

Samer Al-Saber and Yana Taylor

Reflecting on Palestinian Theatre:

A Resilient Theatre of Resistance

Samer Al-Saber, a historian of theatre in Palestine and Yana Taylor, theatre-maker and dramaturg with extensive experience in devising documentary theatre in Australia, began a conversation about 'issues-based' theatre and when it does or does not have salience beyond the confines of an actual theatre event. It became apparent the history of the occupation of Palestine has so thoroughly shaped arts practice there that the very existence of theatre is in itself a critical 'issue' for those intimately involved in its making. Our conversation pivots around the operations of power at work over the last four decades for both artists and audiences in the Palestinian context, a period during which the media environment has changed radically. This offered a valuable touchstone in this example of a body of 'resistant theatre' that continues to adapt and evolve. What follows is not so much a transcript as a rendering of a discussion which took place on 1 March 2014; it takes from several key parts and this edited version was agreed between us.

Samer Al-Saber From my research and my conversations with Palestinian theatre artists, I believe there was a specific period in Palestine when theatre was the most significant art form for resistance against the occupation. In the period between 1967 and 1993, theatre in the Occupied Territories developed very quickly.¹ Six months after the occupation, the Union of Painters and Ironworkers put on a play about the trial of the devil with very few means of production. There is no full record of the play but we know it was well attended despite the short run. The trend of union workers putting on plays continued well into the 70s. In fact one of the legendary theatre troupes began in 1973 called Dababis, which means 'The Pins'. They were a group of construction workers who worked with a man called Ibrahim Jbail. He worked with them to create a production, which became a recurring event. The troupe worked for a few years but ended when the Israeli army destroyed their headquarters which was a small apartment with a few rooms where they had set up a stage. But this was the centre of operations for this theatre company. Jbail told me no one wanted to go there and rehearse anymore. It became a place of fear. Simultaneously, there was youth theatre in schools, community theatre, amateur theatre, religious theatre and, of course, the emergence of Hakawati in 1977.² And there was George Ibrahim, who began professionally in 1970 and has continued until the present. Powerful work happened in the 70s and 80s when the occupation was most direct and most brutal.

Yana Taylor What was the media environment like at this time? I'm asking because I'm interested in the role of theatre where audiences' understandings of what they consider the realities of their world is shaped via information and stories presented in public media. How did it connect to the discourses that were prominent in other media? Did theatre offer a different set of relationships between people?

Samer Al-Saber Theatre became the most popular form because everything had to go through immediate censorship, but the censorship of theatre was more complex. There was no freedom of the press for the Palestinians. Something that could be published in an Israeli newspaper in Tel Aviv or West Jerusalem would be illegal in the West Bank or Gaza. Though people found ways to get news out. There was no Palestinian television or radio. If Palestinians wanted to see television, they'd have an antenna and when the weather was good they would have to catch the off-air transmission from Jordanian television. So in the absence of any big public media, theatre was big media. It was a place for peaceful resistance and communal transmission of information. It was the place to gather large groups of people and, at times, a place to incite when and where necessary. Palestinian theatre artists did resistance plays, some of which might be coded to get past the censor.

Al-Hakawati Theatre's production of *Majhoob, Majhoob* is an example. The plot pivoted around a man who seeks hilariously to 'fix' his day-to-day life in Palestine through his individual efforts but fails most of the time, especially when he becomes a traffic policeman and the traffic gets worse. Its performance in the early 80s generated severe censorship. Security forces arrived to shut a performance in Nazareth (that was under Israeli governance) and threatened to arrest everybody if they did the play. Of course, the event became bigger as the audience composed of Palestinians Christians, Muslims, and Druze, as well as some leftist Jews, demanded to see the play. It happened that a former member of the Knesset, a well-respected Palestinian literary author, Emile Habibi was present. He stood up and spoke against this ban. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, that if the Israeli government can't handle a play, a progressive play, but a play nonetheless, then the state will never be heading for a true democracy. This event propelled this show further. It played over a hundred performances in villages throughout Palestine and throughout Europe where, even in Europe the troupe is challenged. Their poster stated they were from Jerusalem with the words 'Hakawati' and 'Palestine'. As they toured the word 'Palestine' was often scratched out of their posters and replaced with the word, 'Israel'.

Yana Taylor Is this public role for the theatre in Palestine continuing now that there is more public media?

Samer Al-Saber I refer to theatre now as part of a major cultural front in resisting the occupation inside the ongoing activism for liberation. That is a theatrical front, a front where Palestinians go for the complex debates on current issues, where foreigners, or foreign supporters or activists go to see Palestinians in their own internal debate, uncensored, free, and alive. The tradition continues, and this is key to the immediacy of theatre, theatre itself being an issue that carries within it specific current issues. Every production I have ever participated in, seen, studied, heard about, or reconstructed, has had a significant talk back session afterwards. And these talk backs last. A half hour is a short one. When Palestinian audiences see a play, they discuss it, challenge it and speak about it with the actors. If the playwright is there, they want to ask him or her questions. Everybody demands the participation of everybody, that's an essential part of this theatrical front. In the 70s, we saw it with companies in Haifa, Nazareth, Ramallah and East-Jerusalem. In the present we are seeing the front in the form of all the theatres that emerged in the late 80s and 90s continuing through the last 10 years: The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, Alrowwad in Bethlehem – both in refugee camps, Jenin and Aida – Al-Hara Theatre in Bethlehem, Al-Kasaba Theatre and Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah, Theatre Day Productions in Gaza and Yes Theatre in Hebron. So we have the emergence of all these theatres in the occupied territories that are in constant contact with Palestinians inside of Israel, in Nazareth, Haifa, and Jaffa. In my opinion, the centre of this cultural front remains East Jerusalem, because the Palestinian National Theatre or Al-Hakawati

Theatre is in Jerusalem—different names for the same building with a complex history behind the naming.

Yana Taylor What are called Q and As or artist talks often occur during seasons in Australia but these are not as central to performances nor create the ongoing active collective investments you've described.

Samer Al-Saber The theatre allows for immediate participation in a way that other art forms may not. We can characterise the Palestinian experience as an environment governed by power, the lack of power at the level of superstructure. At the same time, the desire for agency, personal agency and collective agency is very strong. When we talk about "the Palestine question", often the discussion is about self-determination and the fact that the superstructure or the system, is one of institutionalised oppression, discrimination and racism. So the desire to participate, to be an agent in the discussion, the desire to assert one's opinion becomes one of the few ways one can assert one's very existence and, in a way, sustain, demand and realise it.

Yana Taylor Sometimes the word "issues" seems to describe pressing and urgent matters that are problems for 'other people' not problems for us, whoever that 'us' may be. That's why I ask, what impact does the nature of 'who' it is who frames the focus of a performance have? Also in Australia, there is a broad resistance to the notion of didacticism in performance when it is not mobilising within a specific campaign. Sometimes I think it's clumsy and unimaginative form, not reflexive of its role that spectators are repelled by! I interpreted Jodi Dean's comments on theatre with politicised intent in her particular cultural milieu as a commodification where audiences and artists have experiences that substitute for and soak up energy from the left; that in a sense, become an ineffective surrogate for wider political action by directing energies into a kind of delusion of private individual consumption (Dean 2012: 13–14).

Samer Al-Saber In Palestine, there are always two different agendas at work. The majority of the works of the theatrical front in 70s and 80s was self-funded. It was funded by ticket sales, volunteers, volunteer advertising, word-of-mouth advertising, and the audience's intense desire to attend the theatre. Post-Oslo with the advent of international monies that funders send in order to manufacture peace, manufacture coexistence, there are two separate agendas; the agenda of the funder and the agenda of the theatre maker. The Palestinian theatre maker wants to make a theatre that is close to the street, a theatre that hears what's going on everyday and is able to reflect, critique, synthesise, struggle with this on stage. Whereas the funder has "issues" and these issues are the 'issue of women', the 'issue of early marriage', the 'issue of AIDS', the 'issue of male misogyny', the 'issue of women at work', the 'issue of sexual education and sexual liberation', the 'issue of gender equality', the 'issue of coexistence with Israel', the 'issue of peaceful resistance', the 'issue of children's right to play', the 'issue of nutrition', the 'issue of education' and so you keep getting issue upon issue upon issue that do matter—they *do* matter to everybody for various personal reasons. However the theatrical NGO has to apply for funding using the forms created by western funders (European and North American primarily). To fill out those forms, they have to use a language that appeals to the funding agency and their committee addressing issues that matter to the NGOs, but that also are normally funded by these funding agencies. You end up with a proposal to do plays that fit with a western agenda, that we must admit is based on a history of orientalism, colonisation and misrepresentation. You get the money and go to do the production. Then you face a series of challenges. Can you do the production as the Americans wish to have it done for a Palestinian audience? Can you take the American script like it was done at the Province Town Players, Broadway, off Broadway, by Steppenwolf, wherever? Can you put that production in front of the Palestinians and tell them to learn from it? What is the value of watching *Death of a*

Salesman or *All My Sons* to a Palestinian audience today? You can appreciate it for what it is, but when you Palestinise it, do it in the local dialect and have Palestinians play 'as if', then you're essentially saying the play is presenting a Palestinian issue. Or, you are exporting an ideology, and sometimes an old ideology, like *Death of a Salesman* emerged after the Depression. Why would it matter to Palestinians? Why is 'Palestinising' it important? Is it to humanise Americans? Is it to present the capitalist system as a viable economy, open market, free market, etc.? So the Palestinian theatre maker has to get the funding in order to pay the artists, keep the theatre running but also find a way to communicate the ideas in a way that is viable and within the parameters of the values of Palestinian society, which has its own religious, political, social traditions, family life, etc. So those two agendas are always at work.

Yana Taylor I can't see the examples that you've raised here of restaging *All My Sons* or *Death of a Salesman*, historically canonical pieces from North America, to be the source of a theatre performing any kind of resistance. If this is the condition that people are finding themselves in making theatre in Palestine, that strikes me as a bit of a dead end.

Samer Al-Saber It is! But the purpose of the funder is not necessarily to subvert the occupation, but to disarm the Palestinians ...

Yana Taylor Why would they want to do that if they are interested playing a productive role in the life of people in the Occupied Territories?

Samer Al-Saber Well that's the heart of the matter here. The coloniser mentality assumes that 'our' theatre, 'our' society, 'our' cultural production, 'our' ideology is far superior to that of the colonised. "If they could just be like us!" "If they could just truly understand Shakespeare!" "If they could just understand Martin Luther King"—I'm referring to a recent production—"If they could just understand it, then they would not be in conflict with our friends the Israelis."

Yana Taylor Are the companies that you described as constituting the contemporary theatrical front, Freedom Theatre, Alrowwad, Al-Kasaba, Ashtar Theatre and Yes Theatre caught in this dilemma in relationships with NGOs?

Samer Al-Saber Most of the funders and artists have successfully managed to find a fine balance. The funding hasn't really stopped and the productions/adaptations are not necessarily brainwashing or designed to render mild or to subdue.

Yana Taylor From what you said it strikes me that Palestinian audiences wouldn't want or support this.

Samer Al-Saber The Palestinian audience is very smart. That's what's amazing. Most Palestinian audience members will look in the program to see who the funder is. If a funder isn't listed they will ask you "Who funded this?" They understand that the source of the money presents a particular lens through which a production is done. They *know* that where the money comes from affects the final product on stage and most Palestinian artists will tell you that, yes, it does affect ... there are very few conditions, if any ... that prevent them from doing what they want, but ultimately the source of the money has some influence. I admire the Palestinian audience because they are always doing the compensatory work to adjust for funding bias. The Palestinian artists brilliantly manage to satisfy the funders without subverting their own missions and ideals as well. They have created a system that works somehow. Most participants see and acknowledge the elephant in the room. It's brilliant.

Yana Taylor When a theatre then grounds their performances in real world events, on testimonies and documents and they are advertised that way, they might be signaling very explicitly that they are not being complicit in this double talk you've described?

Samer Al-Saber Ashtar Theatre's *The Gaza Monologues* is a great example for this. This production came out of the war on Gaza in 2009 where the raids went on for about a month, hitting almost indiscriminately—children died, thousands were injured, schools were hit, a mosque was hit. Ashtar Theatre began by asking kids in Gaza to write monologues of their own experience of the air raids. Their stories humanised the Palestinians. Ashtar took those monologues and had them performed. I saw the original production in Ramallah and was truly impressed that these monologues were written and performed by youth. The show then had international productions. In a truly amazing outcome, Iman Aoun, the artistic director of Ashtar Theatre, followed with productions in various countries performed by local young people from youth theatres representing the original writers. The monologues were performed worldwide. Then she drew a representative performer from each country and, in their own language, the young people presented a multi-lingual staging of *The Gaza Monologues* before the UN in New York. Ashtar Theatre has been funded by multiple agencies. They do projects in many places internationally, have a vibrant theatre in Palestine and have even presented Shakespeare at The Globe in London. In my opinion, *The Gaza Monologues* would be representative of truly Palestinian theatre, youth theatre from the grassroots. Unfiltered.

Yana Taylor Uncensored?

Samer Al-Saber Uncensored. Unfiltered. It was never censored, because it's difficult to censor that play. Young people wrote it, teenagers. It was their experience. You read the play and a kid is talking and says "My Dad kept on smoking cigarettes. He looked around and found all the windows broken except one so, since everything is broken, he takes the good window and smashes it." This experience of this youth, of the war is difficult to censor. Especially when they make it available online!

Yana Taylor Your way of describing *Gaza Monologues* in context of the theatre field gives a sense of how a verbatim or documentary theatre can resonate with what's going on beyond the performance in a vital way. I imagine audience responses in Ramallah compared to those in the US—even in front of the UN—may have been quite different! It may have cut through in some way, that a fictional play might not.

Samer Al-Saber Absolutely. Interestingly, both Edward Muallem and Iman Aoun who are the directors, founders, producers, heads of Ashtar, were members of the earlier Al-Hakawati Theatre. So they are a force for continuity and development. It doesn't surprise me that the Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed in the Middle East is in Palestine. Further it doesn't surprise me that former members of Al-Hakawati were the people who started it, continued successfully to maintain it and have a worldwide reputation for being a premiere Theatre of the Oppressed.

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Yana Taylor In March 2014 a documentary was screened on national free-to-air-broadcast TV by a high profile current affairs program created by Australian investigative journalists that detailed the treatment of children arrested by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) in the West Bank. It laid out how children get used by the IDF to develop intelligence networks, gain information about communities, at the same time that these children are treated harshly and traumatised by their

experiences in detention. As these stories reach out more and more via media, the perception of people outside the Occupied Territories of what's going on in this region is shifting and changing.

Samer Al-Saber There has been a strong move throughout the world to permit the Palestinian story to be told—from a Palestinian perspective—without the usual accompanying negation of that narrative through the telling of an “equal” Israeli narrative. It can be understood in terms of what Edward Said called the “permission to narrate.” The attempt at journalistic balance, so-called balance, has manifested throughout the history of the Israeli/Palestine conflict. When an Israeli story is told, it's usually a story of victory and alignment with the “western way of life.” If the Palestinian story were to be told it always was balanced with an Israeli one thus negating it. But never was the Palestinian story told on its own. In the last few years, we are seeing a huge transformation, which I attribute to: one, a brutal siege and the air raids on Gaza since 2009; and two, the ongoing BDS movement, Boycott, Divestment and Sanction. These two developments together are having a significant influence.

I'd like to say something here about framing of children in this broadcast as an “issue”, as a priority. There is this distinction drawn between the abuse of adults and abuse of children in western contexts, even in theatre, that I find truly disheartening—because the abused adult was once an abused child. This distinction in how the IDF treats children—and its been coming up a lot on international news lately—is certainly bizarre. We're talking about three generations of Palestinians. You've got all this money and NGOs focused on children, education and health in the hope that we can fix and protect the children today—subtext—may they be good adults who will make peace with Israel. But the reality is that while adults probably experience the benefits of some NGOs as well, they are still abused and still won't be subservient to this illusion of peace. And these children who are traumatised and now need to be healed, that prompt the outrage, have parents who *should* have been the cause of the outrage 20 years ago, who have grandparents who *should* have been the cause of the outrage 40 years ago. In the course of saying “Let's save the children today”, there is a conscious act of erasure of human rights as a whole, as a concept ... an erasure of the fact that the abuse is not only of the children, but of adults, of the elderly, of males, females, everybody and an erasure of other injustices. I'm glad that we are seeing the stories about the IDF abusing Palestinian children coming out, but at the same time, I don't believe that it will do anything substantial.

Yana Taylor Would you see this as an adaptation of Said's ‘permission to narrate’ you mentioned?

Samer Al-Saber Absolutely. Narrate the whole story. Let it stand on its own. If you give me a three-minute clip of a child being abused and then you tell me that rockets from Northern Gaza are heading to Sderot, in Israel, very close to Gaza, and an Israeli child died last year, you're still attempting to balance the narrative. Even if you don't do the latter, you are still not telling the whole story in a two-minute clip or half hour documentary because the story continues to be that much bigger and that much more traumatic.

Yana Taylor In your description of the impact of framing the harsh treatment of children as a priority that demands attention, as an issue, you can see the disadvantage of framing things as ‘issues’ per se. A focus on the details of the treatment of children feeds into viewer's empathy with the vulnerability of young people simultaneously stealing oxygen in public discourse from recognising the vulnerability of the whole population. However, it is ambiguous because in their seeking to understand, the stories might not end here for listeners or viewers. These stories might

beg the question, if this is happening to children then adults have also been affected because the adults around them are not able to protect kids from the power of the occupation force.

Samer Al-Saber We can see a shift in media representation. The popular image of the Palestinian child in 1988 during the Intifada was the throwing of a rock at a tank. Everybody who thought of Palestinians, and the Intifada, had that image of the child with the slingshot—that moment of throwing the stone. The Intifada was a true uprising from the grassroots against a direct occupying power. Since Oslo there has been more urbanisation, more Palestinians going into the cities, a Palestinian authority that has control over, mostly, the six major cities, Nablus, Ramallah, Jenin, Hebron, Jericho, and Bethlehem. That's where the majority of the population on the West bank lives. It really happened after Oslo, that Palestinians, in their day-to-day function, and I speak of 'function' as opposed to living here, are dealing with a Palestinian "authority". So, functionally, they have become what Foucault would call "the docile body", a controlled body that is neutralised, disarmed and distant. He even talks about it in terms of mechanisation. In a neoliberal economy, which, in the cities, Palestine is becoming, people have loans, try to pay off their house and their car, struggle for their next pay cheque so they can be in the economic machine. The building of an idyllic environment in the city of Rawabi is an example of this. Essentially, it is like a settlement except Palestinians have built it.

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Samer Al-Saber Settler violence is a new kind of violence that's emerged. But it's not Gaza! ... I certainly know that this is not the most violent moment in the history of Palestine. What is different about this historical moment is that Palestinians have more of a voice and are much more difficult to ignore.

Yana Taylor When you say, "have more of a voice", do you mean inside the day-to-day and internal affairs of the Occupied Territories, or do you mean in the international arena?

Samer Al-Saber The international arena. Now, we have a Palestinian academia. We have a Palestinian journalism. We have institutions that have been running for along time. Electronically there's *The Electronic Intifada* website, for example, the *Palestine Chronicle*, and important traditional platforms, like Al Jazeera, are vehement about presenting the Palestinian point of view. Also the longstanding London-based, Arabic newspaper, *Al-Quds Al Arabi*, that has a lot of power and has more of a pan-Arab narrative. Thus the Palestinian narrative has become more difficult to ignore because Arabs and Palestinians who are in a position of "the elite" are able to communicate on very prominent platforms. Not yet in a similar position as, for example, the Israeli lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, but now Palestinians cannot be ignored.³

Yana Taylor And all of this must be having an impact on the role that theatre plays?

Samer Al-Saber Definitely. Starting with Al-Hakawati in the late 70's and the touring of Palestinian theatre companies in the mid to late 80s, theatre was a pioneering medium when it came to speaking the Palestinian message from the homeland, to the Palestinians abroad and to the West. Post-Oslo, funding also allowed companies to tour abroad. Alrowwad Theatre took *We are the Children of the Camp*, that told the story of children in refugee camps to the US. Al-Kasaba toured *Stories from Under Occupation* to Europe, North America, Japan, different places in the Arab world and throughout Palestine itself. This play was a media machine. It went everywhere! And made Al-Kasaba theatre a truly national institution. Ashtar Theatre played *Richard II* at The

Globe. For Palestinians to play Shakespeare in the homeland of Shakespeare, in a Palestinian interpretation is brilliant! Theatre has opened many doors for Palestinians.

Yana Taylor Do you think it will remain a pioneering medium?

Samer Al-Saber I don't know. I think independent filmmaking has taken over much of the kind of role theatre played in the early 80s, 90s and even in the millennium, for many reasons. To tour a theatre play that has professional actors you are looking at tens of thousands of dollars, to just travel to one country and back. The festival has to pay tens of thousands of dollars just to do a one night or few night engagement. Whereas independent filmmaking, which is proliferating throughout the West Bank, is a new medium where you have lower costs, an individual's labour can produce a film send it off to festivals, to Al Jazeera's documentary channel or have it play on Palestinian television, which only gradually emerged post-Oslo, or on one of several existing stations. Now there is a medium of transmission and the guarantee that the product will represent the artist—the originating artist—exactly as they sealed it in the can. Independent film has grown thanks to many institutions that are making it their goal, such as *Shashat*, which means “screens”, and this includes the theatres as well. Alrowwad has what Dr. Abusrour [founder and director of Alrowwad] calls *Images for Life* program that is all about photography. Cameras are available for anyone in the camp interested in independent filmmaking. There are constant workshops and recently, there was a citizens' journalism program held at Alrowwad. The Freedom Theatre in Jenin is making similar efforts with filmmaking and editing.

Yana Taylor Those conditions resemble in some ways the conditions that underpinned the flourishing of theatre that you talked about earlier ...

Samer Al-Saber Absolutely. The new emergent film community in Palestine, abroad and amongst Palestinians in the diaspora truly resembles the energy of the youth theatre and emergent professional theatre of the 70s and 80s and the heyday of internationalism in the Palestinian theatre of the 90s. I think that role is slowly being taken over by the new film craft.

Yana Taylor But interestingly your description of how they've emerged points to growth within centres committed to theatre development.

Samer Al-Saber Because theatre-makers are also transitioning into film and television, everybody is seeing that this medium serves Palestine in different but productive ways. So theatre actors are starting to do television serials and acting more on film. Young people are very interested in filmmaking, so more and more workshops are taking place to train them. Whenever the desire and the energy to do something exists in Palestine, it is discovered very quickly. There is a constant effort to neutralise Palestine and Palestinians through activities of “peaceful resistance,” but the reality is, it is not neutralising them. On the contrary, culture and cultural production are, in fact, the counter-culture to a neoliberal economy, which is designed to create docile bodies. So culture is the resistant front to a heavily controlled time in the modern history of Palestine.

Yana Taylor Do you think now we've come to this point in history where screen media is playing such an important role, we should no longer expect theatre to play such an actively resistant role?

Samer Al-Saber Theatre's role constantly changes. Historically, theatre was big media. When you go back to the Greeks to the amphitheatres of 10 to 30,000, for them it was big media. For Elizabethans, theatre was heavily censored because it was big media. Something said on the stage could pose a risk to the kingdom. Modern theatre has had an alternative role, whether it's commercial, avant-garde, or resistant and so on. When it comes to Palestine, the role of the

theatre *is* changing—the question is, what will it be? We have seen theatres expand into cultural centres. That the theatre is an amalgam of the different art forms has been the way to develop new capacities and attract new people towards performance, towards the theatre building via workshops, storytelling and various forms of performance. A theatre building very quickly becomes multi-purpose. So Alrowwad theatre becomes a cultural centre, which has photography and filmmaking but sustains, of course, theatrical storytelling, music, dance and soccer tournaments for women. It becomes a community and a cultural centre that is multi-pronged. Same with Ashtar Theatre, which became a training centre for youth, a centre for Theatre of the Oppressed and political participation, although it remains a traditional theatre that does traditional plays and is a ‘roadhouse’ for visiting companies. Al-Kasaba Theatre started in Jerusalem became Al-Kasaba Theatre and Cinematheque, became a movie theatre that has two big screens that hosted an international film festival as well as an international theatre festival. Also Al-Kasaba Theatre Academy was the first to provide a BA in performative art in Palestine. The Freedom Theatre has its own school in partnership with the American University in Jenin that is a centre for the training of filmmaking, photography, theatre and dance. So the theatres become the nerve centre for all the arts partly because the theatre itself is a place. Dance is *not* place, film is *not* a place—a cinema is a place but a film is not a place. A painting is not a place, a gallery is, but the theatre, once you make a theatre with a stage, a theatre building, you have the actual stage, the theatre itself, the place, and the software that operates it, the artists and the scripts that come along with that and so on. It is transforming and it is a nerve centre of culture in Palestine.

Yana Taylor I hear in these accounts a continual commitment to sustaining a place, that having an actual and material building like a theatre is an act of resistance itself, important where the destruction of buildings and seizing of territory is at stake.

Notes

1. The period is bookended by firstly, the 6-day War (1967) in which Israel seized territory that included Gaza, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Golan Heights and secondly the 1st Oslo agreement (1993) in which the UN Resolutions 2242 and 338 articulated the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and also established the Palestinian Authority with administrative responsibilities within the Occupied Territories.

2. *Hakawati* means literally the performer who tells stories, the storyteller. The term is flexible, involves a very open and direct engagement with audiences. It is a traditional form of arab performance that has also been popular in the wider arab world. Alongside this storytelling theatre, shadow and puppet theatre have been major traditional forms and are intimate small-scale kinds of performance – for example, the storyteller for children, the neighbourhood Hakawati, the Hakawati with the ‘box of wonder’. Poetry, traditionally spoken in the marketplace is another powerful traditional form of performance influencing current performance forms in Palestine. This performing poetry tradition can be compared to the epic performance poetry of the Greek classics. Historically, when it comes to theatre in the Arab world there has been no real continuity in terms of a theatre ‘industry’. This is only about 150 years old. [from earlier moment in the conversation]

3. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee is a lobby group formed in 1951 that advocates for pro-Israel policies to the American Congress.

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