**Entry for “Palestinian Theatre”**

Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism

Written by Rania Jawad

\*the green highlights refer to the visual images in a separate document

Because the majority of Palestinians have been displaced from Palestine due to the Zionist colonization of their lands beginning in the late nineteenth century, Palestinian experience, history, and culture are decentralized, transnational, and multi-sited. A discussion on Palestinian theatre therefore invites reflection on colonialism, nationalism, representation, and the relationship between politics, society and art.

The presence of theatre in the Arab world takes the form of diverse performance practices, such as various celebratory and mourning rituals, farcical satires based on acts of imitation, shadow puppetry, and storytelling that draws on Arab folklore, traditionally accompanied by live music. One example of a local Arab theatrical artform صندوق العجب [Sanduq al-‘Ajab]—translated into English as “Box of Wonders” or “Magic Box”—consists of a box structure with holes through which one looks to see pictures on a paper ribbon that a storyteller rotates while narrating. Modern theatre at times draws on such indigenous performance traditions as a counter discourse to European and colonial cultural models.

While the emergence of local performance practices going back hundreds of years cannot be neatly defined, Palestinian encounters with the European tradition date to the establishment of European colonial missionary schools in Palestine in the nineteenth century. These schools promoted the westernization of education and culture in Palestine, which included the study of theatre as a literary and performance genre. Nationalist schoolteachers introduced their students to contemporary Arabic plays as a way to counter Eurocentric pedagogies.

In the early twentieth century, visiting Arab theatre troupes from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria began to perform in Palestinian cities, local Palestinian drama clubs and troupes started to form, plays were being written, the local radio broadcast plays, and local newspapers documented theatre activities. Nasri al-Jawzi is known for helping to pioneer the production and performance of original Arabic plays. His 1935 play *Ashbah al-Ahrar* (Ghosts of the Free), which publicly condemned the selling of Palestinian lands to Zionists settlers, was banned by the British Mandate authorities for its anti-colonial stance. Over time, the theatre became associated with modernity and encounters with the West, while indigenous performance practices became valued as part of local Palestinian-Arab heritage.

The establishment of the Israeli state in 1948 on the lands of Palestine (known in Arabic as *Al-Nakba*) displaced and fragmented Palestine and its people, subjecting them to colonial rule and military occupation. As the majority of Palestinians were turned into stateless refugees, theatre as a forum for self-representation took on both aesthetic and political connotations. The practice of theatre, like song and literature, has been used as a platform to narrate political-historical moments, personal experiences, and social issues that characterize Palestinian society’s past and present. Emile Habibi’s highly intertextual monodrama"ام الروبابيكيا" [Umm al-Rubabikiya, The Mother of Second-Hand Things], which opened in Acre in 1992, is an example of a play that juxtaposes historical junctures in Palestinian history (1948 and 1967). Set in Haifa following the 1967 Arab defeat, the female narrator holds onto the stories of those Palestinians who fled the Zionist forces in 1948 by collecting the everyday objects they left behind.

Major issues addressed in the theatre include the rupture caused by the Nakba and its ongoing legacy, the blurring of the personal and the political, and questions of identity.

"جليلي يا علي" [Ali the Galilean], for example, is an El Hakawati production of the early 1980s that satirically puts forth the question of what makes a ‘Palestinian-Israeli.’ The play traces the life of ‘Ali as he leaves his village in the Galilee to go to Tel Aviv, meets an Israeli who convinces him to go by the Hebrew name of Eli, confesses to his Jewish-Israeli girlfriend that he is an Arab, and is eventually tortured and killed by the Israeli secret service. The episodes—depicted in highly exaggerated aesthetic styles (i.e. melodrama, American Western, psychodrama, modern dance)—are performed in honor of ‘Ali who sits in the audience, clearly dissatisfied how his life (and those of the Palestinians) has been turned into a spectacle to be consumed by Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Theatre texts, techniques, and performances often dialogue with Arab folklore and literary culture. Writer, critic, and political activist Ghassan Kanafani’s works have been repeatedly adapted for the theatre, particularly his novella *Rijal fi-l Shams* [Men in the Sun] that details the plight of three Palestinian refugees. Adaptations of foreign texts are also common practice as a way to resist the ghettoization of Palestinian cultural life and to identify with conditions of injustice throughout the world.

Politicization (that can be traced to early Zionist settlements in Palestine) of the cultural sphere has led to debates over form and content of the modern theatre. As a highly representational medium, Palestinian theatre is frequently read as a reflective mirror of Palestinian realities. Realism in the theatre is used to affirm the national narrative and denounce colonial, societal, and patriarchal oppression. Experiments in form and content at times challenge unified narratives, and more frequently are used to activate audience experiences. Because of the fragmentation and displacement of the Palestinian population, choices in form largely reflect artists’ personal trajectories rather than an artistic movement.

Culture in its many forms has played a significant role as a unifying force for Palestinian identity and the anti-colonial national struggle. Theatre has been practiced to serve the resistance and deemed a political threat by ruling authorities. Theatre artists have been arrested, performances shut down, and theatres raided by Israel, while theatre productions abroad have been censored and canceled. Theatre continues to be practiced in villages, schools, refugee camps, and professional theatres as tradition, pedagogical practice, resistance struggle, and aesthetic expression.

**Further References**

Anis, Muhammed. *Al-Haraka al-Masrahiyya fi al-Manatiq al-Muhtalla*. Haifa: Dar Galileo, 1979.

Darraj, Faysal. “Palestine.” In *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*. Vol. 4: The Arab World. Ed. by Don Rubin. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

Al-Jawzi, Nasri. *Tarikh al-Masrah al-Filastini: 1918-1948* [The History of Palestinian Theatre]. Nicosia: Sharq Press, 1990.

Mahamid, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ra’uf. *Masirat al-Haraka al-Masrahiyya fi al-Diffa al-Gharbiyya 1967-1987* [The Historical Trajectory of the Theatre Movement in the West Bank, 1967-1987]. Al-Tayba: Markaz Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1989.

Slyomovics, Susan. “‘To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound’: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship.” *The Drama Review* 35, no. 2 (1991): 18-38.

Snir, Reuven. “The Palestinian *al-Hakawati* Theatre: A Brief History.” *Arab Studies Journal* 6/7, no. 2/1 (1998-9): 57-71.