

Troubled Contemporary Art Practices in the Middle East **June 3, 2016**

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Lee Perlman presented the joint production “Shame-Talkbacks on Theatre” as a case study in precarious Palestinian/Jewish collaborative artistic mobilization in Israel. “Shame” which premiered in October 2015 at the Tmuna Fringe Theater Center in Tel Aviv, is a devised performance of two consecutive solo pieces in which a Jewish Israeli actress and Palestinian actor, each perform their personal experience of taking oppositional public stands in and outside of the theater while seeking to fulfill their artistic aspirations.

Presentation:

Thank you Ellada. It’s a pleasure and an honor to be here today.

In this presentation I will give brief background on Palestinian/Jewish professional theatre collaborations in Israel, which I coin joint productions. I will relate to the sensitive and central notion of ‘collaboration.’ I will then present the production Shame Busha in Hebrew, Mukhjel or Shaming in Arabic as a joint production which in a very self-aware way attempts to defy the normative patterns of joint productions, to be “a sort of anti-joint production,’ as Shame’s actress and director Einat Weizmann coins it. Shame conveys a parallel message of shared Palestinian/Jewish radical opposition to the Israeli Jewish polity and its policies, each actor, from his vantage point and via his personal narrative and as such is presented here as a case study of Palestinian/Jewish precarious artistic mobilization in Israel.

“Shame” is an example of one of the over fifty collaborative professional theater productions by Jewish and Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel which have been produced from 2000-2015 in repertory and fringe theaters. These collaborations consciously attempt to cross a political and cultural bridge and aim at creating a shared space of public legitimacy, in which it is possible to contain and express diverse and controversial voices, including Palestinian narratives and symbols that lie outside the norm of social and political discourse in Israel and are often excluded from it. These joint productions are typically based on different types of collaborative creation processes: “devised theater” “devised performance,” and, as in the case of “Shame”, through “a non-dialogic narrative structure” whereby performers’ narratives are presented in a distinct and intentionally juxtaposed fashion. Yet the vast majority of all of these joint productions are initiated and directed by Jewish Israelis and performed primarily for Jewish Israeli audiences in Jewish-Israeli theater settings, serving the varied interests of their initiators, ideological, economic, institutional and personal. Interestingly, while they unsurprisingly replicate the power relations between the two groups, in and outside the theater, they also often enable conditions of equality to exist between the Jews and Palestinians taking part.

The joint productions between 2000 and 2015 that I’ve researched were produced, to varying degrees, by Jewish Israeli *and* Palestinian teams of actors, directors, designers and technical crews. These works came into being through a conscious attempt on the part of the initiators and artists to include and to represent both national groups and usually to consciously use both Hebrew and Arabic on stage. These productions provide

Palestinian theater artists, primarily their 20's and 30's extensive professional opportunities and are a platform for professional development to identify and take advantage of opportunities in film and television in Israel and abroad.

These joint productions speak to two distinct, paradoxical notions of collaboration: one, working in partnership **as both a value and a necessity** as artists, as opposed to the notion of collaboration as **cooperating with the enemy**.

In the broader theater and artistic context, collaboration is considered a desirable element in any professional production. At the core of collaboration is a process of generating performances. It reflects artistic work of small and large groups alike, in a positive sense – giving and taking, team work, openness, and creativity.

Yet, in the Israeli socio-political and specifically Jewish/Palestinian context, collaboration also connotes **betraying** one's loyalty to one's values or group of allegiance. In the case of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza, collaboration is usually associated with working hand in hand with Israel's security forces or other government agencies. The loaded Hebrew slang acronym *mashtap* '*meshatef peula*' and *umala*, the commonly used Arabic term, which literally means 'people who work with,' capsulize this derogatory notion of collaborator, a term which evokes sensitivity and defensiveness among and between many Palestinian citizens, especially those who work in

cooperation or in partnership with Jewish Israelis in different non-security related realms.

Collaboration, in this sense, continues to be a vivid component of Israel's Palestinians citizens' collective memory and ethos, warranting many of their sensitivities to other types of collaboration with Jewish Israelis, including in the arts in general and the theatre, specifically. This notion of collaboration reflects a viewing of the Palestinian citizens of Israel as an instrument in Israel's Jewish self-preservation and security imperatives, stripped of their worth, self-identity or agency.

Significantly, the collaboration experienced in these joint productions, often enabled the opposite – they provided the Palestinian theatre artists some sense of sovereignty in determining their own self-definition. They enable an attempt to give the Palestinian artists a sense of agency, rather than viewing them fundamentally as an instrument.

SHAME

“Shame – Talkbacks on Theater”, a devised performance, mostly in Hebrew, of two consecutive 20-25 minute solo pieces, premiered in Tel Aviv in October 2015, perform regularly in the Tel Aviv Tmuna fringe theatre and has been invited to perform at this summer's Avignon Fringe Festival. A Palestinian actor, Morad Hassan and a Jewish Israeli actress (Einat Weitzman), each perform personal experience as theater artists, each seeking to fulfill their personal artistic aspirations and in Hassan's case, to earn a respectful living in Israel as a professional theater artist,

and express his cultural and lingual heritage on stage. Hassan knows very well and explains to his audience that these aspirations are not reachable and as a case in point shares his experience as an actor in *A Parallel Time*, a controversial play which prompted a number of Israeli political leaders to freeze the public national and local funding of the Palestinian Al Midan Theatre which produced it. Hassan expresses in a pointed fashion his protest at being instrumentalized by both the liberal “enlightened” Jewish Israeli theatre and academic establishments.

In *Shame*, there is a restrained but palpable parallel cry of the two artists for non-violent resistance to the state while coping with powerful socio-political and socio-cultural forces in and outside of the theater, which are ‘characters’ in *Shame* via video footage of some of Israel’s senior politicians in both pieces and excerpts from threatening and pejorative talkbacks Weizmann contended with. Some of these talkbacks she recites dispassionately, others she asks audience members to recite (the most vulgar ones) and others are pre-recorded – all conveying the violent and racist discourse within Israeli society, in an ironic fashion.

The intentional non-dialogical structure of the two consecutive, separate monologues grant each actor a distinct voice and enlarge their shared message.

The situational points of departure of Weitzman’s piece are the abusive talkbacks she receives during the Israel Defense Force’s incursion into Gaza in August 2014, in light of the highly publicized social and mass

media exposure of Weitzman wearing a tee-shirt with the symbol of a Palestinian flag in 2006

In Hassan's solo piece, the situational point of departure is his coming to grips, as an actor and assistant director in the Palestinian Al Midan Theater in the northern coastal city of Haifa, with the implications of the decision by local and national Israeli governmental authorities' to freeze Al Midan's core budgetary allocations in the wake of the contested production of "A Parallel Timeline." This production was deemed by senior policymakers as undermining the public interests and sensibilities of Israel's Jewish polity.

"Shame" presents the prices each artist pays: Hassan, due to his ethno-national identity and Weitzman, due to her opinions.

I'd like to read a few brief translated excerpts first from Einat Weizman's performance piece and then from Morad Hassan's.

Weizman's piece Einat – TalkBacks

Talkbacks P. 1,4,

Monologue 5, 10

Morad

Monologues 10 -11

Regev 11

Monologues 13, 14 top 14 Bott.-14

Regev 17

In light of the 'A Parallel Time' affair, one might coin Shame ' the parallel protest – a paradoxical protest against joint productions, the Israeli government's policies towards Palestinians within and outside of the 1967 borders and a protest against the Jewish Israeli liberal hegemony.

Ultimately, Shame, like all joint productions seeks and succeeds in creating a shared space where Jewish Israeli and Palestinian citizens and Israeli theatre spectators can pay attention profoundly to what's happening in the present moment in their society and are probed to give attention to address issues that are often suppressed.