuck together! If we leave each other, you won't work, and I won't work !

But even if a group wants to remain together it is difficult. For one thing, we don't have a national institution which is capable of involving people in a national theatrical enterprise. There is the Palestinian National Theatre (TNP), but it's not a true national theatre; there's no ongoing creative or theatre group, and no national network. There's a building and five administrative employees. Whenever they have money, they produce a play and hire independent actors. So, all the time it is related to projects and to funding, and there's no financial stability and no regular salaries that would normally keep people together. We don't have anybody paying us - not well, not badly, even!

So, we have to move all the time, but movement in Palestine is difficult because of the Occupation. For example, it's almost impossible for people outside of Jerusalem to work in the TNP. You need permission to come and work, and it is very difficult to get permission, unless you are over 55.

On the other hand, this instability can be positive - for me it has been very positive. I was able to work with most of the theatres in Palestine and also in Haifa. I am not stuck with one ideology which ties me to people. I am not stuck with one institution. I am moving all the time, and I am doing what I want most of the time. So, yes it can be positive for those who are artists, especially for those of us who are creating theatre. For there are different kinds of creativity. One can be creative as an actor - can be good in whatever play you find yourself in. But theatre makers; writers, directors and producers need more than that. You need the stimulus of your environment.



## Quds Art



Kamel El-Basha in "des Roses et du Jasmin" of Adel Hakim (Director of Ivry Theater since 1992). Created in June 2015 at the *Palestinian National Theater*, it toured France in November 2017.

**What does the term "'48" refer to ?**

It refers to the whole land that was conquered by the Israelis in 1948.

**And the part which is Israel is called what ?**

It is called nothing, because Israel does not recognize international laws. As Palestinians we refused the Partition. They did not accept it, but they did not refuse it. They claimed the existence of Israel, but we Palestinians don't know what this means. Nobody knows where the borders of Israel are, and so we are fighting over we don't know what. For us Palestinians when you say "'48" it means all the land that was occupied by the Zionist movement during the '48 war, and what came after that - the State of Israel that is recognised by the international community. But we did not recognise it until the Oslo Agreements in 1993. Our leadership admitted that Israel has a right to exist.

So, this is where we have arrived after 25 years of Oslo and "negotiations." Because before that we used to say, "OK here is the State of Israel, you cannot ignore it." There are 8 million people, and they need to live. And most of them were born here. So, we don't have a country - we lose. But we can have our own small state beside the settlers of Israel. Now, after 25 years of negotiations, they are controlling more land, throwing away more people. At the same time, they are losing, they will lose eventually. We will wait and see. Because among us, as Palestinians... for me - I talk about myself, not my leaders - Palestine is all Palestine. Even the Israeli... the Jewish soldiers and all the checkpoints are Palestinian. This is Palestine, I am Palestinian, and I am living in my country..







*Yes Theatre*

2014:  
*The Yes Theatre*  
on tour in France (here in Caen).  
From left to right :  
Raed Al-Shyoukhi,  
Ihab Zahdeh (squatting),  
Mohammed TITi.



# Yes Theatre

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(President)

### Mohammad ISSA

(Administrative Director)

### Majdi SHOMALI

(Financial Assistant)

**Yes Theatre** was officially established as a Palestinian cultural organisation in early 2008. However, its roots go back to 1997 when **Raed**

**AL-SHYOUKHI, Mohammed TITI** and **Ihab ZAHDEH** began training with **Theatre Day Productions - TDP**. In 2001, they became **TSP's artistic team** in Hebron, and in late 2007 **TDP** phased out, having given birth to **Yes Theatre**. In 2004, they were joined by the technician **Hamam AMERO** and have remained the major (and sometimes only) theatre in Hebron.

The success of **Yes Theatre** rests on its ability to transform and integrate three seemingly contradictory pressures into a functioning theatre : first, to produce professional level theatre; second, to remain financially solvent ; and third, to resist the double political and social pressures of life in the most conservative Palestinian city, and life under the Israeli occupation.



Sameh, **HEBRON**, October 26, 2016





At Yes Theatre in Hébron : flyers, posters, articles and other posters hanging on the wall. October 26, 2016



## Ihab Zahdeh :



Our mission is to give theatre, artists, and the arts in general a place in the daily life of people so that they can see and reflect on their lives from other points of view; to let them experience the arts through theatre. Before Yes Theatre there was no theatre in Hebron.

There were some people trying here and there, but they got their knowledge of theatre through television, mostly Egyptian theatre. This is not real theatre; mostly comic, not Palestinian, and not connected to our lives. We decided to make real theatre in Hebron. And this is what we do, both as a professional theatre and in working with young people.



## Raed Al-Shyoukhi<sup>1</sup>



From the beginning we were attacked. We thought that it will not be possible to be actors and to have theatre in Hebron. But we didn't give up, because we believed in what we were doing. Slowly we saw that we were making progress. We were doing good things which people started to accept and like. They saw that we were not doing just a comic theatre for laughing. We are teaching also. It's educational theatre; you don't just see, laugh, and leave. No, they saw that they were watching plays which left question marks in their minds.

Questions ! Oh, really ? Do we have that ? They are right ! What should we do with that issue, with that problem ?



Many questions—we provoked the audience with many question marks in their minds that they have really to think of—what is going around them, what is happening here. On stage we shed light on many problems that people used to not pay attention to.

Ihab talks about circles. We are living in the middle of many circles : the family, the school, the community, and the Occupation. The biggest circle which contains all the circles inside, is the Occupation. We cannot do much about the Occupation, but within the circle of the Occupation we can deal with the other circles; we are fighting the bad attitude of the families, the community, the schools, the street. Everything.

## Yes Theatre

We are working on breaking the negative effects of these circles, which act like handcuffs and prevent you from doing what you want really to do; to make the change you want really to make in this society.

For example, there are important religious and conservative social and political forces in Hebron that believe that theatre not only is shameful but also taboo – haram haram ; not allowed in Islam. To imitate a character, to take the role of any character is not allowed by God. Two of their leaders came to the office here, shouting... and the guys here sent them to theatre. “What is it that you are performing ? This is haram ! This is taboo! Women on stage, acting ; what’s this? What are you teaching are children ?”

We had a performance at that moment. I said, “Ok, calm down. Would you please come and see the performance? We have a performance now.”

“No, we will not see such a performance!”

“Yes, yes. Sheik, you say this is taboo, this is haram, we are doing something bad. Come and see it! If it is bad, let’s talk later, after the show. If it is bad, we can stop it. But if it is not bad, we can talk.”

“Ok.”

They attended the performance. They liked it. So, after the performance I asked them, “Sheik, did you see a girl with uncovered head on the stage ?” They said no.

“Did you see an actor touching an actress (which is taboo in Islam) ?” They said, no.

“Did you see an actress and an actor disappearing backstage?” They said, “No, all the time they were on stage.”

“So what, what’s wrong? What’s the problem ?” He said, “The subject itself, it is about sexual harassment. You know, you are teaching... you are opening the eyes of our sons, our children.”

“Yes, this is the goal; to open the eyes of our children. Can you deny that this problem is taking place in Hebron, more and more every day ?” He said, “No I can’t deny it.”

I said, “Yashik, you have to talk about it in mosques. You shouldn’t attack me, you should cooperate with me, support me. And talk about it on Fridays, in mosques. Do you know where your sons go ? Do you know what your sons are doing now ? Do you know what they watch on computers ? Do you know what they watch on their mobiles ? We have to take care. We are making this play to tell the children, “take care, be careful, this problem exists, you have to be careful, you have to behave. This is you have to behave to solve it, to prevent it, etc.” They have to know about it, to fight it. So, they calmed down.



<sup>1</sup> First interview at the Yes Theater, Hebron, September 16, 2015

## Mohammed Titi<sup>1</sup>:

“ I grew up in the Fawwar Refugee Camp. From the beginning, when I was a child, I liked to talk to people all the time and to imitate them. One day when I was in the refugee camp school, they decided to do a show for a Mother's Day or a Father's Day party. The teacher said, “Ok, we're going to do something, a theatre scene.” I said, “I'll go !” There were two or three of us who made a play.

From that, little by little I started to like these things. A friend of mine wanted to do something to make life easier in the camp, and he asked me to work with him – I was about 17 at the time. The situation in the camp is too difficult. There is nothing for children to do – they just play all the time. It's not a good situation. They need something else to do there. “Mohammad, what do you think if we do a small theatre in the camp ?” I said, “I like that !” We started to make a small theatre, it is not meant to be a professional theatre, just a theatre to give the people some relief from the bad situation. We did 2-3 plays. It was only our idea about theatre, but the people liked the plays. We charged 2-3 shekels and they came. That was in 1996. I laugh now...



Mohammed Titi *en action*.

Then, around this time the Ministry of Culture advertised in the newspaper that they needed to make a theatre here. There were people coming from Holland who want to help. This was **Jan Willem** and **Jackie Lubeck** from **Theatre Day Productions (TDP)**. They were doing theatre for children, and I interned with them for three years. During this time with TDP I also went abroad. After 10 or 11 years they left Hebron – it's their policy ; they help to train a group, and when it becomes an independent theatre, they move on. It's like a phasing out.

In 2008 Ihab, Raed and I established *Yes Theatre*. We were afraid, because **TDP** was going to leave and we were young people and we didn't know if we could carry this organisation along. We had two choices: The first one, the simple way, would be to leave this thing and search for something else.

<sup>1</sup> First interview at the Yes Theater, Hebron, September 16, 2015

## Yes Theatre

The second one, the really difficult one, was to do what we want ; make a new theatre. And this is what we did. It was difficult to start, but with some help from **TDP** to bring some funds from donors, we established *Yes Theatre*.

For me, acting came from the inside, without my knowing it. It was natural. An actor who says, "I will be an actor" won't be an actor! You must have it inside – you must desire these things. And after that, by training, by study, you develop it. But in the beginning you must like it ; you must have it inside of you.

”



Raed Al-Shiyoukhi during a youth internship at the *Yes Theater*.  
September 16, 2015

### Raed Al-Shyookhi <sup>2</sup>:

“ I think I am a resister who is acting. Many other actors believe they are actors who resist. I am the opposite, maybe because I started the resistance before I was in theatre.

When I was in school, we had a pen with 4 colors; black, red, green and blue. I used to open my book and in the middle of the book, inside, I used to draw the Palestinian flag. And once by chance soldiers stopped me. They used to check the books. They know that we draw the Palestinian flag inside our books, small ones because we try to not let them find it. But they found it. They hit me for that. The soldiers said, "What is this ?" I said, "This is Palestinian flag." They said, "What is Palestinian, what is Palestinian flag, what is this Palestine ? There is no Palestine, habibi. There is only Israel." So, he hit me.

<sup>2</sup> Second interview conducted at the *Yes Theater* on October 24, 2015

You know there are things that happen to you when you are a child that you never forget. So, each time you are attacked because you love something, you love it more! If you hit your son because he wants a mobile telephone, he will want it more. I know many people in Hebron who were shot because they raised the flag in the first Intifada. It was... it was a holy thing. When you saw the Palestinian flag, your heart fell on the ground. Wow ! And you got shot because of it. And you love it more !! I gave my blood to this flag ; this is why I love it more ! I can't hate it when I gave it my blood.

I was 18 in the first Intifada in 1988, in the last year of school. I used to throw stones at the soldiers, against the busses; throw Molotovs, go to demonstrations, set tires on fire. I used to do whatever the boys and youth do today. Eventually I was shot; injured in the chest by the border police with an M16. They took me to Al-Makassed hospital in Jerusalem. In the same room there was a young man from Gaza. He was completely paralyzed. A military jeep went over him. His spine was broken, and he could move only his eyes. And there was a guy from Bitoumha. He was hit by dum-dum bullets that explode inside. He had metal bars in his hand. Because he was driving a tractor, escaping from the soldiers, trying to protect his head and three bullets hit his arm. Another guy, I think from Ramallah; they cut his legs from the knee. And another one from Hebron ; they shot a bullet in his heel so he couldn't move his foot.

I was looking at them with the Palestinian flag on the wall and the photo of Yasser Arafat. And wondering, "Does this man know about

these people ? I don't think so." So, I stopped getting involved in demonstrations. I decided to stop throwing stones, to stop participating in demonstrations or in any activity. Because at that moment I believed that stones are useless. This way is useless. You have a big bar in front of you. You have a big army, strong army, weapons, tanks; what are you going to do with stones ? Nothing, and the question then is, what shall you do to resist ? What's the way to resist ?

I went to work as a house painter, and I started writing poetry. Trying to make my words reach the people. I worked in the local radio. I made a program for children. I developed a character of a cat-Harouth, who was with me in the studio. On each show we would take a different issue and we would talk about it. From the beginning I wanted to be an actor or a singer. This was my dream. I used to sing, to make tricks, to imitate my teacher, my neighbor.

Once I fought with my father because a friend of mine who used to sing in the weddings said, "Raed you have a nice voice. Why don't you come tonight and sing at the wedding ?" So, I told my father that I was very happy, "Dad, I am going to sing tonight in a wedding !"

He said, "What ?!"

"What ? I am going to sing in a wedding."

He said "Either this wedding or me, you have a choice."

I went. I sang in the wedding. I was flying ! You know, the first time I am singing with a mike, big loudspeakers... And my father didn't talk with me maybe for a week !







Ihab Zahdeh lors de son interview.

## Ihab Zahdeh <sup>2</sup>

“ I was very young when I started, maybe 18 or 19, something like that. All of my fellow students in school chose to be engineers, you know – people working at a desk, things like that. This was not my wish, and also, I didn't have enough money – I came from a poor, very poor family. I didn't want to put my family in trouble ; if I continue my studies in university or something, it would have been very expensive. And I didn't have this kind of expectation about studying and not earning money. I was very young, and I was jumping everywhere.

And immediately when I finished high school, I jumped out and opened a music shop ! I tried to sell speakers and guitars, pianos, ouds... And nobody came to buy, except maybe a guitar string, but not something important, like an oud, guitar, or a violin. Some people would rent speakers for their parties and weddings, but it's not enough. I couldn't eat from this.

<sup>2</sup> Second interview conducted at the Yes Theater on October 24, 2015

And then one time I rented speakers and microphones and everything to a group of theatre people here in Hebron. They were preparing a play. We were all friends – one of them was Titi. They asked me to help, so I helped them, and suddenly we became a group. When **Theatre Day Productions** came from the Netherlands through the Ministry of Culture, we began a training program which lasted for 4 years or so, from 1996 to 2001. We continued working after graduation, from 2001 until the end of 2007, when **TDP** decided to finish work in Hebron and leave. They phased out over a period of several months, and we took their place in Hebron, with a new name, with our vision and our own mission.

Through all of this, the theatre has changed me... from a person without a dream, without hope, to a person with hope !

A person who believes in impossible things... to believe that there is nothing impossible. This is the change ; to have a discipline, begging to improve things. Without becoming discouraged. And theatre has helped me to understand myself. To know my feelings... not only feelings... my soul !



Ahmad Abo Salem from  
*Sanabel Theater*,  
East Jerusalem  
and Ihab Zahdeh  
(to the right)  
September 16, 2015





# *Asseera Theatre*





2015 : le cadre magique de *Asseera Theatre*, installé dans un centre culturel à NABLUS.



# Asseera Theatre

## NAME & PLACE

### ASSEERA THEATRE

P.O. Box 182, Maghar Village,  
14930 GALILÉE

## WHO

### Radi SHEHADEH

## EFFECTIC

Work alone

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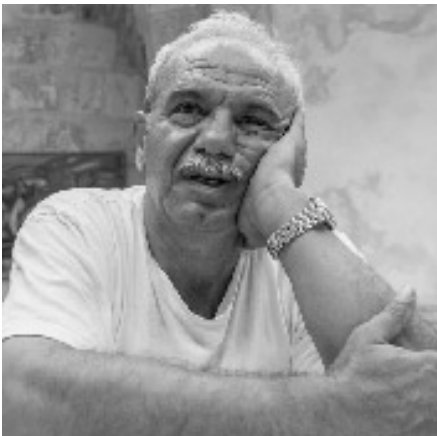
asseera-eng.weebly.com/index.html



*Asseera Theatre* Asseera Theatre was established in Maghar Village in the northern Galilee by the playwright, actor and director **Radi Shehadeh** in 1989. **Radi** had been with **Al Hakawati Theatre** since 1982, and when the building and the direction of the theatre changed hands in 1989, he decided to go off on his own. His life in theatre - his "suicidal involvement" as he likes to call it began in 1969 when he was a student in university.

## Radi Shehadeh :

“ I didn’t plan to do theatre in my life – to be either an actor or a playwright or a director. I finished secondary school, and I hated studies—they were so dry. So, when I went to university in 1969, I decided to choose the course with the least hours of study. I looked in the program of the Hebrew University and I found that Arabic Literature and Theatre was a new program in the University, and that it had the fewest number of hours. And suddenly I found myself in this mud ! But step by step I realised that I had found something interesting—I started to be serious. Also, I was motivated to finish this BA because I thought that Arabic Literature might give me a chance to be a teacher to earn a living. Because from theatre you cannot live.



At the University some of my studies allowed for volunteer work. With some friends and some girls from my family and the families of friends, I went back to my village to establish an activities club. This was a very small conservative village, where there were no organised activities, especially no theatre. We called it "Horriyyat Alkalima" (The Club of Free Words)–the freedom to say the words and to speak out freely, instead of just repeating political slogans. We started this project in 1972. We didn't want money, we just wanted to make something for the village, for our people. And we worked well together.

Right from the beginning many people were against this project because you had girls and boys in the same room, and nobody knows what they are doing inside. It is forbidden to have such a thing ; it is not normal in a conservative village. There was my sister, my fiancée, my friend's sister, my friend's wife; we were six girls and five boys. No village in the whole of Galilee had such a group. Some people started talking, saying it was a brothel – "they close the door when they are working, and they start screaming and saying texts... we don't need such a thing."

When it came time to make the show, we made a condition which would protect us; we said that anybody who wants to see our play must come with his mother or sister or daughter.



Radi Shehadeh  
avec un de ses personnages.

And suddenly for the first time in this village, you could see people sitting like a family together, like any people in the world, watching a play. And we began to get positive feedback because people liked it, and we started to see some change. Though it's dangerous, though there are people against it, though you don't have money, though you are volunteers, though, though, though....

This is a kind of addiction – this is your disease. You lose your life to it. I am not inviting you to see my play because I am doing you a favour. It is because I want it – it is a personal thing first.

And I feed this personal energy from the feedback I get from other human beings. This contact happens whether I perform in front of five people or five hundred people. The way I make the theatre even for five people, you can feel this electric shock–the waves I send.

And suddenly a young guy born just fifteen years ago makes a clip of dancing or something and he becomes rich and famous. And I ask, "Do I have to envy him because he makes this thing for millions of spectators and in order for me to reach these millions with my theatre, I need how many performances ?" How many ? My life will not be long enough—he makes it in fifteen seconds, I have to make it through all my life. And I finish my life, and nobody knows in Maghar who is **Radi Shehadeh** ? In my village many people don't know me. My brother is a bus driver there, and I tell them I am the brother of the bus driver. "Ah you are the brother of Daoud ? Yes, yes we know the bus driver !"

Even so, I am positively addicted! This is why I continue. As I said, it is a personal thing and I have dedicated my life to this for 50 years.



## QUESTIONS TO RADI SHEHADEH <sup>1</sup>:

*Does the theatre tell the truth ?  
A puppet is not a real person,  
and two chairs and a desk are  
not somebody's office. So, the  
theatre is false... or is it true ?*

Neither true nor false - those words are too extreme. It is more complicated than that. It's a relative thing. A play is not false—it is another life. The reality of life helps you to take from it, but not to imitate it exactly. You take it in your mind, and you make it new life of creativity. When I am presenting a story with a puppet or a mask, people watch and notice that "This character is similar to my grandfather." or "Oh, this once happened to me." It is not the same because it is someone else's story presented aesthetically in the theatre. And the more you make it beautiful, the more you take the audience's mind up a degree. That is the great thing in creativity. It makes you go up another step. This is a revolution that doesn't go directly, but slowly, slowly, slowly it makes you think in a pure way, in a spiritual way. It creates a changed life. So, it is not the truth and it is not a falsehood. It is a new life.

### *How do you create a play ?*

When I think of making a new play, I don't think of big things. I have a point: here. [He begins to draw.] And suddenly this point gathers around itself other points, like a circle. Then, other points gather around that circle. And then you gather more and more, but all of them come from this central point. Let's say this play is about rich and poor. I had an idea about somebody rich and an artist who is poor. This is the whole idea. I start and suddenly I have points all around, sometimes like a spiral. I get going along like that, I gather, gather, gather things, gather, gather, gather things. It goes through a long way, but you have to watch out! You can make a play of five hours : once I was here, and then I went there and sometimes I go there, and I ate, and I took the bus, and I travelled and I traveled... and on and on, and you don't finish. So, you have to find a solution, a finish to the situation you are presenting. This is the problem of writing. This is a very basic problem which all story tellers face.

### *So what are the themes that inspire you ?*

Here it is very simple, in a comical way we talk about richness and poverty. Once I wrote about pirates who see an island, and they think it is full of gold. But it is an island of dates. When the sun shines on the dates, the pirates think it is a golden island, so they decide to occupy it.

At a performance somebody asked, "Why do you talk about us ?"

I said, "No, I didn't say 'Israel.'"

"Yes," he says, you said "pirates."



I told him, "Are you pirates ?"

He said, "No."

So, I told him, "I'm talking about other pirates. Did you hear the word 'Israel' here ?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Yes, the people were clapping and saying they are against pirates." I asked him, "Are you against pirates or with pirates ? What is wrong ? I am a human like you. I hate pirates because they come and steal from me."

So, I think like that. this is a human problem. It fits in Ireland, it fits in South Africa, it fits in India, in Iraq. It fits anywhere where there is oppression. Not only here. I said, "I am talking about the English occupation in India – what do you say; in South Africa–what do you say ?"



It is about human nature that refuses oppression. This is my subject. And if by chance I am here in the midst of an Occupation, and now you want to tell me that I am inciting against you ? What can I do ? Do you want me to shut up, to do pantomime only ? I choose a small story from our folklore about somebody who wants to get a horse, an Arabic horse from the other tribe. He couldn't, and there is a rape and music and dancing, and masks. It is very engaging. But it talks about the refusal of rape, the refusal of killing others, the refusal of the tribal way of life. So, these problems are also here in our own society - they are universal. When I reflect these problems in my art, they are common for others because my genes are similar to theirs, as is my humanity. Because all of us are the same thing. We want to live in peace, we want to eat, we want to have luxury,

we want to think freely. If you are against this then there is confrontation and there is a conflict. It's because it is human—because you are addicted to your humanity, that you like to do theatre.



*Asseera Theatre, MAGHAR, October 17, 2016:  
Backstage*



*... .. and the stage side.*





# *Diyar Theatre*

