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Arts in the service of promoting values The experience of establishing the artist group “We” in Gaza during the war

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Alaa Al Jabari, Mahdi Karira, Fidaa Ziad
in conversation with Jenny Karaviti



As part of the 2024 World Theatre/Drama & Education Day events, the Northern Greece Office of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) organised a special event to show solidarity with Palestine. On 7 December 2024 at 11 a.m., they connected virtually with “We” (*Nahnu* in Arabic), a recently formed group of Palestinian artists who are displaced in southern Gaza. The artists first introduced their team by answering questions about how their group was formed, their experiences as artists during the war and their writing, visual arts and puppet theatre workshops in Gaza. Photographs and other material from the group’s workshops and performances were shown during the presentation. Afterwards, members of the Northern Greece Office, namely Jenny Karaviti as moderator of the discussion, Irini Marna and Antigone Tzarbo-poulou, had a brief conversation with the artists.

Keywords: Arts, artists during the war, Palestine, Gaza, theatre workshops, puppetry, visual arts, writing, education, testimonies, psychological issues, social impact

Jenny Karaviti on behalf of TENet-Gr: *Welcome! We would like to hear about the unique circumstances that inspired you to create this artist group in Gaza.*

Fidaa Ziad: Good morning. My name is Fidaa Ziad and I am a writer from Gaza. Recently, some friends of mine who are involved in the arts and I noticed that there is a lot of discussion *about* Gaza, but not *with* Gaza. So we decided to form a small group and named it "We" (*Nahnu* in Arabic). We considered calling it "We" to emphasise that we are talking about ourselves. Through discussion, we agreed that art is a way for us to deal with everyday problems, psychological issues and everything we have experienced because of the genocide that occurred after 7 October. This group and this effort started with three people. Our friend Alaa Al Jabari is a painter; Mahdi Karira is a theatre director who makes puppets. And I am Fidaa Ziad and I participate in the group as a writer. First, I will talk about my role as a writer and then my colleagues will talk about theirs.

J.K.: *In what ways can art help people who have endured such hardship during wartime?*

F.Z.: The tools we have are language, writing, theatre and painting. We use these means first to help ourselves and then to help the world around us, particularly women, children and girls. Art is therefore our means of dealing with the suffering we experienced during the genocide and of highlighting our damaged national identity. During the war, the occupying army tried to eliminate everything human within us. They aimed to strip us of all our human characteristics. In response to being treated as if we were human animals, we decided to create art to show that we are not.

J.K.: *Your involvement in this group relates to writing. Fidaa, was your writing spontaneous or did you follow any guidelines?*

F.Z.: When I started writing, I had two possible directions for my writing. The first was to write in my diary every day and record what I went through due to the displacement and the loss of my loved ones. I recorded all of this in a page titled "Times of surprise and attempts of salvation". I created my social media pages under this title and used them to document my daily life. My second goal was to document the stories of women who had lost their loved ones. I wanted to record how this loss had impacted their psychology.

J.K.: *Could you tell us more about these recordings? How did the women respond?*



F.Z.: The photos above is from a session in which women who have lost their loved ones talk. These sessions took place in an area in the centre of Gaza. The discussions were conducted in a question-and-answer style. The aim was to measure and discuss what we had lost and how our experiences had affected us. We wanted to document our feelings, especially the changes in our emotional world resulting from our losses. During these sessions, we tried to provide ourselves with emotional first aid to help us overcome what we had experienced. In the end, despite each woman having lost her own



loved one, they supported each other and were able to offer advice.

J.K.: *What problems and experiences did the women talk about in their testimonies?*

F.Z.: These sessions captured the social impact of how these women lived during and after the war. From our recordings, we identified that the first problem we would face after the war was the large number of young widows with young children. Secondly, we discovered that many women would lose their support network. In our society, this support is usually provided by men within the family.

Another thing we did in those sessions was to record each woman's personal experiences. We recorded 76 stories from women who had lost a great deal: their homes, their loved ones and much more. These testimonies cover five key things: what we lost; what we fear; our need for security; our experience of displacement; and who we feel has helped us. What we are trying to do is to first create an audio library and then to write these testimonies down in literary form in a book.

As the "We" team, we are trying to create a space through which we can communicate with the world. We want to speak to the outside world from within Gaza. We would like to thank the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network very much for this opportunity.

J.K.: *We will now hear from your colleague, Mahdi Karira, who will talk about his own work.*

Mahdi Karira: Thank you all for your attention. Fidaa spoke very beautifully about us, using lovely words. First of all, I would like to ask you to forgive her for her vocabulary. Because of the war, and because she worked with women who had lost family members – sometimes entire families – we created a language that evokes sadness and uses heavy vocabulary.

Generally, I work in theatre, specialising in puppetry with marionettes that are operated by strings. I also work as a teacher trainer, demonstrating how teachers can deliver lessons through theatre – what we call active education.

J.K.: *Have you worked in puppetry for many years?*

M.K.: Before the war, I ran a puppet workshop with around 80 puppets. I was the first person to introduce this art form to the Gaza Strip, because it was previously unknown here. This art form arrived in Gaza 15 years ago. I also had a group that I called "Nimata". So far, I have created ten theatre performances based on the general theme of family. I also had a mobile theatre before the war, but when the war started, I was forced to flee and go to southern Gaza, where I went without taking anything with me from the theatre or my workshop.

J.K.: *How did you cope with losing all your puppets?*

M.K.: During my time in southern Gaza, I did not lose my passion for making toys. Something was always chasing me and I could hear a voice inside me constantly saying: "Make a toy, make a toy!" But how can you make a toy when you don't have any materials? My audience has always been children. So, I tried to find a new way to make toys.

J.K.: *Did you find any new materials in southern Gaza?*

M.K.: The only raw materials around me were tin cans, the ones that were sent to us as aid. They were everywhere. During the genocide, I tried to make puppets out of them. Through this act, I tried to document our difficult daily life. I wanted to show the hunger, the thirst, the heat and the cold, and the fact that we had nowhere to sleep or take refuge. I also wanted to talk about living in the tents and about all the terrible things we experienced. At some point, I felt that the Gaza Strip was like a big tin can that someone could heat up, cool down or hit ruthlessly. That's how it felt to live in the Gaza Strip. The entire Gaza Strip was like a large tin can!

J.K.: *The image of the Gaza Strip as a large tin can being heated and tossed around brutally is a powerful metaphor for what your people are experiencing. It is also very real, as you describe the tin cans that surround your everyday life. They also represent one of the few acts of universal solidarity that you have experienced. These puppets are therefore very significant to you! How did you feel when you made them?*

M.K.: During my displacement, I made my first three puppets out of tin cans and other recycled and re-used materials that I found around me. However, after making them, I felt that they did not satisfy my passion for puppetry enough, and that they should also have a social role in the world around me, where we were all suffering together. Initially, I was concerned that my audience of children might not accept the puppets because they were made from tin cans, and that they might not like them. The truth is that making puppets out of tin cans is a very laborious and difficult process, and it is painful. I didn't enjoy making puppets out of tin cans at all because it reminded me of the war and the difficult times my family and I were going through. While you are making the puppet, it is a very difficult time, but once you have finished and see the completed puppet, your feelings change.

J.K.: *How did the children and the spectators react to these tin puppets?*

M.K.: What gave me courage was that the children liked what I had made. They found them interesting and liked them! They began to notice the peculiarities of each puppet, saying things like, "This one is made of a fish can! This one is made of peas".

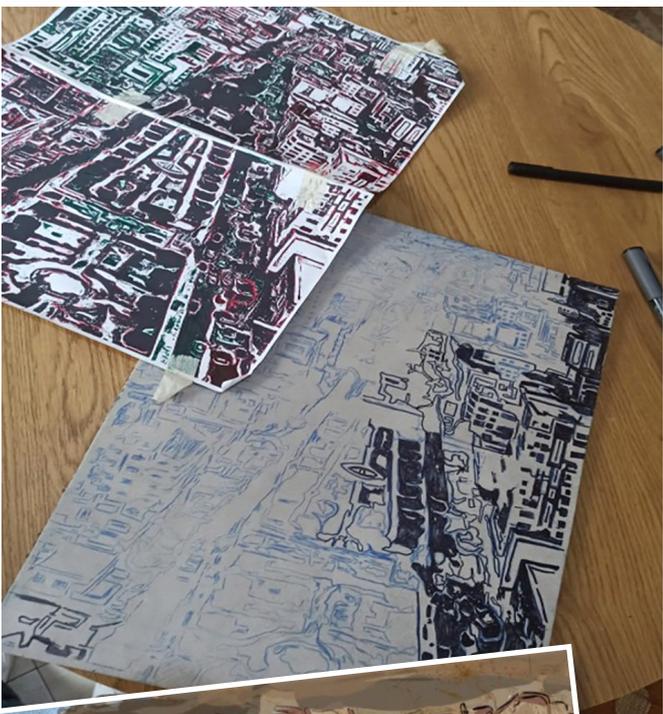
One little girl who had been displaced to the south said to me, "Give me that doll, so I can take it home and sleep with it, because I left my own doll in Gaza City". It was touching to hear that from a little girl.



During another theatrical performance, after I had set up the puppets, a woman came over to see how they were made. When she found out what they were made of, she said to me, "We... a people! It's a sin to die! We are a people who will never die!"

J.K.: *So, have you made any new puppets and started putting on theatre shows for children?*

M.K.: Yes, I have lots of puppets, and I perform shows for people in camps and shelters. It's necessary! I need to do it. I have now built a mobile theatre and made 25 puppets. I have created three theatrical performances and I travel throughout southern Gaza, performing for children. My puppets depict various



characters. There is a mother, a father, and many others. Recently, I also created Hoca, also known as Zoha, who is a traditional figure in our culture and history.

J.K.: *Do you believe that the arts can play a significant role in supporting people affected by war, especially children? How can the arts help?*

M.K.: We lost many things in this war, but the most important thing we lost was our education. By losing school, we lost our education altogether. School is about more than just learning. It is a whole society that teaches children and parents order, routine and behaviour. We lost all of that in the war.

At the “We” group, we strive to convey various messages to society so that people can learn through theatre what they missed out on at school. My dream is to have a bus that doubles as a mobile theatre. Inside, I would have all the tools I need to put on theatre performances for children in all areas. As well as theatre, children would be able to learn painting, participate in a choir and attend workshops and exhibitions. In general, children would be able to take part in a variety of activities to develop different skills. Regarding these dreams of mine, I would like to say that I am a simple person. We are simple people. Among us, there are the strong and the weak. There are good people and bad people. But what sets us all apart is our strength and determination. I believe that my dream will soon become a reality.

I believe that what the women, men and children of Gaza need is to see beauty around them. The things we will show them will provide that beauty. I feel this way every time I go to perform at a camp or elsewhere. You see, people come, children come and they embrace theatre. They love theatre! I would like to

send you lots of photos of the theatre performances I did during the war. In one performance, a little boy came up to a puppet and whispered something in her ear. I was very curious to know what he said.

J.K.: *Thank you very much, Mahdi. Now, let's hear from your colleague, Alaa Al Jabari.*

Alaa Al Jabari: First, let me introduce myself. My name is Alaa Al Jabari. I am 29 years old. Although I studied Health Unit Management at university, I have loved painting and have had a talent for it ever since I was young. In recent years, I have focused on studying art, particularly digital painting, which I taught myself. Recently, I have started creating comic stories.

Before the war, some girlfriends and I had created a digital magazine. It was almost ready for printing when, unfortunately, the war broke out. I have also worked as a digital creator with journalists on various websites. Before the war, I had recently been working on creating children's fairy tales. I went to Egypt to attend a seminar. This was the first time I had ever travelled outside of Gaza!

J.K.: *How would you describe your role as a visual artist in the current circumstances?*

A.A.J.: I currently work for an organisation as a digital arts manager. At the moment, I am placing a lot of emphasis on the workshops I run for children. One of these is called "Returning Home". During these workshops, we hear about the children's experiences and view their creations. We listen to their questions, and we try to understand how they feel, and how they experience this situation. We don't focus on what they produce or draw, but on the process. In essence, these workshops provide children with initial psychological support during the war.

J.K.: *Is your work related to the stories about people in Gaza?*

A.A.J.: Yes. As part of my work, I have recorded displaced people's testimonies, detailing how they lived before and how they live now. I have created all these stories and can send them to you – I have already sent them to Fidaa. I have also worked with her to record testimonies about the losses suffered by women during the war. Currently, I am developing a character for this team. We have created a character that we will call Sumaqie.

J.K.: *Could you tell us more about your experience of collaborating with the Nahnu team, and about what it was like to be an artist during the war?*

A.A.J.: We work together as a team. Fidaa specialises in writing, I specialise in painting and Mahdi specialises in theatre. We all hope to create beautiful things together. The difficulties we faced in the war were truly many. I feel that I was someone else before and am someone else now. The difficulties were enormous. Firstly, we had no electricity or internet. Secondly, we were displaced many times. I was displaced seven times during the war! I lost many things in the war. I lost my paints! I lost my paintings. I lost my entire previous life! It's not just material things we have lost, but psychological things too. Despite all the difficulties we are going through, however, we are strong, and we will achieve our dreams and accomplish something beautiful and significant at some point. One more thing I want to mention is how children are affected. Yes, they are suffering! What they experience is terrifying! But there is also hope and beauty!

Jenny Karaviti: *Thank you very much for your presentation, and for all the amazing things we learned from you today. Thank you also for the hope you represent for our world. The most inspiring people in the world are the true artists with real influence.*

Discussion

Fidaa Ziad: In response to the question of whether we feel safe, I would like to share our perspective. We never feel safe. We create our own sense of safety through the things we do, the arts we are involved in and what we write. That is how we achieve a sense of safety. The answer to the question "How can you be a writer or an artist in Gaza?" is that it is a necessity. This necessity creates many things. I would like to ask whether the organisers of this event are from Northern Greece.

Jenny Karaviti: *TENet-Gr covers the whole of Greece. Although our headquarters are in Athens, it was the Office of Northern Greece that took the initiative.*

F.Z.: As I am from northern Gaza and you are from Northern Greece, I felt like I was back home today. That's how I felt around you.

J.K.: *Please know that people from the islands, as well as from many other places, including Athens, Corfu, Samos, Alexandroupoli, Ioannina and Thebes, are listening to you.*

F.Z.: We would like to thank all the Greeks who joined us today from all over Greece. To answer your question about how you can help us, please contact our friend Auza, who is our representative



in Greece. This will enable us to support the local artists and help them to continue their work. As I understood it yesterday, the main activity taking place today is at a school in Greece. Is that correct?

J.K.: *Yes, it is a TENet-Gr activity, but it is being held at a school that is hosting us. What you can see on screen is the school's main event hall.*

(At this point, members from the Northern Greece Office, who have been watching the presentation, join the conversation.)

Eirini Marna: We are very moved. Thank you.

F.Z.: Now that we are in a school, would the children from Gaza like to exchange letters with children from Greece and share their experiences? If there are any teachers who would like to work with us on this project, please let us know.

Antigone Tzarbopoulou: Last year, a class at this school wrote poems inspired by *The Gaza Monologues*.

E.M.: We can make a connection. There is interest.

J.K.: *We have discussed the idea with Fidaa. It concerns teenagers, and we believe that we can make progress with it through TENet-Gr. Our colleagues here who have children aged 13–17 will also be interested in this project. We can think of it as a TENet-Gr project. Anyone interested can contact them.*

(Information is then provided about TENet-Gr and their theatre-in-education activities.)

Mahdi Karira: I am very pleased with your response. We essentially do the same work, so we need to collaborate. I train teachers in theatre, Fidaa is already a teacher, and I met Hala at a training seminar for theatre educators.

J.K.: *Great! So, this is the beginning of our collaboration!*

M.K.: Paulo Freire tried to ground theatre in its social context and incorporate it into education. In Palestine, there was a figure similar to Freire: Khalil Sakakini. He was the first person to use theatre for educational purposes in the 1930s and continued to do so until 1952. He was a leading figure in the Palestinian educational movement prior to 1948. We studied Sakakini at school too, and we will send you a documentary about him.

J.K.: *We would be very grateful if you could send us any information you have on this matter. Thank you very much. One consequence of colonialism is the erasure of culture and art. We are very moved to hear this. Some of us are already aware of this, but it is very difficult to find information about the East in the West, particularly with regard to its culture, past, present and future. Thank you very much. Freedom for Palestine!*

M.K.: Thank you, too. Freedom for Palestine!

Translation from Arabic to Greek by Nawzat Hadid

Transcription, editing and translation from Greek by Mary Kaldi

Fidaa Ziad is a writer, Arabic teacher and cultural activist. Born in Gaza City in 1987, she now lives in the Gaza Strip. She studied Arabic language and literature, teaching methodology and literary criticism. Her work has been published on numerous literary platforms. She organises cultural and educational activities, and has helped establish cultural groups in Gaza. She is currently focusing her work on recording and documenting the experiences of bereaved women in Gaza. She is studying the impact of loss and grief on women's personalities during wartime with the aim of promoting storytelling as a means of providing psychological relief for women. A collection of poems by Fidaa has recently been published in Greece. Entitled *I Left My Face in the Mirror*, this bilingual edition (Arabic-Greek) features cover art by Alaa al-Jaabari and translation by Nawzat Hadid.

Alaa Kamal Al Jabari is a digital graphic designer and comic art instructor who works across multiple platforms. She studied comics, as well as health services administration and management. She is the expressive arts coordinator at the Paths to Return Home workshops. She created a comic magazine, but its publication was prevented by the war. She has also created six videos documenting the stories of displaced people in Gaza, employing digital design techniques. She uses art as a form of psychological first aid, running drawing, comic book and creative expression workshops for children to provide them with psychological support during the war.

Mahdi Karira is a puppeteer, director and trainer of active learning strategies. He is also the founder of the Puppet Theatre in Gaza City, which is located at the Holst Centre of the Gaza Municipality. Prior to the ongoing war, he had directed around 15 plays, but his theatre and puppet workshop were completely destroyed in the conflict. However, the lack of a workshop and materials did not dampen his passion for theatre and puppetry; instead, he started recycling food aid cans provided during the war in Gaza. He now uses these cans to make puppets and create performances that promote values and address the social issues imposed by the war. In this way, he demonstrates the therapeutic value of art and its ability to provide psychological relief in times of crisis and war.

Jenny Karaviti is a teacher of Greek language and literature, drama pedagogue and writer. She studied History and Archaeology at the University of Athens in Greece, before completing postgraduate studies in Theatre and Theatre/Drama Pedagogy at the universities of Essex and Royal Holloway in the United Kingdom, respectively. She is a founding and active member of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr). As an author, she has published the poetry collection *Ms Sante* (2024) and contributed to the book *The Orange with the Grenade Pin: Theatrical Exercises and Creative Activities*. She has also edited *Ever After: 33 'Artistic' Fairy Tales* by the Art School of Ampelokipi. She has translated poetry anthologies, *When Tomorrow Comes* (2025) and *Think of Others* (2010) by Mahmoud Darwish, as well as poems by Mosab Abu Toha, June Jordan, Chantal Rizkallah and others, into Greek. Her translations also include Christopher Phillips' *Socrates' Café*, Ghazi Algozaibi's *A Love Story* and the theatre script *The Revolution's Promise* by Artists on the Frontline and The Freedom Theatre (2024). She has also subtitled the film *Where the Olive Trees Weep*.