

Let's Talk About Gaza

Interview about the challenges facing the arts and culture in the Gaza Strip

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Ali Abu Yaseen is an actor and the theater director of Ashtar Theater in the Gaza Strip. He started his career in theater in 1990 and he participated in many plays in Palestine and the Arab world. Questions were asked by Bessan Shehada, Project Coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip.

Ashtar is a dynamic local Palestinian Theatre and a non-profit organization that was established in 1991 in Jerusalem as the first theatre training organization for youth in Palestine. Ashtar started working in Gaza in 2010 by producing "The Gaza Monologues", which has been performed and reproduced in different places by different theaters around the world." For further information about Ashtar see <http://www.ashtar-theatre.org/about.html>

How do you see the situation of the Ashtar Theater in Gaza?

The theater situation in Gaza is very difficult because there is a lack of cultural support. We, as playwrights, do not see or feel that there is any strategy or plan to support the national culture. Also there is lack of local funding and local production companies. This is due to the fickle political situation in our country. Here, in Gaza, we have instability, wars and aggressions, internal conflict, and also the siege; all of this has a direct effect on artistic work in Gaza.

As artists we have to keep hope for a better situation, while all of the items I mentioned above have killed the hope inside us. All the cultural activities have disappeared in Gaza. There are no public libraries, no performing arts, and after Hamas took over Gaza, the people started to practice self-censorship because they are afraid. This has drastically affected the artistic creativity in music and theater.

Imagine, that women are absent on the theater stage and the women are the half of our society. If there are one or two women who join us in working in the theater, immediately after a woman becomes engaged she leaves the theater because her spouse doesn't allow her to work as an actor.

I have trained many girls and women to be theater actors, but every time I am worried about when she is going to leave us, and this is horrible. The role of women in our society needs to be reflected by women in theater.

What do you think the people in Gaza want to watch in the theater?

I have thought about this question for long time, because I think that we as actors should make our plays and work directly relevant to people and the problems they are facing. We should reflect our Palestinian cause through the theater, but at the same time, the people are very tired of this demanding situation and the reality that they are living. So I think they want to go to the theater to laugh and to find something different from their reality. This is why we couldn't hold on to the audience who obliges us to work and produce shows annually or periodically, because they didn't find comedic or different things, other than reality.

In the Palestinian theater, all the shows are about martyrs, prisoners, killing, tears, and the occupation. This is because, we as artists, also want to make our shows act as a reflection of our lives to show it in the Arab World to tell our Palestinian story through theater.

Who do you think is responsible for the bad situation of arts in Gaza?

I think the Palestinian Authority (PA) is the one who is directly responsible for the situation. They should fund national festivals and create a national strategy to spread the arts and culture among the people. They should hold festivals and invite artists from around the world to come to produce shows here in Gaza, but they are not doing that. I have a dream to someday see my artist friends here in Gaza and to see journalists come from all over the world to cover stories, including the theater, for people from the outside. There should be a good budget from the PA to support the culture and arts, to build cultural centers and public libraries, and to establish a place for the Palestinian artists to gather and to share their works.

Also, Palestinian TVs should support the local production of series, instead of buying Egyptian series to broadcast on TV. This is also an opportunity to provide support for the local artists and it's a chance for Palestinians to become familiar with Palestinian artists.

How do you see the participation of women in theater and the arts in general?

Lately, I have noticed that the attendance of girls and women in different fields of creativity, like poetry and novel writing is increasing. In Ashtar, we have actresses but there is still a low level of participation. The actresses and I are afraid continually that her father, husband, or other relatives will prevent them from participating. This is because many people, when they hear theater, they just think that the girls will be dancing or maybe doing inappropriate things.

How do you convince the women and their families to participate and continue in working in theater?

The girls and women are very intelligent and we are totally honest with them. We teach them how to believe in themselves and their work, and when they participate, they find that they are improving their personal and professional skills. They also find that they can reflect the societal problems in their work in the theater and their families feel the seriousness in our work.

How was your latest show, "The Cage," and what was the reaction of the audience?

We had a great success in our last work. It was a metaphor for how people of Gaza have been trapped in the completely besieged Strip where people have no control over their lives. This forum theatre was funded by RLS and the reactions from the audience were outstanding. The theater was full during all of the performances and the media carried many reports about it. We received many offers and invitations from organizations and unions to perform special shows for them. I consider it as one of the most important experiences in my life as I am very proud that RLS funded this great work. But I think this is

not enough. There is so much more that needs to be done. I still have a dream that we have a big theater in Gaza and people come and pay tickets because they want to come see Palestinian art in order to support it. I dream that we have different shows about different subjects and that people come to spend recreational time in the theater instead of going to the beach, for example.

What are Ashtar's activities nowadays in Gaza?

Presently, we are doing summer camps for different groups of children. We are doing drama games and sports theater which are new themes of theater in the Arab world. Through our summer camps we teach the children to make games by using the theater and acting tools. We started these summer camps last summer and they were successful, so we decided to continue them this year as well.

Additionally, we cooperated with some schools and created a psychological support drama program for the students in the schools after the latest Israeli aggression. We also found it to be a very successful tool to help the children overcome their fears.

What is your dream?

I dream of creating an educated generation who appreciate culture and are aware of their rights, an educated generation who can participate in discussions, make decisions, and move towards self-determination of their futures.