

(Re-)Enacting Stories of Trauma: Playback Theatre as a Tool of Cultural Resistance in Palestine

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Playback Theatre opens up an artistic and interactive space for silenced voices and counter-narratives. It helps to address potentially traumatic experiences of (political) violence and oppression. The article discusses the resilient power of Playback Theatre in Palestine and gives insight into the strategies of an oppressed

population to define their own sense of self through stories that acknowledge the variety and dignity of their lives.

Keywords: Palestine, Palestinian Theater, Trauma, Cultural Resistance, Memory, Resilience

Introduction

In the Palestinian Territories, the project of occupation and control is most evident in the daily practice of land confiscation, home demolitions, settler violence, military incursions, and political imprisonment, which leads to geographical, political, and social fragmentation and isolation. Adversity and alienation can be considered as an integral part of everyday life that might lead to diverse traumatic experiences. I argue that in this fragile and fragmented context, Playback Theatre offers a chance to name and revisit stories of suffering, loss, and violence and helps to mobilize solidarity and (re-)connect communities.

Against the background of the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, my paper focuses on Playback Theatre as a tool of cultural resistance and in this sense as an alternative to conventional trauma work. My research is embedded in the wider context of Palestinian cultural resistance and commemorative practices. During my research, I got in contact with several non-governmental organizations, amongst others *Cinema Jenin* (which unfortunately has been closed in the meantime) and the *Freedom Theatre*, which are both located in Jenin—specifically, in the Jenin refugee camp.¹ In 2012, one year after the assassi-

nation of Juliano Mer-Khamis, the charismatic leader of the Freedom Theatre, I travelled to Jenin for the first time. There were still ongoing interrogations and detentions to resolve his murder. Nevertheless, the members of the Freedom Theatre continued and reorganized their work based on the belief that artistic expression has a crucial role to play in creating a free and equal society.² A main concern of the Freedom Theatre is to reconstruct Palestinian culture by listening to and sharing (oppressed) stories.

In recent years I conducted several interviews with people engaging in cultural resistance in Jenin as well as in other places in the West Bank. In this paper I particularly focus on my research on Playback Theatre as a tool of cultural resistance. I was introduced into Playback Theatre in 2014, when I joined the Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus project, where members of the Freedom Theatre and international activists go to stay with communities in key areas of oppression. Cultural activities like Playback Theatre have an important function during these *Freedom Rides*.³ Playback Theatre invites community members to share personal stories that are directly transformed into improvised theater pieces by the actors. As will be described in greater detail later, sharing

stories becomes an act of witnessing that contains healing aspects as well.⁴ I also want to highlight the importance of stories from children and youth, the most vulnerable members of society.⁵ The Freedom Theatre offers special activities for children and youth in which they put much emphasis on play and creating a safe space as a foundation for children and youth to be free to express themselves creatively and strengthened in their ability to deal with difficulties in life (The Freedom Theatre, Child). Regarding children and youth, the importance of sharing (and enacting) stories through Playback Theatre is still in great need of deeper research and documentation.

Framing Cultural Resistance in the Palestinian Territories: The Freedom Theatre

The founders of the Freedom Theatre had a vision of building a theater community that joins other forms of resistance. That means that the work of the theater was never aimed to pacify, but to stir, mobilize, and transform (Johansson and Wallin, *Freedom Theatre* 209). In this context, the Freedom Theatre often refers to cultural resistance as a core motivation for its work. Jonatan Stanczak and Johanna Wallin, two of the main members of the Freedom Theatre, explain that cultural resistance

remains a vague and multilayered concept, but that the following definition given by New Tactics in Human Rights comes close to the Freedom Theatre's understanding:

Cultural resistance is the broad use of arts, literature and traditional practices to challenge or fight unjust or oppressive systems and / or power holders within the context of nonviolent actions, campaigns and movements. At its core, cultural resistance is a way of reclaiming our humanity, and celebrating our work as individuals and communities. Cultural resistance tactics are particularly powerful because they serve multiple purposes. They inspire us to own our lives and invest in our communities, while building capacity for local leadership. (Wallin and Stanczak 1155)

In addition, Nabil Al-Raei, artistic director of the Freedom Theatre, points out that a number of factors have fueled debates and created a variety of approaches, concepts and vocabularies leading to concepts like "cultural resistance," "artistic resistance," and "cultural intifada." He emphasizes that "artistic activity is a direct assault on the military occupation of Palestine and requires trust and mutually

supportive and collaborative efforts that unify our purpose through a variety of artistic methods which celebrate our diversity. In this way, art can define and lead resistance" (Al-Raei 1730). Furthermore, Wallin and Stanczak argue that art, such as poetry, music, and theater, has always functioned as an identifying, healing, and unifying factor.

Researchers as well as therapists have already recognized the healing power of cultural expression through strengthening identity, creativity, self-esteem, reflection, and communication practices. This is particularly important in contexts and zones of (political and social) fragmentation. The Freedom Theatre's cultural resistance primarily targets the occupation from within or rather the internalization of oppression. In the Freedom Theatre's perspective, this is where cultural resistance comes in:

Just as we cannot imagine more colors than what our eyes have seen, it is difficult to imagine a reality beyond our own experiences and frames of reference. Art, as the expression of culture, can deconstruct an oppressive reality and make it comprehensible, which is the first step towards changing it. In such circumstances, the act of creating and performing becomes a subversive

act of resistance against the external and internal levels of occupation. (Wallin and Stanczak 1271)

While talking about the Freedom Theatre's concept of cultural resistance, one of his former students told me that Juliano Mer-Khamis always urged his students to be aware of the fact that the occupation of the mind was more dangerous than the occupation of the body. In an interview with Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, Mer-Khamis explained:

[W]e believe that the strongest struggle today should be cultural, moral. This must be clear. We are not teaching the boys and the girls how to use arms or how to create explosives, but we expose them to discourse of liberation, of liberty. We expose them to art, culture, music - which I believe can create better people for the future, and I hope that some of them, some of our friends in Jenin, will lead [...] and continue the resistance against the occupation through this project, through this theatre.

It is important to note that in the Palestinian context, cultural resistance is inextricably connected to the concept of *ṣumūd* (steadfastness). Over the years, there have

been multiple and overlapping discourses on *ṣumūd*, dependent upon the larger needs and contexts of time. As a national symbol, *ṣumūd* only started to be used in the 1960s as part of the Palestinian national movement and can be understood as a tactic of resistance to the Israeli occupation that relies upon adaptation to the difficulties of life under occupation. In other words, it is an active affirmation of the collective presence on the Palestinian land.⁶ The ultimate symbols associated with the concept of *ṣumūd* are the olive tree as well as the peasant women and mother as signs of rootedness, continuity, and connectedness. In this respect, *ṣumūd* is about persevering despite the oppression and hardships that Palestinians face in their daily lives—for instance a community which rebuilds their school for the seventh time or students who go to university despite long waiting times at checkpoints. While planting new olive trees, Alaa, one of my interview partners, explained that for him *ṣumūd* means "keeping my humanity and soul, my ability to laugh and hope."

Against this background, the expression "to exist is to resist" is a common slogan found throughout the Palestinian Territories.

Şumūd (and its reference to cultural resistance) can be understood as a “resilient resistance,” a tactic of resistance that relies on the qualities of resilience such as getting by and adapting to a shock (Ryan 299). Of course, being resilient does not mean going through life without experiencing fear and pain (or other emotions) after adversity and loss, but resilience is found in a variety of thoughts, behaviors, and actions that can be learned and developed, such as in Playback Theatre. In this context, it can be understood as an alternative or rather additional tool for conventional trauma work.

Playback Theatre: Visualizing Personal Stories of Potentially Traumatic Experiences⁷

Playback Theatre is a form of interactive and spontaneous theater. Although performances focus on a theme of interest or concern in a ritualized way, they follow no narrative agenda. Performances are carried out by a team of trained (ideally native) actors. The actors and actresses of the Freedom Bus are themselves Palestinians, which provides them with a deep “understanding of the psychological and socio-political context of stories they encounter” (Rivers, “Playback Theatre” 160). In a personal conversation, Ben Rivers, one of the founders of the *Freedom*

Bus, explained that the Playback process works best when performers are deeply familiar with the language, values, and traditions of the community. The inclusion of non-Palestinian actors would limit the efficacy of the work, especially in a context where many Palestinians feel that their narratives have already been denied or misrepresented (Rivers, “Narrative Power”). In addition, there are also musician(s), a conductor, and—in the case of international participants—a translator.⁸

In the following, I reflect upon a Playback Theatre event in a small community in Area C⁹ of the Jordan Valley. The performance took place on the school playground. The conductor asked if someone from the audience wanted to share a personal story. After some representatives of the community shared their stories, children and minors were invited to tell their stories as well. 15-year-old Osama¹⁰ raised his hand and entered the stage. He took a seat next to the conductor, who supported him by asking some questions about time, place, plot, and emotions:

When I was a little child, Israeli soldiers invaded my parent's home. I was afraid and I peed in my pants. They destroyed everything; they even destroyed my favorite doll with their heavy shoes. I

won't ever forget the sound of my doll breaking into pieces. They took my father and my cousin, they were beating them, they pushed them into their car and suddenly there was a big silence.

The teller chose the actors and actresses to enact the different roles. Then he watched his story recreated on stage supported by the music of an Oud.

In general, the performers must be very sensitive in their acting. Jo Salas (“Stories in the Moment” 119) explains:

Stories that are evidently or potentially traumatic for the teller should not be enacted literally. The teller needs to ‘see’ his or her story, but in a way that maintains a safe distance from it. Horrific events like a bombing or a rape can be depicted with minimal gestures, narration, or suggested offstage.

At the end of the representation, the actors and actresses turned to the teller, thanked him for the story, and waited on the opinion of their enactment.

Generally, after each performance the conductor asks the teller whether he or she felt represented by the enactment. If the teller is not fully satisfied, he or she can ask for variations. For instance, the conductor might counteract by inviting peo-

ple from the audience to share their feelings in response to the story they heard. After a while Rawda raised her hand and was invited to enter the stage:

It was in the evening when the soldiers invaded our home. I don't know what they were looking for, but they were shouting and wanted us to leave the house. I cried. My mother was still standing in the kitchen, making coffee. With a proud smile she looked at the soldiers, telling them that she would leave the house when she's done with the coffee. For a short moment, the soldiers seemed to be confused. After my mother finished her coffee, she left the house, walking upright.

Considering the political violence Palestinians face every day, these stories can function as examples of the profound impact on children's perception of space and reality. In this context it makes sense to refer to the work of Eyad El-Sarraj, who (amongst others) examined the prevalence and determinations of post-traumatic stress disorder among Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip who lost their homes. I argue that his results might also be transferred to the effects of Israeli invasion and devastations of Palestinian homes in the West Bank. If we understand

home as a shelter and the heart of family life, then even the invasion or devastation of home can be a traumatic experience. Home contains vivid memories as well as attachment to (family) objects. In this context El-Sarraj emphasizes that home is often associated with feelings of security and consolation (Quota et al. 314). The (ongoing) invasions and devastations might undermine the children's sense of safety.

Theater has the power to create a safe and *liminal space* to visualize themes and emotions that are usually suppressed or even (social) taboo. Correspondingly, it offers the opportunity to express vulnerability, grief, anger, and other emotions that can be recognized and re-viewed through the performance. Ben Rivers emphasizes that

[a]udience members have expressed their appreciation for an aesthetic space that welcomes diverse emotions and complex narratives—and opportunity so often denied in the prevailing quest for order, sense and survival. (Rivers, "Narrative Power")

As shown by the examples above, stories that are shared during a Playback Theatre event are not only about violence and vic-

timhood; they rather emphasize agency (for instance in the sense of disobedience, as Rawdas story illustrates). The teller usually tells his or her story not only to inform the audience, but he or she is also urging the audience to fight against the injustice as well. Rivers ("Narrative Power") also explains that even though the Playback process is used to inform or mobilize local and regional audiences, many tellers also like to transmit their stories to the outside world. From the audience's point of view, Playback Theatre can thus be understood as a form of witnessing and as one way to counter representations of Palestinian life. For example, organizers of Playback Theatre events also arrange post-performance meetings where (international) event participants are able to discuss concrete actions as a result of the "testimonial process" (Rivers, "Narrating Power"). In addition, the Freedom Bus troupe tries to establish long-term relationships with the partnering communities to build trust and (re-)connect the fragmented communities within the West Bank.

Conclusion: Playback Theatre, Trauma Work, and Cultural Resistance

As stressed above, there is no doubt that people living under occupation are at a high risk of psychological disturbances. Many studies have found that the experi-

ence of political violence often leads to different types of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that can develop following a traumatic event that threatens one's safety and makes one feel helpless (Freeman 6). For the Palestinian context, it is difficult to define or reduce the traumatic effects as post-traumatic stress disorder, because the trauma is neither past nor post, but continuing (Sehwail 55). This means that due to the fact that political violence is still an everyday experience, it is almost impossible to identify or even experience the setting as *post*-traumatic. Above, we also need to recognize that prominent trauma discourses reflect Western perspectives that tend towards apolitical and bio-medical models of assessment and intervention (Rivers, "Narrative Power"; Rivers, "Cherry Theft"; Rivers, "Educate"; Brunner, "Politik des Traumas"). Western trauma discourse is dominantly one of victimization. Of course, victims and perpetrators are necessary categories for thinking about violence, suffering, and vulnerability. But they are often used as dualistic and holistic concepts, which are not sufficient. As already mentioned above, I argue that the response to (political) violence is not limited to being traumatized, but includes resilience. In this sense, I prefer to use the term *potentially traumatic experiences*.

According to Papadopoulos, experiences of extreme adversity can result in a variety of internal states and external behaviors. He mentions negative responses (including psychiatric disorders), neutral responses (resilience), and positive responses. He introduces the term "adversity activated development" (AAD), which refers to new positive qualities resulting from adversity. Against this background, Rivers ("Playback Theatre" 158) points out that up to approximately 73,000 Palestinians who suffer from mental health disorders cannot access appropriate service due to the lack of funding, but also due to the social stigma surrounding psychiatric treatment. I fully agree with Rivers that storytelling and (interactive) theater can offer an important alternative to conventional trauma response. To have the chance to tell what happened to a broader audience in a secure and safe space and to see this story being enacted on stage can help a person to move forward with life. It can move traumatic memory into narrative memory. The person who shares his or her story is no longer alone with his or her painful memories and feelings. He or she is taking an active role, because he or she *chose* to enter the stage. Furthermore, people experience that there are similar stories and feelings, which might lead to solidarity and com-

munity mobilization. Their voices are no longer silenced, and they ideally gain public recognition and respect.

During my research I was able to talk to several *tellers* after diverse Playback Theatre events. Most of them explained that they felt a kind of relief and shifting of perspective that can play a crucial role in the healing process. Fox (and others) emphasize that Playback Theatre promotes both personal affirmation and social cohesion, which offers a powerful response to the alienation and disconnection that many people experience. Against this backdrop, the recognition of shared experiences can become a tool for cultural resistance. As mentioned earlier, from the audience's point of view, the opportunity to have one's story heard can be viewed as one way to counter external representations of the Palestinian reality.

It is important to emphasize that children and youth especially are faced with difficult realities. Their lives consist of more or less constant struggle. Violence affects them almost everywhere: on the streets, at school, and at home. Violence is becoming part of their language, their play and their worldview (Wallin 3990). Many children suffer from trauma and psychiatric disorders; for instance, hyperactivity,

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aggression, concentration problems, and insomnia are very common. Wallin clarifies that there are only a few avenues for release and rehabilitation available to them. Through Playback Theatre (and in Jenin in a broader sense through the children and youth activities of the Freedom Theatre) they have the ability to tell their own stories in a positive and safe environment where they are listened to, respected, and valued as equal individuals. The special strength of Playback Theatre lies in its “visualizing of personal stories.” Children especially are rarely able to express their feelings verbally, particularly if they refer to potentially traumatic experiences. Through Playback Theatre their stories can be visualized and symbolized. This creative response can open a space for diverse feelings and in this sense stimulate resilience. To quote Ahmed Tobasi, theater school graduate and coordinator of theater workshops for young people:

In my opinion they [the children] are the most important audience to us. If we can find a solution to their problems through theatre, we will indirectly find the beginning of a solution to our society's problems. These children are the generation that will lead the country one day. (The Freedom Theatre, Child)¹¹

Coming finally back to the concept of cultural resistance, it is important to stress that there can be no monopoly on the understanding of cultural resistance. This also means that there is no clear and precise definition of cultural resistance. In the context of the Freedom Theatre, Al-Raei points out that “it has been challenging for us to define clearly what we mean by the concept of ‘cultural resistance’. [...] We have approached ‘cultural resistance’ largely in an intuitive and organic way, through our feelings” (Al-Raei, “Shared Responsibility” 1660). Against the backdrop of the Freedom Theatre, I have discussed Playback Theatre as a tool of cultural resistance and in this sense as an additional tool for conventional trauma work in the Palestinian territories.

Sharing Stories about life under occupation is not a new experience for most Palestinians. But Playback Theatre as a story-based strategy appeals to all our senses. It is social and interactive in nature and helps to provoke critical consciousness as well as coping strategies with potentially traumatic experiences. The importance of Playback Theatre for children and youth is still underappreciated, which in my opinion, needs to be remedied. I assume that the special (educational) activities of the Freedom Theatre

can make a significant contribution here as well.

Notes

¹ Jenin was severely affected by the second intifada, when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) occupied the camp in 2002 after ten days of intensive fighting. More than a quarter of the population was rendered homeless. The so called *Battle of Jenin* plays an important role in framing personal and collective memories that refer to traumatic experiences (UNRWA).

² Within the Freedom Theatre there is the understanding that there are four main and intertwined levels of occupation: the external Israeli occupation, the internal political oppression in Palestine, the economic occupation, and finally the occupation from within.

³ The initiative is inspired by the 1960s Freedom Rides that travelled across the Southern United States to highlight and challenge racism. In the Palestinian Territories, Freedom Bus events are typically organized in partnership with grassroots organizations, popular struggle committees, village councils, women's cooperatives, and local activists (Rivers, "Playback Theatre" 160). As a founding member of the Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus initiative, Ben Rivers is jointly responsible for the use of Playback Theatre in the West Bank of the Palestinian Territories. He is specialized in the use of therapeutic and participatory theatre for community mobilization, cultural activism, and collective trauma response. He has worked extensively with communities impacted by structural oppression and political violence, for instance in India, Egypt and the Palestinian Territories.

⁴ It is important to add that Playback Theatre is not about bringing Palestinians and Israelis together in the same events. First and foremost it aims at community mobilization and solidarity within the fragmented Palestinian Territories.

⁵ One of the most prominent Palestinian psychiatrists dealing with the traumatic effects on children and youth was Eyad El-Sarraj. For example, he examined the prevalence and determinants of post-traumatic stress disorder among Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip who lost their home.

⁶ Palestinians often differ between *static şumūd* and *resistance şumūd*. The former is more passive and defined as *maintenance of Palestinians on their land*; the latter contains a more dynamic ideology whose aim is to seek ways to undermine the Israeli occupation.

⁷ As will be discussed later, I assume that the response to violence is not limited to being traumatized. That is why I prefer the term *potentially traumatic experiences*.

⁸ This means that the stories I have witnessed are all translations from Arabic into English.

⁹ The 1995 Oslo II Accord divided the West Bank into three types of area. Concentrations of Palestinian population in built-up areas, which are home to most of the Palestinians in the West Bank, were designated Areas A and B and were officially handed over to Palestinian Authority control. The remaining 60% of the West Bank was designated Area C and is the land that surrounds Area A and B. Area A is home to an estimated 180,000-300,000 Palestinians and to a settler population of at least 325,000 in 125 settlements and approximately 100 outposts. Israel retains full control over security and civil affairs, including planning, building, laying infrastructure, and development (B'Tselem, Planning).

¹⁰ The names have been changed to protect the privacy of people involved.

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