



ANNUAL REPORT 2019

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Introduction

The world is shifting, and becoming a new ground for us to rediscover. What makes theater special is its live nature, its ability to merge two worlds, the imaginary and the real. After all, theater was born to be live and alive

In this off-kilter time, everything around us feels like it is changing and alternating into a new form. Social distancing, hygiene, awareness of ourselves and our surroundings, are evidently more important than ever. These conditions put theater in a position to face maybe one of its biggest existential questions. What will theater look like in the future? How will the present moment affect theater's live nature?

The year 2019 was a turning point in my career as a director. I was privileged to direct my most recent play, "Love on the Shelf," not only with ASHTAR Theater as its producer, but also with four incredible artists, all masters of their craft, who for years were my teachers – and I, their student.

I can't deny the fear I had after accepting ASHTAR's offer to direct their new play for the winter season. I had eight months to prepare: to find or write a play, cast the actors and the crew, and make the work. It might sound like more than enough time; but time was slipping fast, and I was having trouble finding a script that spoke to my own vision and my desire to make something new and exciting.

After countless readings, discussions, and brainstorming sessions, we found a gem. "Egyptian Products" by Laila Soliman is a social dark comedy written 13 years ago. The play has a filmic structure and is inspired by Woody Allen's black and white movies. The scenes are short and shift quickly between locations; dialogue gets cut abruptly by a

phone call, a door bell, or simply by the characters losing themselves in tiny loops of dialogue or action.

Immediately I felt the need to find a new frame for this play, a way to sustain the feeling of a film while on stage. When we watch movies we often feel a special closeness to the characters and the situations, maybe because film provides a one-on-one intimacy that theater, with its bigger than life form, sometimes has difficulty achieving.

Luckily, Masha Kapustina, the scenographer of “Love on the Shelf,” who was attending an immersive theater workshop at the time, generously transmitted the knowledge she was getting – by phone and text message – to me and to the play.

After several long meetings on the phone, we arrived at the idea of having the audience sit on stage together with the actors, allowing them to form, with their seats and bodies, the scenography of the world the characters live in. We wanted to give the audience the ability to really be inside the situation, in the middle of the conflict, to be part of the story without having to do anything but be present.

This takes me back to the question I asked at the beginning. What will theater look like in the future, after the present we are living through right now? Will the coronavirus pandemic affect the live character of theater? Will mediating devices become an indispensable part of the theater experience? It’s really a juxtaposition talking about the importance of immersing and isolating at the same time.

I believe in the ability of theater to re-invent itself. It has been doing so for centuries, transforming its own nature and that of its audience. Clearly, there is a need to think about new ways to make theater and to keep theater alive without endangering audiences and performers alike.

Our ability to watch a play through the small screen changed with the emergence of

social media. Short clips from plays are what people have time and patience for. A full play, one that is meant to be performed for a live audience in theater, will fail, in my opinion, to sustain the attention and interest of an online audience for an hour or an hour and half. The reason lies in the magic nature of theater, which has to be live to touch its audience. Unless it is meant from the beginning to be filmed and screened.

We grew up watching televised plays from Egypt, which were filmed as TV shows in order to reach audiences at home. Today, however, if we want to reinvent the medium and find a new way for theater to engage, provoke, enlighten, and live with its audiences remotely, if we want to find a way for theater to continue, we have to use the concept of isolation as a motivation for creating connectivity.

Emile Saba



ASHTAR FOR THEATRE PRODUCTIONS AND TRAINING

Enhancing Creativity and Commitment for Change

VISION:

Towards a free and creative human being on the cultural, intellectual and social levels; and for a Palestinian society that respects pluralism, democracy and fosters openness and cultural exchange.

MISSION:

ASHTAR for Theatre Productions and Training, seeks to develop a Palestinian individual capable of expressing oneself and communicate with the surroundings and the world.

Creates cultural bridges with international theaters and drawing on the experiences of actors, directors and producers while maintaining creative exchange with them.

Contributes towards the creation of socio-cultural conditions that embraces values of freedom, justice and equality through the use of theater productions and trainings, targeting adolescents, youth and women.

Builds skills and capacities of the local and regional theater movement.

Nurtures the aesthetics and values of performing arts in Palestine.

Productions in 2019



ASHTAR activities in 2019

I.

Drama Training Program

a) Training ASHTAR Students and Producing of “Tales of Juha” and “Anonymous”

For 28 consecutive year, ASHTAR is running this program which lasts throughout the school year, with school and university students. During 2019, ASHTAR Theatre trained 20 young people at the theatre in Ramallah and produced 2 plays with them; “Tales of Juha” and “Anonymous”.

“**Tales of Juha**” was performed by 10 students from first year, 10-13 years old. The play was written and directed by Iman Aoun and Muhammad Ali ran the technicalities. The play was performed four times for the general public at ASHTAR Theatre and one at the municipal festival ‘Let’s go to the Garden’ in Ramallah.

Juha, is a comic character known in many ancient cultures, his stories are of a poor man who was living the events of his time and dealing with mundane situations in unexpected ways and behaving with comical intelligence. His stories were spread by word of mouth, which resulted in the invention of many anecdotes that were fictional.



“Anonymous” is taken from the Greek saga, The Odyssey. The play was written by Japanese Naomi Iizuka, translated and adapted into Arabic by Sabine Saadeh and Emile Saba who trained and directed ASHTAR students aged 16-23 years old. Allina Hill from Germany also worked with the 10 students on voice and movement exercise and choreography as Muhammad Ali designed the sets and the lights together with Emile Saba. The performance was played four times in July.

The play focuses on an unknown child who is a refugee from war, and was distracted from his mother in the ocean. He finds himself on a journey to recover his memory and his mother. During the events of the play we see what refugees go through during their asylum journey, we learn about what a refugee holds in his memory about his country and his family, and his constant fear of forgetting, as forgetfulness becomes the meaning of being lost.



b) Training ASHTAR Students in Jerusalem and Gaza:

ASHTAR runs a drama training program in five schools in Jerusalem. Focusing on students and teachers. Introducing tools to the teachers to be used inside the classrooms to help students obtain stronger focus, to stimulate them and activate them and to help them understand their lessons.

Four plays were produced in May by four different schools and were performed to the school students and parents. 80 students from grade 6 to grade 10 benefited from the program. This program was run with support of the Pontifical Mission in Jerusalem.

In Gaza, ASHTAR team trained 3 schools and one university in Gaza, and produced four plays with them under the supervision of Ali Abu Yasin. 51 students benefited from the program and each play was performed 3 times to peers and families. Around 1,200 people attended the performances. This program was run with support of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Palestine.



C. Student exchange and training at Charlotten Lund School in Trondheim - Norway

Part of the ongoing partnership with the municipality of Trondheim, Edward Muallem and Emile Saba headed with three students: Jana Falah, Fares Farraj, Esleen Atallah, Mid-January to Trondheim. They led an intensive workshop on Theater of the Oppressed, directed the forum play 'EMMA'. Nine students took part in the play: three students from ASHTAR theatre and six students from the Charlotten Lund School.

The play revolves around the life of a sixteen year old girl called Emma, who gets raped during a birthday party organized by a schoolmate, which dramatically changes her life and her relationship towards her family and her community.

The play was performed three times at the Charlotten Lund School in Trondheim, and in April the play was performed in Ramallah at Saint Josef's and The Evangelical Schools.



**145 students
trained during
this year.**

**9 children
and youth
productions.**

26 performances

**5900 audience
member
reached.**



II. Social Theatre Program

a) Local tour with «The Right Move» production:

ASHTAR organized a tour for the interactive performance 'The Right Move' that was produced in cooperation with the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics throughout the West Bank. The play was performed at the Freedom Theater in Jenin, University of Khadouri in Tulka-rem, Jericho Municipal Theater, Birzeit University, University of Hebron and twice at ASHTAR for the Educational Faculty students.

The play highlighted the difficulties faced by Palestinian women at the labor market, their concerns and obstacles that surrounds them, and the injustice they face in many times. The work came with a comical and critical pattern that questioned the practices of the official and private sectors when employing women and the preconceived ideas based on social stereotypes of the role, position, and capabilities of women.

The play was written by Ghassan Naddaf, directed by Muhammad Eid, and performed by: Yasmine Shallelda, Shibli Albo, Khalil Al-Batran, Weam Al-Dairy, Rizk Ibrahim, Maryam Al-Basha, and intermediated by Iman Aoun.



a) Local tour with «The Downfall» production:

“The Downfall” - A theatrical work that discusses the concept of liberal education based on the play «The Legacy of the Wind» By Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee. The play deals with the dialectic of science and religion, and the principle of questioning versus the inevitability of the axioms. It discusses education in Palestine and its role in formulating ready-made stereotypes versus free generations with the ability to disassemble, analyze and criticize.

Adapted and written by Ghassan Naddaf, directed by Muhammad Eid, and play by: Yasmine Shalalkeh, Shibli Albo, Khalil Al-Batran, Mas'ad Hani, Rizek Ibrahim, and Maryam Al-Basha and intermediated by Iman Aoun. The work was produced with support from the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation in Palestine.

First round of performances started in March in several governorates in the West Bank. It was shown at the Jericho Municipal Theater, Al Istiqlal University, the Freedom Theater in Jenin, University of Khadouri in Tulkarm, in addition to other performances presented at ASHTAR Theater for students of Women's Society College and Al-Tirah College, and Pal-estine Technical University in Ramallah.

The second round of performances, was in June, when the play was performed at the Al-Rowwad Center in Aida Camp in Bethlehem, at Al-Quds Open University in Hebron, University of Hebron, and Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, and participated at Farkha International Festival.



The tour ended with a central performance at the Ramallah Municipality Theatre with the presence of representatives from the Ministry of Education, Palestinian Curriculum Center, civil society institutions, independent educational researchers, and university students who all contributed to the dialogue and enriched the discussion that followed the performance.

The dialogue centered on the problems of education in Palestine, and the importance of modifying the Palestinian curricula, as well as the local educational system; to reach a more open and receptive society that accepts social and intellectual pluralism.

*** This program was supported by Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Palestine.**

*** 4,600 people were reached.**



III.

Professional Theatre Program

a) Local and International tour with “Oranges and Stones”:

“Oranges and Stones” toured in high schools around the West Bank. The play was performed 13 times to 1,750 students. The play deals with the loss of the Palestinian homeland from the time of the Balfour Declaration to the present time. In 48 minutes of eloquent silence filled with events and meanings, the two actors depict a world of persecution and resistance, and worlds of events and details that exhausted the possible and reasonable. In addition, the play was performed at “The Theater Lab” at Georgetown university in Washington - DC in May.

The play was directed by Mojisola Adebayo, performed by Iman Aoun and Edward Muallem. Music creation by Rami Washaha, and technicalities by Mohammad Ali.



b) Local and International tour with “ Enheduanna”:

“Enheduanna” - is a performing arts piece portraying the journey of a woman in different situations of her modern life. Enheduanna, known to be the first poetess in history became a symbol to the performing artist Ashtar Muallem who embodies the poetry of Enheduanna, using aerial silk and dance; taking the audience on a journey of a woman in her search for her inner temple in a collaps-ing world.

The performance premiered in July in Ramallah within the activities of ‘Wein a Ramallah Festival’. Following was a group of shows in the cities of Bethlehem, Jenin, and Jerusalem, before it participated in Novi Sad in Serbia at the International Performing Arts Festival INFANT.

As for the second round of performances, they took place in December, with one show in Ramallah for the students of the Women’s Community College at Kasbah Theater, followed by a show at the Palestinian National Theater / El-Hakawati within Francois Abu Salem Festival in Jerusalem, and the third at An-Najah National University in Nablus as part of the international campaign to combat violence against women, when the show was abruptly stopped before it finished by the dean of the arts at the university.

Vision and performance by Ashtar Muallem, directed by Iman Aoun, Music creation by Rami Washaha and lighting design by Atallah Tarazi. The show was produced by ASHTAR Theatre in partnership with The Palestinian National Theater / El-Hakawati, and supported by the Espace Peripherique Ville de Paris.



c) «Love on the shelf» a new production:

“Love on the shelf” was produced in the last quarter of the year, bringing together the senior team at ASHTAR in a new experience with the young Director Emile Saba. In an immersive form, and black comedy, the group presented this play 8 times and was met with great success and exciting interest by the audience and the critics.

The dramatic characters of the play live in their quest of how to free themselves from limitations in an exotic and accelerating world, where human beings lose their sense of intimacy, privacy and love. In which the private overlaps with the public, and in which loneliness and fear of the unknown prevails.

The play was adapted by Emile Saba from the original play “Egyptian Products”, Written by Laila Suleiman. Performed by Bayan Shbib, Muhammad Eid, Edward Muallem, and Iman Aoun.

* 4,750 audience members were reached during all performances.

* This program was supported by a grant from SIDA and OSF as part of the Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PAAN).



IV.

Performances Hosted at ASHTAR

Hosted Performances:

Ashtar Theater has hosted several plays since the beginning of this year:

- The celebration of The World Theater Day on the 27th of March: in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and in cooperation with several theatrical and artistic institutions. The celebration featured various art presentations; circus, music, and the reading of the World Theatre Message by a group of young theatre students lead by Nabil Rai, and the performance of the play 'Jabra' performed by Khaled Massou and directed by Emile Saba, in ad-dition to a panel discussion on Palestinian monodrama.
- The play 'We are also here' Produced by The Freedom Theater, directed by Zoe Laverty and Ahmed Tobasi.
- The monodrama 'Selfie notes' performed by Ahmed Abu Saloum, directed by Nidal Mhallous.
- The play 'Alive performed by Milad Quneibi, directed by Muhammad Eid.



- The campaign ‘Worthy and we deserve’ Organized by Atabet Fan to support a fair work environment for Palestinian women, in partnership with the Ministry of Women Affairs, the Palestine Mobility Initiative, ASHTAR Theater, and Sharek Youth Forum, and through which ASHTAR theatre presented the performance ‘The right move’.
- The play ‘prohibited in the United States’ in cooperation with the ASHTAR Theater, performed by the Native American Ryan Victor Pierce - from New York City and Ashley Marinacio, directed by Iman Aoun.
- “Karama Human Rights Film Festival” 10th edition, ASHTAR hosted a group of 6 short films by Karama Jordan.
- The hosting of a stand-up comedy workshop, which was held by the Freedom Theater at ASHTAR Theater in cooperation with the British comedy director Sam Peel.



V.

ASHTAR in Public Events

Local and international participations:

- Participation in a Ramadan evening at the village in the Jordan Valley, with the performance of 'Oranges and stones' organized by Al-Auja Youth Club.
- 'Oranges and Stones' was performed at 'The Gathering' in Washington within the program of the Political Theater Lab at Georgetown University in Washington - DC. The show was followed by an open dialogue with the audience who was very impressed by the play.
- 'The eagle goes east' is a forum play directed by Iman Aoun who received a CEC Art-slink grant to work with Native American actors in NYC. The play addressed their discrimination in the United States. The work was in cooperation with Eagle Project and Co-Op Theater
- ASHTAR's Friends in New York: the group was formed by theatre friends in the US, to stimulate artistic communication between ASHTAR Theater and US theaters, and to provide support and networking for the ASHTAR.



- 'Enheduanna' at the INFANT festival in Novi Sad in Serbia. The show was presented at the city's municipal stage, and attended by a big crowd who highly appreciated the show.



- Participation with 'Tales of Juha at «Yalla to the garden» Festival, organized by Ramallah Municipality.

- Participation at Birzeit Nights Festival with 'The Downfall' interactive play.

- Organizing an open meeting with key people around ASHTAR strategic views and directions for the next ten years. The theater sought through this meeting to prepare for its future plan and define its cultural and social role within the community and beyond it. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, and a group of partner organizations in the Palestinian cultural scene, including the Ramallah Municipality, Palestinian Performing Arts Network, Qattan Foundation, and CARE International Foundation, along with members from ASHTAR's General Assembly and Board of Directors, in addition to a number of friends and graduates from ASHTAR Theatre.



VI.

ASHTAR and Birzeit University

Cooperation with Birzeit University:

Bayan Shbib, trained and directed the theatre club students at Birzeit Uni on the play “King Lear”, that was performed twice; once at ASHTAR and the second time at the university as part of the competition, organized by the Ministry of Higher Education between different universities in the West Bank. The play won the second award.

The play revolves around King Lear, who, after his old age, decides to divide his kingdom and refrain from ruling, relying on his distribution of this legacy to the one he loves more than his three daughters: Gwernal, Region, Cordelia. Girls race for sweet talk to satisfy the arrogance of their father, King Lear, and for his wealth. However, his younger daughter Cordelia refuses to flatter like her sister in the race of love, and suffices to love her father without any hypocrisy. Which raises the madness of King Lear against her, and following this position, he exiles her from his kingdom, and her behavior is considered a betrayal of his right, which deserves to be punished.



VII.
ASHTAR
Board
and Team

ASHTAR Theatre New Board Members in 2019

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Dr. Samir Hleileh | Chairman |
| 2. Ms. Mayyar Rantissi | Vice President |
| 3. Ms. Hiba Abu Libdeh | Treasurer |
| 4. Ms. Sima Al-Jallad | Secretary |
| 5. Mr. Muhannad Karaja | Member |
| 6. Mr. Khaled Shtayyeh | Member |
| 7. Mr. Zuhdi Al-Jubeh | Member |

ASHTAR Team in Ramallah and Gaza in 2019

1. Iman Aoun – Artistic Director
2. Edward Muallem – Trainer/Actor
3. Lina Ganim – Executive Director
4. Nael Bisharia – Accountant
5. Dina Bukhari - Media coordinator
6. Emile Saba – Director and Trainer
7. Mohammad Eid – Director and Trainer
8. Ali Abu Yaseen - Director and Trainer
9. Isleen Attallah - Assistant trainer
10. Shahd Yaseen- Feild coordinator
11. Mohammad Ali – Technician

VIII.

Networks Partners Donors

Networks

- * Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN).
- * Anna Lindh Foundation Network.
- * ARIADNE Network.

ASHTAR Main Partners in 2019

- Ramallah Municipality
- Palestinian Ministry of Culture
- PPAN - Palestinian Performing Arts Network
- Birzeit Univesity
- Freedom Theatre - Jenin
- Charlottenlund school- Trondheim, Norway
- Ministry of Education

IX.

Artistic Plan For 2020

- Producing and performing 5 small interactive plays with 5 universities in West Bank and Gaza.
- Local and international tour of “Oranges and Stones”.
- Continue the training of ASHTAR Students in Ramallah and producing 2 plays with them in summer 2020.
- Local tour of “Enheduanna” production.
- Organizing the 5th international Youth Festival



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