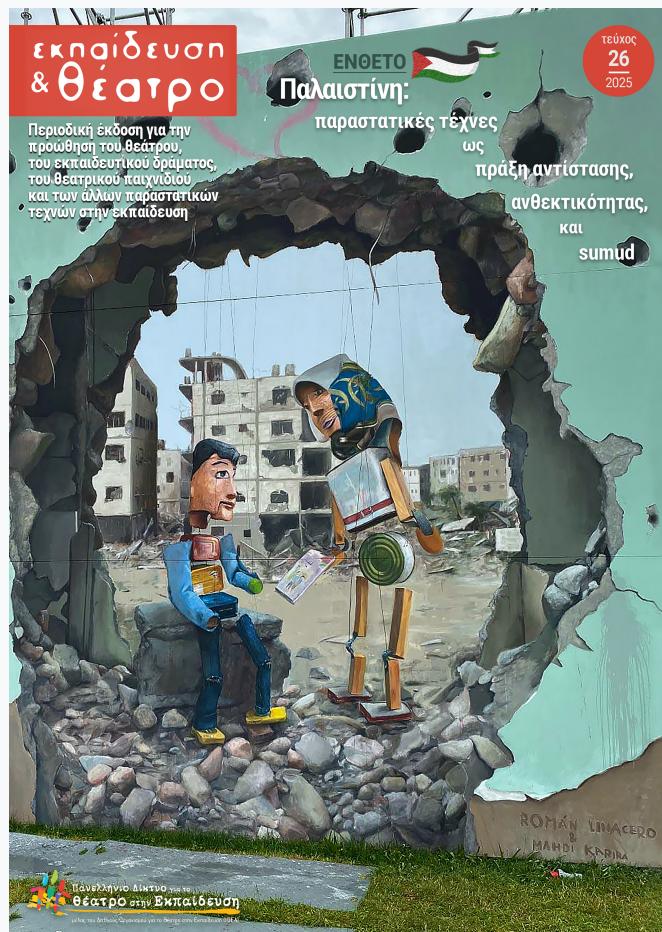


## Education & Theatre

Vol 26 (2025)

### Education & Theatre



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doi: [10.12681/edth.43267](https://doi.org/10.12681/edth.43267)

#### To cite this article:

Abusrour, A. (2025). Beautiful Resistance: Arts for positive change. *Education & Theatre*, 26, 78–90.  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/edth.43267>

# Beautiful Resistance Arts for positive change

<https://doi.org/10.12681/edth.43267>

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## Abstract

This article outlines the author's work and philosophy over the past 40 years, as well as his concept of Beautiful Resistance. Through the performing and visual arts, culture and education, he promotes peaceful and creative self-expression as a means of achieving inner peace. His hope is that people will become peace builders within their communities and beyond. While the article primarily focuses on his work with Palestinian refugees in Palestine, it also provides insights into resisting the ugliness of occupation, oppression and injustice. It provides a platform for individuals living under such injustices and trauma to become positive agents of change and inspire others by serving as role models for present and future generations.

**Keywords:** *Beautiful Resistance, theatre, arts, culture, education, refugee, children, youth, peacebuilding, Palestine*

## Introduction

I was born in a refugee camp in my own country to parents who survived the Nakba in 1948. During this period, more than 70% of Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their land and homes, including my parents. Like more than 530 other Palestinian villages, my parents' villages of Beit Natif and Zachariya were either completely destroyed or occupied and annexed by the newly recognised Zionist state. Families were separated on the roads of exile while seeking refuge and waiting for a solution. Most of the displaced families ended up in one of the 58 recognised refugee camps, established on leased land for 99 years in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. These camps are overseen by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which was established under UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) on 8 December 1949 (United Nations General Assembly, 1949). UNRWA began operating on 1 May 1950, providing humanitarian, health and education services until a just solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees is found.

It took Palestinian refugees several years to settle on these rented lands. Between 1948 and 1950, refugee families were left to fend for themselves; they had nowhere suitable to live, so they took shelter in open spaces or caves. Those who could afford it rented a house or room from families in nearby cities that were not under Israeli occupation between 1948 and 1967. This was the case for my family. After spending around two months in the unoccupied open fields to the east of their destroyed village, they rented a room in Beit Sahour town, east of Bethlehem, until 1950. Like many others, they finally moved to the newly established Aida refugee camp, where tents were set up for them on land leased by UNRWA and recognised as a Palestinian refugee camp. It was supposed to be a temporary situation, lasting a couple of weeks or a few months. However, the newly established "state" did not comply with the United Nations resolutions that had permitted its creation in the first place. These resolutions were intended to facilitate the return of Palestinian refugees to their lands and homes. One such resolution was the UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). This resolution formed part of the UNRWA mandate. In 1955, UNRWA began replacing tents with prefabricated shelters or cinderblock dwellings. Construction of shelters in the Aida camp began in 1956. These consisted of one or two small rooms, depending on the size of the family.

I was born in 1963 in the Aida refugee camp, which was established in an area of 0.071 km<sup>2</sup>

(UNRWA, n.d.). I remember the shelter where I grew up, which composed of two small brick rooms. There were no toilets in the shelters at that time. I remember there being about six public double-unit toilets without doors, scattered around the camp. Later on, families started digging holes in the ground a few metres from their shelters and building small toilets over them. Water was distributed by tanks. Water points were installed in the 1960s and 1970s. Those who could afford it installed electricity and running water in their modest shelters. As families grew and the population increased in the late 1970s or early 1980s, the shelters, which were intended to be temporary, started to deteriorate or became too small for families. People either built more rooms or demolished existing shelters to build better housing with electricity and water installations as well as indoor toilets. As it was not possible to expand horizontally due to other neighbouring properties, the buildings expanded vertically. Families had to pay for their electricity and water consumption. Nowadays, the water and electricity installations are outdated, resulting in frequent cut-outs, particularly to the water supply. In the late 1970s, families started building their own homes to live with dignity. Aida camp is the second smallest camp in the West Bank after the Beit Jibrin refugee camp. It is surrounded by an illegal expansion and annexation wall on the eastern and northern sides. This started as barbed wire in April 2002 and was replaced with 8-metre-high cement blocks between 2004 and 2005. The camp continues to suffer frequent incursions by the Israeli army to this day.

During my childhood, there were few opportunities for children to have fun and there were no proper playgrounds or play areas. We played with plastic balls or footballs made from plastic bags and cloth in the muddy streets, or sometimes in the olive groves to the north of the camp, until the illegal wall was built, which cut off the camp's only breathing space. These spaces were narrow and became even narrower as the population increased and every available space was used to expand the houses.

Such limitations were exceptional for families who had previously enjoyed wide-open spaces on their lands. They cultivated fields with cereals and vegetables, and had gardens and fruit trees. They also kept sheep, goats and other animals. Uprooted families, forced out of their homes by the occupation, were left with the keys to houses that no longer existed. They kept these precious keys, using them to tell stories to their children and grandchildren: "Once upon a time, not far away from here, we had a house and fields stretching as far as the eye could see". As children, we tried to imagine what this could



have been like, but we had no reference point on which to base our imagination. After all, we lived in dirt streets with poor surroundings and basic infrastructure. Stories about life before the Nakba and under British Mandate, as well as attacks by Zionist bandits, were unimaginable to us as children. However, this became familiar after the 1967 occupation and when we encountered Israeli soldiers during the curfews. The stories about the keys and the right of return to our land, and the recommendations to never forget that right, to never lose faith in it and never abandon it – because it is our right and not a charitable act by the occupier or anyone else – were passed on by the elders to the next generation. In 2008, the Aida camp built the world's biggest key: 9 metres long, 2 metres high and weighing 1 tonne. Erected at the north-eastern entrance to the camp, it commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Nakba, reminding the world that we are still living through an ongoing Nakba and that our right of return must not be forgotten despite the ongoing tragedy of occupation.

The families in the Aida Camp were displaced from different villages and towns in the Jerusalem and Hebron districts. They brought with them their traditions, songs and tales, recipes for food and health, embroidery featuring various designs and a language with different accents that allow you to identify the town or village from which these refugees came. They have no wide fields in which to grow their beloved trees and herbs, nor any products to harvest. Nevertheless, they tried to make the most of every plot of land, planting figs, olives, pomegranates, plums, almonds and other trees, as well as herbs such as sage, za'atar, mint and parsley, which they had grown in their homeland. Following the 1967 occupation, when refugees were permitted to visit their destroyed villages for a limited time,

they managed to bring some of these trees and herbs with them.

What work could they do to earn a living? I remember waiting for my parents to collect food rations during UNRWA distributions, which were insufficient. Sometimes, we received second-hand clothes distributed by UNRWA, the Red Cross or other charities. Foreign groups would visit the camp and hand out small food parcels or clothing packages, which were not always suitable for all family members. Due to the lack of resources, some Palestinian families encourage their children to travel to the Gulf or other countries for work after finishing their education, as they value education so highly. This enabled them to earn a good income and send money back home to support their families. This wasn't always easy, and the challenges were tough, but some people succeeded and built good lives for themselves. Others were forced to leave school early to work, mostly in construction or picking fruit and vegetables on Israeli farms. I did the same during summer holidays and school breaks.

As the occupation worsened, life became more challenging. In 2017, a study by Berkeley Human Rights Center at the University of California classified the camp as the area most exposed to tear gas in the world (Benoist, 2018). Yet, 77 years later, the tragic Nakba continues. The oppression is increasing and targeting children and young people. Genocide and starvation of the population in Gaza are occurring, as are new deportations and destruction of properties, collective punishment of families and areas, restrictions on freedom of movement, fewer job opportunities and a lack of income generation, closure of UNRWA offices in Jerusalem and the deportation of all international staff, and plans for the reoccupation of the West Bank. The suffering has increased, a solution has been blocked and international action has been limited to symbolic gestures that quickly fade, while the tragedy continues to worsen.

## Interests

Growing up as a refugee in my own country, I was fascinated by science. I loved studying flora and fauna and dreamed of becoming a great scientist. At the same time, I spent whatever pocket money I had on my other passions: painting and photography, writing and acting. There was not much space to practise or to play in Aida camp, so we mostly performed and watched others perform their short plays in the fields around the camp or in the hall of the Aida Youth Centre which was established by UNRWA in 1968. Some days, we played football between the trees in the olive groves. On other days, especially after it rained, some of us would swim in the



large puddles. Despite the occupation, life seemed simple in the 1970s and early 1980s. When schools organised trips to go to the Dead Sea or Yafa on the Mediterranean Sea, it was a splendid opportunity to swim in the salty water, usually separately from the Israeli Jewish population. This is no longer possible for Palestinians in the West Bank after the Oslo peace process of 1993.

Some Palestinian theatre groups performed in the streets of the camp and other open spaces. Whenever possible, I made sure not to miss any of these performances. There were no professional theatre spaces in the Aida Camp or even in the larger city of Bethlehem. However, cinemas, schools and playgrounds were sometimes used for performances.

I was one of the lucky students who received a scholarship to continue my studies in France. It took a year and seven attempts (and six rejections) to obtain permission from the Israeli military administration to leave the country to study. This was an incredible opportunity to discover myself, continue my academic studies in biology and deepen my artistic practice through painting, photography and, in particular, theatre, both as an actor and co-author of new plays. The profound impact of the arts, particularly theatre, inspired me to consider how I could harness this power to narrate my own story as the son of Nakba survivors and to tell people about Palestine. This form of expression was liberating, allowing me to channel all my anger and frustration into something beautiful, positive and creative, and

helping me to find inner peace. It also inspired my concept of Beautiful Resistance.

### **Beautiful Resistance: Concept and philosophy**

I believe that every act of resistance against occupation, oppression, injustice or dictatorship is a beautiful display of humanity. When people resist, they are rejecting injustice and oppression. I developed the concept of Beautiful Resistance in 1998 as a response to the ugliness of occupation and its violence and oppression. People can respond to injustice with either armed or non-armed resistance, and both are legitimate for those suffering under occupation or oppression. Others accept and surrender, but I believe it is only natural to resist. In most liberation movements, both non-armed and armed struggle are combined. For me, Beautiful Resistance is a way of using performing and visual arts, culture and education as a peaceful and creative means of self-expression. It is a way of defending my humanity and identity as a human being in the face of the dehumanisation and obliteration of my people, culture and heritage by the illegal Israeli occupation. It helps me channel my anger and frustration in a beautiful and creative way, especially when working with children. It enables me to promote inner peace and provide opportunities for them to grow up and contribute to building a better future for their country. However, it is not a magic wand that can solve everything, particularly given the ongoing occupation and oppression.



Throughout history, Palestinians have mastered different ways of resistance. Qumsiyeh (2011) discusses and references around 300 methods of popular resistance employed by the Palestinian people over the last 100 years. These methods include non-violent, cultural, environmental, media and information, economic, international solidarity and armed resistance methods. Although armed resistance is acknowledged, it is considered to have been historically less prevalent than non-armed methods. Contrary to dominant media portrayals, he emphasises that non-violent and creative resistance have been the most enduring and widespread forms. Qumsiyeh has retraced the popular resistance in Palestine since 1920, which includes refusing to pay unjust taxes, planting olive trees on threatened lands, teaching under curfew, creating embroidery that tells historical stories, organising international solidarity tours, publishing poetry, literature and theatre that defy erasure, building local economies and cooperatives, documenting oral history in refugee camps and using music, graffiti and storytelling. Other forms of resistance include strikes, civil disobedience, boycotts, protests and demonstrations.

I believe that resistance is not just a reaction or a one-time action; it is a way of life. This resistance is expressed through culture, by defending identity, rights, humanity, beauty, folklore, narratives and roots to the land and history of Palestine. It involves defending legitimacy and the right to resist by staying on our land and resisting extermination, forced displacement and uprooting. It involves going to work, school or university. This culture of life is referred to as *sumud* (meaning steadfastness

and resilience). It celebrates multiplicity and diversity and preserves inclusion, rejecting exclusion, because I believe that any culture that is exclusive is racist and incompatible with Palestinian culture.

Sumud encompasses education, which continues to be a key form of resistance for Palestinian families. Most Palestinian parents want their children to receive a good education and to feel proud of their descendants' successes and achievements. Staying on the land, building beautiful houses, planting trees and taking care of the land and continuing to challenge checkpoints and illegal colonisers are all great acts of resistance and sumud. Enjoying life's pleasures such as falling in love, getting married, having children and celebrating happy occasions, as well as preserving memories and traditions, are integral to non-armed resistance and sumud.

I established Alrowwad with some friends in 1998. Between 1994 and 1998, I had volunteered to teach theatre at the university, as well as at the UNRWA girls' school in Aida camp and other places. I believed in the power of theatre and the arts to empower people through self-expression, strengthen team work and group cohesion, build confidence and respect and heal individuals, especially those who had experienced trauma under oppression and occupation. I believed that theatre could help these individuals to become peacebuilders in their community, their country and the world by fostering inner peace. Boal's foundational work on the Theatre of the Oppressed frames theatre as a tool that enables the oppressed to rehearse liberation. Oomen (2020) explains, "The theatre of the oppressed is a rising form of activism that refugees, homeless, minority groups and other populations are using to fight issues of oppression that can cause poverty" (para. 2). A case study from West Bengal, India, shows how women used theatre to confront gender violence and social injustice (Mills, 2009). Although I am not a specialist in forum theatre, I believe that the healing power can also be achieved through different forms of performing and visual arts to varying levels.

I developed the concept of Beautiful Resistance to celebrate the culture of life and resistance to oppression which is rooted in the lived experience of Palestinians and to reframe resistance as a creative, life-affirming expression rather than as violence or a reaction (Abusrour & Al-Yamani, 2021). My focus was to inspire hope, promote life and provide positive, peaceful and creative means of expression through performing and visual arts, culture and education, starting with children and young people. The idea was to offer a safe space for expression where they could share their stories, dreams, hopes, fears, worries, frustrations, aspirations and feelings. The aim



was to help them find a way to build their inner peace through their creativity. My work is not about art therapy or drama therapy. It is about a creative approach that heals.

My original idea was to professionally train a group of children from the Aida camp as actors and create a theatre troupe that would act as role models for other children and be the voice of their generation. However, I could not ignore those who were not interested in theatre. I did not want them to end up on the streets and become just another statistic, whether killed by the occupation, disabled for life, or imprisoned by the Israelis. I wanted to create an inclusive space offering holistic activities. Theatre remained a core activity at Alrowwad, but other opportunities emerged, providing a platform for self-expression and inner peace through activities other than theatre. I expanded the Alrowwad programmes to include other performing and visual arts, such as Palestinian folkloric dance (dabka), singing, music, painting, photography, video, sports and technology. This allows us to extend the beneficiary groups to include young people and adults. There is a particular focus on parents, especially women and mothers, because I believe women are the main agents of change in the world.

During the Second Intifada, when the Israeli army imposed incursions and curfews on the Aida camp, Alrowwad became an emergency response centre.

We could not convince ourselves that, as a theatre and cultural centre, we were unable to intervene in the events unfolding around us, in our community and beyond. For many children, Alrowwad was like a second home.

### Why theatre? Why arts?

Returning to Palestine in 1994 after completing nine years of studies in France, and discussing the hopes and dreams of children and what they wanted to be when they grew up, made me realise the challenges we face. While some children wanted to be doctors, engineers, teachers, nurses, journalists, lawyers or pilots, three children out of approximately 30 that I spoke to, including some aged 8, 10 and 13, replied:

- *I want to die.*
- *Why do you want to die?*
- *Because nobody cares about us. When the occupation army enters the camp, no one protects us. No one makes the occupiers pay for their crimes. Nobody stops them.*

When this comes from a child, it means that there has been a huge failure to inspire hope, even in a child. Parents, educators, politicians, leaders and community could not provide any hope in such challenging situations. For me, the question therefore was how to inspire hope in these children and give them the opportunity to live, grow up and achieve their dreams, and realise that they are important



and can make a difference to themselves and the world they live in.

I started with theatre, because I believe in its impact, magic and inspirational power to offer a safe environment and a broad outlook for children and young people, where they can express themselves, shout loudly if they want to, express whatever they want and make their dreams a reality on stage. They can dare to voice what they can't tell others in real life and they can be empowered to narrate their own stories and histories.

The first play, *We Are the Children of the Camp*, recounted their life stories, reflecting on their hopes and dreams, and the tragic history of their families, villages and towns, and their life in a refugee camp. It opened with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This land did not belong to the British, yet they gave it to Jews forced out of Europe and other countries without consulting the Palestinians, even though the British had not yet ruled Palestine. The play then explores the consequences of this promise, which led to the Nakba. Refugees recount what happened in their villages and in the camps where they ended up. They describe the suffering they endured during their exile and the massacres committed by Zionist groups. These resulted in the deaths of 70% of Palestinians and their displacement to refugee camps on rented land. The play also covers life under occupation and checkpoints, media coverage of Palestine and the supposed peace process, all of which have left the region in a state of perpetual conflict.

Thanks to the play, they left Bethlehem and Palestine for the first time in their lives to tour internationally in Sweden and Denmark via Jordan. When they returned, they told other children the stories they had collected, talking about what they had

seen: the abundance of green spaces, running water, rivers and lakes; the kindness of the people they had met and the hospitality they had experienced; and the differences in food. It was a great experience to build on for the coming years.

After returning from our tour on 21 August 2000, we booked a performance of our play at the El-Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre in Jerusalem. We were scheduled to perform on 30 September 2000. However, on 28 September, Ariel Sharon, leader of the Israeli right-wing Likud party, forced his way into the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This triggered widespread protests and led to the Second Intifada. The following morning, our theatre troupe travelled to Jerusalem for a rehearsal for our performance at the El-Hakawati the next day. Things seemed calm. I attended the Friday prayer at around midday. As the prayer ended, a large demonstration started, and Israeli soldiers stormed the area with tear gas and live ammunition. I saw injured people and martyrs being carried away for medical aid. I do not know how I managed to escape and run to the theatre to evacuate the children back to Bethlehem. Roads were starting to be blocked and checkpoints were being set up, but miraculously, we arrived at the Aida camp. This would be the last time these children saw Jerusalem. News reports said that seven Palestinians had been killed and around 300 injured that day. We never performed in Jerusalem.

As the Second Intifada began, it was important to save lives, inspire children to express themselves peacefully and respond to the needs of the children, young people and the community. We introduced a supportive education programme, computer training and a library of books, as well as many other performing and visual arts activities and professional training programmes for young people and women. Our programmes expanded to include kindergartens and schools, providing a safe space for everyone to express themselves and hopefully heal from the trauma. Later on, we continued with other programmes, including professional training in leadership, human rights, Palestinian refugees and the right to return, oral history, carpentry, sewing, embroidery, cooking, marketing, computer skills, life skills, media training, sports and yoga, among others. Local and international volunteers were welcome to propose and deliver training in any field of interest to the community. All possibilities were open. During curfews and incursions by the occupation army, Alrowwad operated as an emergency medical clinic, as there was no such facility in the Aida camp until 2021. Food was also distributed depending on availability and donations. During the 43-day invasion between 30 March and 12 May



2002, Alrowwad worked 24 hours a day to respond to the community's needs.

### Mobile Beautiful Resistance

Alrowwad expanded its projects and activities beyond the Aida camp, reaching different cities, villages and camps across the West Bank. The aim of this programme was, on the one hand, to connect with other Palestinian communities and educate trainers. On the other hand, it was also an act of resistance against the forced segregation imposed by the apartheid occupation system. Travelling in a minibus, the Alrowwad team performed activities and training workshops in kindergartens, schools, community centres, open spaces and wherever else possible. These included theatre and dance performances, clowning, fun activities and awareness campaigns on various topics. Our play bus was equipped with educational and entertaining games designed and manufactured by the Alrowwad team, providing a safe space for play and learning. We believe that education should be enjoyable, providing children with the tools to reflect, analyse and question things, rather than just filling their minds with information to be memorised. We also ran a mobile cinema, touring and showing films for children and communities in various locations across the West Bank. This gave us the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss successes and challenges within the communities. Our mobile Beautiful Resistance initiative challenged the ugliness of apartheid policies,

forced segregation and the fragmentation of Palestinian communities caused by illegal checkpoints, barriers, illegal colonies and annexation.

### Plays and tours

After finishing my studies in France in 1994, I returned to Palestine and worked on a science degree. As I already mentioned, I volunteered to teach theatre at a girls' school in Aida camp and at Bethlehem University, where I taught and conducted research. In 1996, a colleague from the English Department at Bethlehem University asked me to direct a play with a group of students. I adapted a Palestinian folktale: *The Orphan and the Prophet's Cow*, which had a similar plot to *Cinderella*. In the end, the orphaned daughter forgives her stepmother and stepsister for their cruelty. I then created, adapted and/or performed other plays, including *When Old Men Cry*, which was adapted from a newspaper article about Zionist settlers uprooting olive trees and attacking Palestinian villagers in Kifel Hares. *Staying Alive* was a musical integrating Bee Gees songs, scenes from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and a monologue that I had written. *Everyman* was also performed in the Chapel of Bethlehem University, where I assisted with rehearsals and costumes. Later, around 1998 – the same year I founded Alrowwad – theatre activities moved to the Education Department. There, Drama in Education and Storytelling were integrated, and plays were created or adapted for performance by Education Department students.



As for Alrowwad, we started with the play *We Are the Children of the Camp*, which was written based on discussions with the children. After touring with it in Sweden, Denmark, France, Belgium, Austria and the USA, among other countries, we started discussing new creations. What themes should we explore? What issues should we raise to stimulate the audience's thinking? What should our priorities be?

To commemorate the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982, I read all the testimonies and reports and adapted them that into a play called *The Judgement* in which Ariel Sharon, the supervisor of the massacre, was brought to a trial. The play premiered in September 2001, approximately twenty years after the massacre and following the large-scale invasion and siege of the West Bank between March and May of that year.

We followed up with the children. We discussed themes such as justice and injustice, stereotyping, prejudice and misconceptions. How can we talk about these issues? How can we bring these themes to the stage in an artistic way that is easy for the audience to understand? One way of introducing the themes was to use internationally and locally known folktales, offering a new perception of commonly held ideas and connecting stories together to make the ideas more or less complicated.

While working at Bethlehem University and collaborating with the Education Department, I was asked to translate and adapt Douglas Love's play *Blame it on the Wolf*, setting it in a Palestinian Arab context. This production was initially a collaboration between Dr Thomas Hood, Dr Jacqueline Sfeir, Dr Hala Al-Yamani and Education Department students, culminating in a performance.

Some years later, in 2007, I created a new adaptation of the play at Alrowwad. Our new production went on an international tour in Europe and the USA in 2008 and 2009, respectively. The play connected the stories of *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel* (known as *Habib and Nada* in Arabic literature) and the *Wolf and the Three Little Pigs*. In the play, Little Red Riding Hood complains to the village chief and accuses the wolf of eating her grandmother. The chief appointed a jury consisting of an elderly woman, a lazy male peasant and a young girl. He ordered the guards to capture the wolf and summon those who had encountered him. The wolf protested that he had not eaten the grandmother. Witnesses were brought in. The Three Little Pigs gave contradictory accounts. They were unsure whether they had heard the wolf shout, "Open the door! I am so hungry that I will eat anything!" or "I will eat you!"

Habib and Nada testify that the wolf saved them from the witch. Seeking revenge, the witch disguised herself as a wolf and slept in the grandmother's bed. The grandmother is actually her sister. She sends her sister on holiday to Jericho to enjoy the warm weather and swim in the Dead Sea, leaving the house empty and allowing her to convince Little Red Riding Hood that the wolf ate her grandmother. The jury is divided between the two older members, who believe that the wolf is inherently evil and that he did indeed eat the grandmother, despite his denials. The younger girl suggests listening to the wolf and hearing his side of the story. During the trial, the grandmother arrives alive and hugs the witch, her sister, thanking her for the holiday she offered her. This makes the witch angry because the judge, the village chief, was about to sentence the wolf. Even after the grandmother's arrival, the two elders continued to say, "Even if this grandmother wasn't eaten by the wolf, he has surely eaten someone else's grandmother". The audience was asked what they thought about stereotyping. What prejudices do they have about others? Is it possible to generalise, or are human beings simply human beings, with good and bad people in every country, culture and ethnicity?

Other productions addressed health issues such as drug use and smoking, children's rights, gender issues and education. They explored ways to make



education more fun and child-centred, rather than relying on dictation and memorisation, treating children as if they were robots who must memorise everything without being allowed to ask questions.

*Handala* was my adaptation of the cartoons of Naji Al-Ali, the most famous Palestinian Arab cartoonist who was assassinated in London in 1987. Handala is a child named after the Arabic word for the bitter fruit *handal* (coco-cynth) to reflect the bitterness of being a refugee after his country was occupied. He is a 10-year-old refugee child, the same age as the artist when he was uprooted from his village, Alshajarah, in 1948. He refuses to grow up until he returns to his village. He turns his back to the audience/readers and refuses to show his face until he returns. He is barefoot, symbolising the poverty and displacement of the child. He crosses his arms behind his back to avoid shaking hands with those who compromise on the rights of Palestinian refugees. His hair stands on end like a hedgehog's quills, as a defence mechanism for himself and his cause. The symbolism of this character and the others that appear alongside him in the artist's thousands of cartoons makes for a powerful adaptation of the artist's philosophy and work, as well as the power of art as an act of resistance. It is also a reflection of our Beautiful Resistance. Bringing these characters to life on stage pays beautiful homage to Naji Al-Ali's

extremely touching and visionary work, and to the ongoing Nakba of the Palestinians, which continues as if nothing has changed, even about four decades after his assassination.

Collaborations and co-productions with international groups, as well as touring internationally with shows, have helped our young people to mature and become aware of the importance of the arts in general, and theatre in particular. They have recognised the importance of every individual as a changemaker and influencer, and have learned to appreciate the ideas behind plays in a way that respects the audience's intelligence. This is much easier than most politicians' or speakers' repetitive speeches. In that sense, people in the audience and actors on stage are on equal ground as human beings. An open-minded audience may like or dislike a show regardless of the ethnicity, nationality or beliefs of those performing. In this way, stereotypes disappear and pure humanity is shared.

### **Beautiful Resistance workshops**

To grasp the concept of finding inner peace and understand the importance of expressing oneself and the healing power of creativity, I designed workshops for different participants, including children, young people, women, men, educators, artists, parents, social workers and mixed groups. The



workshops encourage participants to discover and explore their inner selves, fostering openness about their relationships with themselves and others, their potential, their limitations, and the internal and external barriers that prevent them from being fully truthful to themselves and expressing themselves freely.

By providing participants with a safe, trusted environment and giving them the freedom to respond, or not, to certain questions or situations enables them to express their responses in whatever way they choose. They worked as individuals, in small groups or as one large group, and chose how to present their individual or collective work. There were rarely any individuals who remained isolated. For them, the workshops were a marvellous way of self-expression, discovery, awareness and healing.

## Impact

Drawing on four decades of direct experience and work with children, young people and adults, particularly in contexts of displacement, trauma and cultural resilience, I can affirm that the performing arts and visual arts are profound tools for emotional expression, healing and peacebuilding.

Engaging with different art forms enables individuals to release anger and frustration, express hopes and dreams, and confront fears and sadness. These creative acts foster self-discovery, emotional regulation and community connection, helping participants build inner peace and recognise their potential as peacebuilders.

This lived understanding is reflected in global research. In her literature review, Misner (2015) highlights the ways in which participation in the arts from an early age supports emotional development, empathy and self-awareness. In her thesis, Sedgewick (2021) demonstrates how the visual arts help children to explore identity, autonomy and emotional balance in the classroom. A review by Birrell et al. (2024) from the University of Sydney shows that arts-inclusive programmes significantly enhance emotional well-being in children aged 0–6 years. Holochwost et al. (2021) affirm that arts education fosters socio-emotional growth and interpersonal skills, particularly when grounded in choice and creative freedom. A UK evidence brief confirms that engagement in arts and cultural activities improves the mental health, resilience and social behaviour of children and young people. Data suggests that these benefits may stem from the arts' ability to foster creativity, enhance self-esteem and promote better self-control in young people (The Social Biobehavioural Research Group, 2023).

In my experience, theatre and the arts have a beautiful, peaceful, creative and positive impact on people's minds and hearts. They offer a mirror to one's inner world and a bridge to others, providing a means of imagining change, building empathy and cultivating hope. Our work in theatre and the arts is not about dictating to others what to think or do or providing solutions; it is about provoking the audience to think, and hopefully inspiring them to take action in the long term to resolve the problems

they face. For those who practise, the impact is not just limited to being on stage or delivering artistic expression; it extends to their daily lives too. For some of our participants, this was a way of rediscovering themselves and what they wanted to do with their lives, whether that be pursuing an education or specialising as actors, writers, artists, journalists, filmmakers or photographers. Our aim is to open doors and provide possibilities, and ultimately it is up to the participants to choose their path. If they seek help or advice, we are here to provide it.

When we toured with our shows in some countries, we ran workshops for young people in marginalised areas. In 2003, for example, we toured France and ran workshops and activities with the children of immigrants. In 2005, we toured the United States, staying for a week in Louisville, Kentucky, where we ran a few days' workshop with African-American children. The discussions we had with the children concluded that the African-American children and the Parisian immigrants were poorer than them, despite the fact that our children came from a refugee camp in Palestine, a country under military occupation. They realised that even in big, rich countries, injustice exists. Countries that talk about human rights and values are not applying them to their entire population. Injustice can exist anywhere, and suffering is not unique to one country or one racial or religious group.

The touring artists, who were children and young people, recognised the importance of their role as ambassadors for the Palestinian narrative of their history. They presented an alternative image of Palestine, challenging the media stereotypes and brainwashing perpetuated by Zionists and their supporters. Despite Zionist groups in different countries trying to stop us from performing in certain places, our young people overcame the challenges. Why such rejection? What would they benefit from preventing us from performing? Why are we labelled as terrorists by nature? If our young people are prevented from performing in artistic shows, what options are left for them? Should they go and blow themselves up? We do not want that. We do not want anyone to think that blowing oneself up is the only way to effect change. Not being allowed to perform their plays and dance shows has had a huge negative impact on our youth. However, they found encouragement and support from different groups and organisations, who opened their arms and spaces to them, acknowledging the importance and power of the performing arts in changing perspectives and challenging stereotypes.

## Conclusion

Beautiful Resistance is a pedagogical approach that teaches children to create beauty in the face of injustice, to tell their stories and to reclaim their agency. It aligns with Freire's principles of liberating education, in which learners are co-creators of knowledge and transformation.

Beautiful Resistance offers the possibility of empowerment, enabling individuals to gain a better understanding of themselves, be truthful to themselves and defend their identity, culture and the principles and values that make us better human beings. Beautiful Resistance inspires hope, promotes life and celebrates resistance, enabling children and young people to live for their countries, defend their causes and be proud of their achievements – not just die for their country or the cause they defend.

Since Alrowwad was established in 1998, thousands of children have participated in its various programmes, including those in performing and visual arts. Some have become professional artists or continued their academic studies, recognising their potential in one field or another. Others became Alrowwad trainers, employees, board members or volunteers. Others have created their own initiatives and are now leading other organisations.

The children of Alrowwad grow up and new children join. Programmes continue and the organisation expands, growing bigger and bigger as its outreach extends beyond the limits forced by military occupation, checkpoints and despair. Clearly, we cannot afford to despair. Through theatre and other arts, children find a way to tell their stories, and generation after generation continues to do so, keeping the memory alive. It is a revival of truth, stories, history and the rights of individuals and the collective.

We do not know what the future holds, but it is looking increasingly bleak. As I said, we cannot afford to despair; we cannot afford to waste time either. We must multiply our efforts and work continuously to make tomorrow better than today. It is important that we maintain our belief that art can save lives, inspire hope, empower individuals, and encourage them not just to wait for miracles to happen, but to play an active role in creating them.

### Note

1. *Sumud* (Arabic: صمود) is a deeply rooted Palestinian concept meaning steadfastness or steadfast perseverance. It emerged as both a cultural value and political strategy in response to the experience of occupation, particularly after the 1967 Six-Day War. It can be passive: Staying on the land despite hardship and terror of colonial settler, or active by building alternative institutions, engaging in cultural and civil resistance to undermine occupation, rebuilding demolished homes, crossing checkpoint to work and school or university, organise community initiatives or cultural activities, keeping folklore dance, songs, food, embroidery and narrative, stories and folktales (Johannessen, n.d.)



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