

ACTING ON AN OCCUPIED STAGE

Palestinian Theatre, by Reuven Snir. Wiesbaden, Germany: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2005. xx + 180 pages. References to p. 216. Index to p. 233. €59.00 cloth.

*Reviewed by Raja Shehadeh*¹

I remember the first non-school play I watched in Ramallah. It was in 1972, during the first years of the Israeli occupation. *Al-`Atma*, written, acted, and directed by al-Balalin theater troupe, was performed in the makeshift, unfinished hall in the ground floor of the newly built Ramallah Municipality. No permit had been obtained from the military governor, and we were expecting soldiers to barge in at any moment to stop the play. The danger added to the thrill of watching this pioneering performance.

Those were the innocent days when the most popular subjects for plays were the Nakba and the occupation. But this play went beyond these nationalist themes. It moved from class struggle, to the struggle between the sexes, to resistance to the occupation, to traditionalism versus modernity and the struggle to build a theater. It perhaps suffered from overkill. It tried to involve the audience by planting actors among them but ended up being rather pedantic and lacking in subtlety.

In *Palestinian Theatre* (part of a series, *Literature in Context: Arabic, Persian, and Turkish*), Reuven Snir, describes *al-`Atma* at length and quotes extensively from it. This is perhaps because it is one of the few early Palestinian plays that is published (in the collection *Modern Arabic Drama* edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen [1995]). Snir describes al-Balalin as “the first professional troupe in the history of Palestinian theatre” (p. 104). He then adds that “with the performance of *al-`Atma* Palestinian theatre became professional” (p. 126). It is not clear what criteria the author uses to arrive at this determination, especially since most of its members were not professional actors. The troupe emerged, he writes, from `A`ilat al-Masrah (Family of the Theater). They had rehearsed *Qaraqash*, a verse play written in 1970 by the Palestinian poet from Israel, Samih al-Qasim. But the Israeli censor prevented them from putting it on. (That same censor had forced an earlier group, called al-Dababis [The Pins] to change the name of their play *al-Khawaziq*, The Shafts, to *Imara min Waraq*, A Building Made of Paper.) Snir’s book is good on placing the development of Palestinian theater in the context of the historical events occurring in Palestine, as well as tracing the cooperation and mutual influence between Palestinians in the West Bank and Israel.

The central and most interesting section of the book is the role played by al-Hakawati troupe in the development of professional theater in Palestine. This company, whose establishment “would prove to be a watershed in the development of professional Palestinian theatre” (p. 130), emerged from Balalin. One of its main founders was François Abu Salim, whose contribution to Palestinian theater and central role in its development is discussed at length. Snir describes him as the son of a French mother and a Palestinian father and distinguishes him from François Gaspard, the French physician. The author is unaware that François Abu Salim was the stage name of François Gaspard,

Raja Shehadeh is author of *Walks in the Palestinian Hills* (Profile Books, forthcoming, 2007).

the son of the physician, who is French on both sides of his family though he grew up in Jerusalem. Such factual errors undermine confidence in the author. (This is compounded by a number of grammatical mistakes which could have been corrected by a good copy editor.) Thus Snir concludes that the establishment of al-Hakawati “would contribute, perhaps more than any other cultural activity in the Occupied Territories, to the forming of a Palestinian political and cultural national consciousness and to the process of Palestinian nation-building. The foundation of al-Hakawati and its various activities mark in brief the ‘golden age’ of Palestinian theatre, helping it to gain an international reputation” (p. 130). There is no doubt that al-Hakawati played an important role in the development of Palestinian theater, but having watched most of their plays I would agree with the comment of Radi Shihada who is quoted as saying that Abu Salim “wanted to promote his universal dramatic conception which traversed the local Palestinian issues” (p. 137).

In fact, it took several years after the demise of al-Hakawati for truly professional theater troupes to emerge in Palestine. Having dedicated one full chapter out of five to the contribution of al-Hakawati, Snir then collapses the later more promising developments, such as the emergence of a truly professional theater with the rise of the National Theater in Jerusalem and al-Kasaba in Ramallah, each with their own theater space, professional actors, and a repertoire, into a few pages in the concluding chapter.

In the spring of 2002, in the same basement in the still unfinished hall at the Ramallah municipality, I went to watch the art exhibit entitled “Like a Phoenix We Shall Arise from the Ashes: The Best Days Are Yet to Come,” about the horrors of the Israeli invasion of Ramallah. Twenty-eight years had passed since the play *al-`Atma*. The occupation was still continuing, the municipality hall was still unfinished, and the artists’ main focus continued to be the occupation with all its horrific effects on the lives of those living under its sway.

In theater, as in art, the Israeli occupation has been a mixed blessing. It has given the artists a compelling subject. Money from international grants is available for the arts and the theater. There is also a greater margin of freedom today from direct Israeli censorship or the stultifying censorship that artists face in most Arab countries controlled by the security services. Still, the full maturation of the art of theater that focuses on the particular human being in all his aspects, not only the political, and touches on those universal aspects that can be felt by anyone, remains largely absent.

STAND-TALL GENERATION

Coffins on Our Shoulders: The Experience of the Palestinian Citizens in Israel, by Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu Baker. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xi + 214 pages. Index to p. 221. \$50.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Reviewed by Samera Esmeir²

Samera Esmeir is an assistant professor of rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley.

At the end of the twentieth century, there prevailed in Israel new democratic political practices aimed at challenging the Jewishness of the State of Israel and the consequent exclusion of the Palestinian inhabitants of the land. These practices triumphed with the coming of age of a new generation of Palestinian citizens born in Israel in the last quarter of the century. The Palestinian citizens making up this generation are the grandchildren of those who survived the Nakba as young adults, as well as the children of those born in the 1950s and early 1960s contributing to the politicization of the Palestinian minority in the 1970s and the 1980s. What are the characteristics of this third generation? How does it differ from its predecessors? What political challenges does it pose for Israel? These are some of the questions at the center of *Coffins on Our Shoulders*. A clue as to the answers can be deduced from the label the authors use to identify this generation: The Stand-Tall Generation. Its members stand tall in that “they display a new assertive voice, abrasive style, and unequivocal substantive clarity. They have unmitigated determination, confidence, and a sense of entitlement the likes of which has only seldom been articulated previously by Palestinians addressing the mainstream” (pp. 2–3).

The book develops two intersecting narratives to examine the Stand-Tall Generation: one socio-historical, the other (auto)biographical. The sociohistorical narrative, divided into two parts, historicizes the struggle of the Palestinians in Israel, as well as the power relations that shaped their political subjectivities. The first part (chapters 1–3) follows the two Palestinian generations preceding the Stand-Tall Generation. It covers the lives of the Arab community in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century, moves on to examine the 1948 war, the resulting displacement of the Palestinians, the military regime, the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the 1973 war, as well as the first intifada. The second part (chapters 4–6) sketches the profile of the Stand-Tall Generation, whose members came of political age in the shadow of “the disillusionment of the Palestinian citizens with the struggle for civil equality,” as well as the “strides made by the Palestinian national movement since the beginning of 1990s” (p. 113). The political identity of the Stand-Tall Generation was founded on practices of struggle “against the state, the Jewish majority, between ideological generations, between classes and religions, between forms of cultural expression, over tradition and its meanings, for gender equality, and more” (p. 116). This generation, therefore, represents “a quantum leap in its political awareness and its abilities to communicate its sensibilities to the Israeli public” (p. 138).

The socio-historical narrative is largely a synthesis of political developments in the course of the twentieth century drawing both on secondary literature and on the authors’ intimate knowledge, memories, and understanding of this history. The chapters on the Stand-Tall Generation, however, include interviews with some of its members. These are mainly university students, civil society activists, and political party members. Left entirely unexamined are the majority of young Palestinians who are not politically visible and yet might be employing political tactics revealing different alternatives for the making of democratic politics. How do young Palestinians who have not finished high school, for example, negotiate their existence against the state? What is their political rhetoric? How do young Palestinian women, who, unlike the women interviewed for the book, are not “resisting” the so-called “traditional” roles, fit in this story of the Stand-Tall Generation? What is the role of violence, illegality, and subversion in political practice?

These questions are left unanswered in a book that purports to offer a generational analysis. This absence can be partly deduced from the authors' adoption of a linear conception of time according to which movements in history necessarily bring about new formations, therefore neglecting that subjects occupy different temporalities and heterogeneous social fields.

The other intersecting (auto)biographical narrative, interjected into the sociohistorical narrative, is made of fragments of the personal stories of the authors and their grandparents, parents, and children stretching back to the first half of the twentieth century. With the (auto)biographical narrative, the grand socio-historical narrative, whose details are generally known, is broken down to concrete stories, histories, displacements, sufferings, and traumas enabling a comprehension of power operations in the formation of the Palestinian suffered subjects of Zionism and their survival. While the story-telling methodology is one of the book's main strengths, the authors do not adequately explain the inclusion of Rabinowitz's (auto)biographical account in a book about "the Palestinian citizens in Israel." Indeed, at points Rabinowitz's personal narrative is strikingly opposed to that of Abu Baker's, exposing the radical inequality characteristic of the relationship between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. But the authors state another objective: "Our narrative presents a Palestinian endorsing a representation configured by an Israeli, and an Israeli embracing a rendition constructed by a Palestinian" (p. 18). The result of this symmetrical endorsement is the staging of the authors' personal stories as parallel, leaving the relationship between the two narratives untheorized. The exclusion of the Palestinians constitutive of many segments of Rabinowitz's narrative, especially about his grandparents and parents, is treated as another personal story, therefore reproducing the force of exclusion rather than interrogating it.

EXILE AND YOUTH

Children of Palestine. Experiencing Forced Migration in the Middle East, edited by Dawn Chatty and Gillian Lewando Hundt. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005. Studies in Forced Migration Series. xiii + 179 pages. Appendices to p. 265. Glossary to p. 267. Index to p. 274. \$60.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

Reviewed by Julie Peteet³

Dawn Chatty and Gillian Lewando Hundt's edited volume explores Palestinian youth across the region with an eye to critiquing interventions that assume a "Western model of child development" (p. 2). The study sought to elicit the voices of the children themselves to probe the impact of forced migration and the kinds of coping strategies youth devise. The book covers the main areas of Palestinian refugee concentration—Lebanon, the West Bank, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and Jordan—in recognition of the geographically fragmented nature of Palestine and its people and to capture the complexity of economic, political, and social characteristics of different arenas of exile

Julie Peteet, professor and chair of the anthropology department at the University of Louisville, is the author of *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

and the way they affect children. The book captures in poignant detail the experiences of the third and fourth generation of Palestinian exiles and provides a provocative look into Palestinian social dynamics across the divide of space and generation.

Funded by the Mellon Foundation and headquartered at the Refugee Study Centre at the University of Oxford, the research project adopted a team approach methodology to cover the five areas. Most significantly, the editors, a social anthropologist and a health specialist, and the local researchers used a “participatory approach” in which members of a community participate in the study rather than simply serve as respondents; they share in the process of learning about their own communities. The project aimed for a holistic approach where the child was embedded in a larger context of family, community, and society. Researchers interviewed and observed the children as well as their parents, teachers, and NGO personnel who work with children. The overarching framework, however, was forced migration.

The book is a contribution to the social sciences and health literature on the life cycle in general and on childhood in situations of forced displacement in particular. The authors adopt the perspective that childhood and adolescence are social constructs and thus will be historically and culturally variable. What is clear in these chapters is the acute historicity and socially grounded meaning of life cycle categories such as childhood and adolescence.

Reading about Palestinian children across the region, one is immediately aware of the difference each regional context produces, and yet one is also struck by the common themes that appear in their lives. These common themes are related to a shared history of dispossession, exile, and refugee camp life that inevitably brings with it a sense of socioeconomic and political marginality as well as the harsh physical conditions of camp life, most acutely the lack of space and the constraints it imposes on social life and well-being. These common themes make for a sense of community with other Palestinian youth in refugee camps. Camps themselves are different places in different contexts; in Lebanon they are spaces of insecurity and violence. In the West Bank, author Salah Alzaroo reports that camps were places where people felt safe and that “social relations between people were positive and intimate” (p. 126).

For these children, the notion of the future was bleak. Youth were aware of the grim prospects facing them and, like refugees in many contexts, the future was full of uncertainty rather than hope. For example, the high unemployment rate in the Arab world means that Palestinian youth face routine economic insecurity. Education once was touted as the way out of the camps and toward a more secure life. Yet in some areas, most prominently Lebanon and Jordan, to some extent education is no longer as highly prized as it was for first and second generation refugees, because it does not hold out the promise of an economically secure and meaningful life. Yet in the West Bank, education and economic prospects were not heavily correlated; Palestinians pursued education and valued it highly even though unemployment remains high. Rather, it was valued for its role in producing a productive citizenry and nation and identity building. In most instances, educational facilities and resources were inadequate—inept and disengaged teachers, poor facilities, violence in the classroom, and severe overcrowding.

Common in the daily lives of all these youth was rampant violence whether from the occupying authorities (West Bank and Gaza); the state (Jordan and Lebanon); or in the schools, the streets, and the home. Poverty, another form of violence, was rampant as

well. One prominent theme that emerged in all the chapters was stark gender disparities and discrimination. Nonetheless, Palestinian youth are challenging structures of authority in the family and society and in doing so crafting spaces and identities that will give definition to their generation.

In their conclusion, Chatty and Hundt connect their research with the formulation of policy. Their recommendation is that the voices and experiences of Palestinian youth should be a starting point for the NGOs rather than the standard top-down approach. Randa Farah in her chapter on Palestinian youth in Jordan makes explicit that Palestinian youth are “not passive recipients in history, rather they creatively appropriate from and discard from the multitude of discourses around them, thereby contributing to the reproduction of Palestinian identity and culture” (p.118), a refrain echoed in all these chapters, either implicitly or explicitly.