

**“A NEW AGE FOR THE LIVING DEAD”: PALESTINIAN
NATION-BUILDING THROUGH THEATER**
**“Una nueva era para los muertos vivientes”: La construcción de una
nación Palestina a través del teatro**

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to trace the emergence and development of Palestinian theater in the shadow of the Israeli-Arab conflict and against the background of the *Nakba* and Palestinian nation-building. It examines the first dramatic and theatrical attempts made during the first half of the twentieth century, the uprooting and the decline of these efforts after the 1948 War, the repression of Palestinian cultural activities during the 1950s, and the new start and subsequent growth of professional Palestinian theater after 1967, especially with regard to the al-Ḥakawāfī troupe. The founder of this troupe was François Abū Sālīm (Abu Salem) (1951-2011), the son of a Hungarian-born French poet and a French painter and sculptor, who integrated himself into Palestinian identity and culture. The professionalization of Palestinian theater in general has been taking a line parallel to the escalation of resistance and has lived up to numerous historical challenges, defying the hardships imposed on the Palestinian people by Israeli government censorship, geographical isolation, and lack of education.

Resumen: El artículo es un intento de rastrear el surgimiento y desarrollo del teatro palestino, a la sombra del conflicto árabe-israelí y en el contexto de la *Nakba* y la construcción de la nación palestina. La discusión se refiere a los primeros intentos dramáticos y teatrales durante la primera mitad del siglo XX, el desarraigo y la decadencia después de la guerra de 1948, la represión de las actividades culturales palestinas durante la década de 1950, y el nuevo comienzo y crecimiento del teatro profesional después de la guerra. 1967, especialmente la compañía al-Ḥakawāfī. El fundador de esta compañía de teatro es François Abū Sālīm (Abu Salem) (1951-2011), hijo de un poeta francés nacido en Hungría y de un pintor y escultor francés que se integró a la identidad y cultura palestina. La profesionalización del teatro palestino en general ha ido tomando una línea paralela a la escalada de resistencia y ha estado a la altura de los desafíos históricos, desafiando las penurias impuestas por la censura, el aislamiento geográfico y la falta de educación.

Key words: Palestinian theater. François Abū Sālīm. Al-Ḥakawāfī. Nakba. Nation-building.

Palabras clave: Teatro palestino. François Abū Sālim. Al-Ḥakawātī. Nakba. Construcción de la nación.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Until the 1980s, most scholars emphasized that Arabs did not know theater before the nineteenth century. Only during the last three decades have some studies suggested that there already existed some sort of a secular and live theater in the premodern Arab world. All scholars, however, agree that the modern Arab theater in its first stages was inspired by the Western theatrical tradition. At the same time, one cannot deny the role played by the medieval Arabic heritage in shaping the art of Arab theater. The controversy now essentially revolves around the extent to which the medieval heritage shaped modern Arab theater and to extent to which foreign traditions shaped modern Arab theater, as well as the nature of the interplay between these two influences¹. Born only in the twentieth century, with sufficient evidence for its various stages of development, Palestinian theater provides us with a rare glimpse into the process of theatrical formation, and a valuable lens through which to understand this controversy. The emergence of Palestinian theater is an evident case of cultural interference; furthermore, this theater would not have appeared in its present form without that peculiar wedding of Western and traditional influences. Arab theater, including the Palestinian theater, drew inspiration from Western theater mainly due to the vacuum that had existed in this domain of Arab culture. Interference normally occurs when a target culture lacks a sufficient repertoire to absorb newly needed functions and tends to be stronger when a body of culture is either in a state of emergence, or vacuum, or at a turning point in its history. Thus, whenever a literature is in need of innovation and is unable to use its own repertoire to that end, it will tend to make use of whatever repertoire is within reach. Though availability may arise as a result of physical contacts, it is nevertheless ultimately determined by how open the target culture is to considering a potential source as “available”².

Palestine, on the margins of the Egyptian cultural center, has never been a center for any significant modern cultural movement in the Arab world during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The cultural activities in Palestine prior to the First World War lacked any political strand in the form of Palestinian consciousness, which has since become an integral element of Palestinian culture in general³. In this sense, Palestinian culture is not exceptional: for example, no par-

1. Snir. *Palestinian Theatre*, pp. 1-14.

2. Sebeok (ed.). *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, vol. I, p. 462. *Semiotics*, vol. 1, p. 462. See also Even-Zohar. “Laws of Cultural Interference”.

3. Peled. “Annals of Doom”, p. 141.

ticular Arabic literature written before the First World War can be identified as national in the modern political sense. Up to that point, Palestinian literature bore the marks of a cultural consciousness of a very special nature but did not reflect the subsequent political consciousness. Nevertheless, Palestinian literary historians and cultural critics have recently taken pains to show that Palestine in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was the center of a distinctive cultural revival. The information they provide is significant but cannot be isolated from the larger context of the eager search for roots, or “the invention of tradition”⁴. This phenomenon has been widespread since First World War throughout all of the nation-states in the Arab world, and has been very common in recent years among the Palestinians as a part of their efforts to strengthen their national identity and promote their hopes of establishing an independent state. “The process of vernacular mobilization”, states British historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1939-2016), “must first discover an ethnic past that is serviceable for present needs and then create a unified and distinctive consciousness and sense of ethnic community and of politicized common culture”⁵. In the Palestinian case, this means accentuating a separate cultural personality and distinguishing it from the wider, all-encompassing Arab identity. In the West Bank, for example, the cultural revival of the early 1970s included the foundation of the quarterly *Majallat al-Turāth wa-l-Mujtama‘* (*Journal of Heritage and Society*) by Jam‘iyyat In‘āsh al-Usra (The Association for the Revival of the Family) in al-Bireh⁶. The publication of this journal since 1973, as a major Palestinian intellectual has stated, was a concrete expression of the “pressing need to recognize and preserve the Palestinian national identity in the face of the cultural and national annihilation as attempted by the Zionist Israel”⁷. In the framework of the Palestinian search for identity, local newspapers have started special folklore sections with invited contributions from readers. The folklore here is less a subject of historical and cultural study and more a vital and dynamic force in society and a symbol of the determination of the Palestinian people to gain their right to self-determination as a nation with a distinctive culture and peculiar history.

Although Palestine had been fertile ground for cultural activities since the 1920s, especially in the fields of poetry and journalism, the development of theater was very slow, particularly in view of the circumstances of the growth and

4. Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.). *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 1-14.

5. Smith. *National Identity*, pp. 132-133.

6. On the contribution of the quarterly, first published in April 1974, see al-Sawāḥirī. “Al-Bidāyāt al-ūlā li-l-masraḥ al-muqāwim fī l-arḍ al-muḥtalla”, p. 132.

7. Ashrawī. *Contemporary*, p. 9.

emergence of modern Arabic theater and dramatic literature. Pioneering Arab ventures into modern drama occurred in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, although the very first attempt was Syrian: after visiting Europe, the Syrian Christian merchant Mārūn al-Naqqāsh (1817-1855), impressed particularly by Italian opera, wrote and produced at his own house in Beirut a play entitled *Riwāyat al-Bakhīl* (*The Story of the Miser*) in 1848, which drew heavily on *L'Avare* by the French playwright Molière (1622-1673), though it was not a direct translation and involved a great deal of singing. After Mārūn al-Naqqāsh's death, his nephew Salīm al-Naqqāsh (1850-1884) moved the theatrical troupe to Alexandria. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the influx of Syrian Christian men of letters into Egypt, where they pioneered free journalism and various cultural activities, was a contributory factor to the lead taken by that country in the Arab renaissance. This was due in part to the stimulation provided by Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition at the turn of the century and in part to the drive for modernization embarked upon by the dynasty of Muḥammad 'Alī (1769-1849). In the nineteenth century, Egypt became the center of the theatrical movement in the Arab world and produced the first notable playwrights in the modern Arab theater, such as the Egyptian Jew Ya'qūb Ṣannū' (Jacob Sanua) (1839-1912) and the Syrian Abū Khalīl Aḥmad al-Qabbānī (1836-1902), who was the first Muslim to rise to prominence in this field. Both of these men produced their plays in Egypt⁸.

The following is an attempt to trace the development of Palestinian theater in the shadow of the Israeli-Arab conflict, on the margins of the Egyptian cultural center, and against the background of Western cultural influence.

2. FIRST ATTEMPTS

Palestine was removed from the main cultural activities of the Arab world throughout the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Literary historians and cultural critics have attributed this vacuum to such political and socio-economic reasons as the severe economic conditions in Palestine, the widespread illiteracy, the absence of educational institutions, and the general cultural backwardness⁹. No Palestinian literature, or any other particular local Arabic literature, bearing distinctive marks of national identity could be found in the nineteenth century. Some poets were writing poems praising the beauty of places such as Nazareth and Haifa, but without any reference to the local political climate. Only after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the promulgation of the Ottoman Constitution of that year did Palestinian national consciousness begin to

8. Snir. *Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 218-222.

9. Al-Sawāfirī. *Al-Adab*, pp. 17-31.

emerge, but Palestinian literature was still trailing behind the pioneering literatures of Egypt and Lebanon. The general cultural atmosphere in Palestine till the 1920s was characterised, as indicated by the literary historian Kāmil al-Sawāfirī (1917-1992), by “all-encompassing darkness of ignorance, a plain scientific backwardness and widespread illiteracy among its children”¹⁰. After the First World War, the cultural atmosphere began to change: Palestine started witnessing a cultural revival, encouraged both by a political revival particularly involving protest against Zionist activities and an economic revival that was taking place due to the newly established British Mandate over Palestine. This cultural revival was encouraged as well by the process of urbanism that the major cities of Palestine underwent at the time. For example, Haifa during the Mandate period attracted thousands of Palestinian rural migrants, who constituted a significant portion of its Arab population and contributed to its economic development, participated in political and cultural activities, and formed a connecting link between the city and their villages of origin¹¹. This atmosphere of revival was stimulated by the opening of new schools and educational institutions, public libraries, cultural clubs and societies, publishing houses, newspapers and periodicals, and literary organs and by the growth of intellectual activity. Between 1919 and 1921, no fewer than fifteen new Palestinian newspapers appeared¹². This growth, concentrated especially in the areas of Jerusalem and Haifa, encouraged the development of literary salons by established families, where young poets, writers, and dramatists were invited to read their works.

In addition, a revival occurred in the area of folk and religious culture that combined such theatrical elements as the *ḥakawātī* (“the storyteller”)¹³, who used to tell tales from folk literature, mainly from *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (*A Thousand and One Nights*); *shā’ir al-rabāba* (“the singer of the *rebab*”, the *rebab* being a musical instrument with one to three strings); and the itinerant storyteller with a “Box of Wonders” or a “Magic Box” (*ṣundūq al-dunyā* or *ṣundūq al-’ajab*). Then there were the religious festivals, such as the traditional birthday (*mawlid*) of the Prophet or the birthdays of saints (*mawālid*), the night-time shows during the fast of Ramadan, and the theatrical elements that could be found in other places in the

10. *Idem*, Al-Sawāfirī. *Al-Adab*, p. 31.

11. Ben Ze’ev. “I Came Naïve from the Village”, pp. 264-281.

12. Sulaymān. *Al-Ṣiḥāfa*, p. 15.

13. On the *ḥakawātī*, the *shā’ir*, and storytellers in the Islamic world, see Lane. *Manners and Customs*, pp. 397-431. See also the first section of chapter eight in Ibn al-Nadīm’s *al-Fihrist* entitled “Fī akhbār al-musāmīrīn wa-l-mukharriḥīn wa-asmā’ al-kutub fī al-asmār wa-l-khurāfāt” (“With accounts of those who converse in the evening and the tellers of fables with the names of the books which [they composed] about evening stories and fables”). Ibn al-Nadīm. *The Fihrist*, vol. II, pp. 712-724, and *al-Fihrist*, pp. 605-613.

Islamic world¹⁴ in popular peasant cultures, such as the *dabka* dances¹⁵, in which a group of dancers with linked arms stamp out the rhythm of the music and sing; and in the *zajal*, that is, the popular Arabic poetry in strophic form, all of which were performed on special occasions such as weddings and feasts and even at funerals. However, these folk and popular activities never developed into theater in the Western sense and only with the rise of a professional Palestinian theater during the 1970s did they become associated with it.

An important forerunner of the first attempts at theatrical activity in Palestine were the performances of the *khayāl al-zill* (“shadow plays”) — a type of puppet theater in which flat articulated figures are manipulated between a strong light and a translucent screen, so that the audience sees only their shadows. Most of the performances of this type of theater were given during the month of Ramadan, when local troupes were competing with performers from the neighboring Arabic-speaking countries. The Arabs of the Old City of Jerusalem in particular, both young and old, were known to be especially fond of *Karagöz*¹⁶. In the month of Ramadan in 1944, for instance, these shadow plays in Jerusalem were directed by a Syrian performer. They were presented twice nightly, the first show being intended for children and the second for adults with a background at times historical and at others satirical¹⁷.

One of the major catalysts of the Palestinian cultural revival, including the theater, was the foundation of Maḥaṭṭat al-Quds or Idhā‘at Filastīn (Jerusalem Station or Palestine Broadcasting Station), which began broadcasting on 29 March 1936. The Arabic section of this station, headed by the poet Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān (1905-1941), encouraged men of letters, poets, playwrights, and actors to broadcast their works¹⁸. The play *Shamshūn wa-Dalīla* (*Samson and Delilah*) by Naṣrī al-Jawzī (1908-1996) was the first to be broadcast from the station. This was also the period in which the geographical position of Palestine on the margins of the culturally prestigious Egyptian center helped to encourage the development of local theatrical activities along with many other cultural activities. Egyptian literature, poetry and prose, newspapers and periodicals, visits of dra-

14. And. *A History*, pp. 53-61.

15. These dances still figure prominently in various Palestinian cultural activities. On the popular dances, especially the *dabka*, see al-Barghūthī. *Al-Aghānī l-sha‘biyya*, pp. 72-82.

16. Karagöz, a word apparently derived from Qarāqūsh, Saladin’s official, was originally the chief character of the Turkish shadow play and his figure gave the title to these plays. The Turkish *Karagöz* was copied in other Arabic-speaking countries and was introduced into their own shadow theatres, just as non-Arab countries were similarly influenced by Karagöz while under Turkish domination. Landau. *Studies*, pp. 24-25.

17. Landau. *Studies*, p. 38.

18. Al-Sawāfirī. *Al-Adab*, pp. 66-72.

matic and dancing troupes, and the pioneering Egyptian cinema were important catalysts for the local revivification of Palestinian culture. For the Palestinian intelligentsia, as for any other intelligentsia in other Arab countries, Egypt was the recognized cultural center of the Arab world. Palestinian intellectuals were not only reading Egyptian newspapers and periodicals but also contributing to them. Palestinian writers were publishing their works with Egyptian publishing houses such as the Palestinian writer Ishāq Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī (1904-1990), who published his famous and controversial novel *Mudhkkirāt Dajāja* (*Memoirs of a Hen*) (1943) in a publishing house in Cairo and asked the leading Egyptian writer Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889-1973) to write the introduction. Some of the first Palestinian dramatists used to publish their works in Egyptian magazines like *al-Hilāl* and *al-Muqataṭaf*, before publishing them in their local arena. The influence of Egyptian culture upon the growing Palestinian culture in those years was intense: local audiences flocked to watch the performances of the Egyptian troupes that visited Palestine¹⁹ and that later became the nucleus for Palestinian audiences who “demanded” local and original performances. Consequently, groups of amateurs, especially students, began producing and performing plays and writing dramatic texts. The Palestinian writer and dramatist Imīl Ḥabībī (1921-1996) notes that when he was a student he acted the role of the thief in a play based on *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*²⁰. Yet almost all the dramatic activities at the time were limited to amateurs and took place within clubs and schools without being developed into professional productions. The dramatic texts were based mainly on translations and adaptations of famous Western plays in addition to texts based upon Arabic literary works from the non-canonized folk literature. Very few original texts were used, and the few that did see the light of day were generally didactic plays staged for social and religious purposes. Frequent insertion of well-known verses from ancient Arabic poetry into these plays indicates their didactic nature. Due to social and religious considerations, only a few females participated in these theatrical activities and female characters were generally converted into male ones.

19. Among the Egyptian troupes that visited Palestinian was that of the renowned actor and director Georges Abyaḍ (1880-1959), who introduced European classical dramas before and after the First World War. Landau. *Studies*, p. 78.

20. That dramatic adaptation of the novel (Hugo. *Notre-Dam de Paris*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) was presumably based on one of the films that were produced in the beginning of the century. The novel has been translated into Arabic as *Aḥḍab Notre Dame* (Hugo. *Aḥḍab Notre Dame*). In his short story “Wa-akhīran nawwara al-lawz” (Finally, the Almond Blossomed), written after 1967 War (Ḥabībī. *Sudāsiyyat al-ayyām al-sitta*, pp. 13-22), Ḥabībī returns to the character of Pierre Gringoire from Hugo’s novel.

With the growth and development of the urban middle classes, some serious attempts were made to initiate professional theatrical activities. One of the first professional troupes was Firqat al-Jawzī (The al-Jawzī Troupe) established by the aforementioned Naṣrī al-Jawzī in the mid-1930s. Naṣrī came from a reputable Gaza and Jerusalem family known for its cultural and theatrical activities. His troupe was the first to broadcast dramatic texts from the radio station, which both encouraged and directly and indirectly accelerated theatrical activities. Imīl Ḥabībī, who was working at the beginning of the 1940s in the Arabic section of the Palestine Broadcasting Station, notes that actors recited the dramatic texts in live broadcasts. Naṣrī, who continued his intense theatrical activities till 1947, wrote several original plays, including *al-Shumū' al-Muḥtariqa* (*The Burning Candles*), a four-act socio-moral drama about the suffering of children caused by their father's unhealthy lust²¹. In his ceaseless quest for new ways to develop the emerging local theater, he was also the first Palestinian dramatist who wrote for children. Among his contributions in this field was the play *Dhakā' al-Qāḍī* (*The Wisdom of the Judge*) describing a famous trial before the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (763-809 AD). In one of his essays published prior to 1948, entitled "How Can We Encourage the Palestinian Theater", he mentioned more than thirty troupes active in Jerusalem alone and bearing symbolic names like al-Nahḍa (The Awakening), al-Taḡaddum (The Progression), and Iḥyā' al-Funūn (The Revival of Arts)²².

Naṣrī's brother Jamīl al-Jawzī (1915-2005) also contributed to the growing Palestinian theatrical movement; in 1937, he established a theatrical troupe within the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Jerusalem, making use of translated texts as well as some of original material. J. M. Landau (1924-2020), who watched one of the plays staged at the YMCA in 1946, testified to the amateurish nature of the production; he also mentioned the attitude of the spectators who could "not distinguish between sitting in a cafe or in a theater"²³. The brothers al-Jawzī resolutely pursued their interest in the theater, but since 1948 they have resided in Jordan and concentrated not on practical theatrical activity but mainly on the historical aspects of Arabic and especially Palestinian theater²⁴.

Another figure of the pre-1948 Palestinian theatrical movement was Jamīl al-Baḥrī (1895-1930), whose interest in theater accompanied his journalistic activi-

21. See *Bama* 50 (January 1947), p. 110.

22. *Al-Hadaf*, 21 April 1946, p. 11. Cf. Landau. *Studies*, p. 103.

23. *Bama* 50 (January 1947), pp. 107-109.

24. Naṣrī al-Jawzī wrote a book on the history of Palestinian theatre 1918-1948 (al-Jawzī. *Ta'rīkh al-masrah al-filasṭīnī 1918-1948*) and Jamīl al-Jawzī was active in the press; see, for example, his essay in the Jordanian newspaper *al-Dustūr*, 29 January 1986.

ties; he also owned the journal *al-Zahra*, produced in Haifa, in which he used to publish his dramatic works. Among these was *Qātil Akhīhi* (*His Brother's Murderer*), a play in three acts, staged in several theaters in Palestine and Syria. In his translated plays, he used to omit the female roles for lack of actresses as well as to insert verses from Arabic poetry according to his didactic and educational inclinations²⁵.

To sum up, Palestinian theatrical and dramatic activities prior to 1948, like Palestinian literature in general, were very limited. The first attempts were marked by European influence, whether in the translation of texts or in their adaptation. As many of the plays were intended to be staged in schools or by groups of students, their didactic nature was dominant. Moreover, Palestinian theater before 1948 was not generally involved in the national struggle. Prose in general, let alone the theater, was barely concerned with politics and focused mainly on educating and entertaining Palestinian audiences. Direct involvement in the struggle was at that time typical only of poetry, which remained the dominant genre in Arab culture till the mid-twentieth century: poetry was still considered at the time as “the public register of the Arab people” (*al-shi‘r dīwān al-‘Arab*)²⁶. Palestinian poetry served as a weapon in the political struggle and following the 1917 Balfour Declaration was overwhelmingly concerned with the anti-Zionist and anti-British campaign. It expressed the innermost desires and fears of the Palestinian community and its feelings toward external threats and the prospects of the foundation of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Although, like many other Arab poets, Palestinian poets before 1948 also wrote dramatic texts, especially verse drama, only a few of these plays were staged successfully. Among those writing for the theater before 1948 were Burhān al-Dīn al-‘Abbūshī (1911-1995), Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Ḥajj ‘Īsā al-Ṣafādī (1897-1974), and Mu‘yyad Ibrāhīm al-‘Īrānī (1913-1987). The constraints of the dramatic genre in that period, however, did not allow for its development as a weapon in the political struggle²⁷.

3. UPROOTING

Following the 1948 War, the greater part of the Palestinian urban intelligentsia, the traditional and social leadership, and most property owners abandoned the territories of the State of Israel. Those who remained were generally from

25. See Landau. *Studies*, p. 103.

26. This saying is found in many different shapes in various works that deal with ancient Arabic poetry, e.g., Ibn Qutayba. *‘Uyūn al-Akhbār*, vol. 2, p. 185. For an examination of this saying with regard to the change in the perception of poetry and its function while Arabic-Islamic society was emerging, see Ouyang. *Literary Criticism*, pp. 56-60.

27. See Snir, *Palestinian Theatre*, pp. 30-44.

the poorer and the uneducated village populations. Most of the cultural activities, including the newly developing theater, were uprooted²⁸. Many of the exponents of the young Palestinian theater left the country, giving an impetus to the development of the newly emerging theater in Jordan²⁹. Cultural activities among the Palestinians in Israel as well as in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank and the Gaza Strip were very limited during that period. The immense shock in the wake of defeat, the fact that the Palestinian majority in Palestine had become a minority in Israel, and the political limitations and the difficult economic and social circumstances under which the Palestinians were living, whether in Israel or in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, prevented Palestinian writers, poets, and dramatists from working freely. Since theatrical activities require more than the mere writing and subsequent publishing of texts, the political and socio-economic circumstances had a greater effect on the theater than it did on other cultural fields, and thus ruled out any real progress in the first years following the war. All that remained from the promising Palestinian theater of the 1940s were a very few amateur troupes, mainly within clubs and schools.

Nevertheless, Palestinian culture, which had emerged and started crystallizing before 1948, did not totally disappear, though it crumbled into two segments — outside Israel and within it. Those Palestinians who were uprooted from their homes following the war and had become refugees suffered the greater shock and were preoccupied with their daily struggle for existence in the refugee camps, whether in the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip. Despite the educational system established by the United Nations Relief and Working Agency (UNRWA)³⁰, significant cultural activities, certainly in the field of theater, were almost totally absent. For various political and economic reasons, the fate of the permanent citizens of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip till the 1960s was quite similar. Hashemite rule over the West Bank and Egyptian rule over the Gaza Strip saw the overt and direct suppression of the publication of any worthwhile literature, especially that of political or social significance. Direct censorship and control over educational and social institutions, clubs, and all cultural activities, along with relentless political persecution, succeeded in maintaining what one Palestinian critic described as “a standard of ignorance and superficiality of alarming dimensions”³¹. Only the regimes’ mouthpieces or writers of trashy third-rate literature succeeded in getting their works published, while underground movements remained scarce and their publications did not reach a significant audience.

28. Snir “A Wound”, pp. 247-248.

29. Landau. *Studies*, pp. 97, 103.

30. Al-Sawāfirī. *Al-Adab*, pp. 79-80.

31. Ashrawī. *Contemporary*, p. 3.

Within Israel, the 1950s did witness certain cultural activities, especially due to the efforts made by the Israeli Establishment to encourage ‘positive’ cultural activities. The vacuum created by the disappearance of the urban cultural elite was partially filled by Jewish writers and poets who had immigrated to Israel from Iraq³². Some Iraqi Jews with acting experience produced Arabic plays, the first of which, staged in October 1956, was the verse drama *Majnūn Laylā* (*The Madman of Laylā*) by the Egyptian poet Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932). The Histadrūt — The General Workers’ Union — played a major role in the Arab sector during these years, organizing and launching ‘positive’ local Arab cultural and literary activities. Needless to say, these activities did not include any criticism of government policy and avoided dealing with controversial problems. The ‘positive’ cultural and literary activities were initiated and cultivated by means of prizes and literary competitions, as well as through The Arab Book Fund acting under the aegis of the state. This fund, for example, published the book *Fī Mahrajān al-Adab* (*In the Festival of Literature*)³³ containing Arabic-language literary and dramatic works, which had earned prizes in the 1958 Histadrūt competition. The book, whose introduction illustrates the effort to produce ‘positive’ literatura³⁴, includes two short plays, both using the Palestinian dialect in the dialogues. The first, entitled *Taṭwwur al-Qarya al-‘Arabiyya fī Isrā’īl Khilāla ‘Ashr Sinīn* (*The Development of the Arab Village in Israel in Ten Years*)³⁵, was written by a Palestinian playwright from Nazareth who preferred not to reveal her name. This play, as reflected by its title, is a good example of the aforementioned ‘positive’ literature. It is the story of a couple, Abū ‘Alī and Umm ‘Alī, who had been living before 1948 in one of the villages in Palestine. They had left their village following the ‘war of liberation’, as the 1948 War is described in the play. After ten years, they returned to Israel to visit their previous birthplace on a symbolic day, the 15th of May 1958 (on 14 May 1948, the State of Israel was declared). The two Palestinians, amazed by all the development that had occurred during their absence in their original village, promise at the end of the play to inform their relatives outside Israel about the miracles and the wonderful projects in the Israeli Arab villages. The play, portraying the development brought to the ‘primitive’ Arab villages by the Israeli authorities, seems to be pure propaganda without any redeeming literary value and illustrates the nature of the cultural activities sponsored by the Establishment. The second play included in the book is *Fatāt al-Yawm*

32. On the cultural activities of Iraqi Jews in Israel, see Snir. “‘We Were’”, pp. 153-173.

33. Agassi (Aghāsī) (ed.). *Fī mahrajān al-adab*.

34. *Idem*, pp. 1-3.

35. *Idem*, pp. 119-129.

(*Today's Young Women*)³⁶, written by Ḥabīb Ibrāhīm Karkabī (1929-2015) from Shfaram. The play, whose events take place in Nazareth in April 1958, deals with the improvement in the status of women in Arab society in Israel since 1948, and its evident message was to serve the aims of the Establishment's propaganda exactly like the first play did.

Palestinian scholars have generally overlooked the 'positive' cultural activities sponsored by the Israeli Establishment — the fourth volume of *Encyclopaedia Palaestina*, dedicated to studies about various aspects of Palestinian society, including theater, generally ignores the period of 1948-1967, dealing only with the cultural activities before 1948 and after 1967³⁷. Not all of the cultural activities in Israel during this period, however, were sponsored and directed by the Establishment; some of them involved leftist writers of the opposition. These writers were active within the framework of the Communist Party, whose intellectuals had not abandoned Israel following the 1948 War, unlike most of the Palestinian elite. These leftist writers faced many difficulties and obstacles, and the Establishment employed various means to disrupt their cultural and literary activities. Furthermore, the Establishment's implicit ban on Communist writers, Jewish or Arab, inspired those writers close to the Establishment to refuse to collaborate with them. Such a polarity was naturally reflected in the literature and readership of both trends, with each having its own writers and audience. The journals of the two camps were fiercely competitive, but the Communist journals stood out, particularly *al-Ittihād (The Union)*, established in 1944, and *al-Jadīd (The New)*, established in 1953, for their quality and wide circulation³⁸. The lack of freedom and the censorship imposed on leftist writers did not prevent their works from gaining a great deal of popularity among the Palestinian masses within Israel and later, particularly from the mid-1960s, even among those outside it. The Communist literary writing in Arabic generally conveyed a worldview whose universality rejected the narrow confines of nationalism and preached equality of rights for all peoples and justice for all human societies. Writers in the 1950s, such as the aforementioned Imīl Ḥabībī, frequently emphasized the obligation of Arabic literature in Israel to "carry the banner of Jewish-Arab brotherhood". They were stressing Jewish-Arab cooperation not only in times past but

36. *Idem*, pp. 130-142.

37. Sayegh (ed.). *Encyclopaedia*.

38. Among the other journals published by the Israeli Communist Party at the time, we can mention *al-Darb (The Road)* (established in 1951) and *al-Ghad (The Tomorrow)* (established in 1954). On these journals and others, see Moreh. *Bibliography*, pp. 91-110.

also for the present and future, as well as praising the contribution of Arab-Jewish writers in this field to this desideratum³⁹.

The first Palestinian printed play in Arabic to be published in Israel after 1948 was *Zalām wa-Nūr (Darkness and Light)* (1954), which was written by Mīshīl Ḥaddād (1919-1999) and Jamāl Qa‘wār (1930-2013). The play, betraying its allegiance to the didactic trend, describes the struggle of a Palestinian student in a secondary school in Israel wanting to study at the university despite his father’s blindness and poverty. The didactic aim of the play, as indicated in the introduction⁴⁰, directs the plot toward culminating in the student’s success despite all the difficulties that plagued him. Another pioneering play published in Israel in the 1950s was the two-act *Sirr Sharazād (The Secret of Sharazād)* (1958) by Najwā Qa‘wār Farah (1923-2015), which was based on the character of Shahrazad from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The playwright, distinguished by her penetrating studies of human emotions, was one of the first female Palestinian writers in Israel. She also published several volumes of short stories and a collection of poetry in prose, in addition to another play entitled *Malik al-Majd (The King of Glory)* (1962), which was inspired by the life of Jesus.

Only during the 1960s did the actual Arabic theatrical activities in Israel, which were in general limited to troupes of amateurs, start to develop rapidly, first in the field of playwriting and later on in the field of staging. One of the prominent dramatists was Salīm Khūrī (1934-1991), who published several plays⁴¹. His first play, *Āmina* (1960), whose title indicated the name of the protagonist, was based on historical events and preaches, through its eponymous heroine, love and brotherhood among peoples. His second play was *Warīth al-Jazzār (The Heir of the Butcher)* (1960), and one of his most interesting recent plays, *Ba‘d al-Aswār (After the Walls)* (1983), clearly reveals the influence of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Khūrī was also prominent in being one of the forerunners in establishing Palestinian children’s theater, which has in recent decades been developed extensively⁴². Plays for children have been presented since the 1980s by professional troupes in various frameworks⁴³. In addition, the Arabic section of Israeli television has played a role in encouraging the provision of Arabic-language theatrical activities for children. One of the successes of this sec-

39. Snir “‘We Were”, p. 168.

40. Ḥaddād and Qa‘wār. *Zalām wa-nūr*, pp. 5-6.

41. Moreh. *Bibliography*, pp. 47-50.

42. Sayegh. *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 239-251.

43. See, for example, the report of the Palestinian dramatist ‘Affī Shalyūt (b. 1962) about the participation of Arab troupes in the Third Haifa Festival for Children’s Theatre held in April 1993 (*Mawāqif*, March-April 1993, pp. 113-119).

tion was the series *Sāmī wa-Sūsū* (*Sāmī and Sūsū*), in which the leading roles were played by George Ibrāhīm (b. 1945) and Labība Darīnī.

The theatrical activities in the Arab sector in Israel were concentrated in Haifa and Nazareth, both dominant centers of the Palestinian intelligentsia and Palestinian culture. The establishment of Beit Hageffen Arab-Jewish center in Haifa and the Frank Sinatra center in Nazareth in the early 1960s indicated some change in the attitude of the Establishment toward the culture of the Palestinian minority. Rather than encouraging ‘positive’ culture, a genuine attempt was made to stir up local cultural activities. With regard to theater, the Jewish actor Arieħ Elias (1921-2015) was sent to Nazareth, where he established a local troupe with the assistance of Palestinian theater people. This troupe staged several plays for al-Masraħ al-Ĥadīth (The Modern Theater) (established in 1965), prominent among which was the famous aforementioned verse drama *Majnūn Laylā* (*The Madman of Laylā*) by Aħmad Shawqī.

Theatrical activities among the Palestinians outside Israel were very limited in both playwriting and staging. Nevertheless, some theatrical activities were held in the West Bank, especially in the framework of the summer festivals in Ramallah and al-Bīra. The director Ṭarīq Mašārwa established a local troupe that staged some plays. Several important dramatic texts were written in the 1960s by Palestinian playwrights outside Israel, prominent among whom was Ghassān Kanafānī (1936-1972). Among the plays he wrote before 1967 was *al-Bāb* (*The Door*) (1964), which tells the story of a young man torn between his ideas and the possibilities of acting upon them. The foundation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 prompted cultural activities aiming at strengthening Palestinian consciousness, including the foundation in Damascus of Jam‘iyyat al-Masraħ al-Filasṭīnī (The Association of Palestinian Theater), which had three main objectives: stimulating national awareness; presenting experiences of the revolution on the stage; and reviving the Palestinian heritage.

4. PROFESSIONALIZATION

The period after the 1967 War marks paradoxically, despite the defeat of the Arabs, not only the political and social reconciliation of the two segments of Palestinians—those in Israel and those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—but also the dawn of the era of optimism, rebellion, and cultural revival. Palestinian theater developed in this period extensively, and drama in the Western sense, written and staged by professional theater people, came into being. This is also the period marking the end of the involvement of the Israeli Establishment in the local Arab cultural arena. The reunification of the Palestinians and the removal of the borders between Israel and the Occupied Territories strengthened the Palestinian

identity of the Israeli Palestinians, making the writing of ‘positive’ literature almost impossible. The Palestinian intelligentsia within Israel was beginning to search for a means of consolidating their cultural relations with their brothers in the Occupied Territories. This phenomenon was also accompanied by a change of view among the Arab general public with regard to Palestinian literature in Israel. Following the initial shocked response of the Arab writers to the heavy defeat of 1967, they gradually became aware of the cultural resistance activities being exercised by the Israeli Palestinian writers, especially the poets. From being considered in the 1950s almost as traitors by the Arab world because of their readiness to accept Israeli citizenship, after the 1967 War they had become heroes. The new political and cultural circumstances brought a worldwide reputation and much fame to Palestinian literature written in Israel; it became the central topic of discussion in literary circles and has been widely studied in various Arab countries. Local Palestinian poetry began to be broadcast on various Arab radio stations, translated into European and Asian languages, and incorporated into poetry anthologies. Later, novels, short stories, and plays became popular to such an extent that the poet Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008) felt obliged in 1969 to voice his dissatisfaction with the injustice critics in the Arab world had done to Palestinian literature by avoiding any objective criticism of it⁴⁴. These critics, in their readiness to accept unconditionally anything that was Palestinian as a positive contribution to the spirit of the nation, prompted a leading Palestinian critic to declare in 1976 that “Palestinian literature is not a spoiled child or mentally deficient person for whom all sorts of excuses and rationalization are to be made. It is responsible enough to demand honesty and responsibility from its readers and critics”⁴⁵.

In contrast to its effect on poetry, the 1967 War did not immediately open any new horizons for Palestinian theater in Israel. The nature of this art and the lack of financial resources necessary for staging plays, an insufficient familiarity with the dramatic genre, and lack of directors and professional actors — particularly female — were among the major reasons for the stalling of its development. Plays staged in the first years after the war were mainly by amateur troupes functioning without funding and mostly in the centers of the Israeli Palestinian intelligentsia in Nazareth and Haifa. Although the repertoire of these troupes was based on those of other Arab theaters, in addition to adaptations of Western plays, more and more original dramatic texts were being staged. Outstanding among them was a verse drama entitled *Qaraqāsh* (1970) by Samīḥ al-Qāsim (1939-2014), one of the prominent contemporary Palestinian poets. This play is considered to be one

44. See his essay “Anqīdhūnā min hādhā al-ḥubb al-qāṣī” (Save us from this cruel love), pp. 2-4.

45. Ashrawī. *Contemporary*, p. 58.

of the first printed plays about which Palestinian literature can boast⁴⁶. Among the prominent theater devotees in those years, we can mention Anṭwān Ṣāliḥ (1939-1997) and Victor Qamar (1942-2009), who had also been active in the Arabic section of Israeli television since its inception.

After the 1967 War, the involvement of the Israeli Establishment in the local Palestinian cultural arena decreased following the failure of a similar involvement during the 1948-1967 period. Nevertheless, the relevant sections of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Histadrūt continued to employ Arabic-speaking Jews in order to start new cultural activities. In 1967, the Ministry of Education and Culture inaugurated in Haifa al-Nāhiḍ (The Rising) Theater, which started as an amateur troupe and later became a professional theater. Its productions, which continued till 1977, concentrated on the 1948 events, particularly the refugee problem, the settlement of Jews in Palestinian lands, and minority rights in Israel, in addition to various aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Al-Nāhiḍ Theater, which also contributed to the development of the local Arabic children's theatrical movement, faced many difficulties just like other Palestinian dramatic troupes at the time, and in particular lacked a sufficient budget to support its activities. Budgetary restrictions were also behind the closure of al-Masraḥ al-Ḥadīth in Nazareth in the mid-1970s. One of the successful theatrical troupes in Israel at that time was Masraḥ al-Ghirbāl. Established in Shfaram in 1977, it organized the First Arabic Theater Festival in Israel in September 1982. Following the festival, Rābiṭat al-Masraḥ al-‘Arabī (The Arabic Theater League) was established on 8 January 1983 in al-Makr⁴⁷.

The revival of Palestinian culture was not limited to the Palestinians in Israel, as it also included the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, therefore constituting another aspect of the reunification of the two segments of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, although 1967 was the actual year in which Israeli Palestinians met their fellow Palestinians who until then had been under Hashemite Jordanian or Egyptian rule, the process of discovery and recognition remained rather slow and tentative until the 1970s. The completion of this process coincided with the 1973 War, which formed a turning point in the uplifting of Palestinian morale. This was also the period in which the cultural activities of the two Palestinian

46. *Idem*, p. 55.

47. In July 1983 the league published a one-issue magazine entitled *al-Masraḥ* (The Theatre) including details about the activities during the festival and aimed at fostering the Arabic-language theatrical activity. An attempt was made in that publication as well as in the activities of the festival not to emphasize the Palestinian national nature of the theatrical movement: it was therefore referred to as an Arabic theatrical movement. This would appear to have been for fear of the authorities' reaction and due to the close links of some of the participants with the Establishment.

segments were interwoven, stimulated by a new self-confidence, after years of defeat. This self-confidence later emerged, in the words of Ḥanān Mīkhā’īl ‘Ashrāwī (b. 1946) —the most prominent Palestinian literary critic of that period— as a “distinctly Palestinian energy which was able to withstand the political setbacks of the Arab world and hold its own as a viable force with which the oppressed faced their oppressors and asserted their presence, their rejection of the status quo, and their awareness of their own national identity and consciousness”⁴⁸.

This Palestinian unity was climactically expressed on 30 March 1976, that is, on *Yawm al-Ard* (The Day of the Land), when the Palestinians both in Israel and the Occupied Territories declared a total strike and faced Israeli soldiers with rocks and burning tires. The tragic events that the Palestinians underwent in the 1970s —the September massacres of 1971 in Jordan and the Lebanese Civil War— contributed to their cohesion and solidarity. They were convinced that their survival depended primarily on their steadfastness in their own land, and not on external forces. This awareness played an important role not only in the political but also in the social and cultural history of the Palestinians. Moreover, since the 1970s we can speak again about Palestinian culture as a whole, as it was before 1948, rather than Palestinian culture within or outside Israel. Both Palestinian segments were becoming closer and more interdependent, despite the various distinctions that existed between them.

Despite this reunification, a great difference remained in the attitude of the authorities toward the Palestinians in Israel and those in the Occupied Territories. While most of the restrictions on the Israeli Palestinians were removed, the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip continued to face the same kind of censorship that had followed the British Mandate emergency laws of 1945⁴⁹. These laws, enforced also on the Arabic newspapers and magazines in East Jerusalem, were very arbitrary and made frequent use of the argument that this or that publication was a threat to “the security of the state”. In that period, for example, the word “Palestine” was considered threatening enough to be censored, even in West Bank children’s textbooks⁵⁰. Nevertheless, these years witnessed a revival of Palestinian cultural activities in the West Bank and especially in East Jerusalem, which became the undisputed capital of Palestinian culture. A prominent role was played by the Palestinian press in East Jerusalem and specifically *al-Fajr* (*The Dawn*), *al-Sha‘b* (*The People*), and *al-Quds* (*Jerusalem*)⁵¹. Recognizing the

48. Ashrawi. *Contemporary*, p. 2.

49. Sulaymān. *Al-Sihafa*, pp. 212-218.

50. Ashrawi. *Contemporary*, p. 5.

51. Shinar. *Palestinian*, pp. 41, 48-52.

need to create further channels for literary expression, these newspapers produced literary sections that gained immense popularity. The Israeli Palestinian Communist newspaper *al-Ittihād* was banned during that period from being sold in the West Bank by Jordanian law, according to which the Communist Party was outlawed and possession of any Communist material was illegal. Nevertheless, *al-Ittihād* and the Communist literary journal *al-Jadīd* played an important role in the development of the Palestinian national consciousness. *Al-Jadīd* remained the main literary Palestinian magazine until March 1976, with the publication of the magazine *al-Bayādir* (*The Pastures*), which soon established itself as the leading organ of intellectual and literary Palestinian life. In it, as in *al-Jadīd*, one could read the works of the major recognized and the most promising new literary figures and at the same time follow the development of contemporary literary trends⁵². Nevertheless, the Palestinian intellectual arena in the Occupied Territories and East Jerusalem continued to suffer from a scarcity of journals and magazines due to the difficulties of obtaining licenses and financial support. Hence, one of the stimulating factors of the cultural movement in the Occupied Territories was the establishment of several publishing houses, prominent among which was Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, which was established in 1974 in East Jerusalem and soon became the major publisher of West Bank intellectual, literary, and political circles. However, the Palestinian cultural revival in the Occupied Territories was not limited in that period to the printed page alone, and various channels of expression were devised to supplement the gaps in and circumvent obstacles to freedom of thought and expression. Poetry reading sessions, panel discussions, seminars, and study sessions became familiar phenomena, especially in the West Bank, and literary events, such as the traditional *Sūq 'Uqāz*⁵³ at Birzeit University, gained increasingly large audiences.

The aforementioned cultural revival was fertile ground for the emergence of one of the most noticeable literary-cultural phenomena of the 1970s, that is, the professional Palestinian theater, which was mainly in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. The first attempt took place late in 1970 when an amateur troupe called 'Ā'ilat al-Masrah (The Family of the Theater) was established in Ramallah and started rehearsals on Samīḥ al-Qāsim's aforementioned verse drama *Qaraqāsh*, until the military authorities banned the staging of the play. The 'Ā'ilat al-Masrah troupe formed the nucleus of the al-Balālīn Theater troupe established in 1971 by François Abū Sālim (Abu Salem) (1951-2011). Son of the Hungarian-born

52. To overcome their lack of freedom, writers frequently used pseudonyms to hide their identity. Ashrawi. *Contemporary*, p. 11.

53. After a famous fair held in ancient times in Mecca at which poetic tournaments were held.

French poet Lorand Gaspar (1925- 2019) and the French painter and sculptor Francine Gaspar, Abū Sālīm was born in Provins but raised in East Jerusalem, where his father took over the management of Saint-Joseph Hospital from 1954 to 1970. He continued his secondary studies with the Jesuits in Beirut between 1964 and 1968, before being hired as an actor at the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. This is the time when he made a decision that would change his life:

J’ai 18 ans, j’annonce à mon père sur la plage de Rawad à Tunis que je j’ai l’intention de m’installer en Palestine, à Jérusalem (côté arabe... à l’Est...) — où lui-même a travaillé pendant 17 ans et où j’ai grandi — pour y faire du théâtre et soutenir les Palestiniens dans leur combat. Comme l’aurait sans doute fait tout père aimant, il tente de m’en dissuader, au moins momentanément, le temps de faire des études, dit-il, d’acquérir une formation, même en théâtre, mais je suis déterminé et incapable pour l’heure, de prendre le moindre recul. En désespoir de cause, mon père me prodigue quelques recommandations, dont une qui me marque et que je relève comme un défi: “Tu risques de ne jamais te faire accepter. Tu as beau bien connaître la culture et la langue arabes, tu n’es pas de sang arabe!”⁵⁴.

He decided to assume a Palestinian identity and integrate himself into Palestinian culture and society, doing everything he could to hide his Western origins (French and Hungarian), at least in his public life, adopting the surname Abū Sālīm and dropping the name Gaspar:

Ainsi donc, je m’inventai peu à peu une histoire et une identité que je jugeai “acceptable” en Palestine et plus généralement dans le Monde Arabe. J’étais né à Bethléem au lieu de Provins, j’étais de mère française — pour expliquer mon teint “désespérément” pâle — et de père palestinien (ou, variante: palestinien d’origine arménienne, histoire que cela ressemble un peu à la réalité d’une racine arménienne chez une grand-mère de mon père), et je me suis appelé François Abou Salem au lieu de François Gaspar⁵⁵.

Abū Sālīm’s reconstruction of his new “Palestinian” identity sheds light on the postmodern notion of identity that suggests that one can always change one’s life, that identity can always be reconstructed, and that one is free to change and produce oneself as one chooses. In other words, identity becomes a freely chosen game, a *theatrical presentation of the self* in which one is able to present oneself

54. From an unpublished essay written by François Abū Sālīm entitled “Exclusion – Insertion en Palestine”. Henceforth Abū Sālīm, “Exclusion”.

55. *Ibidem*.

while being unconcerned about shifts, transformations, and dramatic changes⁵⁶. With his new adopted identity, Abū Sālīm returned to Jerusalem in September 1970 and soon became the major figure in the modern Palestinian theatrical movement. He said of that period:

When I returned from Paris, I wanted to create a Palestinian theater, although friends told me it was not the right time. I knew that I could influence through theatrical-political protest more than through joining some militant organization. I did not go for military training to South Lebanon, because I felt that creating the theater would be more effective in keeping our society intellectually awake, during the long nation-building process. It has not been easy to establish a modern theater. They do not always understand the need for a full company, when one storyteller can enact the entire plot⁵⁷.

One of the major figures in the troupe was the East Jerusalem poet-singer Muṣṭafā al-Kurd (b. 1945), and it included as well Sāmiḥ al-‘Abbūshī, Hānī Abū Shanab, Nādiyā Mīkhā’īl, and Imīl ‘Ashrāwī (b. 1951). The troupe looked for ways to develop a Palestinian theater based upon the idea of addressing the audience in the vernacular (*al-‘āmmiyya*) and the ability to perform its productions in the towns and villages as well as in cafés—that is *masrḥ al-maqhā* (“café-theater”)⁵⁸. On 22 January 1972, the troupe performed the play *Qit‘at Ḥayāt* (*A Slice of Life*), which met with great success and attracted audiences from all over the Occupied Territories and from Israel. One of the reasons for its success was the fact that it did not hesitate to criticize the social backwardness of Palestinian society, including with regard to the status of women. The troupe also produced some of the masterpieces in Palestinian theater in the 1970s, such as *al-‘Atma* (*The Darkness*)⁵⁹ and *Nashrat Aḥwāl al-Jaww* (*The Weather Forecast*). The same troupe also produced folkloristic shows with dances and songs as well as musicals such as *al-Kanz* (*The Treasure*) and the dramatized poem *Yūnus al-A‘raj* (*Yūnus the Lame*) originally written by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet (1902-1963). One of the experimental projects of al-Balālīn entitled *Jarīdat al-Masrah* (*The Theater’s Newspaper*) was a short (about five minutes) theatrical presentation given in the vicinity of schools or in the streets. This was in addition to other activities like the foundation of the Balālīn Friends Group, lectures on the art of theater, popular plays, and musicals. The professional nature of the troupe was expressed in its

56. Kellner. “Popular Culture”, pp. 153-154, 158 (my emphasis).

57. Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 134.

58. Sayegh. *Encyclopaedia*, p. 217.

59. On *al-‘Atma*, see Snir. “The Emergence”, pp. 5-29.

leading role in the week-long First Palestinian Theater Festival, which took place in August 1973 in the basement of Ramallah’s City Hall, an event in which students and other amateur groups presented their works. The festival was organized by the troupe and included sixteen productions. In addition to these activities, a temporary splinter group from al-Balālīn, entitled Bilā-Līn (Without Mercy), put on the play *Muṣāra’a Hurra* (*Free Wrestling*) to great acclaim. Al-Balālīn’s theatrical activities were discontinued in 1976 with the deportation of Muṣṭafā al-Kurd, one of its founders and major activists.

Several other amateur theater troupes were formed in the 1970s such as al-Kashkūl (The Beggar’s Bag), which won acclaim for some of its experimental plays, and another troupe, Firqat al-Masraḥ al-Filastīnī (The Palestinian Theater Troupe) for its play *al-Ṭā’ūn* (*The Plague*). In 1973, al-Dabābīs (The Pins) was established and won success for its productions *al-Ḥaqq ‘alā al-Ḥaqq* (*Blame the Blame*) and *Dā’irat al-Khawf al-Ḍabābiyya* (*The Foggy Fear Circle*), alluding to Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Following the staging of *al-Ḥashara* (*The Insect*), the majority of the troupe’s members were arrested by the authorities⁶⁰. In 1975, another new troupe was established, giving itself the name Ṣundūq al-‘Ajab (The Magic Box), alluding to the aforementioned “Box of Wonders” that the wandering Palestinian storyteller used in the folk tradition. This troupe won great acclaim with the production of *Lammā Injanenā* (*When We Went Insane*) but was forced to stop the staging following the arrest of its leading actor, Muṣṭafā al-Kurd. Other troupes that were active in the 1970s were al-Frāfir (The Birds), al-Masraḥ al-Jāmi’ī (The Academic Theater), and al-Warsha al-Fanniyya (The Artistic Workshop). In August 1974, a theater committee was established within the newly founded Association for Work and the Development of the Arts. The intensive theatrical activities of that period also brought about the development of theater criticism with the emergence of some prominent critics⁶¹.

Almost all the plays presented in that period were written by members of the troupes themselves, and most of these troupes preserved their independence. Financial troubles, lack of qualified actors, and attempts by the authorities to disrupt these troupes caused serious difficulties, which prompted some of the latter to stop carrying out their activities. The attitude of the military authorities to the theatrical movement in East Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories was very arbitrary. The military censor took responsibility for the canceling of plays published or staged in the Occupied Territories, while for plays published and staged in East Jerusalem the responsibility was entrusted to The Council for the Criticism

60. ‘Alyān. “Al-Masraḥ”, p. 84.

61. Sayegh. *Encyclopaedia*, p. 222.

of Films and Plays. However, the Palestinians argued that the attitude of this council was basically no different from that of the military censor. Out of twenty-seven dramatic works examined by the council between 1977 and 1984, only seventeen texts were approved, and even these were partially censored⁶². In addition, the authorities banned the staging of plays in the Occupied Territories by troupes from East Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, and despite all these difficulties, a new national Palestinian theater was emerging in the 1970s, stimulated by major writers and poets who began to direct some of their attention to this genre. Palestinian theatrical activities, especially in the Ramallah-Jerusalem area, brought about several attempts to establish a solid national Palestinian theater. One of the first, albeit unsuccessful attempts made by groups and individuals was to unite under the name of the aforementioned al-Balālīn troupe, but the major event in the development of the national Palestinian theatrical movement was the establishment of al-Ḥakawātī Theater in East Jerusalem in 1977. The foundation of al-Ḥakawātī, which was to become a synonym for the national Palestinian theater, and its subsequent various activities were the brightest expression of the cultural unity of both main segments of the Palestinian people, those inside Israel and those in the Occupied Territories.

The establishment of al-Ḥakawātī Theater, a joint project of dramatists, directors, and actors from Israel and East Jerusalem, marked a prominent phase in the professionalization of Palestinian theater. The troupe was founded and developed by François Abū Sālim and a group of theater people, prominent among whom were ‘Adnān Ṭarābsha (b. 1958), Ibrāhīm al-Khalālyila, Da’ūd Kuttāb (b. 1955), Muḥammad Maḥāmīd, Rāḍī Shihāda (b. 1952), Idwār al-Mu‘allim (b. 1958), Īmān ‘Awn (b. 1963), ‘Ammār Khalīl (b. 1964) and the actress and costume designer Jackie Lubeck (b. 1952), Abū Sālim’s Brooklyn-born Jewish wife. Additional actors, set designers, lighting professionals, and musicians were recruited according to need. The previously mentioned Muṣṭafā al-Kurd, permitted by the military authorities to return in 1982, also joined the troupe. The aim of the founders was to establish a theatrical framework that would contribute to the strengthening of Palestinian culture and to provide an artistic framework that would intensify the political awareness of the Palestinians and become a vehicle for expressing social and political messages. These messages included resistance against the occupation and at the same time protest against negative phenomena taking place in Palestinian society itself. Undertaking the mission to express in dramatic terms the national aspirations of a society under occupation, it could not

62. Shihāda. “*Masrah al-ḥakawātī*”, pp. 180-181.

rely, as had former troupes, on a classical repertoire, though in shaping its own stories and style the troupe drew inspiration from folkloric and traditional sources. The fact that target audiences included intellectuals and professional critics as well as villagers, workers, and merchants, and the fact that the troupe was operating under the military government’s regulations led it to develop a language of subtle symbols and metaphors, which served as an artistic code between the theater and its audience, using plot, rhetoric, creative-interactive processes, and institutional structures as channels for its nation-building messages⁶³.

The theater’s name alludes to the traditional *ḥakawātī* —the itinerant storyteller, who used to appear in places such as cafés and public squares and present his stories based mainly upon ancient folktales and legends. He would accompany his tales with gestures and different voices, and encouraged his listeners to react and become involved. This cultural institution of the storyteller disappeared in the mid-twentieth century following the increasing influence of the electronic mass media and the development of modern theater and cinema. The relation to the traditional *ḥakawātī* was preserved in some of the activities of al-Ḥakawātī Theater and its techniques, and even in the specific arrangement of the seating so as to resemble the atmosphere of a public café. The adoption of the storyteller techniques by the troupe was an act undertaken to indicate the ancient roots of Arabic theater in what was perceived as a new genre that the Arabs, including the Palestinians, had only recently come to know⁶⁴. These techniques motivated some of the original initiatives and experiments of the troupe in its first years. For lack of suitable available dramatic texts, and due to a desire to experiment, the act of playwriting and devising characters and dialogues became a collective undertaking by the actors themselves and was based largely upon improvisation. Western theatrical concepts too were incorporated into the activities of al-Ḥakawātī. Bertolt Brecht and the French stage director Ariane Mnouchkine (b. 1939), the Théâtre du Soleil and le Grand Magic Circus Théâtre of the Argentinian-French theater director and actor Jérôme Savary (1942-2013), and the *commedia dell’arte* and American slapstick all exerted their influence. The rhetoric of al-Ḥakawātī was delivered in Chaplinesque tones, a Brechtian, alienated, “poster-theater” style and a blend of traditional and contemporary symbols. This rhetoric was adopted in order to reach a wide audience, and the plots were full of Arab, Islamic, and mythical characters whose language and behavior bordered on the vulgar. Brash humor served to depict Palestinian and Israeli characters alike.

63. Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 134.

64. On the relation of the Palestinian theatre to the ancient storyteller, which was “the corner stone for the beginnings of the local theatre”, see Shihāda. “*Masrah al-ḥakawātī*”, pp. 172-191.

Thus, Israeli civilians, army personnel, and military authorities were presented in terms as grotesque as those used to describe the Palestinian characters.

The first play produced by al-Ḥakawāfī Troupe, *Bismi al-Ab wa-l-Umm wa-l-Ibn* (*In the Name of the Father, the Mother, and the Son*), was staged during the 1978–1979 season. The play, in circus style, depicted the violent invasion of modernization and occupation into Palestinian life and illustrates how the stress on the father causes him to put pressure his wife, who in turn puts pressure on her children. The play clearly illustrates one aspect that had become predominant after the 1967 War in Palestinian literature in general, namely, criticism of Palestinian society and leadership. The figures, making their first appearance on the stage inside cages, are the husband Aṭrash (in Arabic: “a deaf male”), his wife Kharsā’ (in Arabic: “a mute female”), and their son Muṭī’ (in Arabic: “”). While the training of the female by the male is announced as a “special trick”, a clever, intelligent and modern unknown creature, which may symbolize Israel or modernization, sneaks his way in and imposes himself on the trainer’s pets. The stranger stays on while the trainer tries unsuccessfully to get rid of him:

OK stranger, time’s up! Get lost! Excuse me folks but this is definitely not part of the act. That stranger is taking over! Hey, wait a minute! Where is Aṭrash? Muṭī’, get back in your cage! Kharsā’, cook dinner! [...] The female is on the loose! The offspring is on the loose! I’m losing control!!! [...] My act! My creatures! My work! My act!⁶⁵

One of the Palestinian critics stated that in this play there is no difference between the “social backwardness and the military occupation [...] this society is falling between the hammer of the occupation and the anvil of poverty, economic, social and intellectual backwardness”⁶⁶.

Several plays were staged by al-Ḥakawāfī before an Israeli Jewish audience, causing a great deal of professional and political interest. Among them was *Mahjūb, Mahjūb*, which was staged during the 1980–1981 season and performed over 120 times. The play, in which the troupe attempted to activate the audience by inciting it against the reactionary character in the play, portrays the Palestinians as a community robbed of their vitality and their creativity:

A new age for the living dead [...] a foggy murky world where one comes and goes, speaks and writes, buys and sells, plants and ploughs, works and meets, faithfully but uselessly beating the air and striking the wind⁶⁷.

65. Al-Ḥakawāfī. *Information Brochure* 1985 (according to Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 135).

66. Ghassān. *Al-Masrah al-filasṭīnī*, p. 16.

67. Quotations from the English translation distributed to the audience. Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 135.

This is the dehumanized world into which the anti-hero Maḥjūb steps, soon to understand that such a bare existence holds no more joy than a peaceful death. He gives up and chooses to die but quickly awakens when his companions unfold his life before him. The core of the play comprises the three long nights of his wake during which his life is narrated, interpreted, and performed. The sequence of mishaps typical of his life begins when, in the excitement of his birth, his father drops Maḥjūb on his head. He leaves school after being reprimanded for asking too many questions. In a series of tragicomic episodes, Maḥjūb is made aware that he does not know who he really is. Before the 1967 War, he refuses to stand up for the Jordanian national anthem. He shouts for joy at the radio news bulletin that boasts of Arab victory in the war, but droops in despair when he learns the bitter truth. He outwits an Israeli soldier who stops him at a checkpoint and is subject to interrogation after the colors of the Palestinian flag are recognized among the other colors of his clothing. Maḥjūb is shown as a prospective member of the Histadrūt and as a participant in the Jerusalem municipal elections, who, upon being caught voting by a TV reporter, states: “I didn’t vote. I am simply a worker in the building — I sweep the floors”. Maḥjūb is also presented as an immigrant who tries unsuccessfully to live in the United States, as a prisoner, and as advisor to the late Egyptian President Anwar al-Sādāt.

Reflecting all dimensions of Palestinian life, Maḥjūb directs caustic and bitter criticism at the sterile confusion of his brethren’s existence and wonders at the contradictions in the occupiers’ lives: on the one hand, they display military power, social organization, and technological skill, but on the other hand, they are obsessed with a ridiculous security ritual. Thus, whenever Maḥjūb goes out to dispose of his garbage bag, a voice is heard asking, “*Shel mi ze? Shel mi ze?*”, that is, a Hebrew phrase meaning “Whose is this?” often heard upon discovery of a suspicious object. The influence of the American filmmaker Woody Allen (b. 1935) on various episodes of the play is clear, as well as the influence of Imīl Ḥabībī’s *al-Waqā’i’ al-Gharība fī Ikhtifā’ Sa’īd Abī al-Naḥs al-Mutashā’il* (*The Peculiar Events Surrounding the Disappearance of Sa’īd, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* [optimist and pessimist])⁶⁸, in which the Palestinian tragedy is presented through the story of Sa’īd, whose image represents ironically the absurdity of the life of the Palestinian people from the perspective of those who remained after 1948.

Another important play staged by the troupe was *Jalīlī, Yā ‘Alī* (*‘Alī, the Galilean*) presenting the adventures of a Palestinian villager in Tel Aviv, the very heart of the occupiers’ country. A circus-like burlesque style is used to portray a

68. Ḥabībī. *Al-Waqā’i’ al-Gharība*; Habiby. *The Secret Life of Saeed*.

series of episodes in 'Alī's life as a refugee and stranger in his own country. He is the

tragic son, the naive little boy, the thief in the night, the hot-shot cowboy, the imaginary lover, the silent worker, the steadfast militant, the black and white [...] as he moves from the village of his ancestors to the city of his colonizers⁶⁹.

The question of 'Alī's Palestinian identity is thoroughly explored upon his arrival in Tel Aviv: being recognized by the "sheriff", he is ordered to leave before sundown. An Israeli friend he meets in the local saloon advises him to adopt an Israeli name, Eli, and thus to evade the "sheriff", to court a beautiful Israeli woman, and to work, fight, and play "safely"⁷⁰. At the end, a couple of Hebrew-speaking thugs enter the stage, shouting that their act will be presented instead — it is called "'Alī, the Terrorist"⁷¹.

One of the plays staged by the troupe and regarded later as a self-fulfilling prophecy was *Alf Layla wa-Layla min Layālī Rāmī al-Ḥijāra* (*A Thousand and One Nights of the Nights of a Stone Thrower*). Presented before the outbreak of the first *Intifāda* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987, it portrays a confrontation between a Palestinian youth and the military governor, Gidi, who steals the magic lamp from 'Alā' al-Dīn. The narrator recounts the episode:

In the tiniest flash of a second, a military governor, a modern man, having stolen the lamp of 'Alā' al-Dīn, swept us away to his control tower, his headquarters, his palace [...] I present to you this tale of the magician governor, how he moved us aside and upon his tattered decor, installed himself. I recall it to you in my own Arab spirit and all that has been conserved by my Palestinian memory⁷².

A series of confrontations portrays the Palestinians enduring and triumphing over one thousand and one nights of oppression and humiliation. The military governor loses awkwardly:

Already a man by the age of ten, the stone thrower child's game with the stones became a gesture of a free man. He saw that nothing remained but the stones themselves

69. Quotations from the English translation distributed to the audience. Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 136.

70 The act of changing an Arabic name by a Palestinian into Hebrew in order to safely live and work among Jews is very common among Palestinians and has been frequently illustrated in Hebrew literature, even recently such as in one of Eshkol Nevo's (b. 1971) novels (Nevo. *Hare'yon Ha-Aḥaron*, pp. 126-136).

71. Snir. *Palestinian Theatre*, pp. 141-145.

72. Quotations from the English translation distributed to the audience. Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 136.

to defend his home from the gluttony of the governor, who was gobbling away at the trees, the stars and the sun⁷³.

The struggle is presented as a fight between a Palestinian David and an Israeli Goliath: the Palestinian boy armed with stones is confronting the military governor's well-equipped warriors. This struggle, frequently reflected in Palestinian literature since 1967, develops into a Middle Eastern “star war” with flying carpets fighting rockets and laser beams. The satirical confrontation between the occupier Goliath and the occupied David is associated with the struggle between the traditional and the modern. “If they show us this play”, says the Israeli Jewish critic Amos Kenan (1927-2009), “it means that instead of throwing stones at us, they want to talk to us”⁷⁴. Nevertheless, the staging of the play brought about the arrest of the leader of the troupe, François Abū Sālim.

In November 1983, the al-Ḥakawāfī troupe leased the al-Nuzha cinema in East Jerusalem for ten years and converted it into the first Palestinian theater in the West Bank. The first play to be staged in al-Ḥakawāfī's own theater in May 1985 was *Ḥikāyat al-‘Ayn wa-l-Sinn* (*The Story of the Eye and the Tooth*). It was directed by François Abū Sālim, and among the actors were Rādī Shihāda (b. 1952), Hiyām ‘Abbās (b. 1960), and Jackie Lubeck (b. 1952). The play was a landmark in the development of Palestinian theater as a nation-building communications medium. Unlike the previous plays, it is more sophisticated, employing more abstract terms, a generalized form, surrealist symbols, and a wider use of non-verbal techniques. Music, movement, costumes, puppets, lighting, and sets are put to work, enhancing a theatrical language almost entirely absent from the earlier shows, which relied basically on the spoken word. In the first scene, when tradition is the topic, the musical score is composed of Palestinian country tunes featuring motifs popular in the West Bank villages. The second scene, in which modernity is emphasized, is illustrated with contemporary international rock music, while the musical finale toward the end of the show features a majestic choir performance of the “Kyrie Eleison” of Mozart's *Requiem* as a symbol of total destruction and hopelessness. Combinations of visual elements are used abundantly to convey the play's grim message: colorful laundry hanging overhead during the play later turns into grimy rags; shiny paper used to represent the village square and well becomes paler and paler during the *dabka* dance, in which the elders' bodies disintegrate into inanimate objects. Pessimism reaches its peak when, as a result of the “eye and the tooth” war, the families, dressed in typical

73. *Ibidem*.

74. Urian. “Perspectives”, p. 343.

clothes resembling uniforms, start wandering around the pile of bodies at an ever-slowing pace; the sacks on their backs become heavier and heavier burdens.

The play concentrates on the larger issues of tradition, modernity, identity, war, and peace through a composite process rather than through the specific adventures of individual characters. Tradition is blatantly challenged when the two pairs of twins born by the well refuse to comply with the commitment assumed by their parents when they signed the traditional wedding contract upon the babies' birth. The revolt triggers a long and bloody feud between the families, which becomes the central axis of the plot. A *ṣulḥa* reconciliation ceremony between the feuding sides is imposed on the families in a later scene by the neighbors, in which a traditional *dabka* dance is performed by the elders who did not succeed in forcing their offspring to behave according to tradition. They dance until they disintegrate into an inanimate pile of puppets, which stay put on the stage. The past in which the elders determined the younger generation's ways is dead, but it physically obstructs progress, making all action on the stage take place around the dead bodies. The atmosphere of appeasement is disturbed again in the second part of the play, when a new character, symbolizing Zionism and Israel, makes his entrance. The two sides in the conflict are no longer fathers and sons but Palestinian and Israelis. The longer their endless war becomes, the greater the losses suffered by both sides and the weaker they become. The conclusion is far from optimistic: the final words, "How happy are the parents of the bride and the groom on the day of their children's wedding?", refer to Tanza, a Palestinian, and Sarah, an Israeli woman, who fall in love and marry under the shadow of bombs and death. Thus, notwithstanding the common fate of the two sides, no solution is offered to restore mutual respect and normal life. Walking around in blood up to their ankles, the protagonists cannot bring a message of hope for the present or future.

The outbreak of the first *Intifāḍa* created a new reality for al-Ḥakawātī, and the troupe went into shock: the artistic framework seemed to be slight in the face of the demonstrations of the masses, the stone-throwers, the dozens of Palestinian killed and wounded, and the thousands in prison. Though no restrictions were placed on the troupe itself, it was not permitted to present its work on the main stage of the *Intifāḍa*, that is, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The troupe began to act in a vacuum, unable to reach its audience, although various productions were staged and attempts were made to adjust to the new circumstances⁷⁵. This

75. According to statistics published by the Association of Palestinian Writers fifty-two theatrical productions were staged by Palestinians from the Occupied Territories during the first three years of the *Intifāḍa* (*Filasṭīn al-Thawra*, 20 January 1991, p. 30).

was why several of its founders and earliest members began to search for other new theatrical frameworks. The original group crumbled, and its leader Abū Sālīm left for Europe, but not before al-Ḥakawātī had succeeded during his few years in the Occupied Territories raising Palestinian awareness of the importance of theatrical activities and contributing to the forming of a cultural Palestinian consciousness. Moreover, the theater contributed to the birth of a new generation of actors, of whom several could later be found seeking their own theatrical paths. The great success of al-Ḥakawātī was despite, and perhaps because of, the constant attempts to disrupt its activities by the Israeli authorities. In order to foil these attempts, the troupe was sometimes aided by Israeli Jewish theater people who protested against the abrogation of freedom of speech⁷⁶. The success of the troupe outside the Palestinian arena was not limited to the Israeli Jewish domain alone, for the troupe also won great acclaim abroad. Since the early 1980s, it has conducted annual tours in Israel, the West Bank, and abroad, including participation in festivals in England, France, West Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Poland, Scandinavia, Spain, and Tunisia. One of the successful productions abroad was the aforementioned *Ḥikāyat al-‘Ayn wa-l-Sinn (The Story of the Eye and the Tooth)*, staged at the beginning of 1986 in London. In the late 1980s, al-Ḥakawātī held a lengthy series of performances in Japan, Europe, and the United States, achieving great success according to the Palestinian press⁷⁷.

Al-Ḥakawātī has become in recent years, under its new name al-Masraḥ al-Waṭanī al-Filasṭīnī (Palestinian National Theater), the central framework of the Palestinian theatrical movement. The number of its own original productions has decreased, and it has increasingly become a framework for various productions of Palestinian theatrical activities and festivals including puppet and children’s theater. In 1989, the name of the theater building was changed to al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī (The Arabic Cultural Center). In recent years, a new phenomenon has appeared in Palestinian cultural life: festivals of national Palestinian theater, prompted and sponsored initially by al-Ḥakawātī, are convened throughout the Palestinian centers in Israel and the Occupied Territories, encouraging the development of this art and opening new paths and horizons for it as well.

76. See, for example, *Ha’aretz*, 11 September 1988, p. B6; *Ha’aretz*, Supplement, 15 September 1989, pp. 9-11; *Ha’aretz*, 21 September 1989, p. 10; and *Ha’aretz*, 24 February 1992, p. B3.

77. For the report about the performances in Japan see *al-Yawm al-Sābi’*, 10 April 1989, p. 32; in Europe see *al-Yawm al-Sābi’*, 15 May 1989, p. 32; and in the United States see *al-Yawm al-Sābi’*, 7 August 1989, p. 32.

6. CONCLUSION

Palestinian theater, like Palestinian literature in general, has flourished as a direct reaction to the suppression of freedom, particularly since the 1967 War. Its professionalization took a line parallel to the escalation of resistance and has lived up to historical challenges, defying the hardships imposed by censorship, geographical isolation, and lack of education. Political constraints played a role in leading this theater to develop a style of collective work. Plays have been created, especially in the theater in East Jerusalem, through a process of improvisation on agreed-upon topics; they do not rely on written texts. Some troupes claim that their plays have been written solely for the benefit of the censorship authorities, “who nevertheless fail from time to time, to grasp the real meaning of the messages”⁷⁸. Thus, much variation develops during long months of rehearsal and interaction with the audience, until the plays are given their final shape. Palestinian theater has tried to fulfill the multiple tasks and roles imposed upon it by the historical and socio-political conditions under which it has developed. Its main purpose has been to reflect the political aspirations of the Palestinian people. Therein lie both its strength and its weakness: it is a political instrument called upon to raise the level of national consciousness, to incite resistance and revolution, to record the trials and experiences of the nation as a whole, and to prepare for and project a better future. It also has the duty of being the social critic, conducting an exacting self-examination and exposure of the ills and problems of a traditional society trying to meet the challenges of progress and development. Finally, it is a part of the dynamic cultural Palestinian movement with the projected vision of self-help and education directed toward and rooted in the masses of the Palestinian people. However, sometimes lacking abstract and material security under occupation, it has also lacked the assurance of objective criticism, for most people look to it for its didactic quality⁷⁹.

Palestinian theater developed under the influence of the Arabic heritage, ancient folklore, and contemporary Arabic literature but also under the influence of Western theater. A major influence on this theater is still exerted by Brecht, especially with regard to the essence, contents, and techniques of the epic theater, which appeals less to the spectators’ feelings than to their ability to reason. One cannot overlook too the influence of the Hebrew theater, in view of the fact that many prominent Palestinian actors were graduates of Israeli-Hebrew theater schools. Furthermore, due to the nature of this cultural activity that obliges direct contact with the people, the relationship between the Palestinian dramatic move-

78. Shinar. *Palestinian*, p. 138.

79. Ashrawi. *Contemporary*, p. 58.

ment in Israel and Hebrew dramatic activities is stronger than in any other cultural domain. Palestinian theater has been adopted in its full Western image and practice, but the dramatic impulse in Palestinian peasant culture is still very popular. The two traditions currently exist side by side and are even interwoven: various plays have combined elements from the peasant culture, and some theater troupes perform in the villages and attract large audiences. Essentially, however, the theater is a city activity (mainly in East Jerusalem, Haifa, Nazareth, and Ramallah), and its audience is the middle class, the educated, and the politically aware working class. Nevertheless, the Palestinian themes and the revolutionary orientation of most plays have taken Palestinian drama away from the bourgeoisie and the elite and have made it available to a larger segment of society. Like other cultural and literary activities and productions, drama has become a serious means of political education, as reflected in the activities of al-Ḥakawātī. This theater has functioned as a channel presenting some of the most basic dilemmas of Palestinian nation-building. The troupe has raised questions of identity without concealing its affinity with Palestinian, rather than pan-Arab or pan-Islamic, characteristics; it has given expression to the tradition-modernity dilemma, stating its preference for modernity without, however, discarding tradition as a source of inspiration and reliance. Through its activities, the theater has promoted the *ṣumūd* (“steadfastness”) principle as a solution to the inevitable confrontation between pride and survival and between the hopes for an independent future and the pressures of occupation; and it has enhanced the two-front struggle of Palestinian women, both as symbols of changing Palestinian values and as a channel through which Palestinian actresses may enjoy equal rights.

During the last decades, Palestinian theater has developed in several innovative ways, both inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories. For example, Masrah al-Maydān in Haifa was founded in 1994 with the support of the leftist Israeli Minister of Education Shulamit Aloni (1927-2014) during the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s (1922-1995) government. At the beginning, it was named “The Arab-Israeli Theater”, but after a few years it was given its current name. The theater serves as the artistic community of Palestinian Arabs in Israel, and its productions run throughout the country. The initial budget with the opening of the theater was provided by the Israeli Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Haifa, but over the years the share of the budget from the Ministry of Culture has decreased and the share of the municipality has increased. During the last few years, the theater has faced severe criticism from right-wing former Minister of

Culture and current Minister of Transportation and Road Safety Miri Regev (b. 1965) to the point that the theater is now in danger of being closed⁸⁰.

In the Occupied Territories, we can mention Masrah al-Ḥurriyya (The Freedom Theater), a Palestinian community-based theater and cultural center that was established in 2006 in the Jenin Refugee Camp. The theater aimed to generate cultural resistance through the fields of popular culture and art as a catalyst for social change in the Occupied Territories. The theater's goals were to develop a vibrant and creative artistic community that empowers children and young adults to express themselves freely and equally through art while emphasizing professionalism and innovation. The theater drew its inspiration from a project of care and learning, which used theater and art to address the fear, depression, and trauma experienced by children in the Jenin Refugee Camp. Set up during the first *Intifāḍa*, the project was run by Arna Mer-Khamīs (1929-1995), an Israeli Jewish political and human rights activist who devoted her life to campaigning for freedom and human rights, together with women in the camp. Her work was documented in the internationally awarded film *Arna's Children*, which gives some background information about The Freedom Theater. The film was directed by Juliano Mer-Khamīs (1958-2011), Arna's son, who in 2006 co-founded The Freedom Theater and was its General Director. Juliano's father was the Israeli Palestinian intellectual Ṣalība Khamīs (1922-1994), who was one of the leaders of the Israeli Communist Party⁸¹.

On 4 April 2011, Juliano Mer-Khamīs, whose Israeli, Hebrew, Palestinian, and Arabic identities were struggling inside him, was assassinated. Six months later, on 1 October 2011, François Abū Sālīm, with his unique mixture of Hungarian, French, Arabic, and Palestinian identities, committed suicide. There was no connection between the death of two of the most significant figures in the emergence of the Palestinian professional theater, but one can hardly ignore the personal identity crisis that each of them had suffered in his desire to adopt Palestinian identity while struggling to contribute to the emerging local theatrical movement. Both of them encountered a sense of mistrust on the part of the local elites, who tended to view them as semi-foreigners, as *Le Monde* wrote about Abū Sālīm after his suicide: "Mais il s'est toujours heurté à un sentiment de méfiance de la part des élites locales, qui avaient tendance à le regarder comme un semi-étranger"⁸². Almost forty years before his suicide, in attempt to describe the national and exis-

80. On Masrah al-Maydān, see Marom. *Al-Maydān Theatre in Haifa*; and the theater's official website at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Midan_Theater.

81. On Masrah al-Ḥurriyya, see Wallin (ed.). *Rehearsing Freedom*; Johansson and Wallin (eds.). *The Freedom Theatre*; and the theater's official website <http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/>.

82. *Le Monde*, 11 October 2011.

tential dilemma of the Palestinian human being under occupation, Abū Sālim inserted the following monologue into his aforementioned play *'Atma (The Darkness)*:

خَلِيهِمْ يَتَعَلَّمُوا، الموت نهاية متاعب كل واحد، أقصر طريقة للموت هي الانتحار، بفرجيك، بفرجيك، شبّاك مفتوح، طابق رابع، عملية انتحار نظيفة، ثاني يوم اسمك بالجرّيد، ليش هي هالعيشة اللي كل دقيقة بينظن الواحد فيها على مناخيره، في البيت بيظلموك، في الشّارع بيظلموك، في المدرسة بيظلموك، بدّي افرجيهم خَلِيهِمْ يَتَعَلَّمُوا، أنا مش ضعيف، بقدر أسوي إشي كبير، بقدر أنتحر، بخلي البلد كلها تهنّز، طريق الشّهرة شبّاك مفتوح في الطابق الزّابع.

Let them learn, death is the end of everyone's troubles, the shortest way to die is suicide, I will show you, I will show you, an open window, a fourth floor, a clean suicide operation, the second day, your name in the newspapers, why is this life in which every minute a man becomes sick and tired, at home they oppress you, on the street they oppress you, in the school they oppress you, I want to show them, let them learn, I am not weak, as much as I can do something big, I can commit suicide, I will make the whole country shake, the path to fame is an open window on the fourth floor.

Nevertheless, Palestinian theater is still developing, presenting new concepts, and engaging in fresh interactions with the reality of occupation. For example, in her doctoral dissertation Najla Nakhle-Cerruti studied the development of spatiality in theatrical texts and its interactions with the real space in which they unfold, based on a corpus of six plays produced between 2006 and 2016 by Palestinians⁸³. Because of the strong constraints imposed on the Palestinians vis-à-vis their mobility, the practice of the territory represents first of all an experience of identity that marks the conditions of creation and the dramaturgical choices that are employed. The theater offers the Palestinian human being a space to talk about this experience, and it is the testimony that occupies the stage in various forms of scenic autobiography. Such a testimony becomes a literary object, where the monologized self-narrative allows the Palestinians to express the exile they live in along with its double nature: geographic and psychological. In these scenic tales, the characters end up being confused with the space they describe; literary figures specific to this relationship to space are then developed. Thus, the image of confinement manifests the links between the text and the reality experienced and described. This poetics of space also contributes to the questioning of the myth of Palestine that occupies the texts of this decade, and thus provides a privileged angle from which to analyze the identity dynamics of the Palestinians in their continuing 1948 *Nakba* and ongoing contemporary tragedies.

83. Nakhle-Cerruti. *La Palestine sur scène*.

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