

# Performing the Collective

## Al-Hakawati and Beyond

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### Abstract

The performance experience of theatre and dance has reflected the Palestinian sociocultural situation under colonialism for decades. The early contribution of al-Hakawati theatre troupe to the Palestinian performance renaissance invites examination of how it promoted the centrality of Jerusalem and was the means for discourses about various collectivities in Palestinian society, the societal, religious, and gender discussions within the Palestinian communities. It examines how this discussion influenced parallel performance endeavors in other Palestinian locations concerning social constructs such as class. By comparing the experiences of two generations of Palestinian performers, this essay argues that if national and religious collective identities constantly challenged a gendered one, some tactical initiatives by performing artists encouraged practices towards gender equality within Palestinian society.

### Keywords

Collective identity; contemporary folklore; artists from the middle class; arts in Jerusalem; gender; performance in Palestine.

In 2016, the Jerusalem Arts Network SHAFaq<sup>1</sup> emerged with the vision that art is essential to the lives of Palestinians in Jerusalem and their steadfastness. Through this collaborative space of art activism for producing, promoting, and

representing various artistic productions in and about Jerusalem, the network is reclaiming the position of Jerusalem in the Palestinian cultural scene.

In 2019, a number of cultural events around the performing arts took place in the city. Among them were: the Elia Short Film Festival, an event that connected the city with filmmakers and artists from other Palestinian cities, the Arab region, and the diaspora; Fawanis theatre production, which combined theatre directors, performers, and a diverse Palestinian audience from Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> and outside it; the Jerusalem Nights Festival; the Banat al-Quds<sup>3</sup> music band that toured in several countries; and the travelling performances of the Nakhleh Esheber Institute. In addition, there were performance events which joined Jerusalem with other Palestinian cities such as the Contemporary Dance Festival in Jerusalem, theatre performances from northern Palestine – Haifa and Galilee, and through national institutions such as Tamer Institute. As key components of the current cultural scene in Jerusalem, these performances provide opportunities for exchange and interaction of ideas, performers, and audiences. However, this scene is also constrained by the Israeli occupation practices of isolation, prohibition, interruption of events, and closure of many affiliated centers, as in the 6 August 2019 closure of the Yabous Cultural Center,<sup>4</sup> and the arrest of its director together with the Edward Said Music Conservatory director in July 2020.<sup>5</sup> The scene is also beset by internal complications of conservatism and gender inequalities affecting body representations through a number of taboos, as in the ban of the female dance “Enhedwana” performance at al-Najah University and the pressure against its performance in Jerusalem in December 2019,<sup>6</sup> and the repeated bullying of female artists for standing against escalating punitive policies under the guise of the COVID–19 crisis<sup>7</sup> in the first half of 2020. Amid the enhanced collaboration for cultural participation, and despite the deteriorating sociopolitical situation in the city and in Palestine generally, art continues to be able to uphold its role as a tool of steadfastness and social change.

Since its occupation, the city’s political particularity has manifested itself in multilayered dynamics affecting the performance scene. Among those dynamics is the defensive discourse against “de-Palestinianization” and “de-Arabization” of the city, which prompts a cultural tendency toward reinforcing various collective identities of Palestinians. There are also the dynamics created by art producers who hold, as cultural agents, capacities that bring about some balance between the aesthetic aspects of productions and the various collective identities associated with it. In addition, the political dynamics that have caused the city’s isolation from its surroundings have resulted in cultural activism being instrumental as a tool for restoring the social fabric and steadfastness. Given this complex scene, this essay examines the various collective identities emerging in Palestine, tackled through the Palestinian performing experience of al-Hakawati theatre in the last three decades of the twentieth century. The article also demonstrates how aspects of Palestinian artists’ life experiences, not only those who are active in Jerusalem but others beyond the city, have contributed to restoring modes of cultural activism in the city and the various Palestinian locations.

This article benefited from recent studies on Palestinian performing arts,<sup>8</sup> and on

arts in Jerusalem<sup>9</sup> in the emergence of performance as a collective act. It provides a socio-anthropological analysis of the performing experience, extending the historical understanding of its contribution to the national struggle by introducing subjective reflections by engaged performers in the performance communities in Palestine. It demonstrates al-Hakawati's influence on other contemporary performances produced in Palestine.

## **Data and Method**

This paper uses a narrative analysis of first-hand research carried out over three years, 2011–13, through biographical interviews and documentation on theatre, dance troupes, and productions.<sup>10</sup> Thirty semistructured interviews were conducted with professional performers over the age of eighteen, both women and men, who participated in at least three performances during the period 1960–2013.<sup>11</sup> A methodological decision was made to categorize the artists into two generations of performers: an older generation of performers (above 50 years old) who became trainers later or who no longer perform, and a newer generation of performers who perform currently and consistently within one troupe or more.

## **Collective Identities and the Performing Artists Groups**

Despite calls for modernity, which accompanied the modernization of cities through relations with the British Mandate, trends in art (dance and theatre) in Palestine were derived from the pre-modern era. The twentieth century performing arts created by Palestinians were inspired from Palestinian heritage and demonstrated the consequences of the 1948 Nakba.<sup>12</sup> A reason for maintaining linkage with those traditions is the multiple identities that drove Palestinian society's interests in a colonial context between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Three collective forces, the religious, the national, and the gendered collective identities, were enmeshed with and dominated the emerging performing arts, and influenced strategies of its producers. Several decades before the appearance of al-Hakawati theatre group in Jerusalem in 1977, performances in Palestine shadowed the internal dispute on the themes within the national struggle in Palestine, whether a religious- or a secular-inspired struggle; during certain periods, the struggle conflicted with religiosity, and at other times, it did not.<sup>13</sup> In the late twentieth century, many Palestinians prioritized a collective national identity while battling threats to their existence under Israeli occupation, and performances combined the religious with national affiliations to acknowledge Palestinian resistance. Al-Hakawati theatre in Jerusalem was one of the few emerging ensembles to commit to social and patriotic themes of people's empowerment.

The third collective identity arose as a result of the activism of the women's movement in asserting women's agency in the national struggle. By sharing progressive visions with both the performing troupes and the political factions, the

Palestinian women's movement nurtured the performing arts as a tool to emphasize women's issues and gender equality.<sup>14</sup> Promoting female participation in performance was the task of middle-class agents among women unions. It was also promoted by some members among the national movement factions, and later by civil society organizations concerned with women's rights, and by theatres themselves. However, some challenges faced the female artists within the performing groups, especially challenges pertaining to the conservatism of the other two collectives. As the three collective forces contrasted and clashed within Palestinian society, they created a turbulent socio-political ground for performing artists. They mobilized public opinion regarding the socio-political effectiveness of performance for Palestinians. Such turbulence provokes the question of the role of Palestinian artists' networks and experiences as part of a middle class in conveying the various messaging behind performance in Palestine.

Several studies demonstrate that the middle class contributes to the national economy by its position within social unions, political parties, religious representation, and in media as well as in cultural production.<sup>15</sup> Its cultural capital is its main property,<sup>16</sup> and the stratum of its members support their autonomy from public opinion as a result of their multiple affiliations.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the middle class remains a force that has access to means and resources, and the will to achieve changes in the social conditions that benefit its members.<sup>18</sup> If performing arts are representations of the society,<sup>19</sup> then middle-class performers are those who mediate between capital and labor through their bodies in performance. This process of mediation reflects the awareness needed among performers to produce various messages that aim at eliminating inequalities related to the multiple collective identities.

In the Palestinian case, Hilal<sup>20</sup> demonstrates that the Palestinian middle class emerged following 1948 through a considerable number of political party intellectuals who had not been part of the working class themselves, nor of the elite, and this caused their marginalization. These groups of intellectuals, including artists, developed within the national movement, even though they did not unite in a class. They invested in community mobilizing towards the priorities of the Palestinian national movement and led the political agenda, which included social and cultural aspects of resistance, and fostered the environment for maintaining their social stratum. The middle-class stratum provided performers among its members with power and prestige needed for social change concerning various equalities and freedoms called upon by the collective identities, such as ending occupation, oppression, and gender inequalities. Manifestations of this class turned the performance into what some termed "a form of nationalist education," or "resistance theatre,"<sup>21</sup> and was ceaselessly confronted by the Israeli occupation through the enforcement of military orders aimed at prohibiting the formation of cultural clubs, and using censorship against cultural activities for Palestinians. These orders actually boosted the agency of art activities as forms of resistance,<sup>22</sup> and led to more troupes emerging during the eighties and nineties focusing on a national collective message similar to Balalin (1971–78) and the Wonder Box (1975–77).<sup>23</sup>

## Al-Hakawati Theatre Troupe Experience

Al-Hakawati theatre troupe was active in Jerusalem between 1977 and 1993, and committed to theatre as a promoter of social and political change and extending beyond conventional societal class and traditional understandings of art.<sup>24</sup> Politically, the troupe managed to transform the theatre into a patriotic instrument, as a group member explained: “The [Palestinian] theatre before [us] was more a way to learn English or a fancy way to spend an evening. It did not have any interaction with people’s needs.”<sup>25</sup> The troupe was closed fourteen times between May 1984 and March 1987, seven times between March and May 1987, and banned by the Israeli occupation during the whole of the first intifada. When it managed to reach out to the community by performing in schoolyards of villages, pressure from the Israeli occupation increased. A founding member, François Abu Salem recalled at the time:

The permit [obtained from the Israeli occupation authorities in Jerusalem] for our play *Mahjoob* . . . was withheld at first, but we won the case on appeal. Once you get the censor’s permit, you face with all sorts of other pressures. Sometimes the [Israeli occupation] police come to us and say we need another permit from them, besides the censor’s permit, which is not valid. Alternatively, [an Israeli] government ministry sends a telegram to the schoolmaster on the day we arrive in the village, saying, “Do not give them the use of the school because they are subversive.” And you have to fight it, for the schoolmaster, in fact, is allowed to give you the place. But by then, it is not a question of legality anymore, but of pressure.<sup>26</sup>

The themes of their performances centered on enabling the communities to have agency against the occupation such as combining daily routines with practicing disobedience against its regulations. To do so, the troupe succeeded in employing routines that rely on the religious culture to promote a collective national agency through art. For example, one member of the troupe, Radi Shehadeh, connected the publicity for a theatre piece with the religious ritual *athan* (prayers during Ramadan to break the fast following the firing of the cannon), mocking the frequent Israeli calls for curfews. He recalls:

During Ramadan, we toured al-Mukabir, a suburb of Jerusalem, in a car with a loudspeaker mounted on it, inviting the residents to attend performances in the main square. This amplified announcement mimicked the orders of the Israeli military government, whose public pronouncements generally presage disaster. Instead of curfews, arrests, and imprisonment, the townspeople [were] enjoined to attend a storytelling session and to rejoice [after the fasting breaking]: Al-Hakawati had learned the secret of the trade. Now after long-suffering under occupation, the Hakawati is himself a governor; not a military

governor but a Theatrical Governor [...]: “People of al-Mukabir, by order of the Theatrical Governor, it is forbidden to remain at home, so be there in the town square directly after the breaking-of-the-fast cannon-shot signal. [. . .] Al-Hakawati will be there, waiting.”<sup>27</sup>

Socially, the troupe aimed to create a hybrid theatre that combined folkloric and Palestinian modern themes. Most performers originated mainly from cities like Jerusalem and Jaffa, not villages, and they anticipated the impact of theatre on the design of their present and future. They strove to avoid imitation and the traps of repetition found in folklore, but found in it a source of inspiration for coping with the modern era.<sup>28</sup> The troupe mediated between the elite and the rural community to develop a less conservative view of theatre; and they challenged the claim that theatre was centered around main towns like Jerusalem and Ramallah, with only educated people being able to attend, and that in villages and towns there existed no established theatres, where popular performances could take place.<sup>29</sup> Abu Salem described the reaction of the village population to the patriotic themes of their performances, “The villagers are amazing. They are part of the performance ... [they] have a tendency not to sit down and listen; they yell out their reactions. A huge crowd, outdoor. They all take part in setting up the stage.”<sup>30</sup> Performers ventured closer to the communities and addressed their lifestyle interactively, beginning an organic relationship with their society despite harassment by the Israeli occupation. Not only did al-Hakawati theatre reach out to villagers but they also embraced common characteristics of Palestinian society to call for people’s agency against silence and adaptation to oppression.

Patients from nearby hospitals in Jerusalem attended the premiere of *I Must Have Light* on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1989, at nearby al-Nuzha theatre. The stage and audience overflowed with the wounded:

The setting is a dark room where ’Ayub (Arabic for patience), is seated in a wheelchair suffering from paralysis of the hands and feet. To cry, to laugh, or to go out are forbidden acts. Darkness, they told him, is good. He needs his medicine, but he needs light to find his medicine. Salaymeh faces the audience. By playing ’Ayub, ’Ayub’s mother, a sorceress, assorted neighbors, and friends, he tells the story of the events that led up to his current plight. After the onset of his disease, his mother took him to a fortuneteller and sorceress instead of a doctor. She prays for his recovery, chants, and throws mysterious unguents into the air. Friends visit to tell him that his case is famous. Salaymeh punctuates the drama of his solo narrative with ineffectual attempts to light matches. At last, he succeeds in throwing a lighted match into a standing lamp. The stage appears to burst into flames, and then ’Ayub falls to the ground in darkness.<sup>31</sup>

Al-Hakawati demonstrates the extent to which this troupe formed an organic group of intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense, within the Palestinian middle class.<sup>32</sup> Through theatre and performance, it was able to reach out to both the higher and the lower classes, and against the Israeli occupation system, which continually attempted to eliminate its activism. One member commented, “Performance changes the nature of occupation by placing ‘suffering in the land’ in a Palestinian theatrical framework . . . comedy, children’s puppet theatre, and traditional epic or singing, which take command of a state of affairs that it is powerless to alter.”<sup>33</sup>

However, the same theatre troupe experience reveals a gender challenge caused by the scarce participation of women in theatre. The audience among the Palestinian society identified with the secondary role of women that was introduced by the female performer on stage. Only a few females<sup>34</sup> joined the troupe, and little was performed to reverse the stereotypes of society toward women such as in *I Must Have Light* and in *The Story of Kufr Shamma* and *Mahjoub*. Despite its success in organizing, leading, and directing for the collective patriotic struggle through performance, al-Hakawati affirmed that participation of women in different locations, village, city or camp, is still controversial. Women who were active in performance during that period agreed that the interest to initiate a clash with the communities over stereotyping of women through performance was less of a priority to their idea of national struggle.<sup>35</sup>

Another gender challenge was the intense censorship of plays and imprisonment of actors, which inhibited participation of women in theatre. Families continued to prohibit sons and daughters from participation in theatre troupes.<sup>36</sup> Self-censorship and conservatism not only affected the case of al-Hakawati as an art movement, but it was somewhat generalized within the broader political parties, especially the leftist factions. While it is hard to track a history on the announcement of an established theatre by leftist parties,<sup>37</sup> Jaradat demonstrates how left-leaning intellectuals in Palestine were unable to align their cultural societies with the diverse needs of the population. He related that the adherence by intellectuals to the policies of their parties eliminated internal discussions and evaluations regarding gender relations and the cultural field. According to Jaradat, during their times culture turned into categories, and prejudice became “sectarian,” and took the place of “patriarchy” while maintaining patriarchal positions.<sup>38</sup> Within this context, the cultural representation of al-Hakawati revealed the extent to which clashes of national, conservative/religious, and gendered collectivities were transmitted within the performing experiences in Palestine.

## **Palestinian Performers between Politics and Social Status**

The organic dynamism among performers who lived through the experience of al-Hakawati stimulated other groups that emerged after the 1993 Oslo accords. An examination of the shared aspects of other performance experiences and performer’s life stories sheds light on the dynamics of the relationship between performers and the

dominating collectivities in other locations. Generally, two decades (1993–2013) after al-Hakawati, performers still consider performance and the messages it implies to be a vital constituent of their collective identity. They also consider that they perform for self-representation within that collective identity frame. To them, participation essentially begins with a passion and a talent that develops into providing meaning and awareness about its motivations within society. Representations on the collective level accompany new concepts such as what many expressed as a change in the way they perceive their bodies. The body becomes a constituent part of their identity making.

By sharing life stories, performers reflected on their class affiliation, and about their roles within this class as performers. All thirty performers expressed belonging to the middle class. They base this identity mainly on their medium-level income, their education, and their exposure to other communities and cultures. They also recounted the ability to freely bring up ideas, beliefs, and concerns during the troupe's meetings. Performers expressed respect for the political parties and their roles in supporting performance, yet no more than two performers expressed affiliation to a political party. Production is their hobby or side job, as the majority of performers are employees at civil society organizations and receive middle class wages. They expressed satisfaction that their salaries compensate for the lack of financial revenue coming from performances, so they can afford to perform. All performers said they were committed to social justice issues and sensed that performances achieve social change.

Among the older generation that coincided with al-Hakawati's emergence, one performer described how she belonged to the middle class: "I work and have a steady income and have better conditions than other people. The children go to private schools, and we celebrate Christmas." Another performer said, "I am originally a house painter, a lower class, but changed over time. I studied at the university at the age of thirty-five, and have a steady income now, so currently I belong to the middle class. But certainly, I believe in the lower-class potential – myself is an example." Another said, "My income and education place me within the middle class," while further qualifying, "I need some kind of income to keep me within the middle class, and I constantly look for ways to achieve things for myself that leave me with a good reputation."

As for the young generation that emerged after the Palestinian Authority's establishment, performers focused on education, income, and social engagement as factors indicating belonging to the middle class. One performer saw the reason for his belonging being "because my income is relatively higher than the worker's category. Also, the informal communication and interaction with members within the same class, in the troupe, and with friends from the same private school put me in this class, even if I do not choose it." Another performer recognized, "I use my performance and my participation in the youth political movements to overcome the power imbalance created by the rich to serve the occupation." Another expressed the opinion that "a middle-class person is one with an intellect to analyze and speak out on ideas for a better future, and that is what we are."



As for the older generation, many said they joined troupes to participate in the collective resistance act of Palestinians. For one performer, performance reflected the political awareness of Palestinians, and fighting against oppression and occupation's demolition of the personal, romantic identity. This linking between the collective political identity and the romanticized personal identity motivated performance as a resistive act." For them, the subjective identity – considering their personal feelings and concerns – is fulfilled within the Palestinian collective identity of a troupe. Their views were largely complementary to one another. Many considered that attending Palestinian performances in childhood was familial participation in resistance activities, and involvement in production was mainly to fulfill an individual passion: "to perform . . . is to fulfill one's ego and to improve the body's capacities. Also performing was equivalent to resistance with stones, and I was satisfied with my form of resistance because it rewards and assures my identity as a Palestinian," one performer explained.

Since the Israeli occupation authorities canceled many troupes' productions, one performer explained that people used the opportunity to demonstrate against the Israeli occupation after performances. Another performer mentioned that "performing troupes were mainly affiliated, supportive or connected to political parties. Belalin and Balalin had been one troupe, but because of political differences, split into separate theatre troupes. The development of performing troupes met a substantial national need, and the production of folkloric songs was considered an act of asserting Palestinian identity. A performer from 1948 Palestine described his own experience: "At first it was my desire just to be seen on stage, but after that, I went to perform in Ramallah. There I realized that I do not want to perform in and with an Israeli theatre. I realized that in theatre, I could change mentalities to reflect national stances."

On the other hand, for the younger generation, performers communicated their personal experiences as the main constituent of their identity. In the surrounding political and social atmosphere, they asserted the importance of a high quality of technique for a successful and creative Palestinian performance. Performance for most of them is a "personal interest and an ambition toward professional performance." They were encouraged by a supportive family who believed that performance ability contributes to achieving political and social change. They joined a performing group when they were children based on their parents' desires and, as a result, performance remained part of their lifestyle.

Concerning how they defined their individual identity, performers of both generations shared that performance changed the way they perceive themselves. "When I first joined, I was conservative, shy, and knew nothing about women; I felt so shy holding hands with them. However, with performance, there are lots of 'windows,' lots of meanings to things, not only one way of looking." Another performer said that now she is not shy about walking down the street, and does not feel that she must hide her feminine side – considered a taboo in society. Another young performer stressed, "I lost my arrogance. I thought I should be superior to others, belonging to a wealthy family, and spoiled. The group dealt with me without categorizing and

cared only about my performance skills, so that changed me.” For another person, performance “changed me into a person who has many ambitions in life. Without it, I would have been a useless guy hanging out in the streets today.” Such representations of the transformative power of art on one’s identity explain the collective dynamics in creating an organic, open-minded, and productive space through performance, in ways that seek a collective national identity, with an equal contribution of men and women.

Change on the individual level, which includes class awareness and affiliations, pushed performers to connect to other communities and transcend their differences through training others, whether in theatre or dance. For many, passing on knowledge and experience aimed to encourage others to be involved in similar personal experiences, which can change them as individuals. Both generations participate in “dance schools” or “drama paths” as trainers. One performer summed up, “I established the dance school to give the message that when children grow up loving to dance, they will find places to practice it. We joined life skills with dance to develop individuals with creativity, productivity, and interest in professional dance.” Another performer said, “I work with local organizations on workshops that use theatre in paths that are practical for our lives, for topics such as non-violence, and identity, which I feel are very important for Palestinians growing up now.”

Performers held that the change they experienced in their own identity had an impact on the identity of those they train as well. A performer training in a school in Jerusalem put it this way: “It is more of an educational issue . . . instead of children’s exposure to Israeli songs, it is a priority to encourage them to sing [their own] folkloric songs. Girls in the group found a model of nationalism; they listen to the national values that grew within me while performing with the troupe, and I influence them.” Another performer said, “Working with girls on expressing feelings through the body, not verbally, is honest – and sometimes more influential with children and youth . . . even though with their heads covered by a veil. But they performed in front of the village residents, and they were accepted by them.” Another performer said, “The group of girls that I trained in Bayt ‘Ur refused their families’ orders to quit the troupe to get married . . . [and] organized a group strike. They refused to go to school because they wanted to join the performance. One now is a trainer of dabka in the village.”

## **Middle-Class Performers after Oslo**

Performance in Palestine – forming an organic group that challenges the dominance of one collective over another and over Israeli occupation policies – developed as part of a scene that was independent from the political authorities. It also developed in constant challenge to the conservative fronts of the various collectives within the Palestinian society. After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, it continued to challenge, existing independently amid new forms of dominance. The Palestinian Authority budgets were channeled either toward the arts that align with mainstream

culture, with its dominant religious collective identity, or they inadequately supported the development of any performing culture.

On the other hand, the performance scene in the decades following the Palestinian Authority establishment has been largely dependent on international aid, which allowed intellectuals to achieve the economic stability of the middle class. If some performing groups had to depend on project-based art productions in order to continue their missions, the society's view of foreign funding encouraged performers to engage in additional actions to maintain credibility within the community. The stigma of being linked to an external agenda left performers in a defensive position against the call that they contribute to political decision making by the formal body Palestinian Authority, since both are dependent on foreign aid. Most of the Palestinian middle class are motivated by political decisions rather than by social or economic conditions. Audiences have noticed the correlation between the inability to achieve change on the political level and representations of that in performances, which led performance away from playing an organic role within the various collectivities in Palestine. Aware of this criticism, performers have realized their role, and made attempts to reverse it. "We allocate the revenue from performances to community charity," one performer explained. "We connect to people and support girls' participation in underprivileged locations by dialoguing with families," said another. "We do not take conditional funds and make our best efforts to depend on our own financial resources and not on foreign aid," a third explained. The voluntary nature of the troupes enabled the above initiatives but they still struggle to reverse the stigma.

The post-Oslo period and the ability to travel outside Palestine enabled some groups to introduce contemporary trends into theatre and dance. Attention has been given to the professionalism of the performers and their competence as performers from Palestine. While performances by the old generation introduced themes calling for community mobilization against the occupation, attention shifted after Oslo to reflect the change in political decisions. Many performances in the past two decades introduced themes of remembrance and defeat rather than resistance. Some performers from both generations developed a new philosophy of performance – a belief that individual professionalism in contemporary performance defines a new resistance mode for Palestinians, whereby the representation of Palestinian art based on its quality reverses stereotypes of Palestinians as a backward nation. Many performers stated that they no longer produce art that is admired only for the sake of its being Palestinian, victims of occupation, but strive for quality of production. Interest increased in representing liberal values, knowledge, and skills, showing that Palestinian performing men and women can produce quality art, like any other nation in the world. Others held that "the granting of non-member state status [to Palestine] at the UN in 2013 puts the responsibility on us to perform as well-deserving of a state." The professional interests that the performers developed introduce a new aspect to the understanding of the collective national identity of Palestinians. However, these contemporary trends raised discussion about their contribution to the national struggle. This has the effect of widening the gap between the three collective identities,

especially the collective gender identity of Palestinians. Despite being separated from other Palestinian geographies, Jerusalem continued to take part in this turbulence.<sup>39</sup>

## Collective Gender Identities in Performance

The performing groups are active as middle-class agents towards social change, yet they are still struggling for gender equality and a good reception from the Palestinian audience. One central aspect of the performers' gender struggle for change has been around the authenticity of folklore that uncovered rigid beliefs and inequalities. Some performers considered themselves performing "folkloric dance," others "contemporary folkloric Palestinian dance," and others "Palestinian modern dance," while others term it "contemporary dance." Within theatre, performers consider their genre as "Palestinian folkloric theatre," while others define it as "modern theatre." The diversification and flourishing of styles or performance modes during the past half-century reflect the debate around Palestinian performance that serves specific gender interests. If performers are the leaders of this debate, gender regimes within the performing troupe are decisive. For some performers, detachment from the authenticity of performance is an inventive tactic leading to creativity and individual growth. They emphasize using the term "contemporary folklore" to illustrate a tactic to overcome its rigidity. As one performer explained, "There are up to twenty-four dance routines in folklore, but our troupe uses one hundred routines which are not folkloric but are built on and inspired by folklore." Another performer pointed out, "I cannot do *sahja*, a long dancing routine known in wedding festivities, because it lasts for four hours, but I adapt from it in some routines so that people will not be bored sitting down." For another performer, "We do comedy-drama, a Western style, but with a Palestinian theme."

For female performers specifically, "contemporary folklore" is not only a means for inventiveness and individual growth in which the body is liberated, but also a space to eliminate gender inequalities found within the rigidity of the folklore and its dress code. They reflect on achievements over specific traditional and backward views of women, such as "changing the way the audience expects women on stage to be of bad repute," "changing the view of women performing only feminine roles in performance," and "changing the view that women's bodies exposed to the public is taboo." One performer explained that the dress of female performers evolved over the decades to enable better movement on stage and on certain occasions, men and women appeared with the same costume.

However, despite achievements in gender awareness, female dance performers offered that they had not yet targeted a collective gendered message through performance. Such attempts remained as individual struggles, not a collective one. This was blamed on women performers not showing support for other women within the troupe, according to many female performers: "Female performers do not show enough or consistently organized support to each other, especially in improving

capabilities, or in challenging a certain dress code for performance, or in the selection of time and locations for women to train. It stays at the level of individual complaints.” One performer expressed finding her individual identity within women’s parts: “I love the dabka performance and what it creates with its audience, but contemporary dance is rewarding to me. Whether I performed it or not, when I get into the training hall, I feel all my blood changes.” Another performer said that belonging to a troupe within an organization “gives you, as a woman, space to perform in many locations and to gain support and admiration from the society, but at the same time, it “limits your ambitions in terms of techniques and dress, because sometimes I think of things and rehearse them, but then they do not agree with putting it on stage.” In theatre, on the other hand, the increased interest in gender issues introduced additional relevant topics to their agendas.

This paper traces al-Hakawati theatre experience over time and investigates performers’ individual subjective reflections within a group belonging to the middle class. It examines the extent to which performance can form an organic intermediary group towards change, especially on the gender level, under the dominance of three prevailing collectivities over performance. The performing experience enabled performers to nurture their agency and status to influence communities and encourage broad engagement, especially when the themes supported the national collectivity against colonialism. Individual subjective experiences of performers within these groups correlated with the collective national identity when performance was a resistance tool, but diverged when individual interests became identified within professional objectives or when tangled with political decisions. The gender collectivity was challenged amid the other two collectivities, and some tactical initiatives were witnessed at the level of performers to encourage further practices towards gender equality within the Palestinian society. Relatively speaking, efforts were supported by the national movement and its political factions, yet patriarchal sectarian visions were maintained overall. The period after the Oslo agreement created a gap between the ruling political middle class and the culture-producing middle class, which put performance in a paradox between individualistic goals and resuming the goals of national resistance against occupation. Further investigation of the religious trends in theatrical performances is another interest emerging from this research and yet to be explored.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The SHAFaq network is comprised of five organizations based in Jerusalem: al-Ma‘mal, al-Hakawati, al-Hoash, Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, and Yabous Cultural Center.
- 2 Fawanis is based on *The Little Lantern* by Ghassan Kanafani (1963), a distinguished book in young adult literature of the Palestinian repertoire following the 1948 Nakba.
- 3 Banat al-Quds is one among many music groups of the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music. Members of the group are also part of the Palestinian Youth Orchestra, which includes Palestinian youth from Palestine and the diaspora and tours internationally.
- 4 Negotiation Affairs Department, Palestine, “Monthly Report August 2019,” online at (nad.ps) bit.ly/34Jw1Fo (accessed 27 August 2020).
- 5 “Israeli Forces Storm East Jerusalem Cultural Centers, Seize Documents,” *Palestine Chronicle*, 22 July 2020, online at (palestinechronicle.com) bit.ly/34FHIwW (accessed 27 August 2020).
- 6 “al-Hakawati yu’ajjil ‘ard “Enhedwana” wasata tabayun fi al-’araa’ ” [Al-Hakawati Postpones ‘Enhedwana’ Show amid Differing Opinions], *Akhbar al-Balad*, online at akhbarelbalad.net/ar/1/11/5050/ (accessed 5 August 2020).
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- 14 Interview with Amneh Rimawi, member of Belalin theatre troupe, Ramallah, May 2012.
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- 22 Ilana DeBare, Lisa Blum, and Francois Abu Salem, “Palestinian Culture Takes Roots,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 14, no. 2 (Winter, 1985): 230–34; Ghnaim, *Al-masrah al-filastini*; Samih Mahran, *Al-masrah bayna al-'Arab wa 'isre'il 1967—1973* [The Theatre between the Arabs and Israel 1967–1973] (Cairo: Sina li-l-Nashr, 1992).
- 23 Balalin included nineteen male performers and four female performers. The Wonder Box consisted of three male performers. See Mohamad Anis, *Al-haraka al-masrahiyya fi al-manatiq al-muhtalla* [The Theatre Movement in the Occupied Territories] (Dar Galileo wa Dar al-'Amil, 1979).
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- 25 DeBare et al., “Palestinian Culture.”
- 26 DeBare et al., “Palestinian Culture,” 233.
- 27 Radi Shehadeh, *Al-Masrah al-Filastini fi Filastin 48: bayna sira' al-baqa' wa al-infisam al-hawiyiyati* [Palestinian Theatre in 1948 Palestine: Between Viability and the Schizophrenia of Identity] (Ramallah: Palestinian Ministry of Culture, 1998). Personal interview with Radi Shehadeh, by author, 10 May 2012.
- 28 DeBare et al., “Palestinian Culture.”
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- 30 DeBare et al., “Palestinian Culture,” 233.
- 31 Susan Slyomovics, “To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship,” *TDR* 35, no. 2 (1991): 26.
- 32 David Forgacs, *The Gramsci Reader, Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York University Press, 2000).
- 33 Slyomovics, “Bleeding Wound,” 24.
- 34 Most of the female parts in the performances were acted by Jackie Lubeck, an American and one of the founders of the troupe.
- 35 Interview with Rimawi; interview with Rula Abu Dehu, active in theatre, Ramallah, July 2011.
- 36 Mahamid, *Masirat al-haraka al-masrahiyya*, 67–87.
- 37 Interview with Rimawi; interview with Abu Dehu.
- 38 Ali Jaradat, *Al-yasar al-Filastini: hazimat al-dimuqratiya* [The Palestinian Left: the Defeat of Democracy] (Ramallah: Muwatin, 1999).
- 39 For example, the clashes that occurred in Nablus and Jerusalem in late 2019 concerning a female contemporary dance and theatre performance “Enhedwana.”