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When Theatre Becomes a Refuge: The empowering journey of Al-Harah Theatre for Palestinian children

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When **theatre** becomes a **refuge** The **empowering journey** of **Al-Harah Theatre** for **Palestinian children**

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Abstract

Amid the complex political, social and economic challenges that Palestinians endure daily, there is an increasing and urgent need for creative tools that provide children with a safe space in which to express themselves freely. In a context where genocide has caused the deaths of over 80,000 people, particularly children, and injuries to over 180,000 more, trauma and fear often stifle childhood innocence. The arts become a powerful form of resistance, resilience, healing and hope. This article explores the pioneering work of Al-Harah Theatre, an organisation that has integrated drama and theatre into the fabric of Palestinian schools, treating them not merely as extracurricular artistic pursuits, but as vital instruments of psychological, educational and cultural empowerment. Drawing on over 20 years' experience of working in schools, refugee camps and community centres, this comprehensive account illustrates how theatre can be a catalyst for emotional healing, self-expression and hope in the lives of Palestinian children. Theatre and the arts have also played a crucial role in supporting women and people with disabilities across both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These creative practices have become vital in helping entire communities to confront, process and heal from the ongoing trauma and devastation caused by the Israeli occupation.

Keywords: *Arts, theatre, resistance, resilience, empowerment, cultural identity, creative expression, healing*

Theatre as a form of emotional resistance and healing

In a landscape marked by occupation, displacement and social upheaval, theatre transcends cultural enrichment to become an act of emotional resistance. For Palestinian children living amid checkpoints, violence and the trauma of loss, theatre provides a safe space in which to dream, reimagine their realities and confront their fears, which often remain unspoken. Rather than a luxury, theatre is a vital necessity, a medium through which children can reclaim agency over their narratives and emotional experiences.

Al-Harah Theatre has developed an intentional model that intertwines drama with psychosocial tools. This model effectively transforms classrooms and community spaces into safe spaces and sanctuaries of empowerment and emotional refuge. Rooted in the belief that art has the power to heal, liberate and restore children's voices, the organisation's theatre programmes aim to provide a safe haven amidst chaos and uncertainty. Safety in the midst of danger and violence. This belief has driven Al-Harah's extensive work, influencing thousands of children, women and people with disabilities across Palestine.

Al-Harah Theatre has played a major role in enabling artists in Gaza to deliver similar activities to children in displacement centres. Thousands of displaced children have benefited from drama, animation, circus, music and storytelling activities in fearful conditions and open spaces, if only for a short time. These activities have given children the opportunity to enjoy their stolen childhood, even if only temporarily.

Engaging children through creative expression

At the heart of Al-Harah's approach are drama workshops designed for children aged 6 to 12. These workshops emphasise playful yet purposeful "theatre games" that facilitate emotional expression and self-discovery. Through these exercises, children are encouraged to explore their inner worlds, experiment with different roles and scenarios, and express a range of emotions, including fear, sadness, frustration and joy, in a safe and supportive environment.

Activities often include puppet-making from recycled materials, mask-making workshops, drawing sessions focused on expressing feelings, group singing, role playing and small-scale performances. These creative activities serve multiple purposes, such as sparking imagination, fostering teamwork, strengthening communication skills and promoting emotional literacy among children. These exercises extend well beyond traditional notions of artistic



development, improving mental health, self-confidence and social interaction.

The workshops provide children with a vital outlet through which they can process their experiences. They provide a safe space in which children can freely express themselves. For instance, a child may depict their anxiety about the military presence using symbolic characters or act out stories handed down by family members, thereby reconnecting with their cultural heritage and identity. This artistic expression is therapeutic, encouraging resilience through empowerment.

For the last three years, Al-Harah Theatre has been working with more than ten schools in the Bethlehem area to create theatre clubs through special programmes that included drama training on a weekly basis, as well as activities such as recycling, puppet making, storytelling and performances about the environment and the generational gap. The aim of these programmes is to empower children and open their imaginations, as well as raise environmental awareness. The programme will continue to be sustainable by creating theatre clubs in the schools that can run independently.



A holistic and community-oriented model

What sets the Al-Harah Theatre apart is its holistic, community-centred approach. Rather than limiting its impact to weekly workshops, the programme involves families, schools, teachers and entire communities in the transformative process. The final performances, which are often profound showcases where children share their personal stories and talents, serve as both celebrations of achievement and powerful messages to the wider society.

These performances have included moving portrayals, such as a boy embodying his fear of soldiers by becoming a hero who defeats evil with compassion, and a girl depicting the destruction of her village through dramatic scenes. Such creative expressions foster children's personal growth and raise societal awareness of their lived experiences and struggles.

To monitor and evaluate the programme's ongoing impact, Al-Harah Theatre employs a variety of qualitative tools, including observation logs, interviews and group reflections. Although formal

standardised tests are not used, ongoing field data suggests that most children participating in activities demonstrate significant improvements in confidence, verbal and non-verbal expression, social connectivity and emotional regulation.

Expanding impact across Palestine

Between 2023 and 2024, Al-Harah Theatre held more than 350 drama sessions in schools in the West Bank of Palestine and provided support to artists in displacement centres in Gaza. These sessions engaged over 2,000 children. Providing psychological relief and reinforcing cultural identity and community solidarity, the sessions were vital amid escalating violence, genocide and a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The situation has also deteriorated in the northern West Bank, particularly in the Tulkarem and Jenin refugee camps. Over 30,000 people have been displaced as a result, many of whom are now living in villages, open spaces and makeshift shelters across the region. With limited access to basic necessities, families continue to share overcrowded spaces, struggling to find safety and comfort amid instability.

Among the programme's most impactful initiatives were interactive performances such as *A New Idea*, which focused on children's rights and empowerment, and *The Old Man Sem'an*,¹ a poetic exploration of the intertwined relationship between Palestinian farmers and their land, underscoring themes of dispossession, belonging and resilience.

The programme expanded its scope by training teachers in drama-based pedagogies, establishing theatre clubs led by these educators and providing therapeutic drama sessions specifically designed for children with disabilities. This expansion affirmed the organisation's commitment to inclusivity and capacity building within the educational sector, ensuring sustainability beyond the direct involvement of Al-Harah Theatre staff.

Theatre as a community and human experience

For theatre practitioners, the work transcends professional obligations; it embodies a deeply human engagement that rekindles hope and fuels a shared vision of a better future. The children's ability to generate positive energy, imaginative narratives and resilience reinforces the transformative power of art as a social and psychological tool.

As previously mentioned, Al-Harah Theatre expanded its activities in refugee camps and marginalised areas, particularly in Gaza, to include drama, circus arts and music workshops conducted in displacement centres. These events served as cultural



and humanitarian responses, providing children with rare moments of joy and play, and an opportunity for emotional release, despite the shadow of bombardment and trauma.

Furthermore, these workshops created employment opportunities for artists who were facing high unemployment rates. By providing creative professionals with a meaningful way to apply their skills within their communities, the project became a dual support platform, empowering children and enabling young artists and educators. Over 40 artists in Gaza, and over 15 in the West Bank, have been employed to run artistic workshops and activities for children, women and people with disabilities.

A model for sustainable change

Al-Harah Theatre is an advocate for the deep embedding of the performing arts within Palestinian educational policy frameworks, with the aim of establishing theatre clubs in schools and securing reliable, long-term funding. The model involves forming academic partnerships with local schools and colleges, and potentially universities, to facilitate the establishment of theatre clubs within their curricula. Al-Harah Theatre and other performing arts organisations that are members of the Palestinian Performing Arts Network² are also aiming to make theatre a normal and essential part of community life.

Recently, a dedicated clinical psychologist was integrated into Al-Harah to co-develop trauma-informed interventions through theatre, targeting children, women and people with disabilities. This addition furthers the organisation's holistic vision by ensuring that psychological care complements artistic expression, establishing an interdisciplinary approach to healing and empowerment.

A stage for resistance, healing and hope

The experience of Al-Harah Theatre powerfully demonstrates that theatre can become inseparable from the social and cultural fabric of Palestinian life, not merely as intermittent projects, but as continuous tools for resistance, healing and envisioning a future homeland. In the face of occupation and displacement, theatre provides Palestinians with a vital space in which to reclaim their narratives, challenge despair and nurture a generation with the capacity for self-expression, resistance and reconstruction. The stage becomes a place where hope is cultivated, voices are amplified and communities are strengthened, offering more than just a platform for stories.

Conclusion

The inspiring journey of Al-Harah Theatre affirms a fundamental truth: Palestinian children deserve more than just an education – they deserve a voice,



a stage and a safe space in which to dream freely. Through the power of theatre, these children find refuge not only from the external hardships they face, but also from internal silencing and isolation. This refuge nurtures hope and resilience, enabling them to share their stories, envision brighter futures and reclaim their universal right to a childhood filled with safety and dignity.

In a world overshadowed by injustice and suppression, the Al-Harah Theatre is a beacon of hope, offering a healing and empowering model of art that connects people. It is a source of strength and renewal for Palestinian children and communities seeking creative expression.

None of this can be achieved without the support of members of the international community who respect human rights and freedom of expression. Greater solidarity and collaboration are essential to ensure the sustainability of the Al-Harah Theatre³ and its programmes serving the community, especially children, in Palestine. Practical acts of solidarity can take many forms, such as supporting Palestinian cultural organisations through partnerships or funding, inviting their productions to international festivals, sharing their stories to amplify Palestinian voices, advocating for artists' freedom of movement and volunteering skills in education, the arts or communications. Every gesture of support helps to keep the stage alive as a space for resilience, dignity and hope.

Notes

1. To find out more about the performance, go to: <https://alharah.org/children-and-family/the-old-man-seman-play-2/>
2. To learn more about the Palestinian Performing Arts Network, you can visit: <https://www.ppan.ps/welcome/index/en>
3. Editor's note: For more information about Al-Harah Theatre and its scope of work, refer to their website: <https://alharah.org/>

Marina Barham is the co-founder and general director of Al-Harah Theatre and the Al-Harah Performing Arts Training Centre (PARC). She is also Vice President of the Palestinian Performing Arts Network, the Euromed in Culture Network and the TAMASI Collective for Performing Arts Organisations in the MENA region. She is a prominent cultural figure in Palestine, the Middle East and Europe. In 2017, she became a Fellow of ISPA and the Salzburg Global Seminar. She is also a cultural management trainer in the Arab world. She frequently participates in European conferences, festivals and events, discussing the importance of the performing arts in Palestine and the Arab world. She has produced numerous theatre productions and co-productions, managed and organised several international, regional and local tours, and coordinated several Euro-Med projects funded by the EU. She has also organised the International Theatre Festival for Children and the “Yalla Yalla” Street Festival in Palestine.

George Matar is a dedicated Palestinian cultural activist with extensive experience in the performing arts. He is the production manager at Al-Harah Theatre and the executive director of the Baladi Centre for Culture and Arts in Beit Jala, Palestine. He is currently studying for an MA in Community Development at Birzeit University. He holds a BA in Business Administration and a diploma in Marketing from Bethlehem University, as well as professional diplomas in Cultural and Arts Management from the Al-Harah Performing Arts Training Centre (PARC), and in NGO Management from Birzeit University. With a strong background in theatre, he has overseen the production of over 50 plays at Al-Harah Theatre and produced and choreographed numerous folkloric performances for the Baladi Centre. His deep insight into the cultural landscape of Palestine and the Arab region is complemented by international experience, including an internship at the Edinburgh International Festival in Scotland in 2017 and production management training at Piccolo Teatro in Milan, Italy, in 2016. He is also the main coordinator of the biannual Palestine International Theatre Festival for Children and the “Yalla Yalla” Street Festival, both of which are organised by Al-Harah Theatre.

