



The Jerusalem Ashtar Theatre
Palestine

**ANNUAL
2004
REPORT**

The Dream Of Fakran, Ashtar 2004



ASHTAR for Theatre Productions and Training

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"The future of our nation depends on our ability to create-and to be creative. During the coming decades our most important national resources will be human resources. If our nation is to continue to meet the challenges of the future, we need to develop creative leaders."

From Performing together: The Arts and Education, jointly published by The American Association of School Administrators, The Alliance for Education and The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1985.

WITH OUR GRATITUDE TO YOU ALL

Ashtar Team

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Introduction

Ashtar has always stressed the importance of utilizing drama in introducing different realities and for the expression of innovative ideas. During its various activities, the community was always offered a new window of experience and a new dimension of knowledge and learning. Since its establishment in 1991, Ashtar aims at making theatre a fundamental need within the Palestinian society, through stimulating cultural awareness, awakening perceptions towards aesthetics and arousing artistic sensibility and taste. It also seeks to build and strengthen cultural bridges with the Theatre World through creative works and ideas.

Ashtar is actively engaged in researching and experimenting with various artistic elements, tools and techniques. It delves into the cultural heritage passing all the way to post modernism, creating a theatre that has the flavor of Musk, the color of Amber and the taste of Figs. A theatre that is capable of penetrating all walls including the seventh wall (the audience's subconscious).

Ashtar regards the human investment paramount, as it comprises trainees and actors, technicians and staff members, who ascertain continuous development of ideas and methods and engage efficiently and constructively in the enrichment of

a critical eye and voice in the march of transformation and evolution.

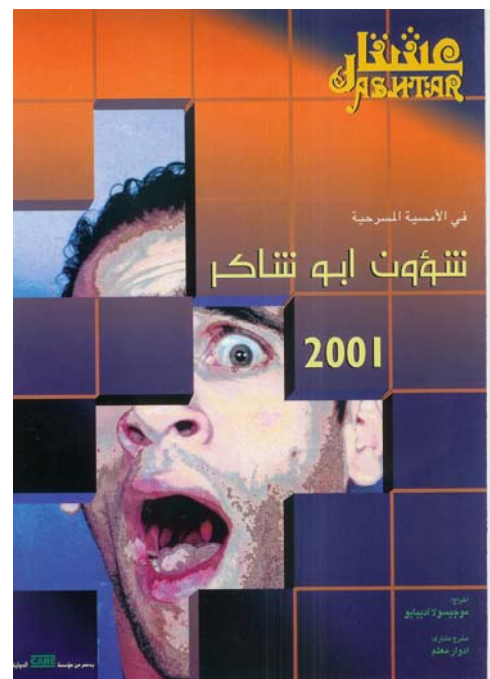
Ashtar's mission as a Palestinian theatre organization centers on the need for theatre appreciation within its society through close cooperation and arousal of the senses towards beauty and taste.

Forum Theatre - Overview

As part of our aim of making theatre both relevant and accessible to all parts of Palestinian society, Ashtar has continued to develop and explore Forum Theatre techniques in its annual series Abu Shaker's Affairs.

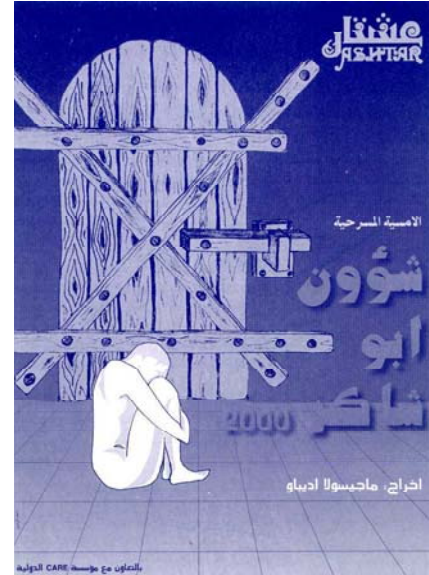
Forum Theatre, based on Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed", is an alternative form of theatre that allows the audience to influence the outcome of the play. It is a highly dynamic, provocative, interactive tool intended to provoke awareness, as well as change or modification of attitudes and actions. It is "a conscious intervention that fosters critical collective analysis of shared problems and acts as a rehearsal for individual and collective social action".

The audience views the play and is then given the chance to participate in the direction of the story by stepping in as it is re-performed and providing alternate behaviors, choices, actions, and words.



The productions provide an open forum for the expression of those voices that are usually overlooked or ignored by the community, developing alternate strategies for combating oppression.

Since 1997 Ashtar Theatre has been producing an annual Forum play that targets local audiences, especially those in rural areas, particularly women, young people and other marginalized groups, according to the particular topics dealt with that year.



So far Ashtar has staged eight Forum productions covering the topics of early marriage, incest, expired food, living with disability, child labor, collaboration, violence against women and violence in schools. More than 380 were conducted, where 60,000 were reached in the different areas of the West Bank as well as Jordan.



Formation of “Theatre of the Oppressed” Multipliers.

Based on Ashtar’s project “Promoting Popular Theatre in Development”, Care International and Ashtar renewed their partnership in a new project “Formation of Theatre of the Oppressed Multipliers”. Again with this project, Ashtar succeeded in conveying its message to the selected target group through the different activities of the project.

Ms. Barbara Santos, the General Coordinator of the CTO, Brazil, re-visited Ashtar in March 2004 and conducted a two-week workshop in Forum theatre techniques. It combined both practical and theoretical work and was followed by the needed evaluation and planning for the next phase. Ashtar’s team of six trainers attended the workshop, where they found it very useful and will help them to improve their skills and abilities.

Main issues that were tackled:

Theoretical

- Theatrical workshop rhythm.
- The Joker role in workshops.
- The dramaturgy of the Theatre of Oppressed.
- Choice of subjects, themes and stories.

- Forum Theatre scene production.
- Creation of the collective text.
- The process of systematization of Forum text.
- The Joker role in the sessions of Forum.

Practical:

- New Exercises and games.
- Techniques of improvisation, demonstration of Forum, character creation and rehearsal.
- Creation of workshops models.

By the end of the training workshop, Ashtar organized a launching day for the project where many local organizations were invited to participate in a practical demonstration that highlights the impact and the importance of such a program. Although four groups were only selected, many others were interested and additional groups were formed. On the other hand, inviting the media also helped in promoting the project on a local level and spreading out the idea.

Accordingly, four community groups were selected to get the needed training on forum techniques where they ended up with a production. The issues raised were based on their stories and experiences.

Forum Theatre - Community Groups Plays

1) Beituna (Our Home)

A group from the Middle East Non-Violence and Democracy (MEND), from Jerusalem & Ramallah were selected and trained as one of the local community groups, which came out of their own play "Beituna".

The story takes place in a small house situated in one of the refugee camps in the West Bank. A family of seven members is facing daily situational life incidents. The father is the only one in charge; he gives orders and makes decisions in a very rigid and violent way, away from any possibility for argument or understanding with the family members. All this adds up and creates a feeling of fear and scattering among members of the family.



The play was co-directed by Mohammed Eid and Maysa Al-Natsheh.

2) Kan Yama Karasi

(Once upon some chairs)

“Kan Yama Karasi” is a play based on real life stories and events, and is a collective writing based on improvisations from a group of 12 grade students at St. Joseph School in Ramallah. It highlights the story of a ninth grade student who gets harassed in several ways and by several people. Leila, in her 14th year has a limited experience, her father is sick and is about to die and her mother is keen on taking care of him. Her only brother studies abroad and her uncle is the chief supporter of the family. Being so, he tries to control Leila in the means he finds convenient. At school as well as at home, there is always someone who tries to exploit others and make use of their weaknesses. As for the street, its danger is boundless and that makes Leila in a weak position subjected to being attacked.



The play was directed by Iman Aoun.

3) Hala Jame'a

(Welcome University)

A group of Birzeit University worked on a play that talks about the different forms of violence that a female university student faces, inside the university campus as well as outside; starting from the family pressures, friends' interference in her personal life and the big society that forms in its

traditions a barrier to her wishes and ambitions. The girl is exposed to the different sorts of annoyance and harassments even in her

basic rights, like choosing her clothes, her friends and reaching to the problem of being forced to marry someone whom she doesn't know.



The play was directed by Raed Al-Ayassa.

4) Rehlet 'Omri (Journey of my life)

Fatima, a fourteen year old girl, lives in a family formed of eight members with the father in control. Her mother forces her to marry despite her being a top student. Fatima lets herself get married, but luckily, she lives with an understanding and caring husband. Unfortunately, this doesn't last long. One day, fire happened by accident inside her house where she gets shocked and is consequently hospitalized in a mental health hospital for a while.

After giving birth to her second child, her husband divorces her and she gets married to another one. In that house too, another fire accident takes place which makes her become psychologically sick and hence is hospitalized for a second time but for a longer period.



The play starts with Fatima narrating for her doctor her story whereby she ends up in being a patient in this hospital.

The team of this play is made up of 6 mentally disturbed patients in addition to 8 nurses, doctors and psychiatrists.

The play was directed by Iman Aoun.

Forum Theatre – Community Groups Performances

The groups conducted 15 performances of the three PT plays (Beituna, Kan Yama Karasi and Hala Jame'a) for school students, colleges and the general audience in October, November and December, and conducted 1 performance of the PT play (Rehlet 'Omri) at the Mental Health Hospital, Bethlehem in December 2004. Additional 6 performances are scheduled for February 2005 in Ramallah and Bethlehem for the PT play "Rehlet 'Omri" and "Hala Jame'a".

Production	No. of Shows	Audience	Male	Female
Beituna	5	340	55%	45%
Kan Yama Karasi	6	1300	40%	60%
Hala Jame'a	5	370	10%	90%
Rehlet 'Omri	1	50	40%	60%
TOTAL	17	2,060	36%	64%

Training

Ashtar is committed to exploring new and democratic methods of seeking and transmitting knowledge, and we believe that our youth are ideally placed to lead the way in this, given our support and faith. On the other hand, in order for Palestinian society to take its place in the transglobal community new methods of communication and interaction need to be learnt and adopted, methods which respect the rights of all members of society, including those of children and young adults.

Drama Book

Ever since Ashtar was established, its founders realized the long way ahead of them and recognized that what will make a real change in the field of training is a new strong curriculum that would lay strong and proper foundations to be followed by whoever would work in the field.

In this spirit, Ashtar's team have worked in the past few years in the different Palestinian schools, and accumulated all the gained universal Knowledge and what they have enhanced through their experiences and their experimental approach.

This spring, Ashtar has finalized and published the book on its training system for theatre devotees, both beginners and those with more experienced. Ashtar Theatre Training System Textbook by Edward Muallem & Iman Aoun contains exercises that start at the very basic level because they intend to obliterate all past experiences.



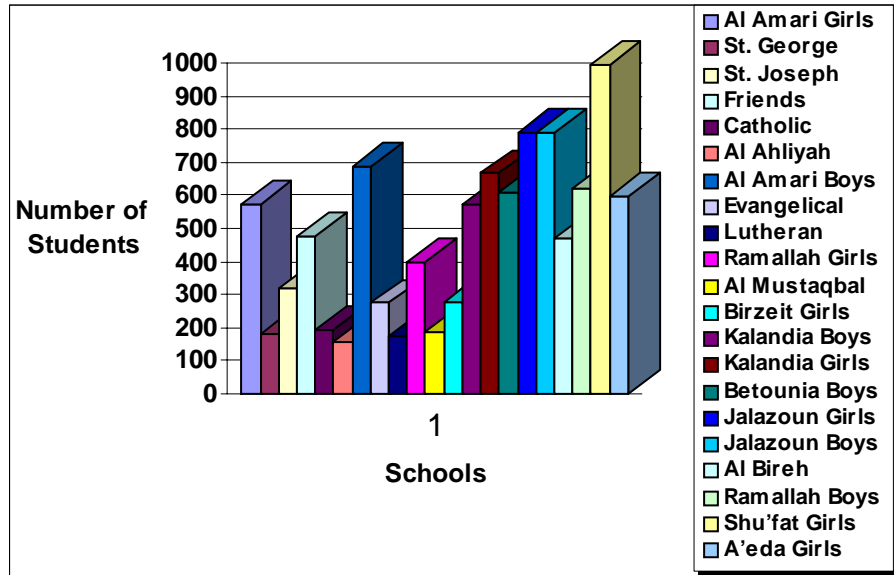
The book embodies the result of many diverse experiences, both scientific and practical. It does not impose one specific method and remains conscious in its acceptance of all trends and schools which formed the tributaries of the basic theatre movement, without isolating itself into one particular trend. It contains a wealth of information for whoever uses it, whether a trainee or a trainer. A lot of effort was invested in preparing and organizing the material of the book, which is probably the only one of its kind in Arabic.

Drama Days

As the main goal of the Drama Days is to use drama as a tool of expression in order to improve students' abilities to interact, share ideas, listen attentively to others and respect other's space, Ashtar succeeded in achieving its objectives by reaching 20 schools this year (UNRWA, public and private schools) through carrying out this special program which came from the very beginning as an intervention tool. The program of Drama Day in School evolved over three stages; the first stage was immediately after the heavy incursions of the Israeli military in the spring 2002, the second one was in the year 2002/2003, and the third stage was in the year 2003/2004. The third stage was divided into two parts for both two semesters, where each drama class consisted of three main categories, which were: warm up, concentration and improvisation.

While the first semester sessions focused on empowering the provided basic introduction to drama techniques, the second semester, stressed more on developing new techniques to nourish the Drama Day curriculum. Story telling became the core of the class, dividing the story into scenes with students' participation. Then they acted it using their bodies, expressions and imaginations in the space.

Posters for the classroom (that show two models of interaction inside the classroom) were also handed out, in addition to the teacher's training manual. Each drama trainer discussed the poster with the students in the drama classroom in the presence of the teachers.



The graph shows the different visited schools:

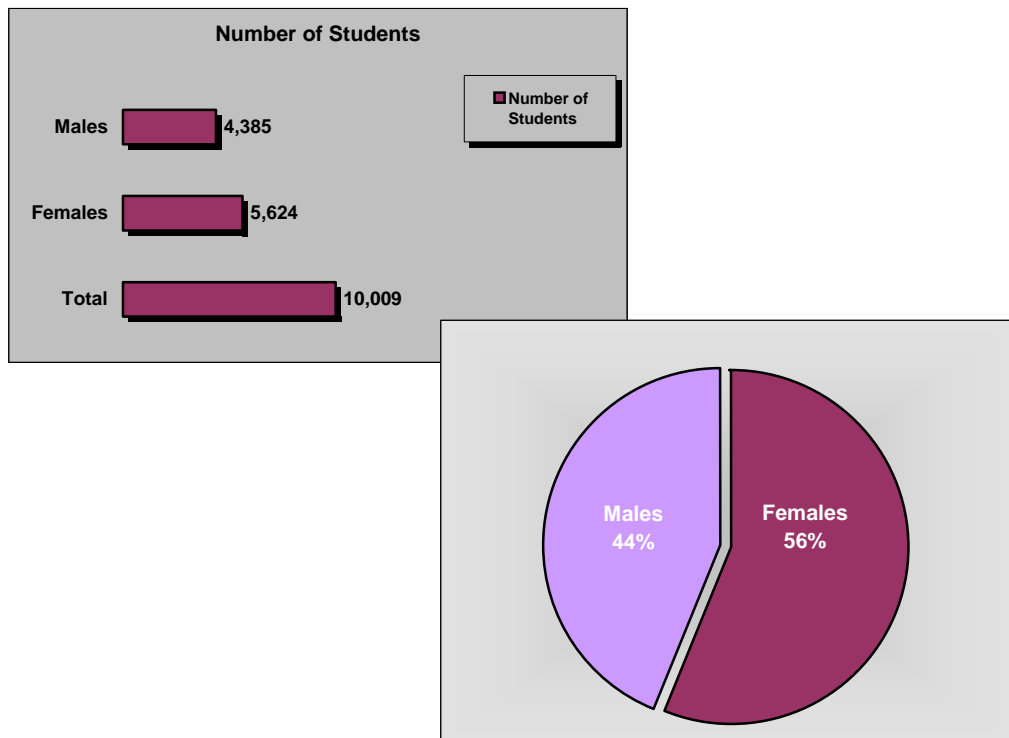
11 UNWRA schools: 8 schools in refugee camps – Jalazoun Girls School, Jalazoun Boys School, Kalandia Girls School, Kalandia Boys School, Al Amari Girls School, Al Amari Boys School, Shu'fat Girls School and Aida Girls School. 2 schools - Ramallah Girls School and Ramallah Boys School in the city of Ramallah. One in Birzeit village near Ramallah – Birzeit Girls School.

8 private schools: St. George School, St. Joseph School, Friends School, Catholic School, Al Ahliyah School, Evangelical School, Lutheran School and Al Mustaqbal School.

2 public schools: Al Bireh Primary School and Betounia Primary Boys School.

Total number of reached students were 10,009, of these 4,385 were males, and 5,624 were females.

56% females and 44% males.



Drama Workshops & Summer Clubs

As result of the successful and ongoing relationship between Ashtar Theatre and the UNRWA schools, Al Amari Ramallah School asked the assistance of Ashtar team in two programs this year; one was a short play from the curriculum that was produced with the 9th graders and participated at the UNRWA contest of curriculum plays. The play was second best performance, yet the first was won by one of Ashtar's Drama Teachers' Training graduate who worked with her students for the same contest.

The second program was a summer workshop with students aged 10 - 14 years old which ended with a short presentation of the students to their parents and friends.

Another drama club was held at Ashtar Theatre with students from different schools for three weeks. The club ended with the performance of Cinderella at Ashtar Theatre, in front of their parents and friends. These clubs were guided by Raed Al-Ayasa.

For the second year, Ashtar's Theatre team passed the National Drama Curriculum that was written by Edward Muallem/Ashtar's General Director.

The workshops were held in both Ramallah and Jerusalem area. A total number of 46 teachers coming from different private schools in both cities participated in a 4-day workshop held both at Ashtar Theatre and Rawdat Al-Zouhour School in Jerusalem.

Tubas - for a second time, Ashtar was commissioned by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and the Danish Red Cross in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, to pass a drama therapy program for school children.

Forty elementary teachers and school counselors graduated from the first program that ran for two years in Tubas. Around thirty female and male teachers and counselors are expected to graduate from this program by the end of May, 2005. Eight schools are implementing the especially designed curriculum by Edward Muallem, for grades 5 and 6 with around 800 students benefiting by having a one and a half hour of a weekly session to be carried out all through the scholastic year. An evaluation and feedback session is held every month with the teachers in Tubas to ensure that the implementation of the program is according to the training standards.

The program is designed to continue for a further year with a new number of teachers and hence benefiting other

schools, teachers and students. This training is given by Edward Muallem and Maisa Al Natsheh.

Seven performances and 74 students from four cities and in front of more than 250 audience members participated in a 2-day Theatre Marathon organized by Ashtar Theatre on the 17th and the 18th of September. This marathon comes as a final activity for the teachers who graduated from the Drama Teacher Training Program –DTT last year. In addition to the above, Ashtar hosted one more show of a group of young students from Huwarah who expressed their interest to take part in such event.

Productions / Performances

1. The “Earth Gods”

‘The Earth Gods’ is an experimental production, which deals with issues very much still relevant to the Palestinian situation today. It is adapted from Gibran Khalil Gibran’s penultimate work, a tri-partite colloquy in poetic form. The adaptation

is by Iman Aoun, the Director, who dispenses with much of the romanticism of the original work,



bringing it into modernity, while yet retaining its universal appeal. The piece speaks of the unceasing inner dialogue of the ego, which directs thought into ruts and action into dead ends. This piece is an invitation to break free of the

mental prison of fatalistically accepting the violence-blame game, to step into the light of self-directed action. By expressing our creativity we become self-authored, our very lives our own work of art.

The Palestinian Ministry of Culture nominated "The Earth Gods" to represent Palestine in Romania and at the Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festival; where it was performed at Al-Hanager on the last week of September 2004.



2. The Dream of Fakran

Ashtar's unique production with young actors and students together, targeted the theme of the importance of having a balanced life; Science and technology cannot stand alone and solve our daily problems. Our spiritual growth alongside our cognitive development is an important factor for our adjustment in life.



The play that is 70 minutes long is directed towards children between 10-14 years old. During the month of July, four performances were conducted at the "Children's Theatre Festival" that was held in Ramallah by the Ministry of Culture and in Bethlehem.

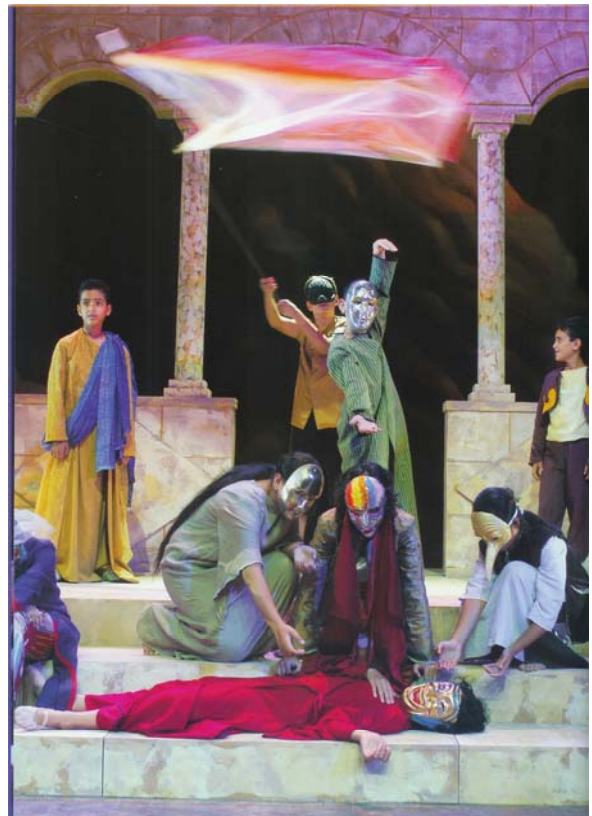


The play was directed by Edward Muallem.

3. Al-Fawanees

After two years of collaboration with the National Music Conservatory: in training the students, co-directing the show, and managing the stage business; Edward Muallem and Ashtar Theatre team are proud of the big success the musical Al-Fawanees has achieved with its performances during the months of July and August.

The Little Lantern is a story about a king who dies, leaving his only daughter an heiress to the throne. He leaves his will with the wise man in the castle, which instructs his daughter that in order to become the queen of the kingdom, she has to bring the sun into the castle before the candle melts. The princess, being young, thought that she would be able to catch the sun and carry it on her back to the castle. She tries many ways, but to no avail. She



later locks herself in her room, and on the eighth day, finds a note under her door, saying that by locking herself in, she will never find a solution. She tries to find out who wrote the note, but fails. Then one night, an old man carrying a lantern knocks at the gates of the castle, but the head of the guards forbid him entry, to which he says, "If you do not allow an old man with a lantern to come into the castle, how do you expect the sun to enter." The princess hears of this, and immediately orders the head of the guards to find the man.

Not knowing who it was, they ordered all those people carrying lanterns in the kingdom to come forth.

Thousands of people flock to the gates,

which were too small to allow all those people in. This forces the princes to order the tearing down of the walls, allowing entrance to the people. When all crowd in, the light emanating from the lanterns is brighter than the sun's light, and as such the sun enters the castle. With the bricks of the walls, schools, and hospitals are built, and the kingdom becomes a happy nation.



4. Abu Shaker – The Instructor

The Ashtar creative team is directly and actively involved in work on the ground, and the themes are selected accorded to the social needs manifesting themselves most strongly at that time. The theme of the play is about the vicious circle of violence that was observed to be growing in schools, which is clearly linked with the ongoing and

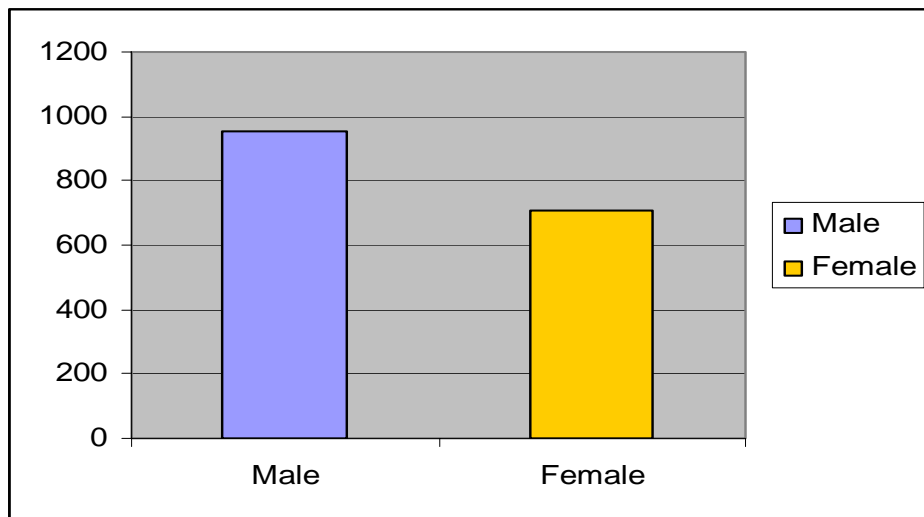


intensified political, economic and social suffering of our people at the hands of the occupying power. (Figures on domestic and family violence rose sharply during the periods of prolonged confinement to the home due to total curfew and heavy shelling. The divorce rate, still a taboo area in Palestinian society, doubled). During their work in schools in the aftermath of this period the Ashtar team observed a sharp increase in the incidences of

violence; many more children bore the signs of having been beaten, sometimes very severely. For this reason the team agreed to develop a Forum play addressing this issue.

“Abu Shaker in Instructor” was produced in 2003 and was performed in 56 locations.

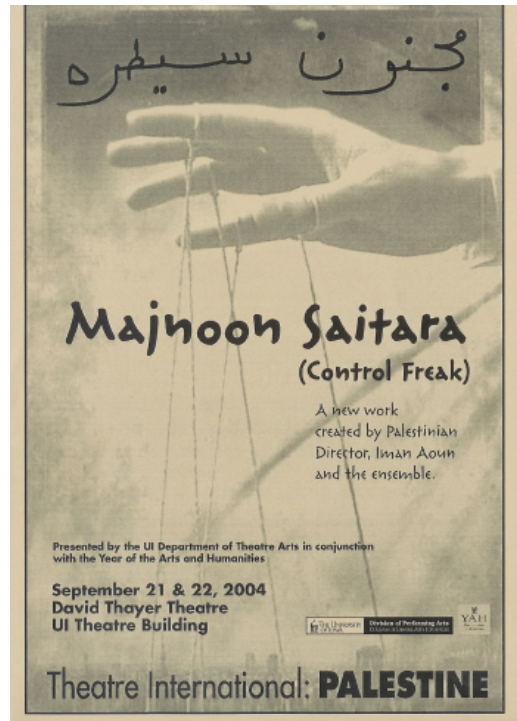
In 2004 the play was performed in cooperation of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in 8 different locations in the north of the West bank (Jinin and it’s surrounding) and in Hebron in the south.



Cross Visits

Part of Ashtar's vision is investing in its staff development

Iman Aoun, Artistic Director of Ashtar Theatre was invited as artist in residence by the University of Iowa in U.S. for three weeks to lead a workshop and direct a forum play with BA & MA theatre students. The 40 minutes play "Majnoon Saytarah" (Control Freak) was based on improvisations around the theme of "Memory" and was performed between the 20th and 22nd of September, is still been performed.



E V A L U A T I O N

Evaluation is a very important element for Ashtar, as we understand the necessity of conducting both internal and external evaluations of our activities in order to more effectively achieve our objectives. Feedback from our target groups and partners is also highly considered. This is done through questionnaires, meetings and joint activities.

As a result of the crisis, we encountered difficulties in fulfilling our tour dates both internationally and locally. Lack of movement, and difficulties acquiring travel permits and securing funding led to the postponement of the tours and adjustment to the local tours schedule.

We can conclude that this year's evaluation led Ashtar to new directions and opportunities, new administrative, managerial policies and guidelines were developed.

Supporters

Thanks to the following for their generous support of last year's programs

- * Care International
- * Dutch Representative Office
- * EED-Germany
- * European Commission
- * NORAD
- * Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation

Also special thanks to:

- * The Ministry of Higher Education
- * The Ministry of Culture