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## *The Gaza Monologues*

### Part I: A transnational theatrical movement of **witnessing** and **resistance**

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#### Abstract

The story of *The Gaza Monologues* is presented in two parts: The first part provides a contextual and critical overview of the project and ASHTAR Theatre's role in shaping political performance in Palestine and beyond. The second part comprises an interview with Iman Aoun, the theatre's co-founder and executive director, who offers first-hand reflections on the project's development, impact and ongoing relevance (see pp. 120–123)

**Keywords:** *Gaza Monologues, ASHTAR Theatre, testimonial theatre, Palestinian performance, cultural resistance*

*Do you know what a tent means? I don't think you do. Let me tell you: a tent means cold, it means slow death and continuous hunger. A tent means you and ten others sleep in a cramped space, half of you inside, the other half outside, like the remnants of life on the edge of nothingness. You wake up with the morning sun that scorches you with its heat, or with flies biting your body. At night, the cold stings you and makes you forget the warmth of life.*

*In the tent, there are no secrets; everyone is exposed to everyone else, and families here have no choice but to share as if we are one family. Every morning starts with a new struggle for survival, to secure bread and a little water. We don't know rest here, and we have become like an entire people sharing one bitter dream. Every day is a new story, a new loss, a renewed longing and pain.*

—Tamer Najem, *The New Gaza Monologues*

How can theatre respond in the face of unspeakable violence, and how might it carry the weight of collective grief, rage and resistance across borders? Through monologue, letter and interview, this paper explores the role of performance in bearing witness to, and responding to, the situation in Gaza. The first section examines *The Gaza Monologues*, a landmark project initiated by ASHTAR Theatre in Ramallah in 2010 (Ashtar Theatre, 2010). Created in

the aftermath of the 2008–2009 attack on Gaza, the monologues are based on the testimonies of young people in Gaza and have been performed around the world as an act of transnational solidarity. The project has evolved into a living archive, which is revisited during periods of renewed violence, reminding audiences of the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people and the enduring power of youth expression. The second section, *Letters to Gaza*,

draws on the tradition of letter-writing in the context of diaspora and war. It is a series of letters written by theatre artists and scholars and addressed to Gaza. In addition, this issue includes an interview with Iman Aoun, the co-founder and executive director of ASHTAR Theatre, who offers intimate access to their vision for this project. Aoun reflects on the creation of *The Gaza Monologues* and the challenges of theatre amid ongoing genocide. Her words shed light on the stakes of artistic production in Palestine, offering insight into how theatre can become a form of resistance, resilience and care. Together, these three sections encourage readers to bear witness to and recognise the vital role of theatre in preserving memory, envisioning justice and sustaining collective hope.

### ***The Gaza Monologues***

Initiated by ASHTAR Theatre in 2010, *The Gaza Monologues* has emerged as both a powerful theatre production and a long-lasting global movement of testimony, solidarity and resistance. The project originated in the aftermath of Israel's assault on Gaza in 2008–2009. It began as a workshop with 33 young people from Gaza City, offering them psychosocial support and helping them to transform their lived experiences of war into personal monologues. The young people who created these monologues first shared them publicly in Gaza (Ashtar Theatre, 2013). From the beginning, the project was conceived as both a theatre initiative and a political intervention. It aimed to emphasise the voices of Palestinians, presenting them not as objects of pity or abstract symbols of suffering, but as the authors of their own narrative.

At its core, *The Gaza Monologues* employs a dramaturgy of testimonial realism, based on the principles of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2008). ASHTAR Theatre has used this approach in Palestinian contexts for many years. The 33 monologues are notable for their clarity and emotional precision. Each one recounts a singular experience of terror, loss or defiant hope during the 2008–2009 bombardment. Apart from individual catharsis, these pieces aim to create a public acknowledgement of Palestinian humanity within a global discourse that routinely devalues or erases it – what Judith Butler (2009) might refer to as “grievable life”.

The movement's transnational dimension is crucial. By disseminating the monologues worldwide, ASHTAR Theatre establishes a global network of solidarity and implicates international audiences in the ethical imperative to witness and take action. Over the years, these texts have been translated into numerous languages and performed by theatre

groups, schools and activist organisations in multiple countries, including Brazil, Japan, South Africa and the United States (Ashtar Theatre, 2010). Thanks to the project's replicability and pedagogical design, it can transcend its immediate context and adapt to diverse political and theatrical landscapes while retaining its testimonial power.

What makes *The Gaza Monologues* especially significant is their ability to be reactivated in response to renewed violence. Revivals occurred in 2010, 2014 and 2021, as well as when the current genocide began. Following a call from ASHTAR Theatre (Sheehan, 2023), the monologues were performed on 29 November 2023 – the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People – in a show of solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza who were under bombardment at the time (HowlRound Theatre Commons, 2023). Rather than being a static reproduction, every revival is a reconnecting of memory to the present. It asserts the continuity of Palestinian suffering and resilience over time. In doing so, the project encourages us to remember the ongoing violence in Gaza, defying the amnesiac cycles of the international media and ensuring that the voices of those whose pain is often dismissed as background noise in geopolitical analysis are heard.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing genocide in Gaza – the most intense and prolonged campaign of ethnic cleansing in the territory since 1948 – *The Gaza Monologues* has once again become a global rallying cry. Since October 2023, artists, educators and activists worldwide have staged readings, installations and digital performances of the monologues to show their solidarity. These iterations are not mere repetitions, but urgent political acts. Each performance highlights the long-standing structural conditions of occupation and siege, contextualising the ongoing violence as part of a continuum, rather than as a sudden rupture. Many of these performances feature updated monologues and reflections from surviving members of the original 2010 group. These additions extend the scope and evidentiary function of the work, creating *The New Gaza Monologues* (Ashtar Theatre, 2024). Ali Abu Yasin, ASHTAR Theatre's trainer and director, continues to write monologues throughout the genocide. He was responsible for bringing the original production of *The Gaza Monologues* to life in Gaza. Iman Aoun, ASHTAR Theatre's executive director, translates these monologues into English and post them on the website (<https://www.gazamonologues.com/>).

This ongoing project challenges the convention that theatrical pieces are set in a specific place and time. Rather than being a single play fixed in time, *The Gaza Monologues* constitutes a living archive – a

collectively activated repertoire of testimonies operating within and beyond the proscenium. Disrupting the linearity of theatre history and state-sanctioned chronologies alike, it instead offers a palimpsest of Palestinian witnessing. In this sense, the project highlights the difference between an archive and a repertoire: the monologues endure not only in written form, but also through performances, each of which carries the weight of historical continuity and the urgency of present-day violence (Taylor, 2003).

Who should perform this living archive? This question is often asked about the monologues, particularly in a world that has witnessed significant cultural appropriation. However, Samer Al-Saber, a Palestinian theatre scholar, argues that non-Palestinians can and should perform *The Gaza Monologues*. He emphasises that students should not allow differences, such as race, nationality, religion, privilege or safety to create distance between themselves and the characters. Instead, they should focus on shared human experiences. Al-Saber stresses that the playwrights intended for these words to be spoken aloud by a wide range of people, and performing the monologues is a form of solidarity and advocacy (Al-Saber et al., 2022).

*The Gaza Monologues* is more than just a play; it is a movement. Over the last fifteen years, ASHTAR Theatre's stewardship of the project, through translations, training workshops, digital platforms and strategically chosen performance dates (such as the UN International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People), has established the group as both a cultural institution and a political catalyst (United Nations, 2010). In doing so, they highlight theatre's role as more than just aesthetic representation, but also as a means of civic engagement and transnational solidarity. It showcases memory as a form of resistance and the voices of young people as a source of political clarity, presenting theatre as a permanent space for public truth-telling. Its continued relevance during the current genocide underscores the power of performances to provide a space for grief, demand justice and convey the ongoing desire for Palestinian freedom.

### Letters to Gaza

*Dear disabled and sick people of Gaza, I think of you daily and I have been for the past, soon, half a year. The world was not made for us, the crips, the chronically ill, the mad, the immunocompromised, and now you are in circumstances that abled bodied people cannot even survive. A mass-disabling in fact. A[n] ongoing genocide. I can't believe my own eyes. My heart*

*is breaking every day. My jaw clenches in rage from the injustice. I have watched videos of deaf people who don't hear the airstrikes. Pictures of people who have no chance of climbing through the rubble. Fridges for medicine that are banned from entering by the zionist occupation forces. I can only think of the people on the other side that are operated without anesthesia and people who don't receive the medication their lives depend on. The Al Shifa hospital is currently besieged and as an immunosuppressed person, I know how dire a hospitalisation can be as a patient under normal circumstances. During war, under these circumstances, it is unfathomable. As disabled people we are often the first to go under any circumstance – people are taught to question the value of our existence. But I get to witness your strength and the true beauty of your people. We see you. We hear you. And we won't stop witnessing – even from afar.*

—Ar Utke Ācs, *Letters to Gaza*

Amid the ongoing genocide in Gaza since October 2023, ASHTAR Theatre has launched the *Letters to Gaza* initiative (Ashtar Theatre, 2023). This urgent cultural response to the recent unbearable violence was initially conceived as an open call for letters of solidarity addressed to the people of Gaza, but the project quickly evolved into a global, multilingual chorus of care, grief and resistance. Submitted by artists, students, children, educators and ordinary people from around the world, these letters have been read aloud and performed in numerous venues.

*Letters to Gaza* represents a vital addition to ASHTAR Theatre's long-standing commitment to testimonial and participatory forms. While *The Gaza Monologues* centered on the voices of young people from Gaza itself, *Letters to Gaza* reverses the direction of address: here, the voices come from outside Palestine and are directed inwards in a gesture of collective witnessing and transnational embrace. This reorientation is significant. It affirms the ethical imperative to not only listen to Palestinian voices, but also to speak out against atrocity and articulate solidarity through intimate, embodied language.

In terms of structure, the project draws on epistolary traditions that blur the boundary between private emotion and public action. The theatrical reading of letters has a long history of conveying interiority, moral clarity and political appeal. ASHTAR Theatre's approach leans into this affective potential by curating performances that are direct, emotionally unguarded and formally simple. The project's performative power lies precisely in its accessibility:



anyone can write a letter, and anyone can read one. In this sense, *Letters to Gaza* becomes a radically inclusive dramaturgy of solidarity, decentralising authorship and inviting a polyphony of voices. By doing so, it resists the monolingual logics of empire, instead embracing a decolonial ethic of plurality.

*Letters to Gaza* acts as a counter-archive to dominant narratives in the mainstream media. In a global information ecosystem where Palestinian voices are often suppressed, distorted, or ignored, these letters serve as a record of resistance. They reject dehumanisation, assert the dignity of those living (and dying) under siege and describe the genocidal conditions with clarity. In this way, the project aligns with the concept of the “civil imagination” – the ability of individuals to intervene in the machinery of state violence through acts of witnessing, correspondence and care (Azoulay, 2012).

ASHTAR Theatre’s framing of the project emphasises the performative dimension of writing. These are not passive letters, sent into the void. They are intended for reading aloud, staging and sharing. In Palestine and beyond, public readings of *Letters to Gaza* are often accompanied by moments of silence, music and ritual. Sometimes, they are performed alongside *The Gaza Monologues*, creating a dialogue between the past and the present, the inside and the outside, and between survivors and witnesses. Rather than aiming for catharsis, these performances seek to foster connection and hold space for grief and solidarity across geographical boundaries.

*Letters to Gaza* is a remarkable example of “performative resistance”, whereby acts are resistance in themselves. Through this initiative, ASHTAR Theatre shows how art can provide a means of achieving moral clarity, fostering emotional solidarity and encouraging global political action. At a time of unbearable loss, *Letters to Gaza* offers more than just words; it offers an act of reaching out, across walls, borders and silences to affirm Gaza’s enduring humanity and the world’s responsibility towards it.

*The Gaza Monologues* are a testament to the power of theatre in times of profound crisis. ASHTAR Theatre’s work offers Palestinian youth a space in which to process and perform their lived experiences, and it has also resonated internationally, sparking dialogue and solidarity across borders. Since their launch in 2010, the monologues have been performed in over 80 cities worldwide, translated into more than 20 languages and staged by schools, theatre companies and activist groups. They continue to be used in educational and human rights contexts as a poignant record of the ongoing impact of violence in Gaza. To further explore these themes, please read Part II, which features a

substantive conversation with Iman Aoun. She reflects on ASHTAR Theatre’s methodology and the evolving role of theatre under occupation.



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