

Editorial

François Abu Salem and Theater in Palestine



This issue of Jerusalem Quarterly is dedicated to the memory of François Abu Salem (1951-2011), a pioneer of Palestinian theater and a true Jerusalemite.

The performing arts began to develop in the Middle East in the early twentieth century, when Syrian and Lebanese pioneers made their mark, mostly in Egypt. Theatrical troupes like that of Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, actors such as George Abyad, Mary Muneeb, and Najeeb al-Rihani, and dancer Badia Massabny, among others, were the rising theater celebrities of the time. Although some of the plays from Egypt and Lebanon were performed in Palestine as early as the 1920s, theater as a Palestinian practice took longer to emerge. Still, theatrical shows of one form or another were part of everyday Palestinian culture, whether with puppeteers or Sandouq al-Ajab (musical stereoscopic box viewer, or

wonder box). Characters such as Awaz and the clown, Karagoz, featured prominently in the genre of political satire. As Wasif Jawhariyyeh informs us, theatrical sketches with Awaz and the clown were a fixed feature in the spacious Jerusalem coffeehouse owned by Ali Izhiman in the late Ottoman period. Al-Hakawati, or the storyteller, was another theatrical figure who used to give dramatic recitations of folkloric Arab tales such as that of Abu Zayd al-Hilali.

During the British Mandate period theatrical productions became quite common in schools and continued to be staged for the next several decades. The Ramallah Festival held at al-Tira UNRWA college was an important national event in the short-lived Jordanian period in eastern Palestine. But professional theater was not born until the early 1970s, and the name François Abu Salem was closely associated with it.

On Saturday, 1 October 2011, the life of François came to an abrupt end as a result of his fall from a building near his home in Ramallah. Many believe he committed suicide. He was 60 years old. He was among the founders of a number of theatrical groups, including the very first experimental group in Palestine, *Balalin* (balloons), which staged its daring play *al-Atmeh* – “The Darkness” – in 1972. He also directed *lama injanena*, (*When We Went Crazy*) in 1976 and moved on to establish al-Hakawati theater group in the late 1970s which in the early 1980s established the first Palestinian theater in the old cinema-house al-Nuzha, which for a while was used to screen porn films and was renamed Raghdan. The theater has since once again changed its name to the Palestinian National Theater and is still open in East Jerusalem to this day.

His training in Paris with Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil, widely acclaimed for the innovative and collaborative nature of their productions, influenced the theatrical style of François. This style was apparent in the play *al-Atmeh*, where actors emerged from the audience and non-actors participated in the dialogue. The same could be said of *lama injanena*, with the two actors on stage playing homeless madmen reflecting freely on their plight and the political situation. The actors wrote their own individual scripts and the director was able to weave them together through collective writing and experimentation. The stage itself was bare and the actors were the only focus for the audience’s attention. But in *alf-Lilah fi Souq al-Lahameen*, “one thousand nights in the meat market,” the décor and stage props were elaborate, with powerful music and songs composed by the then exiled musician Mustafa al-Kurd. Although more professional, the sense that the play was collectively written was there. That play was a mix of dream-like early orientalist takes on the Arabian Nights with contemporary street settings from the Old City of Jerusalem at the time.

François Abu Salem was a Palestinian pioneer, a Jerusalemite in taste, sensibilities and manners. Yet his Palestinian-ness was not inherited, as he was born to European parents living in the region, but was an identity he freely chose. His name will always be at the forefront of the history of Palestinian theater. His most untimely death came only months after the loss of another Palestinian-by-choice theatrical personality, Juliano mer Khamis who was criminally and stupidly murdered in Jenin refugee camp. They will both be sorely missed.

In the early 1980s, Abu Salem directed one of the first Palestinian films to be produced in the West Bank. Unfortunately, the film was lost and never made it beyond the first local screenings. It took many years before Palestinian cinema productions became professional and widely watched. Among the pioneers of the new cinema, from the late 1980s on, is Elia Suleiman, whose latest film, *The Time that Remains*, is reviewed in this issue by Tom Hill. Suleiman's film deals, in part, with the war of 1948, the period when Zionist forces and the nascent Israeli army ethnically cleansed the part of Palestine that became Israel later on. In the contribution by Marian Houk, evidence is presented that shows beyond doubt that the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians continues to this day. Her essay deals with the continuous effort by Israeli authorities to displace Jerusalemite Palestinians.

A number of essays in this issue deal with the general theme of material culture. Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins examines what she calls "the afterlife of the Oslo agreement" through the material waste gathering and commercial recycling in the occupied territories. She argues that the rise of the *baleh* or previously used markets and the accumulation of garbage are all but signs of the Palestinian dependency on foreign aid and the politics of the peace process. In his essay on water works in the Artas area in the 1920s, and the dispute over diverting the agricultural water of the area to serve new Jewish immigrant homes in Jerusalem, Vincent Lemire also offers a valuable analysis of material culture and makes a significant contribution to the supremely important new discipline of hydro-politics. In addition, two essays by Salim Tamari and Abdel Karim Abu Khashan complete studies the first parts of which appeared in *Jerusalem Quarterly* 47 and 43 respectively. While Tamari furthers his revealing explorations of the shifting boundaries and conceptions of Palestine in Ottoman maps and military manuals, Abu Khashan summarizes and interpretively comments on the French writer Pierre Loti's account of his journey from Gaza to Jerusalem.

Francois Abu Salem
(1951-2011)