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ART AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE – PANEL DISCUSSION (TRANSCRIPT)

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Following the play “*The keepers of infinite space*” at [Park Theatre](#) (Park 90), Clifton Terrace, Finsbury Park, London.

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Cultural Resistance – A panel discussion

A panel discussion on how art can respond to and challenge oppression
6 February 2014

- **MS:** Momin Swaitat (Actor, Freedom Theatre Palestine)
- **ZL:** Zoe Lafferty (Associate Director, Freedom Theatre Palestine)
- **AA:** Atef Alshaer (SOAS Research Fellow and translator)

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- **RB:** Rana Baker (SOAS Palestinian citizen journalist)
- **SD:** Selma Dabbagh (Palestinian novelist and playwright)
- **CR:** Caroline Rooney: Global Uncertainties Leadership Fellow



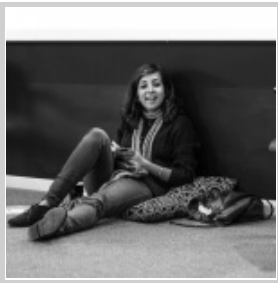
Momin Swaitat (Actor, Freedom Theatre Palestine). Image courtesy plus.google.com



Zoe Lafferty (Associate Director, Freedom Theatre Palestine). Image courtesy ZoeLafferty.com



Atef Alshaer (SOAS Research Fellow and translator). Image courtesy poetrytranslation.org



Rana Baker (SOAS, Palestinian citizen journalist). Image courtesy plus.google.com



Selma Dabbagh (Palestinian novelist and playwright). Image courtesy SelmaDabbagh.com



Caroline Rooney (Global Uncertainties Leadership Fellow). Image courtesy kent.ac.uk

Transcript of “Art and Cultural Resistance” – panel

Duration: 47:06 mins

ZL: Thank you so much everyone for staying behind; I know it's been a long evening and I know that you're up against the Tube strike... so thank you. I'm Zoe, I directed the play and I will be facilitating this evening although please think up any questions and maybe you guys can introduce yourselves and what it is you do?

MS: Hi. My name is Momin, I'm from Jenin and I'm an actor from the Freedom Theatre.

AA: My name is Atef Alshaer, I'm from Gaza and I work in... [cell phone rings, laughter] This is part of the act! [laughter] Sorry... My

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name's Atef, and I'm from Gaza and I teach at SOAS [in the Department of the Languages and Cultures of Near and Middle East]

RB: My name's Rana Baker and I'm from Gaza and I'm doing my master's at SOAS.

SB: I'm Selma Dabbagh. I'm from a mixture between Palestine and England, I grew up in the Gulf. I'm also a novelist and a playwright, and I've worked as a lawyer as well.

CR: I'm Caroline Rooney, I'm with the Global Uncertainties Programme, the research programme.

ZL: And I think, it's really interesting to say that [indistinguishable] forum? [indistinguishable] cultural resistance was an idea I first learned about at the Freedom Theatre [indistinguishable shouting] and so why don't we start off by introducing everyone to what you feel cultural resistance means and where you learnt about that idea.

MS: OK, that's a very interesting question.... OK, I think cultural resistance this is an idea [that] start[s] from 2006, with Juliano Mer-Khamis, who [comes] from a Jewish-Israeli mother and a Christian-Palestinian father. He [came] to Jenin refugee camp to start the Freedom Theatre when that was a time, to sign between the Israeli government and the Palestinian PA [indistinguishable].

So... cultural resistance...we LOST the Second Intifada, we LOST public opinion, we LOST as a Palestinian, so we took to start in a new venue, from a new platform, which is theatre, music, poetry, cinema... [All of this] is going to help, to bring back, that we are not terrorists. We are human, who's looking for a life, who's looking to survive...and by doing theatre and showing the story, we thought that, OK, we find a level that we can talk with the international people, to start to believe in us again, after this huge war machine by the Israeli with propaganda.

Cultural resistance for me is to stand on the stage, and to fight against [the] war machine. This is for me what is cultural resistance, to get a new generation of hope, after we lost our hope, we lost our home, we lost the way... We lost the nation. Cultural resistance [brings] back those things, who we are, where we are, what we want to be, where we want to be, where we want to go... and which people we want to be...

I'm so glad, so happy, Zoe decided to do this play with the British actor and British director to find a level to speak to the British

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audience.

ZL: Selma... Forgive me if I'm wrong; your novels are inspired by, for instance, the idea of cultural resistance?

SD: Well that's not really a term I had in my mind when I wrote; I think when you write, you can start off with really huge political plans...or objectives [indistinguishable] the closer I got to my characters it actually more that I was keen to push out any big picture plans for what I was going to achieve in my work and I thought were more limited in terms of what I thought, in terms of worlds I was creating and how the characters were related to each other I was quite... actually I went to these places working a big scheme where I was trying to write this huge Palestinian novel which covered the whole history, that's what I was trying to write, and then I went down and down to trying to write just one issue, that maybe that was, I thought, I could contribute in terms of seeing really something about political consciousness and how it connects Palestinians on the Diaspora and inside, and the different groups and refugee groups 'cause I was very interested in how Palestinians had been divided up. I studied this as a lawyer; there are different ways of being chalked apart and separated from each other. So I was trying to look at something which connects them. What's individual, emotional responses to the cause wherever you are, in the Gulf, or in the States, wherever you might've ended up, in Gaza.

So I had one idea that I was working around my characters. I think...I found that the writing space itself had to be more connected to the characters and then sometimes when you're re-writing, you're trying to look at big picture messages or possible implications of things, and trying to look at it in those terms.

I have...I work on Palestine and Israel as a lawyer as well and I also do my writing. And I think with all of these things, with art as a form of resistance, is very important [indistinguishable] kind of how much you can set yourself out as an artist, and how many messages you can convey can sometimes, has to be quite limited. Although very effective in the way, for example, they came across tonight.

ZL: [To Rana Baker] Maybe you can tell us a little bit about your inspirations for your work?

RB: Basically, before I talk about cultural resistance, just to make clear, than when I talk about cultural resistance, it doesn't mean that I condemn by any means armed struggle, because I believe that it's the right of the Palestinian people, and I strongly believe in armed

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struggle. Another point before I kick into that, is that cultural resistance in Palestine did not start in 2006. It obviously started well before 2006; we have a lot of examples if we look at Palestinian history and Palestinian collections and forms of art and cultural resistance that they produced. I think that is undeniable and so to say that it started in 2006 is a huge reduction I believe. Just quick examples that I sort of gave and people that inspire me, so that leads nicely into what I wanted to say, people that inspire me are [Ghada Karmi?], Edward Said obviously, and [Hussan Qadufathi?] and these people were born and struggled a lot a lot before 2006.

MS: What I say 2006, it means, it has reached me as a generation in Jenin. Until then, I never heard about Edward Said because I was busy dealing with this huge war machine in Jenin. I'm not going to go for Edward Said, or Mahmoud Darwish. So I found Juliano [Mer-Khamis], who's Jewish-Palestinian, who's come and bring me this idea, and this is for me as a normal guy, I'm from Jenin refugee camp, this is started in 2006.

RB: Yes but we studied Mahmoud Darwish in school, it's in the books... so we know all about him. So right... what I want to say in my explanation is that people that really inspire my work are Edward Said [and ??], so I really channelled into academia, so I like these people and I try to really look into their ideas. And I think that I myself like to talk more about, that I like to express other form of cultural resistance is actually talking about the past because the past is NOT dead as for example, [?] liberal Zionists like to say. So for me, cultural resistance is mainly looking back at the past, trying to recover the past. SO if we look at Israel as a settler-colonial state, it's not only a war machine going on there, it's also a cultural and historical erasure project. And that's what's happening in Palestine.

[For example] I went to Yaffa [Yaffo/Jaffa] last August, I got the chance to go there, and when I went there I saw first-hand, how this history machine, history erasure, this erasure of history works. So if you look at Yaffa, there are lots of places that have completely changed. So you really walk and look for Arab traces, and you rarely find any. That something I feel we should talk about more., talk about Yaffa, collect stories from people who lived there, people who worked there, who had family and were eventually kicked out in 1948.

So for me, cultural resistance is looking back at the history, we collect the history rather than saying, "Let's look into the future". I mean we have to look at the future but we also have to understand that the past and the present are tied together. We can't really break them from each other because how we see the past is informed by

our present. And vice versa, and that is something that Edward Said wrote a lot about so I'm half-quoting him now. These are not my own ideas, just to cite [his writing]. That's it.

CR: After, you work at SOAS teaching poetry. What role do you see that, in terms of resistance? I know that it involves some of the ambiguities and ambivalences that someone was talking about, and maybe you can say something about that. And I know particularly that you've been working on poetry for Hamas, which I find very interesting, if you can say something.

AA: In Palestinian poetry, in a way, particularly the diverse experience of the Palestinians at the individual level and the collective level. I think for some, whichever walk of life the Palestinian comes from, they have shared references which are very visible in their poetry and their work. But they also have individual experiences which are also present in their work.

I think some Palestinian poets, they are vanguard Palestinian poets, such as, Mahmoud Darwish... start to think poetry as having, in certain words, as existential and humanist terms. But the fact of thinking of these terms, humanism and existentialism, you couldn't just be outside of context. So in a way how to make poetry that is of humanist dimensions but also poetry that speak to the moment that derives its inspiration from what's happening ... because what is happening is abnormal.

And in that sense, you can not just turn your back on what's happening. And that's one dimension of Palestinian poetry, which at least in the later stage of it, such as Mahmoud Darwish, and in that sense, the combination of poetry as an aesthetic form of expression and all the standing static form of expression Arab [have] and connecting it with the question of tradition and the question of modernity, which are very serious questions that many poets from the Arab world have grappled with. Also Palestinian poets such as Mahmoud Darwish have seriously incorporated and dealt with it and contributed. So it's somehow gone beyond Palestine and it is still also incorporating Palestine, so in a way, asking bigger questions than just poetic resistance and sometimes the limited sense that it's understood.

On the other hand, other poets, such as [that of] Hamas poetry....I've studied the leaders of Hamas, and the leaders of Hamas, most of them have written poetry that might not be known and most of them have produced poetry, and also they continue to do so.

And actually their poetry is also fascinating. On the one hand, it's obviously the visibility of ideology inspired by religious ideology is quite there, it's quite prominent. But in the other hand, also you see very individual moments. Such as, it was fascinating in the play, there was one moment in the play, where the husband ask his wife to stay for one moment, because it's so precious. That actually is one poem that was expressed by a Palestinian Hamas leader [Ibrahim al-liqaitha?] who was assassinated by Israel in 2003. Exactly in these terms, how precious [is] that moment in prison. He's speaking about his experience in prison. And also [Abdel Abduratissi?] who was assassinated by Israel in 2004. Both of them wrote from prison about their experience.

And then there is, of course, poetry that has a sense of ideological closure. So these certain diverse experiences between the collective and individual, between the national and international, are serious questions that find manifestation in Palestinian poetry in general. And there is also sometimes it's startling, it's beautiful, it has a political message, it has a humanist message. It's also time, it's timeless. It has a lot of good qualities, it depends on the hands of which writer poetry [?] somehow.

ZL: Does anyone have any questions?

(Male audience 1.) I've just come down from Manchester for this, I'm at Manchester University studying Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies and this is the exact topic for my dissertation. So I have quite a lot of questions [audience laughter]

I thought the play was amazing as well. I've been doing a lot of reading, and the term "cultural Intifada" has come up, quite a bit, it's been in use by people in Israeli media, by academics, by activists and I was wondering what you guys thought of the term "cultural intifada" and whether you see various forms of cultural resistance, whether it's films, documentaries, poetry, theatre, if you see them culminate in some sort of bigger picture which we could call "intifada" or do you think they're sort of isolated?

MS: This time I can relate to [the question] myself. Cultural intifada start and the word the first time has been mentioned in Freedom Theatre. Not because I'm from Freedom Theatre; not because I don't because I do respect Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said, I respect all these people. But let me allow myself just for one minute.

When Juliano established the Freedom Theatre that was in 2006, and then many people if you look at, learn about the history of the

Freedom Theatre, which started in the first Intifada with the Stone Theatre. All of the group of the actors, they were either in Fatah, Hamas, or Islamic Jihad and all them got killed. And Juliano came after in the Second Intifada and he opened the Freedom Theatre. And then most of the people, again who joined the Theatre, they was with their weapon. And they put their weapon inside and they joined the theatre. And then this is what started the idea of “cultural intifada”. We are not giving up the weapon; we are using the weapon in a different way.

Which I still believe in a normal weapon, in M16. But M16 need somebody to lead for it, not just M16 within Hamas hands or in Fatah’s hands, which I’m against all. I’m against Hamas, I’m against Fatah, I’m against Palestinian PA...against Israel. I’m fighting all in one time [at once]. At the same time I still believe in weapons, because this huge war machine, it doesn’t need Mahmoud Darwish poetry to talk.

[audience laughter]

I know about how much Palestinian love Mahmoud Darwish. Everything they put, Mahmoud Darwish, Mahmoud Darwish, Mahmoud Darwish... I’m not going to put Mahmoud Darwish poetry when the helicopter comes to assassinate Frantissi[?]. I find myself to, when I come here on this stage, and talk to you people, as a Palestinian who lives this struggle, which it was in its highest level of violence in the Second Intifada, and now I find myself I can talk. This is the revolution, this is the Intifada we are talking about, not Darwish not the [Palace?], not nothing.

The new generation, we need to build up, THIS... what the Israeli war have destroyed in Palestine. We need to build. We have no time to look in the past, we need to go for war. We have no time to go for that. Because there is a new generation are growing up under Hamas, Fatah and Islamic Jihad and I love when you say that it’s not about the Occupation anymore, that it’s about Palestinian inside themselves.

RB: I said that? I didn’t say that!

AA: Nobody said that...

ZL: You said that!

MS: OK I’m saying that, I’m in a time in which I can’t fight this Israeli practical, technical enough. Which is they are very intelligent.

I have no time to fight this war machine. So I need to find a way, I need to build up my new generation to know how to face this huge propaganda by the Israeli....

ZL: [to MS] We need everyone to respond....

[audience voice in Arabic - "nuqta ou satr ijdeed" which translates " [put a] period [on it] and a new sentence"]

MS: Ok sorry, what I was going to say, This is what I'm saying, this is the Intifada to me as a Palestinian from Jenin camp, to put the weapon and come talk to you and to talk to the rest of the world what happened with us.

AA: I think there's a lot in there. [audience laughter] I think basically this [for] Palestinians, that culture can not be separated from politics. No sort of cultural intifada, political intifada. We have to look at it as a holistic thing. I think culture in terms in art, there has always been artistic expression manifestation of the political in Palestine. That is likely to continue now that the novel is gaining ground, more than poetry, though poetry is still there and I believe it will always be there in one form or another. But the novel is also gaining ground.

And it is very interesting that Palestinians have, in the last two decades or so, [that] so many art forms have come to the fore, and gained international attention. And it's really refreshing, so many voices and so many really wonderful works such as this one that we saw tonight. Hopefully that it will grow but it doesn't exclude the political work, the struggle in general, the cause of liberation, the discussion as to how this cause of liberation has to be handled, which can not be just in one form; it has to be inclusive and hopefully it will be so. And this artistic artwork, output, will continue and meanwhile, political struggle, there will be debate about it. If there is Intifada, it will be Intifada INTIFADA, whether it's violent, or what [form of] violence it will take, that's another thing... and I don't know what else to say...

24:00

RB: So I think it's really important how we use [the term] "intifada" and how we are saying "cultural intifada" because not everything is "cultural intifada" and we have to be aware of that. Because recently, there has been a lot of people speaking on behalf of the Palestinians as if Palestinians can not speak for themselves. And that has been included in the category of what constitutes a "cultural intifada" and we should be aware of how we actually use the term.

On the other hand, when we say “intifada”, we should think about or deconstruct the binary between the violence and non-violence because it’s not either ‘a violent Intifada’ or a “non-violent Intifada’. Because if you look at the two Palestinian Intifadas in 1987, and then in 2000, they were both working hand-in-hand, they were both working together. So there were people throwing stones, there were people who were carrying M16s, which I strongly believe in.

And there were also people who were doing a lot of artwork, who were poets, who were writers and intellectuals, who were trying to speak out, articulate things. I believe this is the role of the intellectual the artist the poet, is to articulate the vision for the future. And that vision for the future is not separate from the past and the past informs the future and vice versa.

This is Palestinians. This is something to be aware of, that it’s not a binary opposition between violence and non-violence. Both of them go hand-in-hand. So when Israel is bombing Gaza, for example, we don’t expect somebody with a guitar singing. Right? So that is something that is also logical. There is some logic to the meaning as well.

SD: I have a couple things to say. One, I’d be quite interested to know about non-Palestinians representing Palestine and problems with that...because I don’t have [a problem with that] because I think it doesn’t really matter where the person is from at all; it’s what they’re saying, and who they’re talking to and how it’s being said. As long as they’ve done their research and are being responsible in themselves for saying things, then I’m very happy for them to do so.

That’s one thing. The other thing is, I think there are quite a few strictures that get put on the artist, not saying any one artist in a very grand sense, but I think bearing witness to the past is very important because it’s constantly being taken away from us, but we have to still have the freedom to be inventive with it, and creative with it. In terms of the future, I think, yes the vision of the future can be very positive, and I think the work of [Ilis Sulemien?] as a filmmaker is quite inspirational, it’s very exploratory, it’s very playful, it’s got kind of optimism in it which I love.

But also I think there can be something in art, and I think since 2006, in this new era, I think there is this ability of the Palestinian artist to be really interrogative, and challenging of their own authority and their own society, in a way which you couldn’t really [before], which wasn’t happening. I’m not in favour of Oslo, but I think that’s one of the only positives since Oslo, is that we’ve become much more self-

critical as well. And I think that's coming through in the art forms.

And also I think that art has this very important, very non-political role, of just creating a space, where you can find solace, of people who have gone through a similar experience to yourself. And just having that little space, as well as an imaginative space, I think is, in situations which are, can be very difficult... It's a key thing to keep you going for other things. So a poem about a flower is just as relevant as something more [?]-based.

CR: Perhaps I'll cut in now...Towards the end of the year, I went to Jihad prisoner's museum at Abu Dis. The prisoners art, what struck me about it, that a lot of art was being made in the prisons, a lot of it [were images] was of ships, horses, and deserts... they were all images of freedom, not of confinement, they weren't depicting the prison situation. And I was reading a bit about how prisoners cope, especially ones in solitary confinement, they all speak about how they use their imagination, that is what got them through. It wasn't anger or anything...it was like, imagine yourself out of there.

(Female audience 1): I think we need to be more careful about we use the term "cultural resistance" because not everything that a Palestinian artist does is necessarily "cultural resistance".

The thing that you're talking about is that after 2006, there was a rise in the NGO movement, and doing Palestinian culture became "trendy", so they started to get funding from foreign aid, and in response, Palestinian artists started to create art that was very, very interesting and appealing to the global West, but did not know anything about the situation. Not many artists in Palestine create art for Palestinians, and the biggest example of that is the signs that are used in performances and in artworks. With the very example that you just said of the Abu Jihad Museumm (which I went to a panel about it just a few months before we came). And you know what people said? Is that they went there, and they were really confused. Because there's this rotating door that you're supposed go through and it's supposed to signify prison, or it's supposed to give you the feeling of being in prison. But people were really, really confused because you go through them at checkpoints all the time.

So I think the question that we're supposed to be asking is, "What is culture resistance?" and "who is it cultural resistance for?" Is it to educate foreigners, that we're going to wait for the whole time so that they can come and save us? Is that what it's for? And why is nobody creating art for Palestinians in signs and a language that they understand? Is that not important?

ZL: I feel like that one was at me [laughter] which I am very happy to answer to...because I agree with what you're saying.

My personal journey was an alien from space. I met Juliano in New York, and he said come work at the Theatre, and I said fine, I knew nothing but I think you're an incredibly interesting man and let's go! And through that, I went through many journeys and learning and trying to listen, to understand.

I absolutely 101% agree with you that one of the main problems, and probably one of the first things that I ever brought back to Britain was the fact that the NGO community is causing chaos and that's that. And I think that we absolutely need to look to ourselves and myself, in the damage and destruction that we cause not only in Palestine but in many, many countries where we've caused destruction in the first place, and we've come back with this kind of idea of saving and rescuing.

I hope we did touch on that in this play!

(female audience 1): That's what I was going to say, because nobody even talked about that...and the thing is...

ZL: And I think we DID touch on it in this play, and we didn't let ourselves off too much. However, I would agree that we are focusing on kind of, a Palestinian within an Israeli prison, but I hope we didn't let ourselves off the hook...

(female audience 1): No! I don't think so! But I think that's exactly something that's also present in the play as well. Like in the first section about Rawabi, they say the guy who was formerly in the resistance, and then he started to... he basically sold out because he wanted to do something profitable. But I don't think NGO workers are any different...

ZL: No, no, I agree!

(female audience 1): Because it's very profitable...

ZL: I think that we can talk about greed and it's an EPIC conversation, and internationals and foreigners, which I am, I'm not trying to pretend to have an Palestinian blood in me... I don't [?]. I don't hide

(female audience 1): BUt it doesn't matter who you are, because it's exactly what she [Dabbagh] said before, it's what you do...

ZL: But, I think that I felt I very very personally responsible to tell the story, not only because I'm very aware of British history in Palestine, which is why I was interested to go, but also through Juliano of the Freedom Theatre, who's been arrested because of the consequences of our work. And I think that apart from the fact there was initiation [?] and Omar and blah blah blah..

Because actually this is a story that British people need to be aware of. And hopefully we have light on it, and this is not a situation that is so dissimilar from Guantanamo Bay etc. This is a world that we're all involved in...I'm not quite sure what the conclusion is, the point is...

AA: I think we shouldn't conflate some issues here, which is art, and that some people are trying to appeal to an international audience and write for an international audience and excluding Palestinians. I think art has its own parameters, it's own chemistry and demands. And I think we should not castigate artists who take these demands into consideration. And this is where the greatness of somebody like Mahmoud Darwish comes in really... because he's able to incorporate a variety of elements which art somehow itself can embody, the fact that it's inclusive. It's not exclusive. That's the dimension that we should not forget.

We're not just trying to reach Palestinian audience but also Palestinians, they have diverse experiences, and some of their experiences [?] also any experience anywhere else. So the issue of NGO's for example is an issue worldwide. There are problems in Africa, problem in many places. In Syria, now should we talk about political humanitarian issue? The thinking is we should be more, we should give space to the capacity of art to be inclusive, to be local as well as international.

I think somebody like Mahmoud Darwish, who here I disagree with [Momin's], perhaps maybe not too positive sentiments about it. I think he [Darwish] was great in actually incorporating various elements, that art itself requires, the moment itself requires, the fact that his ambition requires, his language requires, the subjects of language itself. All these are serious questions that can't just be brushed away because of political sensibility here and there.

This is what art is much more giving, is much more, as Selma said, it's a space, the capacity of art to give a space for a new one. Which the Palestinians need...

MS: I just want to add [one] small thing....that you say, that we must do an art or theatre which deal with the Palestinians, which the

Palestinian can see ...

(female audience 1): Yes so that they can understand....

MS: Exactly... this is what we need [is] theatre in Jenin. People never saw theatre in their life. Me myself, I never saw theatre before Juliano, which [is] what I'm talking about...generation [after] generation...no theatre there OK? So theatre for me now is in Jenin, The Freedom Theatre, it's the most important thing to be there [in Jenin] because theatre brings back new colour. It colours the situation in different colour after all [that has] happened.

To have a theatre, children [when] they saw theatre for the first time, they get like a butterfly, they get like [mimes fear]. [When] the lights turn off in the theatre the first time, before they settled, when the light turned off, children start to scream because for them light turned off is death. It means to them that Israeli tank is coming, [makes tank rumbling noise]. For them, this is what means [when] the light [is] turned off. And then when the light turned off, they start to scream. Then when the light turned on again, and the show starts, which is for the first time, they were like shocked. Children were, like, oh my God [makes amazed/happy face]. It's very easy to create a theatre.

It's very easy to create an actor, but it's very difficult to create an audience.

So this is one of our [biggest] obstacles... I was kicked out from my family home, because I want to study theatre. People used to throw stones at me, on my way to the theatre. Zoe, how many stones did you have? [audience laughter] Please tell them, c'mon...

ZL: Yes, but I don't...

MS: You know what I mean? So a theatre there is not an easy thing, and we built it, we built it from scratch...we built the [?] building there, this is not easy. This is not Mahmoud Darwish again [audience laughter]

ZL: I think we've got that point [indistinguishable]

RB: Can I just say something? I'm sorry to say that, you know, just don't take it personally...but I'm totally against painting a picture of the Palestinians as, you know, people who would throw stones on people who create things, because otherwise we would never have any theatres in Palestine, you know? Yet these incidents DO happen,

but I think probably what you're saying, is you're putting it, in, you're de-contextualising it and you're talking about the rigidity(?). But I think it's just very important to say what and how and where. Just put a context into that, because otherwise you're actually reinforcing the difficult image of the Palestinian or the Arab. And I think that this is...

CR: But he's talking about his experience, his individual experience... and I've been to Jenin theatre and it's quite [indistinguishable, audience reacts]

RB: That's what I'm saying, I'm saying that these incidents DO happen. But it is important to put them into context, that's what I'm saying.

[indistinguishable, audience reacts]

(female audience 1): If you really want to put them into context, we need to ask ourselves the question, of why there is that rejection of the theatre? Because it as art form that is not common. It does not a part of culture...it is not...

MS: That is not true!

(female audience 1): Wait, let me finish... because the kind, not theatre in general, but the kind of performance in the way that it is done, and in the way that it's alienating. Before, if you actually look at performances that used to take place in the 1960s, it's very different. People in Palestine are not used to going to a performance and being silent. They interact, they get up, they clap.

Why did nobody create theatre in which clapping takes place? Do you want to know why not? Because people don't get funding to do that!

RB: We get our funding [indistinguishable]

ZL: If I could just make sense... just to understand the last point being as in, there's not funding for theatre in Palestine where people can clap...?

(female audience 1): No. There is no funding for the kind of theatre that is socio-culturally appropriate to the Palestinian people. Because that's not what gets [funding].

ZL: What is "socio-conscious" mean?

(female audience 1) Socio-cultural context? How you understand things, incorporating signs that are part of people's reality.

ZL: [to MS] Do people clap and scream and cry and enjoy any performances that you've done in Jenin?

MS: Of course!

AA: In fact, in fact, what he said, it's right, it's wonderful, to have that personal experience, I think it's a great thing. But I think to say in fact that there's not theatre for Palestinians. In fact, in Gaza... [indistinguishable] it's exactly what you do...

RB: I know, I come from Gaza!

AA: It's not well-known, but it's just as entertaining, as amazing as you can think of. It might be amazing for [?], or [?] an amazing Palestinian writer wrote theatre. I mean there are so many Palestinians who wrote theatre. It's not like the theatre in Jenin which has acquired such attention, which is rightly so. [Juliano Mer Khamis's] extraordinary effort should not be undermined... should not be excluded, but I'm saying there are also other pictures. Trying to focus on this as the only thing that is happening. It's quite reductive.

ZL: I think that's interesting about what you're saying...

[indistinguishable audience muttering, panel talking amongst themselves]

ZL: Guys, we're going to have to stop in a few minutes, we're going to get kicked out...

MS: I just have one thing to say...

ZL: Quickly, quickly! Let's take one more question...otherwise we're going to get kicked out in a minute.

MS: Just quickly, just quickly... I'm just going to say two things, which is, that I'm so happy to have this conversation because we need to touch people, I need to touch from the side, which is really nice... [audience laughter]

ZL: We're going to have a question next...

MS: OK I have a question [to RB] As a girl from Gaza, it would be a

theatre show in Gaza, and you are an actor. We have a scene together, we have to hold hands, or just do something, I don't know. Does your family allow you to do something [like this]?

RB: Oh yes. Can I just explain something? You're definitely...that's what I'm talking about, you're generalising people in Palestine [indistinguishable] you're making these statements. I am sorry that is so absurd, you're definitely reducing it. I am a Muslim, forgive me this personal information. I am Muslim, I grew up isolated Muslim girl in a Christian school. I danced dabke [traditional dance] with my male classmates.

MS: Oh c'mon, dabke again?

RB: Next to whom I was sitting... and we held hands while we were dancing. And we'd have all these romantic relations. I mean I was in love with some of my male classmates, and it was fine, you know? And that was after 2007, that was after Hamas took control. So what I am saying is that are incidents, there is SOME stoning that happens, there are SOME cultural forms that are not accepted.

MS: There is nothing accepted in Gaza!

ZL: [to MS] No, no, don't keep... let her...

RB: But we should put that into context, that is all that I'm saying, is just put things into context. So that things are purely spoken.

CR: [to MS] Wasn't that your point about the audience, about how to create an audience?

ZL: [to audience] May we have your question please?

(female audience 2): Having seen this play and then this panel discussion about cultural resistance, I think it's really important to have. Yeah, this is sort of epic discussion. And just to add something; actually, I do know that the prisoners themselves would actually perform Shakespeare in the jails. So that's something, in the 80s, I know that's something that wasn't uncommon, to entertain themselves and occupy their minds and whatever else, as cultural resistance. My question is in regards to the play itself....and the...

ZL: If I knew your question was coming to me, I wouldn't have asked... [audience laughter]

(female audience 2): It's not going to be difficult, hopefully not. If

you could just maybe elaborate more on how you guys incorporated this really fascinating way, imaginative way, of resistance, through the smuggling of sperm.

ZL: We didn't imagine it! It's happening! I think in terms of the play, we wanted to look at Saeed's resistance.... who is not...I mean in terms of let's talk about stereotyping, you can have many many stereotypes about Palestinians, and I wanted to look at someone who is very much getting on with his life, he's involved in books, he's teaching young people and blah-blah-blah...and look at his idea of resistance, which was ultimately to have, to continue, and have a child, and make the most important connection again which is with his wife.

And to look at that idea, the importance of family, which I so often think, just gets forgotten when you talk about politics, arms, and this and that. But the thing that is most important of all is family. And I think that was why we were (when I say we, I mean me and Omar and Caroline) which is why we were so interested in the idea of what he [Saeed] would do to keep that family together, which for him was the most important thing. And looking at how to get [?] into this world. And I think that family is a human need, love and a child. And kind of go that's what's important to him [Saeed]. That's what he's fighting for.

And I think, although I'm the only English person on the panel, I think that it's something that is, a reason that all of this is going on, what people want, family and freedom and basic human right which we take often very much for granted here. So I think that's why we were so interested in that. And it is true, 40 babies I think?

(female audience 2): Did that come like...because the discussion they [Saeed and his wife] were having at first, she was resistant, and he said, "No, we need to do this". Did that come from interviews that you'd done with people, prisoners who'd done this?

ZL: It's actually very hard... I did, not so much interviews, but just talking to friends, who'd been through this situation, and actually, none of them had smuggled their sperm out, so I couldn't ask them. So that material was just read about. To be honest, it came from improvisation between two British people. We kind of said, Right, scene is, you've got this idea, wife's coming to visit, you've got to kind of translate that idea. And no one goes, "By the way darling, I'm going to smuggle you my sperm." It just didn't seem a realistic scene. So that's kind of how it came about, through the actor's improvisation.

I think we might need to end there. Thank you so much, to this panel....[applause]

[end transcript]

More links and Information

- [“The Keepers of Infinite Space” at Park Theatre](#)
- Read my [review of “The Keepers of infinite space” here](#) - [kelise72.com](#)
- [Freedom Theatre](#), Jenin, West Bank/Palestine
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