

***BETHLEHEM SITE-SPECIFIC THEATER FESTIVAL.* Produced by Al-Harah Theater. Twenty performances at various venues in the Old City of Hebron, Bethlehem, and Beit Jala, OPT. August 27-29, 2023.**

Between the 27<sup>th</sup> and the 29<sup>th</sup> of July I had the pleasure of watching the second edition of the Bethlehem Site-Specific Theater Festival, produced by Al Harah Theater in Beit Jala in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This year's festival took as its foundation stories personal to the communities within which they were performed, a concept introduced at each performance by General Manager Marina Barham or Deputy Manager and Artist Nicola Zreineh. These stories were rooted in *hakawati* and storyteller Sally Shalabi's interviews with community elders; after collecting the narratives, Shalabi summarized them, and directors prepared each piece for the stage. By placing the local stories in specifically chosen locations, in the town from which the story itself emerged, the pieces took on a layered meaning, allowing the setting to become an additional character in each performance.

The festival included twenty different performances in nine total locations throughout the Old City of Hebron, Beit Jala, and Bethlehem. Each play was overseen by a new director who had received training from the Scottish theatre company Grid Iron, which specializes in creating site-specific and location theatre, and from Unga Clara Theatre in Sweden. Six of the directors who participated in these workshops were selected to participate in the festival. The festival highlighted the beauty and history of meaningful buildings in urban settings, showcasing the richness of the old cities while pointing toward a bright artistic future led by the newly minted directors.

In addition to the beautifully showcased artistry, Al Harah Theater noted on their social media that through this festival, they were able to employ 50 artists and 10 technicians part-time, a sizable feat.

Three stand-out pieces include *I Was There*, written and directed by Mo'Tasem Abu Hasan; *The Freedom Fabric*, written and directed by Sham Yousef; and *Bokjeh*, written and directed by Majeda Subhi. All of the pieces were performed in Arabic; the translations in this review are my own.

*I Was There* opens with an Egyptian detective questioning a man from Bethlehem, Peter (Mo'men Sadi), who has gone to Egypt to study medicine and ends up in Iraq. Peter's ambition is significant:

الطموح فيه جريمة والاصرار انتحار، والوجود بحد ذاته انتصار.  
مع كل مرة كان في سقوط ونهاية، كان في اصرار اكبر على اني اكمل،  
وكلمة مستحيل ما كانت موجودة في قاموسي.

In ambition there is a crime. Insistence is suicide. Existence is itself a victory. With each instance, there is a fall and an ending. I had greater insistence to continue, and the word impossible didn't exist in my dictionary.

The detective, a recorded voice, ominously informs Peter that he will be surveilled and insists that he follow a straight and narrow path: “لا شمال ولا يمن ، دغري بس” (“No right, no left, just stay straight”). The piece plays with time, providing glimpses of Peter's life in Iraq and his membership in the Baath party; the detective's continued presence in his life; Farid Al Atrash's influence on Peter, first through his music, and then through their friendship; and the emotional core of the play, his father (Nabil Al Raee), who stands by silently throughout much of the piece, showing that he was in fact “there.” The warm and watchful presence of renowned actor Nabil Al Raee emanated through the room, creating a feeling of home even while the character Peter struggles with his place in the world.

This performance took place in a historic home, emptied of all its contents, and the emptiness allowed for surprise after surprise. The play began in a room directly inside the entryway of the building, and the two subsequent scenes each drew the audience deeper into the house, simultaneously revealing more of the characters' psychology as more architecture was revealed. Mo'Tasem Abu Hasan's brilliant direction turned the home into an arena of potential, with moments of discovery as nooks and crannies revealed themselves to be areas rich with storytelling possibility. Issam Rishmawi's design and lighting drew the audience's attention to areas of transition, like the stairs, doors, and windows, and incorporated candles, flashlights, and the natural light of the early evening in ways that underscored the theme of hope in persistence.



*Image 1: Actors Mo'men Sadi (right) and Nabil Al Raee (left) as Peter and his father, respectively, in I Was There, directed by Mo'Tasem Abu Hasan. Photo credit: Ma'moun AlHerimi. Courtesy of Al Harah Theater.*

While *I Was There* features a group of men, *The Freedom Fabric* features a team of women, skillfully directed by Sham Yousef. The mother, Ferial (Salwa Nakkara), begins the play by looking for her children, particularly her daughter Arwa, whose birthday it is. She rolls dough to make a special dessert playfully called *lisan al-asfour* (bird's tongue), while telling the audience in hushed and loving tones about how she learned to make it. As Ferial's hands devotedly roll the dough, she reminisces about her late husband, who passed his love for this treat on to their daughter.

This performance took place outside, on the steps of the Bethlehem Centre for Cultural Heritage. Sunlight shone on Nakkara's face, bringing her eager eyes to life, and casting shadows on the stairs upstage of the playing space.

As the script progresses, it becomes clear that Ferial is hallucinating. An unnamed female character (Hala Salem) joins her onstage, presenting probing questions and challenging Ferial's memories, and gently guiding her to realize the truth—these stairs are not her stairs, this home is not her home, and Arwa is no longer alive. As the mother's memories disintegrate, the other character, a surrogate for Arwa, performs a fast-paced and emotionally charged dance, showering the area around her with flower petals, as her mother murmurs words that describe the dissonant experience of invasion:

Strike - He did not do anything - But he- Did not do anything -  
 Arrest - Gas - Beating - Fear - Violation - Turn off the light -  
 Anyone here? - On the roof - Forbidden to enter - Do not dare -  
 Raise - Your hand - On the wall - Get out of here - Worry - Siege -  
 Medal of Courage.

As these lines—fragmented memories of the mother's conversation, possibly with the soldier who killed her family—cease, the mother again calls for her children, effectively looping back to the beginning of the play, implying that the cycle continues.



*Image 2: Salwa Nakkara (left) as Ferial and actor and choreographer Hala Salem (right) as the unnamed female character in The Freedom Fabric, written and directed by Sham Yousef. Photo credit: Ma'moun AlHerimi. Courtesy of Al Harah Theater.*

In a similar vein, *hakawati* Majeda Subhi's story *Bokjeh* asks the audience to follow the story of a family from the 1948 Nakba to the present moment, detailing moments of hardship and separation and what it means to navigate the Occupation as a family. Subhi directly addressed the audience, modulating her speech as she painted a vivid picture of the family being forcibly removed from their homes. Her soft, pleasant voice brought the audience into the story of the family who, in the days that followed their expulsion, took refuge in the YMCA. She underscored the mother, Um Faiza's, desperate attempts to return to her home one last time to retrieve her children's belongings and her prized sewing machine, which would later help her make a living.

Um Faiza removed the items from her home and carried them in a *bokjeh*, a large piece of cloth in which Palestinian women would wrap clothes, food, and other belongings, tying it with a knot on top and carrying it on their heads. Subhi reminds the audience that “we see [the *bokjeh*] in the scenes of the Nakba and of Palestinian alienation, and it has become a metaphorical term in which we express the search for a homeland.” This moving piece deftly divulged the family’s history to a cross-generational audience, children sitting in the front rows on cushions while older audience members sat or stood behind them. One of three *hakawati* who performed in the festival, Subhi’s storytelling is part of a *hakawati* lineage that shares oral history and tradition with members of subsequent generations.



*Image 3: Hakawati Majeda Subhi performing Bokjeh. Photo credit: Marina Johnson.*

Throughout the festival, intergenerational and community connection became apparent when the family members whose stories were being performed onstage were acknowledged after each play. Emotional plays took on a new meaning when family members who had allowed their story to be shared with the audience sat in the front row, visibly moved. The festival relied on audience and community attendance and response, which was overwhelmingly positive; most plays included a “standing room only” section for audience overflow.

Al Harah means “neighborhood” in Arabic, and Al Harah Theater knows how to draw an audience and move them emotionally, and also physically, across time and space. Connections formed between performers and audience members as they moved from site to site together, breaking down hierarchical barriers, and activating the sidewalks and streets in imaginative ways. Personally, I will not be able to walk past any of these locations without remembering the stories I heard there. These newly acquired narratives are part of the embodied memory that these artists shared with me.

**Reviewed by Marina Johnson, Stanford University**

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