

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 5 Summary

THEATRE, RESISTANCE, AND PEACEBUILDING IN PALESTINE

by Abeer Musleh

In this chapter, Palestinian youth worker and scholar Abeer Musleh highlights two organizations that are using theatre to contribute to peacebuilding in Palestine. Al-Rowwad is a community-based organization that provides theatre training for youth in the Aida refugee camp in the West Bank. Ashtar is a professional theatre company and theatre school based in Jerusalem and Ramallah (West Bank).

For Palestinians who have been living under military occupation for more than forty years, these two organizations offer outlets for individual expression and creativity, tools for critical thinking and communication, and a sense of empowerment, self-confidence, and hope. Although the methods they use are quite different, Ashtar and Al-Rowwad both believe that theatre has an important role to play in the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice, and peace.

Context

When the state of Israel was created in 1948, 75% of the indigenous Palestinian population was displaced; many Palestinians became refugees in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere. In the 1967 war between Israel and neighboring Arab states, Israel occupied two territories—the West Bank and Gaza—that had been under Jordanian and Egyptian rule, respectively. The Palestinians living in these territories—and their children and grandchildren—have been living under military occupation ever since.

The impact of the events of 1948—which Palestinians call the *Nakba* (the Catastrophe)—cannot be overstated. Families were broken up, land was lost and stolen, and 531 Palestinian villages were destroyed or resettled by Jews. The *Nakba* completely disrupted the economic, social, and cultural life of Palestine, and the enduring occupation and violence in the region has left little opportunity for Palestinians to rebuild.

While there was an active theatre scene in the cities of Palestine prior to 1948, the *Nakba* put an end to it, and it wasn't until after 1967 that a strong theatre movement once again emerged. In the 1970s and 80s many new theatre companies sprang up, though most of their work was focused entirely on political goals: to inspire national unity and to mobilize people in resisting the occupation.

Today, theatre in Palestine is still inspired by the political and social realities on the ground, but the theatre artists highlighted in this chapter are not interested in sending dogmatic political messages. Rather, they are drawing on the aesthetic power of theatre to help people think critically, explore and express their feelings, engage in dialogue with others, and make change in their own lives.

Al-Rowwad

Al-Rowwad is a community center situated right in the middle of the Aida refugee camp. It serves a population that has long endured military occupation and poverty. Al-Rowwad teaches the children of the camp theatre skills with the aim of nourishing their humanity and their capacities for constructive action in the world. As Musleh writes:

Through the creation and performance of plays, Al-Rowwad's students develop self-esteem, maturity, acceptance of others, dialogue skills, and the ability to work as part of a team. Through profound, non-competitive interactions with each other, the students also become more willing and able to discuss sensitive or challenging ideas.

Each year, Al-Rowwad produces a play called *We the Children of the Camp*. While the basic structure of the play is the same each year—tracing the history of Palestine from the early 20th century to the present—the content changes each year based on the experiences, desires, and abilities of the children. Al-Rowwad staff help the children to articulate their priorities and to shape their ideas and experiences into material for the play. Students who participate in this process year after year become more comfortable sharing their opinions, talking about traumatic experiences, and expressing themselves in front of their peers and their community.

Al-Rowwad's emphasis in this process is on developing young people's artistic, interpersonal, and *intra*-personal skills, rather than on delivering a product or message. The director of the organization says: "These children have the talent and the force to express themselves in a beautiful, nonviolent, civilized, and humane manner.... We want our children to find the peace within themselves in order to be able to deal with the world around them in a positive and constructive way, to prepare a better future for themselves and for the generations to come."

Ashtar

Ashtar has been a professional performing and training institution since 1991. It was founded, Musleh writes, "on the notion that drama can help people develop life skills, including expression, creativity, emotional and psychological stability, awareness of surroundings, and tolerance."

In 1997, Ashtar worked with the Theatre of the Oppressed and learned the approach to liberation theatre developed by the renowned Brazilian scholar, activist and educator Augusto Boal. Ashtar began to use the forum theatre performance method, in which audiences can interrupt and interact with the performers, affecting the outcomes of a play. Using this method, Ashtar began to produce an annual play called *Abu Shaker's Affairs*. The play is always based around the same character, but the themes vary each year, reflecting the most relevant and pressing issues in Palestine at the time. Over the years, the play has addressed such controversial issues as "honor" killings, early marriage, the absence within families of democracy and equality, and Palestinian collaboration with the Israeli forces. This is consistent with Ashtar's mission, which is, in part, to explore the

places “where society has introduced prohibitions and taboos inducing heavy silence over matters.”

During performances of *Abu Shaker’s Affairs*, audience members are able to intervene in the drama by raising questions, making suggestions and engaging in dialogue with the artists and with each other. Musleh writes that “with all the discussion and debate that happens during performances” Ashtar’s artistic director sees the forum theatre process “as a way of ‘giving society the tools to be democratic.’ [The director] adds that the goal of Ashtar is to help community members take ‘a critical look upon the society’ and ask themselves, ‘What do I (as an individual) want in my community and what can I do?’”

Ashtar emphasizes that Palestinians must resist and overcome oppression within their own society while also resisting the Israeli occupation.

Resistance as Peacebuilding

In this chapter, Musleh asserts that an important part of peacebuilding in Palestine is resistance to occupation and oppression. She indicates that, while people from other places might hear “resistance” as a solely military word, for Palestinians, the word also has another meaning. It also refers, she writes, to:

the process of building healthy and effective individuals and communities, maintaining a rich culture, and developing the social, political, and economic infrastructure required for independent statehood—all in the face of forces that seek to thwart these efforts. For many Palestinians, an important part of resisting the injustices they face is educating their own people, particularly the youth, building their self-esteem, and helping them to see themselves not as passive victims but as active citizens.

Indeed, the director of Al-Rowwad talks about his work as nurturing a “beautiful non-violent resistance” among Palestinian youth. He helps young people get beyond political slogans and stereotypes, and into their personal stories and feelings. Ashtar similarly empowers people to explore their own feelings and experiences, and to take constructive action in their lives.

Both groups, according to Musleh, “are offering Palestinians non-violent ways of resisting occupation and oppression—ways that increase the humanity and agency of Palestinians rather than harming them and perpetuating suffering.”

More from “Theatre, Resistance, and Peacebuilding in Palestine”:

- In this chapter, Musleh also discusses the international tours on which Al-Rowwad has taken its theatre groups, and she describes the organization’s role as a community center, safe space, and trusted ally within the camp.

- She highlights the emergency intervention work that Ashtar did during the most recent Israeli military incursions in the West Bank—using drama to help students and teachers cope with the trauma.
- The author identifies the Arabic concept of *Sumud*—often translated as “steadfastness” or “resilience”—as critical to understanding peacebuilding in Palestine today.
- She also provides an extensive discussion of the history of Palestinian theatre and a detailed description of the political context in which Ashtar and Al-Rowwad are working today.