

The Performing Arts in Palestine



By Mahmoud Abuhashhash

Use of the term “the performing arts” locally to designate a field that combines theater, dance, music, and circus may well not go any further back than 2007. A researcher would probably not find references to the term in the records or documentation of local cultural organizations, in any press coverage of their work, or in any literary criticism prior to that year. This is worth considering since adoption of the term carried with it a particular significance and has heralded some important changes. Among the most notable of these was perhaps the openness of the cultural organizations to new collaborations with partners outside Palestine, and to new ways, visions, and concepts in their work that have emerged out of an organic and rich entanglement among the various subdisciplines of this expansive field. All these areas of the performing arts entail the use and the presence of the body as the main element of the art in question and its expression. Perhaps the most

exciting aspect of the performing arts, as Edward Said observed, is its “uniqueness,” in the sense that it “happens as a single event, something temporary, impossible to be repeated and revisited.”

Around the same time that the term performing arts became more widespread, what had until then been called the plastic arts was in turn subsumed under the term visual arts, a development that can be read as a culmination of an openness to new artists, practices, and horizons. This development also tells us that the cultural scene was going through a phase of rephrasing and redefinition, a development that cannot only be looked at in isolation from what was happening culturally in Palestine and the region, and the rest of the world. Such changes accompanied a new

phase of cultural work that entailed more complexity and which was more dependent on professional engagement and institutional support. This was all part of a larger system than had existed before, was more dependent on the work of institutions and on local, regional, and international foreign funding (such as the A.M. Qattan Foundation, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, SIDA, the Ford Foundation, and many others), and on a diverse network of partners. Cultural work over this period ceased to be defined, as it had in the past, by individual, collective, and voluntary initiatives that were driven by passion and a desire for change.

The performing arts have never been more youthful, diverse, or lively than now. Major practices that were once on the margins of artistic life, if not

Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, Akram Khan Company UK, *Vertical Road*. Photo by Laurent-Ziegler.



Taha, Amer Hlehel. Photo by Saheer Obaid.

absent, such as contemporary dance and circus, are at the heart of this scene, and a new generation of talented young people, of directors, writers, and actors, has begun to shake up Palestinian theater after a long period of dormancy. The music scene is also blooming with unprecedented diversity and richness.

Last April, Sareyyet Ramallah organized the 13th edition of the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival (RCDF), strengthening the position of contemporary dance as a

Troupe, and these, as well as initiatives in teaching ballet, have created an atmosphere in which children and the new generations are encouraged to participate; some of the students have also been encouraged to continue their studies in dance. Now there are more dance productions, sometimes in partnership with foreign dance troupes, and a number of Palestinian dancers (Mohammad Samahneh, Hamzah Dumra, Kamel Jarjawi, and Ayman Safyeh, for example) have joined notable international dance productions.



Beethoven's Ninth Symphony performance at Ramallah's Cultural Palace, 2018. Photo by Alexander Wendler.

crucial artistic practice that has its own dedicated practitioners and growing audiences. Tellingly, the staging of this cultural event no longer provokes the same kind of censure it once did. Dance has increasingly come under the auspices of a number of organizations and has been included in education and training frameworks. This achievement would not have been possible without the accumulation of long experience and many collaborative contributions and efforts. There is also a long history of teaching *dabka* that has been supported by many organizations. At the top of the list are the Popular Arts Centre and the Funoun Dance

Interest in contemporary dance extends beyond the cultural centers of Ramallah and Haifa. Nablus has seen the opening of a new institution focusing on this art form and has been attracting many new participants. The growing interest in dance practice is reflected in new collaborations among artists from various fields, as in the collaborative work of choreographer Samar King and theater director and playwright Amir Nizar Zuabi, for example.

Circus is the other new and vital addition to the field of performing arts. The foundation of the Palestinian

Circus School (PCS) in 2006, followed by other similar initiatives, such as the Nablus Circus School and Gaza Stars Circus School, has been hugely influential in introducing this practice to young people, and the circus has become a vital component of artistic life in Palestine. The circus school productions, and the place of circus itself, have shifted from being a scene of entertainment to a forum for the expression of individual and collective questioning. It may well be that this practice, which involves both sports and performance, is a great way to attract new blood to the field of performance arts, especially among more conservative communities, and could be one of the reasons why it attracts new audiences. In the last few years, there have been new circus school productions, both in Palestine and abroad, which have furnished the basis for successful tours and brought about new collaborations and partnerships.

In the last decade, there has been a notable regression in the role of the historic theater organizations in Palestinian cultural life, either because they have hardly opened their doors to new generations of practitioners at all or embraced new visions and artistic experiences, or because of mounting financial problems. This has led to a reduction in the number of yearly productions and to the erosion of the theater audiences that were built up over many decades, beginning in the 1970s. Such a crisis was also exacerbated by the loss of some of the key players in Palestinian theater such as Francois Abu Salem (2011), Juliano Mer Khamis (2011), Yaqoub Ismail (2008), and Riad Masarweh (2016). With their departure, an important era came to a close.

Palestinian theater could be described as being in a state of catastrophe if the field were limited only to the more longstanding, historical institutions. Fortunately, however, a new generation of young directors and actors has

begun to present their own experiences, carving out their own place through interesting and original interventions. We could mention here the Yes Theatre in Hebron, founded in 2008, the Shiber Hur Theatre founded in Haifa in 2008, and the Khashabi Theatre in Haifa in 2015. The Hakawati Theatre has also managed to reassert itself after enduring many difficulties over the last decade. If the Harah Theatre and Anad Theatre in Beit Jala, the Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah, and the Freedom Theatre in Jenin are added to this list, a new theater landscape is evident, in which Ramallah and Jerusalem are no longer the centers of theatrical productions, and Haifa has assumed a more central role.

The last decade has witnessed the institutionalization of theater education in the West Bank. In addition to Ashtar Theatre's long experience in theater training, the decade also saw the establishment of the Drama Academy in Ramallah's Kasaba Theatre, in partnership with Wolfgang University in Germany and the acting training it offered. The Harah Theater in Beit Jala also offers training in various aspects of theater, such as scenography, sound and lighting design, costume and stage management. And let us not forget The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, which should also be acknowledged. Alongside these are other significant initiatives: the Summer School for Performing Arts (PASS), organized by the A.M. Qattan Foundation (2007–2014) in partnership with the Flemish Royal Theatre (KVS); Les Ballets C de la B dance troupe; the Writing for Theatre workshops, also organized by the A.M. Qattan Foundation with London's Royal Court Theatre and the British Council, and the many scholarships offered annually to students to continue their studies abroad in various areas of the performing arts. Cumulatively, these initiatives have encouraged the emergence of a new generation of people who are active in theater, music, and other performing arts fields.

It is worth noting that what is absent from the theater arts scene is a diversity of productions. The audience in Ramallah or Jerusalem is rarely able to see more than one or two local productions in a year, and this has resulted in the fragmentation of the theater audiences in these cities. It is more challenging than previously for a production to go on tour to various Palestinian cities. The crisis suffered by theater organizations has hit hardest those institutions that host suitable theaters. Because of the high costs of productions, there is a situation now in which most successful theaters show their work only in their own theater, or abroad. There are some plays, however, that have enjoyed significant success, such as *Taha* by Amer Hlehel, which since its production in 2014 has had more than 133 performances, 53 of which have been the English version of the play performed in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The Badkeh dance performance has had more than 180 performances in 13 countries around the world and has been seen by more than 40,000 people. The acclaimed Palestinian actor Mohammed Bakri is still, after more than 30 years, performing *The Pessoptimist*, directed by the late Mazen Ghatas, who died in 2006. Plays by local Palestinian writers and playwrights have also been produced by internationally renowned theaters: Dalia Taha's *Fireworks*, for instance, has been produced by the Royal Court Theatre in London, and her *Keffiyeh/Made in China* was produced by the Flemish Royal Theater. Remah Jabr has had her plays produced in Belgium and is now working in Toronto. Director and writer Amir Nizar Zuabi has worked with many important theaters in London and New York. Adania Shibli has had her plays produced in the United Kingdom and the United States. Palestinian actors such as Khalifa Natour and Amer Hlehel have toured with the Peter Brook Theatre for many years. Yet all these achievements can be juxtaposed with the continuing inability to establish a stable local theatrical scene.

In music, things look a little different, and the liveliness of this scene is worthy of celebration on account of its diversity, richness, and openness to all possible forms of musical expression, together with the growing presence of Palestinian music locally and abroad. There is a striking number of productions produced annually by musicians and music bands across Palestine and beyond. The second edition of the Palestine Music Expo (PMX), organized in April in Ramallah, captured much of this liveliness and diversity. Over three nights, the Expo presented 26 musical experiments from various parts of Palestine. The Expo aims to afford international possibilities for Palestinian music, to strengthen the music-making industry in Palestine, and to work on issues such as distribution and rights.

These successes would have never been possible without the efforts of many organizations, in particular those involved in music education, such as the Edward Said Conservatory of Music with its five branches in Jerusalem, Ramallah,

Bethlehem, Nablus, and Gaza, as well as various musical ensembles such as the Palestinian National Orchestra, the Palestine Youth Orchestra, and the Conservatory Orchestra, a number of Oriental music bands, Al Kamandjati in Ramallah with its various educational programs in different areas, including Jenin, Deir Ghassaneh, Jalazon, Am'ari, and Qalandiya refugee camps, the Beit al-Musica in Shafa'amr,

over the world and has supported many new music productions. The foundation has also played an important role in establishing the Gaza School for Music, which has become the fifth branch of the Edward Said Conservatory and is now changing the face of the music scene in Gaza, a scene that has recently seen the emergence of many exciting initiatives and projects.



Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, Badke. Photo by Danny Willems.

and many other initiatives, including the Sabreen Association for Artistic Development in Jerusalem. These initiatives and organizations have fostered the emergence of a new generation of young musicians. Since 2000, the A.M. Qattan Foundation has helped more than 75 talented students to continue their studies in music in academies and conservatories all

Last week I had the chance to attend a performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony in the Ramallah Cultural Palace. The performance was part of a festival organized by Al Kamandjati under the title *For Jerusalem We Sing*. This brilliant performance involved both Palestinian and international musicians, as well as a large choir and four opera singers. To be able to see

a performance like this in the heart of Ramallah is a truly great thing, and it is heartening that residents of Jerusalem, Nablus, and Bethlehem had the same opportunity.

There is an increase in the presence of Palestinian music on different platforms across the world. The most prominent of such groups is the Trio Jubran and the Sabeel Duo (Ahmad Khatib and Youssef Hbeish), the bands

Mohammad Ghazi, and Abdelkareem Qazmour, for example. This important research has deep resonance with the contemporary music scene. It also enables a retrieval of the urban history of Palestine, a history that has been forgotten as historically the Palestinian response to the Zionist narratives has emphasized a return to a rural scene, to the land, the *dabka*, the olive trees, and practices such as embroidery.



Palestine Music Expo, Ramallah 2018.

Soul 47 and DAM, and Kamelia Jubran. In spite of the many music festivals organized locally, few of these afford room for new musical productions. If it were not for the Music Expo, it would have been difficult to get a sense of the full scope of the musical scene. This musical renaissance overlaps with the significant work of Nawa, the Palestinian Institute for Cultural Development, which is focused on researching the musical heritage of Palestine before the *Nakba*, and the reproduction of musical works by prominent musicians who played a major role in the musical life of countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt – Rouhi Khamash, Riyad Al Bandak,

Mahmoud Abuhashhash is a writer and a poet. He is the director of the Culture and Arts Programme of the A.M. Qattan Foundation. He received his master's degree in arts criticism and management from City University, London, in 2004. In addition to publishing three literary books, Mahmoud has edited and co-edited several art books and catalogues about young Palestinian artists. He also writes articles and catalogue essays on art and visual culture in Palestine.

Subcontracted Nations Exhibition



Subcontracted Nations is a group exhibition that questions various concepts of nation. In these times, major transformations in these concepts are taking place through rhetorical and political discourse across the globe.

The exhibition draws its title from the proliferation of the processes of subcontracting found in our world today, whether it is the subcontracting of health services or the privatization of public resources, including water and education. These processes have resulted in the diminution of the role and obligations of the state.

The exhibition addresses the question of how the various forms of neoliberal orders in societies are being kept within socially and economically acceptable limits, in a manner considered optimal for preventing dissent, thus serving to maintain the delusion of social agency. The effects of these neoliberal mechanisms have become intrinsically entrenched in the production of day-to-day relationships, from family and sexual relations to the status of citizenship and the structure of politics.

This imposition of neoliberal mechanisms has contributed in numerous ways to the transformation of the individual through reformatory techniques, predesigned lifestyles, and dependency, among other factors.

To learn more about the 53 artworks and the participating artists, please visit <http://www.qattanfoundation.org/en>.

Curator: Yazid Anani

Assistant Curators: Abed al-Rahman Shabaneh, Aline Khoury

Open to the public from 11:00 to 19:00 daily, except Fridays and Sundays, until September 30, 2018.