Performing Immobility in Contemporary Palestinian Theatre

Irene Fernandez Ramos

Introduction

From the signature of the Oslo Accords (1993-1995) and the outbreak of the second Intifada (2000), the Palestinian population has been increasingly subject to the consolidation of a closure regime that materializes itself through different means: an increasingly complicated bureaucratic system of permits, a network of segregated roads, the segregation barrier and the system of check-points. These restrictions have naturally had an impact on individual and collective identity and its representation. The present article explores how what I call the "dynamics of immobility" locate Palestine in a marginal position, marked by the exclusion from the patterns of global mobility, the impact of the Israeli occupation and the disruption of Palestinian socio-political life.

At the same time, insofar as the margins are defined not as opposed to the center, but as alternative places of Otherness, I want to argue that the Palestinian position on the margins enables the articulation of different narratives to represent and counter the intricate power dynamics at stake in the Palestinian context. Within that context, art, and more specifically, theatre, enables an open space for social dialogue. This article will analyze *Confinement*, a play produced by the Palestinian theatre group Al-Harah in 2010, in order

After the Oslo Accords (1993-1995), Palestine has witnessed the consolidation of a closure regime that limits the freedom of movement of its population. This system has located Palestine in a marginal position within the global patterns of mobility and has had an impact on internal social dynamics and in artistic representation. Theatre can portray, represent and challenge this process of immobiliza-
tion. Through the analysis of the play *Confinement*, produced by Al-Harah in 2010, this paper will analyze how theatre can open new spaces of representation that allow alternative narratives within the intricate panorama of the Israeli occupation.

Keywords: Theatre; Palestine; Immobility; Space; Margins.

to understand how the process of meaning creation that involves audience and performers during the theatrical event has a strong potential not only to represent the Palestinian marginal position, but also to foster the collective re-negotiation of identity narratives.

Palestine as a 'Place of Otherness:' The Dynamics of Immobility

During the last 66 years, Israeli policies have combined the creation of a sophisticated system of physical barriers, such as the Wall and the check-points, a regime of administrative curtails (Brown 504) and the establishment of settlements inside the 1967 "Green Line" that appropriate more Palestinian land and reduce Palestinian territories to an ensemble of "gated communities" (Bowman 129). These structures are directed to establish a system of movement restrictions that pushes Palestinian reality to a position in which Palestine becomes a "place of Otherness" (Hetherington viii). The consideration of Palestine as an 'Other' locates it on a marginal, "unbounded and blurred space-between rather than the easily identified space at the edge" (27-28).

In this sense, the Palestinian context cannot be understood in binary terms (center vs. margins); it is not a question of being outside or inside a certain pattern of global mobility, nor of being outside or inside a certain social space. Rather, the Palestinian context is conditioned by multiple dynamics that are intimately connected—namely its exclusion from the context of international globalization, the repressive character of Israeli occupation and the complex internal dynamics within Palestinian society—and which determine its marginal position. The movement restrictions imposed on the Palestinian population have created a complex panorama that fuses "displacement and return, absence and presence, movement and confinement" (Kelly 26). This panorama is not only determined by physical exclusion, but mainly by an entangled network of social, cultural, psychological and political variants that have consolidated a generally immobile scene.

Immobility can be understood as opposed to the notion of mobility, which has become a keyword in the analysis of new socio-political, economic and cultural patterns within the current context of globalization (Soja; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry; Tawil-Souri; Baldassar and Merla). Urry refers to this recent phenomenon as a mobility turn to point out how "all social entities […] presuppose many different forms of actual and potential movement" (*Mobilities* 6). At the same time, Cresswell defined movement as "mobility abstracted from contexts of power" (2), from which we can infer that mobility is movement that is concretized within contexts of power. This means that mobility is translated into fluxes of people, objects, capital and information (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 1) that are imbued with complex dynamics and interrelations, and therefore it can be seen as a phenomenon both geographical and social (Urry, *Sociology* 3).

Paradoxically, as stated by Leuenberger, within this time of rapid globalization, a contradictory trend can be witnessed: "the proliferation of walls, barriers and fences" (64). These barriers do not necessarily need to be physical, as socio-economic, geographical, cultural and political factors can also curtail access to this global mobility. In this sense, mobility is linked to power dynamics within geographical and social space. This intrinsic inequality in access to mobility has been defined as a mobility gap (Shamir 200) which needs to be acknowledged in order to recognize that globalization entails "processes of closure, entrapment, and containment" (199) which can "weaken social capital and generate social exclusion" (Larsen, Axhausen, and Urry 20).

Palestinian history is a good example of the impact of differentiated mobility (Massey 150) as an exclusionary pattern based on the unequal access to mobility,

which pushes Palestine to a marginal position. For instance, highly mobile subjects, such as refugees, find themselves with a restricted freedom of movement due to other socio-economic and political reasons than those which caused the initial displacement (Jeffers 64). Indeed, forced migration has been a fundamental part of Palestine's history during the 20th century, and the question of the Palestinian refugees is not only political; it is also a social issue that, as highlighted by Bowker, has a central relevance for broader Palestinian identity narratives. The Nakba marked the beginning of more than 65 years of endless conflict (Kramer 323) and precipitated the forced eviction of more than 750,000 people, who sought refuge in the neighboring Arab countries and in other areas of Mandatory Palestine.

However, exile was only one of the geo-demographical strategies of Israel that shaped the current situation: the Oslo Accords deepened the patterns of differentiated mobility (Falah 1357; Hanafi 112), creating what I call an "extensive sense of immobility" that pervades not only Palestinian everyday life but also the aesthetic representation of Palestinian reality. The spatial confinement and movement regulations have infiltrated every daily action, which has had a strong impact on the individual and collective construction of iden-

tity. In this sense, the position of marginality that those patterns of immobility impose over Palestinian reality allows spaces for "alternate ordering" (Hetherington viii), where alternative narratives shaped by resistance and transgression are formed. Theatre, as a form of art based on space and bodies, has a very strong potential as a place for community dialogue and the development of new narratives of resistance.

Palestinian Theatre as a Space for Altering Orders

The potential of theatre relies on its definition as one of the liminal places of otherness that allows immobility to become visual, dynamic and at the same time real and denied. The theatrical stage opens a representational space as "the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 39) in which immobility can be represented. The intricate dynamics of the Palestinian context are therefore represented as interweaving within the different dimensions of theatre spatiality. Consequentially, the bodies of the performers can be consciously immobilized as an aesthetic choice whenever theatre allows an infinite range of possible movements.

An example of that kind of aesthetic choice is the play *Confinement*, produced in 2010 by the Palestinian theatre group Al-Harah ("The Neighborhood") based in Beit Jala. The synopsis of the play states:

Three people find themselves confined. Their souls, hearts and minds are tangled. Their lives become a mixture of madness and silence. They lose their target and their roots.
They discover that this confinement is only an illusion or a trick or an expression of fear and distress.
Will this discovery change their attitude towards life?

The play was directed by Raeda Ghazaleh and inspired by a play of the same name originally produced in the 1970s by the Palestinian group Dababis, in which three people find themselves stuck in a bottle. The creative crew from Al-Harah adapted it to the present situation with the financial support of the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts (SADA) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The action unfolds as two actors and one actress wake up in a three-meter-diameter round stage that represents the inside of a bottle. The play does not want to question why they are there; it is mainly focused on the consequences—both individual and collective—that the enclosure has for the three of them.

At first glance, *Confinement* illustrates the sense of immobility through its scenographic arrangements: the round non-proscenium stage is demarcated by a circle of light and empty glass bottles as it reproduces the inside of a bottle in which the three characters are confined. The audience sits down around the stage and the "line" between audience and performers is eliminated (Wortham 51). This kind of central staging—also called arena or theatre-in-the-round—constitutes an "architecture of intimacy" (Kaplan 114). The close interaction with the audience challenges performers' safeness at the edge of the hidden spaces and the backstage. There is neither front nor back; everything is seen, there is no comfort area, no possible escape. In this sense, central staging in *Confinement* recreates what Bowman calls "encystation" (295): the performers are enclosed within the space of the stage in the same way Palestinian communities find themselves encircled by the wall or disconnected from their neighboring communities.

The context of closure will always strongly influence the process of meaning creation. "The operations of stage are applied to existing spaces of representation" (Schmidt 286) and, therefore, the different layers of theatre spatiality cannot be analyzed without including in the equation the socio-cultural context that stands beyond the walls of the theatre (Tompkins 538). *Confinement* draws a parallel between the Palestinian reality and the actions of the performers; the representation of personal experiences on stage allows the members of the audience to "confront ambiguous issues in their own lives" (Meisiek 802). In this sense, just as "listening, […] speaking and seeing, happens in specific physical situations" (Shepherd 8), the theatrical process of meaning creation is strongly determined by social and moral values, but, at the same time, it allows those values to be challenged and subverted. Theatre becomes, then, a place for negotiation—a contemporary agora where the body is a tool for social dialogue. This negotiation is inscribed in a wider code of social norms that are translated into daily life through physical techniques that are learnt and defined in terms of morals and "manners" (Goffman 24). Within the Palestinian context, the representation of immobility is not only relevant because of the presentation on stage of the individual experiences related to it; it is also significant in terms of the construction of a common meaning for this 'immobility,' drawing upon the individual-collective experience of the audience. The present article wants to assert the relevance of the aesthetics of Palestinian theatre as a medium for understanding the complicated socio-political dynamics that intervene in that context. As stated by Lola Frost, aesthetic interventions are political "because they disrupt the accepted order of things" (435). I argue that it is within that possibility of disruption that the aesthetic expression articulates its agency, as we can see in the case of Al-Harah's *Confinement*.

Theatre Audiences and Social Dialogue

As we have seen, it is paramount to include the socio-cultural context that stands beyond the walls of the theatre (Tompkins 538) in the analysis of the different layers of theatre spatiality. On the one hand, the translation of this spatial reality into theatre necessarily reflects the social and physical dynamics linked to certain power structures. On the other hand, theatre can destabilize official meaning, which in the Palestinian case allows not only for the construction of a spatial counter-narrative to the Israeli geographical primacy, but also for an open critique of social issues within Palestinian society.

Audiences are paramount in the process of meaning creation, as they are in charge of connecting the witnessed reality on stage with the individual-collective experience of every member of the audience. In

Al-Harah's *Confinement*, the central staging breaks the distance between performer and audience but does not constitute any ease or comfort for the audience. On the contrary, it seeks to foster the "activation of the audience" (Büdel 288). Some parts of the theatrical action may be lost to some portions of the audience because of perspective limitations. The spectators will have to experience the unease of striving to have a full picture, which is indeed an impossible task. In my opinion, what could be seen as a loss of the theatrical illusion due to the physical proximity performer-audience (Cole 19) fosters instead the reaction of the audience and has a strong impact in the process of meaning creation. *Confinement* plays with the audience, pulling and pushing them within its "alienation effect" (Brecht 130). This alienation is created by means of a contradictory theatrical language: on the one hand, the play portrays typical everyday gestures and movements that create the spectator's identification with the characters, while at the same time the characters shift their profound internal dialogues into expansive and impish games that suddenly outpace the audience. The overall tone of the play is waving and changing, proposing an abstract code to the audience in which the connections between the gestural sign, the reference to the everyday world

and the overall meaning of the play are recurrently deconstructed. In this sense, in the same way as Brecht—who defends a theatre where the spectator does not identify with the characters (Silberman, Giles, and Kuhn 5)—in *Confinement* the audience senses distance rather than empathy, which affects the process of meaning creation as the iconical communication becomes meaningful after "a process of reconstruction and symbolization/stylization" (Pavis and Biller-Lappin 68). However, the scenographic arrangements can trigger different unconscious reactions in the audience that are then reinforced by the actual message articulated by the text and the movement in the process of collective meaning creation. In this sense, *Confinement* wants to foster reflection about the sense of the characters' confinement and the role of society in that confinement through different highly symbolic scenes. For instance, the third scene begins when one of the actors starts wandering around, painfully pulling his legs with his hands while he repeats: "I'm carrying my four walls and walking with them."[1] A square inside the circular stage is drawn by a light beam as the rest of the stage and the audience are left in semi-darkness. This scene was inspired by Ghassan Kanafani's short story ʿAṭash ("Thirst"), first published in Kanafani's 1961

first short story collection *Mawt Sarīr Raqam 12* ("Death in Bed Number 12"). It narrates the story of a depressed man who lives an undesired and downcast—yet passively accepted—life confined within the four walls of his apartment.

In the foreword of the short story, republished in 2013, Alex Taylor states that:

> At the time Kanafani wrote this story, […] it may have seemed that Palestinians were, lost in a sense, with nothing else to do except tell others how they have been wronged. Today, though Palestinian activism is strong, the search for dignity depicted in Kanafani's "Thirst" remains as poignant as ever. (34)

The search for dignity stems from a profound sense of estrangement of the self, within which an individual recognizes that he/she has become a stranger both to himself/herself and within the society. "To carry four walls" does not entail that these four walls are mobile, but that they are inside him; they are carried and limit his individual freedom. The walls that are carried are the boundaries between him and a world that imposes the toil of permanently dealing with social norms and its translation into self-constraint.

According to Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*, the essence of life is the "feeling of participation in a flowing onward" (xvi).

The patterns of Palestinian *immobility* confine the population within the margins of the global connections and international aid system, the Israeli colonial project, and the Palestinian national project in which socio-political, economic or cultural participation has little room for autonomous development. The Oslo Accords "dealt a heavy blow to Palestinian national unity and effectively ruptured Palestinian national consensus" (Ibrahim 61). The breach was not spontaneous; it responded to the focus of Palestinian nationalist elites on the construction of a Palestinian nation-state on the basis of a homogeneous Palestinian identity formulated upon ideas of authenticity, tradition and fixed notions of gender and religious affiliation. To achieve this homogeneity, the official discourses appropriate individual experience in the interest of a "master narrative of identity" (Hammack 13) that perpetuates a solid set of power relations.

Confinement presents the effects of this intricate power matrix to the audience. Furthermore, it reflects how the restrictions that follow these power structures can result in the burden of fitting into social standards of tolerableness. The play translates these structures and the denial of social distance into a denial of physical space which is "inscribed in bodies" (Bourdieu 17). This strategy can be seen in the fourth scene, which starts when the three actors shake and wave from one side of the stage to the other as if the bottle were being shaken. They cannot control the chaotic force that pulls and pushes them as if they were little insects, and eventually their movements inside the bottle become a linear and monotonous movement similar to military marching. They line up, keep their gaze lost on the horizon and mark a repetitious pattern accompanied by string music that seems to chaotically follow the movement.

One at the time, the performers go out of the linear movement imposed by this marching queue and face the other two performers who remained in the queue with simple and functional movements—plugging their ears, laughing out loud, rolling up their trousers—that challenge the ruling movement. The marching represents the order established by social norms that are challenged by the discordant movements. However, what is interesting here is not only the dynamic of challenging the dominant movement, but mainly the fact that, one after the other, the performers come back to the ruling movement by themselves. This pattern of submission and self-constraint illustrate what Nabil Al-Raee—artistic director of *The Freedom Theatre*, a renowned Palestinian theatre from the refugee camp of Jenin whose founder Juliano Mer-Khamis was assassinated on the 4th of April 2011—stated in an interview with Patricia Davis:[2] "One of the most important things the occupation has succeeded in doing is to kill hope, to shut down the mind, and to kill the imagination. You can't dream. You have a limit."

In *Confinement* the audience is confronted with this image of how coercion and fear are not enough to 'colonize' the mind of the actor, and, as stated by Dascal, there has to be an unconscious acceptance of that set of beliefs. In this sense, this scene is a reflection of the immobilizing and confining power of social rules and norms. The scene ends when one of the actors steps out of the queue and does not accept the pressure of the others. Instead of coming back to the queue, he says: "F: If I go from here they say why from here, and if I go from there they say why he goes from there?"

This sentence illustrates the permanent sense of inadequacy to social norms and the social pressure they are subject to. The textual binary structure "If I … they say …; if I … they say …" is then articulated as repeated and intermingled monologues by the other characters, not as an exchange, but rather as a linear discourse about the role of social pressure in the meaning of their confinement. As stated

Irene Fernandez Ramos

is a PhD candidate within the Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies (CCLPS) at SOAS, University of London. In 2012, she started a PhD thesis about the impact that movement restrictions imposed over the Palestinian population after the Oslo Accords—understood in physical, psychological and social terms—have had on the representations of space in dramatic production. Her working title is "Performing Immobility: Space, the Individual-Collective Body and the Narratives of Oppression in Contemporary Palestinian Theatre."
email: 529313@soas.ac.uk

by the director, Raeda Ghazaleh, the audience laughed out loud in this scene, in which "nobody would think they would laugh."[3] This reaction reflects two different trends: on the one hand, the audience feels a certain degree of familiarity and identifies with the experience presented on stage. On the other hand, they recognize the absurdity of some of these constraints when represented on stage, following the Brechtian style that I mentioned above. In any case, the audience is urged to think about the wider sense of that confinement and to connect the space that they have in front of them with both individual anxiety and social constraints. In this sense, the aesthetic choice of representing the lack of movement in a graphic and uncanny way shows Al-Harah's interest in provoking a reaction from the audience that will open a dialogical space where resistant narratives can be articulated.

Final Remarks
The play finishes without any apparent conclusion. This absence is not innocent; in the same way that the play does not ask any direct question about the nature of performers' confinement, it does not pretend to offer any response. *Confinement* confronts the audience with an aestheticization of the lack of movement that is present in their daily lives while at the same time applying a Brechtian strategy to distance them from it. In this sense, theatre opens a place of Otherness similar to the one in which the different Palestinian contexts have been confined due to the context of the Israeli occupation. The limitations that social rules impose over individuals and that are represented in *Confinement* are inscribed into a wider narrative of disciplinary restrictions—the political context of occupation and the global patterns of neoliberal mobility—which again denies the binary division of centre vs. margins.

The technologies of the occupation applied in Palestine represent a "ritual of exclusion" (Ozguc 6) which aims at demarcating and rendering invisible an important segment of the Palestinian population. Palestinian *immobility* cannot be understood in territorial terms, as it refers to the "structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age and class" (Tesfahuney 501). The structures of power that articulate that "ritual of exclusion" are constitutive of both Israel's colonial project and of the structures of power within Palestinian society. Both curtail the population's freedom of choice over their lives and have an impact on individual and collective construction of identity, which is a dynamic process that pervades the artistic scene.

Theatre represents an interstitial space for social negotiation that reflects the interconnected dimensions of Palestinian complexities. In this sense, the representation of *immobility* in the Palestinian context is not at all a denial of the possibility of development and change within Palestinian society. On the contrary, as it has been stated before, *immobility* should be understood as a notion that goes beyond the mere lack of movement and which points out the lack of freedom to choose one's movements due to the restraining power dynamics that are linked to the context of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Not only does theatrical space allow messages of political resistance against these power dynamics; it also challenges "the processes of representation itself, even though it must carry out this project by means of representation" (Carlson 142). Following this idea, Palestinian theatre becomes a new space of alterity in which realities different from the socially constructed realm that lies outside the walls of the theatre are allowed. If we allow theatre to be a space for practice, it will offer a space in which bodies can freely renegotiate time and identity in a time of increasing anxiety over a panorama of ever-increasing restrictions.

Notes

[1] The translation of the original Arabic text presented in this article was provided by Al-Harah in March 2014.

[2] For further details, see <http://howlround.com/death-and-art-in-palestine-nabil-al-ra-ee-and-the-freedom-theatre#sthash.ItWQrl1g.dpuf>.

[3] Skype communication with theatre director Raeda Ghazaleh, Aug. 21 2014.

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