

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 6 Summary

WEAVING DIALOGUES AND CONFRONTING HARSH REALITIES: Engendering Social Change in Israel through Performance

by Aida Nasrallah and Lee Perlman

In this chapter, Palestinian Israeli Playwright Aida Nasrallah and Jewish Israeli theatre scholar Lee Perlman present examples of theatre institutions that are contributing to peacebuilding in Israel. They highlight the Arab-Hebrew Theatre in Jaffa, which has been producing bi-national as well as uni-national plays since 1991.

Throughout their discussion of such institutions and their explanation of the historical and political context in which they operate, Nasrallah and Perlman weave their own inter-personal dialogue, a story of two individuals who come to know each other, haltingly, across national, cultural, and linguistic differences and suspicions bred from sixty years of conflict. The authors' discussion of theatre organizations contributing to peacebuilding in Israel is thus interspersed with and underscored by their rendering of their own relationship—as a Palestinian woman and artist and a Jewish man and academic. They compose their own process of getting to know each other into a small drama, highlighting the different perspectives they each brought to their meeting, the hesitations and mistrust they felt in the early stages, and the relationship they eventually develop not through perfect understanding or agreement, but through a building over time of respect and trust.

Context

This chapter focuses primarily on relations between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel, as opposed to relations between Israelis and the Palestinians living in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Nasrallah and Perlman describe Jewish and Palestinian Israelis as “two national groups living within the same borders.” They explain that after the 1948 war that resulted in the creation of the state of Israel:

Palestinians who had remained inside the borders of Israel were “granted,” or, as many felt, “compelled” to receive Israeli citizenship, while their brothers, sisters, cousins, and parents remained refugees in neighboring Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere.... The Palestinian citizens of Israel began the complex process of becoming citizens of a state whose language, symbols and narrative were alien, and the founding of which had utterly disrupted their lives, communities and body politic.

Since 1948, the Palestinian citizens of Israel have faced perpetual discrimination in many domains of public life, including “land allocation, housing rights, and education.” In addition, they have faced suspicion from the majority Jewish community, many of whom question their loyalty to the state.

The Israeli theatre has traditionally been dominated by Jewish performers, directors, producers, and writers. It wasn't until the 1970s that the country began to see fully realized Palestinian characters on stage and that themes relevant to Palestinians began to be addressed. While there have been, since that time, a number of institutions, programs, and productions bringing Palestinian voices to the stage and openly addressing issues of peace and justice in Israel and Palestine, the tension, segregation, and imbalance of power between the two communities makes cooperative theatre efforts challenging. It has been particularly difficult since the start of the Al-Aksa Intifada in 2000, when relations between the two communities began to deteriorate.

As Nasrallah and Perlman put it:

The larger social context in which these theatre groups operate is not one that promotes and nurtures cooperation...Artists who choose to confront and humanize Palestinian-Jewish relations within Israel face difficult questions not only about the subject matter they're taking on but also about the types of partnerships and organizational relationships they forge.

Indeed, a major challenge for joint Palestinian-Jewish efforts in Israel is figuring out how to create organizations and programs across cultural and political differences, and across a significant power imbalance, without inadvertently perpetuating the status quo.

The Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa

The Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa, founded in 1991, houses two troupes—one Hebrew-language and Jewish, the other Arabic-language and Palestinian. The two troupes produce separate performances, as well as joint, bi-lingual performances. The theatre also hosts community dialogues and programs.

Before 1948, when many Palestinians were forced to leave their land, Jaffa was 86% Palestinian and a major center of Palestinian cultural life. Today, Palestinians are only 34% of the city's population, and the cultural prominence of the community has been lost. Jewish and Palestinian residents of the city live in close proximity but do not have many opportunities to break through the barriers erected by a painful past.

In this context, say Nasrallah and Perlman:

...the Arab-Hebrew Theater's goal is two-fold: to provide a space in which Palestinian culture and perspectives, as well as the Arabic language, once again have prominence in Jaffa *and* to provide a forum for ongoing Arab-Jewish cooperation. The theatre's organizational structure—two independent troupes within a shared theatre—reflects this dual mission along with the troupes' core belief in the need for *both* partnership *and* autonomous Palestinian and Jewish theatrical expression.

The two troupes share a commitment to making work that both meets high aesthetic standards and has social and political relevance.

Nasrallah and Perlman describe several bi-national productions of the Arab-Hebrew Theatre, including *In the Shadow of a Violent Past – Docudrama: The Truth and Reconciliation Committee*, which debuted in 2000. This play brought together Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, as well as Palestinians from the occupied territories, to perform an imagined truth and reconciliation committee (TRC), modeled after real committees like the one that took place in post-Apartheid South Africa. A combination of professional actors and non-actors portraying themselves came together on stage to give testimonies of crimes committed in the occupied territories. “The performance invited audiences to confront the injustices of the Israeli occupation,” say Nasrallah and Perlman. They continue:

One of the goals of the production was to help Israeli Jews, many of whom aren’t exposed to sympathetic Palestinian stories in the mainstream media, to identify and empathize with the “other.” Another goal was to shift public opinion towards ending the occupation, as audiences, Jewish and Palestinian alike, were reminded of its horrors. The initiators also sought to create a model of what a Palestinian-Israeli TRC might in fact look like, once the conditions for its establishment were ripe.

The authors also describe the play *Longing or Exile at Home*, first performed in 2001. Through six different narratives—including those of a Jew who immigrated to Israel to escape danger in Cairo and of a Palestinian whose grandfather was displaced from his village in Northern Israel—the play presents exile (whether cultural, national, or psychological) as a common thread between many Israelis of different backgrounds.

Building Peace

The productions of the Arab-Hebrew Theatre contribute to peace by helping Jewish and Palestinian Israelis to grapple with difficult truths, to see the humanity of the “other,” and to acknowledge their own responsibility in the conflict. For example, *Longing* invites audiences to empathize with *each* of its characters, and *In the Shadow of a Violent Past* “put[s] the audience in the role of being the accuser and the accused.”

The work of empathizing and of taking responsibility is extremely difficult for many audiences—but profoundly important. The plays provide “safe spaces” in which people can do this difficult work: acknowledge the legitimacy of the narratives of the “other” and think critically about their own role in perpetuating the status quo. The dialogue that the authors weave into the form and content of the essay enables the authors to reflect deeply and personally on the role that active listening must play in the creation of theaters where art and peacebuilding can coexist.

More from “Weaving Relationships, Embroidering Dialogues”:

- In “Weaving Relationships, Embroidering Dialogues,” Nasrallah and Perlman go into greater depth about the work of the Arab-Hebrew Theatre, elaborating on several of the theatre’s productions, and highlighting the voices of the theatre’s co-founders.
- The authors also provide more in-depth discussion of the historical and political context of the conflicts between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel.
- They also discuss several other groups in Israel whose work has contributed to peace, including Peace Child, which brings Palestinian and Jewish Israeli school children together to create and perform plays based on their life experiences.