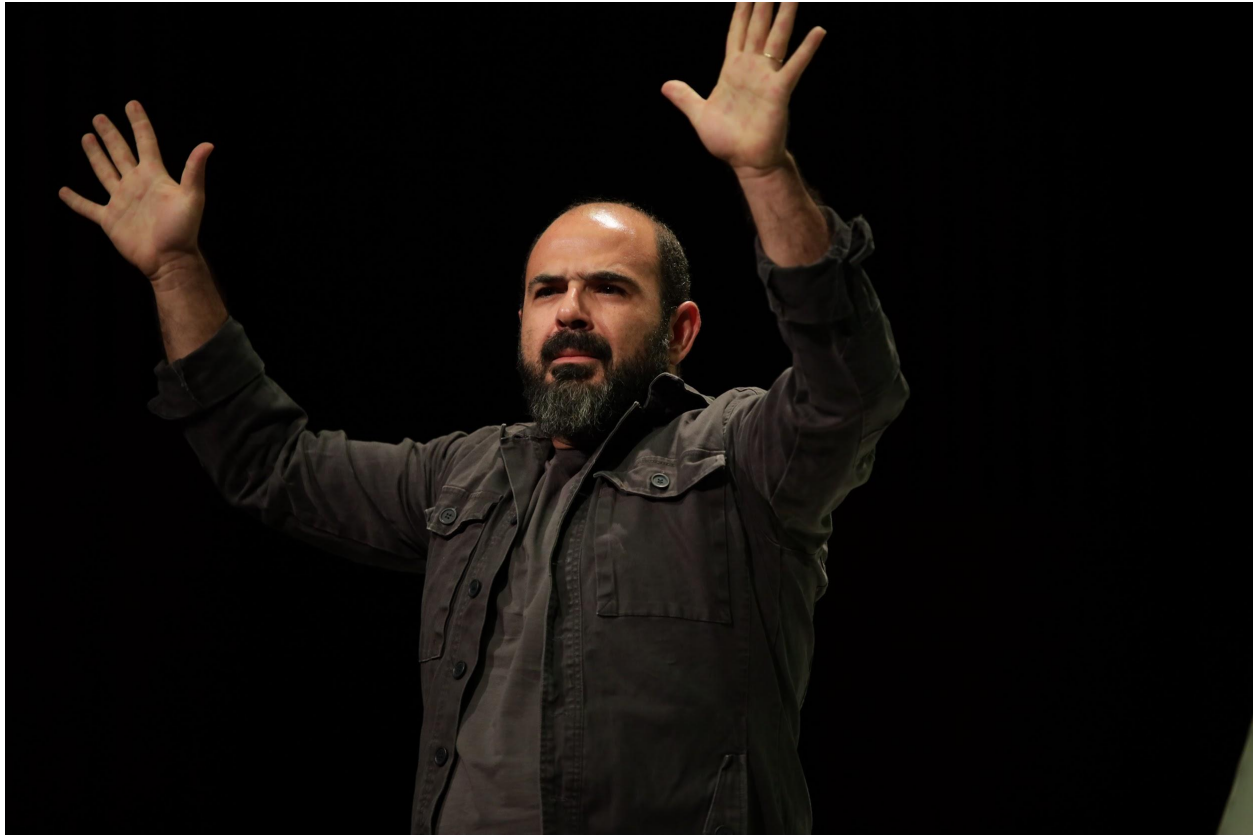


***HOOTA*. By Amer Hlehel. Directed and designed by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Produced by Qadita and Sard, Haifa. Staged at Ramallah Municipality Theatre for the 14th annual Wein a Ramallah Festival. Aug 11, 2023.**



*Amer Hlehel as Basel in Hoota, directed and designed by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Photo credit: Saeed Qaq. Courtesy of Amer Hlehel.*

As Palestinian audiences have come to expect from actor and author Amer Hlehel, his latest one-person performance, *Hoota*, draws spectators into a journey of expansive storytelling and engaging theatricality, marking crucial political turning points and personal dilemmas through a conflictual individual history that stands in for a greater human experience. The play's gut-wrenching story transcends its protagonist to communicate the meaning of factionalism in war-torn regions, where the flow of violence begets more violence, and the cycle of armed operations turns into its own inescapable cause for existence. Individuals find themselves caught in crossfires that force them to join the nearest militia to protect themselves. New groups emerge to liberate territories only to be taken by other groups, one overcoming the other, while innocent

populations suffer conditions outside their control. The meaning of this play emerges in the protagonist Basel's running in a flow of political and military currents that are beyond his understanding, until it is no longer possible to run.



*Amer Hlehel as Basel in Hoota, directed and designed by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Photo credit: Saeed Qaq. Courtesy of Amer Hlehel.*



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The play opens with Basel as an eighth grader who attempts to impress the students in his class and the girls in his neighborhood by conquering the deep hole, Hoota, that lies just outside his village. His gamble on this dangerous once-in-a-lifetime adventure leads to immeasurable joy, success, fame, gossip, and consequences. But Basel's childhood of lovingly memorized poetry, folktales, childish behavior, and village rumors quickly becomes a nostalgic memory as a war overtakes his region—which is unnamed, standing in for devastation in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Eastern Europe. As Basel grows older, he identifies the contemporaneous historical junctures that mark battle-ravaged sites, while maintaining the anonymity of his village, thus turning Basel into an 'everyman' wrecked by continuous destruction and unending rebellion. The protagonist finds himself in the midst of

fighters, more fighters, other fighters, and then newfangled fighters who become different fighters; he participates or not, as needed to survive.



*Amer Hlehel as Basel in Hoota, directed and designed by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Photo credit: Saeed Qaq. Courtesy of Amer Hlehel.*

The genius of the play manifests in Hlehel's commitment to the theoretical premise that vicious inter-population conflict, even when supported by imperial powers, requires, at its core, a human being to pull the trigger against another, both being in a similar position regardless of the

ideology underpinning their political factions. He leaves the cause of war outside the journey and transcends the political and economic material circumstance to focus on the mechanism that sustains the destructive impulse: survival. Basel is handed a gun by an unknown faction while being shot at. He shoots back at an equally unknown faction. Once saved by a faction, he must belong and, at times, participate. The condition of war on the ground is an unrelenting current, and all factions want the same thing: to stop it. The author conceptualizes a world that is familiar to its audience, then applies a theoretical situation of “kill or be killed,” and allows the protagonist to respond to a constantly changing situation, where the power structure shifts, cycling through common political ideologies: Marxist, democratic, Leninist, radical, extremist, fundamentalist, and religious. The only common factor in all of them is individuals pulling the trigger of a handgun.



*Amer Hlehel as Basel in Hoota, directed and designed by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Photo credit: Saeed Qaq. Courtesy of Amer Hlehel.*

The production relies on Hlehel's ability to function as narrator, holding the audience's attention as the story moves from the village into the mire of factional warfare. Like a skilled storyteller, he directly addresses the audience, transitioning them from one event to another. As he grips the listener with a vocally consistent and clear narrative, he embodies the characters in each scene, characterizing them with individualized physical and vocal qualities and distinct personalities. Playing characters ranging from schoolchildren to determined militants, Hlehel presents people who interact during peaceful times, followed by unforgiving times of disorder and turmoil.



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Director and designer Nizar Amir Zuabi represents the hole with a cloth that captures dark ink-like liquid as the gory events of the play shed innocent and guilty blood alike. The uneven liquid progressively becomes a marker of time and increasing bloodshed, unpredictable but salient. Muaz Jubeh's lights paint the white cloth with an expressive backdrop, matching the intensity of stage events and symbolically gesturing to various political factions as it changes color. Summer King's suspenseful music tells the story of a world upended against its will, guiding the audience's emotional state. Zuabi's streamlined concept intelligently illustrates the world of the play while rightfully spotlighting the spine of this production, the solo performer. Underneath Hoota's stab at universality, the foundational Arab context of its makers will always haunt its viewer and its host theater. Most countries mentioned in the play are majority Arab. The play's title, Hoota, gestures to a natural site in Syria's Raqqa, where ISIS once discarded dead bodies. To an Arab audience that carefully follows the struggles of their people in neighboring countries over the past few decades, contextual references abound to news from the field, to stories of siblings on opposite sides and once-peaceful neighbors losing all trust. To a Palestinian audience that has witnessed the ebbs and flows of factional politics and the rise and fall of organized militias, Hoota strikes a deep emotional chord. To all audiences, the durable cycle of violence, by no means senseless but by all means cruelly self-fueling, is unmistakable. At the 'Wein a Ramallah' festival in Palestine, Hoota is a one-person performance accompanied by a mental newsreel from familiar civil wars and invasions and the ongoing destruction of Arab lives in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Libya. This newsreel also recalls Palestine's painful past and present, Lebanon's civil war, Syria's recent carnage, and Iraq's devastation over three decades. No doubt, this reel matches the image-world of the author and creative team.



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The breathtaking seventy-minute performance at the Ramallah Municipality theater was met with a well-deserved standing ovation. Hlehel's marathon performance departs from his previous one-person show, *Taha* (2014), which carried a more moderate pace that relied on a combination of paced poetry and a dash of conceptual magical realism. *Hoota* begins as a recognizable tale but quickly spins out of control, leaving the audience and the performer breathless. The running motif and accompanying pattern of switching sides create a staccato rhythm: rapid, unstable, shifting, and unpredictable. The violence of the situation depicted on stage places the audience in the situation of the characters in the play, begging for it to end, only to be disappointed by another historical turn and the reinvigoration of the cycle. The structure and performance of the play thus match their spoken content like a burning star, its hellish blaze almost never-ending. To watch *Hoota* is to enter the nightmare and accept that it is ours: inescapably, we are both the killer and the corpse.

**Reviewed by Samer Al-Saber  
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