

National Institute of Dramatic Art

Beautiful Resistance

Storytelling as Leadership in Palestine



(The Freedom Theatre, 2017)

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Assessment 3

Host Organisation: The Freedom Theatre, Palestine

Prelude



In November 2018, I rode in a sherut (shared taxi) from Ramallah to Jenin, Palestine where I met a man my own age named Mohmmad. Over the course of our trip, he told me many stories about living in the occupied territories. He had not seen his family for several years as they lived in Gaza, where Israeli defence forces make it near impossible for Palestinians to enter and exit. Mohmmad told me it was very unlikely he would ever see them again.

He spoke so eloquently about his pain, fears and hopes for the future. He also spoke to me about the joys of attending his friend's wedding and the peace he finds in the middle of the night, speaking to God.

When we parted ways, I thanked him for sharing such a rich conversation with me and he said, "telling my story makes me feel safe."

I was both moved and taken aback by this statement as I had shared a similar sentiment with a friend several years earlier. I had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and felt quite helpless as there was not a lot of literature available at the time for young people living with the condition. I felt abandoned by the lack of storytelling around this subject and was compelled to share my own.

I created a blog site that became an online community for young people with MS. The process was not only cathartic for me, but also provided a space for others to share their story. My subsequent work in forum theatre has revolved around the emotional and

psychological benefits of storytelling. Although my experiences are very different to Mohammad's, we are united by the sense of safety that storytelling can illicit.

When embarking on this research journey, I instinctively knew that Palestine would be the perfect place to explore storytelling as a leadership method. I was aware of the conflicting cultural stories that have created civil unrest and also the organisations which are fostering new stories. I hadn't anticipated that storytelling would be even more enshrined in the culture than my research led me to believe. From the moment I arrived, every single Palestinian I met told me their story, often before I had introduced myself. They were eager to share their experiences, not only to raise awareness but also, as demonstrated by Mohammad, because it gave them strength.

This cultural obsession with storytelling challenged my perceptions about the way we discuss Israel and Palestine in the western world. Behind the settlements, "solutions", propaganda and heated debates are people with stories. In order for the Palestinians to be free, these stories desperately need to be told.

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1.Introduction

1.2 Background and scope

In late 2018, I met Palestinian organisation The Freedom Theatre in France where they were touring a production of *Return to Palestine*. I then went to their headquarters at Jenin Refugee Camp in the West Bank. My journey through the Middle East was just as fruitful as my time with the organisation. I gained many insights from travelling through Palestine and observing the cities and people I visited on the way.

In purely geographic terms, Palestine has continued to shrink over the last 70 years (Decker,2017). This map illustrates the Palestinian loss of territory over 64 years following the creation of Israel.



(Palestine-Israel Action Group 2014)

Daily struggles include limited access to food and water, restrictions on travel and the fear of violence and death (Al Jazeera 2019). Despite this, Palestinians' commitment to cultural storytelling ensures their identity remains.

1.3 Research Aims

Using my experiences as a case study, this paper explores storytelling in occupied Palestine as it relates to leadership. The research outcome is my learnings and their application to organisational change.

2. Context and Literature Review

2.1 Storytelling as Leadership

Storytelling is widely acknowledged as an effective tool for leaders to intensify their influence on followers (Weick 2000; Boje 2001; Denning, 2001 Kouzes & Posner 2012, Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist 2013; Rooney 2016). Used effectively, it can assist a leader in building trust, developing a shared vision, stimulating followers and influencing the values of an organisation (Bolman and Deal 2013). The arts provide many techniques to share stories, suggesting that an arts leader can be a storyteller in both their work and their leadership.

2.2 Duelling Narratives

A brief history of conflict in the region

One of the biggest myths surrounding the Israeli- Palestinian conflict is that it has been occurring for hundreds of years as part of religious war (Decker 2017, Shefir 1996). Religion is involved but the conflict only dates back to the early 20th century when Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in relative peace in the nation of Ottoman (Shefir 1996, Gorney 1987). With the invasion of the British, the land became known as the British Mandate of Palestine (Tessler 2009).

In 1948, 13,000 Palestinians were killed (Al Jazeera 2014) and over 80,00 removed from their homes as part of the Zionist Enterprise, a movement that aimed to colonise the region and establish the state of Israel (Johansson and Wallan 2018). Theodor Herzl, the ideological founder of Zionism, believed that Judaism was not just a religion but also a nationality deserving an independent state (Goldberg and David 1996). He told compelling story about a people chosen by god who would one day return to their promised land.

In the wake of the atrocities Jewish people suffered during the Holocaust, the movement was imbued with a sense of urgency and international support. For Zionists, 1948 is the year the Jewish people achieved freedom but Palestinians refer to this event as the Nakba (catastrophe) (Scham 2013). These conflicting perspectives are a phenomenon Padraig O'Malley (2016) refers to as Duelling Narratives.

The Nakba was followed by decades of uprisings, negotiations and false promises as Israel strengthened control of the land (Johanssen and Wallan, 2018). While many perceive Israel as a democracy, their current right-wing government is positioning it as a Jewish State. This ideology is in conflict with democracy as it fails to recognise people from a multitude of religious backgrounds (Scham, 2016).

History, narrative and myth

When examining historical narratives in any context, it is imperative to draw a distinction between *history* and *narrative*. While it's tempting to describe *history* as the basic facts of a past event, historians often add their own stamp or interpretation. We can refer to reliable and professional researchers to extract these facts from the propaganda that often surrounds them. At the same time, nations and individuals rarely refer to historians to establish their cultural history anyway. Nations derive this from stories, newspapers, politicians, art and other sources. When a cultural history is created in this way, we refer to it as *narrative* (Scham 2013). Some elements of a cultural narrative are based on outright falsehoods but these can be corrected. *Interpretation of facts*, on the other hand, are difficult to revise. In this sense, the adage "never let facts get in the way of a good story" is actually a fundamental ideology informing individuals' perceptions of the world.

Scholars who explore Israeli-Palestinian relations have also struggled with the conflicting cultural narratives (Decker 2016, Scham 2013, Bar-Tal 2006, West 2003). While names and dates are rarely in dispute, the meaning assigned to them have been muddled by later events, theological perspectives and political ideologies (Scham 2013). In 2003, the John F Kennedy School of Government invited academics from Zionist, Non-Zionist Israeli and Palestinian backgrounds to discuss whether a joint-narrative can be achieved. Participants agreed on many basic facts but the *narratives* differed. Significantly, the conference showed that an academic narrative did not reflect the beliefs of the average Israeli or Palestinian citizen (West 2003).

The Palestinian experience

Regardless of which narrative you believe, the Palestinian people were removed from their homes, isolated in refugee camps and still live in an occupied territory (Johansson 2018). While some proposals to bring peace to the region are more academically preferable than others, Palestinians experience this not as a political issue but rather a human rights one (Kateb 2004). This context informs the work of *The Freedom Theatre*.

2.3 Cultural Resistance

Any discussion about duelling narratives supports the notion that storytelling is a powerful weapon in a conflict. As well as creating collective identities, stories provide individuals with a set of values to operate within (Rooney 2016). While narratives shape the way communities perceive themselves and others, storytelling can also lead to social and political change.

Cultural resistance uses art to raise awareness of an issue and provide tools for individuals to cope with their circumstances. New Tactics in Human Rights describe this as:

[...]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. (New Tactics in Human Rights 2012)

The separation wall surrounding Bethlehem is a great example. A foreboding, prison-like structure, the Palestinian people have transformed the wall with paintings, poetry and other moving artwork. It is a stark reminder that military power and brute force are no match for a people who refuse to be silenced.



(Moynihan 2018)

The Freedom Theatre

The Freedom Theatre draws its inspiration from the Care and Learning Centre established by Arna Mer Khamis in the 1980s (The Freedom Theatre 2019). Arna was born to a Jewish family and spent her life living and working with Palestinian children. A powerful advocate for Palestinian rights, she used theatre and visual art to help children overcome fear, trauma and depression (Zubeidi 2018).

Arna received international recognition for her humanitarian work and was awarded funds to open a small theatre (Wallan 2018). Her son Juliano, one of three children born to Arna and Christian Palestinian Saliba Khamis, was a very successful Israeli actor. Juliano described himself as “100% Jewish and %100 Palestinian”, joining a growing movement of Jewish people who condemn the Zionist project (Dahlah 2011). After Arna's death, Juliano and his friend Jonathan Stanczak decided to continue his mother's work with a new generation.

Juliano used his influence to gain international support and the theatre was highly regarded in the West Bank (Fox 2012). In 2011, Juliano was assassinated and his legacy continues under the guidance of artistic director Nabeel Al-Raei and general manager Mustafa Sheta. The organisation now consists of a professional drama school that devises the company's core work. With the support of international sponsors, they take these pieces outside of Palestine, building on Juliano's initial vision (Al Raei 2018A).

Beautiful resistance

Al Rowaad Society is a comparable organisation that also facilitates cultural resistance. Their new centre in Aida Refugee Camp, Bethlehem contains woodwork workshops, a teaching kitchen, accomodation and a children's school among other programs (Alrowaad, 2019). General manager Dr. Abdelfattah Abusrour (2018) refers to this type of resistance as beautiful:

My philosophy is called beautiful resistance. Partly because I believe that any resistance against oppression and injustice are beautiful acts for humanity. Also, Choosing culture and arts and education as means of resistance are beautiful acts of resistance. As means to save lives, inspire hope and to give our children and young people every possibility to express themselves in the most beautiful, creative and non-violent ways. I believe theatre is the most beautiful way to share laughter, tell your story, tell your history and build peace. If people don't have peace within themselves, how can they build peace with anybody else?

Abusrour acknowledged that this terminology receives a lot of criticism because the word resistance is often associated with weapons and violence. For him, violence is not an effective form of resistance.

True resistance is only through art because 99 percent of Palestinians have never carried a gun in their life and they are living, existing, enjoying life, resisting marginalisation. All these are acts of resistance and resistance is beautiful, whether it's art or unarmed. And I don't think there is such a thing as ugly resistance in that sense. That's why I compare it to beauty, because it reflects your beauty as a human being... We do not have the luxury of despair so beautiful resistance is simply what we have to do for our children and the children of the world. We have to make every day more beautiful than the day before. We have to do it. The media and god will not help those who don't help themselves. (Abusrour A 2018)

This perception of “living, existing, enjoying life” as a form of resistance establishes the context of this research as much data comes from Palestinian people living their daily lives. Although they live under occupation, their fearlessness and optimism highlights their determination to resist.

3. Method

The research draws on methods found in Narrative Enquiry and Reflective Practice. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) describe Narrative Enquiry as an “umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context.” Here, my own reflections are used to capture the narratives for a broader enquiry.

Using Labov's “thematic organisation” model, my experiences provide a framework to present the narratives of others (Coffey 1996). Narratives are sourced through semi-structured interviews, personal communications and observations. The findings are divided into two chapters:

Stories of the Past: the impact narratives have on the region, organisation and individuals.
Stories of the Future: the way these narratives can be challenged through storytelling.

The analysis combines these findings and relates them to my growth as a leader.

4. Results part one: Stories of the past

4.1 Individual narratives

My own narrative as a researcher was not as clearly defined as the one I was working within. I accepted that my experience would be one of unlearning, positioning my narrative as malleable and open to change. This approach allowed me to embrace the feelings and thoughts of others from a place of empathy, with very few conscious biases. Unconscious biases and misconceptions, however, were harder to escape. These were informed by the media's insistence that both nations wanted to see the destruction of the other.

Arriving in Palestine

This narrative was strengthened by my experiences at Paris Airport when I was accosted by Israeli security staff. I was interrogated for five hours, strip searched, bag searched and asked for the passwords to my computer and phone. They confiscated my jeans for an undisclosed reason and would not allow me to carry anything on the plane. Eventually, I was allowed on my flight but we were delayed for several hours because each passenger who fit a certain profile went through the same process.

Although I was uncomfortable, I legitimised the experience because I assumed that Israelis were living in constant fear. This narrative was challenged when I arrived in Jerusalem, a seemingly Western city with many historical sites and no sign of conflict. When I took a bus to Ramallah, however, the atmosphere changed dramatically.

We stopped at a checkpoint where a very young Israeli soldier told everybody to get off the bus. There was no explicit reason for this and I suspect the soldier was just flaunting his power. The atmosphere was tense and a group of Palestinian children started crying. When we finally drove away, fear was replaced with relief. From then on, I understood the context not as a war, but rather as one group oppressing another.

Travelling to Jenin Refugee camp, I spoke to many Palestinians about the suffering they go through. I never brought it up but it was impossible to have a conversation without discussing the Israeli occupation. For example, two boys on a sherut to Jenin asked what sights I'd like to see and I mentioned the Dead Sea, which is controlled by Israel. This opened a dialogue about land rights more broadly. The journey felt like an Occupation

Museum as the boys pointed out settlements, road signs warning of “dangerous” Palestinian areas and destroyed buildings.

This context led me to believe I was about to enter a miserable place full of sad people. This expectation could not be further from the truth. Although my stay was not long enough to assess the reality, it was clear that the positivity, hope and resilience fostered by The Freedom Theatre had lessened a lot of social pain.. That’s not to say the people of Jenin don’t suffer, but rather that hope is stronger than pain.

Challenging my narrative

Artistic director Nabeel Al Raei is also conscience that visitors to the theatre are going to arrive with preconceived notions and he is quick to challenge false narratives. One of his greatest interests is in challenging the Israeli narrative through kindness and education:

Some Israeli individuals may say “I will come visit Jenin” for example. Of course, they are most welcome to see. It’s a way of explaining the occupation to them. Because what Israel is trying to do is eat their minds, wash their minds with the idea that if they come meet a Palestinian, they would be killed or kidnapped or hurt and that’s not true. I just want everyone to have equal rights. Everybody - Israeli and Palestinian. Then we can live safely and happily in the way we want. (Al Raei, 2018A)

Al Raei’s work goes beyond Palestine and has a broader objective to bring peace to the entire region. He stated many times that he does not care what the land is called and is more interested in rights than titles. The organisation is built around these values. For example, the name “Freedom Theatre”, suggests that the organisation’s main goal is simply freedom, regardless of what form that takes. General manager Mustafa Sheta (2018) expanded on this concept, noting that their mission is much larger than the occupation:

Me: If the occupation ended and the Palestinian people were free, would there still be a need for the Freedom Theatre?

Mustafa: Yeah, sure. The idea of freedom is not just related to the occupation. It’s related to the concept of freedom, which is a constant struggle for the human. If we end the occupation, we will, for example, have a problem with women’s rights. If we fix women’s rights, we might have a problem with the Palestinian authority. If we fix this problem, we search and search. We must take care of the poor, for example. We must always enhance and improve our thinking. We didn’t choose the title Freedom Theatre just because of the occupation. We want freedom to be a part of our normal life.

By challenging my own perceived narrative, I understand the context not as a conflict between two sides, but rather as a constant struggle for freedom and peace.

4.2 Cultural narratives in an organisational context

While I felt a shift in my perceptions as an individual, I was curious to see how these values facilitate the running of the organisation. The organisation had narratives of their own, informing approaches to leadership, group work and community engagement.

Language

There are many ways to tell a story, but the choice of words and the meaning assigned to them is particularly important. In Palestine, I redefined my vocabulary to match the language fostered by the organisation.

A notable example of this occurred when I spoke to Al Raee for the first time on the phone. He challenged my use of the word “conflict” as it does not represent the experience of his community. For Palestinian children in particular, their only knowledge of Israel is teenagers with machine guns, border walls, checkpoints and people entering the village in the middle of the night to arrest people. Reflecting on this, I realised that the word “conflict” implies a disagreement between two states. This removes human rights violations from the conversation, because it focuses political groups, rather than human beings. The word occupation is more accurate description in this context.

This was one of many Western terms that don’t reflect human experiences. Another example is the word “settlement” to describe the gated Israeli communities on Palestinian land.

The word settlement in English doesn’t give the ugly side of the story because it comes from settling down, like “I’ve found a space that is nice and free and I’m settling down.” But we are talking about colonies. That means these people have come and stolen the land of other people and they built their colonies. (Al Raee, 2018B)

The most significant use of language to reframe the experience was Al Raee’s refusal to place Zionists and Jews in the same category. This was a recurring theme amongst many Palestinians I met who repeatedly asserted that they did not have any issues with Jews,

despite the stereotype that is so prevalent in the Western world. Al Raee (2018B) describes the distinction between these groups quite succinctly:

When I say Israelis, I'm not talking about Jews because there are Jewish Palestinians. 70 years ago, before Israel was born, there were Jewish people, Christian people and Muslim people sharing the land. These are all Palestinians.. I'm not talking about these people. I'm talking about people who came and displaced people from their homelands, took their place and put their state above my land. I've lived half of my life now in a refugee camp. I have no problem with Judaism. There is a huge number of Jews in Nablus who formed an armed resistance against Israel. I have a problem with Zionism and Israelis who adopt Zionism as their ideology. And Zionism is equal to fascism in my opinion.

Many Jewish people in the Western world distance themselves from Zionism and in Israel, there is a growing movement to condemn the human rights violations towards Palestinians (Bar-Tal 2006).

The language in the organisation is very distinct from the political discourse in the West. The occupation isn't perceived as political because the impact is so profound and ingrained in their daily lives. This builds on Al Raee's and Sheta's comments about fighting for freedom broadly, as opposed to a specific political goal. These values appear in both the organisational norms and the artistic output which is discussed further in Results Part 2.

Legacy



(Freedom Theatre 2016)

In the way historical narratives inform communities in a broad sense, the history of the organisation remains deeply intertwined with its present operations. An example of this is the story of Juliano Mer Khamis. I initially assumed that the leader of the company would be Al Raei or Sheta. However, my interviews with several members of the company led me to believe that Juliano is still the leader. The amount of respect and admiration that I've observed has elevated him to mythical proportions. Some claim he could speak to monkeys, all say he was a visionary and even those who describe him as insane, still sing his praises.

Whether he was a superhero of legend or just a human being is open to debate. When assessing his impact on followers, I don't think it matters. Maybe he could speak to monkeys, maybe he couldn't but his story is having remarkable results. I've rarely seen artists work with such a clarity of purpose. Sheta (2018) fondly described Juliano as the leader of the company:

Juliano is still here. He didn't leave because all the work depends on Juliano's idea. He's like the godfather for the theatre. I think he would be honored by our work because we are continuing after what happened to him. And we have achieved great success. When we won the award at the Palestinian theatre festival, I dedicated it to Juliano's soul. I think if he came back to life and looked for his organisation, he would be honoured and satisfied with our work.

Juliano firmly believed that art was the most powerful way to resist against oppressors; an insight that reverberated through everything the company does. A memorable quote by

Juliano is “we are not building artists, but rather leaders in society’ (Schatz 2013). Al Raee (2018A) expanded upon this:

It’s about building minds. Preparing a whole generation in a different way. That they will be able to use art and culture as a weapons. But they will be ready also for all the changes that need to happen in the right way. That means education, self-discovery, exploring through art and being ready not only to be an artist but somebody who is fighting for people’s rights.

The recognition of Juliano’s legacy gives the artists a very clear vision and set of values to work towards. Like the broader Palestinian identity, the stories created the culture and the culture created the people

Turning artists into Leaders

The organisational culture was particularly noticeable when the actors warmed up prior to a performance in France. There were several exercises but the one that demonstrated team unity the most was one I recognised as “Energy Circle”. The actors imagined there was a ball of energy inside them and allowed it to fill their bodies, activate several body parts and then pass it to someone else in the circle. They bounced off each other’s energy organically and uninterrupted. They connected with each other so smoothly that it seemed as though they had an actual ball. Although Al Raee taught them the game, the actors were so driven by a united purpose that the leadership took a life of its own.

Actor Ameer Abu Alrob (2018) explained that the company takes a holistic approach to working with Palestinian youth. This highlighted the impact an organisational narrative can have on individuals.

It was really interesting to study at the Freedom Theatre because it’s not just a theatre. They are based in culture, based in education. They taught me math, they taught me history. All the time, I thought “I could be a lawyer. I could be a doctor” Many things at the same time. Me, as Ameer, I’m not just an actor. I am a human. That’s what I love about the Freedom Theatre. They are teaching humanity before they are teaching art.

Teamwork and group synchronicity are entwined in all this work meaning the qualities required for performance arose from the culture of the organisation. For Abu Alrob (2018), cultural resistance shapes his outlook on life even when he’s not performing.

For example, me as Ameer, I'm not afraid to tell people that I am a member of the LGBT community. I'm not going to leave this space of earth because Palestine has been a station for all the world. For their wars, for their craziness. Through the freedom theatre, I've realised that theatre is part of my fight. I'm fighting two fights. One, obviously against zionism. But the other is my fight as an LGBT person. That's not always accepted everywhere. Juliano wanted to create leaders. To lead a fight, to lead a war. We are not leading art so that people can clap for us. We are creating art because we are creating a situation for other people who are in the same shit like me to feel themselves, to be themselves, to have freedom walking the streets.

Abu Al Rob's comments suggest that the performance outcome and the process itself cannot be separated. Devising a play is cultural resistance in itself and a lot of power lies in the leaders that emerge as result. In this sense, storytelling isn't only a method *used* by leaders but it also *creates* them. This strengthens the interplay between artistic practice and leadership qualities.

5. Results Part 2: Stories of the Future



(Moynihan 2018)

5.1 An analysis of *Return to Palestine*

Having established the impact cultural narratives can have in an international, organisational and individual context, an analysis of *Return To Palestine* illustrates how narratives can be challenged and revised. Appropriately, the method to achieve this is a narrative artform, specifically theatre.

The entire show takes place on a 1x2 metre platform, representing Palestine which is growing smaller each day. The actors fill the space with dynamic, stylized action as the play moves from one location to the next. Their bodies portray city streets, cars, airplanes and other backdrops. Additionally, they each play several larger than life characters.

The story follows Jad, a Palestinian boy who was raised in America and returns to his homeland for the first time. As he travels through the region, he wonders why anybody would return to Palestine in the first place. The play is humorous and bluntly honest, creating an enjoyable and accessible insight into the Palestinian experience.

The process of making the play

Under the guidance of director Michaela Miranda, the play was created through extensive story gathering in several refugee camps. Miranda (2018) explains the playback process:

One of my first learnings was that personal stories could completely challenge governmental narratives – putting human actions into context and therefore leading into empathy. I had the privilege of being the only Arabic speaking foreigner in the Playback Theatre troupe that since 2011 performed in several communities in Occupied Palestine, with an initiative called Freedom Bus. We would present ourselves to the community and ask them to tell their stories, playing them back through an improvised dramatization.

When played back, the personal story not only may become easier to negotiate with for the teller, but it is also an incredible opportunity to create a space of interpersonal dialogue in which empathy but also learning and resilience can find their way.

A powerful example occurred during the playback workshops, which revealed that the program was delivering functional advice as well as helping individuals deal with trauma:

In one of our themed performances, a young man shared on how he suffered from psychological torture when interrogated in Israeli prison: he was made to believe that he had a deadly disease and was dying, he was given shots and diagnosed by probably fake doctors. The goal was that he would share names of others to be also imprisoned and interrogated. The teller shared that he didn't share any names despite believing that he could be dying.

After the performance, when gathering narratives, some of the members of the audience reported that they were thankful for seeing that story, now they knew that if it would happen to them, they should resist and not believe everything they would be told by Israeli interrogators. This was cultural resistance in its pure form, happening through us, in a story-based manner. (Miranda 2018)

Miranda noticed that this format was having a wonderful effect on communities, but wanted to increase the scope of what she could do with the stories:

Throughout the time I was one of the actors in the Playback troupe, there was a great learning but also a big frustration: Playback performances are only effective if there is an intimate atmosphere in which a safe place is created, so stories can be shared, also, the fact that we are improvising the stories, many times we would lack a more aesthetic treatment of the stories – such stylization that would allow touching the heart of each story deeply and with it clear moments of catharsis as well as dialectics. Finally, the impact, although big in quality was small in quantity, the feeling always that there was more to do.

Miranda positioned personal stories as vehicles for broader conversations using Jad as a “dorothy figure”, to guide the audience through the region and history. By having a likeable character for the audience to relate to, each depiction of life in Palestine became more

relatable. Jad's naivety and ignorance towards the occupation also provided an opportunity for audiences to challenge their own perceptions. For me personally, there is a lot I don't know about Palestine so it was useful for Jad to act as my proxy.

A major theme is the fact that if the land of Palestine is forgotten, so to are the stories and the people. Palestine is not only portrayed as a slowly fading piece of land, but also as a spiritual, emotional place. Regardless of whether the land exists or not, the people and stories define what it means to be Palestinian. The following excerpt illustrates this beautifully:

Jad: There is something I want to tell you Amal. I was welcomed by family in Dheisheh refugee camp and immediately made a friend, a boy Called Malek, about my age.

Malek died three days ago in my arms, shot in the chest by the Israeli army.

My sister, never shall I forget Malek's eyes holding on to life, nor shall I forget the grief that molded his Mother's face into it's traits forever.

After burying him, I went out of the cemetery and the camp suddenly seemed to me like something new.

It seemed just the beginning. I imagined that the main street was only the beginning of a long long Road leading to Shujaiya.

Malek lost his life when he threw himself into the frontline, fighting guns with a rock. He could have stayed home. he could have saved himself but he didn't.

Why?

No my dear sister, I'm not coming back to America and I have no regrets. This feeling that you had as you left Palestine. This small feeling must grow into a giant deep within you.

I won't come to you but you return to us!

Come back to learn from Malek's eyes what life is and what existence is worth. Come back my sister!

We are all waiting for you !

(Miranda and The Freedom Theatre students, 2016)

5.2 The stories we tell and the stories we hear

Audience reactions in France and Palestine

Viewing the piece again in Ramallah revealed a distinction between the way Palestinian's perceived the work compared to international audiences. As the Palestinians were already connected to the occupation, they were able to see other themes. For the French audience, however, the meditation on conflict stood out front and centre. This highlights both the pros and cons of storytelling in this context. On the one hand, allowing the audience to perceive their work as political means it is a great device for raising awareness of the Palestinian cause. Conversely, this perception is very removed from the intent of the work, which is rooted in self-expression.

This nuance reveals a disparity between the stories people tell and the stories people actually hear. While a storyteller may have a specific reason to speak, this is not necessarily received by the audience. The Freedom Theatre's challenge is to create a bridge between both perceptions. They address this by rooting all their stories firmly in human experience. Regardless of what message people think the play is trying to send, it's ultimately about a young boy coming of age in a complex situation. Additionally, the other characters tell specific stories about how the occupation is affecting them as *people*. While there are many references to the broader context, this is always a background to human experience. In this sense, the occupation informs the artists but it does not define them or detract from their individual perspectives. To reaffirm that he is talking about people not politics, Al Raei ends each performance with a Q&A so he can address the play and the context as separate issues.

Art vs Activism

Building on this distinction, Al Raei often told me that he is not an activist or a therapist but simply an artist. This was particularly highlighted when I asked him about the drama therapy programs, which were once a staple of the company:

We don't want to turn into a social centre in the sense that we don't want to deal with people and actors as having a sickness. I believe theatre itself is a healing process. I think doing theatre in such a pure and open way will cure people anyway. The style of doing theatre in this way will always give you a chance to experience yourself, your problem and find a solution for it. Especially when you present your personal story in front of an audience. (Al Raei, 2018A)

For Al Raee, he is an artist first and any agenda outside of that is merely symptomatic of the art. This view was shared by many of the artists I met in the region. Conversely, Sheta sees himself as an activist first and positions the art as a type of activism.

I don't believe in the concept of arts for art's sake. For me, all the work must be directly for the people in our state...To increase their awareness of their rights and why they are here. Because we are in a conflict zone, all the work must talk about the occupation. But how can we be both arts and activism? This is a challenge for us because we don't live a normal life under occupation and we are constantly searching for an identity. We don't have a state and if we did it would come from the Palestinian authority and not the people. This is the problem. (Sheta 2018)

Sheta's comments highlight even more complexity around the issue of arts vs activism as he believes activism is inevitable. Upon reflection, I recognise that Sheta's and Al Raee's views on this issue are deceptively similar. That is, they both have the same goal but are framing it in different terms. As Sheta comes from a political science background and Al Raee comes from an arts background, it is easy to see how their perspective of the same thing comes from a place that is simultaneously different and the same. Again, these views are directly linked to the cultural narrative both parties operate within. Although they are in firm agreement about the issues surrounding the occupation, their approaches to solving them are based on their chosen weapons. For Al Raee, the weapon is art, while for Sheta it is social activism. Comparing their leadership styles shows that the outcome is the same.

Palestinian artists are social and political leaders as all three areas are deeply intertwined. Even if their intention is purely to express themselves, storytellers challenge cultural narratives and establish new ones going forward. This is similar in many other contexts but in Australia, I'm able to separate political work from escapist work. There is an argument to say that all art is inherently political but that discussion is for another time.

6. Discussion



(Moynihan 2018)

6.1 Creating an organisational culture

Throughout my studies in Cultural Leadership, I've understood a "cultural" leader as a leader in the cultural sector. Spending time with The Freedom Theatre has made me aware that in an organisational context, effective leaders create, challenge and foster cultures of their own. My findings reveal that Juliano's original vision of using art to create leaders has been extended to create an entire ecosystem where leaders and followers are indistinguishable. In this sense, the company is led by values rather than individuals.

When examining Al Raee and Sheta's approaches to leadership, I see an incredible focus and commitment towards these values. Their work is consistently informed by the company's legacy, a thirst to reframe narratives and a deep sense of responsibility towards their community. Although there is a lot of evidence to praise their individual efforts, their effectiveness is built on their ability to perceive themselves as just a small part of a greater vision.

An example of this is Abu Alrob's perception of himself as a leader and his understanding of the theatre's role in a broader struggle. By recognising that the company teaches humanity before art, he highlights the larger organisational goal and then locates himself within that.

He is highlighting that the company doesn't produce stories but rather uses them as the means of production. The final outcome is social change, as opposed to theatre.

6.2 Competing Narratives

While The Freedom Theatre has clearly defined their organisational narrative, they face challenges when positioning this within a global narrative about Palestinians. This is particularly evident when performing internationally and interacting with the perception that their experience is political. Like with all their challenges, the narrative itself provides strategies to address this.

Return to Palestine is a fantastic example of a piece driven by this clarity of purpose. Both the process of creating the work and the performance itself explore and challenge the political ideologies that surround a Western view of the occupation. Ironically, though, there is nothing political about the performance or process. Rather, the emphasis is always on humanity. An audience may assign political connotations to the piece but that discourse is merely a symptom of a deeply humanistic experience. In this sense, the piece tackles politics by not mentioning it at all. An audience may enter with a particular ideology but they are presented with a depiction of humanity in a very raw, emotional sense. This depiction is entirely removed from politics despite being informed by it.

7. Conclusion: Storytelling as Leadership

Each of the leaders I met in Palestine have shown leadership by challenging cultural narratives and fostering social change in a national, organisational and individual context. When applying these findings to my development as a leader, I recognise that storytelling plays a much larger role than being a device leaders can use. An effective leader understands the broader story that surrounds their work, and crucially, what their role is in that story. I often struggle with the perception that a leader is an authority figure and in this context, an authority figure is not needed. Rather, the people who follow a leader (and their stories) should be the authority. When it comes to applied theatre in particular, a leader who claims to know what they are doing is missing a lot of opportunities and value that can be found in their followers.

Effective leadership appears to be a process of releasing control and embracing the chaos of a given organisation or community. Indeed, most of my great learnings came through immersing myself in the Palestinian culture and accepting the chaos that surrounded me. Be it chatting on public transport, navigating city streets or simply ignoring the narrative in my head, the most profound knowledge came from unexpected places. I was able to tap into a new form of empathy that was driven by unlearning as well as deep listening. Once I understood myself as a vessel to absorb the stories of others, I was more connected to myself as a leader.

By letting go of a need to control the story, I was completely and utterly free.

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