

Mousa Nazzal, Hamza Al-Bakri and Dia Barghouti

Interview with Laween Palestinian Cooperative: Theatre in the Time of Genocide

Laween is among several Palestinian theatre cooperatives established over the last decade, which have not received sufficient attention from theatre scholars. Born out of the struggle of living under Israeli apartheid, the repression of the Palestinian Authority, and alienation from NGO theatres, whose work has been depoliticized by reliance on foreign funding, the emergence of these theatre cooperatives represents a significant change in the Palestinian cultural landscape. Working with a renewed cultural and political consciousness, Laween seeks to reflect collectively on, and resist the various forms of oppression experienced by, the Palestinian community. The ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, together with Israeli military and settler violence in the West Bank, make it more pertinent than ever to rethink what 'cultural resistance' means in the Palestinian context and to give attention to the community initiatives grappling with the brutal realities of ethnic cleansing through art. The interview here with two of the founding members of Laween, Mousa Nazzal and Hamza Al-Bakri, discusses the development, challenges, and envisaged future of this Palestinian theatre cooperative.

Mousa Nazzal is a freelance theatre artist who combines acting, directing, and workshops in interactive drama, clowning, and devised theatre. He is co-founder of the Laween Initiative for Community Expression, a member of al-Basta Theatre Collective, and works as a medical care clown with Red Noses Palestine.

Hamza Al-Bakri is a PhD candidate in Palestine studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. He is a board member of the Al-Mada Association for Social Change through Creative Arts and co-founder of the Laween Theatre Initiative for Community Expression in Palestine.

Dia Barghouti is a playwright and researcher based in Palestine. Her work on indigenous performance practices in Tunisia and Palestine has been published in, among other journals, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Performance Research*, *Jadaliyya*, and *Bab el-Wad*. As well as supplying its introduction, she has also translated the following interview from the Arabic.

Key terms: Palestinian theatre, art cooperatives, cultural resistance, NGO theatres, social change.

Introduction

The ongoing Israeli genocide in the Gaza Strip, which began in October 2023, has killed over 43,000 Palestinians (more than 16,765 of them children), injured more than 101,000 people, and displaced over 85 per cent of Gaza's population.¹ Those who have not been killed or imprisoned by the Israeli military suffer from lack of access to medical services, food, and clean water. Israel's refusal to allow humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip has led to the death of patients with treatable

diseases such as cancer and diabetes due to lack of access to treatment. Shortage of medications has forced doctors to amputate, after bombing, the limbs of patients, including children, without anaesthesia in emergency life-saving procedures. Lack of access to clean water and food, because of the Israeli siege, has led to the proliferation of skin diseases and starvation, creating one of the worst humanitarian situations in the history of the region.

Meanwhile, Israeli aggressions in the West Bank continue to escalate with over

700 Palestinians murdered by the Israeli army and illegal Israeli settlers and more than 6,250 injured.² There has also been a substantial increase in the number of Palestinians imprisoned. At the time of writing this article, there were 10,100 Palestinians imprisoned in Israeli prisons, 270 of whom are children; 3,398 of them are administrative detainees, which means that they have not been officially charged and can be held in Israeli prisons for an indefinite amount of time.³ Although the torture of Palestinian prisoners is not new, Israeli authorities have instituted a policy of starvation.⁴ Nine Israeli soldiers have been accused of gang-raping a Palestinian prisoner at the Sde Teiman detention centre.⁵

In addition to illegal Israeli occupation, Palestinians in the West Bank are living with a complicit Palestinian Authority under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas. Elected in 2005, Abbas has not permitted elections since then. In 2018, he dissolved the Palestinian Legislative Council, which, not followed by elections, gave him absolute power. Since the reign of Abbas, the Palestinian Authority has maintained close 'security coordination' with Israel, ensuring that authority officials, their families, and prominent business owners are given special privileges, while policing the Palestinian population and violently suppressing resistance against Israeli occupation and apartheid. Moreover, the West Bank, which is full of illegal Israeli settlements, is effectively under the control of the Israeli military, which continuously imprisons, tortures, and kills the indigenous Palestinian population.

The Palestinian Authority was established in 1994 after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993. The signing of the Oslo Accords was preceded by the first uprising (or *intifada*, 1987–93), which included acts of mass resistance and civil disobedience amongst Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, annexed by Israel after the 1967 war. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority brought with it significant changes to the Palestinian socio-political context. This included the institution of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which provided basic

services such as healthcare and education. The dependency of these NGOs on foreign funding resulted in the depoliticization of the grass-roots movements that had played an essential role in the first Palestinian uprising.⁶

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of various theatre troupes, notably Bala-lin, Dababis, Sunduq al-'Ajab, and al-Hakawati. The Hakawati was one of the first to be institutionalized, receiving a grant from the Ford Foundation in 1984.⁷ Institutionalization of grass-roots theatre initiatives increased significantly in the 1990s, during which some of the most well-known Palestinian theatres today were established. Among them was Ashtar Theatre, whose work is based on Augusto Boal's Forum theatre.⁸

Scholarship on Palestinian theatre has extensively covered the activities of Ashtar, as well as other NGO theatres, which is often represented as a form of resistance against Israeli settler colonialism.⁹ More critical approaches have been taken by Rania Jawad and Rashna Darius Nicholson.¹⁰ Nicholson openly challenges the claim that the activities of these theatres constitute a form of 'cultural resistance', arguing that the process of NGOization and reliance on foreign funding impedes Palestinian NGO-theatres' ability to challenge Israeli settler colonialism.¹¹ Most unfortunately, the activities of theatre cooperatives (which had emerged due to the growing community frustration with the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Authority, and cultural NGOs) have been omitted from the literature. Yet the development of these cooperatives marks an important shift in Palestinian cultural production and political consciousness. Members of these cooperatives have rejected the NGO model of institutionalization and reliance on foreign funding. Even though members may apply for occasional grants to cover operating costs, the majority of the cooperative work is volunteer-based. Notable examples of volunteer engagement include al-Basta Theatre (2015), Athar (2021), and Laween (2022).

The interview below with the founding members of the Laween Theatre cooperative, which took place on 23 April and 9 June 2024, discusses the development, challenges, and

future of theatre cooperatives in Palestine. Its focus is on the socio-political conditions that led to the formation of the cooperative rather than its aesthetics, which are still in the process of development.

Dia Barghouti *How did you and Mousa begin working together?*

Hamza Al-Bakri I research performances of masculinity in Palestine after the Oslo Agreement as part of my PhD, using social and applied theatre methods, which challenge dominant colonial methodologies and repressive political systems. I began [to do theatre] with the theatre manifesto I worked on with Dalia Taha and Ghassan Nadaf [two prominent Palestinian playwrights]. We wanted to create a new theatre movement. The manifesto was the result of many sketches which were written collectively through improvisation, then performed. I then saw an announcement for another theatre workshop, called Ma'mal Masrahi. That is where I met Mousa Nazzal and Khalil Batran, who were curating the workshop. The four workshops were part of an artist residency with the Ramallah Municipality. It was a great experience because it gave me the opportunity to reflect and create a dialogue with society. It was also a way of thinking about social issues that need to be addressed.

Mousa, how did you begin to work in the theatre?

Mousa Nazzal I started doing theatre at al-Masrah al-Sha'bi ['The Popular Theatre']. I saw an open call for a play by Fathi 'Abd al-Rahman, who established al-Masrah al-Sha'bi in al-Am'ari refugee camp. The play, titled *Hay al-Tanak* [*Neighbourhood of Tin Containers*], was about competition for the limited resources at the camp. I played the role of a lawyer called Sunbul: this was my first experience on the stage. I then continued training as an actor with al-Masrah al-Sha'bi for three years. Unlike theatre backed by NGOs, Fathi's was a poor theatre which never accepted conditional funding and the aim was never to make major productions. It was to address the political and social issues affecting people's lives. Fathi significantly

influenced all the actors who trained at al-Masrah al-Sha'bi. I then got a scholarship to study at the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy [in the UAE]. I went from a place where we would use 5,000 shekels (£1,055) to do a six-month run to a place where every lighting fixture costs \$50,000.

Even though the Academy gave me all these technical opportunities, I couldn't connect with people there or accept the inequality. I left a year later. I wanted to build my theatre skills with Palestinians in Palestine. In the Emirates I had the opportunity to develop my technical skills, not my political, social, and spiritual consciousness. This is because of political repression in the Emirates. For example, we were not allowed to commemorate the Nakba [the Palestinian 'catastrophe' of 1948, the forced displacement of nearly two-thirds of the indigenous Palestinian population by Zionist forces]. They want an apolitical theatre.

Then you went back to Palestine?

Nazzal In September 2021, and I came back with a lot of energy. I started looking for new opportunities. I worked with a theatre cooperative called al-Basta, established in 2015 by Hussam Gosheh and Mahmoud Abu Shamsiyeh. Al-Basta used interactive theatre to address social issues. Basta is rooted in Invisible Theatre [founded by Augusto Boal]; there is a Basta [marketplace] and there is Abu Risheh [the seller], who performed in the streets of Jerusalem. They also had a performance in Ramallah, where they were selling pyjamas, and people genuinely couldn't tell if it was a performance. While members of al-Basta sold pyjamas, they criticized the Palestinian security forces [established after Oslo]. Some police officers bought pyjamas from Abu Risheh [the main character], who was speaking to them, and they were laughing without realizing that the performance was criticizing them.

This is before you started working with al-Basta. Could you tell me about your experience working with this theatre cooperative?

Nazzal I worked on a performance called *La'ihat Illtiham* [*The Devouring Charge*]. I played the

role of a young man who is interrogated by the Israeli military. The performance documented the interrogation and trial of administrative detainees [those imprisoned by Israel without trial].

Did you base the performance on the experiences of Palestinians in Israeli prisons?

Nazzal We did interviews with freed prisoners and used their testimonies as material for the play. This performance was important to me in a personal way. During rehearsals, the Israeli army arrested my brother, Salah. I was also interrogated by the Israeli secret service.

You were performing an experience you had gone through?

Nazzal Yes, in the rehearsals I told them about the methods the interrogator used to intimidate me. Certain expressions he made, the movements of his hands: all these actions were done to make me anxious. My work with al-Masrah al-Sha'bi, my return from the Emirates, and my experience with al-Basta motivated me to start something, especially because it was difficult to get involved with the established theatres.

Did you feel there was something missing in work with these NGO theatres? Is that why you wanted to create a different kind of initiative?

Nazzal I can't say it was conscious. I didn't think I would curate this workshop with the Ramallah Municipality or that the Laween theatre cooperative would be created. Nor did I have a clear critique of these theatres at the time. I just felt they were inaccessible. The issue with these institutions [NGO theatres] is that it isn't clear how to become involved [to work with them].

Al-Bakri There are so few opportunities to work in theatre, and the reason is dependence on funding. When there is no money, there is no theatre. Another problem is that theatres have become institutionalized and follow their own agendas. Do the projects of these [NGO] theatres address social and political issues? How close is their work to the lived reality of Palestinians? For me, as a Palestinian, do I want to make work that discusses my

lived reality under political repression and Israeli occupation, or do I want to perform a play written by a foreign playwright for a different context?

It seems the issue with NGO theatres is that they don't create plays for Palestinians because the main motivation is acquiring funding for their salaries. This dependency on foreign funding also means that they often perform plays irrelevant to the Palestinian context. Is this why you felt you needed to create a new theatre that focuses specifically on the Palestinian experience and needs of the community?

Al-Bakri This was the basis on which the Laween theatre cooperative was created. We didn't know, at the time, that we were going to develop a cooperative. We were working on a performance [Ma'mal Masrahi Residency], but we didn't have any material [text]. So each of us decided to write about issues important to us. For example, I think a lot about masculinity in my research so I found myself writing about the contradictions and ideals imposed on men in Palestinian society. We developed these texts through improvisation, and wrote and directed the performance collectively.

Your first performance was part of the artist residency you did with the Ramallah Municipality curated by Mousa?

Al-Bakri Yes, we did four workshops. They included different exercises: writing exercises, movement, improvisation, and group work. Each person took twenty minutes to write something, then the group reconvened and we worked on the text and improvised. After the workshops, each person continued to work on her/his text. We decided to do a performance in a circle, where it wouldn't be clear who was an actor and who was a spectator. We wanted to break all the walls, even before playing, so we had actors sell the tickets for the performance.

Why didn't you want separation from the audience?

Nazzal Our choice wasn't necessarily conscious. Someone from the group stressed that

our performance was directed towards people, and if we wanted to engage in this direct way with society, we shouldn't create distance from the audience. We didn't want a passive audience; we wanted to have a sense of togetherness. That's also why we stood outside before performances to sell tickets.

Does this approach also reflect your relationship to the community outside the theatre? It differs from the NGO theatres in that you are addressing people's reality, and questioning with them, rather than trying to teach them lessons.

Al-Bakri Maybe we can think of it that way now, but at that moment we wanted to create a new kind of performance: no stage, only chairs organized in a circle; no separation from the audience. The audience couldn't tell who was an actor. We entered with the audience, sat with them, and then the monologues began.

What were the monologues about?

Al-Bakri Our experiences in society. In my monologue I asked: am I the fighter in Jenin? Am I a wealthy senator? Am I the impoverished manual labourer who works in Israel? Or the exhausted teacher? At the end of the monologue, I made a plea to God, then played a game with the audience by asking them if they are God. These comic parts, including interactions with the audience, explored the image of men in Palestinian society. A participant talked about patriarchy and her relationship with her family. Another shared his experience of being beaten up by the Palestinian government forces. There was also a monologue where an actor spoke about getting shot by the Israeli army at a checkpoint, which made him question many things about his life.

Nazzal Khalil and I would facilitate the development of all of this dialogue. We did the lighting and ensured there were smooth transitions between the monologues.

Al-Bakri That is how the monologues were developed. The last monologue was a critique of Palestinian [NGO] theatres; specifically, a recent controversy with Ashtar

Theatre. Members of Ashtar were attacked by Tanzim Ramallah al-Tahta [the Fatih political parties' 'organization', the popular arm of the political party based in Ramallah's Old City. Fatih is the leading party in the Palestinian Authority] while doing a children's performance with colourful puppets. Members of the Tanzim claimed Ashtar's performance supported the LGBTQ community. Even though Ashtar called the police, the issue was resolved through tribal law ('Asha'iri), instead of judicial law. The last monologue was a critique of Ashtar: how can you say that you are teaching the Palestinian community values that challenge patriarchy, and then resort to the use of patriarchal tribal law? Members of Ashtar were in the audience and the monologue was specifically for them.

Could you give a bit more context about these attacks?

Al-Bakri There were a series of performances that were part of a festival organized by Ashtar Theatre. One of them was a street performance with large colourful puppets. At the time [2022], there was an attack on the cultural sector. The Qattan Foundation and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah were attacked by the same Fatih Tanzim, with the support of the Palestinian Authority. This Tanzim was shutting down music and theatre performances. Artists would call the police to protect them, and the police wouldn't come.

Members of this Tanzim were part of the Fatih political party, and the Palestinian Authority supported these attacks by not interfering?

Al-Bakri There are several examples of this. The Qattan Foundation received a threat from this same Tanzim. They threatened to break in and destroy the foundation if they didn't cancel their events. The organizers contacted the police, but no one came. Obviously, this is politically motivated.

Nazzal The people shutting down these performances were a group of thugs, and their actions were in line with the aims of the Palestinian Authority.

Was it part of the Palestinian Authority's broader policy of targeting the cultural sector?

Nazzal Certainly, because the Palestinian Authority knows how to control these violent groups in other contexts. The Palestinian Authority didn't react when this group attacked the cultural sector so it's clear they condoned their actions.

These attacks were about more than homophobia. Would you say the Palestinian Authority and the Fatih Tanzim used homophobia to suppress and control cultural activities in Palestine?

Al-Bakri The Palestinian Authority used homophobia to enforce its dominance. Even performances not related to the LGBTQ community were attacked under the same pretence. For example, Maki Makuk's music performance at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre. The Palestinian Authority shut down this performance, claiming it was for the LGBTQ community. At that same time, there was the Ween 'Ala Ramallah Festival, which was not shut down because it was organized by the Ramallah Municipality. So homophobia was a means of controlling the cultural sector.

And this is also a form of censorship.

Al-Bakri It was a form of dominance, censorship, and control of who is allowed to engage in artistic and cultural production. The accusation of supporting the LGBTQ community was used so that members of Palestinian society couldn't fight back. The aim was to use homophobia to prevent social and political critique. This is because the Palestinian Authority knows that Palestinians are afraid of openly defending the LGBTQ community because this is a taboo subject in Palestinian society. This strategy was enforced in a systematic way at the majority of cultural centres.

Let us go back to the Ashtar performance. Could you explain more about why the actor who did the monologue about Ashtar Theatre was so disappointed?

Al-Bakri The actors attacked in the Ashtar performance filed a lawsuit against members of the Tanzim who attacked them. The Palestinian Authority and the Fatih Tanzim

wanted to solve the issue through tribal law. Members of the Tanzim sat with people from Ashtar to reach an agreement, which meant that the actors who were attacked would have to withdraw the lawsuit. This was part of a systematic effort to exert political control.

Nazzal Solving the issue this way required that Ashtar agree to the imposed system of tribal law. If Ashtar had not agreed to do this and had supported the actors, the theatre would have been closed. This is how the Tanzim exerted dominance over Ashtar and the actors who filed the lawsuit.

So the actor who performed the last monologue of the performance that led to the development of the Laween theatre cooperative was criticizing how Ashtar had dealt with this event?

Al-Bakri It was a critique of Ashtar and the entire theatre scene that is elitist. At the end of the performance, the actor said: 'We told you what we wanted to say, and now it's your turn.' Then we distributed pens and papers to everyone in the audience. We told them they had ten minutes to write. We then asked who wanted to perform their monologue. The audience became the actors and the actors became the audience.

Nazzal For us, the success of the performance was based on how many people spoke. It was a space for people to express themselves. There was one woman from Bayt Duqqo in the audience who performed a monologue about how she decided to no longer change her accent while she was living in Ramallah.

Al-Bakri She shared this story after an actor [in the Laween Cooperative] from Bayt Duqqo performed a monologue describing how he was shot at an Israeli checkpoint. When she heard him speaking in the Bayt Duqqo accent, she decided to no longer pretend to have a Ramallah accent. In our last performance, where there were two hundred audience members, forty people felt safe enough to share their stories and critique the Palestinian Authority, Israeli colonialism, and society. That is what

we wanted – a space where people could express themselves, which includes social and political criticism.

What was this first play by the Laween theatre cooperative called?

Al-Bakri *'Alam min Waraq* [A World of Paper], first performed in August 2022.

Nazzal The first performance was at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre. Afterwards, we decided the performance of *A World of Paper* was not enough; we needed to create a theatre movement. We didn't want these kinds of collaborations to stop. We also didn't want them to develop into an institution, but a community. We realized *A World of Paper* questioned our futures, the main question being: Laween . . . to where? Where are we going? How long will we be oppressed? How long will colonialism last? That is how Laween began as an initiative for the expression of social and political issues through art, which seeks to redefine freedom and solidarity. It is a way of resisting political, colonial, and social repression.

Al-Bakri Another reason for creating the cooperative was that, after performing *A World of Paper*, we realized we could continue to work in the same way, focusing on issues that are important to Palestinian society. We realized how much theatre can have an impact. Each time we did a performance, more people attended and participated (Figure 1).

The work of Laween is volunteer-based, but you take occasional grants for operating costs?

Nazzal It is volunteer-based. If opportunities present themselves, such as artist residencies, we take them, but we aren't trying to institutionalize the initiative or make it an NGO theatre.

Perhaps this brings you closer to Palestinian society in terms of the topics you explore in your theatre practice?

Al-Bakri Our strength is that we work with the idea of a zero-cost theatre. Our first performance was zero-cost. For another performance, which was part of a residency at

the Qattan Foundation, titled *'Ilta'ena Bi-Hilim?* [Have We Met in a Dream?], we had a small budget. But we could have done it without a budget. This is the problem with institutions [NGOs] – if there is no money, there is no performance. We never wanted to work with these NGO theatres because they are disconnected from people and our aim is not to make money. Our aim is to have social influence. If we have financial opportunities, that's great, and if not, then that's fine because we know why we are doing this work [for social change].

How many plays have you performed?

Al-Bakri Four plays: *A World of Paper*; *Laween (To Where?)*; *Have We Met in a Dream?*; and *Ihki Ya Shahrazad* [Speak, Shahrazad]. We performed *A World of Paper* three times in Palestine, and *To Where?* was performed in Exeter. The Exeter performance was based on *A World of Paper*. At the time, Mousa was also working on *Have We Met in a Dream?* in Palestine. And they were performed roughly the same time [May–June 2023].

Nazzal *Have We Met in a Dream?* was a fictional work about a group of imprisoned people with amnesia. The meaning of the play is that no one is able to escape the prison-like space without solidarity. The characters were extremely different – for example, an optimist and a pessimist. Our message was that, despite these grave differences, everyone had to work together to get themselves out of the situation.

Is this performance about divisions in Palestinian society?

Nazzal Yes, each monologue represents the multitude of opinions in Palestinian society, as well as the idea that there can be no liberation without solidarity. *Have We Met in a Dream?* was performed twice, once in the Qattan Foundation, and once at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah.

The To Where? performance in Exeter is an interesting example because it stresses that Palestinians not only need to learn from international artists,



Figure 1. Performance at the Qattan Foundation (2023). Photo courtesy of Laween.

but also that Palestinians' experiences and expertise are relevant to other places.

Al-Bakri It was based on the workshops Mousa and I worked on in Palestine. The workshop [at Exeter] was only for people of colour from different backgrounds: four from Palestine (some diaspora), Somalia, Brazil, India, Kuwait, and Iraq. It was a group of oppressed people from different places. We wanted to explore what solidarity meant across borders. We also wanted to stress that, even though we came from different contexts, we all suffered from the same systems of oppression. Mousa was involved over Zoom and I facilitated the workshops. We did four of these workshops in Exeter. Our idea with Laween was that anyone who wanted to participate in the workshops could become part of the theatre cooperative and learn how to facilitate workshops. This is how the *Speak, Shahrzad* performance was developed by a woman called Hiyam, a storyteller (*hakawatiya*) who led a workshop with a group of women.

Nazzal The performance is created collectively through the workshop. It is a space for collective creativity that is horizontal, where there isn't a playwright or a hierarchy.

Can you give me examples of what you do in the workshops?

Al-Bakri In the workshop of *A World of Paper/ To Where?*, participants entered a room full of papers on the floor. We gave them time to experiment. At the workshop I did in Jenin there was a woman who started to create borders with the papers to create more space for herself. A woman in the Exeter workshop started ripping the paper, which, for her, symbolized white supremacy; ripping gave her a sense of agency (Figure 2). Essentially, it is a way of expressing [how people are feeling]. In one workshop, people shared their experience of being racially profiled at airports, and the complexity of being a Palestinian who passes for white, or one with a foreign passport who is subjected to racism at Ben Gurion Airport. You see the different layers of oppression. On



Figure 2. The Exeter Workshop in collaboration with the Roots of Resistance student initiative in Exeter (2023). Photo courtesy of Laween.

the last day [of the Exeter workshop], I asked people to explore these experiences through improvisation.

But how do you create the performance? Do you take the content from these different workshops and improvised sessions, and make a series of monologues?

Al-Bakri We create the performance through writing exercises and improvisation. Then we give participants a month and each person writes their own script. We reconvene, edit the texts, and create the performance. The texts are edited collectively, and sometimes different elements are mixed. For example, one of the sentences written by a British-Indian woman was: 'All roads to justice come from and go back to the land.' This line was the opening of the play [at Exeter]. The different actors repeated this sentence as they moved around the space. Performers then shared their stories of struggle. One person talked about racism against Palestinians in Jerusalem, another spoke about being part of the Palestinian diaspora but being unable to go and live in Palestine. But not everyone performs real stories. Some prefer fiction, such as one participant who wrote a poem about pine trees that he made into a rap song. Just like the performances in Palestine, after the actors performed their monologues, we asked the audience to become the actors.

In a sense, the Exeter performance is the opposite of how NGO theatres operate in Palestine. Instead of drawing on the European theatrical tradition, you are taking a method you developed in Palestine and introducing it to other contexts. Perhaps closeness to the audience is also part of that?

Al-Bakri We brought two hundred people together in a space and created a sense of community and familiarity, making space for them to express themselves and talk about their struggle and political oppression. There isn't space for these conversations elsewhere.

Nazzal Palestinian theatre is a poor theatre, we don't have resources. The idea with Laween was to create a zero-cost theatre. We developed a social/political theatre for expression from these very simple exercises.

Part of what we see as Palestinian theatre is the creation of spaces for people to participate, because every person who is Palestinian suffers from political violence [life under Israeli apartheid and oppression by the Palestinian Authority] and certainly needs a space to express themselves and process [this violence].

This is another important aspect of your work. You are creating work specifically for a Palestinian audience, unlike many of the NGO theatres, who focus on making their work accessible to donors as well as European and American audiences.

Nazzal It's great that it worked in other contexts outside of Palestine. Another aspect that I think is important is the solidarity it created between people. When someone shares their experience, they enter into a relationship with other members of the audience and feel compelled to listen to, and empathize with, other people's experiences as well. For example, if I am an audience member talking about a political issue and I listen to someone talking about their struggle with gender identity, neither of us will be able to ignore the inequalities and oppression that we see [relating to gender or political violence]. For us, *A World of Paper* is a means of creating solidarity.

I'm not sure if this was intentional, but I see similarities between your performance and the theatrical forms that existed in Palestine before the mass displacement of Palestinians by Zionist forces in the Nakba of 1948. This includes the use of improvisation, audience participation, and feelings of communion. Do you think, consciously or not, by focusing so much on the collective and removing the separation with the audience, you are in some way reviving certain aspects of extinct Palestinian performance practices? Could this be because, despite the fact that many of these indigenous traditions disappeared, certain features, such as not having separation from the audience, continued to be part of Palestinian society?

Nazzal I'm not familiar with this aspect of Palestinian theatre history, so it's difficult for me to claim it's a revival. For us, it's not merely about technicalities, it's also about our needs [as a society]. We are not only acting, but also reflecting on and protesting against the

repression we experience. If removing this distance with the audience and using a circular space is part of Palestinian theatre history, then, yes, we are using this aspect of our performance history.

Al-Bakri I would say there certainly is an element of revival of traditional performance practices, but not in a conscious way. It results from the relationships we create within the theatre and the reasons why we created Laween. If I, as a Palestinian, want to express something and want to find a way of connecting to people, without having an agenda that I'm trying to impose, then it is natural that I would create this kind of performance [without separation] because in my local traditions this is how I engage with people.

Perhaps these notions of performance are still part of Palestinian society?

Al-Bakri Perhaps it was reflected in our work because it is ingrained in Palestinian society. It is a reflection of our lives and what we need, which comes from our culture, but in an unconscious way. Maybe now that we have become aware of it, we can think about it more, but when it emerged it was a reflection of what our lives and social relations are.

Nazzal This was possible because there wasn't an expert among us trying to enforce a specific method. Even for me, I don't feel I have enough experience to be teaching a certain method. Laween is a space of exploration and learning.

Al-Bakri One of the issues is that we don't know about Palestinian traditions before 1948. Our aim is to create social and political change through theatre. Were there performance traditions before 1948 which were part of social-political change? These questions interest us.

There certainly are examples of performance practices before the Nakba that had political significance, such as the Sufi festival (mawsim) of Nabi Musa that turned into an anti-Zionist protest in 1920. Even the songs that were part of this Sufi festival began to incorporate anti-Zionist and anti-

colonial chants in the British colonial period. Perhaps your work is similar to these indigenous performance practices in the sense that you were creating a collective space through which people can express themselves and enact change upon their social and political realities.

Al-Bakri That is our main aim, to create change and instigate action.

Nazzal These are conversations we constantly have amongst ourselves. How can we continue to be agents of change? Sometimes this means we have to refuse funding that we had previously applied for. We recently had to reject a feminist community fund called Doria. It was created by cooperatives from Egypt under the NFP [Not-For-Profit] Act, and is in part funded by the Canadian Government. We decided to apply to the open call as Laween Theatre. They wanted to give us an emergency grant, not only to do theatre, but also other forms of community support, given the genocide happening in Palestine. Items 15 and 16 of the contract had a list of so-called 'terrorist' organizations we were not allowed to affiliate with. This means not involving anyone who is in any way affiliated with the following political parties: Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Al-Bakri We decided not to take the grant. How can an organization claiming to represent queer feminists in the Arab World, people who are usually sidelined and marginalized, ask us to sign a contract that reinforces the problematic discourse of Palestinian political organizations being 'terrorist', which is a form of whitewashing?

Could you explain what 'whitewashing' and 'pink washing' is?

Al-Bakri The example I gave is both whitewashing and pink washing, because the Canadian Government is participating in the genocide in Gaza and the colonization of Palestine, and has a long history of colonization of the indigenous population of Canada as well. At the same time, the Canadian Government is giving funds to this institution [Doria], which talks about the importance of supporting

women and the LGBTQ community – marginalized communities the Canadian Government claims they want to support. The Canadian Government allegedly cares about human rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, while supporting Israel's genocide and colonization of Palestinian women and members of the Queer community. We decided to reject the fund. We consider ourselves to be part of the liberation movement, and we are among many cooperatives and institutions who refuse conditional funding. When you accept conditional funding, you are forced to police members of the community who work with you or who participate in your events.

That also means you would need to ensure that whoever participates in your events is not politicized in any way. Is it not also part of a broader strategy to depoliticize Palestinian society, which began with the development of NGOs?

Al-Bakri What is so problematic is that they are asking us to reproduce the same oppressive methods of policing used against the LGBTQ community to ensure that whoever participates in our workshops is not politicized. We would never accept this kind of conditional funding which asks us to reproduce the same methods of policing organizations like Doria claim to be fighting against [the policing of the LGBTQ community].

Would you say theatre in Palestine is in crisis? In the sense that there is a severe lack of opportunity and funding? Or is this the strength of Palestinian theatre? That, without funding, there is the opportunity to do something revolutionary?

Nazzal Of course theatre in Palestine is in a state of crisis because all of Palestine is in crisis, and this includes the cultural sector. But we refuse to give up. We will find other sources of funding. It doesn't have to be through institutions; we can do workshops, we can sell tickets to our shows. We know theatre needs certain resources, but the only way theatre can truly speak is when there aren't restrictions placed on what can be said. Even before [Israel's war on Gaza], there was a crisis in the theatre. Some theatres decided to survive by accepting conditional funding, others did crowd-funding campaigns; some theatres were influential

and then dwindled, but there isn't a theatre that consistently created performances. We don't want to be held captive to funding. If we don't have enough funding for a play, we will do a workshop, we will do an event for children. We want to remain active all the time. And when there is an opportunity for funding, we can do bigger projects.

How has Israel's genocide in Gaza affected your theatre work?

Nazzal All theatres are affected by this war. It shifted the focus from the individual to the collective, and this required an examination of the issues that affect Palestinian society. Israel's war on Gaza is an attempt at ethnic cleansing, so it is natural for the theatre to address this collective threat of annihilation. Eventually, we will have to do a piece about war, displacement, and migration. It is impossible to work as a theatre-maker and not address these issues. It would be equivalent to trying to erase your own Palestinian identity. There is a need to create work which explores this collective experience.

Al-Bakri When the war started it was impossible to do a performance or a theatre workshop. The nature of the work needed to change, so we decided to work with children. We worked on a performance based on a children's story titled *Luna al-Majnooneh* [*Luna the Insane*]. The author, Bisan Ntayil, is from Gaza. We performed the story at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre and the Am'ari refugee camp. We wanted to work with an author from Gaza to help children make sense of the experience, who, just like us, are suffering from the war. We recorded the performances for Bisan, who was in Gaza. She said that our performance lifted her spirits during the war. We constantly adapt and change to respond to the events taking place, and we refuse to do any work dictated by external donors.

What do you think is the role of theatre, and of cultural production more generally, in resistance? You don't have to have a clear answer to this question; I am just thinking, with you, about what cultural resistance might mean in the Palestinian context.

Al-Bakri The answer to this question can be found in our history. We know Ghassan Kana-fani [a Palestinian writer assassinated by Israel in 1972] wrote plays and novels that were part of the literature of resistance, which is art that supports the revolution and helps people to think and imagine – to go beyond suffering, to have hope, and reimagine the future. This helps people persevere, and this is extremely important for us to think about as people working in art and culture.

Of course, we need to acknowledge that, in the last thirty years, after the signing of the Oslo Accords, this kind of art of resistance ceased to exist. During the first uprising [1987–93], songs used to incite political action. The smuggled cassettes with resistance songs told people how to resist. Art was not entertainment, or separate from reality, it was part of our lives, of resistance. This was all destroyed by Oslo, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and NGOs. It created a depoliticized culture of NGOs, which prioritizes funding. As a result, people began to see theatre, music, and other art as unnecessary because they had lost their meaning. The difficulty was how to make art relevant again, and then the 7th of October happened and that changed everything. Everyone began to rethink the projects they were working on before the war.

Nazzal It undermined the projects of the NGOs and stressed the need for collective action – not as solidarity with Gaza, because we are not separate from Gaza. There was a need to examine what this experience meant to us. For example, if you were an organization working with children before the war, you are faced with the question of how to explain genocide to children. The war forced people to reassess what is important at this moment: is it relevant to the collective? The war was and continues to be brutal, and it has forced those working in the cultural sector to question who their work is for.

Al-Bakri We live under occupation so we are always in a state of emergency. However, when the war started, none of these NGOs

had emergency contingency plans. Look at the cultural NGOs now. Since the war, everyone has stopped working. And this is part of a pattern. Every few years there is a war on Gaza, and work stops.

Could this be because NGOs are alienated from the communities they claim to be working for?

Al-Bakri Many of these NGOs were set up by former leftists who have been depoliticized, which alienated them from the community. The aim of these cultural NGOs was never liberation. How can you claim to work for a community if you have nothing to offer in this critical moment of war?

Can we then say that 'cultural resistance' is the cultural work that is close to the community?

Nazzal Yes, and it is cultural resistance if it is continuous, not the kind of work that stops when there isn't funding. Of course, there might be political events that necessitate changing the nature of the work, but it shouldn't stop. The feeling of impotence we feel is because we live in a city [Ramallah] that is structured on alienation.

Is this because of repression by the Palestinian Authority that restricts political/cultural action?

Nazzal The entire security apparatus [of the Palestinian Authority] is designed to make you feel alienated. If you try to organize, you get attacked, so it is natural that people are scared. That is why the NGOs can't change; because it would require changing policies that have been instituted for thirty years [since Oslo]. There are theatres in Palestine that didn't make any statements about the war because they were worried about losing foreign funding, from funders complicit in the genocide.

This relates to the issue of class, since most of the Palestinians who work in these NGOs are from a particular class.

Al-Bakri The aim of Oslo was the creation of a Palestinian elite that is afraid to lose privilege and therefore won't struggle for liberation. The same goes for the Palestinian Authority. It is in their interest for the Israeli occupation to continue because, if the

occupation ends, the Authority will be dissolved. In the Palestinian revolution and the *intifadas* [uprisings of the 1980s and 2000s], who resisted? It was the farmers and the workers, not members of the elite. Oslo created different kinds of elites: political, economic, and cultural. All these elites are part of the colonial order.

Of course, there are exceptions. There are certain cultural organizations, including Mada, which created the Owneh initiative that focuses on the development of an alternative economic system, that would allow cultural and social organizations to be free of the colonial order. They reject conditional funding, which condemns Palestinian resistance. Such organizations are trying to promote the idea of working together and sharing resources to deal with the problem of funding. Much of the cost can be cut by collaborating. There is also an initiative to explore alternative sources of funding beyond the US, Canada, and the EU.

Are you currently working on anything that addresses the genocide? I know we are still in the middle of a traumatic event, so it may not be clear yet how or what you want to do as theatre-makers – beyond the performances that you were doing with children.

Nazzal Nothing is clear yet, but we are trying to examine what this [war] means. We feel it is important to work on the future of Gaza, as the name of our collective [Laween, 'To Where'] suggests. We are asking: where can we go from here? How can we reimagine the future of Gaza? What will liberation look like?

This relates to an important point you made earlier. To work on Gaza, to reimagine the future, even one distant from our current reality, is important, because it is a means of going beyond the restrictions imposed by colonialism.

Nazzal Another project we are currently working on is with former Palestinian prisoners, so as to give people who have been imprisoned and their families the opportunity to create a performance. Even if the work does not provide a new political commentary [Palestinians have a long history of producing prison literature], it is a social commentary

on the lived experience of so many people who are imprisoned.

Al-Bakri We want to create space for prisoners to talk about their own experiences because what usually happens is that others discuss their experience – in art, theatre, or films. This is why the participants will be freed prisoners, or those close to them. We may think that the moment of arrest or the trial is the most important moment, but a former prisoner might tell us about something different, like the tension between members of different Palestinian political parties in Israeli prisons, or the relation with the prison guards, or the methods of resistance used in prison.

We want to understand what the most important issues are to these former prisoners. This is important because prisoners are the basis of the liberation process, and they are the reason that Hamas revolted against Israel on 7 October. One of Hamas's demands was freeing political prisoners. At the same time, prisoners are people who are absent in society and have been marginalized after Oslo. Yet being a prisoner is such an essential part of the Palestinian experience, especially because Israel is also ethnically cleansing Palestinian prisoners.

Nazzal We already have a group in mind to work with; we only hope that they will not be [re]arrested and imprisoned during our workshops. It is a phenomenon so prevalent, and has affected many of the people we work with, including one the performers in *Ihki ya Shahrazad* [*Speak, Shahrazad*], named Ikhlas Sawalha. She was arrested three months after the performance. She's still in prison. It's striking that, in the performance, she was speaking about how she would visit her husband in prison, and she is now in prison herself.

Thank you both for your time and for sharing your thoughts about this very important work.

Notes and References

My special thanks are to Professor Maria Shevtsova for her intellectual guidance and support. I would also like to thank the members of Laween, Zeina Amro, A. Alasaad, and Faris Giacaman.

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