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The Gaza Monologues

Part II: Iman Aoun in conversation with Marina Johnson

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This interview is the second part of our focus on *The Gaza Monologues* and ASHTAR Theatre in the current issue (see also *The Gaza Monologues*: Part I, pp. 92–97). Specifically, Marina Johnson talks to Iman Aoun, the co-founder and executive director of ASHTAR Theatre, a leading Palestinian theatre company based in Ramallah which is recognised for its commitment to social justice through performance. One of its best-known projects is *The Gaza Monologues*, a powerful series of testimonies written by young people in Gaza in the aftermath of the 2008–2009 Israeli offensive. The interview further elaborates the discussion of ASHTAR Theatre's work and Aoun's artistic and political vision.

Keywords: *Theatre of the Oppressed, political theatre, memory and identity, transnational performance networks, community-based theatre*

Marina Johnson: *As both a theatre artist and an activist, what were your thoughts on theatre, and specifically The Gaza Monologues,¹ once the genocide began? Did you immediately decide to start working with them again? Could you talk me through your thought process?*

Iman Aoun: Every time war breaks out in Gaza, those of us in the West Bank feel powerless because, although Gaza is close by, it is also far away. We are unable to reach the people we work with there, people who are very dear to us, and we cannot keep them safe or help them get to safety in times of war. However, we feel we have a duty: if we cannot help them physically, we can at least give them a stage through which they can raise their voices to the world and tell their story. We provide a stage through which they can convey their messages and show the world what life is like for them when they are under attack. When the genocide started, we felt that... I mean, this was the sixth time it had happened – it is not the first time. Each time it gets worse, and this time it was clear from the beginning that it was going to be hell. The idea [to create an open call to perform *The Gaza Monologues* in 2023] came about because the

world started to react differently this time. People were feeling, thinking and talking about how brutal the Palestinians were towards the Israelis [on 7 October 2023, while ignoring the history of occupation and assault on Palestinians]. I wanted to present the world with a controversial narrative that highlights the fact that what is happening is not happening out of the blue. It is a continuous genocidal campaign by the Israeli occupation against our people since 1917, with the aim of eradicating the people and taking the land. We are familiar with the branding used by the Israeli nation: "A land without a people for a people without a land".² They tried to turn this forgery into a reality. As Palestinian activists and artists, we wanted to show that there is a different narrative that deserves to be told and heard. The fact is that the Palestinians really do face these horrors over and over again, and not because we are violent by nature. At ASHTAR Theatre, we already have *The Gaza Monologues*, which tell an alternative story. Stories speak to people's hearts and minds, so we wanted to share these stories with people around the world once more. That's why we have sent them out to inform the world that this has been happening since 2008–2009, during the initial attack. It was

also important to highlight that young people and children are the most affected and have a completely different perception of the situation, and we wanted this perception to be heard.

M.J.: *In November 2023, the world responded to ASHTAR Theatre's call to perform the monologues. While I was in Palestine during the genocide, I found out about The New Gaza Monologues, which were written recently by the original authors.³ How have you stayed in touch with the authors and how were the new monologues written? The original monologues were produced under the guidance of Ali Abu Yassin. Was he involved in The New Gaza Monologues?*

I.A.: Ali was one of our students and has since become our colleague. He is a prominent figure in Gaza, working as an artist, actor, director and dramaturg. In 2010, he and I worked closely together, with me supporting him with the training and helping to develop his ideas until they were ready for the stage. He was the key figure on the ground and I was the person behind the scenes, if you will. Ali worked with us both before and after *The Gaza Monologues*, training young people. The authors of those monologues received an additional three years of training, after which they graduated and got their certificates. They then started working with us on different projects, so we have remained in contact with them ever since. Of course, we lost touch with some people as they grew up, got married and started new jobs. In 2023, we made a special effort to reconnect with everyone, but unfortunately we were unable to reach some of them. However, we have remained in constant contact with many of the authors throughout various projects and different training sessions. After completing their training, they started teaching the next generation, supporting them through wars in Gaza using the same methodologies.

When the international community began performing *The Gaza Monologues* during the genocidal war on Gaza, people kept asking about the original authors. To date, we have been in contact with 22 of them, and we've held several Zoom meetings. Many of the authors are in daily contact with us. During one of these Zoom meetings, we asked them to write another testimony about how they feel, since the world has been hearing their voices and responding to their monologues. Twenty-one of them wrote new monologues. Well, 20 of these are monologues that you can read, but one person submitted a blank piece of paper with tears on it, which speaks for itself.

Before this, however, there were always other projects, such as the 2021 documentary, *The Gaza Monologues: Ten Years and the Dream Continues*.⁴

This short film was about the writers facing a double siege: the health-related siege due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Israeli-imposed siege. Twenty-three of the original authors participated in the film. They attended a five-day workshop and were featured in the documentary. For each and every one of them, writing again at this stage in their lives meant taking a different approach. Many of them wrote out of pain more than anything else. Now they have families, and their fears have grown, because they are concerned not only for themselves and their parents, but also for their children and about Gaza as a whole. Writing provides some relief from trauma and offers an outlet.

M.J.: *What you said about the international community becoming really invested in the writers resonated with me. I have directed several productions of The Gaza Monologues in the [United] States and the writers' names are imprinted on my mind. When I was watching the new short film collection, From Ground Zero,⁵ I noticed that Tamer Najam had directed one of the short films. Having read his testimonial in The Gaza Monologues, when I saw his name, I immediately thought, "I know him!" This is a testament to the power of The Gaza Monologues. Thanks to the project created by you and ASHTAR Theatre, there are people who have never been to Gaza but feel a deep sense of connection with the people of Gaza, and this connection motivates them to continue advocating for Palestine.*

I.A.: The main aim of *The Gaza Monologues* was to advocate for political change and push governments to alter their standpoints and decisions in order to stop this genocide and finally deliver justice to Palestine. For me, the most important part of engaging audiences around the world is that people started to say that they understood, and that *The Gaza Monologues* became an extra tool to help them speak up for the people of Gaza and tell their stories first-hand. That's why the monologues started being used in demonstrations. Hopefully, with a long-term approach, Palestine will be liberated and Gaza will be safe under Palestinian leadership, and nothing worse will happen. I would like to see all the activists, artists and students who performed these monologues visit Gaza to show their support and engage with the people, so that they feel this duty is an ongoing commitment until justice is served.

M.J.: *I love that prospect. Earlier, you talked about how Israel brands itself as a nation. The Gaza Monologues also presents Palestine in different ways. Can you talk about the idea of nation branding, which I know is something that you explore in your scholarly work?*

I.A.: Every nation needs to position itself in the minds of the people globally, because we are fighting a fight that is not just with bombs and artillery, but also with technology. Currently, branding Palestine and Gaza is also keeping the place, keeping the people and the story strongly alive in the minds of the public. Branding works both ways. It involves investing in a place, but also receiving something in return, whether you are a tourist, an investor, an artist, and so on. Palestine has a very rich history, culture and heritage, but the international community does not really have the opportunity to experience this, because when they visit as tourists, they only see the Israeli perspective. This means that they don't really integrate with us, understand us or see Palestine through our eyes and vision. That's precisely why I want to change this narrative, and show them the beauty, richness and heroic moments of my nation and this place. The people of Gaza and their brand revolves around resistance, resilience and *sumud* (steadfastness), as does that of people of Palestine as a whole, because now we cannot only talk about Gaza. We are also talking about Jenin, Tulkarem and Nablus, and all the refugee camps that have been safeguarding the Palestinian story and cause over the years. This is why it is important to recognise that some history is recorded in books, but other histories are embodied in people's lives.

M.J.: *That's beautiful, Iman. Building on the idea of branding, you launched the Letters to Gaza campaign. I loved the call for submissions when I read it, because we have gained so much from The Gaza Monologues, and Letters to Gaza provides an opportunity for people to respond. Where did the idea for this project come from, and how do you think it was received?*

I.A.: *Letters to Gaza*⁶ was a response to *The Gaza Monologues* and the massive global impact it had. We wanted to give something back to these people, but it's not a trade. It's more about growing together towards a shared goal: enabling people to connect through writing and ideas. The group in Gaza hasn't heard all the letters yet. They haven't seen all the presentations, but the fact that people were able to respond and that the people in Gaza were able to read the letters has made them feel more valued. When you are in such a dire situation, it is important to have genuine support and to feel that you matter to someone, that your life is worth living and is worth fighting for and is worth saving. Otherwise, it becomes easy to give up and say, "Why should I try? We're all going to die anyway, so just bomb us all". Frustration can take over your mind. However, when people are connected to you and care about

you, it creates a space for a stronger fighting spirit and resistance.

M.J.: *That makes perfect sense, and I appreciate that you said it is not transactional. Because I think that the transactional idea is very Western. What this is about is helping each other in different ways, all in the name of liberation. Is there anything else you would like to say to people reading this?*

I.A.: The only thing I would like to add is that I hope we will see a version of *The Gaza Monologues* in my lifetime where the authors talk about how liberated they are, how beautiful life is now and how everything that they have lived through and suffered is behind them.

M.J.: *I look forward to that.*

Notes

1. For a copy of *The Gaza Monologues* in different languages, please visit: <https://www.gazamonologues.com/copy-of-team>
2. This phrase originated from 19th-century British Christian Zionist circles. For more information, refer to an article by A. M. Garfinkle, titled "On the Origin, Meaning, Use and Abuse of a Phrase" (<https://doi.org/10.1080/00263209108700876>).
3. For *The New Gaza Monologues* in Arabic and in English, visit <https://www.gazamonologues.com/s-projects-basic>
4. You can watch the short film here: <https://www.gazamonologues.com/videos>
5. *From Ground Zero* (2024) is a collection of 22 short films made in Gaza, initiated by Palestinian director Rashid Masharawi. More information can be found here: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt32606918/>
6. To read and download the letters, use this link: https://www.gazamonologues.com/_files/ugd/07c7f7_ffb6e6617e2943ad9b5283f49964079e.pdf

Iman Aoun is an award-winning Palestinian theatre artist who started her professional career with the El-Hakawati Theatre Company in 1984. In 1991, she co-founded ASHTAR for Theatre Productions and Training, becoming its artistic director until 2021, when she took on the role of the executive director. Her work often focuses on grassroots movements, indigenous people, youth and women's empowerment in the fight against occupation, gender disparity, international donor agendas, corruption and political stagnation. She has collaborated with, engaged with and presented at a number of well-known international organisations including the United Nations, UNESCO, UNRWA, Care International, Cairo American University, La MaMa Theatre in New York, the Globe Theatre in London, Northumbria University and Hamad Ben Khalifa University, among others. A recognised feminist, she became the Palestine Coordinator of the One Billion Rising Campaign (2014), a global initiative by V-Day, fighting violence against women. She also led the "Letters to Gaza" solidarity campaign in response to the genocide in Gaza (2024). During her nearly four-decade career in theatre, she has received prestigious awards from the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (1996), UN-Equity-Now-USA (2000), the Cairo Youth Regional Festival (2005), Algiers Arab Theatre Festival (2009), the Yemeni Ministry of Culture (2010), CEC Arts-Link (2013), the Palestinian Ministry of Culture (2014, 2017) and the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs (2016). She was a finalist in the Gilder Coigney International Theatre Award by LPTW (2020), and her debut documentary film, *The Gaza Monologues: Ten Years and the Dream Continues* won multiple international awards. She has co-written three books on theatre training and ten short plays. She is a founder and board member of the Palestinian Performing Arts Network.

Marina Johnson is a PhD candidate at Stanford University with PhD minors in Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies and the Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. She was a 2021–2022 Graduate Public Service Fellow with the Stanford Haas Center and the 2022–2023 co-artistic director of the Nitery Experimental Theatre. While in Palestine, she co-directed *Al Manshiyya* (Palestinian National Theatre El Hakawati), *Al Akhbar M3 Manar*, *Nazira* and *Qirshekl Abyad* (Al-Harah Theatre), and led workshops at ASHTAR Theatre. At Stanford, she directed the TAPS Winter 2024 mainstage *The Wolves*. She regularly works on community-engaged theatre projects in the Bay Area. She has worked as a dramaturg with Golden Thread Productions, Silk Road Rising and Penn State University, as well as on several Stanford mainstage productions. Select additional directing credits include: *The Shroud Maker* (International Voices Project), *Shakespeare's Sisters* (Stanford) and *The Palestinian Youth Monologues* (Stanford). She co-hosts *Kunafa and Shay*, a MENA/SWANA theatre podcast produced by HowlRound Theatre Commons. She is also a member of Silk Road Rising's Polycultural Institute. She has trained with Theatrical Intimacy Education, the Society of American Fight Directors, the SITI Company, the Kennedy Center Directing Lab and the Chicago Directors Lab. She holds a Certificate in Critical Consciousness and Anti-Oppressive Praxis from Stanford University, an MFA in Directing from the University of Iowa and a BA and a BS from Penn State University. Her scholarship has appeared or is forthcoming in *Theatre/Practice*, *TDR*, *Theatre Topics*, *Arab Stages*, *Milestones in Staging Contemporary Genders and Sexualities* (Routledge) and *Women's Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance, Volume I: Performers* (Bloomsbury). For more information, visit <https://marina-johnson.com>