

The Uprising and Folklore

Visiting Firqat Al Fanoun Al Shabiya

In October 1988, a group of solidarity activists visited the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In February 1989, they published a book based on their experiences, entitled «*No Way Back! Everyday Life in the Palestinian Popular Uprising - A Collection of Short Stories*» (in German). The article below is an excerpt from one of these stories which tells of their discussion with *Firqat Al Fanoun Al Shabiya* (Popular Arts Ensemble), and of their attending an intifada folklore evening in *Al Hakawati* theater in Jerusalem.

Two hands rapidly beat a drum. The rhythm steadies and the sweet sound of a flute mingles with laughter. Hands clap to the beat. Running shoes and boots join in, stamping in time. The room shakes as they leave the floor and land again. Melting together, steps glide in unison through the room.

Suddenly something slams into the roof with a loud bang—once, then again. Shots? Settlers or soldiers? A shiver runs down my spine. Is *Al Hakawati* being raided again? The music is silenced and within a second, the dancers and musicians are on their way outside, fists clenched, their running shoes skimming the floor. One moment caught up in the joyous fever of the dance and the next motionless, then they tense up, off to fight. Moving slowly, I just make it to the door as they return laughing and shaking their heads in amusement.

«Shebab,» they explain. «They're throwing stones with our roof as a target. They say they're practicing for the intifada—six or seven year olds!»

Bewildered I return to my seat. How quickly people react to the unexpected here! How fast a situation can change! The dancers are back in line, fingers close around the flute, the drummer is sitting with hands poised. This is all part of the struggle. From the first drum beat on, the struggle never stops. It just changes form.

Dance rehearsals are two hours, twice a week. The musicians hold additional sessions to concentrate on the finer points of every song. Rehearsals are usually at 4 p.m. so that the members can come right after work. Occasionally they are cancelled, like last Friday, when the group participated in the National Volunteer Program for the olive harvest.

*Stay here my friend and hear the melody,
so that all nations will hear the melody of our songs...*

A strong voice begins an intifada song.

*We tell the story of a people,
a people fighting against all enemies...*

Firqat Al Fanoun Al Shabiya was formed on March 9, 1979. Having started with eight members, they are now fifty musicians and dancers. After a rehearsal, we spoke with some of the group's founding members about their goals and hopes, and about the culture of the Palestinian resistance:

“The Zionist assault on the Palestinian people is not only a political-economic one; it is also directed at our culture. We consider the arts a part of our struggle. The occupation is attempting to rob us of our culture, traditions, costumes and folklore. The Zionists lack a unified folklore, because they come from different parts of the world, from different cultures and backgrounds. Therefore, part of their strategy is destroying our folkloric heritage.

*Intruders have come to our land
and planted themselves on its soil.
They have driven our children away
and massacred our elders.
Destroying the roots of our trees
and burning the branches.
They have not left one flower
blooming in our homeland.*

“The necessity of preserving our culture and folklore led to the idea of forming a dance group. Many of us danced as a hobby, and we wanted to come together and work collectively in order to be more productive. Moreover, cultural activities open up new doors enabling us to reach out to the people. Speaking to them in a language they understand is extremely important, as is relating to their everyday life and the suffering they experience, as an expressional medium.

“Our work developed in different stages. In the beginning we would go to the villages and regions where these songs and dances originated. We watched how the people danced, learned the lyrics and the steps, and then performed them on stage.

“This beginning stage concluded in 1981, and was followed by a more advanced level of work. The membership increased as did the qualitative participation of female members. Before we had to go to the girls' families and convince them to let their daughters dance. This is no longer necessary, and their participation has led to the development of a more overall picture of folklore. During this stage, we also introduced new instruments, including the *oud*. Previously we had worked basically with drums and the flute. At the same time, our style developed, as did our lyrics; also the people underwent a transformation. They were no longer people who simply had a knack for it, but people who devoted themselves to developing