

PERFORMING ARTS IN PALESTINE: A STRUGGLE AGAINST OPPRESSION

Concurrent to its onslaught on Gaza and the West Bank, Israel raided the world-renowned Freedom Theatre in Jenin Refugee Camp on 13 December 2023. Israeli soldiers ransacked and vandalized the theatre, before abducting its artistic director, producer, and an actor. This incident comes as a reminder of Israel's longstanding history of suppressing the cultural space in Palestine - a tool of its oppressive control. Suppressing the performing arts is one of many ways Israel attempts to stifle any form of Palestinian political expression or achievement. It is grounded in a fear of the power of culture.

Resisting through the Arts

Over the decades, the performing arts scene in Palestine has flourished as a symbol of resistance. The story and spirit of Palestinians' struggle is expressed through theatre and dance, as shown by the examples of Jenin's Freedom Theatre and Ramallah's El Funoun Popular Dance Troupe. The Freedom Theatre's repertoire ranges from the classic fable Animal Farm to original plays themed on the politics of Israel's occupation, including Power/Poison, Return to Palestine, The Siege, and Fragments of Palestine. Likewise, El Funoun's repertoire is comprised of dabke performances bring Palestinian stories to life through traditional folklore. Both provide artistic training to foster and empower talented young actors and dancers.



“The war on culture has always been at the heart of the aggressors’ war on our people, as the real war is a war on the narrative to steal the land and its rich treasures of knowledge, history, and civilization, along with the stories it holds.”

- Dr. Atef Abu Saif, writer and Minister of Culture



Suppression and Solidarity

The Stone Theatre, precursor to the Freedom Theatre, was founded by Jewish human rights activist Arna Mer Khamis in 1987 during the First Intifada. It was destroyed by Israel in 2002 during the Second Intifada in 2002. Its Artistic Director, Juliano Mer Khamis, son of Arna Mer Khamis, was then assassinated by masked gunmen in 2011. The theatre's co-founder, Zakaria Zubeida, was arrested by Israel in 2019 and is being held in an Israeli prison. Its producer, Mustafa Sheta, has been held under administrative detention since December 2023. Nonetheless, to this day they still strive to operate amid difficult conditions and frequent Israeli incursions. The Freedom Theatre was recently nominated for the 2024 Nobel Prize.

Dancers in El Funoun and other dabke groups have been subject to a long history of arbitrary arrests in the middle of the night and prolonged unlawful detention by Israel without charge or trial. This is often coupled with evidence and reports of torture or solitary confinement.

The Palestinian struggle is also a struggle for artistic freedom and cultural preservation. More and more artists and cultural workers around the world are standing in solidarity with Palestine.