

# The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine

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## INTRODUCTION

*Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin*

In 1948, nearly 800 000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes by a movement aiming to colonise the land of Palestine. This was the original Nakba, catastrophe, of the Palestinians. Those who had fled sought temporary refuge in safe areas, waiting for the war to end so that they could return. On the outskirts of the Palestinian town of Jenin, at the northern edge of what is today called the West Bank, a refugee camp was established in 1953 by the United Nations. Refugees from the Galilee and the Haifa region settled in the camp, which was initially made up of tents and simple one-room structures. It was to be known as the Jenin refugee camp, one of 58 recognised Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and the diaspora. The refugees had lost their homes, their lands and most of their belongings but not the belief that they would one day, soon, be able to go home. For the refugees in Jenin, home was not far - on a clear day visible from the hilltops overlooking the camp.

Uprisings, wars, negotiations and false promises followed as the years and decades passed by, while the Israeli occupation expanded its control of lands and minds. Meanwhile, the population of the camp grew but the 0.42 square kilometre plot of land remained the same. Thus the camp grew vertically, a new floor added for every new generation that married and started a family. In 1987, during the outbreak of the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising) a woman from the nearby coastal town Haifa by the name of Arna Mer Khamis led a group of women from the refugee camp in setting up several alternative education centres, 'children's homes', in Jenin camp and town. The local legend tells of how Arna entered the refugee camp barefoot, carrying pens and papers in her hands, and gathered children around her. Curiosity won over suspicion and Arna came to be trusted, respected and loved in Jenin.

Many women joined Arna and their work came to be known as the Care and Learning project, which received the Right Livelihood Award in Sweden in 1993. With the award money a small theatre, the Stone Theatre, named after the stones children threw at invading Israeli tanks, was built on top of a residential house belonging to the Zubeidi family. Samira Zubeidi was one of Arna's closest partners and her sons Zakaria and Daoud were involved in an acting group led by Arna and her son, Juliano

Mer Khamis. Juliano, born to a Palestinian-Christian father and a Jewish-Israeli mother, was at the time a famous and controversial actor in Israel. He helped his mother lead theatre workshops in Jenin refugee camp and stage plays with children and youth.

Arna died of cancer in 1995. Her death and changed socio-political circumstances contributed to the end of the Care and Learning project. After almost a decade of fruitless peace negotiations, resulting only in further land grabs and hardened oppression, the second Intifada broke out in the year 2000. Some of the former participants in the project took up leading positions in the resistance in Jenin refugee camp, and many died during the Battle of Jenin in April 2002. Juliano returned to the camp shortly after to find it in ruins, along with the Stone Theatre – an experience he documented in the film *Arna's Children*, featuring some of the former child actors in his mother's project. One of the last survivors of the early theatre groups was Zakaria Zubeidi, Samira's son. At the end of the Battle of Jenin, Zakaria became the military leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and as a man wanted by the Israelis lived underground for several years.

For Zakaria, the dream of establishing anew a cultural centre in Jenin refugee camp had remained alive since the days of the Stone Theatre. In 2005, while parts of the camp were still in ruins, the idea of building on the heritage of Arna, Samira and the other women was put into action by a group of people that included Zakaria, Juliano and Swedish activist Jonatan Stanczak.

In February 2006 the doors to The Freedom Theatre were opened, while clashes still raged on the streets outside. The building was an old British army structure built as a storage facility for the former train station, which had been converted into a UN distribution centre and later, a community centre that had subsequently been closed and the building was abandoned. It was renovated and transformed into a makeshift theatre with donated theatre lamps and rented plastic chairs. The opening event gathered a large crowd of adults and children who were treated to music, circus and theatre performances. Jenin town and camp VIPs gave the initiative their blessings, requests to perform and pledges of support poured in from around the world. The Freedom Theatre was born and it was time for Resistance through Art.

Alice dreams of true love but is about to be forced into an arranged marriage. At her engagement party, a white rabbit appears and takes Alice on a confusing journey to a new world: Wonderland. She spins around and around on a rotating stage until she lands in front of a large, hissing, caterpillar that reveals Alice's fate: to liberate Wonderland from its oppressors.

from The Freedom Theatre's adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, 2011

In its first decade, the makeshift theatre hall with rows of rented plastic chairs has grown into the largest cultural centre in the northern part of the occupied West Bank. More importantly, it has become a nucleus of artistic, socio-political creation, conversation and cultural resistance in the heart of Jenin refugee camp.

The Freedom Theatre's work is based on the belief that artistic expression has a crucial role to play in creating a free and equal society. The theatre stages plays, runs professional training in acting and devising, offers pedagogical training and creative after-school activities. It runs courses in photography and filmmaking, produces exhibitions, short films, a youth magazine and various publications. It has within its first ten years raised a core of actors, stage managers, theatre technicians, cultural administrators, photographers, filmmakers and instructors. It has engaged more than 100,000 artists, spectators and visitors in performances, trainings, workshops and presentations, in Jenin and elsewhere in Palestine. It has toured in over 15 countries and created an extensive international network of partners and friends.

The Freedom Theatre's journey has not been easy. External and internal opponents have continuously attacked it, in words and in actions. In April 2011, one such attack proved fatal when Juliano Mer Khamis was brutally assassinated outside the theatre by an unknown murderer. Over a year of intense harassment followed, where The Freedom Theatre was hit from all sides. The Israeli occupation forces attacked the theatre building in nightly raids, detained or arrested students, actors, staff and board members, in some cases presenting absurd allegations of involvement in Juliano's murder, only to release them a few days, weeks or months later. The Palestinian Authority also targeted people associated with the theatre, allegedly in connection

with Juliano's murder. Although The Freedom Theatre announced immediately after the murder that all of its members were committed to assist in the investigation and were available for questioning, both authorities chose to use force. Many of the theatre's members, particularly children and youth, had to leave The Freedom Theatre out of fear. The safe space created laboriously over the years was shattered to pieces.

What is it about The Freedom Theatre's work that provokes so? Perhaps Juliano described it best:

What we do in the theatre is not trying to be a substitute or an alternative to the Palestinian resistance in the struggle for liberation, just the opposite. This must be clear. I know it's not good for fundraising, because I'm not a social worker, I'm not a good Jew who comes to help the Arabs, and I'm not a philanthropic Palestinian who comes to feed the poor. We join, by all means, the Palestinian struggle for liberation, which is our liberation struggle. We are not healers. We are not good Christians. We are freedom fighters. *Juliano Mer Khamis 1*

The founders of The Freedom Theatre and those who joined them had a vision of building a theatre community that would not attempt to replace other forms of resistance in the struggle for liberation – rather to join them. The Freedom Theatre was never aimed to pacify, its work was intended to stir, mobilise and transform.

To a large extent this vision grew out of the unique persona that Juliano was, the dual Jewish-Palestinian identities that he embodied and embraced, combined with the reality on the ground in Jenin following the devastation, physically and figuratively, of the second Intifada. However, The Freedom Theatre was never a one-man show. It was and is a collective effort of many voices and experiences, most of them born as refugees in Jenin camp. The fact that The Freedom Theatre not only survived after Juliano but continues to evolve and re-imagine itself, proves that it is not the mind-material or modelling of one individual, but the creation of a movement that is not limited to its physical location, it includes people around the world. Juliano was the

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<sup>1</sup> Juliano Mer Khamis, interview by Maryam Monalisa Gharavi (see Chapter 6).

first to point this out. ‘This is not about philanthropy or social work, but about a joint creative process of partners in an agenda that includes education, culture and a struggle for freedom,’ he said at the opening in 2006. The Freedom Theatre would in the words of Juliano ‘cooperate with other similar forces in generating a cultural resistance, carrying on its shoulders universal values of freedom and justice.’ That cultural resistance was, and still is, channelled in the teaching and artistic productions of The Freedom Theatre and in the non-compromising attitude towards local stakeholders, partners, donors and the media. For this and more, The Freedom Theatre quickly became known. For this and more, The Freedom Theatre quickly triggered the wrath of those who for diverse reasons opposed its work. It still does. Some critics accuse The Freedom Theatre ‘after Juliano’ of becoming cowardly, weak – complicit, even. This book will argue that those claims are unfounded.

The Freedom Theatre’s journey has proved that change does not come easily; it requires dedication, perseverance and fighting spirit. Motivation comes in the form of personal sacrifice, a sense of purpose, direction, of being part of something greater than the individuals who make up the movement.

‘Our work raises questions – that is in fact our main responsibility. We invite a multitude of voices, ideas and experiences and open windows to new worlds. But we do not offer solutions. The questions will by themselves inspire thoughts, ideas, and ultimately change. And the answers will come from within the human being. Art teases us, forces us to ask why, to challenge.’

(Faisal Abu Alhayjaa, actor and 2011 graduate of The Freedom Theatre School)

During the first years when The Freedom Theatre went through difficult challenges, Juliano used to say: the show must go on! Which is exactly what it does.

There is a deceptive air of calm in Jenin refugee camp these days – but not at night. At night, the piercing sound of gunfire, stun grenades and tear gas are as normal as the sounds of barking dogs roaming the streets. The Israeli occupation forces make frequent nightly raids to arrest or intimidate, resulting in clashes between soldiers and young camp residents. Other nights, the gunfire is the result of clashes between Palestinian Authority forces and camp residents. On a good night, the gunfire signals



the celebration of a wedding or the release of a prisoner.

Nowadays, Jenin refugee camp is not only associated with the death and destruction of the second Intifada; it is also known in Palestine and internationally for innovative, thought-provoking cultural work. As Juliano predicted: a seed has been sown, and it will continue to grow.

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The contents of the book cover the life span of The Freedom Theatre thus far, starting with Arna Mer Khamis' groundwork with children in Jenin refugee camp and with a final chapter on the envisioned future of the organisation. The three sections in between the Introduction and the Future parts are not chronologically but thematically arranged, namely Cultural Resistance, Performing Arts and International Perspectives. Hence the volume does not have the ambition to cover all events since the start in 2006. Instead the aesthetic, educational and political aspects of The Freedom Theatre have been selected in view of the book's potential readerships. Some chapters are academically written whilst others have been written or informed by contributors whose professional and personal testimonies relate more directly to particular practices, concepts, projects or events. Some key voices from The Freedom Theatre are relayed through interviews while others have written their own chapters. The selection of authors is based on the thematic 'through-line' of the volume. Ideally, many more authors, commentators and interviewees – too many to be named here – could have been included due to their important contributions to The Freedom Theatre throughout the past decade, but in the end, the book's format decided the selection. This volume does not purport to express the opinions of everyone who has in one way or another contributed to what The Freedom Theatre is today – that would be an impossible task. The result will hopefully appeal in equal measures to a number of readerships, from scholars and intellectuals to theatre workers and activists, who have prior knowledge of The Freedom Theatre and Palestine, as well as those who do not.

The first part (Background) provides an introduction to key personalities, ideas and practices of the organisation's initial years. The incipient stage, prior to The Freedom

Theatre's official start date, is characterised by Arna Mer Khamis' drama therapeutic program with children during the first Intifada and her legacy constitutes the most significant foundation and inspiration of The Freedom Theatre. It is interesting to note that the combination of pedagogy and theatre underpins the community-based theatre in Jenin, much like South American Theatre of the Oppressed, African Theatre for Development and European Applied Theatre.

The remaining chapters of the Background section consist of testimonies of the early days of The Freedom Theatre and Arna's world-renowned son Juliano who co-founded the theatre with Zakaria Zubeidi and Jonatan Stanczak. Zubeidi personifies the continuum of armed-cum-cultural resistance and literally broke the lock to the door of what was to become The Freedom Theatre space with his machine gun. His local knowledge and street wisdom helped mobilise the first acting group to the theatre. Stanczak provided the administrative backbone that allowed for institutional growth. Mer Khamis took responsibility for the educational and aesthetic parts of the organisation. Many others contributed to the establishment and development of The Freedom Theatre, among them were Bilal Al-Saadi who later became the chairperson of the board and Jenny Nyman, who mobilised overseas funding and provided a visual appeal to the theatre.

The key idiom of The Freedom Theatre is 'cultural resistance', which is also the heading of the book's second part. Juliano preferred the more dramatic term 'cultural Intifada,' but the politically recognisable act of 'resistance' has become an established suffix of the theatre's cultural mission. That does not mean, however, that there is a consolidated understanding of the meaning of cultural resistance within The Freedom Theatre. In fact, the only shared description of the idiom among employees and members is that it is about more than a resistance to the Israeli occupation. Everyone recognises the equally significant resistance to the ideological compartmentalisation and indoctrination of Palestinian society as well as the corruption of the Palestinian Authority. The interviewed alumni students are a case in point with their multiple views on cultural resistance. Integral to the cultural resistance is also the theatre's affirmative stance to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, with frequent decisions of collaborations and other relational matters in accordance with the movement's agenda. Former Artistic Director Nabil Al-Raei accounts for a

holistic view of cultural resistance although with the Israeli occupation as the main source of cultural, artistic, political and psychological resistance. The occupation is all around, every waking and sleeping hour, and the houses in the refugee camp are leased up until the Palestinians gain the right of return. Stanczak is no less holistic and links the concept of cultural resistance to four levels of occupation, namely the Israeli occupation, the normalising compliance with the occupying conditions by the Palestinian Authority, the dependency on an international aid economy and the effect of all these pressures and demands on individual attitudes and behaviours. Two international chapters conclude the part with democratic perspectives on The Freedom Theatre. Jen Curatola discusses the ways in which The Freedom Theatre contributes to Palestinian civil society through building social capital, promoting democratic principles and mediating between individuals and sites of authority. Ola Johansson assumes an alternative perspective towards the concept of cultural resistance by viewing the artistic projects, social work and political activism of The Freedom Theatre as a democratic counter-occupation.

The third part (Performing Arts) exemplifies and analyses performance practices at The Freedom Theatre. The exception is the first chapter by Hala Nassar, one of Palestine's leading theatre scholars, who provides an historical background to Palestinian theatre, that is not very well-known to international readers. The following chapters offer a wide-ranging typological spectrum of theatre practices at The Freedom Theatre, which can be appreciated in relief against Nassar's horizon. Micaela Miranda outlines the central impetus of the creative performance practices within the organisation, namely its educational program. Students are primarily recruited from the nearby camp, town and villages but also further afield in the West Bank and go through several stages of artistic training along with personal and social transformations. The education corresponds to the organisation's local, regional and international concepts and aesthetics. The Freedom Theatre also offers educational and theatrical opportunities for children and youth, which is explained by Johanna Wallin along a reflective timeline from Arna Mer Khamis' programme to the provision of workshops and a child centre on the premises today. Ben Rivers analyses an initiative for which Rivers himself was instrumental and which has had long-term consequences for The Freedom Theatre, namely the Freedom Bus tours with playback theatre and cultural activism involving local participants across the occupied

territories. The latter half of the Performing Arts part exemplifies, by a variety of texts, four theatre productions which were selected due to their correspondences to the aforementioned four levels of occupation (cf. the chapter 'Cultural Resistance' in Part II). Whilst *The Siege* deals with the Israeli occupation, *Animal Farm* suggests internal Palestinian hierarchical and oppressive blockages. *Alice in Wonderland* assumes an international perspective by scrutinising the performance as a 'dangerland' by re-imagining themselves as fantastical avatars from animals to otherworldly creatures, and *Suicide Note from Palestine*, finally, perceives the occupied conditions from a calamitous individual viewpoint and in doing so comments on the key players that are involved in determining Palestine's fate.

In the fourth part (International Perspectives), visiting artists and leaders of some of the solidarity organisations around the world contribute with their unique experiences. Jacob Gough and Zoe Lafferty reflect on working alongside Juliano Mer Khamis in the early years and the transition into The Freedom Theatre's second chapter, while Sudhanva Deshpande accounts for the collaboration between his Indian street theatre group Jana Natya Manch and The Freedom Theatre. A geo-artistic South-South exchange involving a co-production requires not only an aesthetic commensurability but also a delicate organisational agreement and a sound economic bargain. Gary English contextualises his experiences in Jenin by geopolitical reflections and a political discourse that characterises some of the most critical international stances against Israel's legacy, mythology, belligerence and occupation. Robert Lyons embeds his political discourse in the workshops he led with students at The Freedom Theatre, especially with scenes from Bertolt Brecht's repertory. The rest of the part consists of personal reflections and anecdotes from Friends organisations in Sweden, France and the United States respectively.

The fifth part is all about the future with a capital F. Johanna Wallin brings together visions for a sustainable future organisation, in consultation with peers and colleagues at the theatre. The volume then ends with a poetic fragment from the recently devised production *Return to Palestine* (2016). The final passage is worth quoting at the onset of this anthology as it implies an historical revival for the future:

*We will return to Palestine. We will be proud of who we are and what we do.*

*We will believe in our ability. We will respect ourselves and each other. We will trust ourselves and each other. We will be true to our cause. We will stop seeing ourselves as victims and take back the initiative. We will stop looking at others and start looking at ourselves. We will refuse to fight each other. We will unite. We will hold our leaders accountable. We will lead by example and practice what we preach. We will not be held back by our past, we will use it as a stepping-stone to leap forward in fearless conviction that a bright future is ours. We will return.*

Ola Johansson & Johanna Wallin

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