

Gathering for Israeli/Palestinian Peace Group of Northeastern Connecticut

The Freedom Theatre Under Assault; Building a Cultural Institution

Under Military Occupation (8/2/2012)

by Gary M. English and Laura L. Wilson

Section I

The Freedom Theatre Background and Introduction:

In 2005, Juliano Mer Khamis, who was at the time a famous Israeli/Palestinian actor in Israel, was asked to help create The Freedom Theatre in the Jenin Refugee Camp by Jonatan Stanczak, a Swedish/Israeli activist, and Zakaria Zubeidi, former commander of the Al-Aqsa Brigade in Jenin during the Second Intifada. Together they built The Freedom Theatre out of the bull-dozed ruins of the community arts center known as The Stone Theatre, which his mother, Arna Mer Khamis had started in the Jenin Refugee Camp in the early 1990's. This story is well documented in Mer Khamis' film, *Arna's Children*, where tragically, we witness 10 to 12 year old children who performed in youth plays grow up to be freedom fighters and terrorists killed during the second intifada and in particular during the notorious "Battle of Jenin" in 2002.

Because of the notoriety of its director, Juliano Mer Khamis, and his mother, Arna Mer Khamis, this theater has a profound cultural and political history. The Stone Theatre and then The Freedom Theatre were both built initially as a social organization for the children of the refugee camp; but The Freedom Theatre, while maintaining and building important trauma treatment programs, aspires to a much bolder agenda: to form an active political non-violent resistance to the occupation of Palestine through the arts, film and most of all through theatre.

Many examples abound in which human rights issues are illustrated through the dramatic content of a play. In academic circles, we often talk about "Representations" of Human Rights

in the arts, including drama, literature and images from popular culture such as poster art, film and other forms of media. However, there is a deeper connection between the nature of drama as a discipline and its potential as a cultural and political force that interrogates the nature of various questions in human rights including the search for personal dignity, the illusion of justice, the exploration of the psyche of perpetrators of human rights abuses and the atrocities that often follow in the wake of this abuse and finally and perhaps most importantly, the ability to create empathy across ethnic and social divisions. Much has been written about how Theater can be used as a political and cultural force. Both Bertolt Brecht and Malcolm X believed that politics and culture were inseparable indeed in the same way that politics and economics are inseparable. Particularly in the US, drama that attempts to address political or human rights issues suffers from the overuse of melodramatic structural conventions that deliberately simplify the roles played by the active participants into neat categories of victims, perpetrators and heroes.

The recent history of theater in Palestine is rich, varied and indigenous to the poetic tradition of storytelling within Arab cultures as a whole. Many important theatre institutions have grown within the West Bank and Gaza and have developed various approaches to affect political resistance and artistic expression. In an area where the most basic and personal decisions are regularly viewed as having profound political consequences, the theater artists in the West Bank struggle with how to present material that aims to address political questions within specific communities and across the landscape of a military occupation.

Three principle aims of Palestinian theatre are to create a common ground of human understanding throughout the region, to affirm a core cultural identity within the Palestinian community and to challenge certain negative international perceptions of Palestinian identity and experience. In addition, much of the drama produced in the region is a form of both social

service and political resistance – a cultural intifada it has been called – and takes many different forms. Some of these forms include, so-called “Documentary Drama” that is drawn from actual individual experiences and converted to collections of staged monologues. Another method is to adapt well known plays or other literary works to the stage (such as *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell) that, through their adaptation, ask the audience to transfer their empathy from the generally understood premise of the play to the newly defined circumstances of the adaptation.

Of particular interest are those artists whose work aims to address the political question of the occupation of the West Bank through original plays that focus on the every day human experience of Palestinians. Through varied storytelling structures, they argue, audiences bear witness to Palestinians who, like everyone else, love their children, search for security in their lives, confront familial tragedy and grasp for meaning in the midst of ongoing political instability.

The Freedom Theatre is a hybrid organization functioning as part arts institution and part social services group that builds community capacity within a refugee camp.

The resident artists of The Freedom Theatre have struggled with their relationship with the local camp population in Jenin. This struggle has flared over content of the theatre’s programming (the relationship of the theatre to the values of the refugee camp) and the progressive nature of the film and media program that has focused on issues of women’s rights in the Palestinian community. Juliano Mer Khamis led an organization for six years that was focused on educating a new generation of Palestinian artists who view themselves as freedom fighters in their own right, producing plays and films as political resistance directed against the Israeli occupation and additional abuses enacted by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank (and in turn, carving out their own social identity). It is interesting to note that this group of artists also views aspects of

the traditional conservatism of the Palestinian Refugee Camp culture can be an impediment to the growth of an intellectual, creative and political identity that could become the essence of a new resistance, a third intifada or so-called Cultural Intifada.

Udi Aloni, an internationally recognized Israeli/American Film Maker, has worked with young Palestinians at The Freedom Theatre on projects that investigate and expose flaws in traditional Palestinian society including a film about “honor killings” where brothers have murdered their own sisters because of perceived dishonorable sexual behavior. The young filmmaker directing this project spoke to me about his life growing up in the Jenin Refugee Camp. He also shared that he was a former member of Hamas but has abandoned Islamic fundamentalism. He said, “I learned so much from the Second Intifada. I learned that during the battles, when life is so fragile and so cheap, that you discover it’s true worth. ...It is easier to die than it is to live.” During our interview he related the details of his life, first growing up in the arts center in the camp where his mother worked with Arna Mer Khamis, and then his subsequent evolution into Hamas as a personal return to Islam. “My father was sent to prison for being a communist and member of the PLO when I was 6, and I was 16 when he came home.” He said, “I had no idea who he was, and since he was a communist and secular, I began to rebel against his values. Our relationship broke down completely.” I asked him if he felt as though he didn’t have a father at exactly the moment he needed one, and he said, “Yes.” I asked, “Did you seek a substitute father?” And again he said, “Yes, and that was Islam.” He was going to meetings as a member of Hamas, and one day he found himself beating his own sister for not wearing the Hijab and for dating a boy he knew. He returned to The Freedom Theatre because “[he] knew that was his true home.” He now considers his camera a substitute for a gun, but as we will discuss later, it is not simply the Israeli agents of the occupation to whom the camera is

pointed. As Juliano Mer Khamis had said, “The first, most important enemy is the enemy within,” This was a common point of attack that Juliano would often take that would force young people to examine their own closed mind first and to some extent the closed mind of the society they live within.

The Freedom Theatre’s first major international success was a staged adaptation of *Animal Farm* in 2009, the first of three productions staged since then by the conservatory theater and directed by former Artistic Director and current Master Teachers, Nabeel al-Rae and Micaela Miranda. Rather than use the obvious and ideologically based premise of staging *Animal Farm* as an indictment of the Israeli Occupation, the mainspring of the production was the more brutal and painful truth that it is the Palestinian Authority that is, as Al Rae says, “the hands of the Israel occupation.” The fundamental theme of the production was collaboration – the collaboration of the PA in the implementation of the brutality of the occupation. As Juliano Mer Khamis said, “The most present and immediate enemy is not Israel or Israeli troops. It is the unspoken restrictions Palestinian Society imposes on those who want to challenge the territories’ political leadership.” At the end of *Animal Farm*, Napoleon (the leader of the group of Pigs that foments the original revolution against the Farmer) negotiates with the Farmer (as in the novel), as they realize they need him and want to do business with him. But at the end of the play they now speak in Hebrew. The implication to a Jenin audience is clear: the leadership of the Palestinian Authority is functionally part of the Israeli occupation. While this was one of the first conservatory productions of The Freedom Theatre, it raised such a stir that part of a tour throughout the West Bank was cancelled and the director, Nabeel Al Rae, was questioned by Palestinian Authority intelligence off and on for two weeks.

In January, 2010 Juliano Mer Khamis adapted and directed a production of *Alice*, based on *Alice In Wonderland*. What follows is a selection from comments about the production published online by Samer Al Saber, a doctoral student working on a dissertation in West Bank theatre:

The power of the production lies at the intersection of the personal and the political. This danger land allowed the actors to re-imagine themselves into fantastical avatars from animals to otherworldly creatures. They also enacted a much needed revolution.

Whether reality and dreamland can converge offstage remains to be seen; however, there is no doubt that The Freedom Theatre and its *Alice* are both undeniably here. (2011)

These recent stage adaptations of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*, developed by Mer Khamis and Al-Raei, addressed the nature of the political necessity invoked by the Israeli government and military, the role of the Palestinian Authority within the occupation and specific repressive aspects of Palestinian society, particularly in the refugee camp itself, all of which in different ways conspire to perpetuate the violence of the occupation and to severely limit individual expression and liberty.

Whether or not a non-violent resistance based on artistic and cultural activity has any chance of success may depend on which competing elements within both the Israeli and Palestinian experience (and from all sides of the conflict) become the dominant voices. This deeper understanding of the conflict can be best revealed through the language and syntax of art and culture and not necessarily traditional political, polarizing discourse. Contemporary politics has become more divisive than ever, and this is as true in Israel as the United States where, in both cases, domestic political survival may be the greatest impediment to civil public discourse about progress in the Middle East.

No place is this more true than in the United States where Americans tend to insist on moral clarity that frames conflict within cleanly defined packages. In these packaged versions of political conflict there is little or no room for complex personalities, morally ambiguous circumstances or soiled leaders who, though they make mistakes, might gradually make amends despite their most immediate enemies: the extreme positions from within their own local political factions.

Many journalists, most notably Ethan Bronner of the *New York Times* and Hugh Naylor of the Abu Dhabi English Language paper, *The National*, are looking for an expanded vocabulary beyond mainstream political rhetoric and have turned to theatrical idioms and language as a way of looking at what has long appeared to be an intractable conflict. The poetic conventions of Drama and art in general contain the space for contradiction and paradox that so often lay at the heart of human conflict rather than the traditional language of political conflict that seems to magnetize the participants quickly into extreme positions. The humanization of each individual is more possible because the intention of the work is to reveal the essence of human experience as suffering, and this knowledge humanizes us all and without judgment.

Ethan Bronner suggested in his analysis in the *New York Times* that “trying to tell the story so that both sides can hear it in the same way feels...like a Greek tragedy in which [he] play[s] the despised chorus...because the fervent inner voice of each side is so loud that it drowns everything else out” (2009). In this context every criticism of Israel is an attack on the legitimacy of Israel; every attempt to hold the IDF accountable is anti-Semitic. But equally, amongst the Palestinians, any working cooperation with Israeli institutions equates with collaboration with the oppressor and cooperation with an illegal occupation.

Udi Aloni, until recently, has been excoriated in the Israeli Press as a “traitor” since his sympathies have been squarely centered on Palestinian rights. These artists, including Mer Khamis and Aloni are considered traitors by the extreme elements of their respective societies. Only recently are some of the ideas shared by these artists, including the “bi-national non-violent resistance” and the “multi-national” movement toward a single state solution, beginning to get a hearing within the mainstream Israeli Press.

It is certainly ironic that this third intifada, this cultural revolution seems to be coalescing in Jenin. Jenin is the site of the so-called Battle of Jenin, in 2002, where over 100 Palestinians and Israeli soldiers died prompting the documentary *Jenin, Jenin* by Mohammed Bakri – a condemnation of Israeli behavior during the siege – that is the only film ever to be successfully banned in Israel (UN General Assembly, 2002, par. 56). This siege known as Operation Defensive Shield was devised by the Israeli Defense Forces as a military operation to stop the movement of suicide bombers from Jenin into Israel, claiming that over 25 suicide attacks had been planned from the camp between 2000-2002 (UN General Assembly, 2002, par. 45). Some of the first female suicide bombers, including Hanadi Jaradot, came from Jenin Camp. It seems even more fitting that this new ascension of Palestinian cultural resistance should grow out of one of the most violent and conflicted periods in the recent history of the Palestinian conflict, the Second Intifada.

As the voice of cultural resistance continues to unfold, one of the most compelling problems associated with it is the conflict between violence and non-violence, between the national and the international, between the urban and rural traditional and the progressive and between the Palestinian refugee culture and the non-refugee Palestinian culture.

Section II

The Political Situation in Jenin: Operating a Theatre under Military Occupation:

On April 4, 2011 Juliano Mer Khamis was assassinated in the Jenin Refugee Camp as he was leaving The Freedom Theatre. As mentioned earlier, in addition to operating important social programs for the children of the refugee camp, The Freedom Theatre aspires to a much bolder artistic and political agenda: to form an active resistance to the occupation of Palestine through the arts. After a year and a half, there has essentially been no progress in the investigation of Juliano Mer Khamis' murder and no one has claimed responsibility. Immediately after the shooting IDF representatives demanded all of the physical evidence associated with the crime (including the car, his laptop and cell phone), and only recently have they returned the car. Despite the fact that Jenin is in Zone A and under direct governance of the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli Intelligence took control of the investigation after three months. In the aftermath of the murder – and in a completely unexpected and unprecedented way – the IDF has literally attacked the theatre itself and arrested or interrogated nearly every Palestinian member of The Freedom Theatre faculty and staff. On the one hand the Israeli Military and Intelligence communities seem to want to demonstrate they are actively investigating a crime that took place over a year ago, and on the other they are continuing to make arrests of theater staff (claiming some connection with the murder) who thought of Juliano as a father – an iconic figure who was their mentor, artistic and political leader, and institutional figurehead. Having failed to connect the murder to anyone associated with the Theater and with no progress in the investigation, it seems at the very least surprising that the IDF continues to harass the theatre unless there are other political motivations connected to the work produced by the theatre.

Although one might conclude Israeli law enforcement maintains an interest in the case due to Mer Khamis' status as an Israeli citizen, he was well known as aggressively opposed to a two state solution, was generally dedicated to a universalist view of a bi-national state, and was dedicated to Palestinian resistance to the occupation.

After three years of international success Mer Khamis was contributing to a new type of resistance that had three distinct if interrelated targets: one, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; two, the complicity of the Palestinian Authority as collaborator with Israel in eliminating effective political dissent in The West Bank; and three, the continuation of repressive practices within Palestinian culture and particularly within the refugee camp culture itself that undermine political agency. As an alternative to the traditional views of the occupation and the resistance to that occupation, Mer Khamis and Al Raei have been using the power of drama and the deliberate deconstruction of dramatic and literary form and character to focus on the myths associated with those traditional views. The most insidious and perhaps transparent myth within the widely held views of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict may be that the power structures on either side are in any way interested in a two state solution. It may be true that a two state solution will be eventually imposed on the region, but the facts of history suggest that the fundamental view by both sides is that the region of Palestine or Israel from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, from Lebanon and Syria to Egypt is one country. One is Palestinian. One is Jewish. Each is made up of several religious and cultural traditions. This paradox expressed violently over the past five decades is expressed through art within the bi-national peace movement: one country, two nationalities. It is this vision, in part, underpinned by the philosopher Edward Said, that informs the political art of The Freedom Theatre.

It may be the principle cause of Juliano Mer Khamis' assassination was the fact that this vision was beginning to gain traction – a threat to the extreme doctrines of all sides of the conflict.

“Our first enemy is ourselves,” he used to say, “and the violence we do to women, to gays and lesbians, must be corrected before we can effectively resist the occupation. Before we can resist the given circumstances, the first enemy we must conquer is ourselves.” It is possible Juliano Mer Khamis might have been murdered by a fellow Palestinian, who might have been brutalized himself within the confines of a refugee camp and too enraged by his own experience to understand his own motives. Whether or not the shooter was Palestinian or not, we may never know whether he was manipulated by Israeli or Palestinian civil, military or paramilitary authorities threatened by the growth of the bi-national movement.

A chronology since his murder includes several events listed below as provided by The Freedom Theatre (and also detailed on their website). They begin on July 27, 2011 with Israeli soldiers attacking the theatre at 3:30AM and most recently have culminated with the arrests of Co-Founder Zakaria Zubeidi and current Artistic Director Nabil Al Raei.

July 27, 2011 – Masked and heavily-armed Israeli soldiers attacked the theatre at 3:30AM, hurling rocks at the building and knocking out many of the windows. They arrested Adnan Nagnaghiye, the facilities manager, and Bilaal Saadi, the Board chair, on the spot. Bilaal's home was also damaged. (Bilaal and Adnan were released from detention on August 23, 2011.)

August 5, 2011 – Rami Hwayel, a 20-year old acting student in The Freedom Theatre's Acting School, was blindfolded and arrested at a checkpoint. (Rami was released in September, 2011.)

No charges were presented. Although he was found during the month long interrogation to have illegally entered Israel at a previous time, it is a commonly held view that if the IDF holds a Palestinian for a month or more, they will find some detail, often meaningless, that they can then use to defend the initial arrest – nearly always without legitimate cause.

August 28, 2011 – The Israeli army entered the home of Mohammed Nagnaghiye (Eisht), the security guard at The Freedom Theatre. They beat him and turned all three floors of the house that his family and relatives live in up-side-down before taking him away in handcuffs. On their way out of the refugee camp they fired rounds of live ammunition to disperse crowds of youth that had gathered and started to throw stones at the armed vehicles. Eisht was released a few days after the abduction.

December 23, 2011 –The Israeli army invaded Jenin refugee camp for the second night in a row. They arrested three members of The Freedom Theatre at midnight: Adnan Nagnaghiye, Bilal Saadi and the young actor Faisal Abu Alheija. All three were later released in the morning about 8 hours later.

December 29, 2011 – Zakaria Zubeidi, the co-founder of The Freedom Theatre, was informed by the Palestinian Authority that his amnesty was revoked by the Israeli authorities. The amnesty agreement granted in 2007 by the Israeli Prime Minister’s office was in return for Zakaria’s ending of armed resistance. The amnesty agreement allowed him to remain safe inside the PA district of Jenin where the Israeli military would not seek to arrest or assassinate him. Zakaria was taken into custody by the PA. After worldwide protests, Zakaria was released on

January 6, 2012 with limited amnesty.

May 8, 2012 – Current Artistic Director Nabil Al Raei and his wife, Acting School Co-Director Micaela Miranda (a Portuguese citizen), were ordered to come to Salem for questioning by Israeli Security Services. At that meeting Al Raei was accused of plotting the murder of Juliano Mer Khamis. In separate interrogations, Miranda was told her husband was responsible for the murder. They were not held, and were returned to rehearsal for a production of *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter.

May 13, 2012 – Zakaria Zubeidi was arrested by Palestinian Authority security forces and taken to Jericho prison. He was not allowed to see his family or speak to his lawyer for several weeks. He is suspected but not accused of “failure to report knowledge of a crime.” He has now been held for 115 days without legal charges brought against him.

June 6, 2012 – Nabil Al Raei, the Artistic Director of The Freedom Theatre, was arrested at 3:30AM and, in front of his wife and other family members, taken away by Israeli soldiers first to Jalameh prison and then to Ashkelon prison. He was held for two and a half weeks without access to lawyer or family and was held for interrogation, again without formal charges. He was eventually convicted of “helping a previously wanted person” (Zakaria Zubeidi, his neighbor and friend) for buying him cigarettes and driving him in his car once in 2010.

Human Rights Watch investigated these activities and released a report on July 27 that made the following statement:

The Palestinian Authority and Israeli military authorities should both end abuses against members of the West Bank-based Freedom Theater, Human Rights Watch said today.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) arrested the theater company's co-founder, Zakaria Zubeidi, in May 2012, held him incommunicado, and allegedly tortured him. It arrested his defense lawyer in July. Israeli authorities arrested the company's artistic director, Nabil al-Ra'ee, in June, held him incommunicado, and allegedly subjected him to physical and psychological ill-treatment that might have amounted to torture. (2012) After several hearings in which no charges were filed Al Raee was finally charged with aiding a wanted man – Zubeidi – who was not wanted, indeed, had been reaffirmed with his amnesty earlier this year. Al Raee was released on bail on July 10, and his trial concluded on July 29.

“Israel and the Palestinian Authority are trampling on the rights of Freedom Theater's staff,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “A theater should be able to offer critical and provocative work without fearing that its staff will be arrested and abused.” [...]

The PA appears to be abusing the theater's staff because of the company's criticisms of the PA's rule.

The productions of The Freedom Theatre, based in Jenin, have criticized the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and abuses by both Israel and the PA in the territory. Some staff and acting students are former members of Palestinian armed groups who renounced violence in favor of nonviolent opposition to Israeli and PA policies.” (HRW, 2012)

Against competing claims by both sides regarding the nature of Palestinian resistance, what is the best frame to look at these events? As an artist in the United States, I take for granted that my work will generally be allowed to go forward without censorship if it still faces criticism on political grounds. In the Middle East, where nearly all public acts including the arts have a political context and invite political consequences, what can we assume is the meaning behind the attacks on The Freedom Theatre? One could assume that if there were legitimate evidence to suggest that some at the Theatre were involved in Juliano's murder, then it might be safe to suggest that some progress would have been made in the year and a half since the shooting. We might also safely assume the arrests that have been made would not be justified on the most trivial grounds possible, as is the most recent case in the arrest, interrogation and trial of Nabeel Al Raei. However, deeper questions remain including the nature of free artistic expression in Israel and Palestine, in general, and how the arts are perceived as a political force. In fact neither the PA nor the Israeli Government and Military have been particularly tolerant of artistic criticism. Several Israel-based artists have complained as well regarding their own treatment when producing work that presents the human side of Palestinian life or critiques the human rights abuses resulting from the combined efforts of the Palestinian Authority and the IDF.

Amir Nizar Zuabi, a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship and Artistic Director of ShiberHur (a theatre in Haifa on the North Coast of Israel), is a well known director from the Middle East whose early work includes *Stories Under Occupation*, and *Alive From Palestine*. His most recent work includes *Comedy Of Errors* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, *Beloved*, at the Bush Theatre and *I Am Yussef And This Is My Brother*, at The Young Vic. This play relates the familial experiences of a Palestinian village (in what is now Israel) in 1948 immediately after the UN Vote for partition and focuses on the dynamics and poetry of Palestinian life. The play

takes place during the Nakba, or the “disaster,” including the massacre by “the Irgun and Stern Gang troops” in Deir Yassin that made this village “the epicentre of the catastrophe” (Pappe 90-91). In an interview in 2010 Zuabi related a series of events following the success *Alive From Palestine*. After several major positive reviews from the International press for his production at the Young Vic in London, and a major International tour, he received a phone call from his parents who live in East Jerusalem. He was told they had been visited by the Shin Bet, the Israeli Internal Security forces and that later their home had been ransacked. When returning to Israel via Rome he was detained by El Al security (The national airline of Israel) in Rome and asked, “So are you still doing theatre? ...be careful.” And “We don’t want to warn you again.”

During Al Raei’s interrogation in June, the Israeli investigators from military intelligence admitted to him that they knew he had nothing to do with Mer Khamis’ murder, but they needed a reason to arrest him so they could interrogate him about other matters and “because he ran a theatre that was critical of the Palestinian Authority and the occupation called The Freedom Theatre.”

In May, The Freedom Theatre was in rehearsal for a production of *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. This play speaks in an abstract language about the nature of familial loyalty when facing external threats and how, when given the opportunity, guests can often attempt to take over, sometimes violently, the local communities offering them some level of generosity. But the play also deals with the corrupt nature of relationships within the family and critiques the manner in which various kinds of paternalism and fundamentalism – be it colonialism or terrorism – destroy the common experience of humanity. Edward Said has suggested that the Hebrew and the Palestinians share a common experience of diaspora as refugees. And as Eyad El Sarraj, a well-known psychiatrist in Gaza, has noted, “the Middle East conflict between

Palestinians and Israelis is a deadly battle between two victims” tossed into a circle of mutual trauma and violence (Sarraj 1).

Again as Sarraj suggests, “It is known from the [psychiatric] literature that traumatic events are harmful for the development of the individual...and severe disturbances of the ‘normal’ development during childhood will result in psychopathology in adulthood” (2).

If this idea can be extrapolated from the individual to the community to the nation, from individual pathology to a national pathology, Juliano Mer Khamis had suggested we need more theatre, more art – not less. It remains to be seen if The Freedom Theatre experiment can continue to survive the various assaults over the course of the next few months and years.

Section III

Applied Theatre and Drama Therapy at The Freedom Theatre:

Applied Theatre is a term that encompasses a wide variety of dramatic structures that intend to help individuals and groups cope with a variety of social problems. Also described as “Social Drama,” these structures include among others, Psycho-Drama, Drama Therapy, Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre. As a set, these activities are often more focused on the therapeutic effects of creativity and drama in particular and less, or, in some cases not at all concerned with artistic quality or aesthetic practice. Drama Therapy is an important therapeutic tool used in the United States and world wide to help treat severe trauma amongst individuals and groups who have suffered individual and at times collective acts of abuse and emotional distress. It is of particular use in public school settings in New York City, and it is interesting to note that Drama Therapists are certified by the State of New York to work with traumatized youth and children within the New York Public School system.

Many individuals have attempted to quantify and track the level of traumatization that has taken place within the general Palestinian society and the refugee camps within Palestine, including The West Bank and Gaza. Eyad El Sarraj has spent more than 25 years treating severe trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in children and youth and has documented the scope of PTSD events as well as the percentages of the population effected by these events.

With the mean age of the population of Gaza being 60% under the age of 20, children not only actively fight, but are subjected to the same human rights violations as their parents (Sarraj 3). They are witness to the humiliation of their parents and their parents' inability to protect them, especially in occupied territories where their authority is often undermined by Israeli forces. A recent research project on 944 children in Gaza revealed a high level of PTSD (55.1%): more than half (32.7%) of the children suffered from severe levels (Sarraj 14, 16).

Violations of human rights by Israeli authorities include, but are not limited to: torture, killings, bombings, jailing, community-wide curfews, restrictions on clothing (Palestinian flag colors), denial of the freedom of speech, meeting, traveling, publishing, expression of national identity, or singing a national song (Sarraj 5-7). During the second intifada, 7000 children were injured (Sarraj 11). During the first 20 years of occupation, 400,000 Palestinians were jailed for various periods (Sarraj 6). Today, there are 350 Palestinian children still imprisoned since March, 2002 (Sarraj 11).

As a result of these abuses "the rise of Islam as a political movement of resistance has...politically radicalized increasing segments of the population" (Sarraj 3). It is important to understand that at the core of the Arabic Islamic community is the mentality that urges individuals to "avenge defeat to the bitter end, even across generations...They will only stop if

the aggressor will publically acknowledge his guilt and assume responsibility. They will [only] then enter the honorable “Solha” or peace” (Sarraj 16).

The most disturbing of all statistics regarding suicide bombing came out of a recent GCMHP (Gaza Community Mental Health Program) study, where “34% of boys aged 12-14 years reported they considered that the best thing to do in life is to die as a martyr” (Sarraj 17). Suicide bombing is the direct effect of all the transgressions of the trauma caused in this conflict. Palestinians are victims of severe psychological trauma across generations, starting in the early stages of childhood, developing across the years through subjection of human rights violations, and witnessing violence, living through the destruction or seizure of their homes or land, leading to extremist mentalities and retaliatory terrorist attacks such as suicide bombing.

One of the most important programs at The Freedom Theatre aiming to relieve the effects of PTSD and other politically and socially driven stress on communities, children and youth in the West Bank, is The Playback Theatre Co., directed by Ben Rivers. What follows is a selection of comments made by Ben Rivers in a forthcoming article about Playback Theatre in Palestine:

For a population that has sustained itself through commitment to liberatory struggle and strong familial and social networks, it could be argued that the values, methods and assumptions of Western, individualistic psychotherapy hold limited currency. Communal story telling, interactive theatre and other arts-based interventions might offer more culturally and politically relevant alternatives to the psychotherapeutic models that currently dominate the landscape of mental health service delivery in occupied Palestine [...]

Inspired by the historic Freedom Rides of the USA Civil Rights era, the Freedom Bus engages Palestinians and internationals in multi-day journeys through geographic

areas most impacted by the Israeli occupation and Israeli apartheid policies. Since its inception in December, 2011, the Freedom Bus has held Playback Theatre events in towns, villages, Bedouin encampments and refugee camps throughout the West Bank, and with Gaza via video conference. [...]

In Playback Theatre, a facilitator, known as the “conductor,” invites members of the audience to share thoughts, feelings, stories and experiences from their own life. When an individual “teller” steps forward, they are welcomed to sit at the side of the stage where the conductor then interviews them. During this interview, the conductor asks questions that help the teller to establish the basic elements of their story (i.e. time, place, characters, emotion, relationship, plot and significance). The teller is also invited to select actors from the ensemble who can play one or two central characters from their story. Once the teller has finished narrating their account, the actors enter the stage area and perform the story as a short piece of improvised theatre using words, sound, movement and dance to portray the central themes of the teller’s story. Musicians who sit to the side of the acting space accompany the enactment with improvised sound and music. At the conclusion of the enactment, the conductor checks in with the teller to see if the enactment resonated with their subjective experience of the events described. If the teller is satisfied, they are thanked and returned to the audience. A new teller is then welcomed to the stage. Alternatively, the conductor might ask the audience for thoughts and feelings that arose in response to the prior story. The actors will then “play back” these experiences using an abbreviated response known as a “short form.” [...]

Importantly, the re-visitation of traumatic material occurs within the context of accompaniment, support and active agency. The man who tells a story about torture is no

longer alone with his memories and feelings of violation. Nor is he powerless in the way that he was. He chooses to enter the stage. He volunteers to tell. He casts the actors. He separates past from present. [...] When the audience responds to one story with another, similar or related story, the recognition of shared experience can result in a heightened awareness about the broader political and historical dimensions of personal trauma. [...] Individual traumatic memory is thus transformed and integrated into a collectively summoned social narrative (Salas, 2011). [...]

It is usually taboo for Palestinian men to speak openly about [...] shame, vulnerability or fear. To do so challenges cultural notions of masculinity. During one performance however, Raed who had been imprisoned for 3 years due to his affiliation with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) shared the following testimony:

Psychological torture was the worst aspect of those 3 years in jail. [...] While I was there, they tricked me into thinking my mother and sister had been killed, that my father had been seriously injured and that our home had been demolished. [...] I remember going completely numb. I could not feel anything. This was their way of trying to break my spirit.

Two male actors, Ahmed and Faisal, performed Raed's story [and]...succeeded in crafting a satisfying response to Raed's testimony:

I was very happy with the enactment. [...] After telling my story, I also felt a sense of distance between the prison experience and myself. This was something new that I had not felt before. After the performance many people came up to me, wanting to connect. [...] It was also difficult to share my story, because when we

retell a painful experience we are reminded of it ... The prison experience influenced everything in my life. [...] I hoped that telling my story would lift some of its weight.

For Raed, he emerged with a new and empowered relationship to the traumatic experience that had previously overwhelmed him. (Rivers 3-15)

In common with adults, children share the experience of mistreatment by Israeli and local authorities and also the social stressors associated with admitting feelings of shame and fear as they grow through adolescence. As Rivers notes about another Playback Theatre experience:

One youth, Musa, came forward to tell his story. Like other children [...] Musa bore clearly the signs of trauma. His eyes were glassy, his affect was flat and he appeared somewhat “absent.” In Musa’s story, we learned how the Israeli police entered the village and arrested him for no valid reason. After taking and handcuffing Musa, they transported him to Halamish Detention Centre where they interrogated him with a gun pointed to his head.

Musa’s account is not atypical. In the past 11 years alone, around 7,500 children, some as young as 12 years, are estimated to have been detained, interrogated, and imprisoned under Israeli military law. This averages out at between “500-700 children per year, or nearly two children, each and every day.” (Defence for Children International (DCI, 2012, p.7). In January 2012, DCI submitted a report to the UN Rapporteur on Torture with findings that a majority of Palestinian children detained in the West Bank are seized in the middle of the night in what are often described as terrifying raids conducted by the army:

Most children have their hands painfully tied behind their backs and are

blindfolded, before being taken away to an unknown location for interrogation.

The arrest and transfer process is often accompanied by verbal abuse and humiliation, threats as well as physical violence. Hours later the children find themselves in an interrogation room, alone, sleep deprived, bruised and scared.

(DCI, 2012, p.7)

An effective response to stories of trauma and oppression requires certain aesthetic and ethical sensibilities on the part of the artist - a “moral imagination” (Lederach, 2005) that enables the actor to be “in touch with, and grounded in, the limitations and suffering of the real world, and simultaneously to imagine and work toward a more just and more life enhancing imagined order” (Cohen, Varea and Walker, 2011, p. 162).

This does not mean that the artist imposes a foreign remedy. Rather, the artist must learn to listen for the “double-storied” (Denborough, 2008) dimensions of an account - to recognize and reflect not only the oppressive and traumatic incident, but also the varied ways in which the protagonist responded: how they tried to protect themselves, their family and their community, the skills and values they drew upon, what resources were mobilized, etc. Through this process, local knowledge and practice is inscribed in narrative form. The audience thus comes closer to their own sources of resilience and healing - a phenomenon that acts “as an antidote to the imposition of outsider healing knowledge’s” (Denborough, 2008, p. 42). [...] As Playback practitioners we therefore strive to recognize and represent narrative elements that may incite or reinforce a critical consciousness of the sociopolitical context surrounding each story. At the same time we try to honor the emotional elements of the teller’s account. In this way, the performers

help to uncover and reflect the multiple dimensions of personal, social and political reality – multi-faceted narratives so often denied by circumstances that demand adherence to limited storylines. [...] Within the Playback event, the community is able to approach “unexpressed stories of suffering, unremembered erasures, unmourned losses, unresolved conflicts and dilemmas, unpunished crimes, unfulfilled yearnings, unacknowledged complicities, unspoken feelings of remorse, and unreconciled relationships” (Cohen, Varea and Walker, 2011, p. 163). Within the dramatic space and communal dimension of the Playback process these varied responses to violence, adversity and oppression can be named, embodied, revisited and attended to.” (Rivers 10-22)

**Acknowledgement: material in Section 3 referencing Eyad El Sarraj research assembled by Research Assistant Megan Wittel.*

Works Cited

Al Raei, Nabil. Personal Interview. July 2010.

---. Personal Interview. July 2012.

Al Saber, Samer. "A Re-Imagined Revolution in Jenin's Freedom Theatre: Alice in Dangerland." *Counterpunch*. Web. 4 Feb. 2011.

Bronner, Ethan. "In This Mideast Tragedy, Reporters Are The Despised Greek Chorus." *New York Times*. New York Times, Feb. 2009. Web. 5 Feb. 2009.

El Sarraj, Eyad, and S. Qouta. "The Palestinian Experience." *Disaster and Mental Health*. World Psychiatric Association. 2005. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., Chapter 16, 229-37. Web. n.d. <<http://www.kibush.co.il/search.asp>>

The Freedom Theatre. "News." Web. 4 Feb. 2006-Present. <<http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/news.php>>

"Israel/Palestinian Authority: Theater Group Hit From Both Sides." *Human Rights Watch*. Web. 27 July 2012.

Mer Khamis, Juliano. Personal Interview. July 2010.

Pappe, Ilan. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. New York: Oneworld Publications, 2006. Print.

United Nations. General Assembly. *Report of the Secretary-General prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution ES-10/10*. 30 July 2002. Web. n.d.

Zuabi, Amir Nizar. Personal Interview. July 2010.

Citations from material within Ben Rivers' anticipated paper to be published

Salas, J. (2011) Stories in the Moment: Playback Theatre for Community Building and Justice. In *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict. Volume II*. Eds. C. Cohen, R.G. Varea, and P.O. Walker.

Defence for Children International Palestine Section. (2012) *Bound, Blindfolded and Convicted: Children Held in Military Detention*. Retrieved from www.dcipalestine.org/sites/default/files/report_0.pdf on 14 July 2012.

Lederach, J.P. (2005) *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, C., Varea, R.G., and Walker, P.O. (2011) The Permeable Membrane and the Moral Imagination: A Framework for Conceptualizing Peacebuilding Performance. In *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict. Volume II*. Eds. C. Cohen, R.G. Varea, and P.O. Walker.

Denborough, D. (2008) *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to Individuals, Groups, and Communities Who Have Experienced Trauma*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.