

# Palestinian Theater

The following is a paper presented by George Ibrahim Habash, Secretary of the League of Palestinian Theater Activists in the Occupied Territories, to the conference held in Athens in December 1989, by the International Committee of Artists and Intellectuals for the Support of the Uprising and the Struggle of the Palestinian People in the Occupied Territories.

First of all, allow me to present a brief historical overview of the real beginnings of the Palestinian theater and its active role in the process of struggle. The very dialectics of occupation and resistance constitute the basic framework of the local Palestinian theater. No theater, unless it is involved in resisting the occupation, is worthy of the name.

The genuine experience of the theater began in the early seventies against a backdrop of no actual theatrical experience. The period of Jordanian rule of the West Bank witnessed no real experience in this field. In fact, this period was characterized by paralysis of the cultural movement in general. The emergence of the local theater in the seventies was not a unique or isolated event, but was part of a broad upsurge among the various sectors of the Palestinian people at that time. The June 1967 defeat had provided a rare opportunity. The masses, at that time, surpassed the limited potentials of the ruling Arab bourgeoisie. They discovered the real path of history through action which relied on their own potentials, instead of merely making use of the narrow margin of freedom to act and innovate which was grudgingly allowed by the regimes.

The Palestinian resistance, which paved the way for all strata of the Palestinian people to put their hidden potentials to use, was the main manifestation of the upsurge of the masses. Theater in the occupied territories started under the influence of a markedly rising revolutionary climate. From the very beginning, it was a patriotic theater. Without the new climate created by the revolution, it would

have been impossible for the society in the occupied territories to foster the initial experiments in theater. All the popular masses - the intellectuals, workers, peasants, petit bourgeoisie,



Scene from Al Hakawati production:  
«The story of the eye and the tooth»

etc., both men and women, were caught up in the revolutionary tide of the resistance movement which had broken all chains. They became an attentive audience for the new theater,

despite the fact that there had never been any local theater before.

In this sense, the emergence of the theater was in itself an act of resistance to occupation. As a matter of course, the masses' readiness to sacrifice increases under occupation, as long as there is a revolutionary leadership, with leaders who remain among the masses, not on their shoulders.

From the beginning, the theater in the occupied territories benefited from the artistic experience of other peoples... Our local Palestinian theater has been identified with an extremely simple set, complete elimination of the fourth wall and audience participation. The theater groups were supported by the intellectuals, and theater critics emerged. Women began to act in the local theater. The scarcity of resources encouraged self-reliance. The local theater was able to present the works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere, Brecht, Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, Mahmoud Darwish, Samih Al Qasem, Ahmed Fuad Nejm, etc. It was able to apply different methods of performance and production. It benefited from the methods of Stanislavski, Mairhold, Grutovski, etc. The gains made by the local theater were due to the revolutionary atmosphere to which I referred earlier, as well as to the open social relations prevailing among the people in the occupied territories, and their desire to resist the occupation.

Yet the spontaneous emergence of the theater was not free of errors and weaknesses. Most of those who took part in the local theater movement lacked both practical and academic experience in this particular field. Their artistic and theatrical culture was