

Fostering Collective Identity through Theatre

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The edited volume *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine* illustrates the theatre's history, vision and work through a series of interviews with key people who were associated or working with The Freedom Theatre (TFT), before and after its co-founder's assassination. It is an outcome of a process that ran over a year and a half which sprung from the realisation that TFT had never told its story in its own words. The book encapsulates the lifespan and growth of TFT from its nascent stage to the present when it has grown to be one of the most important cultural centres in Palestine and the world. The volume is a personal account and perspective from within TFT, an internal process of reflection that critically analyses the work and the context in which it takes place. Although the book is well-documented and provides insights into the everyday world of people living in Palestine, at times it gets repetitive and the

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ideas are not coherent, thereby disrupting the flow. The interviews are powerful and insightful while a few seem to have been added just to be more inclusive.

The Freedom Theatre

TFT was never aimed to pacify, its work was intended to stir, mobilize and transform (p 19).

TFT has its roots in the Care and Learning project and the Stone Theatre which was initiated by Arna Mer-Khamis (a political and human rights activist) in the late 1980s, who created the project to support the education of children in the West Bank. It was established during the First Intifada, an uprising against the Israeli military occupation. TFT was established shortly after

the height of the second intifada in 2006, by Juliano Mer-Khamis (son of Arna Mer-Khamis), Zakaria Zubeidi (a former student of the Stone Theatre) and Jonathan Stanczak (a Swedish activist). TFT aimed to create a cultural resistance by using art as a catalyst for social change. The goals of TFT are to create an effervescent and innovative community that enables children and young adults to express themselves freely, equally and professionally through art. The theatre uses drama, role playing, music, dance, and art to facilitate students to articulate their frustrations and act out the struggle they face in their everyday life. TFT provides opportunities to youths through drama workshops and theatre programmes, teaching them methods and approaches of acting from around the world and prepares them for a future career in the performing arts. This also provides an outlet for individual expression of emotions and the search for solace by providing a safe space for youths to deal with their depression, an alternative narrative to challenge dominant discourses of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict both on a global and international level.

The assassination of Juliano Mer-Khamis, left TFT in a limbo, and it was difficult for its partners and members to

envison its future. However, through grit and perseverance, and the wish to fulfil Juliano's dream granted them courage to continue even in life-threatening conditions. Today, it continues to train actors, technicians, cultural workers, photographers, film-makers and teachers, and presents plays in the West Bank and internationally with its compelling, powerful and emotive art. It has created a network of partners within Palestine and across the globe, who contribute personal and professional perspectives on the marvel that is TFT. "What had begun as a fervent grassroots creation quickly became recognised in Palestine and globally for its artistic products as well as its bold socio political message" (p 42). The book also refers to the environment under occupation, the political scenario and the challenges it faced.

Juliano Mer-Khamis

He was a naturally great leader with a very clear vision: creating a generation of artists who will read, understand and reflect upon reality—artists that will resist all different types of injustice, oppression, colonisation in all its levels and through them create a movement that will become a revolution. (p 62)

Born on 29 May 1958, Juliano was an Israeli Jewish/Palestinian Arab actor, director, film-maker, and political activist. He wanted to create an "art revolution" to help liberate the Palestinian

people. He believed that his work in the theatre was a means of implementing and teaching universal values of freedom that were separate from any political agenda. Despite this, he only managed to alienate those he most wanted to inspire, and was assassinated outside the theatre on 4 April 2011. The book brings to life Juliano, a passionate and empathetic person, visionary and creator, through several interviews carried out with people who were close to him, those he inspired and those who worked with him. There are many opinions on who and what Juliano was but one single thread that runs through all of them is that Juliano was a "force of nature." The chapter, "Julian Mer-Khamis" in the book compiled by Johanna Wallin, presents a brief chronology of his life, while the chapter "Jul and I" by Nabil Al-Raei paints a vivid picture of the man he was. Other interviews with members of TFT and associates reinforce the same thoughts and views.

Cultural Resistance

Popular culture and art have been a part of Palestinian history for the past 70 years as a means of sociopolitical resistance against Israeli occupation. TFT continues this legacy as a mode of non-violent resistance to Israeli occupation while fostering a Palestinian collective identity

and refers to its cultural resistance as a core motivation for its work. The book, through numerous interviews with Juliano as well as others, provides a diverse perspective on "cultural resistance." To some, it is the "broad use of arts, literature and traditional practices to challenge or fight unjust or oppressive systems and/or power holders within the context of non-violent actions, campaigns and movements" (p 84). The concept of cultural resistance of TFT stands on three main pillars, namely (i) identifying the points of injustice; (ii) creating conditions for change; and (iii) uniting resistance. These have been elaborated in the section "The Freedom Theatres Cultural Resistance" by Wallin and Stanczak.

To fully understand cultural resistance, it is important to know what culture is. TFT's perspective of culture is the fine web that binds people together, and gives a common language and framework. The word cultural resistance remains to be a vague concept, though it has been widely used but rarely defined for what it stands for. However, there can be no "monopoly on the understanding of cultural resistance" (p 115).

To some, cultural resistance is to lead a life without constraints, without being steered and to keep Palestinian identity alive as humans, and to achieve this, there

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has to be an end to occupation altogether. Some felt that armed resistance cannot be separated from cultural resistance. According to Faisal Abu Alhayjaa, “today’s generation is trapped inside check points and has no dreams. This demands cultural resistance. We have to end the occupation together” (p 125).

Plays that Made a Difference

TFT over the years produced several adaptations of famous works such as George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun*, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as the adaptation of the South African anti-apartheid play *The Island*. The plays were a rumination, analysis and pragmatic description of Palestinian society and occupation.

The theatre has also produced several original plays such as *The Siege*, which poses a direct challenge to the Israeli demand that the Palestinian fighters only be considered as terrorists. The story is told from the points of view of six

Palestinian freedom fighters. *Suicide Note from Palestine*, inspired by Sarah Kane’s 4.48 *Psychosis*, brings a completely fresh narrative, creating something new by representing the dilemma of Palestine in the international scene, criticising Arab leaders, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the European Union and United States with aplomb.

In 2015–16, TFT collaborated with Jana Natya Manch, a Delhi-based theatre group, to create a joint production that toured 11 cities in India. Subsequently, the Indian group travelled to Palestine to perform its play in the West Bank. The section “Solidarity is not a One-way Street” by Sudhanva Deshpande discusses the act of solidarity, emotional connect and the learning that emerged from it.

The book brings to light the role that is being played by the development sector. It is a historical fact that Palestinians have been surviving on donations from the United Nations bodies, and other international NGOs, Scandinavian countries,

EU, as well as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf since 1948. However, according to Hala Khamis Nassar, “The Palestinian cultural scene needs to review its visions and agendas which obviously conflict with western donor’s visions and agendas” (p 139). The book also gives a brief introduction to the history of Palestine and the environment in which TFT operates.

The book is insightful and engaging; however, the deeper issues probed in the interviews could have been better organised and woven in such a way as to give more coherence and flow to this powerful and important documentation. Although there are chapters that do justice, there are some which seem disconnected, repetitive and not so relevant to the life story of “The Freedom Theatre.”

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