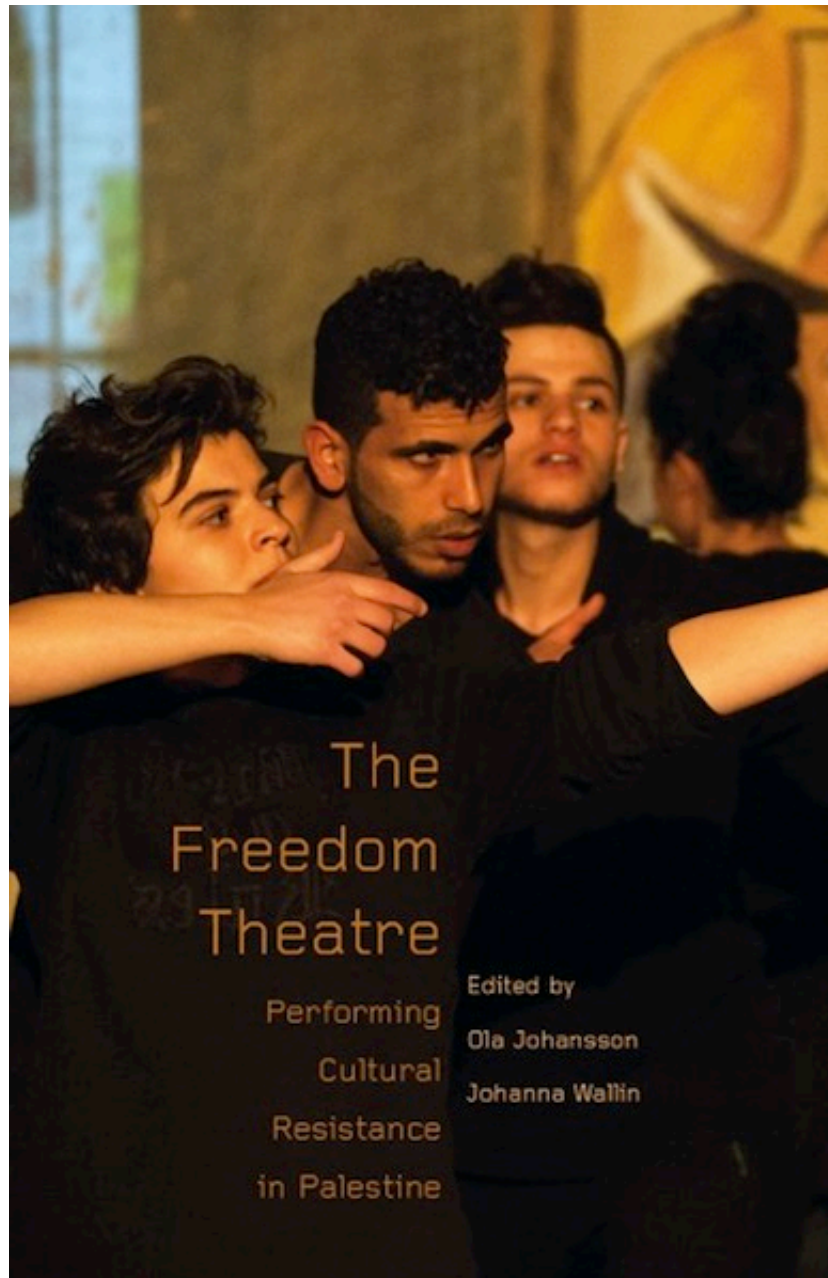


The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine.
**Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin, eds. New Delhi: LeftWord
Books, 2018. Pp. 417.**



The Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp in occupied Palestine gained international notoriety in 2011 when an unidentified masked assailant shot and killed founding co-director Juliano Mer Khamis. The son of a Palestinian-Christian father and Israeli-Jewish mother, actor-director Mer Khamis had sidelined a thriving stage and screen career in Israel to help establish The Freedom Theatre in 2005. After his death, playwright Naomi Wallace commented that most obituaries of Mer Khamis in the U.S. and Europe emphasized his dual Israeli-Palestinian identity and sketched an image of him as “a kind of vague universal artist, working through some form of vague theatre for some kind of vague liberal freedom” (58). These notices, in short, whitewashed his radicalism, in particular his unequivocal commitment to social and economic justice and resistance to the occupation. In *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, editors Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin reclaim Mer Khamis’ unique legacy and document the company from inception to the present-day. Most remarkably, their volume brings to light The Freedom Theatre’s deep embeddedness within its local community even while situating it within a comparative international framework. The book captures the radical internationalist consciousness – and broad political relevance – of this quintessentially Palestinian cultural institution.

Johansson and Wallin organize their volume around five loosely thematic sections: “The Beginning, Arna, and Juliano Mer Khamis,” “Cultural Resistance,” “Performing Arts,” “International Perspectives,” and “The Future.” Each section culls different forms of documentation and analysis, including academic articles, case studies, interviews, speeches, personal reflections, and theatre reviews. Taken together, this collage of diverse voices offers a penetrating account of The Freedom Theatre as a complex grassroots organization—at once a thriving production house, a rigorous arts school, and a lively community center. Johansson and Wallin are clearly invested in creating a platform for members of the theatre—artists, teachers, graduates, and staff—to narrate their own story. They contextualize these first-hand reflections on the theatre’s history, philosophy and practice with academic essays on closely related topics. The section on “Cultural Resistance” includes reflections on the creative activism of The Freedom Theatre alongside articles on the wider political economy of the West Bank, with an emphasis on how the neoliberal transformation of recent decades has challenged Palestinian civic institutions. “Performing Arts” connects narratives on the company’s artistic and pedagogical practices with historical essays on the rich tradition of anti-colonial and anti-elitist performance in Palestine, going back to the Ottoman Empire and British Mandate. “International Perspectives” positions the theatre within a comparative global landscape. International artists and scholars, who have collaborated with The Freedom Theatre, juxtapose the company’s work with examples of cultural activism from around the world, including street theatre in India, community-based theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Occupy Wall Street in the United States.

From its earliest iterations, The Freedom Theatre embodied a comprehensive understanding of resistance, present in a vibrant and engaged cultural life. The theatre did not originate with a charismatic director in search of an artistic platform, but rather with a committed educator and activist—Juliano’s mother, Arna Mer Khamis, who was a psychodramatist. In the chapter “Arna,” Johanna Wallin describes how Arna Mer Khamis, together with other women in the Jenin camp, founded the Care and Learning Houses (1987) and later the Stone Theatre (1993) in order to offer secure spaces for Palestinian children to learn through creative play. Arna Mer Khamis did not encourage the children to abandon their grief and anger. Turning drama into a sphere of resistance, she instead educated them about their oppression and taught them to channel their rage into the artistic process. As she wrote in her “Right Livelihood Award Acceptance Speech,” (1993), which is reproduced in full in the volume, Arna Mer Khamis believed strongly that “there is no freedom without knowledge. There is no peace without freedom” (48). An

interview with Juliano Mer Khamis, “Art is Freedom Without Force,” conducted by Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, reveals that Arna’s approach to creative critical pedagogy provided Juliano with the ideological foundation for The Freedom Theatre’s “cultural Intifada,” as he phrased it (63). Like his mother, Juliano saw art as a powerful tool for education and agitation, and a catalyst for starting a “universal, liberated discourse.” He had no interest in “doing art for the sake of art” nor was he interested in healing (72). He pushed back against the widespread notion that this type of therapeutic theatre work somehow dissipates resistance. “We didn’t try to heal their violence,” he argued. “We tried to challenge it into more productive ways... We’re not healers. We’re not good Christians. We are freedom fighters” (71).

Members of The Freedom Theatre have not only made theatre into an arena of resistance, expanding the array of sites where struggle takes place, they have also developed an especially profound understanding of oppression. In a chapter on “The Freedom Theatre’s Cultural Resistance,” Wallin and theatre co-founder Jonatan Stanczak explain that oppression goes beyond the occupation, colonialism, and apartheid that is imposed by the Israeli state. A Palestinian elite, they argue, sustains Israeli power, providing an “illusion of self-governance” while running the occupation from within (88). Political coercion goes hand in hand with an “economic occupation,” which has “trapped Palestine in structures of neoliberal capitalist exploitation,” generating persistent poverty and unemployment (89). Wallin and Stanczak underscore in particular the role of industrial zones where labor protections do not apply, as well as various forms of foreign aid, which perpetuate rather than alleviate Palestinian dependency. Lastly, they engage with the “occupation within,” which they see as the theatre’s primary target. Drawing on the writings of Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire, they describe this “internalization of oppression” as a process by which the oppressed see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor (91). The oppressed internalize the oppressor’s inferior image of them and become “sub-oppressors” (92). They become unable to imagine a different self-image, or by extension an alternative governing structure that allows for an independent, equal, and free society. From the theatre’s perspective, art has a crucial role to play in forging a society’s “civic imagination.” As the expression of culture, art “can deconstruct an oppressive reality and make it comprehensible, which is the first step towards changing it” (92).

Everyday practices at The Freedom Theatre fully reflect this astute understanding of the structures of power—from education and community activism to theater training and full-scale productions. A chapter on “Education at The Freedom Theatre” by school director Micaela Miranda discusses the theatre training program where personal stories, gathered from students and from the community, form the basis for devised performances that challenge official narratives about Palestine. The curriculum combines the devising process with conservatory theatre instruction – voice, body, and script analysis – allowing students to develop their own “tools of expression” (243). Student training at the school has culminated in poignant productions that have toured throughout Palestine and internationally. In the chapter, “Performing Four Levels of Occupation,” Wallin and Johansson compile summaries and reviews of the company’s most prominent productions to date. *The Siege* (2015) dramatized the forty-day standoff between Israeli military forces and armed Palestinian fighters, who took refuge alongside two hundred civilians in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem during the second Intifada. Based on interviews with participants, the play offered an insightful meditation on the lopsided balance of power under the occupation and the painful dilemmas involved in violent struggle. *Animal Farm* (2009) adapted George Orwell’s novel into a thinly veiled critique of the Palestinian Authority, implicating the Palestinian elite in sustaining Israeli rule. *Suicide Note from Palestine* (2013), loosely inspired by Sarah Kane’s play about suicide, *4.48 Psychosis*, delved into the psychological aspects of oppression within an occupied and fractured Palestinian society.

Several chapters in the book demonstrate the impact of the theater on students and community members alike. They explore possibilities for collective transformations of Palestinian society from within. In “I Found a Voice,” sisters Rania and Suzan Wasfi narrate their journey from students to full-time program coordinators. They describe The Freedom Theatre as a place where they experienced gender equality for the first time, gaining the skills and confidence to build careers as artistic leaders. The sisters focus on the importance of the theatre as “a free space where there were no chains keeping us shackled” (118). The Wasfi sisters’ story of social mobility is juxtaposed with a chapter on the more prosaic challenges faced by The Freedom Theatre’s housekeeper, Miriam Abu Ateyah, known as “Um Mohammed.” For ten years, Ateyah, a mother of four, has arrived early each morning in her black hijab to cook and clean for the theatre staff and its guests. The chapter explores how her views of the theatre have changed over the years from one of suspicion to respect, love, and pride. “Um Mohammed,” Ibrahim and Wallin explain, “speaks from her heart and she doesn’t mind what people think. It is people like her, honest, spontaneous and straightforward, who ignite revolutions” (172). The chapter shows The Freedom Theatre’s capacity to nurture a culture of resistance, building solidarity within the organization and in the greater community.

Solidarity at The Freedom Theater, we learn, extends internationally in somewhat surprising ways. The members have collaborated with theatres around the world, such as Jana Natya Manch theatre in India and Theatre Hotel Courage in the Netherlands. Like The Freedom Theatre, these other groups devise performances from stories and interviews they collect in the community and perform as a way to raise the political consciousness of the audience. In a chapter entitled, “Solidarity is Not a One-Way Street,” theatre artist and scholar Sudhanva Deshpande writes about a collaboration between The Freedom Theatre and New Delhi-based street theatre group Jana Natya Manch (Janam). The two theatres came together through a mutual desire to learn from one another. Members of Janam wanted to understand how The Freedom Theatre maintains high artistic and professional standards without “compromising its political stance” (345), while members of The Freedom Theatre wanted to learn about Janam’s approach to creating political performance in public spaces. The two companies created a show together in Arabic and Hindi, *Freedom Jatha*, which toured India and Palestine. The show linked the two countries in their shared struggles against “religious fundamentalism, colonialisms past and present, and the neoliberal assaults on people’s lives” (351).

The Freedom Theatre remains a vibrant institution almost a decade after the assassination of its legendary co-founder. In the final chapter of the book, “The Future of the Freedom Theatre,” Wallin compiles a series of interviews with the theatre’s current leadership, staff, and graduates on the future direction of the organization. Far from settling into a drab routine, Wallin’s interviews capture an opinionated and fearless tenor of debate within the organization. While some members believe the theatre should concentrate fully on producing the highest-level professional theatre and media, others argue vehemently for the continued integration of children and youth programs within a larger community center. The role of NGO funding within the theatre’s budget is perhaps the most contentious subject. Some argue that a robust budget is necessary for The Freedom Theatre to have continued reach and influence within the community. Others insist that NGO funding, mostly in the form of international foundation grants, has had a negative influence on the organization, and a crippling effect on Palestinian society more generally. In reflecting on the lack of consensus within the organization, Stanczak sees these differences of opinion as a positive thing. “The Freedom Theatre is not an isolated island and the contradictions that it embodies are in fact cultural resistance at work. We do not preach it; we live it” (409). Ultimately, Johansson and Wallin’s insistence on including diverse and divergent voices throughout the book seems to deliberately

mirror the democratic culture of active participation that The Freedom Theatre strives to cultivate as an institution.

Overall, the book presents a compelling vision of theatre as a social and political institution, challenging some deeply-held assumptions about the possibilities and limitations of drama as a medium. Through their rich history and case study of The Freedom Theatre, the editors propose a broad understanding of theatre as not merely a performance space but as a platform where professional artistic work, training, education, and community engagement shape the collective consciousness of both artists and audiences. The theatre's rigorous professional standards and bold aesthetic experimentation draw creative inspiration from their surrounding community. This not only infuses the theatre with a sense of profound purpose and provides its stories, places, and characters; It also, in turn, allows the theatre to reach a diverse audience and produce internationally relevant work. Likewise, the book itself, with its collage of grassroots and international voices, both localizes and deprovincializes the important work of this institution. It is an invaluable resource for artists, scholars, and activists interested in Palestine specifically and in the workings and implications of cultural resistance globally.

Rebekah Maggor is Assistant Professor of Performance at Cornell University. Her approach to creating and researching theatre brings together expertise in acting, directing, voice and speech, and translation. She has acted and directed at numerous U.S. theatres and worked as a voice and speech coach on Broadway, in regional theatres, and for film and television. Her research centers on political theatre and drama in translation, with an emphasis on recent Arabic drama from Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. She co-edited and co-translated *Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution* (Seagull Books, 2016), which received a National Endowment for the Arts Literature in Translation Fellowship. Her forthcoming anthology, *Theatre Between Home and Exile: New Plays from Palestine*, co-edited with Marvin Carlson and Mas'ud Hamdan, will be published by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications. Her work also appears in *Modern Drama*, *Arab Stages*, *Voice and Speech Review*, *The Forward*, and *American Theatre Magazine*. She received grants from the Fulbright Scholar Program, the Doris Duke Foundation, the Mellon Foundation's Theatre Communication Group Global Connections, and the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. www.RebekahMaggor.com



**MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
PUBLICATIONS**

Arab Stages

Volume 10 (Spring 2019)

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Arab Stages is a publication of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center ©2019
ISSN 2376-1148