

# Star-Crossed Lovers in a Star-Crossed Land: Romeo and Juliet in Palestine

Penny Johnson

My only love sprung from my only hate!

Too early seen unknown, and known too  
late!

Prodigious birth of love it is to me

That I must love a loathed enemy.

– Juliet in William Shakespeare, *Romeo  
and Juliet*, 1.5.138–41.

## Abstract

Reflecting on a 2016 production of *Romeo and Juliet in Gaza* at Gaza City's Said al-Mishal Cultural Centre – destroyed two years later in a targeted Israeli air strike – the author turns to two other stagings of *Romeo and Juliet* in embattled Palestine, a joint 1994 production by the Israeli Khan Theater in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Kasaba Theater in Ramallah in the aftermath of the Oslo accords, and *In Fair Palestine*, a film made by students at the Friends School in Ramallah during the second Palestinian intifada with an initial screening in 2008. All three productions tell much about the times in which they were created.

## Keywords:

Palestinian theater; Gaza theater; Shakespeare staging; *Romeo and Juliet*; cultural destruction; film and drama under occupation.

I try to imagine myself there, waiting for the actors to come onto the modest stage at the al-Mishal Cultural Center in Gaza City, a city now in ruins. It is 2016, two years after Israel's "Operation Protective Edge" killed over two thousand Palestinians and eight years before the current murderous assault on Gaza and Gazans.

The play being staged at al-Mishal is *Romeo and Juliet in Gaza*. Shakespeare's iconic play has been performed innumerable times in many languages and often with local twists to the star-crossed lovers and the feuding families that lead to their demise. As part of the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival,

*Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* contained overtones of the Sunni–Shi‘i divide. In a beloved Turkish production staged in Istanbul and London in 2015 – entitled *Mahmud and Yezida* – Romeo is Muslim and Juliet is Yazidi. As I imagine the Gaza production, my thoughts turn to two other stagings of *Romeo and Juliet* in our embattled country: a joint production of the Israeli Khan Theater in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Kasaba Theater in Ramallah in 1994, and *In Fair Palestine*, a film made by students at the Friends School in Ramallah in 2008. All three productions tell us much about the times in which they are created.

For eight nights at al-Mishal, after the Palestinian national anthem, *Romeo and Juliet in Gaza* opens onto a crowded café in a refugee camp, young men at tables whiling away the time playing cards. Yusuf, the son of a Hamas leader, falls deeply in love with Suha, daughter of a doctor who is a Fatah notable. When the fathers enter the café, they clash and come to blows. The café owner – a Gazan everyman figure – throws them both out. “Don’t reconcile! Keep cursing at each other!” the owner yells at them.<sup>1</sup> The audience, obviously critical of the poisonous split between the two organizations, applauds.

Directed by Ali Abu Yaseen and written by Atef Abu Saif, the seventy-minute performance ends neither with the two dead young lovers entwined in a tomb nor with the reconciliation of their feuding families. Despite Suha’s pleas, Romeo leaves Gaza on an illegal migrant boat. His fate is unknown, but the ending evokes a 2014 shipwreck off the coast of Malta when hundreds of Gaza migrants were lost at sea. Crucially, the play offers no reconciliation between the warring fathers – the fervent wish for such a resolution was left to the full capacity audience of more than three hundred. Director Abu Yaseen said the play gave “a space for love and for youths to dream of a beautiful future away from the current state of Gaza.”

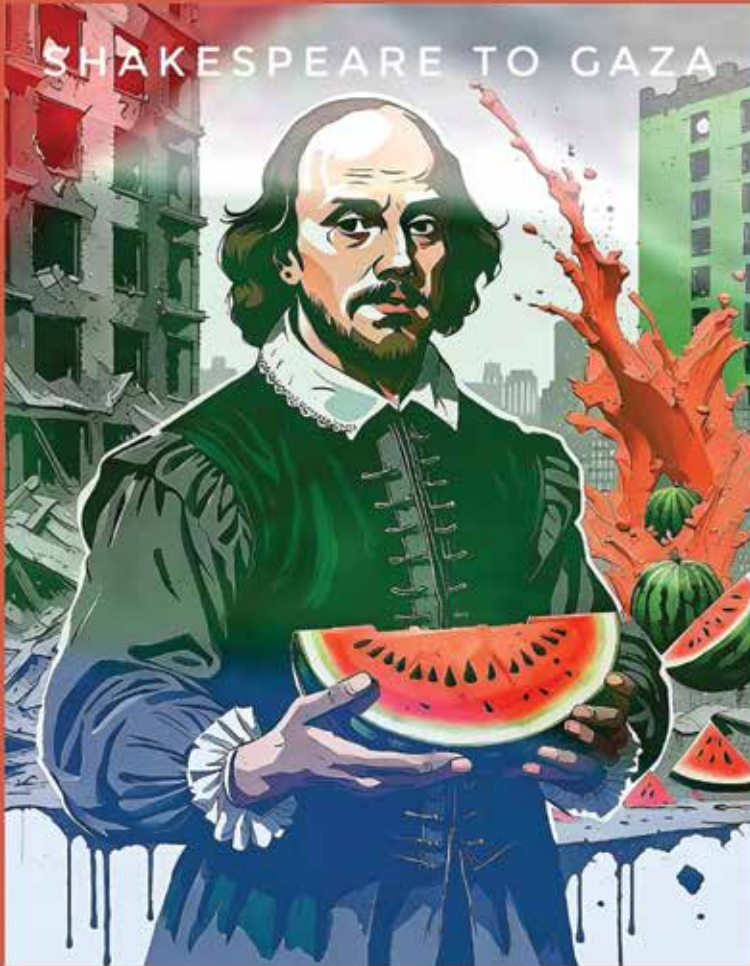
Two years afterward, on 9 August 2018, those dreams were demolished when an Israeli air strike destroyed al-Mishal Cultural Center, leaving only a pile of debris. Although artists and performers gathered the next day to stand on the rubble in an act of solidarity and fourteen prominent directors and playwrights in the United Kingdom penned a strong letter of protest, the broken stones remained the only witness to a once vibrant cultural site. Abu Yaseen mourned – “We have lost the only home for artists in Gaza.” The head of the center’s dance troupe added that even “our memories have vanished now.”

In his 2022 poetry collection, Gazan poet Mosab Abu Toha reflected on the destruction, remembering:

Dreams of children and their parents, of listening to songs, or watching  
plays at Al Mishal Cultural Center. Israel destroyed it in August 2018.  
I hate August. But plays are still performed in Gaza. Gaza is the stage.<sup>2</sup>

The next year, Gaza was indeed a “stage” as Abu Toha and his family endured Israel’s brutal assault on Gaza. His home in northern Gaza, his precious personal library, and the Edward Said libraries he founded were destroyed, and several relatives

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were killed. Abu Toha and his family left for Rafah from where, by virtue of his son having U.S. citizenship, they were scheduled to leave. However, he was detained by the Israeli army at a checkpoint along with several hundred other men and was reported missing for several days before being released and continuing his onward journey out of Gaza. All the world's a stage, indeed.

It is perhaps not surprising, but is certainly telling, that about three decades earlier, the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet* after the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 was a joint Israeli-Palestinian production, bringing together the Khan Theater in Jerusalem and the Kasaba Theater in Ramallah. It was supported by an international partner, the Lille Theater in France, a sign of the optimism of the early post-Oslo times. In the production, a Palestinian Romeo from the Montagues loves an Israeli Juliet from the Capulets. But just as all does not go well for the two lovers in Shakespeare's play, the players themselves faced multiple problems as the Oslo optimism crumbled, sharp antagonisms flared, and the Israeli occupation tightened its grip. On the Israeli side, codirector Eran Baniel received two death threats shortly before the play opened, from extremist members of his own clan for daring to stage a play that "encourages interfaith marriage."<sup>3</sup> On the Palestinian side, codirector Fouad Awad and the Palestinian actors were discouraged by the cancellation of rehearsals and of the play performance itself in Jerusalem's Old City because of opposition from Palestinians living there – a poll indicated that very few would attend.

Just as rehearsals began in West Jerusalem, an event occurred that brought not only fear and discord to the players but a major shift in relations between occupier and occupied in the country. On 25 February 1994, Israeli-American settler Baruch Goldstein gunned down Palestinian worshippers inside Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, leaving twenty-nine dead. Violent clashes ensued as the Israeli army cracked down on Palestinian protestors – followed by the first string of suicide bombings carried out by Hamas. The stated aim of the two theater directors – "to remind all that the cost of hatred between fathers is the death of their children" – had an increasingly desperate ring.<sup>4</sup>

In the wake of the Hebron massacre, Palestinian actors boycotted the rehearsals and three Israeli actors dropped out. The Israeli army's new checkpoints and barriers blocked Palestinian actors with West Bank identity cards from entering Jerusalem. After several long and painful meetings, Israeli actors reportedly said, "We are ashamed." The two troupes decided to continue and the play opened in Jerusalem in June 1994.

Even though I was in Ramallah at the time, could have attended a performance, and knew some of the Palestinian performers, I find it harder to imagine this Romeo and Juliet in Jerusalem than Romeo and Juliet in Gaza. I also cannot remember any friends or colleagues in the West Bank who were in the audiences in West Jerusalem, despite the popularity of Kasaba's Ramallah productions. Trying to view the stage and actors through the fog of time, I could locate only one photo of a dress rehearsal and none of the actual performances. The staging seems to have been largely traditional. The players wore Renaissance dress and the Israeli director told National Public

Radio that “all our history comes onto the stage without [taking] one word away from Shakespeare.”<sup>5</sup> However, these words are themselves important. When the Palestinian Montagues speak among themselves, they speak in Arabic while the Israeli Capulets speak to each other in Hebrew. But when the two sides speak to each other, it is in Hebrew. Actor and Kasaba stalwart George Ibrahim, who played Mercutio, had hoped that the audiences would include both Palestinians and Israelis, but this wish seems to have been thwarted by the profound unease felt by many Palestinians at a joint production in highly unequal and oppressive times.

One change from the text is highly significant. Like the Gaza production, this *Romeo and Juliet* does not end with reconciliation, but with the chorus repeating the prologue:

Two households, alike in dignity  
In fair Verona where we lay our scene  
An ancient grudge breaks to new mutiny  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

The failure to reconcile is certainly a gesture to the conflicts on the ground. But Ghassan Abbas, who played the Duke of Verona – the moral arbiter of the play who encourages the two sides to reconcile – had an even more bitter comment. He said he “feels like a hypocrite when he delivers those lines” promoting reconciliation between the warring factions. “In my role I speak peace,” he says, “... in my life I am at war.”<sup>6</sup> The Khan-Kasaba production went on to a successful tour in Europe, although Arab audiences largely boycotted it, noting not only the coproduction but funding from the Israeli government.

*Romeo and Juliet* lived on, however, in Palestinian high schools and universities throughout this period. Just down the street from the Mishal theater and at roughly the same time as the staging of *Romeo and Juliet in Gaza*, Jehan, an English teacher at al-Rayyes High School for Girls, waged a campaign against the play’s inclusion in the curriculum. Donald MacIntyre, in his wide-ranging book on Gaza, describes Jehan’s successful “mini-uprising” against the required teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which she argued that *Romeo and Juliet* was the “wrong play at the wrong time,” not only contradicting Islamic values but encouraging “suicide and disobeying parents.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately she succeeded in having it replaced by a play about a king’s descent into madness – *King Lear*. It is a bit hard to see *King Lear* as a great improvement in terms of moral uplift, as Jehan herself admits, it’s “full of misery” and everyone dies. However, her excision of *Romeo and Juliet* led me to think further about the fate and transformations of this iconic play in Palestine.

In his book *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine: Teaching under Occupation*, Tom Sperlinger describes holding a class on Shakespearean drama at al-Quds University in 2013 and asking his students “how the play might be adapted to a film in Palestine.”<sup>8</sup> One young woman placed the two lovers in a famous feud of Jerusalem families in the

1950s, while others saw a more contemporary dilemma separating the pair – only one had a Jerusalem identity card. When Sperlinger asked his class if Romeo and Juliet should escape into exile, there was resounding agreement. When he proposed “To Gaza?” the students roared with laughter. A student named Qais offered my favorite reinterpretation, however, setting the play toward the end of the second intifada, where Rami, from Ramallah, and Juwayda, from a Palestinian village inside Israel, can only meet on the internet. Instead of hearing of Juliet’s death, Rami is told by his friend, in a mixture of “Shakespearean verse, Arabic, and Scouse” (the latter being the slang of Liverpool, as Rami and his friends are fanatic Liverpool football fans) that “Your Ju was with a smile next to a soft lad with a Merc...” This Juliet had transferred her affections to a rich Palestinian from Israel.

Students at the Friends School in Ramallah began working on their version of *Romeo and Juliet* in 2006, encouraged by a teacher there, and produced the film *In Fair Palestine* in 2008. This staging of *Romeo and Juliet* in Palestine opens with a scene that the young actors clearly enjoyed. In the original Shakespearean text, a Capulet servant bites his thumb and a clash ensues when a Montague servant says, “Do you bite your thumb at me?” This scene is enacted by the Friends School actors through a car chase that involves spinning cars and much youthful exuberance. The biting of the thumb seems more a bit of teenage one upmanship rather than the beginning of a blood feud and indeed the young actor relishes the line “I do but keep the peace.”

*In Fair Palestine* had an enthusiastic audience and hundreds packed the Ramallah Cultural Center for the opening of the 58-minute film, applause breaking out frequently when sons, daughters, and neighbors appeared on the screen. This viewer was particularly taken with her friend and colleague Rita Giacaman’s delivery of the spicy speeches of Juliet’s nurse – although Rita told me that her young colleagues were often exasperated because she forgot her lines. Long-time Friends School teacher Don Hutchison was also good as Shaykh (not Friar) Lawrence.

But it was the youthful vision of the codirectors and scriptwriters (Faris Giacaman, Yazan Nahhas, and Tarek Knorn, among others) that informed the play. The Friends School team had a mission to explain their lives and their communities and “to express ourselves in a manner different from the way the news represents us,” as Tarek told a Reuters reporter.<sup>9</sup> Thus the story of the two star-crossed lovers is interspersed with male students walking along the Wall – built as they grew into adolescence and shadowing their lives and ability to move. (The school’s student magazine at the time was called *Behind the Wall*.) The teens explain the occupation’s oppressive measures as well as telling their audience that Palestine, its “villages, camps and cities” encompassed people of all classes in a spirit of “social solidarity,” a message that sits somewhat uneasily with Shakespeare’s warring world in *Romeo and Juliet*. In a modern vein as well, the film contains discussions among the team on characterization – and crucially on the issue that greatly concerns them, arranged marriage and the rights of young people to freely chose who they love.

In a film of less than an hour, this is quite a load of diverse material and the twists of the plot can be confusing. Audience interest, I think, was held by the vitality of the

young actors – so close in age to Shakespeare’s Juliet “who hath not seen the change of fourteen years.” Romeo in this version is slight and wears glasses, in many ways a classic nerd, and his vulnerability touches the heart. And, with another contemporary touch, he does not receive the message of Juliet’s faked death because the messenger is turned back at an Israeli checkpoint. The film ends with the two young lovers holding each other in death, not in a tomb but in a grove. The abrupt ending gives no time for a reconciliation of their elders but the perils and hopes of teenage life – from Verona to Ramallah – lie with them.

In March 2019, actors, musicians, and Gaza municipal officials again congregated on the ruins of al-Mishal Theater. Clowns reenacted the airstrike and Yasser Farouk’s “Sad Ney” played from the sound system. Artists brought their work to paste on the rubble. With the cooperation of al-Ashtar Theater in Ramallah, artists vowed to continue performing, but the theater itself could not be rebuilt.

The author of the text for *Romeo and Juliet in Gaza*, Atef Abu Saif, now the Minister of Culture for the Palestinian Authority, returned to Gaza with his teenage son in early October 2023 to attend a Natural Heritage Day in Khan Yunis. He was looking forward to a last autumnal swim in the sea. Abu Saif and his son remained in Gaza – moving from his home in Jabaliya to Khan Yunis and then to a tent in Rafah – until late December, when they made the journey to Egypt through the Rafah crossing. Abu Saif vividly recorded his war experiences in WhatsApp messages and voice mails, now published by Comma Press under the title *Don’t Look Left*.<sup>10</sup>

*Romeo and Juliet*’s director Ali Abu Yaseen remained in Gaza. In a post to the *Gaza Monologues*, an ambitious project of the Ashtar Theater in Ramallah recording voices from the many wars in Gaza, Abu Yaseen spoke to Shakespeare, posting his words on his Facebook page on 5 November 2023, as the bombing of northern Gaza intensified:

How could you, William Shakespeare, write us in *Romeo and Juliet* and warn us of the ugliness of conflict and war between cousins and that everyone will pay the price? The vision has changed, my friend. It has become much more difficult. The sound of rockets makes the heart jump in fear. The smell of gunpowder and carcinogenic smoke forcibly penetrates your lungs. Phosphorus bombs, which are banned internationally, burn the green and dry land. Seeing your loved ones in pieces. Your heart that is torn a thousand times every day as if it were a piece of rubber. Get up, Shakespeare. Help me, my friend. I’m really tired. Resist with your wise pen, full of love, joy, revolution, humanity, hope, and freedom, openly, maybe we will all become brothers under that blue sky.<sup>11</sup>

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## Endnotes

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- 3 Laura Blumenfeld, "Mideast Side Story," *Washington Post*, 30 June 1994, online at [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1994/06/30/mideast-side-story/b5e0c4a2-3db0-422c-813f-c5fb77b87e24/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1994/06/30/mideast-side-story/b5e0c4a2-3db0-422c-813f-c5fb77b87e24/) (accessed 25 March 2024).
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- 7 Donald MacIntyre, "Shakespeare in Gaza," in *Gaza: A Country Preparing for Dawn* (London: Oneworld, 2017), xii.
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- 9 See "In Fair Palestine: A Story of Romeo and Juliet," online at [vimeo.com/ondemand/ifpcm](https://vimeo.com/ondemand/ifpcm) (accessed 25 March 2024).
- 10 Atef Abu Said, *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2024).
- 11 Online at [www.facebook.com/ali.abuyaseen](https://www.facebook.com/ali.abuyaseen) (accessed 25 March 2024).