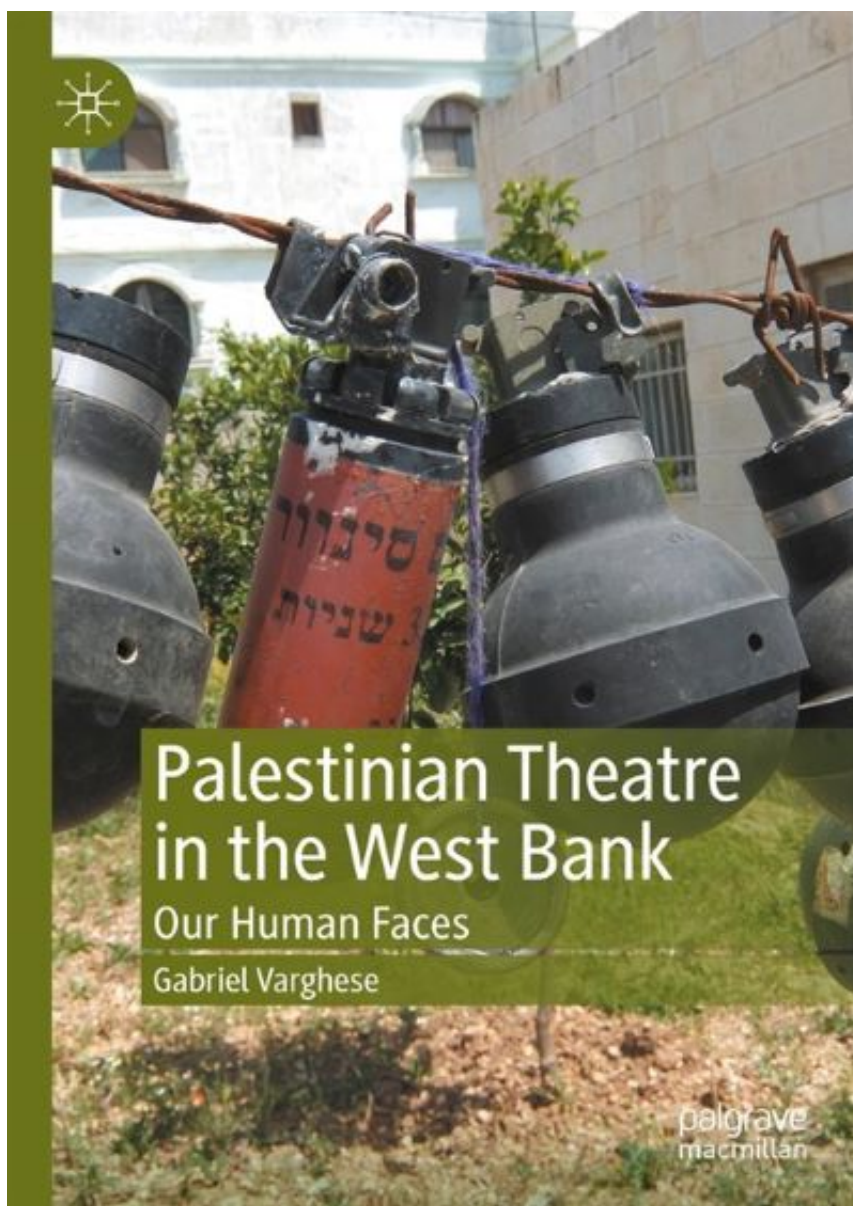


Review of *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* by Gabriel Varghese



By Ashley Marinaccio

Despite a robust array of scholarship on Palestine, very little published material exists on Palestinian theatre. Gabriel Varghese addresses this matter in his first book *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces*, based on his Ph.D. research. Varghese has written a bold, insightful and theoretically provocative exploration of the major contemporary theatres and theatrical work existing in the Palestinian West Bank. Through tracing the histories of five prominent West Bank theatres including Al-Kasba Theatre and Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah, Al-Rowwad in the Aida Refugee Camp, Al-Harah Theatre in Beit Jala, and The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, Varghese situates Palestinian theatre beyond the “political” and claims theatre as a key element for Palestinian liberation through its spotlighting of oppressive Israeli state practices, contesting Zionist narrative and reclaiming the Palestinian narrative.

In his introduction Varghese sets up his key argument that Palestinian theatre-makers participate in “abject counterpublics,” which he calls “a discursive and performative space in which theatre-makers contest Zionist discourse and Israeli state practices.”^[1] He sets up his argument which states that Palestinian theatre in the West Bank, while informed by colonial abjection is an important site for counterpublic formation. Over the course of five chapters, he interrogates his theory providing readers with well-researched, theoretically engaged, and evidence supported book.

In his second chapter “Cultural Intifada, Beautiful Resistance” Varghese traces the history of the five prominent theatres in the West Bank, focusing on the differences of each theatre and the work they are producing. He situates the work in Al-Rowwad Theatre’s idea of “beautiful resistance” which is used to help children in the Aida Refugee Camp discover ways of resisting the everyday experiences of occupation, and the stereotypes that are placed upon them by the international media. While each of the theatres are doing very different and equally important work, Varghese notes that they are united in their confrontation between the Zionist public sphere and a Palestinian abject counterpublic.

The following chapters focus on case studies that demonstrate how Palestinian theatres and theatre-makers “reconstruct abjection as a site of resistance and counterpublic formation” (59)^[2]. Varghese shows that this moves beyond the stories that are told and into collaborations both within Palestine and internationally. Chapter three focuses on how theatre humanizes Palestinians through the use of performing personal testimonies. He explores Al-Kasba Theatre’s *Alive from Palestine* (2001), Al-Rowwad’s *We Are the Children of the Camp* (2006), Ashtar Theatre’s *The Gaza Monologues* (2010) and the Freedom Theatre’s Freedom Ride project. Chapter four explores gender on the Palestinian stage and national discourse by looking at Al-Harah Theatre’s *Shakespeare’s Sisters*. The final chapter of the book explores international solidarity movements.

Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces is a necessary contribution to Palestinian scholarship, theatre scholarship, and post-colonial scholarship. Varghese’s book is a well-researched and critical contribution to the fields of Palestine and theatre studies, especially for a field where only a handful of scholarly texts exist. This book provides a necessary foundation for theatre students and scholars who want to gain a better understanding of the important theatrical contributions coming out of Palestine under the Israeli occupation.

Ashley Marinaccio is a theatre artist and scholar who creates work to challenge the status quo. She is dedicated to documenting the socio-political issues that define our times. As a director and playwright, her work has been seen off-Broadway, at the White House, United Nations, TED conferences across the United States, Europe, and Asia. Currently, Ashley is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Theatre and Performance at the CUNY Graduate Center. Ash is the founding Artistic Director of the theatre company and United Nations NGO Girl Be Heard, where she received numerous accolades, including LPTW’s Lucille Lortel Visionary Award. Learn more: ashley-marinaccio.com.

^[1] Varghese, Gabriel, “Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces (New Texts Out Now),” Interview by Jadaliyya. June 25, 2020. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/41345>

[2] Varghese, Gabriel. *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.



Arab Stages
Volume 12 (Fall 2020)
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