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Palestine: Performing Arts as Resistance, Resilience and Sumud

A journal for the promotion of research on and practice of drama/theatre and other performing arts in formal and non-formal education

Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network

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Contact: journal@theatroedu.gr / info@theatroedu.gr / www.theatroedu.gr

Copy editing - Proofreading:
Aimilia-Alexandra Kritikou
Layout - Cover design:
Liza Panteliadou

Cover photo: **Mahdi Karira**, artwork: **Roman Limacero** & **Mahdi Karira**

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Journal aims and scope:
- To create a channel of communication between teachers, academics, artists and students with a particular interest in combining theatre, educational drama and performing arts with the educational process, wherever it takes place, inside or outside the school context.
- To advance knowledge and promote research in the field of theatre and performing arts at all levels of education, both nationally and internationally.
- To promote dialogue and communication among its readers on theoretical and practical issues related to theatre and performing arts in education.

The Journal's fields of interest:
The journal covers all fields in which learning and theatre/drama co-exist such as:

- Theatre/Drama and Performing Arts teaching
- Theatre/drama as an educational means and teaching tool
- Community Theatre
- Theatre as social intervention
- Theatre in Education projects
- Playing-through-Theatre
- Drama Therapy, Psychodrama, Playback Theatre
- Other issues pertaining to the theory, practice and research in the field of theatre and performing arts in education.

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a note from the editorial board

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Dear reader,

A scientific journal that publishes one issue per year aims to monitor developments in research, theory and practice in the field as far as possible, but cannot always keep up with current events. Today, however, it is impossible to remain indifferent to an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe such as the genocide unfolding in Palestine, which can be witnessed in real time. Systematic violations of fundamental human rights, coupled with an absence of effective international accountability, raise critical questions about the functioning of institutions and international law. They also call into question the sustainability of the values that constituted the post-war democratic ideal. Eighty years after the United Nations was created, the ideas on which the international community is based are being strongly questioned. The simultaneous rise of far-right and authoritarian political rhetoric around the world is creating an atmosphere of insecurity that jeopardises our collective capacity for democratic dialogue, empathy and participatory action.

In this context, the theatre and drama education community cannot ignore the political and pedagogical nature of theatre as an art form. As Freire and Boal remind us, theatre and education are fields of dialogue, awareness and resistance to degradation. The current situation highlights an acute contradiction: while many governments remain silent or are complicit in the face of injustice, citizens, artists and educators around the world are developing discourses and practices of solidarity. They are claiming the self-evident right to human life and dignity in solidarity with a people who are being persecuted so unjustly, and who are being fought over and disappearing. Despite the weakening of legal and diplomatic institutions, the moral and political responsibility of communities remains active. In the streets, classrooms and theatre stages, new forms of public dialogue and critical consciousness are emerging. Perhaps more than anywhere else, there is a renewed belief that art and pedagogy can function as acts of freedom, memory and resistance.

Since its foundation, the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) has been working to build relationships of communication and cooperation with artists, academics, researchers, educators and activists from Palestine. This has created a network for the exchange of experiences and knowledge, formed through meetings at international conferences, joint campaigns and international programmes. For almost three decades, we have witnessed the global development of theatre and drama education, recognising how theatre and the performing arts serve as forms of artistic expression, social empowerment, psychosocial resilience, resistance and healing. In Palestine, from Gaza and Hebron to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, theatre takes the form of experiential testimony and collective empowerment, providing children, young people and communities with the means to survive and find meaning in perpetually challenging circumstances. In this issue, we

have decided to focus on the Eastern Mediterranean. As well as presenting local research, we have given a voice to Palestinian theatre practitioners, drama educators and artists who have made remarkable and consistent contributions to the international debate on theatre's power as a pedagogical and social practice. We hope these narratives will foster understanding, dialogue and solidarity within the international education and performing arts communities.

Therefore, readers will notice that this issue devotes just a few pages to local activities, work and events in order to make room for our special insert on Palestine. In the Research articles section, **Maria Filippopoulou-Iosifidou** and **Konstantinos Mastrothanasis** explore how theatre and drama pedagogy can foster resilience in children and adolescents during times of crisis. Through an extensive review of international literature, the authors demonstrate how drama processes – ranging from improvisation and dramatisation to puppetry – can serve as spaces for healing, emotional regulation and collective empowerment.

A Viewpoint article by **Antigoni Parousi** offers insights into the career of the iconic 20th-century puppeteer, Michael Meske. She explores how his work evolved and changed over the years, with a focus on the Swedish artist's creative presence in Greece from the early 1970s onwards.

In the Reports section, **Georgia Antoniou**, **Anastasia Lazaraki** and **Eugenia Zagoura** revisit the International Conference "Theatre/Drama and Inclusive Education", held in Athens in March 2025. This three-day event, organised by TENet-Gr, celebrated the tenth anniversary of the "it could be me – it could be you" programme and the completion of the "Theatre Makes Politics" initiative. The conference aimed to open a meaningful dialogue on inclusion in education. Through their eyes, we gain insight into the keynote speeches, workshops, presentations, events and artistic performances.

In the section dedicated to doctoral dissertation presentations, **Maria Tzovenaki** presents her research into school theatre productions and their pedagogical value, conducted in Cypriot high schools. Considering the context, process and outcomes of student performances, she explores whether creative and productive theatrical work constitutes a pedagogical act that goes beyond creating a theatrical end product.

Next is the special insert entitled "**Palestine: Performing arts as resistance, resilience and *sumud***". The articles clearly demonstrate that theatre practitioners, drama educators and the wider arts community in Palestine exist, survive and resist, utilising the performing arts as a means of survival and active social action. The applications of theatre are not confined to formal education; inevitably, they acquire characteristics of resistance and community theatre, extending to education, therapy and resilience.

This special feature begins with an introductory note from the Editorial Board, which provides a detailed overview of the contents. To summarise, the research section comprises three articles based on various research projects. The first article, by **Khitam Edelbi** and **Shams Almanal Timraz**, uses autoethnography to explore the Palestinian experience. It examines experiential art forms and emphasises the importance of storytelling in transmitting historical memory, preserving collective identity and envisioning the future. **Hala Al-Yamani**, **Abdelfattah Abusrour** and **Fadel Alsawayfa** used interpretive analysis and poetry in a mixed-methods design to examine aspects of the lives of young Palestinians. In qualitative research conducted with postgraduate students at Bethlehem University, they based their study on Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun*. Their analysis and the resulting found poems highlight dominant concepts such as homeland, emigration and a strong sense of belonging. In her case study, **Rand Barakat** explores the use of the arts in education as a means of promoting personal, pedagogical and community development within the context of Palestinian higher education. Her research is based on the accounts of three current and former students of Bethlehem University's MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices.

In the Innovative Programmes section, a number of artists, activists and theatre/drama educators present and discuss their community-based work at the heart of recent developments. **Abdelfattah Abusrour** talks about his work and his belief that the arts can encourage peaceful and creative self-expression. He refers to this approach as Beautiful Resistance, a concept that emerged primarily through his work in the Aida refugee camp and with the cultural organisation Alrowwad. **Marina Johnson** re-examines *The Gaza Monologues*, an ASHTAR Theatre project that transformed the testimonies of young people in Gaza into an ongoing global act of remembrance and resistance. Fifteen years later, the project has been given new life through *Letters to Gaza*, an initiative inviting people worldwide to share messages of solidarity. **Marina Barham** and **George Matar** introduce us to the work and philosophy of Al Harah Theatre. For over 20 years, the theatre has worked with disabled and non-disabled children in schools, refugee camps and community centres. Theatre and drama are used as catalysts for emotional healing, self-expression and hope, helping to transform the experiences of children, women and people with disabilities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. **Khalid Massou** presents an inclusive school theatre programme developed by Inad Theatre in partnership with the Effetà special school for deaf children and young people in Bethlehem. The partnership views theatre as an act of social justice, aiming to expand access, cultivate empathy and affirm the right to education for all. Finally, **Jenny Karaviti** outlines a number of actions organised by TENet-Gr's "4 Colours" working group to raise awareness and demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian people. These focus, among others, on *The Gaza Monologues* by ASHTAR Theatre and The Freedom Theatre, based in the Jenin refugee camp.

In the Interviews section, **Marina Johnson** talks to Iman Aoun, the co-founder of ASHTAR Theatre, about using art as a means of survival, maintaining continuity and resisting oppression. They discuss the revival of *The Gaza Monologues*, the creation of *The New Gaza Monologues* and the most recent initiative: *Letters to Gaza*. Through her words, Iman connects artistic practice with political responsibility, shedding light on how theatre can serve as both a witness to history and a source of life amidst the siege. Finally, **Jenny Karaviti** introduces the recently formed Palestinian artist group "We", whose members have been displaced in southern Gaza. During a live online discussion organised as part of the 2024 World Theatre/Drama & Education Day events, digital graphic designer **Alaa Al Jabari**, puppeteer and director **Mahdi Karira** and writer **Fidaa Ziad** talked about how their group came together, their experiences as artists during the war and the writing, visual arts and puppetry workshops they are currently running for children and women in Gaza. The discussion emphasised the ability of theatre to bridge distances, facilitate the processing of grief and foster hope in the face of disaster. Mary Kaldi edited the discussion transcript and organised the written presentation.

In the face of concepts and realities characterised by profound human suffering, such as apartheid, ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, violations of fundamental rights and the loss of land and memory, the contributors to this issue celebrate the power of creation. Here, art, education, theatre and the performing arts are not just aesthetic expressions, but also potent cultural and pedagogical gestures that affirm identity and dignity. Embracing the spirit of sumud – unwavering perseverance in the face of oppression – this issue is a collective testament to our belief in people's ability to create, communicate and maintain hope. We hope that reading this issue will encourage reflection, evoke emotion and inspire action.

Sincerely,

The Editorial Board

Enhancing the **resilience** of **children** and **adolescents** through **drama pedagogy** in **times of crisis**

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Maria Filippopoulou-Iosifidou
Open University of Cyprus

Konstantinos Mastrothanasis
Open University of Cyprus

Abstract

The use of drama pedagogy has emerged as a significant method of supporting the psychosocial resilience of children and adolescents during times of crisis, such as pandemics, social upheaval and natural disasters. A key focus of this approach is addressing the negative impact of such crises on young people's mental health and social development. Typical manifestations include anxiety, depression and social isolation. Using theatre and drama techniques has been shown to be an effective way of enhancing adaptive skills, promoting collectivity and fostering emotional well-being. This paper constitutes a theoretical study based on a narrative review of the international literature published between 2004 and 2024. It highlights the need for a long-term evaluation of theatre/drama-based interventions, as well as the importance of designing applications that are culturally and socially responsive. Drama pedagogy can reinforce psychological resilience and foster young people's social and emotional competencies during times of crisis.

Keywords: *Drama pedagogy, applied theatre, resilience, crises, well-being, social support*

Introduction

Epidemics, natural disasters and other crises arising from social phenomena (such as armed conflicts, global economic downturns, migration flows, terrorist attacks and climate change) affect public health and the mental and social well-being of individuals. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable during this sensitive stage of development and are often the worst affected by these impacts, which can have serious and long-term consequences for their current and future lives (Lehmann et al., 2022).

Providing psychosocial support for children and adolescents during times of crisis is crucial, as they face numerous challenges, including fear, uncertainty and anxiety. These factors can have an adverse effect on their mental health and social interactions. As demonstrated in related studies, such situations can lead to feelings of insecurity, difficulties in social relationships and can even result in behavioural disorders (Peek, 2008). Psychosocial support is said to play a pivotal role in maintaining their emotional balance and developing strategies to enhance their psychological

resilience (Dray et al., 2015). Well-structured interventions that focus on emotional regulation and creating affective bonds with both peers and adults can significantly improve mental well-being (Solga, 2019).

Drama education and, drama pedagogy more broadly, can serve as powerful tools enabling children and adolescents to express their emotions during crises and discover new perspectives and coping mechanisms in response to disruptions in their daily lives and uncertainty about the future. The playful nature of drama education, involving theatre games, improvisation, storytelling and role play, helps children and adolescents express fear, anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty, establishing an imaginative relationship with reality that has a therapeutic effect on their consciousness (Tam, 2020). Based on a drama pedagogy approach, young people are encouraged to engage with their emotions and view their experiences in a more optimistic and positive light (Solga, 2019). At the same time, values such as cooperation, communication, empathy, solidarity and collective action are promoted, giving children and adolescents the skills they need to deal with challenges and build collaborative relationships (Kladaki & Mastrothanasis, 2022). Indeed, studies have shown that, in times of crisis, people in different countries have turned to the arts, theatre in particular, to maintain a sense of belonging and community (Hirsu et al., 2020; Pigkou-Repousi, 2024).

This paper explores how drama pedagogy can support the management of the psychosocial consequences of epidemics and crises affecting children and adolescents. More specifically, it examines how theatre/drama-based interventions can alleviate psychological distress and foster resilience among young people, and identifies effective methods in this context.

Methodology

This paper presents a theoretical study based on a narrative review of international literature. The search focused on scholarly publications in English and Greek, published between 2004 and 2024, and was conducted using the databases Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar.

Combinations of keywords such as “drama education”, “applied theatre”, “crisis intervention”, “psychosocial resilience”, “children” and “adolescents” were searched for in both English and Greek, employing logical operators (AND, OR) where appropriate. Studies describing theatre/drama-based interventions in crisis contexts, such as pandemics, natural disasters and social traumas, with the aim of supporting the psychological resilience of children and adolescents were prioritised.

The psychosocial impact of crises on children and adolescents

Crises are events that have widespread and often long-lasting consequences for people’s lives (Pikoulis et al., 2022). While everyone is affected by the hardships that accompany such situations, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Their developmental and age-specific characteristics, coupled with the ongoing process of identity formation, make them more susceptible to the psychosocial repercussions of crises. Such periods can disrupt the psychological stability of children and adolescents and influence their development at critical life stages. Therefore, it is essential to understand the extent and nature of the impact of crises on the mental health and social development of children and adolescents. The negative effects of these experiences are not confined to the immediate aftermath, but can have long-lasting consequences for their well-being and ability to cope with future adversity.

Psychologically, the effects of crises can be especially profound and long-lasting, affecting people of all ages. However, children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable as they are still developing cognitively and emotionally, and are navigating crucial phases in the formation of identity, personality and emotional maturity. The experiences they have during these phases can have deep and lasting implications for their mental health and their ability to handle future stress and anxiety (Levine, 2003).

Children and adolescents often experience a range of adverse psychological effects in the context of public health emergencies such as pandemics and epidemics. These can include anxiety, sleep disturbances, behavioural changes and depression. Such symptoms are often linked to feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future, as well as isolation resulting from disconnection from their social and educational environments. Furthermore, their emotional stability and self-esteem are often disrupted, making them more vulnerable to long-term psychological challenges (Racine et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant rise in psychological issues was observed among children and adolescents, who were subjected to prolonged stress due to social isolation, school closures and widespread uncertainty. This has been shown to lead to long-term psychological consequences, including anxiety disorders, depression, and in some cases, heightened aggression. In their study, Loades et al. (2020) concluded that the social exclusion and disruption to school routines experienced by young people during the pandemic had a considerable impact on elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Similarly, research by Jiao et al. (2020)

found that children in lockdown exhibited increased stress, sleep disturbances and loss of appetite.

Furthermore, during crises, children and adolescents often struggle to maintain connections with their peers, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and depression. These difficulties are largely due to movement restrictions and the absence of a physical school presence, both of which severely limit social interactions and negatively affect their social development. A UNICEF (2020) report highlighted that school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse impact on the development of children and adolescents' social skills, primarily due to a lack of interaction with peers.

In addition, crises can significantly disrupt family structures, particularly for children and adolescents. This often leads to financial difficulties and breakdowns in communication, which further undermines their overall well-being. Also, the social inequalities persist and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups, with a direct impact on children and adolescents. This can manifest as limited access to technological resources, which are essential for remote learning, increased social isolation and greater psychological strain.

It is crucial to understand the impact of these experiences, as this forms the basis for developing preventive and supportive strategies that enable children and young people to cope effectively with crises and build psychological resilience. Psychosocial resilience is a key factor in addressing and managing the psychological and social consequences that children and adolescents face during periods of crisis. Challenges such as social isolation, disruption to school routines and uncertainty about the future, as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the urgent need to strengthen this capacity.

Psychosocial resilience is the ability of an individual or group to adapt to adversity, overcome challenges and recover from them (Levine, 2003). One of the most widely acknowledged theoretical frameworks is that of Ann Masten (2001), who conceptualised resilience as "ordinary magic" arising from the normal functioning of core support systems such as family, school and community. According to Masten, resilience is not an extraordinary trait, but rather a natural human capacity that can be reinforced through appropriate support mechanisms. Other theorists, such as Luthar et al. (2000), have emphasised the importance of protective factors that counterbalance adverse conditions and foster positive development. A more recent perspective is that of "ecological resilience" (Ungar, 2011), which highlights the influence of sociocultural context and available resources on an individual's ability to adapt. It is clear, therefore, that psychosocial resilience is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors, including the family environment and the level of social support available to the individual. Research has shown that children and adolescents who are surrounded by a supportive network of family members, peers and educators are more likely to develop resilience in times of crisis (Prime et al., 2020).

A safe and supportive environment encourages children and adolescents to express their feelings and thoughts freely. It also equips them with essential coping strategies for managing the challenges they encounter. Such an environment empowers young people, strengthening their self-confidence and helping them recognise their own capacity to overcome adversity (Solga, 2019).

Moreover, strategies such as developing social skills and teaching problem-solving techniques are fundamental to enhancing mental resilience. Targeted educational programmes aimed at strengthening resilience provide children and adolescents with the necessary tools to navigate crisis situations (Touloupis & Athanasiadou, 2024). These programmes promote self-confidence and adaptability, better preparing young people to meet the growing demands of contemporary society.

The drama pedagogy approach to managing the impact of crises

The effectiveness of drama pedagogy in crisis management is rooted in theoretical perspectives that emphasise the therapeutic and empowering potential of art, particularly drama and theatre. As Boal (1993) argues, theatre can serve as a space for social and psychological liberation, enabling individuals to process experiences of oppression and trauma through performative action. Similarly, Dorothy Heathcote's pedagogical method, known as the "Mantle of the Expert", promotes children's active engagement in imagined scenarios, enhancing their sense of responsibility, self-esteem and decision-making ability in situations requiring adaptability and collaboration (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Papadopoulos, 2010; Papadopoulos & Kosmas, 2020). The connection between theatre and resilience is also supported by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, as dramatic activity encourages imitation, observation and active participation – elements recognised as essential for developing psychosocial skills.

Drama pedagogy integrates the art of theatre with educational practices, moving beyond the confines of semiotic performance analysis or literary interpretation. The aim is to cultivate aesthetic

experiences and emotional engagement for all participants – facilitators and group members alike – by enacting a creative event (Katsaridou, 2014; Lenakakis, 2008). Drama pedagogy and applied theatre are acknowledged as effective tools for addressing the psychosocial effects of crises (Giotaki & Lenakakis, 2016). Especially during pandemics, epidemics and other crisis situations, drama pedagogy provides children and adolescents with the opportunity to express their emotions, make sense of their experiences and confront the psychological difficulties that affect their development. It also helps them build coping mechanisms and resilience (Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2024).

This approach enables children and young people to express their emotions and share their experiences during difficult times, which is an essential process for their mental health. Through applied theatre techniques, they can participate in activities that enhance their decision-making and collaboration skills while engaging in an educational experience that fosters self-expression, critical thinking and social interaction (Asimidou et al., 2021; Mastrothanasis et al., 2023; Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2025). As previously discussed, crises can make young people feel isolated and unable to manage their emotions. Drama pedagogy and applied theatre offer supportive environments in which young people can share their experiences and explore their emotional worlds creatively (Pigkou-Repousi, 2024).

Specifically, the process of theatre games enables children and adolescents to externalise their emotions and thoughts, thereby releasing internal tension and anxiety experienced during crises in a safe and supportive environment (Vasiou et al., 2024). Furthermore, through dramatisation and improvisation, they can act out situations that concern them, which helps them understand and process their emotions. Techniques such as story dramatisation and readers' theatre serve as pedagogical tools in crisis response contexts. They enrich children and adolescents' understanding of the causes of disasters and their consequences, while fostering empathy, an essential capacity for responding to the needs of others in distress (Mastrothanasis & Kladaki, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies showed that participants experienced emotional, psychological and social empowerment when puppetry and puppet animation were successfully integrated into remote education (Vitsou & Dimou, 2023).

Presenting educational programmes that applied drama pedagogy as an intervention strategy during crises demonstrates its vital role. One such example is the "Happy4Rs" programme, which was implemented in Hong Kong following the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme aimed to support students and educators as they returned to school. Drama techniques were employed to bolster psychological resilience, enabling participants to articulate their anxieties and fears through performance. The programme made a significant contribution to the emotional recovery of both children and educators, fostering cooperation and emotional understanding (Tam, 2020).

Another relevant initiative was the "Creative Recovery" programme in Australia, which used theatre to address the mental health challenges experienced by children and adolescents during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through dramatic storytelling, improvisation, role-play and theatre games, participants explored the emotions caused by social isolation, thus enhancing their emotional well-being and psychological resilience (https://creativerecovery.net.au/).

As previously noted, the use of applied puppetry further illustrates the positive impact of drama pedagogy in crisis contexts. During the period of the lockdown imposed due to the pandemic, remote puppetry-based programmes were developed in schools across Ohio, Zimbabwe and New York. These programmes aimed to provide emotional support and strengthen resilience among students and educators. Similarly, the "COVID Puppets – The Show Must Go On" workshops at Pelangi schools in Indonesia encouraged children to express their feelings about the pandemic by creating puppets from recycled materials. The influence of the Sesame Street initiative was also deemed highly significant, given that it produced specialised educational material on pandemic-related topics such as handwashing and mask-wearing (Vitsou & Dimou, 2023).

All of the aforementioned case studies confirm that drama pedagogy can offer powerful tools for improving the psychosocial resilience of children and adolescents during times of crisis (Barnes & Coetzee, 2014). Such activities provide young people with the opportunity to process feelings of isolation and anxiety, boost their self-confidence and develop problem-solving skills. At the same time, the collective nature of these interventions fosters a sense of community, providing meaningful support to young participants during periods of adversity and helping them build resilience.

Narrative review of emergency drama-based interventions

Drama pedagogy is widely recognised as an effective educational practice in emergency response interventions, providing a creative way to support

children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. It can be applied in a variety of settings, such as schools, community programmes and mental health centres, to enable emotional expression and the processing of experiences, thereby promoting psychological well-being.

Chang's (2005) study emphasised the therapeutic potential of theatre in alleviating the psychological distress suffered by students in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1999 earthquake in Taiwan, which caused thousands of casualties and injuries. Research has shown that theatre workshops organised in schools provided children with a space to express their trauma, process their emotions and begin the process of psychological recovery. Integrating psychodrama techniques with Gestalt therapy, a psychotherapeutic approach focusing on the individual's present experience, created a safe framework within which children could enhance their resilience and regain essential communication skills (Mastrothanasis et al., 2025). These workshops not only fostered cooperation and facilitated therapeutic reintegration into the community, but also, in line with the observations of Woodland et al. (2023), underscored the potential of drama pedagogy to address issues such as "eco-anxiety". This approach reinforces community resilience and collective recovery following disasters.

In a related study, Hirsu et al. (2020) examined cultural intervention programmes using children's literature and artistic practices for populations affected by the 2017 earthquake in Mexico. They found that such interventions can provide substantial emotional relief and a sense of security to those affected when implemented in post-disaster recovery contexts. The intervention used illustrated books, dramatised storytelling and theatre games as core tools to strengthen positive emotions and encourage active problem-solving among participants. The educational content focused on interpreting natural phenomena and connecting them to children's everyday experiences. Sharing personal narratives within the group simultaneously reinforced social cohesion and solidarity, significantly reducing anxiety and feelings of alienation.

In this context, the study by Giotaki and Lenakakis (2016) highlights the potential of theatre as an educational tool for helping preschool-aged children to explore and make sense of complex concepts during times of socioeconomic crisis. The researchers investigated how young children perceive economic hardship and their capacity to express and regulate emotions while developing empathy through a theatre pedagogy intervention implemented in a kindergarten classroom. Techniques such as Theatre of the Oppressed, dramatised storytelling, improvisation and role play enabled the children to embody everyday experiences related to crises such as unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, and to propose alternative coping strategies and ways of showing solidarity. The results showed a significant improvement in the children's understanding of social issues, as well as an increase in empathy and participation in diversity activities. This study demonstrates that theatre can provide a space for dialogue, empowerment and reinterpreting reality, even at preschool level.

More recently, a study by Bubeck et al. (2024) examined the role of community theatre in facilitating trauma recovery following coastal disasters, as well as its potential as a means of communicating risk in disaster mitigation efforts. More specifically, the researchers evaluated community theatre interventions implemented in coastal regions of Vietnam. Through performances targeting children and women in these communities, theatre was found to enhance psychological recovery, risk perception, flood awareness, self-efficacy and the importance of civic engagement. Furthermore, the study documented a positive influence on participants' willingness to engage in collective risk reduction initiatives, alongside indications of long-term behavioural change.

Barnes and Coetzee (2014) examined the potential of theatre as a form of social intervention in conflict and post-conflict situations. Focusing on regions affected by war, the authors analysed how theatre can promote healing from trauma, empower individuals and communities, and foster resilience, particularly among vulnerable groups such as refugees, survivors of conflict and children.

Tam (2020) describes an applied drama education project conducted in schools in Hong Kong, aimed at empowering children and teachers and supporting their recovery after the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. The project featured workshops using dramatised storytelling, theatre games and improvisation to help participants adapt to changes induced by the crisis. Preliminary findings suggested that the approach was beneficial, enhancing the psychological resilience children and educators alike in the aftermath of the pandemic. By offering meaningful support and contributing to their personal well-being, it demonstrated its relevance and applicability in future crises.

Moreover, the multimodal use of puppetry has been adopted internationally and in Greece. In November 2020, a programme involving first and second grade pupils was conducted at a primary school in the city of Volos. During the programme, the facilitator presented short puppet stories that

addressed pandemic-related emotions such as sadness, nervousness and loneliness. The children then made their own puppets from various materials and brought them to life in group sessions. Each session concluded with a reflective discussion, enabling the children to express and share their emotions with their peers. Research findings showed that creating and animating puppets fostered a positive and optimistic outlook on the future among both the children and the facilitators (Vitsou & Dimou, 2023). This supports the argument that puppetry can serve as an immediate and effective tool for crisis management (Papouli, 2025).

Conclusion

This study examined the role of drama pedagogy as an effective tool for managing crises among children and adolescents, particularly in the context of pandemics, epidemics, natural disasters and social crises. A review of the relevant literature revealed that diverse theatre/drama techniques, such as dramatised storytelling, theatre games, improvisation and puppetry can foster psychological resilience in children and adolescents, particularly in educational and community settings.

Various theatre/drama-based projects implemented in the aftermath of severe crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, were analysed to highlight drama and theatre's ability to encourage emotional expression, collaboration and a sense of community. Such interventions support children and adolescents in confronting traumatic experiences, managing their emotional responses and developing resilience skills to help them navigate critical situations and overcome the psychological and social repercussions of such events.

Drama pedagogy and applied theatre provide safe, supportive spaces in which children and adolescents can express thoughts, fears and concerns that they might otherwise be unable to articulate (Arampatzidou et al., 2015; Mastrothanasis et al., 2024). They cultivate empathy, cooperation and emotional understanding through theatrical and dramatic practices, which are vital skills for effective crisis management. Furthermore, these interventions have been shown to boost self-confidence, creativity and the ability to solve problems strategically (Mastrothanasis et al., 2018; Papakosta et al., 2020).

Drama pedagogy thus affirms the educational function of drama/theatre, which not only offers psychological support but also provides opportunities for learning and personal development. Interventions in different contexts show that it can be used as an immediate response to crisis situations and as a way of strengthening the psychological resilience of children and young people (Sextou, 2022; Sextou et al., 2020).

Suggestions for future research

There is a clear need for further investigation into the long-term effectiveness of drama pedagogy interventions. Future research in this field should focus on evaluating the sustainability of such programmes, particularly in terms of their ability to foster psychological resilience in children and adolescents over time.

In addition, exploring potential differences based on demographic variables such as gender, age, cultural identity and socioeconomic background would be valuable in designing differentiated interventions tailored to the specific needs of diverse groups. Designing and implementing theatre/drama-based programmes in different cultural contexts could deepen our understanding of theatre's role as a method for crisis management. Examples include initiatives targeting refugee populations (Pikoulis et al., 2024; Puchner et al., 2018) or communities in conflict zones.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that educational programmes incorporating drama pedagogy should be developed as part of preparedness strategies for the psychosocial management of future crises. Such interventions may serve a preventive function by strengthening the resilience of children and adolescents before a critical situation arises (Touloupis et al., 2024). An interdisciplinary approach combining drama pedagogy techniques with other forms of artistic expression, such as music, visual arts or creative writing, within the educational process is of particular interest for future research. This could contribute to the creation of a multimodal model aimed at empowering the emotional and social development of students.

Limitations of the study

This study is a narrative review, which is a methodological choice that limits the generalisability of its conclusions due to the absence of strict criteria for systematic search and evaluation. Additionally, the chronological scope of the included studies is somewhat narrow, as most of the interventions relate to the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, which may affect the diversity of case examples.

Furthermore, there is a limited number of empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of such interventions, and data concerning long-term outcomes is often lacking. It is also important to acknowledge that not all populations benefit equally from drama pedagogy practices. Some children or adolescents may prefer less expressive or less group-oriented

forms of engagement, suggesting a need for differentiated methodological approaches that are tailored to the individual needs and preferences of participants.

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Maria Filippopoulou-Iosifidou graduated from the Department of Theatre Studies at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece and is currently undertaking postgraduate theatre studies at the Open University of Cyprus. Since 2010, she has worked as a drama teacher in primary education and has also served as an assistant director in theatre productions. She has attended workshops on improvisation, photography and videography, and has participated in seminars on theatre games, puppet construction and animation, classroom management, forum theatre and playback theatre. As part of her teaching practice, she has created short films and implemented projects focusing on puppetry and animation.

Konstantinos Mastrothanasis has a PhD from the Department of Primary Education at the University of the Aegean in Greece and is a post-doctoral researcher at the Medical School of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece. He lectures in theatre pedagogy, drama education and arts-based teaching methods for vulnerable groups at universities in Greece and Cyprus. His work focuses particularly on applied theatre in education, health and well-being. He is the coordinator and adjunct professor of the MA programme in Theatre Studies at the Open University of Cyprus. He also serves as the supervisor of the national team of experts at the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP). The aim of this team is to enrich digital educational content in Music and Drama Education by creating interactive, open and accessible digital environments powered by artificial intelligence. His work has been recognised by the Hellenic Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (IAKE) and the Hellenic Scientific Association for the Promotion of Educational Innovation (EEPEK).

Our **Michael Meschke**

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Antigoni Parousi
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the work and presence of the Swedish artist Michael Meschke in Greece to date, following the parallel paths that emerge from both external, historical accounts of events as well as internal structures shaped by a personal experience of many of these events. It attempts to present the historical and personal records of these two trajectories, as well as the dynamic relationships that connect them. It was originally conceived as an oral presentation for a tribute event titled "To the great master Michael Meschke, the puppeteer of the 20th century", organised by the "Theatre at your fingertips" – Puppet Theatre Museum on 13 December 2024 in Athens.

Keywords: *Michael Meschke, puppet theatre, International Puppet Theatre Festival of Hydra*

Introduction

Nestled among apartment blocks, small vendors' shops and grill houses in the Athenian district of Metaxourgeio, an unexpected standalone building emerges: the Puppet Theatre Museum (https://www.mairivi.gr/el/mouseio). It houses puppets, marionettes and shadow theatre figures from around the world. This is the realisation of yet another idea by the Swedish artist Michael Meschke, conceived following his first visit to Mairivi's workshop. The museum is now a fully operational reality. Visitors, both children and adults, come to discover the diverse traditions that have shaped the art of puppetry across the globe for centuries.

In this museum, visitors encounter puppets not as living characters performing on stage, but as works of art. One can sit and observe them, examining them from various angles and focusing on the details, such as their costumes and features, or the materials and techniques used to create their movement. Visitors may wander around the museum as they would a garden, without focusing on any particular exhibit, yet still gaining a sense of the puppets' presence, which is crucial to the space they explore (Meschke, 2009).

Peeking out from among a row of suitcases at the museum's entrance are the puppets from the 1955 children's show *The Circus*, known as "The Acrobats". These puppets are one of Meschke's early works and were recently donated to the museum by the artist. They have an abstract aesthetic: white fabric forms without facial features, each with a uniquely shaped body that captures the viewer's attention. Some are operated by strings and others by rods. They are soft, flexible, lightweight and malleable. They invite you to step into a space that offers more than just information or education. It is a place steeped in history, and if you dare to walk through it, you cannot help but experience it for yourself. Even without touching a single puppet or crafted figure, the "strangely alive" forms (Bell, 2014), gathered in clusters from corner to corner, compel you to leap across countries and centuries. When you return to the streets of Metaxourgeio after your journey, feeling slightly dazed, you can't help by wonder what puppet theatre artists imbue their works with to unsettle your everyday sense of reality so powerfully. Are these fragments of their own lives and thoughts? Or are they pieces of your own life and inner world – your desires and fears – that they have somehow stolen and carved into these strange yet familiar forms? How did they imagine you from so far away, across time and space? And how do they now play with your reason and your emotion, being present yet absent?

Who is Michael Meschke?

Born to a pastor father and a musician mother, Michael Meschke received a puppet theatre as a birthday gift. He spent his childhood happily moulding clay into all kinds of objects while also learning his first theatre lessons at school, where he studied the classical playwrights.

Anyone studying international puppet theatre will find that scattered biographical and artistic records confirm Meschke's status as a prime example of a multicultural personality. Born a German citizen in the Polish port city of Gdańsk (then known as Danzig) in 1931, he came into the world at a time when the city was still under German administration. Both his parents were artistically trained: his father held a doctorate in "sword dancing" and his mother was a church organist. They worked for the German church as a pastor and musician, respectively, before becoming educators in Sweden, to which they had fled.

Meschke spent his early childhood in Schillersdorf, a small town on the Polish-German border which is now in Poland, but was part of Germany at the time. In 1939, his family fled to Stockholm due to his mother's Jewish heritage. There, they all enrolled at the renowned Viggbyholm School: his parents as teachers, and Meschke as a pupil.

He began his puppetry apprenticeship in the workshop of Harro Siegel.[1] He then studied mime with Étienne Decroux, which made him realise the expressive potential of human movement. This knowledge would later inform his work with theatrical puppets. He also studied directing under two prominent theatre and opera figures: Oskar Fritz Schuh and Jean Vilar.

The artist's personal history is intricately interwoven with the events that have shaped world history: the rise of Nazism, the persecution of his family (due to his mother's Jewish roots), their self-imposed exile to Sweden and his coming of age in a land of democratic freedoms and progressive education while the most horrific war unfolded across Europe. As a teenager, Meschke wandered through the war-torn ruins of Europe, watching in awe as the pieces were put back together to create a new life. It was through his art that he learned how to enrich this life in accordance with his moral convictions.

In Sweden, a country without a puppetry tradition, Meschke took his first daring step by combining the craft of puppet-making with theatre. This marked the beginning of a series of revolutionary steps that made his name synonymous with disruption and innovation, helping to create a new global aesthetic in puppet theatre.

In 1952, he created Baptiste, a marionette that marked a significant point in his personal journey. During a challenging time living in Paris, he sculpted Baptiste from a small amount of clay in his workshop, using the puppet's melancholy gaze to express his inner world. Baptiste, his most famous marionette, was inspired by Jean-Baptiste Gaspard Deburau, as portrayed by Jean-Louis Barrault in the film *Children of Paradise*. Although Meschke never performed with Baptiste, the puppet held deep emotional significance for him, embodying aspects of his own biography as a puppeteer. The puppet's character was heavily influenced by Marcel Carné's film, with its theatricality, moving performances and intense emotional imagery (Meschke, 2004).

In 1958, he founded the Stockholm Puppet Theatre (Marionetteatern), which was the first puppet theatre to be integrated into a national theatre in the West. Meschke was undeniably a pioneer. His repertoire included works by classical authors such as the ancient Greek tragic poets, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and Cervantes, as well as modern writers such as Hoffmann, Jarry and Brecht, and folk traditions. He gradually abandoned the small puppet stage and introduced cinematic techniques into his productions. By incorporating traditional puppet methods from around the world, he demonstrated his deep respect for both tradition and innovation.

He reflected critically on the potential and pitfalls of puppetry. For Meschke, innovation stemmed from in-depth research and study of tradition, as well as thoughtful adaptation to contemporary realities. To this end, he travelled extensively, from Greece to India, Latin America and Thailand, studying puppets in all their forms – from early clay figurines to the intricate constructions of the East. Freeing himself from bias, he allowed himself to be equally influenced by the simplicity of Greek idols and the rich, refined techniques of East Asia.

Meschke's dialogue with his puppets began the moment he conceived their form. Given his belief that "not all puppets can play all roles", the technique chosen, the materials used and the innovations employed to achieve specific movement capabilities, all determine the expressive range of each puppet – the very field in which its personality can unfold. These are the essential elements of the *animated*, rather than the *inanimate*. The puppeteer is not the absolute master. The characters on stage may lead him down unforeseen paths.

He began creating a play with a clear vision of what he wanted to express. The process evolved through ongoing and open collaboration with his team, comprising both people and puppets. While the final result could be anything, one constant remained: his unwavering respect for the intelligence and aesthetic sensibility of his audience, whether adult or child. This is evident not only in his children's shows, but also in the educational programmes offered at his museum.

His puppets, which are expressions of a universal human sensitivity, are now preserved and displayed in dedicated sections of puppet museums across Europe. Regarded as works of art, they provide historical evidence of his long journey in the world of puppetry.

A citizen of the world

Moving between Sweden, post-war Germany and France, Meschke learned puppet-making from a sculptor who taught at his school, movement from a German puppeteer and mime and stage directing from theatre professionals. From that point, he literally embarked on his journey into the world. He visited, collaborated and created work in almost every country where puppetry, both traditional and modern, flourished during his younger years.

He was an active member of Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA) from the beginning of his career. In 1972, he was elected to the Executive Committee. The following year, at the annual meeting of the national centres in Stockholm, he presented the "Stockholm Declaration", a set of proposals reflecting his desire to revitalise the International Centre. While serving as Vice President in 1976, he realised this vision by establishing local puppetry centres in Mexico, Thailand, India and Greece.

Meschke's involvement with UNIMA went far beyond organisational matters and the values the union represented. He also focused on the professional development of puppeteers. For Meschke, it was clear that puppeteers needed training. At Marionetteatern, he often led their training himself and invited specialised teachers to deliver training in various techniques. His commitment to education and empowering puppeteers was evident in his activities within UNIMA, where he played an active role in setting up schools that shared his vision of the "modern" puppeteer. Throughout his artistic journey, he explored a wide range of approaches, moving from one aesthetic perception to another and experimenting with different interpretations, which he discussed in his books. He also engaged respectfully with the interpretations of others. He remained – and still remains – in constant dialogue with the puppets he used in his productions.

In 2009, he was honoured alongside Margareta Niculescu[2] and Henryk Jurkowski[3] for his contributions to puppetry and to UNIMA at the International Puppet Festival in Charleville-Mézières.

Our Meschke

So, we come to Meschke's Greece. He first visited the country on holiday during the dictatorship in order to experience the land, light, colours and earth before staging his performances: *Antigone* (1977), *Odysseus* (1978) and *Oedipus* (1980) (Meschke, 2007). He got to know and love the country, its culture and its people, as well as the sun and the sea. Above all, however, he fell in love with the island of Hydra. It was there that he bought his summer residence.

Thus, he found himself in Greece, where he connected with Greek puppeteers and Karagiozis players. He organised UNIMA and settled on Hydra, becoming known as "our Michalis". And "our Michalis" was more than just a person or a puppeteer who performed. He embodied the Argentinian puppeteers, the Parisian stilt-walkers, the puppet-gourd figures from Togo, the Indians from Kerala, the Indian Malik, the Sicilian knights, the Japanese Kuruma Ninyo and the great Bunraku master Minosuke Yoshida. They were all together on the captivatingly Aegean yet colourful and international beach of Hydra, immersed in historical time.

A small, cosmopolitan island with a rich history, Hydra is an outcrop dotted with beautiful houses and old mansions built around the harbour. It is one of the few places to remain untouched by "civilization"; there are no roads for cars, so everything is transported on foot or by mule.

I first met Michael Meschke in Hydra. 1985 was a significant year: the Athens Puppet Theatre of Eleni Theocharis Peraki closed after 45 years in Greece, and the International Puppet Theatre Festival began. Although 40 years have passed since then, it feels like yesterday when I speak of the creator of this institution. He managed to sustain and serve the festival for two decades on an island with extremely unique conditions.

Hydra proved to be the ideal place. Michael Meschke organised the first "Puppet Days" on the island, combining his professional experience and personal contacts with important artists from around the world. The event established Hydra as the island of puppetry. The initiative aimed to promote intercultural exchange through an art form that transcends language barriers, since puppetry is primarily a language of movement that is universally understood. During the first few years, traditional techniques and contemporary expressions came together for a week. However, economic reasons later limited this to an annual three-day event facilitating exchange and dialogue.

Initiated by Meschke, these meetings led to the establishment of the Greek Centre for Puppet Theatre and Karagiozis, also known as "UNIMA Hellas",

which is a branch of the international UNIMA union. The main objective was to raise awareness of and elevate the art of puppetry in Greece.

Performances were presented every evening, initially in the area in front of the old cannon and later on the football field. In the mornings, workshops for children, as well as thematic meetings, lectures and exhibitions, were usually organised indoors.

In addition to the evening shows, the invited troupes performed excerpts from their work at the harbour in the morning. At 11:30, the "EFTYCHIA", a line ferry carrying holidaymakers, arrived. It was time for the happening: from one end of the harbour to the other, there was a festival featuring music, puppets and everything else in the programme. Initially conceived as a "teaser", this idea was intended to generate interest in the evening shows. Each performer prepared a short presentation of five to ten minutes, which they performed multiple times in different parts of the harbour. These morning presentations very successful and gradually led to troupes being invited to perform exclusively at the harbour.

The Greek Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Hydra initially welcomed and encouraged Meschke's idea of creating the International Puppet Theatre Festival. The Hydra Film Club, led by Lakis Christidis, an island resident and key collaborator, adopted the festival, and it began. Despite the often challenging circumstances, the aim of breathing new life into the Greek puppetry tradition became a reality (Parousi, 2012).

> I wanted to reciprocate the love that Greece had shown me, but all I had to offer in return was my work. So, I proposed to Melina Mercouri, the Minister of Culture, that we create an international festival as a Greek-Swedish collaboration [...] Our goal was to present puppet shows from cultures around the world that would be open to all, regardless of economic, linguistic or cultural barriers. Entry would therefore be free, and the organisation would be voluntary – no one would make money. The key to the plan was that I could invite colleagues from all over the world to perform for free, with accommodation on the island being their only compensation [...]
>
> I was completely unfamiliar with Greek customs and the surreal bureaucracy, a particular feature of which is that the authorities may agree to provide subsidies, but then pay them months after the event they are supposed to be supporting. Apparently, they assume that someone else will cover the expenses, which are normally paid before the event, not after! (Meschke, 2004, p. 148)

Preparations for the festival took place in Stockholm during the winter, with open communication maintained throughout. Most of the artists were friends or collaborators of Meschke's. They were attracted by the prospect of spending three days in Hydra. Many came with their families and extended their stay by an additional ten days to enjoy a holiday. The "island of Meschke", with its bright sunshine, sea and hospitable inhabitants, quickly gained a reputation in European artistic circles. Consequently, we received an increasing number of letters from new troupes wishing to participate. However, tickets, food and accommodation still represented a significant expense for us organisers, and the subsidy funds were always limited. Therefore, we took the mobility of troupes into account, which reduced distances and ticket costs. We invited troupes who were travelling to or from Europe to stop in Greece. Beyond the Swedish Embassy and the Swedish Institute, which supported the festival in every possible way, many artists managed to secure funding for tickets from their home countries. Embassies and cultural institutes, as well as private friends and acquaintances also made positive contributions.

However, this situation gradually changed over the years as the status and demands of puppetry within the global theatre scene evolved. The number of international festivals increased, and troupes grew larger. They incurred fees and fixed expenses, and despite their goodwill, they could hardly perform without pay anymore. This new reality would alter the festival's operating model. Shortly before we stopped the festival, we proposed that the municipal authority take over its management. Unfortunately, they did not respond.

> Out of all the soloists who appeared, the ones that really stood out were Horacio Peralta from Argentina and Ariel Bufano, my peer in profession, spirit and soul. Other notable performers were the Parisian stilt walkers, Danai Kanlanfei from Togo who made marionettes from water gourds, the Indians of Gopal Venu from Kerala, who, because they didn't like Greek food, survived by boiling and eating white rice all day long.
>
> By contrast, my friend and philosopher K.S. Malik, who was also Indian, felt so comfortable that he delivered a captivating speech that disrupted our entire programme. Alongside the festival, we increasingly organised symposia and workshops for children under Antigoni's care.

> The knights from Sicily, the famous Puppi of Mimmo Cuticchio, were unforgettable too, with their splendid armour shining in the sun as they arrived at the harbour hanging on the ship's railing. The Japanese puppeteers were impressive too, such as Korio IV Nishikawa, with his authentic Kuruma Ningyo dolls, and Minosuke Yoshida, the great Bunraku master from Osaka, who was accompanied by a national television crew. They filmed a report about his visit to Hydra which was broadcast four times across Japan. (Meschke, 2004, p. 148)

The 1995 festival

The year 1995 was different from the previous years for two reasons. Firstly, the International Day of Peace was celebrated with a special event. Secondly, the festival began with a ten-day puppet workshop, and the final results were presented during the festival's three-day programme. I coordinated the workshop and served as the organisation's liaison.

The final form of *The Apocalypse* was still just an idea in Michael's mind, an experiment yet to be realised. The theme was a trial, with Mephistopheles and the Angels acting as the opposing parties. The structure of the performance was modular, with short scenes featuring excerpts from previous Marionetteatern shows, such as *Don Quixote*, *Antigone* and *The Odyssey*. Specifically for *The Apocalypse*, puppets from the Stockholm performances were transported to Hydra, where they were combined with other ideas and excerpts that had been developed earlier in the Athens workshop.

For ten consecutive days, we worked tirelessly to learn techniques, rehearse and create everything necessary to bring the idea to life. For the final performance, students from the Finnish puppet school, along with a group of volunteer musicians, joined in. The show was to begin with a procession of Angels starting at the port of Hydra and crossing through the town to the stadium. Meschke's concept was that the Angels would symbolise peace. They would carry staffs bearing banners inscribed with the word "peace", and drummers would encourage the crowd to follow them to the stadium. Another one of his ambitious ideas was for the Angels to arrive by sea, emerging from the depths on a small boat and disembarking at the harbour. I describe it as ambitious because the festival lacked the funds to even maintain itself. The workshop was free, the performances were open to the public and everything relied on volunteers and the organisers' passion. Therefore, finding and hiring a traditional Hydra caique for two hours was a real luxury!

Yet, at the last moment, one was found. None of those who participated will ever forget it! That's when we became Angels, standing in the sea and walking in the sky.

> At dusk, we boarded the caique, dressed in white cloaks, each with two large, pure white wings attached to the shoulders. We loaded the staffs with flags and slowly slipped behind the cape, powered by a diesel engine. Inside the boat, we tried to find spots where our wings wouldn't get crumpled up. Everyone was anxious – surely ten days was too short a time to prepare, and we knew it. It took more than half an hour to round the cape and it was fully dark by then. Nothing could be heard except the sound of the engine and the splash of the waves.
>
> We breathed in the sea breeze and lost ourselves in it. The return journey marked the beginning of our roles. No one spoke. We watched the harbour lights growing larger as we approached. Our breath caught. We heard the ship's whistle which meant we had arrived. We began to wave to the crowd waiting on the pier. The caique docked, and we descended the ladder one by one, majestically. The people didn't understand what was happening. They stood there, watching us, as if we were angels. Were we?
>
> At the start of the procession, the musicians took their places and we followed in relaxed twos and threes. We marched slowly and solemnly while waving flags. The emotion and the sea breeze accompanied us on our journey, and one thing was certain: we were somewhere else.
>
> The atmosphere was transferred to the audience, who applauded us. Women, children and tourists followed along; some appeared on balconies and others stood outside shops.

The route was not short. We reached the stadium and took our places. The stands were all full… the performance began… Mephisto, tall and thin, dressed in a black tailcoat, greeted the audience aggressively and began his confrontation with the Angels…

Everything felt like a dream. I can't remember if things went well or if we were on the edge of disaster… The beginning was impressive, and we all felt very confident in what we were doing when a summer rainstorm perhaps brought our nirvana to a divine end. We were determined to perform the entire show even in the rain. Then Meschke's voice brought us back to reality: "No more episodes. Let the Angels come out and finish with the dance".

We gathered the children who were watching the performance inside the stadium and, holding their hands, we began to dance. The Angels removed their wings and placed them on the crowd, who despite the rain entered the stage area and danced for peace. (Parousi, 2009)

The 2003 festival

Within the framework of a festival that was, for some of us, a school in itself, the workshops organised over the years provided an opportunity to undertake a short apprenticeship with established artists and practitioners who employed innovative approaches or traditional techniques. Each workshop held during the festival's 20-year history had its own special significance. I will elaborate on two of these workshops, mainly because the available data (video recordings, artists' diaries and trainees' testimonies) provide a comprehensive overview, and also because many of the workshop participants were trainee educators. At the 2003 festival, two workshops were held: theatrical puppet construction with the Arketal troupe (4–10 July) and capoeira, a Brazilian martial dance (5–10 July), with instructors Calibre and Sliman from Metz, France.

The migratory birds

The Arketal troupe conducted a workshop on creating and animating marionettes based on designs by the painter Marius Rech. The workshop culminated in a presentation at the port of Hydra, where large, human-sized constructions with the features of migratory birds came to life.

The workshop instructors were Greta Bruggeman (puppeteer, builder and set designer for the Arketal troupe), Marius Rech (painter, sculptor, fine arts professor and set designer) and Sylvie Osman (puppeteer and actress for the Arketal troupe). The general idea of the Arketal workshop's scenario in 2003 – still relevant today– was as follows:

> A group of migratory refugee birds disembarks at the port of Hydra. On the shore, two illegal immigrants are waiting. Obstacles placed on the ground represent the borders. First crossing: With their gaze, the group demarcates this trajectory, unfolding along it with movements and rhythms that are more or less sluggish. Meanwhile, the illegal immigrants make sounds by tapping on reeds. Second crossing: The refugees jump over the obstacles and line up behind each other. Sounds – Obstacles: Along the refugees' path, a whistle signals an

> external threat. Reactions: The birds tremble. The reeds rhythmically echo this trembling on the ground. Then, the two illegal immigrants form a door-like passageway through which the birds pass. This short route was repeated three times during the procession, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes each time. (Parousi, 2012, pp. 349–350)

The encounter with the capoeira group and the final performance

The three-day presentation period arrived quickly. The finished puppets were impressive, towering over café awnings. The migratory birds troupe performed formations along the entire length of the harbour, coordinated but also hesitant in their first appearance. However, this initial awkwardness and tension dissipated very quickly. For each stop, the group had chosen a rather melancholic Greek song. Together, the birds stood out with their long wooden legs and their strange pointed mouths that opened and closed, capturing the audience's attention. Each pair had to coordinate their walking and head movements well. They made many small daily appearances at the port, improving each time. On the last day, they met the capoeira group. The two groups almost merged. Keeping to the sound and rhythm, the bird puppets improvised within the capoeira circle. These improvisations thrilled the watching crowd, who applauded and took photographs. The bird troupe had gained the confidence they needed – they were no longer huddled together in fear. They had inhabited the souls of their puppets, which were not easy to construct or move. Any mistakes were no longer evident: what stood out instead was the group's energy, the participants' enthusiasm and the pastel colours of the birds (Compagnie Arketal, 2004).

> None of us expected to finish our giant marionette in just four days. On the fifth day, we rehearsed in order to identify the weaknesses of each puppet and work out how to present them to the public. The show was a success. We enjoyed it so much that we paid no attention to the crowd. They saw huge marionettes coming into the city streets. Gradually, boys and girls emerged from underneath. We were something different at the festival. On the last day, we had a surprise in store for everyone. Our birds "played" with a capoeira group. It was amazing. (Machi Kalivrousi, then a student at the Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens)

Instead of a conclusion

I do not know what the "improvisational revelation" of Hydra ultimately offered its creator in terms of designing and realising the final Marionetteatern performance. What I can say with certainty, however, is that the pieces I described were unique to those of us who participated, regardless of our response. At the same time, it prompted UNIMA Hellas to create their own distinct piece for the International Day of Peace, independently of Meschke's initiative.

The International Puppet Theatre Festival lives on in the hearts of the locals and the children who grew up with it. A stroll around the harbour will bring you into contact with at least ten people who will ask: "When is Michalis coming with his puppets? What are you going to do this year?" Then the stories will begin: "Have you seen those puppets that played…" This is our own "Michalis", as the people of Hydra called him. He gave to the place and took from it. Since every event exists in its own time, the Hydra festival lives on in the memories of those who experienced it.

An artist's contribution to the development and dissemination of their art is not fully conveyed by their thoughts and opinions, as expressed in their written or oral texts, nor by their works and productions alone. In order to understand the mark an artist leaves on the global web of culture, equally important are the subjective experiences of events that reflect the artist's thoughts and opinions. When these experiences are expressed as faint voices or third-party narratives related to the artist's legacy, they shape the most essential elements of cultural history, imbued with the artist's work. Culture is forged through the experiences of others, which can glorify, confine or even erase creations from cultural archives.

When discussing Michael Meschke, we can document his life, artistic activity and professional and personal relationships by collecting evidence from

archives, texts, photographs and videos. This text attempts to record experiences that shaped Meschke's identity as perceived by others within the Greek context. In some of the previous paragraphs, I have tried to describe these aspects of "our Meschke" and integrate them into a broader global narrative.

From biographical and historical evidence relating to his artistic career, it appears that Meschke, the "citizen of the world", was a person with a penchant for education. The puppetry organisations he helped to establish in various countries (see UNIMA) have functioned and continue to function as educational organisations that interact with arts schools worldwide and have gradually integrated puppetry into the recognised field of performing arts. In these performing arts, "our Meschke" was a teacher! He initiated you into "how things are" by getting you to do them yourself. Once you had learned "how they are done," you could recall your experience and admit that: Everything flowed like a dream. I don't remember whether things went well or were on the brink of disaster, but I clearly remember what it was like to be part of a puppet performance.

As you leave the museum, you feel certain that "our Meschke", who could be said to live in Sweden today, is here with his entire world. You leave him behind as you step out onto the streets of Metaxourgeio. Beyond organising and educating people in this global and multicultural performing art, which is consumed by the ephemeral nature of its creations, the "artist Meschke" was obsessed with creating timeless centres and imprints of the workings of puppetry, such as museums.

Notes

1. Harro Siegel (1900–1985): A German puppeteer and puppet theatre teacher. In 1928, he founded his own troupe and developed its repertoire in line with the trends of the German youth music movement of the time. In 1936, he became a professor at the National School of Fine Arts in Berlin. In 1943, he was appointed Professor of Art Education in Braunschweig. It was there that he founded and organised a puppet theatre festival in 1957.
2. Margareta Niculescu (1926–2018): A Romanian puppeteer, director, producer, teacher and theorist of the art of puppetry. A graduate of the Bucharest Theatre Institute, she was awarded the State Prize of the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1953. She received further awards at international puppet theatre festivals in 1958, 1962, and 1965.
3. Henryk Jurkowski (1927–2016): A Polish historian and theorist of puppetry, theatre critic, playwright, translator and university professor. He was the author of numerous books, studies and essays on puppet theatre, which were published in multiple languages.

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1988: *Una estética para el teatro de títeres!* [Aesthetics for the puppet theatre], in cooperation with Margareta Sörenson

1989: *En estetik för dockteater!* [Aesthetics for the puppet theatre], in cooperation with Margareta Sörenson

1992: *In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre*, in cooperation with Margareta Sörenson

1996: Grenzüberschreitungen [Crossing borders]

2002: *Marionettisten, memoarer* [The marionettist, memoirs]

2006: *Michael Meschke, texter om dockteater 1949–2004* [Michael Meschke, texts on puppet theatre, 1949–2004]

2009: *A theatre – an era, testimonies about the Stockholm Marionetteatern and the Marionettmuseum*

2012: *Le théâtre au bout des doigts* [Theatre at your fingertips]

For more information about Michael Meschke, please visit: https://www.michaelmeschke.com/bio3.htm

Antigoni Parousi is an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She studied pedagogy and completed a doctoral dissertation on puppetry directing. She has taught and conducted research on the pedagogy of theatrical expression for over 30 years and has relevant artistic experience. She has published over 80 articles in international and Greek journals, edited volumes, conference proceedings and books. She has directed over 50 puppet theatre performances and was honoured with the International Prix Michael Meschke in recognition of her work in developing and renewing the art of marionette puppetry.

"Theatre/Drama and Inclusive Education" Highlights from the International Conference in Athens

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Georgia Antoniou
Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network

Anastasia Lazaraki
Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network

Eugenia Zagoura
Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network

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The International Conference "Theatre/Drama and Inclusive Education"[1] was held in Athens from 21 to 23 March 2025 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the "it could be me – it could be you" programme and the successful conclusion of the "Theatre Makes Politics" initiative. The conference aimed to provide an international, interdisciplinary platform for the exchange of pedagogical, artistic and socio-political practices and research in the fields of inclusive pedagogy and the applied performing arts. It also sought to promote the values of equality and justice by championing inclusive education regardless of identity, vulnerability, or ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic background.

Amid the difficult educational reality we are experiencing in public schools, the conference was a real oasis for us. It is a reality in which teachers, despite having limited resources, try to pave the way for inclusion, often encountering resistance and many obstacles. In this oasis, we met people from all over the world: a vibrant gathering of motivators, artists, theatre professionals and educators.

During the three-day conference, there were 7 keynote speeches, 30 workshops, 55 research paper presentations, 9 working groups and discussion panels, and 7 artistic events (hard to believe, but true!). We would like to present some of the conference's highlights as we experienced them.

The first keynote speech was delivered by the captivating John O'Toole, an iconic figure who had come all the way from Australia. His speech was a stark reminder of the fact that most of us are trapped in an educational system based on a dualistic approach of "right" and "wrong", as predetermined in each subject, and on some kind of fixed "proper" behaviour. This system fails to promote the development of imagination as well as social and emotional skills. In our country, this system unfortunately downgrades art education in schools by reducing teaching hours and abolishing courses.

Another impressive speaker was Kostis Papaioannou, who, in his keynote speech, talked about the role and responsibility of teachers in a world of utter chaos. How much do we concern ourselves with issues of fear, anger and hatred that arise inside and outside the classroom? Are we looking for new ways to deal with them? Are we alert to what is happening around us? The speech could be titled: *If you want to be called a teacher*.

Finally, Kostas Magos gave a highly interesting speech on intercultural education. He informed us about the policies related to the goal of inclusive education, as well as how to avoid pitfalls and achieve this important objective.

One of the workshops that took place was titled "*We all can...* Supporting Diversity Through Enhancing the General Self-confidence of Adolescents in Secondary Education". Led by Aikaterini Asimidou, Antonis Lenakakis and Angelos Souliotis, the workshop involved exercises to help us get to know each other and express ourselves with lots of music and movement. We worked together to present a text in our own and personal ways. The important part was finding one's own unique way!

In addition, the workshop, "Devising as a Process of Inclusion and Developing Group Harmony", led by the amazing Sanja Krsmanović-Tasić, exceeded our expectations. Drawing on her many years of experience in theatre education, she guided us on a surreal yet realistic, imaginary yet rational journey though place and time – and all by the sole means of a newspaper!

In the workshop "Codes Under the Shadows", Aglaia Naka and Christos Rachiotis explored everyday situations involving the alternation of light and darkness and visibility and invisibility. Using two balls (one representing light and the other representing darkness), a variety of exercises were created to promote awareness of human rights, respect for diversity and the development of emotional intelligence and empathy.

The workshop "Who Was My Granny", presented by Sunčica Milosavljević, Nataša Milojević, Mladen Brekić and Sara Prodanović, showcased a creative drama approach to analysing family histories with an emphasis on female ancestry. This method was developed in Serbia and France with the aim of promoting women to take action within

their communities. By studying the biographies of female ancestors, the workshop aimed to encourage young people to take an interest in history. It is important to remember that theatre and education both aim to highlight and utilise cultural heritage so as to strengthen social cohesion.

In the workshop titled "Elements of Applied Theatre and Technique by Ivana Chubbuk: 12 Tools in Drama Pedagogy on Examples of Scenes from Plays by A. P. Chekhov", Arma Tanović Branković developed a training programme based on the tools and techniques of Augusto Boal's applied theatre, the work of drama educator Ivana Chubbuk and the Stanislavski method. Using these tools, she explored the way characters can be personalised and the development of awareness of one's actions, taking a deeply interdisciplinary approach that incorporated scenes from Chekhov's plays.

In the workshop, "Where is mum? – Applying Drama for Gender Equality Education", Martha Katsaridou and Koldo Vío explored how theatre and drama can promote gender equality education. The way in which humans create and interpret meaning through language and imagination helps us to better understand ourselves and our environment. Starting with a children's book on discrimination and gender stereotypes, we became co-researchers aiming to highlight inequalities and promote transformative thinking and social change. The workshop was held as part of the Erasmus+ programme "Equality Street".

And just when we thought we had seen and done everything, we entered a presentation room and realised there was still more to give and take! The presentations comprised opinion pieces, research, examples of good practice, teaching proposals and artistic activities – an incredible source of inspiration! First, we will refer to the 8th session, which took place on Sunday under the general title "Intercultural Performing Arts Practices for Inclusive Communities" and involved a journey from Italy to India, China, the USA and, finally, Ireland. We will focus on China (have they really come so far?) and the exceptional William Yip. After bringing us back to the here and now with an amazing quick exercise, he showed us how the integration of theatre and drama education in remote schools in China bridges the educational and emotional gaps troubling both children – whom he calls "left-behind children" – and their teachers. By promoting inclusion, creativity and empathy, these interventions address systemic inequalities while empowering marginalised communities. William Yip has convinced us that theatre in education can transform human lives, and he will probably convince you too if you start following him and take a look at his work!


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Moreover, in the working group and discussion panel entitled "Identities, Interculturality and Performativity: Challenges, Contradictions and Reflection", coordinated by Despoina Karakatsani, participants from various educational and scientific fields examined the following topics: the impact of dual identities on the academic success of migrant children; the role of education in times of social cohesion crises; the "woke agenda" and the "anti-woke" ideology in relation to human rights and intercultural education. The ways in which theatre in education and anti-woke views exert influence on intercultural educational practices were also explored.

Coordinated by Giorgos Moschos, the working group and discussion panel "Theatre Education in Prisons: Limits, Challenges, Perspectives" discussed the importance of theatre and the performing arts in prisons, with the participation of Dora Katsamori. It is now undeniable that educational activities for prisoners can play a decisive role in helping them to develop skills such as teamwork and resilience, as well as motivating them to redefine the value of life in the suffocatingly difficult reality they experience. The issues that should be taken into account when implementing theatrical activities in prisons were also discussed. Based on the questions raised for discussion, it was suggested, among other things, that educators should see and treat the people in front of them as human beings and not as "criminals", and not dwell on their pasts, as they are simply their students.

In addition to the above, various events that followed the main speeches provided food for thought, such as the stand-up comedy show "Fine!", performed by the talented actress Manal Awad. Using humour, she addresses difficult questions such as: What is it like for a woman to leave Palestine as a refugee and try to start a new life in Greece? How does it feel when this situation is presented to you in the form of stand-up comedy, while you are simultaneously aware of the horror of it? Truly disarming!

Another intelligently devised, surprising and moving event was the theatrical performance based on Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Think of Others", which was designed by students of the Experimental Music School of Pallini with the participation of students from the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of the Peloponnese and with the support of UNIMA Hellas.

All in all, it was three days filled with knowledge and experiences, as well as fun! On one occasion, hundreds of people from all over the world came

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together to dance in a spontaneous street Zumba session! For the conference finale, we enjoyed a delightful and innovatory musical evening entitled "Our Voices", featuring Angeliki Toubanaki and the String Theory choir, aptly followed by songs and dances performed by the children of Pallini Music School.

In conclusion:

If the conference had a colour, it would be yellow like the sun!

If it had a feeling, it would be hope, because we all felt hopeful about a better education and, by extension, a better world!

If it were a song, it would be "This Bitter Earth / On the nature of daylight" by Dinah Washington and Max Richer. There's a verse that says it all:

> But while a voice
> Within me cries
> I'm sure someone may answer my call
> And this bitter earth, oooh
> May not, oh, be so bitter after all

Photos by Nikos Govas, Christos Rachiotis and UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis

Note

1. For more information about the 2025 International Conference "Theatre/Drama & Inclusive Education" organised by the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network in Athens, visit: https://theatroedu.gr/en/What-we-do/International-Conferences/International-Conference-2025/Conference-2025

Georgia Antoniou has been a maths teacher since 2002. In 2009 she was assigned to a public school. After initially focusing on preparing students for national exams, she realised that there was a lack of activities centred on fostering the children's emotional development and social skills, which drove her to create a school drama group. In 2019–2020, she participated in the "Theatre in the New School" programme by the National Theatre of Greece. After that, she took part in the National Theatre of Greece's "Teachers' Academy" (project manager: Sofia Vgenopoulou) for two years (2020–2022). She has attended numerous seminars from the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-GR) and actively participates in the "it could be me – it could be you" programme. She believes that teaching art in schools can help children to understand the value of diversity and to learn how to express themselves creatively.

Anastasia Lazaraki is an English language teacher with extensive experience in both public and private education. She has participated in numerous professional seminars covering subjects such as teaching, environmental education, educational technology, human rights and drama in education. She has curated and directed school theatre productions and participates as a trainer in European Erasmus+ programmes for educators and students. Her aim is to utilise drama pedagogically to enhance inclusion within the school community.

Evgenia Zagoura is a physical education teacher at Mandouki Primary School in Corfu, Greece. From 2016 to 2023, she was the Local Coordinator of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) in Corfu and, from 2021 to 2023, she was the President of the TENet-Gr Board of Directors. She coordinated the Corfu Theatre Forum group of TENet-Gr in a performance titled *And our Cherry Garden is Wonderful*, which aimed to inform and raise awareness of environmental issues. An active member of the Adults' Workshop in Corfu, she has also worked as a workshop facilitator for children and young people at the Municipal Regional Theatre of Corfu. She has designed and implemented theatre in education programmes and theatre performances in both formal and informal educational contexts. She is a founding member of the theatre group DOCs Theatre, which specialises in researching and experimenting with documentary and devised theatre techniques.orkshop in Corfu, she has also worked as a workshop facilitator for children and young people at the Municipal Regional Theatre of Corfu. She has designed and implemented theatre in education programmes and theatre performances in both formal and informal educational contexts. She is a founding member of the theatre group DOCs Theatre, which specialises in researching and experimenting with documentary and devised theatre techniques.

Student theatre performance in high schools in Cyprus Framework, process and outcome

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Maria Tzovenaki
Frederick University, Cyprus

Keywords: *Student theatre performance, school theatre competitions, theatre in education, drama training for educators, theatrical techniques*

This dissertation, which was supervised of Dr Andri Ch. Constantinou, Professor of Theatre Studies at the School of Education and Social Sciences, Frederick University, was defended by Maria Tzovenaki in Nicosia, Cyprus in September 2024. The research was conducted in five high schools in one district of Cyprus between October 2021 and April 2022. The study examined whether theatre productions in the participating schools were primarily a pedagogical act and process, or if their main purpose was to produce a polished final performance. Specifically, it investigated the issues faced by educators when preparing student theatre performances and managing the various tasks involved in staging their productions. The findings document the current state within the examined framework and contribute to improving performance organisation and avoiding choices that might hinder the productive experience of the student ensemble members.

Research questions

- What is the purpose of school theatre performances for adolescents in Cyprus?
- Under what conditions is the play chosen and the team formed?
- What role do educators play, and how much freedom do they give students?
- Does the school administration support the overall effort?
- Is there collaboration between the educator responsible and others within or outside the school community?

The significance of this research lies in emphasising the importance of the preparation process rather than just the outcome. Participants from the school community can benefit in many ways. This is the first empirical study of school theatre performances in Cyprus. The researcher aims to contribute to international drama pedagogy research by presenting various models for organising student performances. This will enable educators interested in, or already involved in, this field to deepen their knowledge and select the model that is most beneficial and productive for all contributors.

The study was structured into three phases: (a) interviews with five educators who directed student performances; (b) observation of rehearsals of four theatre groups; and (c) the implementation of a drama pedagogy programme within one of the groups, to determine whether the programme helped its members prepare for their performance. A qualitative methodology was employed to analyse the subjective attitudes and behaviours of those involved in the production using various research tools, such as interviews with educators and students, observation of rehearsals and the researcher's reflective journal. All the research data was entered into Taguette, a qualitative data analysis software, where it was coded and organised into a thematic map containing nine themes. These themes were made up of categories that were grouped based on relevance. Thematic analysis was conducted in six stages in an attempt to answer the research questions.

The main conclusions of the thesis are summarised as follows: The formation of the group through auditions and lengthy rehearsals, the involvement of theatre professionals in some schools and the large sums spent on venue rentals, stage sets and costumes suggest that the main objective of the student performances in the participating high schools was to create a polished artistic product, rather than focusing on the process itself. However, results from other research conducted abroad show that the performance process is equally significant to the final product. It is important to pursue both a quality outcome and a quality experience for the students simultaneously.

Although not observed in all schools, collaboration between educators and theatre professionals can be productive. It reduces errors and makes use

of theatrical techniques to prepare students. Typically, the preparation process focuses on the educators rather than the students, with the educators directing the process and thus limiting the children's initiative. However, many scholars argue that the opposite should be true. It has also been noted that implementing theatre exercises and games in two schools made the process more enjoyable, bringing the students closer to the characters they portrayed. This was demonstrated by the drama pedagogy programme conducted with one of the groups that participated in the research. For this reason, the training of educators in drama pedagogy is essential.

It should be noted that the Pancyprian School Theatre Competitions organised by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation and the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth often cause anxiety and tension among team members. Indeed, rules are sometimes broken to give certain schools an advantage. The pursuit of distinction in theatre competitions at all costs leaves no room for inclusive pedagogy. It is pedagogically appropriate to select students with a range of abilities and utilise the diversity within the school environment, as this improves outcomes for students.

At the same time, the importance of exploratory learning in the preparation process is emphasised, with students encouraged to experiment and discover knowledge under the guidance of educators. Children should actively participate in every stage of the process, from selecting the play and adapting or writing it to forming the team, setting up the stage, performing, creating sets and costumes, collecting props and managing the music. This approach ensures experiential or empirical learning. According to this pedagogy, educators must place students at the centre of the process, giving them considerable room for active participation so that they can experience the theatre performance as their own, without dictating what they should do.

Finally, in addition to suggestions for improving the organisation of the Pancyprian School Theatre Competitions and the preparation of student performances, recommendations for future research are also provided.

Maria Tzovenaki was born in Athens and graduated from the Department of Modern Greek Philology at the School of Philosophy of the University of Crete, Greece, in 2002. She also completed a postgraduate programme in Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at the University of Cyprus in 2007 and worked on her doctoral dissertation at Frederick University. She is currently studying at the Department of Theatre Studies at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. Since 2003, she has worked as a language and literature teacher in both private and public secondary education schools in Cyprus, taking on the organisation and directorial supervision of student theatre performances in middle and high schools across the island. For the past three years, she has also taught Greek at the special education unit of the Linopetra High School in Limassol, participating in theatrical activities that included children with special needs alongside students from other school classes.

Palestine: **Performing arts** as **resistance**, **resilience** and ***sumud***

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Editorial note

For over two years, and indeed for many decades, the international community has witnessed an escalating humanitarian crisis characterised by profound cultural suppression and unprecedented violence against civilians and cultural institutions, including theatres, schools, universities and community spaces. The ongoing occupation and genocide of the Palestinian people is also evident in the disruption, threat or forced displacement of artistic and educational activities. In turbulent times like these, it is a moral imperative and urgent ethical responsibility to act, rather than merely bear witness to these practices. In November 2024, the *Education & Theatre* Editorial Board decided to dedicate its next issue to the Palestinian theatre, drama and education community.

We therefore established communication channels with our peers working in education, theatre, drama and the performing arts in Palestine. It quickly became evident that culture and the arts play a crucial role in their unarmed resistance to the occupier. They embody the finest qualities of Palestinian resilience and tenacity, as well as *sumud* (often translated as steadfastness), in the face of the looting of their narrative, land and folklore. This resistance provides Palestinians with valuable opportunities to learn about and express their experiences through various art forms in formal and informal educational settings.

After extensive communication, dialogue and the exchange of ideas and views, Issue 26 proudly presents a diverse selection of contributions from practitioners, educators, artists, researchers and activists who have persevered under conditions of displacement, fragmentation and loss. Together, these contributions highlight theatre, drama and the performing arts as vital social practices, offering communities a means of sustaining memory, fostering collective care and exploring the possibility of a hopeful future.

In this context, theatre, drama and the performing arts transcend their conventional function as sources of personal or collective entertainment. Instead, they constitute a language through which lived experience and collective trauma can be expressed, confronted and processed. Rather than manifesting as a spectacle, resistance emerges through the everyday act of creating spaces for expression. Resilience is reframed as a shared capacity built on human relationships, community interconnection and intergenerational knowledge transmission, rather than as individual endurance. Here, the concept of sumud (steadfastness) is revealed not as passive endurance, but as a dynamic commitment to staying put, remembering and imagining alternative possibilities. The following articles outline how art forms such as theatre, storytelling, poetry and drama are used as creative strategies to reflect experiences of freedom of thought and expression. They recount aspects of Palestinian narratives and portray elements of Palestinian life.

The insert begins with three research articles, each offering a different research paradigm. In their discussion of the Palestinian experience, **Khitam Edelbi** and **Shams Almanal Timraz** emphasise the significance of storytelling in transmitting historical memory, and consequently, in safeguarding collective identity and envisioning the future. In their autoethnography, they analyse embodied art forms such as the dabkeh dance, theatre, literature and graffiti on the Separation Wall. These cultural expressions and political testimonies counteract the fragmentation of the people and provide a sense of continuity through storytelling. Recognising the perspective of author Ghassan Kanafani, who viewed storytelling as a means of cultural survival and a revolutionary act, they present two stories by their sisters, Muhibah Edelbi and Sabha Timraz. These stories recall intergenerational memories of Palestinians being displaced from their homeland during the Nakba of 1948 and act as a form of resistance against erasure. Finally, Edelbi and Timraz explore the role of graffiti during the First and Second Intifadas, and the increased visibility of Palestinian storytelling through theatre and digital media. These amplify marginalised voices by promoting them on global platforms.

Hala Al-Yamani, **Abdelfattah Abusrour** and **Fadel Alsawayfa** introduced found poetry as a legitimate analysis tool into the research dialogue. Combining this approach with interpretative analysis enabled them to explore various aspects of the lives of Palestinian youth. In their qualitative research with postgraduate students at Bethlehem University, they used Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun* as a pre-text in drama workshops. Throughout these workshops, participants were able to engage creatively with the novella's characters, exploring and challenging their choices through improvisation and role-play. The qualitative research was based on testimonies from five students, who provided data through individual interviews and written reflections. Combined with the researchers' observations and analysis, the resulting found poems highlighted dominant concepts such as homeland, emigration and a strong sense of belonging among all the young participants.

Rand Barakat reviews the Master's programme in Creative, Pedagogical and Community Practices at Bethlehem University. This Palestinian arts-based programme focuses on personal, pedagogical and community development within the context of Palestinian higher education. Through qualitative case studies and semi-structured interviews with three female students, the review explores their motivations, experiences and engagement with creative practices. Thematic analysis reveals how the programme fosters critical reflection, personal growth and innovative teaching methods among participants while providing a supportive environment in which to confront complex social and institutional challenges. In the face of dispossession, fragmentation, control and standardisation, Barakat concludes that this Master's programme emerges as a vibrant alternative, placing creativity, dialogue and socio-culturally connected learning at its core.

In a different vein, the Innovative Programmes category features contributions from artists, educators and activists who share their work and experience in the field. **Abdelfattah Abusrour** presents "Beautiful Resistance", his philosophy on how the arts contribute to peaceful and creative self-expression. Wanting to utilise his previous interdisciplinary

knowledge, he focuses on telling his story and speaking about Palestine. Through sharing important autobiographical details, he helps us understand how he developed his approach to working with Palestinian children and young people in communities and refugee camps, such as Aida. This approach enables them to express themselves through the arts, to resist the uprooting and inhumane conditions in which they live and to ultimately discover themselves in the same way that he did. He redefines resistance as creative expression rather than violence. Through the Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, which he founded, he creates and adapts performances for students using theatre in education and storytelling, among other methods. These performances promote creativity, self-expression and a deeper understanding of Palestinian culture and identity.

In her article, **Marina Johnson** revisits ASHTAR Theatre's *The Gaza Monologues*, a project that transformed the testimonies of Gazan youth into a lasting global act of remembrance and resistance. Johnson explores how this work has found new resonance 15 years later through *Letters to Gaza*, an initiative inviting people worldwide to share words of solidarity. Together, these two initiatives reveal theatre's power to bridge distances, convey grief and sustain hope in the face of destruction. Johnson emphasises the performative nature of writing these monologues, which continue to serve as a striking example of "performative resistance". This is the first part of Johnson's work on this issue and should be read in conjunction with Part II, in which she discusses the project with Iman Aoun, the co-founder and director of ASHTAR Theatre (see further below).

Marina Barham and **George Matar** take us on an empowering journey with Palestinian children, showcasing the work of Al-Harah Theatre. In the face of genocide, theatre becomes a refuge and the arts transform into a powerful form of resistance, resilience, healing and hope. We witness the pioneering work of an organisation that has integrated theatre and drama into the heart of Palestinian schools, not just as an extracurricular artistic activity, but as a vital toolkit for psychological, educational and cultural empowerment. Barham and Matar emphasise that these creative practices are a catalyst for emotional healing, self-expression and hope. They describe how their work helps communities – including children, women and people with disabilities – to process and cope with the ongoing trauma and despair caused by the Israeli occupation.

Khalid Massou, co-founder of Inad Theatre, focuses on inclusive theatre and drama processes that bring together people with and without disabilities. He presents a case study of an inclusive theatre programme developed by Inad Theatre and the Effetà School for students with hearing impairments in Bethlehem. Drawing on the philosophies of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, Massou argues that this project redefines theatre as a participatory pedagogy, restoring agency and confidence to young people affected by violence. Through such collaborations, he suggests that theatre can become an act of social justice that expands accessibility, nurtures empathy and affirms the right to education for all.

From a different standpoint, **Jenny Karaviti** provides an overview of the actions organised by the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-GR) in solidarity with Palestine over the years. She also introduces "4 Colours", a relatively new working group comprising TENet-Gr members and volunteers that was set up to coordinate these activities more effectively. Named after the four colours of the Palestinian flag, the group's main focus is to strengthen dialogue, advocacy and solidarity actions under the TENet-Gr umbrella. Karaviti reviews some

of the main activities undertaken by the group, such as translating Palestinian poetry, joining or endorsing solidarity campaigns, and holding or participating in events. The paper provides examples of where TENet-Gr and Palestinian voices converge, including the ASHTAR Theatre, *The Gaza Monologues*, The Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp and the artist group "We", which is showcased elsewhere in this issue.

In the Interviews category, **Marina Johnson** talks to Iman Aoun, the co-founder and executive director of ASHTAR Theatre. In the second part of Johnson's work featured in this issue (see also Part I above), they discuss the revival of *The Gaza Monologues*, the creation of *The New Gaza Monologues* and the *Letters to Gaza* solidarity initiative. Here, Aoun interweaves artistic vision and creation with political responsibility, revealing how theatre can serve as a means of bearing witness and fostering connection in times of siege.

Lastly, **Jenny Karaviti** discusses the newly formed group of Palestinian artists, "We", who are displaced in southern Gaza. During a day conference celebrating World Theatre/Drama & Education Day in Thessaloniki in November 2024, painter and digital graphic designer Alaa Al Jabari, theatre director and puppet maker Mahdi Karira, and writer Fidaa Ziad communicated via live internet connection with TENet-Gr members and friends. They talked about how the group came together, their experiences as artists during the war and the writing, visual arts and puppetry workshops they run in Gaza. Fidaa Ziad presented extracts from her diary in which she reflects on her experiences of displacement and shared some recorded stories of women who had lost loved ones, as well as discussing the psychological impact of this loss. Mahdi Karira described how he creates puppets out of food cans, the only material available to him, and presented the mobile theatre he has built to perform for children in southern Gaza. Alaa Al Jabari talked about the workshops she runs for children. By listening to their experiences and questions, and discussing their creations, she provides them with initial psychological support during the war.

The cases presented in this issue do not cover all aspects of theatre, drama and the performing arts in relation to the educational work currently taking place in Palestine. Nevertheless, they encourage the international scholarly and cultural community to engage in dialogue about the performing arts as a means of achieving cultural continuity, educational progress and a political presence. When the line between life and death is blurred, Palestinian artists, educators and pedagogues are naturally drawn into activism. They remind us that theatre and drama can serve as both refuge and public declaration, as a healing practice and as an act of resistance. Above all, they call upon us to listen with care, respect and solidarity. It is therefore fitting that their voices are disseminated widely and published in the official languages of this journal – Greek and English – as well as in Arabic, their original language. We anticipate that the ensuing discourse will encourage profound understanding, emotional engagement, and reflective action.

The Editorial Board

Echoes of resistance
The role of storytelling and performing arts in preserving Palestinian identity

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Khitam Edelbi
Dar al-Kalima University, Palestine

Shams Almanal Timraz
producer, art critic and cultural consultant

Abstract

This article examines the central role of the native voice in transmitting historical memory, emphasising how it sustains collective identity and shapes our vision of the future. In the Palestinian context, storytelling serves as both a cultural archive and an act of resistance, countering fragmentation by maintaining narrative continuity. The analysis engages with embodied art forms such as dabkeh, theatre, literature and mural painting on the separation wall as vital modes of cultural expression and political testimony. The legacy of Ghassan Kanafani is highlighted, recognising his assertion that storytelling is a form of cultural survival and a revolutionary act. Contributions by Khitam Edelbi and Shams Almanal Timraz further ground the discussion. The first is a narrative recounted by Muhibah Edelbi and the second is a performance by Sabha Timraz. Both recount intergenerational memories of displacement from Al-Birwa and Isdud during the Nakba of 1948. These stories serve as a form of mnemonic resistance against erasure. Finally, the article examines the role of graffiti during the First and Second Intifadas, as well as how Palestinian narratives have gained a wider reach through theatre and digital media. These continue to amplify marginalised voices across global platforms.

Keywords: *Storytelling, performing arts, Palestinian identity, Gaza, Ghassan Kanafani, memory, resistance, Indigenous peoples, graffiti, intergenerational trauma, digital media*

Introduction

Across Indigenous communities worldwide, storytelling and the performing arts have served as sacred vessels for memory, resistance and identity. As Sium and Ritskes (2013) assert, "Stories become mediums for Indigenous peoples to both analogize colonial violence and resist it in real ways. A kind of embodied reciprocity exists between a people and their stories" (p. 5).

These creative expressions are far more than mere modes of entertainment; they are vital tools of survival, resilience and resistance in the face of colonial violence and cultural erasure. Through artistic forms such as the rhythmic cadence of oral poetry to the visual symbolism embedded in traditional crafts and theatrical performances, Indigenous peoples have preserved their histories and asserted their presence.

This article explores the global significance of storytelling and performance, with a focus on the Palestinian experience from the British Mandate and the Nakba of 1948, through to the present-day realities of occupation, exile and genocide. Using an autoethnographic approach, the authors demonstrate the importance of passing on the Palestinian story through the generations in order to preserve a heritage that has been under threat of erasure by the Israeli occupation since 1948.

Drawing on personal and collective memory, the article discusses how Palestinian narratives have been preserved through painting, theatre, song, poetry, literature and folkloric dance (*dabkeh*). These forms of expression have played a crucial role in resisting extinction. To highlight how trauma and memory are transferred intergenerationally and how art becomes both a witness and a form of healing, the authors incorporate personal family testimonies, particularly from their sisters who lived through the Nakba and still carry its psychological scars.

Storytelling as survival in Indigenous contexts

In the absence of, or in the face of distortion to, written historical records by colonial regimes, Indigenous communities have preserved the truth through oral traditions. As Calder (2013) argues, narratives foster empathy, critical imagination and humility, shaping both identity and collective memory. For colonised peoples, storytelling becomes a means of reclaiming agency over their history and future. These stories are active tools of resistance, woven with ancestral wisdom and contemporary urgency, not passive recollections.

Similarly, Ceaușu (2018) highlights the therapeutic power of creative expression, asserting that art therapy is a means of reclaiming emotional and social well-being, rather than just a form of psychological intervention. In this light, performance and storytelling are not luxuries, but essential acts of survival and self-determination. These cultural tools help communities' counter alienation, affirm identity and foster a sense of belonging, particularly in situations of trauma and displacement.

The Palestinian narrative tradition

In Palestine, storytelling has played a particularly important role in maintaining cultural continuity and resisting political fragmentation. Before and during the British Mandate, and increasingly after the Nakba of 1948, Palestinian families and communities relied on oral histories, folktales, embroidery, poetry and dance to sustain their identity in the face of loss. The Nakba resulted in the forced displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians and the destruction of more than 500 villages. It was not only a physical catastrophe, but also an assault on memory and history.

In response, Palestinians turned to cultural production as a form of resistance. Stories of village life, harvest songs, embroidered thobes bearing the names of destroyed towns and theatrical reenactments of historical events have all served to preserve the memory of Palestine as it was before 1948. These forms continue to evolve, adapting to new contexts while maintaining their core function of asserting presence, humanity and rights in the face of ongoing erasure.

Art as the language of the silenced

In therapeutic contexts, storytelling can reveal profound psychological truths. People recount experiences not just as chronological events, but as narratives imbued with transformation, struggle and meaning. When language becomes insufficient or inaccessible, people often turn to symbolic and embodied forms of expression such as art, music, movement and crafts. As Ceaușu (2018) observes, these non-verbal forms enable the articulation of the unspeakable. For communities subjected to silencing or repression, the arts offer an alternative mode of communication, one that transcends linguistic barriers and evades censorship.

Palestinians have long embraced this visual and embodied language. Whether it is the meticulous embroidery that stitches memory into fabric, the defiant rhythm of the dabkeh dance, or the evocative murals painted on separation walls, art provides a sanctuary for expression. These creative acts do more than narrate suffering; they proclaim survival, assert dignity and embody hope.

In her study, Karim (2022) documents how contextualising the historical and contemporary practices of Palestinian artists can transform art-making into a tool of decolonisation. This process challenges dominant representations, galvanises solidarity and disrupts systems that deny Palestinians their autonomy and a voice.

Similarly, Ankori (2006) asserts that, despite the catastrophic rupture of 1948 and its devastating impact on Palestinian society, artistic traditions from before the Nakba endure as vital cultural reservoirs. These traditions not only anchor contemporary Palestinian art, but also serve as a foundation for its continuity and resilience.

The intergenerational power of story

Family narratives also play a crucial role in shaping collective identity. Kiser et al. (2010) argue that storytelling within families creates shared frameworks that help individuals and communities make sense of trauma and imagine a collective future. In Palestinian society, intergenerational storytelling has preserved the names of villages, the stories of exile, the experiences of resistance and the dreams of return.

Lullabies whispering of lost olive groves, proverbs carrying the wisdom of elders and oral tales passed from grandparents to grandchildren function

as portable homelands. In the diaspora, whether in refugee camps or urban metropolises, these stories become anchors of identity and acts of remembrance.

From Nakba to now

Following the expulsion of 1948, Palestinian refugees found themselves scattered across borders, often barred from returning home. Oral storytelling became a crucial means of preserving their culture. Without access to the lands of their birth, families described their villages in intimate detail, naming the trees, the festivals and the neighbours. This oral preservation served as both testimony and resistance.

Ghassan Kanafani, a renowned Palestinian writer and political activist, is renowned for his profound literary exploration of exile, resistance and identity. His narratives often delve into the psychological and political dimensions of displacement, transforming personal grief into collective resistance.

One of Kanafani's most notable assertions is: "The Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary, wherever they are". This statement underscores his belief in the universal relevance of the Palestinian struggle and its resonance with wider revolutionary movements around the world.

Although the exact origin of this quote is not definitively documented, it has been cited in various reputable sources discussing Kanafani's work and ideology. For instance, an article on modern diplomacy references this statement in the context of Kanafani's Marxist-Leninist views and his involvement with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The above quote also appears in discussions about Kanafani's internationalist outlook and his emphasis on solidarity among oppressed peoples worldwide. Kanafani's work, such as Men in the Sun (1999) and *Return to Haifa* (2000), exemplifies his commitment to portraying the Palestinian experience and advocating for solidarity among oppressed communities. His belief in the power of narrative to mobilise the oppressed and inspire global solidarity continues to influence discussions about resistance literature and political activism.

Storytelling as resistance
Al-Birwa: Thorns of memory between loss and survival by Khitam Edelbi

"I wish they had lived on as long as we did, and we would have slept on thorns." This is a phrase used by the ancients following the desecration of Palestine in 1948. It is with this phrase that my esteemed sister, Muhibah, began her story of Al-Birwa as she sat before me. It is a story that remains deeply etched in her heart.

> I was seven years old on the day our beloved queen fell before them, killing some of her people, desecrating her land, stealing the blue of her sky and polluting her waters. Our Al-Birwa was the town to which our parents moved from Acre to cultivate their land and harvest its crops. There, in Al-Birwa, we owned the most beautiful house, cultivated the most beautiful land and harvested the most beautiful crops. There, my mother gave birth to me and my seven siblings: Mahmoud, Muhibah, Nusaybah, Amirah, Subheyah, Zadah and Mohammad. There, we lived part of our childhood, which was stolen from us by the occupier. On the day they arrived bearing hatred, hunger and weapons, we were all at home: my mother, my six sisters, their guests as well as my father, who was sitting in the specially prepared Arabic diwan to receive them. They shouted demands for the villagers to vacate the houses within half an hour. My mother poured rice and milk into bowls for us and waited for them to cool down. But when they were cold and ready, no one wanted them; the children who had loved them ran away, and from that day on, they lost their taste. We ran and wandered in the wilderness. We raced, climbed, fell, stopped, fainted, cried, screamed and were silent. We were hungry and thirsty until we arrived at the unknown. We left our land, our house and our money behind, in Al-Birwa, carrying with us what remained of our love for it and our childhood. My father, fearing for us, forgot to wear his traditional Arab gown, which he had worn with pride. He and my mother took nothing from the house except us, for we were their most precious possession. Everyone who lived in Al-Birwa was evacuated. The adults rushed to carry the children, who ran in a state of panic. We walked with hundreds of people towards the village of Sha'ab, whose people and homes embraced us. We spent a few days there, and it was our first shelter after migrating. From Sha'ab, we walked until we reached Nahf, the village where my grandfather, Hamad Abu Awad – the village headman and most prominent figure – lived. My grandparents, Hamad and Zahiya, embraced us, and we thought we had reached safety. But then they arrived again, with their equipment and their brutality and their weapons. And so, we fled again. This time, we ran from Nahf to the village of Sajur. There my mother discovered that she had lost two of her children, Mahmoud and Nusaybah, during the escape. This loss was

even more agonising that losing Al-Birwa. She lay on the ground, putting her life on hold until her children returned. "I will not eat or drink until my children come back to me", she said. They returned two days later, and her life returned with them. From Sajur, we went to Nahf, and from there, to Akka (Acre) – the homeland of our father after he lost Al-Birwa, his second homeland. We started from scratch. There were nine mouths screaming in hunger and nine hearts bleeding with tragedy. We had no money, no home and our dignity was shattered after we had had money, a home and honour. Today, 64 years later, we still embrace the remains of those who were martyred for it. Sixty-four years later, we still pass by Al-Birwa but do not enter it; we still smell its soil, but do not eat its produce. We have forgotten all our dreams, remembering only the dream of returning. Sixty-four years later, we still remember the details, every detail: the details of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Galilee. I wish that, like our blood, they would last forever, and that we would sleep on thorns.

Reflection

When recounting Al-Birwa, Muhibah offers more than a personal recollection; she weaves a tapestry of memory, loss and resistance, embodying the Palestinian struggle to preserve identity in the face of displacement. Her narrative, rich in sensory detail, serves as a vessel for the past, a past that continues to haunt and shape the present. Through her words, the land of Al-Birwa is not lost, but is made eternally present.

The imagery is poignant: the milk and rice cooling in waiting bowls, a hurried flight through the wilderness and the silence of hunger and thirst. Though rooted in personal experience, these details resonate with collective grief. Through them, we recognise the deep scars left by trauma: not only the physical violence of forced displacement, but also the psychological wounds that alter a community's relationship with home forever. For Muhibah, Al-Birwa is more than just a lost village; it is a part of her identity, an indelible mark and a piece of her unforgettable and unreachable childhood.

The story of her family's forced displacement from Al- Birwa to Shaa'b, Nahf and Sajur, and finally to Akka (Acre), echoes the recurring rhythm of Palestinian displacement. Each new home is built on the shifting sands of memory and longing. Yet, even in the face of this ceaseless movement, storytelling offers a sense of stability. It is through the act of remembering and retelling that Muhibah and others like her hold on to the essence of what was lost. The homeland becomes a realm of the heart, not just a place on a map, and this cannot be taken away through physical exile.

The emotional power of Muhibah's story lies not only in its sadness, but also in its resilience. Sixty-four years later, the soil of Al-Birwa is still imagined, smelled and mourned, despite the violence of history. This narrative is a profound statement of survival, a refusal to let go or allow erasure. In narrating the details of life before and after the Nakba, Muhibah does more than document history: she preserves it, protects it and ensures that it is passed down as a living memory and a beacon for future generations.

Ultimately, Al-Birwa becomes a symbol of the broader Palestinian experience, in which trauma, memory and identity are interwoven through storytelling. Through these stories, Palestinians continue to assert their place in history, resisting the forces that have sought to erase them and those that seek to obscure the truth of their existence. Thus, preserving Palestinian identity is a defiant and continuous affirmation of life, love and home.

A survival in a circle of exiled fabric of trauma by Shams Almanal Timraz

The Nakba of 1948, during which the mass expulsion and displacement of Palestinians occurred, took place 24 years before I was born as a refugee. The Nakba shaped every fibre of my family's existence. My parents and older siblings were among the hundreds of thousands who were forced to flee. When they were expelled from our hometown of Isdud, they set off on foot walking towards Gaza, disoriented and terrified, carrying only what they could bear.

My eldest sister, Sabha, was just a little girl. Barefoot, exhausted and bewildered, she kept asking our mother the same desperate question: "When will we get home?" Her childish voice, echoing through the chaos of exile, served as a piercing reminder that the trauma of war does not spare no one, not even the very young. It takes hold early and leaves a deep mark.

Our mother, walking with several children and bearing the unbearable weight of sudden homelessness, could offer no answers, only her presence. In an instinctive act of emotional survival and maternal creativity, she removed her dayer – a voluminous black overskirt traditionally worn by women in Isdud. She gathered it into a circle on the bare earth, helped Sabha through the central opening and seated the younger children around the edges. "Here is home, my darling", she said softly, anchoring the children not in geography, but in love and togetherness. That improvised circle of fabric and grief became their only sanctuary in a world torn apart.

Now, decades later, Sabha lives with dementia. She no longer recognises faces or remembers daily events. However, the trauma of displacement has paradoxically anchored one memory that remains intact: that moment in the circle. We still find her sitting quietly in the centre of our mother's old black dayer, reliving the only home she has left, a tactile memory etched deeper than time or cognition.

Psychological reflection

From a psychological perspective, this moment reveals how trauma can solidify memory. In his seminal work on trauma, Van der Kolk (1996) states: "Both my interviews with traumatized people, and my brain imaging studies of them, seem to confirm that traumatic memories come back as emotional and sensory states, with little capacity for verbal representation" (p. 296). Edelbi did not see her sister Muhibah lose her ability to speak, as Muhibah continues to recount the events of the Nakba in 1948 and the family's loss of home and land as if they happened only yesterday. In contrast, Sabha, the sister of Timraz, who experienced a loss of language, dramatically expressed her own Nakba by sitting at the centre of a cloth circle symbolising home – the same cloth upon which she had sat the day her real home was lost.

While dementia gradually erodes cognitive functioning, particularly short-term memory, traumatic memories often persist, because they are encoded through heightened emotional intensity and somatic imprint. For young children in particular, early trauma can become embedded in the body, influencing attachment patterns, emotional regulation and spatial identity (Schore, 2001).

Sabha's repeated question, "When will we get home?", reflects a child's primal need for safety, structure and familiarity, all of which were violently taken away from her. By drawing a circle with the dayer, our mother performed a psychologically significant act of containment, offering a spatial and symbolic representation of safety in a reality that offered none.

This behaviour aligns with trauma theories that emphasise the importance of embodied rituals and symbolic gestures in establishing emotional security. As Van der Kolk (2014) suggests, the body "keeps the score", retaining traumatic experiences somatically when cognitive processing is disrupted. For Sabha, the cloth circle that she revisited repeatedly in old age functioned as a corporeal mnemonic, grounding her sense of maternal care that she had remembered amid the terror of dispossession.

From an academic perspective, this story lies at the intersection of trauma studies, memory theory and feminist geography. The use of fabric, specifically the dayer, as a material and spatial surrogate for home, disrupts conventional notions of domesticity associated with permanent residences. Here, home is not a place, but an act of reclamation that can be performed and carried with you.

In Palestinian cultural discourse, the mother often embodies the continuity of the nation and memory. This story exemplifies how, through acts of caregiving and improvisation, women preserve cultural identity in the face of erasure. The mother's gesture transforms traditional attire into a spatial metaphor, illustrating what Edward Said (1993) termed "the contrapuntal reality" of exile, living in the absence of place yet recreating it through memory and symbol.

Furthermore, the persistence of embodied memory, as experienced through dementia, challenges linear historiography. This suggests that history is archived not only in documents and testimonies, but also in sensory experience, inherited emotion and the physical repetition of symbolic acts.

The "circle of exile" is a multi-layered concept that encompasses a psychological defence mechanism, a maternal act of protection, a feminist reimagining of space and a visceral archive of Palestinian dispossession.

Sabha's vivid, sensory memory of that moment, soaked in emotion, has endured, even though much of her everyday memory has faded. In cases of dementia, it is often the neutral, mundane memories that are lost first, while those associated with intense emotions, such as fear, love or loss, remain remarkably resilient.

Research into trauma and memory shows that the brain processes emotionally charged experiences differently. These experiences are encoded more deeply and are less vulnerable to the typical patterns of memory loss. For Sabha, the improvised "home" her mother created during their journey from Isdud to Gaza left an enduring emotional mark: a symbol of safety amidst upheaval. Even today, when she sits within a circle of cloth reminiscent of that time, her body remembers what her mind can no longer fully express. Her story highlights that memory is not just a chronological record of facts and events; it is a living, embodied archive – a dynamic repository of how we felt, how we feared and how we survived.

Psychological trauma has an immediate effect on individuals, and the stress it induces can have long-term consequences, including increased vulnerability of the brain to diseases such as dementia. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that elevated cortisol levels resulting from acute and chronic stress can have a negative impact on cognitive processes such as learning and memory. This effect may be particularly pronounced during

critical periods of neurological development, such as childhood, and later during neurodegeneration in old age.

Psychological trauma triggers a complex array of emotional, physiological and neurological responses. In the immediate aftermath of traumatic events, individuals frequently experience acute stress marked by feelings of fear, helplessness, confusion and anxiety. While these reactions are natural, they can lead to longer-term neurobiological changes if the trauma remains unresolved, which can further complicate the brain's ability to process and preserve memory.

One of the most concerning aspects of trauma is its ability to have long-term neurological consequences. Prolonged psychological stress has been shown to alter the brain's architecture, particularly in areas responsible for memory consolidation, emotional regulation and executive function. Over time, these neurobiological changes can increase an individual's susceptibility to various cognitive and neurodegenerative disorders, including those linked to dementia. Research indicates that chronic exposure to stress hormones, particularly cortisol can trigger inflammation, neuronal damage and volumetric reductions in essential brain regions such as the hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex. These areas play a pivotal role in sustaining cognitive resilience and emotional balance.

Both Muhibah, Edelbi's sister, and Sabha, Timraz's sister, are experiencing significant memory loss. According to Timraz, Sabha no longer recognises any of her family members. Muhibah, while still able to recognise her relatives, struggles to recall what she ate the previous day. Despite her recent memory loss, Muhibah vividly remembers her life before the Nakba of 1948, the events that unfolded during it and the subsequent years of poverty and suffering.

In contrast, although Sabha appears to have lost her memory and language skills, her body still expresses meaning. When seated in the centre of the dayer, her gestures and posture evoke the precise way she sat in 1948 after losing her home and land. In this way, her body communicates what language no longer can.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may develop in individuals who are

> exposed to actual or threatened death, either by directly experiencing the traumatic events, witnessing them in person as they occurred to others, learning that the events occurred to a close family member or close friend, or experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic events. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 143)

Neither Edelbi nor Timraz witnessed the Nakba firsthand, as they were born after 1948. However, they have inherited the trauma through the oral histories recounted by parents, siblings and extended family, whose narratives have been shaped by the dispossession of Palestine. For the purposes of this article, they have shared the experiences of their sisters as repositories of this intergenerational memory.

Scientific research further emphasises that the timing of exposure to trauma plays a critical role in its psychological and neurological effects. Trauma experienced during sensitive developmental periods can have particularly damaging and long-lasting consequences. Childhood is characterised by rapid neurodevelopment, during which the brain actively forms and refines neural circuits. Adverse events during this period can disrupt these processes, resulting in impairments in emotional regulation, learning and memory (Teicher & Samson, 2016).

Similarly, old age is another period of vulnerability due to natural decline in the brain's plasticity and resilience. Exposure to trauma at this stage can accelerate cognitive decline and increase the risk of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia (Severs et al., 2023). The cumulative burden of lifetime stress, often referred to as "allostatic load", can further compound these vulnerabilities, especially when unaddressed (McEwen, 2007).

Understanding the intricate relationships between psychological trauma, stress and brain disease is essential in order to develop effective prevention and treatment strategies. Evidence-based therapeutic interventions and early psychosocial support may reduce the long-term effects of trauma and foster mental and cognitive resilience throughout the lifespan (Yehuda et al., 2018).

Intifadas and creative resistance

During the First Intifada (1987–1993), storytelling took on visual and performative forms. Graffiti became a means of protest, while political theatre emerged as a powerful mode of popular education. Through his satirical cartoons featuring the iconic child Handala, Naji al-Ali conveyed complex political critiques in ways that were accessible, emotional and profound.

In her seminal article, Peteet (1996) argues that graffiti emerged as one of the most prominent cultural features of the occupied West Bank during the height of the First Intifada in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These writings, some hastily scrawled and others rendered with remarkable precision,

commanded immediate attention and appeared on nearly every stone wall in the region. Typically, each piece bore the signature of a Palestinian political faction, either in its full name or in the form of an acronym.

Peteet (1996) also argues that the ubiquity of graffiti served as a persistent reminder of the surreal nature of everyday life under military occupation, as well as the collective energy of the uprising. Alongside the daily general strikes, graffiti imbued the public sphere with an aesthetic of resistance. It directly contested Israel's assertions of omnipresent surveillance directly, standing as a visible testament to the state's inability to fully monitor or dominate Palestinian space.

The Second Intifada (2000–2005) coincided with the rise of digital storytelling. Palestinians used photography, blogging and social media to share their personal stories and challenge mainstream media narratives that often dehumanised them. Platforms such as The Electronic Intifada (https://electronicintifada.net/) and citizen journalism challenged the hegemony of Zionist discourse by documenting daily realities from a Palestinian perspective.

Building on this visual tradition of resistance, Edelbi and Waybright (2025) explore the layered cultural meanings of graffiti and mural art on the separation wall – a structure that partitions the West Bank from Jerusalem and other areas occupied since 1948. In their recent study, they document how Palestinian artists responded to the construction of the wall by inscribing revolutionary quotations, memorials to political martyrs and depictions of sacred sites in Jerusalem onto its concrete surface. These interventions have transformed the wall into a contested canvas that now dominates much of the West Bank's urban visual landscape.

Edelbi and Waybright (2025) also note that, over time, the wall and its Palestinian graffiti have attracted international street artists and large numbers of foreign tourists. This influx has spurred a growing graffiti tourism industry, one that has generated a set of complex and sometimes troubling consequences. Their work highlights the critical debate that these developments have provoked within Palestinian society, particularly among artists and cultural workers, regarding the ethics of visibility, the politics of public space and the responsibilities of those engaging with a living site of resistance.

Witnessing in the digital age

In recent years, particularly during Israel's ongoing assault on Gaza, storytelling has become an urgent form of witnessing. Despite bombings, censorship and infrastructure collapse, Palestinians have continued to record their stories. Journalists such as Wael Dahdouh and Hind Khoudary have reported under fire, often after losing family members themselves. Their storytelling is an act of both journalism and resistance against invisibility.

On social media, Palestinians share their final messages before death, images of destruction and moments of fleeting joy amidst war. These digital stories reach global audiences, sparking protests, shifting public discourse and exposing the complicity of Western powers. As Young (2022) notes, Palestinian art and narratives resist the machinery of erasure and build solidarity networks that transcend national borders.

Psychological and physiological functions of storytelling

Luitel and Dahal (2021) state, "Writing lives and telling stories as inquiry is likely to raise the consciousness of the researchers, participants, and readers" (p. 3). Perhaps the primary goal of the authors in narrating their personal histories was not merely to inform fellow researchers and readers about the Nakba and the suffering endured by their families, but also to express their own deep pain. Nevertheless, this articulation of pain inevitably functions as a powerful form of education, offering insight into how such trauma becomes embedded in the physical and psychological memory of others such as their sisters. These stories, rooted in events that occurred 75 years ago, are still being passed on, either orally through Muhibah (Edelbi's sister) or physically through Sabha (Timraz's sister), demonstrating the intergenerational persistence of memory.

However, the benefits of storytelling transcend political and cultural significance; they also have profound psychological and physiological dimensions. Pennebaker (2011) demonstrates how the narration of emotional experiences, whether verbally or in writing, enables individuals to process trauma and reorganise their internal narratives surrounding painful events. This process, often referred to as narrative restructuring, can promote emotional healing and cognitive transformation.

For Palestinians, this therapeutic aspect of storytelling is significant. In the face of intergenerational trauma, prolonged occupation and repeated displacement, narrating one's experience can be both a form of catharsis and an act of resistance. It enables individuals to reclaim their agency, transforming them from passive victims into active narrators and protagonists of their own lives. Therefore, storytelling is not merely an act of remembering; it is a means of survival and a reclamation of subjectivity amid structures of erasure.

The future of Palestinian storytelling

As technology advances and repression intensifies, storytelling continues to adapt. Palestinians are finding new ways to narrate their truth, from documentary films and virtual reality installations to Instagram reels and spoken word poetry. This innovation ensures that their stories remain accessible and relevant to global audiences, particularly younger generations.

At the same time, the core functions of storytelling – preserving memory, asserting identity and resisting erasure – remain unchanged. Whether performed in a refugee camp, stitched into a wedding dress or broadcast on an international stage, Palestinian stories convey the same unwavering message: We are here. We remember. We resist.

Storytelling arts in the digital, interactive world: Palestinian models

As traditional storytelling adapts to the digital era, new forms emerge that enable broader audience engagement and the preservation of cultural identity in virtual spaces. Palestinian experience, rooted in oral tradition and performative expression, has notably evolved through the use of multimedia, digital platforms and interactive technologies. This evolution ensures that Palestinian narratives survive and reach global audiences in dynamic ways.

A notable example is the rise of interactive documentaries and digital archives. The Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question (https://www.palquest.org/), conceived by the Institute for Palestine Studies as part of a joint project with the Palestinian Museum, is one such project. It offers interactive digital timelines and personal stories for users to explore, merging archival research with user-directed storytelling.

Another important model is that of The Freedom Theatre, which is based in the Jenin refugee camp. It has expanded its live performances to include online platforms, offering virtual workshops, streamed plays and interactive Q&A sessions that maintain the immediacy of live performance in the global digital sphere. Their productions often invite audience interaction, blurring the boundaries between performer and viewer, and enabling diaspora Palestinians to participate in cultural expressions from afar (Reeves, 2022). In an interview conducted by Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, Israeli-Palestinian actor, director and filmmaker Juliano Mer Khamis, founder of The Freedom Theatre, referred to art as a means of mobilising people towards freedom clarifying that, "Art cannot free you from your chains, but art can generate and mobilise [a] discourse of freedom. Art can create debate, art can expose" (Gharavi, 2011).

Another example of adapting storytelling into new formats is Palestinian artist and playwright Amer Hlehel. His performances, such as *Taha* (2017), a monodrama based on the life of the poet Taha Muhammad Ali, have been filmed and adapted for digital streaming. This makes making deeply personal Palestinian narratives accessible to a wider, international audiences.

Social media platforms have also given rise to new forms of performative storytelling. Artists such as Rana Bishara and Suad Amiry use platforms like Instagram and Twitter, as well as podcasts, to combine personal stories with political commentary. These interactive, multimedia-rich formats help them reach younger generations.

In the realm of digital comics and graphic storytelling, initiatives such as The Palestine Project combine visual arts with narrative to create shareable online content that educates and mobilises, particularly non-Arabic speaking audiences.

Finally, the use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) in Palestinian storytelling is beginning to emerge. Projects such as The Rift: A Palestinian Journey (created by immersive artists such as Rula Halawani and others) use VR technology to recreate demolished villages and historical sites. This allows users to experience the layered narrative of Palestinian loss and resilience in an embodies way.

These contemporary models preserve and reimagine Palestinian identity by offering interactive, participatory and democratic ways of engaging with history, memory and resistance. They demonstrate that, even as they evolve technologically, storytelling and the performing arts remain essential vessels for cultural survival and political expression.

Conclusion

In the Palestinian context, storytelling and the performing arts are not just aesthetic pursuits; they are vital acts of remembrance, resistance and resilience. These creative forms do not exist in isolation, but are intricately woven into the fabric of collective struggle and historical consciousness. As Paulo Freire (2000) reminds us, being human means being transformative, making and remaking history through creative engagement with reality. In Palestine, artists, poets, dancers and storytellers embody this principle, asserting their humanity through creative expressions that resist erasure and demand recognition.

In a world characterised by fragmentation and silence, the arts offer Palestinians a powerful means of engaging in dialogue across generations and borders, and in opposition to the machinery of occupation. This dialogue is revolutionary, not passive.

It carries the weight of history and the promise of a liberated future. Telling a Palestinian story today means resisting forgetting and participating in creating a future grounded in justice, memory and the irrepressible vitality of the human spirit.

For Palestinians, storytelling and the performing arts have always been more than cultural practices; they are lifelines. Against a backdrop of genocide, occupation and forced displacement, these creative outlets serve as tools of resistance, healing and survival. They bridge generations, counter historical revisionism and humanise a people who are all too often silenced.

As Israel's ethnic cleansing policies continue, the Palestinian story grows louder, more insistent and more creative. Each poem, dance, mural and lullaby, there is a profound assertion of existence. In a world that often seeks to silence them, telling their story is the most radical act of all.

According to Freire (2000), human beings are transformative and creative entities who are constantly interacting with reality. They do not only produce material goods and tangible objects, but also generate social institutions, ideas and concepts. Through these continuous practices, humans simultaneously create history and become historical social beings. Unlike animals, humans can embody time in three dimensions: the past, the present and the future. As a result, their history, shaped by their own creativity, evolves as an ongoing process of transformation, forming historical units. He emphasises the necessity for the oppressed to engage in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as active agents of change. Engaging in dialogue with the people is utterly essential to any genuine revolution. This is precisely what distinguishes a revolution from a military coup. The earlier the dialogue begins, the more revolutionary the movement becomes. Such dialogue is not only fundamental to revolution, but also aligns with another fundamental human need: the need for women and men as to communicate and connect with others, because they are communicative beings at their core.

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Dr Khitam Edelbi (PhD, Lesley University) is an Expressive Arts Therapies specialist with over 30 years' experience in drama, storytelling, theatre production and art therapy. She currently teaches on the Art Therapy Programme at Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem. Since 2009, Dr Edelbi has been training psychologists and social workers in the use of various artistic methods of expression and psychological support. She worked as an actress in theatre, children's theatre and cinema for several years. She also writes and tells stories for children. Her doctoral dissertation, *Using Playback Theatre with Adolescents in the Qalandia Refugee Camp in Palestine*, was published by Lesley University. She has co-written and published several academic papers: "A Colorful Language: Playback Theatre as a Way of Listening with Youth in Palestine" with Hussein-Shannan in 2023, and "Assessment and Cultural Sensitivity Regarding International Graffiti on the Separation Wall in Palestine" with Waybright in 2025.

Shams Almanal Timraz is a producer, art critic and cultural consultant with over twenty years of experience in art production and creative consultancy across all disciplines. Of Palestinian origin and raised in Europe, she has dedicated her career to enriching the Palestinian cultural landscape through critical discourse, creative production and strategic consultancy. Her expertise spans film and theatre criticism, artist development and curating programmes that connect local narratives with global audiences. She holds a Master's degree in Conflict Resolution and International Mediation, and has worked in the Middle East for many years. She has managed cultural spaces, led exhibitions and helped shape arts policy. Shams brings unique expertise in cultural mediation and conflict-sensitive creative practices. She is the founder and director of Shams & Rise Arts, a consultancy and production platform that advances independent cultural initiatives with social impact.

Using **Ghassan Kanafani**'s novella ***Men in the Sun*** to explore **Palestinian youth's perceptions** of the notions of **emigration** and **homeland**

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Hala Al-Yamani
Bethlehem University, Palestine

Abdelfattah Abusrour
Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, Palestine

Fadel Alsawayfa
Bethlehem University, Palestine

Abstract

This article examines important aspects of the lives of Palestinian youth, who endure a reality of persistent challenges and existential threats. One significant challenge is the appropriation of Palestinian culture by the occupying power, which systematically targets all aspects of daily life. Using Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, researchers explored the extent to which Palestinian youth are aware of their sense of belonging, their homeland, emigration and displacement, by developing dramatic scenes from the novella. This involves encouraging participants to work on these scenes and present their ideas and perspectives on the pre-text drama and the above topics included in these scenes, as a teaching strategy. Five Master's students participated in this study, which adopted a qualitative interpretative approach enriched by found poetry to analyse the data and presentations. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, researcher observations during workshop sessions and participants' reflective journals. The results revealed that the participants enjoyed learning through this pre-text drama strategy and learned how to use this technique in teaching and learning. They expressed a strong sense of belonging to their homeland and a rejection of emigration.

Key words: *Palestine, pre-text drama, Men in the Sun, found poetry, emigration, homeland*

Introduction

Israeli operations and occupation in Palestine continue to make daily life extremely challenging for Palestinians of all ages and backgrounds. Palestinian youth are one of these groups and are one of the most important pillars of society, providing the community with a significant source of energy. They are a group that influences, and is "influenced by various socioeconomic effects" (Al-Sakka et al., 2016, p. 16). Palestinian youth can contribute effectively to all social, civil and political institutions. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) (2023), as of the end of 2023, youth accounted for 22% of Palestine's total population. In the West Bank, this figure was around 22%, compared to 21% in the Gaza Strip.

The overall situation is devastating, with people facing various obstacles. Young people are also struggling to survive in harsh conditions in occupied Palestine. In 2023, the unemployment rate for females in the West Bank reached 56% and 34% for males. The highest unemployment rates were recorded among those with an intermediate diploma or higher (48%), approximately half of whom were graduates (PCBS, 2024). Notably, there is a significant gender gap, with 34% of males and 61% of females unemployed, making Palestine home to some of the lowest female labour force participation rates globally (Khatib, 2022). Gaps such as this may be related to cultural expectations, with males being expected to provide for their families, particularly economically.

For educated individuals, high unemployment is linked to limited job opportunities for graduates in the Palestinian labour market. These limitations are a result of the occupation's various forms of warfare against Palestinians, particularly the restrictions on business and the economic framework. These challenges highlight the difficulties experienced by young people in the region. Khatib (2022) observed that finding employment and a life partner are significant sources of insecurity for young people.

Additionally, restrictions on movement and dehumanisation by the occupying forces towards young people during their daily activities are prevalent. In the West Bank, they face movement obstacles (849 checkpoints and barriers), according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2025), and apartheid among Palestinian localities after the Oslo Accords (85% illegal annexation and expansion wall). Working or studying at national universities in different cities is challenging due to occupation barriers and checkpoints hindering people's ability to move freely and exercise their right to education or work. This can lead to feelings of anxiety, stress and despair.

A 2015 youth survey showed that around 24% of people aged 15–29 wanted to emigrate. This figure was higher in the Gaza Strip, reaching 37%, compared to around 15% in the West Bank. The percentage was higher for males (29%) than for females (18%). This desire to emigrate is driven by the wish to escape the insecure situation in Palestine (PCBS, 2017; United Nations Population Fund, 2017).

However, Khatib (2022) clarified that "70% of youth have no plans to emigrate, while 10% are thinking of emigrating, 16% would like to emigrate and 3% will certainly emigrate" (p. 26). He discussed reasons related to the stability of the situation at that time that affected these percentages. Furthermore, he examined the growing religiosity within this group and its connection to the Palestinian national struggle, which is associated with sumud (Arabic: صمود), meaning steadfastness, perseverance and resistance to the occupying authority (Gren, 2009). Religious people consider sumud to be the duty of everyone in order to resist occupation. No later studies have examined the attitudes of young people towards emigration.

In addition to the various issues arising from the Israeli occupation, another challenge is the struggles of young people within the education system.

Education and arts in Palestine

Since the Nakba of 1948, Palestinians have considered education to be a means of resisting the Israeli occupation and of improving their challenging living conditions, both in Palestine and elsewhere. Consequently, they have the highest enrolment rates in the Arab region (Irfan, 2023). However, this sector has always faced significant challenges imposed by occupying forces, which have deeply harmed the quality of education in Palestine (Adams & Owens, 2016; Al-Yamani et al., 2016; Danil et al., 2023; Rahman, 2009).

The construction of the apartheid wall (or wall of expansion and annexation) negatively affects the progress of the educational process by hindering Palestinian students from easily reaching their schools. This, alongside school closures, blocked roads and restrictions on school construction, significantly impedes the development of a high-quality Palestinian education system (Al-Yamani et al, 2016; Danil et al, 2023).

Moreover, the educational system in Palestine is predominantly traditional, placing the emphasis on the teacher's central role rather than that of the learner. It emphasises knowledge and textbook content, encouraging memorisation and the "banking concept of education", as described by Freire (1970). Creative thinking, innovation, active learning and the use of the arts are not very common in educational

institutions. However, recently the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) adopted "a learner-centered education based on respect of differences and diversity, and adopt all measures needed in this direction in terms of curriculum development, teacher qualification and provision of appropriate teaching and learning resources" (MoEHE, 2017, p. 44).

Significant challenges have been encountered in transitioning from traditional teaching methodologies in formal and non-formal education. Although the arts are not usually included in formal curricula, they form part of non-curricular activities in educational institutions. Artists, community groups and cultural centres have played a significant role in engaging the younger generation with the arts (Abusrour & Al-Yamani, 2021). Palestinians need to develop a clear, practical model for teaching and learning, in which learners are actively engaged and able to construct their own knowledge in a safe, open educational environment. Rather than being passive, learners should interact with and respond to the different aspects of the world around them. Exploration, interaction, engagement, dialogue, critical thinking and problem solving are key components of this process, as outlined in critical pedagogy by Freire (1970) and the concept of education for liberation. Researchers suggest that drama can serve as a beneficial model for this type of educational approach.

Drama and pre-text as a process in teaching and learning

In Palestine, performing arts have recently been integrated into some educational programmes for teaching and learning. However, few studies have examined the role of the performing arts in education (Alsawayfa, 2025a,b). In this study, researchers used pre-text drama in the teaching and learning process and as a research tool. This is a practice that is not widely adopted in the region.

Pre-text drama is a drama activity that aims at engaging participants in a meaningful learning process. It can be based on real or imaginative events. As Fleming (2001, as cited in Owens, 2014) suggests, it is "often a deceptively simple starting point used to engage participants and allow them to move quickly towards complex and challenging drama activities". Furthermore, pre-text drama allows all educational competencies to work in a transversal and interdisciplinary way while favouring the different learning rhythms of each participant (Aznar et al., 2021).

In this process, learners "practice living", as Way (1967) described it, through various activities that transcend time, place and the people related to that time and place. They even go beyond the self by playing different roles to those played in ordinary daily life. They play other roles, using personal experience to help them understand other points of view and discover new aspects of life.

According to O'Sullivan (2018), process drama is a vast, exploratory approach to drama education, where the focus is on the journey rather than the final product. Rather than rehearsing for a polished performance, students step into roles, respond in the moment and engage with authentic scenarios. Through this unfolding experience, they gain insights into themselves, their peers and the issues at hand. It is a participatory social activity in which individuals share or work with others in dramatic situations, facilitating a great deal of "personal and psychological liberation" (Young, 2000, p. 115). This

process enables students to develop a deeper understanding of their core issues, reality, culture, beliefs, attitudes and the world in which they live (Boal, 1998; Kennelly, 2006; Park-Fuller, 2005; Weinstein & West, 2012). As with good teaching and learning practices, the main aim is "autonomy, independence, and mutual respect" (Owens & Barber, 2001, p. 8).

It enables participants to confront the reality of what is inevitable and to challenge familiar ideas, assumptions and definitions. It is a form of art that frees the imagination, allowing participants to explore different possibilities and alternatives for their own lives. It provides golden opportunities to try out different ideas, dreams, hopes and fears, and to explore all sorts of conflicts without feeling fearful or threatened, since in dramatic experiences, people generally inhabit a fiction (Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2006; Rohd, 1998). It encourages reflection by using stories related to their own or others' lives to experience what it means to be human in many different situations (Greene, 1995).

The participants experience a different world and reveal an inner life that they usually tend to hide, especially in Palestine. Through this process, people express deep feelings and confront themselves by comparing the "self" with the "other" in the dramatic process. They discover their own beliefs, attitudes, feelings and thoughts by testing their entire self against the world of the other. They immerse themselves in the social, cultural and political fabric, trying to understand its warp and weft. According to Heathcote (1976), when individuals take on imagined roles, they encounter challenges and situations. Reflecting on these experiences enables learners to discover both themselves and the world around them.

In this process, participants work on investigating, defining, translating and interpreting the situation and all related aspects. This requires participation and engagement, as well as cooperative working, dialogue and open communication to share the thoughts and opinions of all participants. This approach to learning acknowledges and respects "difference", recognising its value and providing ample opportunity for it to emerge. It enables the group to make their own decisions (Weinstein & West, 2012). Owens and Barber (2001) described this type of process as "liberating rather than reductive and restrictive" (p. 10). Participants think about, practise and imagine alternative realities before enacting them in the real world. This allows people to practise expressing their thoughts and feelings freely, creating a better understanding of themselves and helping them to reorganise (Wright, 2000).

The learning contained in drama has two interrelated aspects. The first is embodied experience and the second is the reflective explanation of experience, which includes communication (Wright, 2000). This reflection is effective in terms of social understanding, social exchange, collective thinking and how to work on changing reality. Drama provides a platform for challenging traditional ideologies and instigating change on various scales, from the individual to small groups (Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2006; Rohd, 1998). It is acknowledged that drama provides a space for resisting traditional beliefs and fostering transformation at various levels. This process nurtures uniqueness and profound personal aspirations, which are crucial for holistic growth. It enables learners to evolve from within through creative self-expression and collective awareness of critical issues.

Research methodology

The main objective of this study is to examine how pre-text drama can be used as a tool for learning, teaching and research. The study will focus on examining the interactions, reactions, thoughts and understanding of participants and groups during and after the drama workshop. It aims to study the various possibilities and challenges of using pre-text drama with Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun* (1999) among different Palestinian groups; to study the quality of participants' experiences of pre-text drama and how they express these experiences; and to explore participants' actions, interactions and understanding with regard to the novella's embedded concepts. The main questions that the researchers seek to answer in this article are:

- At what levels can participants engage in this type of drama process and how do they approach it?
- How do participants engage with the main concepts embedded in Kanafani's novella, such as safety, family and emigration?

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, arts-based research design to explore the lived experience of first-year students on the Master's programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University. The study focuses on the quality of the participants' learning experience and their perceptions in relation to the main concepts embedded in the novel. This participatory drama pre-text prioritises the participants' voices and enables them to express their views on their experience of drama.

Five Master's students enrolled on the second drama course in spring 2025 agreed to participate in this study. They were all female and lived in different

cities, including Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron. Two had full-time jobs, one had a part-time teaching position and two were unemployed. They came from diverse economic and social backgrounds and had different experiences.

Researchers used *Men in the Sun*, which was written by Ghassan Kanafani, a leading Palestinian writer, journalist and artist who was assassinated by the Mossad in Lebanon in July 1972. On one level, the novella embodies the collective trauma experienced by Palestinians displaced by the Nakba in 1948. Through the fragmented memories and unspoken losses of its characters, it illustrates how this foundational rupture continues to influence identity and a sense of belonging. On another level, it delves into the universal search for economic survival. By depicting the characters' perilous journey across borders in search of work, Kanafani sheds light on the experiences of migrants worldwide – individuals who are forced to leave their homes yet cling to the hope of a better future (Al-Sultan, 2007). The main characters in the novella are forced to search for a better life. Each character has a dream and a goal to find job opportunities, which leads them to the Arabian Gulf, especially Kuwait. The pre-text drama in this research project focused on three different scenes that included only three main characters from the story.

The researchers selected and adapted scenes from the novella for presentation to the study group. They performed the scenes as actors, narrators, observers, discussion facilitators and guides, using music and videos. They also prepared accessories and costumes for participants to use to improvise certain scenes if they wished. Participants were free to judge the characters, talk to them, challenge them, play their roles and change their choices through improvisation.

Various tools were used by researchers to collect data for this study. These included note-taking observations and recordings of participants' comments and descriptions during different artistic activities in the drama workshop. These activities included introductory warm-up exercises, the main drama activities and exercises at the end of the session. In-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with students, focusing on their experience of drama and how they interpreted, embodied and reimagined the story. These interviews explored the students' thoughts and feelings about the embedded concepts of the pre-text drama and their opinions on the actions and interactions of the main characters in the novella. Four students were interviewed via Zoom and one student in person at Bethlehem University. The Arabic language was used for all data gathering, and the responses were then translated into English by the research team for analysis. Students were asked to write their own reflections and express their thoughts and feelings about their experience of the drama session freely.

We approached this research from an interpretivist perspective, using data collected from students. The aim of this analysis is to understand how students interpret their experiences of drama (Denzin et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). This approach is deeply rooted in the interpretive process and includes preparing the data, grouping, numbering and coding it, and organising themes by grouping the codes to establish categories and conceptual themes. Philosophically, we believe that research is both subjective and interpretive. Our position is informed by Crotty's (1998) belief that meaning is constructed through engagement with life experiences. For this study, we took an arts-based approach to collecting and analysing the data. We were struck by the figurative language used by the participants. They expressed strong feelings and emotions in a manner that warranted unconventional analysis.

Furthermore, found poetry was employed as an arts-based approach to data analysis. Alsawayfa (2025b) suggests that found poetry is a meaningful means of analysing and presenting qualitative research data. This involves identifying evocative words and phrases in participants' interviews and reflective journals. The process involves repeatedly engaging with the data to select poems that accurately represent participants' experiences. The poems are presented in Arabic, the participants' native language, and in English to help readers engage with and connect to the participants' experiences. We recognise that translation in research can be problematic, with meaning potentially being lost in the process. To address this, we adopted Steiner's

(1998) concept that every act of communication is an act of translation. In other words, translation involves interpretation. Our aim was to move beyond the surface meaning of words and communicate the participants' felt experiences. We were also aware that we were translating the poems for readers from different cultural backgrounds.

A clear explanation of the research idea, objectives and all relevant information was provided to the group of students by ethical considerations. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Permission was obtained to record individual interviews and take photos during the drama session. Participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and data was stored securely.

Findings and discussion

This research used Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men in the Sun* (1999) to explore the perceptions of emigration and homeland among Palestinian youth. The qualitative findings were based on data collected from students on the Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices Master's programme at Bethlehem University. Mixed methods involving found poetry and interpretation were used to analyse the data collected from the participants. Found poems were crafted from interview transcripts and reflective journals. This creative approach to data analysis allowed the researchers to present the data in a novel way and also enabled the participants to actively engage in the research process as creators of meaning (Alsawayfa, 2025b).

The findings are discussed in broad, themed categories. These categories are interrelated and are not intended to be exclusive, but rather to represent areas where perceptions and concepts converge. For the purpose of this article, three overarching themes were derived from the five themes identified in the data: Pre-text drama experience, Emigration and Homeland. The discussion of our findings is organised accordingly. The five participants in this study contributed to these salient themes. Throughout the research and data analysis process, they shared their perceptions and experiences of participating in drama activities.

The pre-text drama experience

The project as a whole was a new and interesting experience for the participants. They enjoyed and appreciated the different aspects of the drama workshop and shared their thoughts on the learning experience. This theme emerged consistently throughout the analysis of the participants' transcribed data. The analysis showed that the pre-text drama workshop encouraged active engagement. The following found poem uses the participant's own words to provide insight into how she described her learning experience:

Learning experience

Constructive experience
Cumulative
The novella deepened my understanding
Of the topics of migration
And homeland and identity
Made me think deeply
About issues of refugees and diaspora
And homeland and belonging
The suffering of refugees is not just stories
It is complex human experience
A struggle between hope and despair
Drama was able to unravel complex concepts
It broke the barriers of silence and submission
(AI, individual interview)

خبرة تعلم

خبرة بنائية،
تراكمية،
عمقت الرواية فهمي،
لموضوعات الهجرة،
والوطن والهوية،
جعلتني أفكر بعمق،
في قضايا اللاجئين والشتات،
والوطن والانتماء.
فمعاناة اللاجئين ليست مجرد قصص
هي تجارب إنسانية معقدة،
صراعٌ بين الأمل واليأس،
استطاعت الدراما تفكيك المفاهيم المعقدة،
كسرت حاجز الصمت والخضوع.
(أي، مقابلة فردية)

Participants found the learning experience new and different. Most of them had previous learning experiences based on Kanafani's novella. They had studied it at school, at university or both. They found that our use of drama and related activities set us apart from their former learning experiences: "It was really interesting. I lost track of time; it was practical and memorable" (AN, individual interview).

One participant mentioned that she had studied this story before, but could only remember the main idea and not all the details. The teachers used traditional teaching methods that focused on their own role, and the students were passive. This reflects what Freire (1970) described as "banking education", which is the most dominant approach in our region's educational system. Some students found pre-text drama to be an effective learning strategy.

Others recognised the meaning of the learning experience when it is not related to: "Transforming information, but it's about living various events and experiences, which help people to discover themselves and communicate with others" (AR, written reflection).

This demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the relationship between drama and active learning (Adams & Owens, 2016; Al-Yamani, 2011). It shows the positive attitudes that students have developed towards the constructivist and progressive educational approach adopted in the Master's programme, in which learners are actively involved in the teaching and learning process. One of the students said:

> This experience stimulated the critical thinking of the participants, and motivated their feelings towards liberating their consciousness [...] Drama activities provided an excellent opportunity to practise critical thinking through the use of voices and movement [...] All of these activities were liberating because we did not stick to the story as written by Kanafani. Instead, we rewrote it using our voices, movements, and internal dialogue to experience the place, space, characters and various events. (AI, written reflection)

They have noticed the difference between the traditional, dominant approach to education in Palestine and the new, progressive approach adopted by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in its new strategy (2017).

They recognised the importance of addressing subjects and written materials that are relevant to reality and meaningful in the learner's daily life. Many of them mentioned how this aspect of the drama session helped them to interact with and understand part of their reality. One of the students stressed:

> the necessity of starting from individual and group practice and experience in order to develop critical consciousness towards the community [...] This means true learning will not be achieved unless we undergo positive and critical experiences, taking responsibility for our learning and interpreting it according to our reality rather than accepting it as ready-made knowledge. (AR, written reflection)

They mentioned how this experience connected them:

> in [pinpointing] suffering as what is going on with people in Gaza Strip. Everyone started thinking about everything around us. The best thing was that it was realistic and pushed us to think deeply about our reality. However, we mostly talked about the importance of a learning process that should be based on reality, and that sometimes we are not living our reality. (ZA, individual interview)

The learning process has value when it relates to subjects and topics connected to the real world and life. However, this is not the case when it relates to rigid educational structures. The learning process should prepare students for the unpredictable challenges of real life by encouraging them to explore, act and interact with their environment (Freire, 1970; Khan, 2012; Robinson & Aronica; 2015).

They realised that drama is more than just an aesthetic medium. They considered it:

> an act of cultural resistance, and a means of exploring the deep national human character. It's a tool for raising critical awareness and liberation. Representing issues related to emigration, identity and diaspora has made me think about the concepts of homeland and belonging, and to understand the pain of the displaced, viewing it not as distant stories but as complex human experiences filled with contradictions between hope and despair. (AI, written reflection)

They considered drama to be a tool for breaking down the "wall of silence and obedience" in order to openly discuss various critical issues (AN, written reflection). It provided them with an opportunity to enter the world of others and to "practice accountability both from outside and within the character. This transition between perspectives reshapes awareness of the event and strengthens reflection and emotional empathy skills" (TM, written reflection). They developed empathy by experiencing the conflicts and choices of others, which made the situation and reality of others more understandable (Al- Yamani, 2015; Johnson, L., & O'Neill, 1984).

The drama session was a teaching and learning model that helped students to learn how to use various drama activities and techniques based on a specific text. This included writing letters to the characters in the story and considering the underlying themes. Two students recognised that "teaching could involve more than just using specific strategies, such as reading a story or doing drama activities. It could also stimulate thinking about specific ideas" (ZA, individual interview). There was expressed interest in incorporating drama activities into teaching to enhance student engagement and understanding. One participant stated, "I learned a clear approach to using stories in drama, which will help me plan activities, transition between them, connect to the story content, ask relevant questions and provide engaging activities" (AI, individual interview). Several students also mentioned their intention is to use drama in their work with students or participants. One said, "I plan to integrate these activities into various themes, using drama as an experiential learning approach that fosters transformation and deep understanding of subjects" (TM, written reflection).

Those interested in integrating critical pedagogy into dramatic activity design focus on major questions that occupy the human conscience, such as migration and homeland. They develop dramatic projects based on the real-life experiences and testimonies of refugees and migrants. This gives a collective voice to these experiences and transforms texts into a dialectical dialogue that drives social action. One of them said:

> I will strive to integrate a critical perspective into the design of future educational activities. Drama will be more than just a means of representation; it will be broader than that. It will be a space for resistance and collective thinking about the nation and society. Drama will evolve from a narrow context to a vast world, becoming a means of social, cultural and community change. (AI, written reflection)

This reflects students' critical awareness of the role of the performing arts as a medium through which people can explore stories, conflicts and real events. They engage in thought processes, practise various techniques and imagine alternative realities before enacting them in the real world (Boal, 2000; Cohen-Cruz, & Schutzman, 2006; Johnson & O'Neill, 1984; Rohd, 1998). Students recognise how drama can provide a space for resisting dominant traditional thoughts and creating change at various levels, from the individual and small group to the community and societal levels.

Emigration and existence

Another salient theme that emerged from the research data was emigration and existence. During the drama session, students displayed two different attitudes towards travelling to other countries and migration. They all expressed a desire to visit other countries, mentioning destinations such as Switzerland, Spain, France, Turkey, Qatar and Algeria. They explained their reasons for choosing each country, primarily focusing on its natural beauty, the opportunity to freely explore different places and cultures, and the shared culture and identity. These reasons reflect the participants' desire to experience freedom in other locations, given the restrictions on movement imposed by Israeli occupation. Furthermore, a number of individuals showed an interest in cultural aspects and identity, particularly those related to language and religion.

Regarding the concept of emigration, most participants in the session expressed a refusal to leave Palestine, except for one individual who was open to the idea of moving to a new country. Some said that leaving the country temporarily for specific reasons, such as continuing one's education or exploring other places, is acceptable, but not permanently. During an individual interview, TM said: "I thought deeply about this question and my answer was always not to emigrate, but travel and come back to my homeland [...] When you asked about selecting a place that we would like to visit or live in, I decided to travel and come back to my home". Two of them discussed how difficult it was to answer questions about emigration and leaving Palestine. This was the first time they had been asked this type of question. "I struggled with the content of the session and

with answering the question of whether to stay or emigrate to other countries. I felt hesitant about answering it as if it were a subject of life or death" (ZA, reflection).

These feelings reflect the strong bond between a person and their homeland. The group presented various reasons for rejecting the idea of leaving their homeland. One person considered this to be part of accepting their reality as it is and being unable to change it. She said,

> I call this the future, or I would call it the unknown ambiguity, which always carries negative aspects and never positive ones. Sometimes, a person tries to improve their reality by holding onto the things around them. As Freire mentioned in 1970 regarding the oppressed reacting to oppression, but they have nothing except this reality and they hold onto it. (AR, individual interview).

In this case, the refusal is related to fears surrounding the unknown consequences of migration. She explained the passivity of accepting reality as it is, rather than advocating critical consciousness and taking transformative action, as Freire (1970) explained regarding the position of the oppressed who are fearful of freedom. Others refused to emigrate due to their love for Palestine and the value they place on the land and homeland.

Identity develops through experiencing various situations within a specific context, remaining strongly connected to the social and cultural environment. Said (2000) discussed identity in the context of exile. He considered exile to be a time of divided identity, where a person is torn between their memories of the past and the new person they are forced to become. The students' concerns related to their identity and sense of belonging in terms of their culture, nation and personally. Furthermore, the concept of *sumud*, meaning steadfastness and rootedness, was cited by students as a reason for not emigrating from Palestine. They face significant difficulties in Palestine, such as checkpoints, closures and challenging life circumstances, particularly in Jerusalem, an area subjected to strict control procedures by Israeli occupation forces. From a religious viewpoint, living in Jerusalem

> means having a sense of steadfastness. We face significant difficulties, and it is not easy to live in Jerusalem and abide by all the restrictions. From a religious perspective, there is a big struggle between our existence and our being rooted to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which challenges our presence and connection to Jerusalem. (AI, written reflection)

This highlights the significance of religious beliefs that inspire people to remain in Palestine, protecting their homeland and holy sites from the occupier and maintaining their connection to the land. The people's existence as resistance proves the land's authenticity. Khatib (2022) touched on this concept in his study of Palestinian youth and their attitudes towards emigration. He considered sumud, or steadfastness, whereby some young people believe it is important to hold tightly to the land and resist simply through their existence.

The following found poem, crafted from participants' interviews and reflective journals, reflects the concepts of emigration and existence:

Migration and staying

During a dramatic activity,
We were asked a question:
If you had to emigrate,
Which country would you choose?
And we were asked to express
ourselves artistically:
In drawing,
In poetry,
Or a prose poem.
At first,
I didn't know my destination,
Especially since I hadn't thought
about it
Before seriously.
It didn't concern me at all,
Because I always prefer staying
in my country,
The idea of immigration was not
present in my life,
Or in my imagination.
I felt a bit confused,
When he asked us to choose,
I found myself thinking shallowly,
My thoughts were trivial.
Automatically,
I imagined myself in France,
In one of the streets of Paris,
On a cold morning,
I wear a brown coat,
I drink coffee,
And I have a croissant,
And I watch the passers-by.
The scene appeared elegant and
calm to me,
Especially since I love photography,
Capturing such atmospheres,
So I decided to embody it as a kind
of beautiful fantasy,
Without initially succeeding in its connotations,
Where I drew a cup of coffee,
and the sweets,
And a brown coat.
I am not looking to emigrate,
But rather to temporarily travel,
I expressed my opinion honestly,
I might travel to a country like
Turkey,
But I will definitely return to my homeland.

الهجرة والبقاء

في نشاطٍ درامي،
عرض علينا سؤالا:
إذا كان عليكم أن تهاجروا،
فأي بلدٍ ستختارون؟
وطلب منا التعبير فنيا:
بالرسم،
بالشعر،
أو الخاطرة.
في البداية،
لم أكن أعرف وجهتي،
خاصةً أنني لم أفكر في هذا،
من قبل بجدية.
لم يكن يشغلني أصلا،
لأنني دائماً مع البقاء في وطني،
فكرة الهجرة لم تكن حاضرة في حياتي،
أو في مخيلتي.
شعرت بشيءٍ من الارباك،
حين طلب منا أن نختار،
وجدت نفسي أفكر بسطحية،
كان تفكيري تافها.
بشكل تلقائي،
تخيلت نفسي في فرنسا،
في إحدى شوارع باريس،
في صباحٍ بارد،
أرتدي معطفاً بنيا،
أشرب القهوة،
وأتناول قطعة كرواسون،
وأراقب المارة.
بدا لي المشهد أنيقا وهادئا،
خاصةً أنني أحب التصوير،
تصوير مثل هذه الأجواء،
فقررت تجسيده كنوعٍ من الخيال الجميل،
دون أن أوفق في البدايةً عند دلالاته،
حيث رسمت كوباً من القهوة،
والحلويات،
ومعطفاً بنيا.
أنا لا أبحث عن الهجرة،
بل عن سفرٍ مؤقت،
عبرت عن رأيي بصدق،
قد أسافر لبلدٍ كتركيا،
لكن أعود لوطني حتما.

Unsurprisingly, participants in this study spoke of existence and interconnectedness playing an integral part in their experience. This view is clearly reflected in the above found poem and the transcribed data from participants. It could be argued that the participants' experiences are an example of their identity as Palestinians, who remain steadfast in their homeland despite political instability and injustice.

Homeland: Space and place

The significance of drama lies in its ability to provide individuals with the opportunity to develop their own unique perspectives. It positions them as subjects in the world rather than objects. In this pre-text drama, participants deeply discuss and reflect upon the notions of homeland, space and place. Almost all of the participants in this study emphasised the importance of homeland, space and place when reflecting on their participation in the pre-text drama. The concept of homeland was perceived differently by each individual. One participant differentiated between what we consider to be a homeland and what actually serves the homeland. This concept aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) belief in a direct relationship between geographical, historical and social conditions, and the emergence of polyphony, resulting in multiple voices and self-expression.

The family was an important factor when discussing the concept of homeland. This was evident when developing the scene of Abu Qais's decision to leave the country; a number of students focused on the idea of place. They emphasised either staying together as a family in their homeland because "no place would be better than this place" (TM, Observation), or leaving together and facing the same destiny.

The following scene showcases the participants' attachment to family regardless of the place where ZA (Mother), AI (son) and AN (Father) are:

> ZA (Mother): If you're leaving, you can go of course, but you should take us as a family with you.
> AI (son): Father, please take us with you.
> AN (Father): I have no idea where I am going yet. I swear to God that I have no idea specifically where I'm going.
> ZA (Mother): Instead of worrying about us and what is happening to us, let us accompany you.
> AI (son): Please, Father, take us with you.
> AN (Father): If I take you with me, I'll be preoccupied with you, the things I'm carrying and where we're going.
> ZA (Mother): Listen to me, let's go together, the three of us, and either live together in our homeland or die together.
> AN (Father): Either we live together or we die together. Our path is unknown!
> ZA (Mother): No one will leave while the others stay; we all share the same destiny. (Observation)

This reflects their refusal to be separated as a family and their desire to stay together and face life united, indicating that family is also homeland. Others believe that a place is connected with the people who live there, as they have expressed it:

> I like living in places where I like the people who are there. I wouldn't be able to live in a place without friends or relatives. On the contrary, when I am with my family and loved ones, then I feel like the homeland is connected with family. People who lost their families in a specific place may still live there and consider it their homeland because it reminds them of their family. (ZA, individual interview)

Therefore, homeland is more than just a geographical location; it is about the people, stories and memories associated with it, and it is a place where a person feels safe and secure (Said, 2000). It is a space filled with dynamic relationships and interactions with the social and physical environments.

They considered those without a land or homeland. "We would never have them in exile or in other countries. We have learned this, and it is rooted within us as part of our socialisation" (AN, individual interview). They feel it is their responsibility to pass this on to the next generation, either directly or indirectly, since doing so directly is not permitted, particularly in formal education in the Israeli-controlled parts of Palestine. Said (2002) discusses the experience of exile and the impossibility of fully reclaiming a lost homeland. A homeland is rooted in a person's spirit and body. Others recognised that they could not even imagine leaving Palestine because they are so deeply rooted there. They consider emigration to be "leaving a part of their personality, the place where they were born, as well as their cultural and national identity" (AI, individual interview).

Participants express their personal and national identities through their connection to their homeland. Leaving that place can impact their identity. Al-Sakka et al. (2016) described this as a dynamic process in which all elements interact to form a united, shared identity shaped by strategies of belonging.

The poetics of space and place, and the concept of "homeland", are reflected in the poem below, which was created from a participant's reflective journal:

My homeland

I chose my homeland,
For the beauty of its nature,
And the scent of the earth,
And the details of
tranquility,
The homeland is a living
spirit,
It beats within me.
Belonging is not a decision,
Politically or economically,
But an internal feeling,
It cannot be taken away.
I felt that the homeland
resides within me,
Even if I distance myself
from it,
The departure seemed
painful,
Even if it was temporary,
I couldn't imagine the
idea of immigration as an option,
Because I see the
homeland in small details,
Do not leave me,
In the depths of my mother,
In the smell of bread,
In the shade of a small tree,
I have known it
since childhood.

وطني

اخترت وطني،
لجمال طبيعته،
ورائحة الأرض،
وتفاصيل الطمأنينة،
الوطن روحاً حيا،
ينبض بداخلي.
الانتماء ليس قرارا،
سياسياً أو اقتصاديا،
بل شعوراً داخليا،
لا ينتزع.
شعرت أن الوطن يسكنني،
حتى وإن ابتعدت عنه،
بدا الرحيل مؤلما،
حتى لو كان مؤقتا،
لم استطع تخيل فكرة الهجرة كخيار،
لأنني أرى الوطن في تفاصيل صغيرة،
لا تغادرني،
في لجة أمي،
في رائحة الخبز،
في ظل شجرةٍ صغيرة،
أعرفها منذ الطفولة.

The findings of this research suggest that a sense of homeland, space and place, and family are essential in shaping the identity of Palestinian youth. This is evident in the participants' responses and reflections on their pre-text drama experience. The found poem above shows how one participant described her homeland and what it means to her: homeland is more than just a place of birth; it is something that lives inside her.

Conclusion

In their approach to arts-based research methods, as outlined in this paper, the researchers explored the use of stories in their drama-in-education research. The choice of Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* was significant given the current history of forced emigration due to political, social and economic conditions. Examining cases in Africa, Iraq, Syria, Myanmar (Rohingya), Ukraine, Sudan and Palestine, among others, we found that the novella was highly relevant to such research. The researchers were involved in designing the methodology, strategy and selection of the study group. They selected and adapted scenes from the novella to present to the study group. The researchers performed these scenes as actors and narrators and, as facilitators, encouraged participants to improvise certain scenes from the novella. Participants had the freedom to improvise with the characters and their choices. They reflected on their experience in journals and during individual interviews. Their input was kept anonymous to protect their privacy.

This research was about learning and exploring together through action. It was research with them, not about them: collective thinking, a focus on questioning, a sense of belonging and the making

of challenging choices. It was also a learning experience for us as researchers, teaching us about the choices that Palestinian youth make concerning their identity, homeland and emigration when given the opportunity. They also learned about themselves in the process.

The research produced clear evidence of the effectiveness of using pre-text drama in the Palestinian educational context. It provides a positive educational model for the study's participants, emphasising learner-centredness and liberatory education as fundamental principles. This is particularly pertinent given the reality in which the learners live, with the world serving as a fundamental principle when addressing, analysing and discussing various topics. The experience highlights the importance of incorporating pre-text drama into educational practices and of learning through working on this educational strategy. It also demonstrates how the experience contributes to planning and thinking when working with others in an educational context. The study also explored how the artwork interacted with the key concepts of emigration and homeland presented in the novella.

This study examined the attachment to the homeland and reluctance to emigrate, despite the difficult circumstances in the region. The pre-text drama experience helped the participants to empathise with the experiences of others living in difficult circumstances who choose to emigrate, such as people in the Gaza Strip. It also became evident that the concept of homeland is tied to the people and all the experiences and memories associated with that location.

Using found poetry in this research provided a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences of taking part in the pre-text drama, as well as their perceptions of emigration, existence, homeland, space and place, and family. Found poetry is valuable in its own right, as it provides an opportunity for engagement and challenges conventional ways of knowing and existing in the world (Alsawayfa, 2025a).

We urgently need to incorporate this type of educational work into various contexts, such as learning and teaching, scientific research and working with different groups. All individuals involved in education should be encouraged to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Conversely, this work is one of the few studies in arts-based research. Therefore, there is a need for further research in this field to examine the effectiveness of arts-based research in participants' lives. This study primarily included a group of young Palestinian females and did not include males. It is important to study the various aspects related to the drama strategy and the multiple themes conveyed by the story of *Men in the Sun* (1999) with other groups from different cultures and ethnicities

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Dr Hala Rashed Al-Yamani is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Bethlehem University in the West Bank, Palestine. She is the former Dean of the Faculty of Education and Chair of Early Childhood Education. She has worked with national and international teams to develop the MA programme, "Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices". She teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses related to creative pedagogies, such as drama in education, storytelling, oral interpretation and theatre in education. She leads projects and conducts research based on arts-based methodology, using pre-text drama as the primary tool in education and early childhood education, as well as in pre-service and in-service programmes within cultural and intercultural contexts. She has also performed in several Palestinian plays. Furthermore, she has led, researched and directed theatre projects incorporating elements of community theatre, such as forum theatre and street theatre.

Abdelfattah Abusrour is an author, actor, theatre director and trainer, as well as a researcher. He is also an Ashoka social entrepreneur and a Synergos social innovator. He is the founder and general director of the Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, which was established in 1998 in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, Palestine. He developed the concept of Beautiful Resistance, which uses performing and visual arts as a creative and peaceful form of expression in situations of oppression and trauma. This approach aims to save lives, inspire hope and encourage individuals to become peacebuilders within their communities and beyond. He has contributed to educational research and taught drama and storytelling in education. He has also conducted conferences and practical workshops in different countries.

Fadel Alsawayfa, EdD, is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Bethlehem University in Palestine and the Chair of the Early Childhood Education Department. He teaches undergraduate and postgraduate students courses such as Drama in Education, Storytelling, Play and Creativity, Arts-Based Research, Creative Pedagogy and Community Practices and Mantle of the Expert. He uses self-reflexive methodologies such as self-study, poetic inquiry, autoethnography and narrative inquiry. He is passionate about research and teaching methods inspired by the arts and creativity. He recently published a book with Brill Sense titled *The Road to Found Poetry: Understanding People's Perceptions and Lived Experiences Creatively.*

Rehearsing pedagogy: **Arts-based education** as **creative practice** in **Palestinian higher education**
A case study of the MA Programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University

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Rand Barakat
Bethlehem University, Palestine

Abstract

This study examines the MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University, situating arts-based education as a tool for personal, pedagogical and community development in Palestinian higher education. Employing a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with graduates and current students to explore participants' motivations, experiences and engagement with creative practices. Thematic analysis highlights how the programme fosters critical reflection, personal transformation and innovative teaching approaches, while providing a supportive space for navigating complex social and institutional challenges. Findings demonstrate how arts-based pedagogy can reshape teaching practices and inform understandings of learning, identity and community engagement within contexts marked by cultural and structural constraints.

Keywords: *Creative pedagogy, arts-based education, teacher training, critical pedagogy, educational transformation, creative agency, Palestine*

Introduction

In Palestine, the arts constitute a critical medium for expression, resilience and the preservation of cultural identity, particularly within higher education, where they are increasingly recognised as instruments for professional development and reflective practice. This study investigates the MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University, examining how its pedagogical strategies cultivate students' creative, social and reflective competencies.

Learning within the MA programme is often embodied and participatory; students form circles, articulate personal narratives, respond through movement and enact memories, thereby generating spaces characterised by reflection, emotional engagement and collective meaning-making. Situated within the broader sociopolitical context of the city, with its calls to prayer, quotidian rhythms and proximate checkpoints, these practices facilitate students' navigation of challenges and exploration of identity. For this paper, semi-structured interviews with students and graduates explored programme motivations, pedagogical impact and the role of the arts in everyday life, with thematic analysis revealing how the programme supports professional growth, personal resilience and the continuity of cultural identity in Palestinian higher education.

Arts-based education in Palestine: Historical and pedagogical foundations

Arts in Palestine have long functioned as more than aesthetic expression; they have served as powerful tools for resistance, cultural preservation and political commentary. From community-based storytelling to politically engaged theatre, artistic practices offered Palestinian ways to rehearse freedom, assert presence and sustain hope, aligning with Boal's (1979) concept of "rehearsal for transformation". As Shaik (2024) notes, since 1948, art has played a central role in expressing national identity and countering cultural erasure. Performing and theatrical arts, in particular, exemplify how communities employ creative practices to reflect critically on social realities, resonating with Freire's (2000) principles of dialogue and participatory learning.

The First Intifada (1987–1993) marked a significant shift in how the arts functioned within Palestinian society. According to a study on the artistic production in the First Palestinian Intifada, Elayyan (2023) argues that visual arts, theatre and music during the First Intifada served not only to express national identity, but also to actively counter the narratives imposed by occupation. Artists across Palestine collaborated on projects that documented everyday struggles and embodied collective memory through performance and image-making. Cultural institutions like El-Hakawati Theatre and community centres provided spaces for artistic production despite censorship and closures. These practices illustrate how arts functioned as informal educational spaces fostering reflection agency and critical engagement.

In the Second Intifada (2000–2005), artistic production became more symbolically layered, addressing trauma, displacement and social fragmentation (Shuman, 2024). Institutions such as The Freedom Theatre (https://thefreedomtheatre.org/) and Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society (https://alrowwad.org/) expanded community-based arts education, providing psychosocial support, creative engagement and critical learning opportunities. These organisations worked primarily with youth and marginalised communities, demonstrating that arts-based education can serve as both a method of expression and a pedagogical tool for critical thinking and social transformation.

Despite this rich tradition, the role of the arts within formal education remains limited. Palestine's national curriculum prioritises core subjects, leaving little room for critical, creative or student-centred artistic approaches (Rowe, 2016; Shinn, 2012). This dynamic reflects Freire's (2000) critique of the "banking model" of education, where students are positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants in meaning-making. Research by Wong et al. (2021) highlights how arts-integrated educational experiences can promote critical citizenship, dialogic learning and reflective practice, offering alternatives to conventional schooling constraints.

In this context, Bethlehem University's MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices emerges as a timely intervention, operationalising arts-based approaches to foster creativity, reflection and cultural engagement in higher education. The following section examines the programme as a uniquely Palestinian model of educational innovation, grounded in community, creativity and care.

Bethlehem University's MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices: A model of arts-based education

Rooted in learner-centred approaches and arts-based research, the MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices was launched in 2021 as a 37-credit-hour programme[1] designed to foster critical, creative and community-responsive educators. It blends interdisciplinary coursework across drama, theatre, music and visual arts, alongside foundational studies in philosophy, pedagogy, research and community engagement. According to the programme's formal description on the university's official website, students are encouraged to develop pedagogical tools that are both contextually responsive and socially engaged, reflecting principles of participatory dialogic learning (Freire, 2000) and embodied, transformative practice (Boal, 1979) intended for application in schools, community centers, refugee camps or cultural institutions across Palestine (Bethlehem University, n.d.).

More than a degree, the programme functions as a space for critical reflection, co-creation of knowledge and community-centred action. Through intensive summer residencies, fieldwork and sustained engagement with local artists and international scholars, students are invited to ground theory in lived experience. In this context, the arts operate as both a language and a method, aligning with arts-based research principles, enabling students to reclaim voice, resist fragmentation and imagine alternative possibilities.

The curriculum reflects this vision. Courses include Philosophy of Education, Creative and Critical Thinking, Current Debates in Education, Participatory Action Research Methods, and two levels each of Drama in Education and Creative

Learning Practices. Specialised courses in Culture and Practice through Arts-Based Research, Community Engagement and Practices, Theatre in Education, Visual Arts and Music Education provide students with both theoretical grounding and practical application. The programme culminates in a dissertation, an education placement and a final research project, all of which are integrated into a wider framework of arts-based inquiry and educational transformation (Bethlehem University, n.d.).

Developed in response to the limitations of traditional teacher preparation in Palestine, the programme invites educators to rethink their roles and relationships to knowledge, students and community. Creative pedagogies are not framed as perspective techniques, but as orientations to learning that begin with care, curiosity and cultural relevance, reflecting Freirean dialogic pedagogy and arts-based research principles. At its core is an emphasis on arts-based research, not as illustration, but as a generative mode of inquiry. Here, knowledge is co-created through image, sound, movement and story. Educators are trained to work with communities rather than on them, drawing from learners' lived experiences as the foundation of meaning-making.

Within a context where top-down reforms often fail to reach the practices of everyday teaching, this programme offers a rare and sustained space for transformation. By embedding creative, reflective and transdisciplinary practices in teacher training, it fosters not only professional development, but the possibility of a more humane, relational and liberatory model of education.

Voices from the programme: Lived experiences as pedagogy

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the lived experiences of students in Bethlehem University's MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices. The case study design was chosen to allow in-depth exploration of how arts-based pedagogical practices are enacted, experienced and reflected upon in context, aligning with principles of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three women affiliated with the programme, two graduates and one currently enrolled student at the time of the interviews. The interviews were conducted via Zoom between May and June 2025, in Arabic, recorded with permission and translated into English by the author for analysis.

To ensure participant safety and ethical rigour, anonymity is maintained throughout this paper. Participants are referred to using pseudonyms: Layla, Noor and Sara. This approach protects their identities while allowing their experiences to be meaningfully represented.

Participants gave verbal informed consent at the beginning of each interview after the study's purpose, procedures and sensitive nature of the topic were fully explained. Confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time were assured.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data following a six-phase model, as outlined by Terry et al. (2017). This process included familiarisation with the transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, refining themes and selecting representative excerpts. The analysis revealed recurring themes including personal transformation, critical consciousness, arts as resistance, pedagogical unlearning and the tensions of applying creative education in constrained environments. These themes shape the presentation of the participants' narratives that follow, which are offered not merely as testimonials, but as embodied pedagogical texts.

Framing the voices

In order to understand the lived impact of this pedagogical model, we turn to the voices of three participants, Noor, Sara and Layla (pseudonyms), whose journeys through the MA programme reflect both its potential and its limitations. Their narratives illustrate how creative pedagogy, when grounded in the Palestinian context, becomes not only a tool for educational practice, but also a vehicle for personal transformation, social awareness and cultural resistance. Across their stories, recurring themes illuminate the relationship between education, identity and activism under occupation.

While each participant brought her own context and perspective, they shared a deep engagement with the programme as a space of unlearning, experimentation and redefinition, not only of teaching practices, but of the self.

In what follows, their experiences are presented as personal testimonials as well as pedagogical texts, offering insight into how learning becomes meaningful when it is tied to context, embodiment and collective struggle.

All three participants entered the programme with a background in education, but with varying exposure to the arts. Yet, their motivations shared a common thread, a desire for more meaningful approaches to teaching and self-expression. Noor described her initial interest as a search for "something different, something strange and more aligned with what I love, music, arts, drama". Sara

saw the programme as an opportunity to expand her pedagogical practice and explore education as a participatory and socially engaged process. Layla, already immersed in early childhood education, viewed the programme as a space to rethink her role as a teacher within an educational system shaped by daily intrusions of occupation.

Shifting perceptions: From arts as expression to arts as praxis

As the programme progressed, all three participants described a profound shift in their understanding of the arts, not as a decorative or supplementary element in education, but as a central mode of critical engagement and pedagogical praxis.

Sara reflected on how the programme pushed her beyond traditional teaching, stating, "Pedagogy became something else; it was about creating spaces for dialogue, for shared inquiry, not only delivering knowledge". Noor described how the programme "opened my eyes to new ways of thinking, critical awareness, creative exploration and a deeper engagement with what lies beneath the surface of things".

Layla echoed this shift, particularly in how she began to relate to the learning process of her three-year-old students. She noted, "before I entered the programme, I thought I was giving my students the freedom to be creative, but I now realise that I was still drawing the path for them. The programme made me understand that I needed to respect each child's learning style". Layla further emphasised that the programme "made me live, see and experience things I had never encountered before".

Taken together, the reflections of Noor, Sara and Layla reveal a collective movement from instrumental views of education toward more transformative, embodied and contextually responsive understandings of pedagogy. Each participant underwent a shift from seeing the arts as tools for engagement or creativity to understanding them as modes of meaning-making, relationality and critical inquiry.

Noor's awakening to "what lies beneath the surface of things" signals a deepening of critical consciousness, where art functions as a method of inquiry into power, memory and identity. Sara's emphasis on dialogue and shared inquiry marks a clear departure from transmissive models of teaching, pointing toward Freirean, participatory learning spaces. Layla's recognition that she had previously limited her students' freedom highlights the internalisation of hierarchical pedagogy; her subsequent shift toward respecting diverse learning styles reflects the programme's impact on both epistemological and ethical levels.

In each case, learning was not merely about acquiring new methods, but about unlearning inherited assumptions, confronting complicity and embracing the vulnerability required to teach with openness and integrity.

Pedagogy as challenge: Rooting the arts in the Palestinian context

Moving beyond personal transformation, the participants' narratives reveal how creative pedagogies in this programme became deeply connected to the Palestinian context. Rather than treating the arts as neutral or apolitical, they engaged them as living practices of survival, resilience and identity-making within a fragmented reality. The classroom, in this sense, functioned not merely as a site for learning, but as a space for cultural expression and critical engagement.

Noor, for example, reflected on how her awareness of structural and social dynamics deepened over the course of the programme. She described how it "opened my eyes to things I hadn't seen before," referring to her growing understanding of systemic challenges, collective memory and the everyday politics of space, language and representation. She emphasised that "art isn't something separate or secondary. It became part of meaningful engagement. When we dance, act or write, we're not just expressing; we are exploring, questioning and responding to our context".

Sara echoed this connection between art and critical awareness, particularly through her work with children. For her, artistic engagement was not only a tool for developing skills, but also an entry point into difficult conversations about social realities, belonging and resilience. She described performance as a way of reclaiming space and asserting presence, a method of saying "we are here" in environments that often limit expression.

For her MA thesis, Sara led a community-based project with children exposed to trauma. Using drawing, movement and storytelling, she supported them in processing emotions through non-verbal expression. She observed that many "would jump at every loud sound" or depicted collapsed buildings and helicopters without prompting. Sara reflected that "art became not just a means of emotional release, but a pathway to understanding. I wasn't offering therapy, yet the children revealed emotions they couldn't articulate with words".

Layla, in turn, spoke about how the programme helped her reconsider her role as a teacher within constrained educational systems. She began to see pedagogy itself as a site of engagement, particularly in contexts where classroom practice is limited

or closely monitored. “The programme helped me realise that my responsibility isn’t just to teach,” she explained, “but to create a space that is free, safe and reflective. That space might be the only place where a child can fully explore who they are”.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how creative pedagogies function not only as strategies for teaching, but as forms of cultural and social engagement. In contexts marked by fragmentation and constraint, the arts become a radical practice of connection and reflection. Through embodied performance, critical dialogue and collective inquiry, participants positioned themselves not only as educators or artists, but as facilitators of learning that is socially responsive, critically aware and culturally rooted.

Between vision and reality: Tensions, limitations and possibilities

While the MA programme offered participants new ways of thinking about education, applying these ideas in real-world settings often exposed difficult tensions. Creative pedagogy, centred on freedom, criticality and expression, frequently collided with institutional restrictions, social norms and political censorship. These challenges unfolded on multiple levels, in the implementation of creative practices within constrained school systems, and in the participants’ negotiation of social and cultural resistance within their communities. The following analysis explores these tensions on both levels.

Implementing Pedagogy: Institutional and political constraints

Sara, for instance, found herself torn between the ideals of student-centred learning and the rigid expectations of the school system. “I realised I was still drawing the path for children”, she explained, even when trying to offer them space. Her challenges were not only pedagogical but political. Working in an Israeli municipality-run kindergarten, she is explicitly forbidden from addressing anything related to Palestine, not even symbolically. This silencing underscores how structural power constrains the scope of educational freedom for Palestinian educators.

Noor also faced resistance, especially when working with war-affected children through theatre. Some parents dismissed her methods as mere play, and broader societal taboos made it difficult to discuss sensitive topics around childhood and trauma. Still, she found power in dialogue: “I learned how to create simple, shame-free spaces for mothers to talk and think together”.

These stories reveal how transformation is never straightforward. Participants were not only innovating pedagogically, but also carrying the emotional burden of navigating censorship, social expectations and their own vulnerability as educators. And yet, they persisted, not by applying theory rigidly, but by adapting it with sensitivity, courage and care.

Facing cultural resistance: Social norms and entry barriers

While institutional constraints shaped the classroom context, cultural and familial dynamics posed barriers at the level of personal legitimacy. Layla, for example, encountered resistance from her community around her engagement with the arts, particularly singing and performance. Her family only began to accept her involvement when it was framed as part of her teacher training. Yet this seemingly minor shift in framing became a crucial entry point. Through storytelling and creative exploration, she moved from self-doubt to confidence, ultimately crafting her own expressive voice.

These layered tensions, between theory and application, freedom and constraint, social expectation and personal growth, underscore the complexity of practising creative pedagogy in Palestine. Rather than a frictionless implementation of theory, these narratives highlight creative pedagogy as a practice forged in tension – one that makes its greatest impact precisely because it operates in contested spaces. This insight has significant implications for future work at the intersection of education, culture and political struggle in Palestine.

Discussion

The narratives of Noor, Sara and Layla reveal that Bethlehem University’s MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices is not merely a site of teacher preparation, but a space of political awakening, cultural resistance and epistemological transformation. Their experiences suggest that arts-based education in Palestine does more than prepare skilled educators, it actively challenges dominant educational paradigms that prioritise control, efficiency and standardised outcomes over context, creativity and community.

These findings resonate strongly with Paulo Freire’s (2000) theory of critical pedagogy, which rejects the “banking model” of education in favour of dialogical, co-constructed learning that cultivates critical consciousness. For these participants, pedagogy emerged not only as a professional practice, but as a political and ethical stance. Their

accounts exemplify Freire's notion of praxis, reflection and action upon the world, in a context where education itself is deeply politicised.

The participants' shift from viewing art as mere expression to embracing it as pedagogical and political praxis aligns with Clover and Kaya's (2025) argument that the arts are central to radical adult education. Creative practice, they contend, allows for embodied, affective forms of learning that expose systems of power while opening spaces for imagination and resistance. In this study, participants engaged storytelling, drama and visual art as tools of transformation, strategies that enabled them to navigate trauma, reclaim identity and foster critical dialogue in colonised spaces.

These findings also speak to the field of arts-based research, which, as Barone and Eisner (2012) argue, challenges positivist traditions by valuing the interpretive, affective and sensory dimensions of knowledge production. Noor's and Sara's use of performance and drawing with children affected by conflict exemplifies arts-based research in action, demonstrating how art can function both as a method of inquiry and as a mode of knowledge creation in contexts of social injustice.

Equally important are the tensions that surfaced between participants' pedagogical ideals and the institutional and political constraints they encountered. These experiences mirror Davies' (2004) observations that peacebuilding and critical pedagogy often collide with bureaucratic and state-imposed structures of control, leaving educators in a state of constant negotiation. Sara's experience in a municipality-run kindergarten highlights this dilemma, her efforts to enact critical pedagogy were curtailed by surveillance and censorship, yet she found ways to subvert these limits through relational and child-centred practices.

The gendered dimension of these struggles also warrants attention. Each participant navigated cultural and familial expectations around performance, professionalism and propriety, reflecting findings by Alayan et al. (2012) on Palestinian women educators who straddle multiple, often conflicting, identities under occupation and patriarchy. Layla's negotiation of her community's disapproval of performance, and Noor's creation of "shame-free spaces" for dialogue, underscore the intimate entanglement of gender, pedagogy and emotional labour in educational resistance.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that conceptualises education in Palestine as a site of cultural and political struggle rather than a neutral, technocratic process (Said, 1993). The MA programme under study demonstrates how higher education, when rooted in local realities and artistic practice, can serve as a generative space for resistance and renewal. Its emphasis on embodied learning, community engagement and critical dialogue provides a counter-narrative to both militarised occupation and depersonalised schooling, positioning education as a vital practice of freedom.

In sum, the findings from these interviews illuminate the complex work of Palestinian educators who seek to bring critical, arts-based pedagogies into spaces marked by occupation, censorship and deeply rooted social norms. Far from being a linear process, this work emerges through negotiation, between theory and lived reality, between institutional restrictions and personal agency, between vulnerability and courage. This suggests that the power of creative pedagogy lies not only in its ability to inspire new ways of teaching, but also in its capacity to sustain educators through these tensions, allowing them to carve out spaces of freedom and dialogue even under constraint.

Research scope and limitations

While these insights offer a valuable window into the programme's impact, they are drawn from a small group of participants and may not represent all graduates' experiences. The study focused on women educators and relied on self-reported reflections, which, while rich, are inevitably shaped by memory and personal interpretation. Moreover, the research explored the implementation of creative pedagogy primarily in early childhood and community settings; further work could examine how these approaches are adapted in secondary schools or higher education. Future studies might also include longitudinal data or comparative perspectives to explore how these tensions evolve over time and across different Palestinian contexts.

Conclusion: Holding space for change through creative pedagogies

In the face of occupation, fragmentation and an educational system often driven by control and standardisation, the MA programme in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices at Bethlehem University emerges as a living alternative, one that centers creativity, dialogue and contextual learning. The lived experiences of Noor, Sara and Layla reveal how arts-based pedagogy can function not only as a teaching method, but as a political, ethical and cultural intervention.

Through their narratives, we witness how education rooted in local realities and artistic practice becomes a site of resistance, healing and redefinition.

Participants shifted from traditional views of teaching toward more embodied, participatory and transformative understandings of learning. In doing so, they encountered both possibility and tension, negotiating systemic constraints, gendered expectations and emotional vulnerability, while continuing to forge new pedagogical paths.

This study suggests that meaningful educational transformation does not occur solely through theory, but through lived, creative engagement with the world. The programme's commitment to unlearning, imagination and care points to a model of education that is urgently needed, not only in Palestine but globally.

As creative pedagogies continue to be marginalised in formal education, this research affirms their critical role in cultivating consciousness, resilience, and hope. Future research might explore how such models can be sustained, scaled or adapted in other communities navigating oppression, displacement or transition. For now, the stories shared here stand as a testament to the quiet revolutions that unfold when education dares to be human, artistic and free.

Note

1. Based on the U.S. credit-hour system, commonly used in higher education, 37 credit hours correspond to approximately 925-1,110 hours of structured academic and field-based learning.

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Rand Barakat is an educator, researcher and writer based in Jerusalem. She holds an MA in Creative Pedagogies and Community Practices from Bethlehem University, Palestine, where her thesis examined the role of interactive storytelling in fostering environmental awareness among students. With a background in English language and literature, and over six years of experience in formal and non-formal educational settings, Rand explores how creative, student-centred methodologies can support meaningful learning and community engagement. Her current work focuses on the role of the arts in education in contexts of social and structural challenges, with an emphasis on identity, resilience and cultural expression. Through both academic inquiry and field-based research, she contributes to interdisciplinary discussions bridging pedagogy, creativity and empowerment, investigating how arts-based education can serve as a tool for dialogue, critical thinking and collective transformation.

Beautiful Resistance
Arts for positive change

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Abdelfattah Abusrour
Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, Palestine

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^2 (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 was 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* (colocynth) 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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Abdelfattah Abusrour is the founder and general director of the Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, which was established in the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem in 1998. His concept of Beautiful Resistance, which uses performing and visual arts as a creative and peaceful form of expression in situations of oppression and trauma, aims to save lives, inspire hope and encourage individuals to become peacebuilders in their communities and beyond. Abusrour is an author, actor and theatre director, trainer, activist and human rights defender and researcher who obtained a PhD in Biological and Medical Engineering in France in 1993. He is also an Ashoka social entrepreneur and a Synergos social innovator. He has contributed to educational research and taught drama and storytelling in education. He has conducted conferences and practical workshops in different countries, using Beautiful Resistance to empower people by encouraging them to build peace within themselves and become active agents of change.

The Gaza Monologues

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

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Marina Johnson
Stanford University, USA

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 Ács, *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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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

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

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Marina Barham
Al-Harah Theatre, Palestine

George Matar
Al-Harah Theatre, Palestine

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 Network[2] 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 Theatre[3] 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.

An **inclusive theatre programme** by **Inad Theatre** and its **role** in **education** Analysis of a training programme

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Khalid Massou
Inad Theatre, Palestine

Abstract

This article aims to shed light on Inad Theatre's use of inclusive theatre techniques as an educational and pedagogical tool aimed to promote social inclusion and cultural empowerment for people with disabilities. The work conducted with the Pontifical Institute Effetà Paul VI will be analysed to present this experience, in order to highlight the training programme developed and assess its impact on students. The article will also explore how children interacted with the programme and experienced their journey. Inad Theatre believes in the role of theatre in enhancing the educational process, which aims to strengthen Palestinian cultural identity, instil social and ethical values, raise awareness, modify behaviour, develop various skills and promote a culture of love, forgiveness, acceptance of others and openness to other cultures.

Keywords: *Inclusive theatre, school theatre, hearing impairment*

Introduction

Khalid Massou, the author of this article, co-founded Inad Theatre during the First Intifada in 1988, providing himself, a passionate theatre enthusiast, with a space for self-expression and resistance against the Israeli occupation. He later majored in Theatre at the University for the Arts, Sciences and Communication in Chile. These studies enabled him to transform Inad Theatre from an amateur theatre company to a professional one. He then decided to study Education at the Al-Quds Open University in Palestine to improve his skills as a drama trainer. Finally, he studied Management of Cultural Institutions at the Dar Al-Kalima University. His drama training prompted him to undertake the study of people living with disabilities at the Effetà school in his capacity as a trainer for the programme.

Palestinian students face significant challenges, the most notable of which is the ongoing Israeli occupation that continues to deny children of their right to an education. Their freedom to move between Palestinian cities is restricted due to the Israeli regime's policy of segregation, which involves an apartheid-style wall and military checkpoints. This effectively turns Palestinian cities into prisons, preventing students from reaching their schools. Systematic Israeli restrictions, such as the demolition of schools and attacks on them, the intimidation of students and the arrest of both students and teachers, create an abnormal educational environment in Palestinian schools. These factors deny students of their right to an education and negatively affect their academic performance.

The right to education, which is guaranteed by international treaties, is systematically and openly violated by the Israeli regime, without any deterrent. Evidence of this can be seen in the experiences endured by Palestinian students in Gaza during wars of extermination. These wars have involved unimaginable crimes against children, families, schools, places of worship and hospitals, depriving people of their basic human rights.

This programme is designed for students of all ages who live in areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. These areas include cities, villages, refugee camps and remote locations such as the Jordan Valley. Unfortunately, we cannot implement the programme in schools in Jerusalem as the Israeli occupation authorities prevent drama/theatre trainers from the West Bank from entering the city, due to military checkpoints and the requirement to obtain permits from the Israeli military authorities in order to teach there.

The drama and theatre education programme aims to enhance students' abilities in self-expression through physical, vocal and emotional means. It also seeks to provide a safe space for students to talk about the various issues they face, which can affect their lives in different ways, whether socially, academically or politically.

A school theatre programme by Inad Theatre

Inad Theatre is one of the cultural institutions that has introduced drama and theatre education programmes into Palestinian schools, including government schools, schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which has support people living in camps since the Nakba of 1948, private schools affiliated with charitable organisations and churches, and project-based schools.

At Inad Theatre, we believe in changing the traditional approach to teaching, which focuses on academic achievement. We advocate a liberating education that evaluates students' achievements in terms of their personal development and provide learning opportunities to help students face the future with sustainable knowledge and develop a fully integrated personality.

From this perspective, Inad Theatre considers school theatre to be an effective tool for building our children's resilience. This is achieved by making the educational environment more enjoyable for students and helping them to overcome the difficulties caused by military checkpoints. Furthermore, school theatre can encourage students to continue attending classes and avoid dropping out due to the systematic challenges imposed on them by the Israeli occupation. Many students at the Effetà school live outside the Bethlehem Governorate and must travel long distances every day. They must undergo inspections of their school bags and present their birth certificates proving their age, and their disability cards proving their hearing impairment before reaching school. This causes students to suffer on a daily basis. Therefore, theatrical activities have become an emotional release outlet, enabling students to express the fear and anxiety caused by these violations.

This programme comprises two components: educational theatre and child-to-child theatre. Educational theatre aims to theatricalise the curriculum through a teaching and learning process carried out during school hours, either as part of the set curriculum or as an extracurricular activity. In this context, the Inad Theatre drama trainer works with students to deliver educational theatre. A specific lesson from the set curriculum is selected, enabling the trainer and their students to transform the educational material into a theatrical script. This

highlights the educational and pedagogical goal, intended to be conveyed to students in an engaging way that leaves an emotional impact. This can be achieved through monologues and dialogues performed by the chosen characters discussing the educational and pedagogical topic, or through puppetry or other performance arts.

Child-to-child theatre produces performances for children and young people under the age of 18. Students lead the performances themselves, under the supervision and guidance of a drama and theatre trainer from Inad Theatre. This activity is usually carried out during school hours, often as part of an extracurricular programme. The theatrical work is produced collaboratively by the trainer and the students. This involves writing or dramatising the script, as well as developing the performance in all its technical and artistic details. The students play central roles, with a focus on them as the core of the teaching and learning process. The content of this work does not have to follow the curriculum.

Inad Theatre classifies both components as school theatre and delivers them in educational settings. This classification distinguishes between school theatre and professional children's theatre. The two are fundamentally different: those involved in professional children's theatre at Inad Theatre are professional actors who perform plays for children in theatres and schools. They have a specialised, professional team consisting of writers, directors, actors, technicians and administrators to produce these performances. In contrast, school theatre is primarily executed by drama and theatre trainers and students.

The philosophy of Boal and Freire within the Inad Theatre experience

Augusto Boal's vision led to the creation of the Theatre of the Oppressed. In his book (Boal, 1980), he explains that the Theatre of the Oppressed provides an opportunity for marginalised and disabled people to express their concerns and advocate for their rights. Inad Theatre views inclusive theatre as an extension of Boal's philosophy and vision.

In addition, Inad Theatre shares Paulo Freire's vision of education for the oppressed and liberation-oriented education. Freire (1970) emphasises the pivotal role of students in the educational process, as partners and co-creators of decisions. Students should have space for expression and creativity. From this perspective, Inad Theatre places students with disabilities at the heart of the creative process, working alongside teachers to develop the theatrical production and contribute to all of aspects of its creation.

Inclusive theatre and Inad Theatre

The school community in Palestine is diverse, encompassing students from various social, religious and political backgrounds, and with different physical and mental capabilities. Palestinian schools recognise the importance of social inclusion, particularly with regard to people with disabilities. Many specialised schools cater for this group, such as the Effetà school in Bethlehem.

Working with civil society institutions and schools for people with disabilities has led to the definition of inclusive theatre as "theatre that includes people with disabilities – whether motor, visual, or hearing impaired – and people without disabilities in the same theatre production, in order to highlight their rights in the cultural arena, address their societal issues and showcase their talents".

Inad Theatre seeks to build partnerships with schools in order to implement a collaborative drama and theatre programme. Effetà and Inad Theatre agreed to run a theatre/drama course incorporating inclusive theatre methods, and both parties worked hard to ensure the success of this initiative for the benefit of the students. Support from the school administration helped the students to successfully complete the theatre project.

The objectives of this initiative were as follows:

- Develop their personal and social skills, create a space for self-expression and confidence, and improve communication. This objective was achieved by carrying out a series of improvisation exercises with the students. For example, theatre games helped students to develop their communication skills and become more confident when expressing themselves in public.
- Create a cultured environment that treats people with disabilities with respect rather than sympathy, breaks down stereotypes and establishes policies that protect their rights. This objective was achieved by creating a safe space in which students could develop positive attitudes towards their disability and talk about it without shame. For example, Effetà students' participation in the school theatre competition alongside non-disabled students demonstrated how the latter expressed admiration for the Effetà students' performance, thereby highlighting their right to participate in cultural activities alongside their peers.
- Utilise inclusive theatre as an educational method to enable students to engage with the curriculum in a liberated, non-didactic manner, through drama/theatre activities that stimulate interactive and collaborative

learning. This objective was achieved by involving students in the writing process.
- Use inclusive theatre as an awareness-raising tool to highlight students' needs and challenges. This objective was achieved through their participation in the staging of "The Piper" during the school's Open Day, where they demonstrated their ability to address an audience and tackle educational issues.

Building and designing the training programme at Effetà

The goal was to create a theatre performance using inclusive methods. This involved conducting a series of training sessions with students at the Effetà school, adopting a general-to-specific approach. This educational approach in the learning process was applied to the field of drama, exposing students to general educational experiences before guiding them towards the specific objective of the performance. For example, theatre games and improvisation exercises were designed for Effetà students, beginning with general principles and culminating in the final outcome (the performance).

The programme targeted tenth-grade students and one ninth-grade student with hearing impairments. Twenty-five training sessions were held, each lasting an hour and a half and taking place once a week. Nine students of both genders participated.

Massou, the programme's trainer from Inad Theatre, was informed by the school's principal, Albert Hani, about the nature of the students' disabilities. Speech and hearing specialist Issa Zeitoun then explained that the students at Effetà school either have temporary or permanent hearing loss. Sometimes, this requires them to undergo cochlear implant surgery instead of wearing hearing aids, in order to avoid complete deafness. Zeitoun clarified that communication with students is achieved through sign language or lip-reading. However, Massou was afraid that he would have to communicate with the students through sign language, which he did not know. Before the training began, he was instructed to speak slowly and clearly so that the students could read his lips. Working with students who had pronunciation difficulties meant that the trainer had to focus on vocal exercises related to theatrical lines. These exercises were kept short, and specific words were selected to ensure clarity of understanding.

Practical and theoretical aspects

The practical aspect included theatre games. These were adapted from the original games by Augusto Boal (2022) to suit the nature of hearing impairments of the Effetà students. The theoretical aspect, on the other hand, involved introducing the concepts of school theatre and inclusive theatre, as well as familiarising the students with theatrical elements such as the tools of the actor's trade and the components of a play.

From Inad Theatre's perspective, writing is a valuable form of expression. To facilitate creative writing, the trainer must be able to collect these improvisations, process them dramatically and shape them into a theatrical script, all the while preserving the original improvisations and respecting the students' work. Once the students have written the script, they do not need to memorise it – they can deliver their lines in their own way.

Inad Theatre believes in giving students sufficient space when they are involved in creating a theatrical production. This frees them from the constant stream of information and strict directorial notes, enabling them to think outside the box. This helps them to develop their own directorial vision, rather than becoming mere instruments manipulated by the director on stage. Regarding the assignment of roles, each student chooses the role they wish to play. In our opinion, this is particularly important when dealing with people disabilities. If students do not feel connected to the characters they are portraying, they will become like puppets in the trainer's hands, performing roles without feeling them.

During the process of composing the scenes, emphasis was placed on the emotional aspect. We believe in respecting students' expression of feelings, as this boosts their self-confidence. At the beginning of the training, the students were reluctant to express themselves, but after the trainer implemented a series of ice-breaker exercises, they became more confident in sharing their feelings. Sadeen, for example, was the only female student in the training group and was initially shy about acting in front of her classmates, but grew in confidence after the workshops.

During the preparation stage, the group helped to choose the music for the performance. The trainer asked the students to suggest pieces of music. During one of the training sessions, the students proposed various musical compositions, listened to them carefully and then made their selection. The Effetà group also visited the Inad Theatre, where they had the opportunity to select costumes to match the characters in the play from the costume storage room. Each student chose a costume to suit their character and discussed their choice with their classmates. Finally, the students began designing the set by looking at the available props in the

school. Based on their vision, they selected suitable props and used these to stage the scenes.

It was important for the trainer to perform with his students in the performance, as this fostered a friendly relationship with the team and made the students feel more secure on stage. Furthermore, his participation was an expression of appreciation and respect towards the students, emphasising the idea of inclusive theatre.

The students agreed that the story of the Piper would serve as a model. The objective was to instil the concept of justice in them by adapting the tale for the theatre. The trainer introduced them to the Brothers Grimm's tale, in which they expressed an interest. Once they had confirmed that they were happy for the story to be staged, they began to discuss and analyse it.

Training for the performance started with improvisation exercises to help the students to express the story's events in their own words and encourage them to engage in the creative writing process. First, they decided on the characters, established the order of events and identified the conflict. Then, the students improvised the events of the play sequentially.

The confrontation between the Piper and the Mayor was an example of the improvisation process. The Piper demanded his rightful monetary reward, but the Mayor refused, highlighting the conflict between the two characters regarding the importance of keeping promises. The trainer explained the event to Ahmed, who was playing the Piper, and asked him to express his claim in his own way, while the trainer played the Mayor. Both sides improvised the situation, with Ahmed expressing his stance with the trainer's help. The latter reinforced the conflict between them by refusing to give Ahmed the reward. This contributed to the students' creative writing sessions, in which the trainer prompted them with details of each improvised scene, and they wrote down the dialogue themselves until the script was complete. Here is an example from the script:

(The Piper returns after freeing the town from rats.)

Piper: I came back and freed you from the rats as you saw.

Mayor: Thank you, God bless you.

Piper: Where's the reward? Where's your promise?

Mayor: What promise? That I would reward you?

Piper: A thousand dinars. You promised me a thousand dinars.

Mayor: Nobody promised you anything.

Everyone: Looks like you're a fraud.

Piper: I'm not a fraud, you promised me.

Abu Hamdan: Get out!

Abu Sultan: Get out!

Everyone: Get out!

Mayor: Do you want to take our money, a thousand dinars for a few rats?

Piper: I saved you from disaster, this is my right, and you promised me, and a promise from an honourable man is sacred.

Everyone: Get out!
(Music plays and the villagers gather to drive the Piper away. He leaves sadly.)

Before the performance, Massou made sure that the students arrived early to review the script. The trainer also led them in warm-up exercises to prepare their bodies and voices. Each student put on their costume and had their make-up applied by the trainer. The group remained backstage, focused, until the performance began.

The performance took part in a competition organised by the Palestinian Ministry of Education. It was also performed during the school's Open Day, which was attended by parents and students. Seeing students with disabilities step onto the stage and perform had an impact on both the students and the audience. The students felt confident and enjoyed performing in front of their families and peers. Parents felt proud watching their children celebrate their achievements on stage.

Opinions and evaluations

Albert Hani, the principal of Effetà school, commented on the experience: "It was an innovative and very beneficial pioneering experience, which boosted students' confidence and developed their performance skills. This improved their academic performance and their ability to communicate effectively".

Teachers Wafa Ghattas and Mira Bannoura said: "Our students had a unique experience. They found that acting was an effective way to communicate their feelings and thoughts. They used body language and facial expressions in a spontaneous and touching way, and theatre provided a safe space in which they could express themselves freely, without restrictions or judgements. This allowed them to unleash their innermost feelings and confront challenges. Moreover, this experience helped the teachers to understand the students' abilities and hidden potential".

Sadeen Saad, the student who played the role of the Mayor's daughter, stated: "At first, I was reluctant to perform in front of an audience due to my fear of judgement. However, after taking part in the training, I was able to develop my skills, feel more relaxed and gain self-confidence. It also helped me to discover and develop my talent for acting".

Ahmad Salah, the student who played the Piper, said, "I was shy at first, but I managed to get over my shyness by taking part in the play". He added: "I used to believe that people with hearing impairments were incapable of integrating into society. However, after participating in

this performance, I was able to challenge this perception and show that we can be creative".

Elissa Metwasi, a hearing and speech therapist at Effetà school, commented: "I strongly encourage the idea of inclusive theatre for its benefits in developing students' speech, language and auditory skills. We saw this improvement in their receptive language skills, as inclusive theatre helped them to understand speech and expand their vocabulary. We were surprised by the progress students made after going through this theatrical experience and by how much clearer they were able to pronounce words and sentences".

Working with Effetà school on this inclusive theatre initiative has helped Inad Theatre to develop mechanisms for working with students with hearing impairments. This has encouraged Inad Theatre to expand their work with Effetà and apply it in other schools. This will also help Inad Theatre staff members to develop their inclusive theatre skills, giving them a better understanding of the needs of people with disabilities and the most effective ways to interact with them to achieve better educational, teaching and theatrical outcomes.

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Khalid Massou is the artistic director and co-founder of Inad Theatre. He is also an actor, writer, director and drama trainer. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Acting and Education, as well as a Master's degree in Cultural Institution Management. He has worked as an actor, writer and director since 1987, participating in all of Inad Theatre's productions. He teaches drama and theatre at Dar Al-Kalima University and works as a drama trainer at Al-Quds University. Since 1994, he has performed in numerous productions for both children and adults with Al-Kasaba Theatre. He has participated in many Arab and international theatre festivals, and has received multiple awards and certificates of appreciation. He has presented children's programmes on the radio and television and has appeared in various Palestinian TV series and films. He specialises in community theatre and inclusive theatre.

No one is **free**, **until everyone** is **free**[1]
How the **actions** for **Palestine align** with the **goals** of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network

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Jenny Karaviti
Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network

Abstract

Faithful to the principles of freedom, justice and the defence of human rights, the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) aligns its Palestine-related activities with its goal of using theatre as a means of social transformation. Since 2010, TENet-Gr has participated in international campaigns, such as *The Gaza Monologues* by ASHTAR Theatre, and has developed educational and artistic programmes that amplify Palestinian voices. By establishing the "4 Colours" group, the organisation has reinforced its support for The Freedom Theatre and the Cultural Intifada movement. It has held, and continues to hold, public readings, online screenings and other solidarity events, and to collaborate with Palestinian artists. Through these initiatives, TENet-Gr promotes and supports cultural resistance to the settler-colonialist, apartheid and dehumanising regime that the Palestinian people have endured for over 70 years.

Keywords: *Theatre/drama, arts in education, Palestine, human rights, cultural resistance, TENet-Gr, The Freedom Theatre, Gaza Monologues, solidarity*

Introduction

According to the statute, one of the goals of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr) is to promote the exploration of approaches and techniques for using theatre as an art form and a learning tool, as well as a means of social transformation in both formal and non-formal educational settings. Social transformation involves changing societies and people for the better. For TENet-Gr, this "better" is inextricably linked to the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, self-determination, safeguarding human rights and children's rights and solidarity.

For this reason, TENet-Gr has been organising educational programmes and various other initiatives on issues such as human rights, discrimination and refugees for two decades. In this light, the organisation could not remain indifferent to the ongoing Nakba[2] in Palestine (Al-Awda, 2025; United Nations, n.d.; United Nations Special Committee on Israeli Practices, 2025), a situation perpetuated either by the deafening silence of the majority of the mainstream media or by the reproduction of Zionist propaganda. In Palestine, a 19th-century Zionist plan is still in place, despite us living in the 21st century. Colonialism and an apartheid system, worse than that which existed in South Africa, are still present. There are settlements and ghettos, such as the Gaza Strip, which is reportedly the world's largest open-air prison. This information comes from various sources, including the United Nations (n.d.), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2014), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2010), Human Rights Watch (2023) and Høvring (2018). Contemporary historians such as the Israeli scholar Ilan Pappé (2016; Avgi Newsroom, 2017) have reflected on this situation in their work, as have politicians such as the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron (Watt & Sherwood, 2010). Indeed, relatively recently, international humanitarian organisations, scientific associations and experts have argued that genocide is being committed in Gaza (Albanese, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; International Association of Genocide Scholars, 2025; International Court of Justice, 2024).

Our concern has always been about how we could make a contribution to this cause through the arts, especially theatre and drama, to give a voice to oppressed Palestinians and reach as many people as possible.

The Gaza Monologues and a poetry anthology

The first occasion arose in 2010 when Iman Aoun, the artistic director of the Palestinian ASHTAR Theatre, invited TENet-Gr to participate in the international

campaign about *The Gaza Monologues*, based on texts written by teenagers during and after the Israeli offensive against Gaza in 2008–2009 (Ashtar Theatre, 2010; https://www.gazamonologues.com/).

At that time, TENet-Gr translated and published these monologues in Greece. The organisation also coordinated student performances and readings in many cities across Greece, in which thousands of students and hundreds of teachers participated. A related video was posted on the TENet-Gr YouTube channel (Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network [TENet-Gr], 2010). The translated texts were also used by theatre professionals in Greece, including Mania Papadimitriou, who directed the performance *Gaza Is... (Survival Lessons)* in 2011. Papadimitriou dedicated this performance to the memory of Juliano Mer-Khamis, who was a director, activist and the founder of The Freedom Theatre. He was murdered by Israeli occupation forces in the Palestinian city of Jenin in April 2011. Drama pedagogues and TENet-Gr members Sonia Mologousi and Iro Potamousi (2011) authored educational material based on the performance. Two years earlier, TENet-Gr and Nisos Publications had published a bilingual (Greek and Arabic) poetry anthology by Mahmoud Darwish, titled *...να σκέφτεσαι τους άλλους...* [...Think of Others...] (2009). Proceeds from its sale covered the travel and participation expenses of two young ASHTAR Theatre actors at the TENet-Gr Theatre Summer Camp in Spetses in 2011. The actors took part in the Young Theatre Voices workshop alongside Greek peers who had performed their *Gaza Monologues* at school festivals the previous year.

The creation of the "4 Colours" group

Following the events in Gaza on 7 October 2023, several members of the TENet-Gr approached the Board of Directors with a proposal to set up a working group to address the issue of Palestine. This group would monitor developments, particularly with regard to arts and education, and study ways

to take action and establish partnerships. It would also provide advice and support to TENet-Gr members and friends throughout Greece, helping them to plan and implement theatre and drama education activities, as well as other artistic events to show solidarity with the Palestinian people. Thus, the "4 Colours"[3] group was formed and continues to be active to this day. The group has played a key role in the following actions.

The Gaza Monologues in 2023

To mark the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on 29 November 2023, TENet-Gr organised public in-person and online readings of *The Gaza Monologues* in Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities. This was in response to an appeal from ASHTAR Theatre to the international arts community. Furthermore, the Northern Greece Office of TENet-Gr organised a livestreaming of the readings in Thessaloniki, which was subsequently made into a video. This video has been subtitled in English and has been made freely available on the organisation's YouTube channel for use by members, friends and anyone interested (TENet-Gr, 2024b).

Actions in solidarity with The Freedom Theatre

In December 2023, Israeli occupation forces attacked the internationally renowned Palestinian Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp for the umpteenth time, vandalising the theatre and arresting its staff. As part of an international campaign of solidarity, TENet-Gr started collecting signatures by sending an open letter to its members, friends and collaborators in Greece. This letter was addressed to individuals, organisations, foundations, artists, educators and professionals in the fields of culture and education. The letter called for the release of The Freedom Theatre staff and members of the Jenin community, as well as for the theatre to reopen. The open letter was circulated online and read out at theatres and other artistic venues.

At the same time, members of the "4 Colours" group translated *The Revolution's Promise*, a theatrical composition created by The Freedom Theatre and Artists on the Frontline (2024), into Greek. They also translated individual narratives-testimonies of Palestinian artists. These shocking texts honour cultural resistance, highlighting the scope and

absurdity of censorship, as well as the brutality of Israeli attacks against artists. The texts form part of the global artistic movement, the Cultural Intifada (https://www.theculturalintifada.com/), which is a form of creative resistance against occupation, apartheid, ethnic cleansing and genocide in Palestine. The translated texts can be found on the TENet-Gr website (https://theatroedu.gr/).

To celebrate World Theatre Day 2024, and as part of the solidarity campaign with The Freedom Theatre, TENet-Gr organised an online event in solidarity with The Freedom Theatre on 26 March 2024. In order to share the experiences of Palestinian artists with the widest possible audience, the event featured readings by the renowned Greek actors Orpheas Avgoustidis, George Karamichos, Maria Protopapa, Klelia Renesi and Yannis Stankoglou, as well as the rapper 12th Monkey. The readings were taken from the Greek translation of *The Revolution's Promise* (Artists on the Frontline & The Freedom Theatre, 2024). More than 500 people attended the event. We were delighted to have students from The Freedom Theatre Drama School join us online: Chantal Rizkallah, Aya Samara and Naqaa Samour. Chantal also read her prose poem, "Sounds of the Absurd" (2024).

Structured ten-minute discussions were facilitated between the readings, with participants being randomly assigned to groups of ten. The following questions were asked:

i. Why are arts and culture such powerful tools against oppression?
ii. Why do you think artists' work is censored?
iii. How does the personal testimony you heard differ from what we hear and read about Palestine, the Palestinians and the Israeli occupation in the Western media?
iv. Are you aware of any other cases in history where boycott strategies have been used against states other than Israel? Why do you think the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement could be an effective tactic?
Where could you read a testimony monologue? In your workplace, classroom, theatre group or student club? Elsewhere?
vii. Is there a possibility for you to arrange a public reading of the full theatrical piece, *The Revolution's Promise*, in your area?
viii. In what other ways can we demonstrate our tangible support for Palestine?

In solidarity with the Freedom Theatre, local TENet-Gr offices organised numerous in-person events across various cities. These events, held in collaboration with educational and artistic organisations, featured materials from *The Revolution's Promise* and *The Gaza Monologues*, as well as poems by Darwish (2009).

Online screening of the documentary film *Where the Olive Trees Weep*

Deeply convinced that knowledge is power, TENet-Gr organised a public online screening of the documentary film *Where the Olive Trees Weep* (2024), directed by Maurizio and Zaya Benazzo. The screening took place on 27 June 2024 and was organised in collaboration with the educational group Skasiarcheio,[4] the Greek branch of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS Greece)[5] and the feminist organisation To Mov.[6] The film is part of a wider project examining colonial trauma in communities around the world. It documents the lives of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, shedding light on the pain, intergenerational trauma and resilience resulting from displacement, home demolitions, the destruction of farmland, water deprivation, the denial of basic human rights and imprisonment. The film also raises moral questions about justice and freedom, asking what makes the oppressor so blind to their own brutality. The film's central figures are Ashira Darwish, a Palestinian journalist, activist and therapist; Ahed Tamimi, a Palestinian activist; Amira Hass, an Israeli journalist; and Dr Gabor Maté, a Hungarian-Canadian Jewish physician and author who is internationally recognised for his work on the relationship between mental and physical health. He offers therapeutic sessions to female victims of torture in Israeli prisons.

Following the online screening of the film, there was a discussion with Ashira Darwish and Themis Tzimas. A lawyer with a PhD in Public Law and Political Science from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece, Tzimas writes articles and gives public speeches analysing the legal dimensions of Palestinian resistance based on international law.

With the Palestinian artist group "We" in Gaza

In line with TENet-Gr's ongoing commitment to amplifying Palestinian voices, the Northern Greece Office collaborated with the recently established Palestinian arts collective "We", who had been displaced from northern to southern Gaza at the time, to celebrate World Drama/Theatre & Education Day 2024. The group was invited to participate in the day conference virtually to present their work. The group comprises Fidaa Ziad, an educator and writer who is responsible for the group's public

representation; Alaa Al Jabari, a visual artist and digital graphic designer; and Mahdi Karira, a puppeteer and theatre director. We spoke to them live about how the group formed, the writing, art and puppetry workshops they hold in Gaza and their experiences as educators and artists during the ongoing war against Gaza. More than 200 members and friends of TENet-Gr attended the online presentation and discussion in person and remotely. The video footage is available on YouTube (TENet-Gr, 2024a).

Making use of the material: More actions

The freely accessible translated texts and videos provided several TENet-Gr members with an opportunity to express their creativity by designing original artistic and drama education activities for children and adults. These activities were either implemented as events organised by TENet-Gr local offices, or in collaboration with other local artistic organisations as part of larger initiatives. Examples include anti-racism festivals in Chios, Athens, Thessaloniki and Kalamata, a feminist festival in Athens and interventions in Patras, Corfu and elsewhere.

At the same time, and continuing to do so, TENet-Gr responded to invitations from other cultural and artistic bodies to participate in discussions and present artistic and drama-based practices in solidarity with the oppressed Palestinian people. In this context, TENet-Gr participated in the newly established Cultural Network for Palestine-Greece conference in Athens in April 2025. The author presented a paper titled “So That Their Voices Be Heard!”

This text will conclude with the voice of Mustafa Sheta, The Freedom Theatre’s production manager, who wrote a letter of gratitude entitled “From Jenin with Love”. The letter was written on 12 April this

year, a few days after his release from prison. It was addressed to TENet-Gr in response to their open letter of solidarity and petition demanding his release. Mustafa chose this particular date – the 19th anniversary of the founding of The Freedom Theatre – to pay tribute to the sacrifices of martyr Juliano Mer Khamis and freedom fighter Zakaria Zubeidi, and to honour the efforts of all those who support the theatre. He writes, "We will continue our journey, even though our theatre in the refugee camp is now closed and occupied by snipers and cruel soldiers of the occupation. I am here, ready and steadfast, and I will continue".

The "4 Colours" group is also here, along with members and friends of TENet-Gr. We will continue to plan and implement training and solidarity actions for Palestine, collaborating with individuals and organisations that share our goals and vision.

Translated from Greek by Nassia Choleva

Photos by Christos Zikos, Hara Tsoukala and Nikos Govas

Notes

1. A shorter version of this text was published in the weekly supplement Skasiarcheio (Truancy) in the *Efimerida ton Syntakton* newspaper on 6 August 2024.
2. The term "Nakba" (meaning catastrophe in Arabic) refers to the displacement of around 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948 during the establishment of the State of Israel, the destruction of over 400 Palestinian villages, and the onset of the Palestinian refugee crisis. The concept of the ongoing Nakba encompasses not only the 1948 expulsion, but also the ongoing violence, loss of territory, displacement, and denial of the right to return that Palestinians have experienced since then.
3. All TEN-et-Gr members are welcome to participate in the "4 Colours" group. More information are available here: https://shorturl.at/TLvAT
4. The educational group Skasiarcheio (Truancy) is a collective of educators and creators. It aims to promote a public school that compensates for inequalities, with a political character; a community school in which critical and institutional pedagogy will find their place. To find out more, you can visit: https://synathina.gr
5. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement is a global campaign of peaceful resistance launched by Palestinian civil society organisations in 2005. The movement promotes boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel with the aim of ending the occupation, the apartheid system and discrimination in historic Palestine.
6. To Mov (The Purple) is a Greek feminist collective that campaigns against the violence and exploitation of women.

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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*.

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 is 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 grassroot 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

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 Tsarbopoulou, 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?*

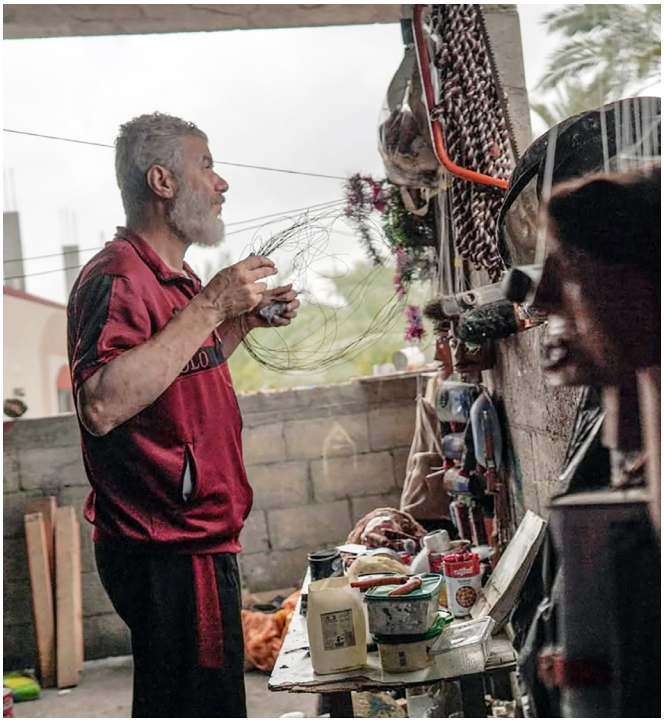
F.Z.: The tools we have are language, writing, theatre and painting. We use these means first to help ourselves and then to help the world around us, particularly women, children and girls. Art is therefore our means of dealing with the suffering we experienced during the genocide and of highlighting 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 reused 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 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 Tsarbopoulou: 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.

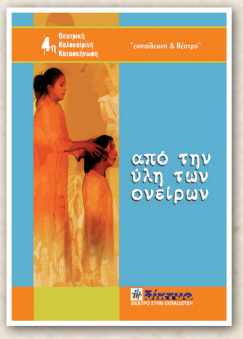
Mahdi Karira is a puppeteer, director and trainer of active learning strategies. He is also the founder of the Puppet Theatre in Gaza City, which is located at the Holst Centre of the Gaza Municipality. Prior to the ongoing war, he had directed around 15 plays, but his theatre and puppet workshop were 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.

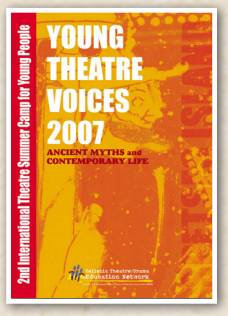
Jenny Karaviti is a teacher of Greek language and literature, drama pedagogue and writer. She studied History and Archaeology at the University of Athens in Greece, before completing postgraduate studies in Theatre and Theatre/Drama Pedagogy at the universities of Essex and Royal Holloway in the United 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*.

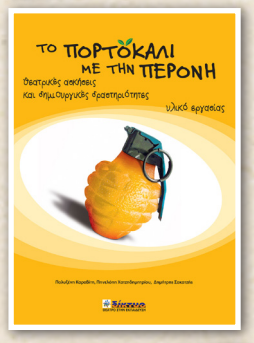
PUBLICATIONS

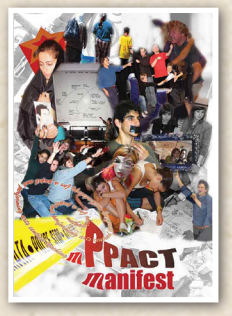
PROJECTS-SEMINARS-WORKSHOPS

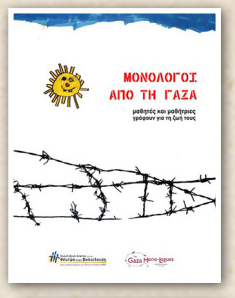
THEATRE SUMMER CAMPS

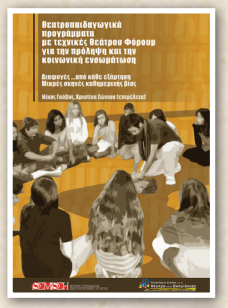


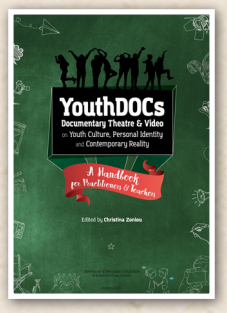


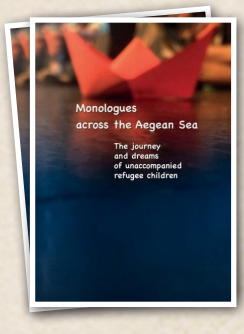


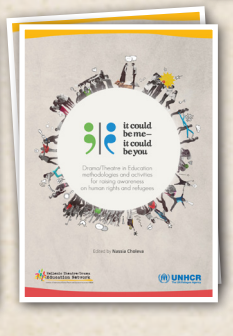


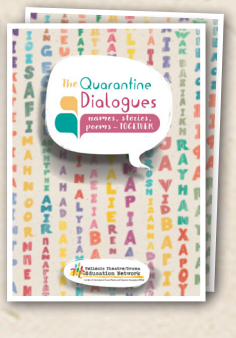












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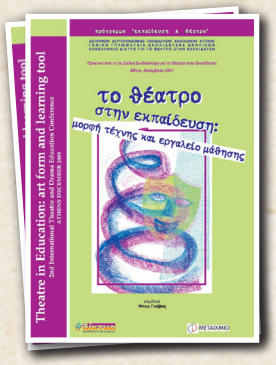

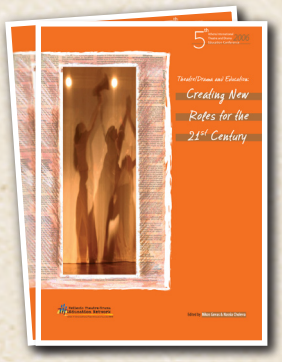

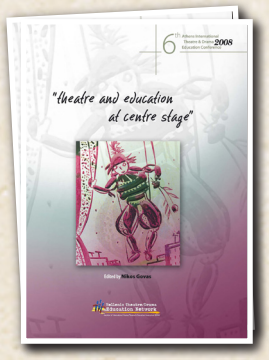

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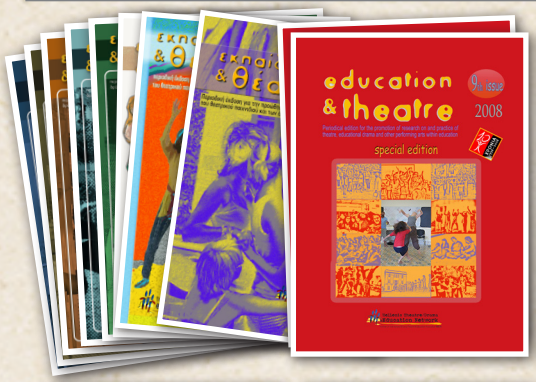

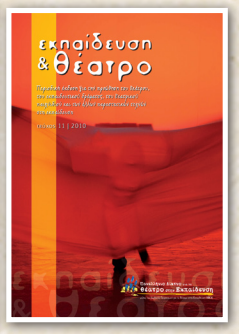

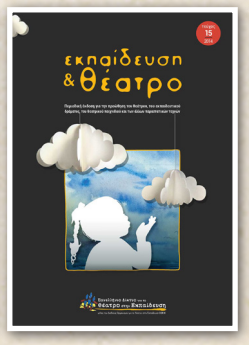

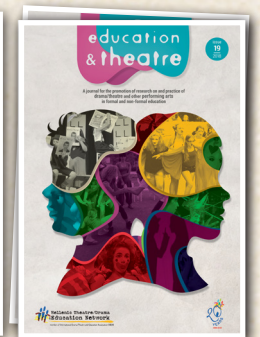

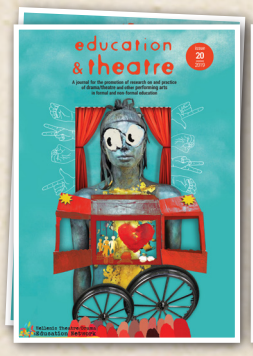

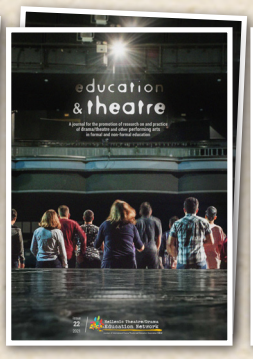

عدد
26
2025

التربية و المسرح

مجلة تشجع
البحث عن وممارسة
الدراما/ المسرح وغيرها من
الفنون الادائية في
التربية الرسمية
وغير الرسمية

إدراج

فلسطين:
الفنون الادائية
كمقاومة
والقدرة على التحمل
والصمود

هيلينك للمسرح/ الدراما
و الشبكة التربوية