



ASHTAR FOR THEATRE PRODUCTIONS & TRAINING



ANNUAL REPORT 2003

More than just a Report!

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Thank you

**To all our friends,
supporters & partners**

**For getting us started
For keeping us going**

Throughout the writing of this report, I was thinking of all the difficult times when we were besieged on all sides by various problems and there seems no way out. We did overcome such situations with hard work and determination, as we strongly believe in what we are doing.

"Tell me and I will forget
Show me and I will remember
Involve me and I will understand"

Aristotle

*With our deep appreciation and gratefulness
Joviana E. Stephan
Administrative Director*

Mission Statement

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

Ashtar seeks to build and strengthen cultural bridges through networking with international theater people and organizations.

Ashtar is involved in continuous research and development through various art tools and techniques within its own history looking towards the future to create a unique theater. A theater that is capable of penetrating the unconscious of the theater audience.

Ashtar believes that its most valuable investment is in its human resources which include varies trainees, actors and technicians which will ensure its continuous development of its own methodology and ideas as well as self criticism.

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After more than ten years of struggle, hard work and international communications, Ashtar for Theatre Productions and Training remained true to its promise, explicitly expressed in its Mission Statement. It surmounted the vicissitudes of the daily life in this war torn country, where the very existence of the nation, the society and the individual is continuously threatened by a relentless and unscrupulous adversary. An adversary bent on supplanting the Palestinians of this land with his own people who are converging from all over the world.

Over the years, despite frequent curfews, closures and ongoing raging violence, Ashtar not only reached the Palestinian society to leave a positive imprint on the minds of the young and the aged alike, but was able to reach world theatres through its overseas performances and cooperation with renowned theatres of Europe and the United States. It ventured to invite international directors to participate in its work such as Barbara Santos of CTO, who came all the way from Rio de Janeiro to direct a play and train actors.

Ashtar was also recognized with top awards at the Cairo International

Experimental Festival in 1996. Ashtar is always keen on participating in world conferences for theatre with a view to learn from and communicate with other world theatre groups.

Ashtar's adoption of Forum Theatre has had its positive impact not only on social issues that were regarded as taboo topics in our society but also helped junior and senior students at schools with a fresh approach towards their regular studies through the theatre. At the request of the Palestinian Ministry of Education, Ashtar introduced theatre training into schools curricula.

I am not to enumerate all Ashtar's activities, but I would direct you to Newsletters that were released for a more detailed purview. You can obtain a copy from Ashtar or ask them to email a copy to you.

Ashtar's productions culminated in the adaptation of Gibran Khalil Gibran's "The Earth Gods" which shifted the focus from the human attributes of the gods, as with the original text, to the human potential for embodying divinity.

It is with the cooperation and support of the various local and international institutions that Ashtar was able to maintain and achieve its goals as set in its Mission Statement. Ashtar is grateful to all those who assisted and supported it and to all the spectators who attended its performances.

***Antoine Nesnas
On Behalf of The Board of Directors***

Introduction

This Annual Report is in fact the first in the last two years; the year 2002 was one of extreme difficulty, suffering and loss in Palestine. 'Normal' life became altogether impossible, and people simply kept their heads down and focused on surviving, waiting for the nightmare to pass, and praying that it would not take a child, spouse or parent with it.

Despite these atrocious conditions, however, we did manage to publish our book in that year, the one-off publication commemorating our tenth anniversary 'Ashtar: A Blazing Stage,' thanks to the sponsorship of the Swedish Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Care International.

The work of Ashtar over the last three years of al-Aqsa Intifada has been blighted by the overspill of violence and conflict. Even during the less intense days, much of our regular activity was made impossible by the proximity of the theatre to the "Muqata'a", the headquarters of President Arafat, which remained a main focus of Israeli destructive attention throughout that period. Even when the curfew on the rest of the city was lifted it was impossible to come and go from the theatre and its offices, due to the constant presence of tanks, warplanes and heavily armed soldiers. Consequently, during the heat of the "Ijtayah" we were obliged to move our computers into make-shift offices in our own homes, and much of our outreach work was curtailed.

Notwithstanding these difficulties and challenges, we continued our work, going into the community and carrying out workshops tailored both to the needs of the moment and its restrictions. Often a workshop was terminated mid-way due to shelling or aerial bombardment of the school or the sudden transformation of the surrounding area into a 'military closed zone'. These efforts, however, made a radical difference to the lives of those they reached, and built the foundation for the Drama Days project, which is now going from strength to strength.

Activities' Overview

During the last two years Ashtar have been actively involved in a number of projects in the community, including the publication of a **Drama Teaching Manual**, capacity building in training for Forum theatre techniques and the on-going **Abu Shaker series**, which this year focuses on violence at school.



For the first time since the outbreak of the current Intifada we were able to resume our annual production of an experimental theatre piece, which this year is adapted from a poem of Gibran Khalil Gibran, and entitled '**The Earth Gods.**'



From the ashes and destruction reeked by the violent re-invasion of the Israeli occupiers rose, in direct response to the needs of the community, the Ashtar program **Drama Days** in schools. This evolved over three main stages to address the traumatisation of the children, while also offering new learning techniques to be put into use once the armed forces had withdrawn and their right to an education was consequently restored.

We continued to implement and expand our training program on a number of different levels. We have participated in the project launched by the Danish Red Cross and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society 'Children Affected by Armed Conflict' program in the village of **Tubas** in the north area of the West Bank. We also continued to build drama as a permanent curricular feature in the Palestinian education system through our Drama Teachers' Training program (DTT), carried out in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, and through our various on-going drama clubs at the theatre.

On the other hand, we are involved with the up-coming children's musical '**Fawanees,**' which is based on a story by national hero and literary giant, the late **Ghassan Kanafani**. Ashtar General Manager, Edward Muallem is providing the young cast with theatrical training as well as assisting visiting Swede Fernando Nope in the direction.

Late spring we ran a six-day intensive workshop for mental health and social work professionals designed to offer new tools for dealing with the psycho-emotional pressures under which they are living. This employed for the first time here in Palestine a group of techniques developed out of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed known as the '**Rainbow of Desires.**'

Conferences and cross visits were attended in Sweden, Bosnia, Egypt and Belgium and a tour of Abu Shaker was conducted in Jordan.

During the celebratory Ramadan Nights season we organized a special games show involving college students based on improvisation techniques: **Theatre Sport.**

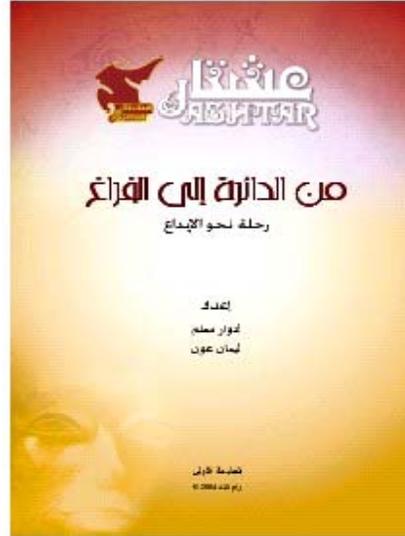
Finally, we re-vamped and re-launched our website; for all our latest news and updates please visit us there:

<http://www.ashtar-theatre.org>



Drama Book (NEW in April 2004)

With the support of Norad, Ashtar have developed its first Drama Book, comprising over 320 exercises. The book is the result of five years of experience in the field of drama training, with illustrations and step-by-step guidance on how to do the various exercises. These are divided into the categories of warm-up, concentration and improvisation exercises. The book will be an important reference source for use by non-specialists and specialists alike, and an indispensable tool for teachers, particularly those wishing to continue working with the techniques following Ashtar workshops and Drama Day visits. The book is copyright of Ashtar.



Despite the huge number of books that any theater art devotee would find on texts, history, criticisms and actor formation, and, despite the very large theatre experiences he may have encountered or have gained knowledge about in both the Arab and foreign worlds, modern and ancient, he would still find that this book adds something new particularly in the areas of compilation and classification of the training material. It renders it simple to reap the anticipated benefits therefrom on the practical level, readily discerned by both trainee and his supervisor.

Primarily, the book pays special attention to the training of youth at schools in addition to those adults at other institutions, as the need arises. This gives it an extra dimension because it emphasizes the importance of training the young, a particularity unavailable to those who enroll in theatre institutes after having terminated high school because, to a large extent, they have already formed body habits and the modes of dealing with it. To reform these habits in conformity with the nature of practical theater needs would require a great additional effort, often unavailable at institutes. It is much easier to govern the bodies of youth in their expressions, because body conformity is ripe and only needs formation through exercise. This is exactly what this book strives to adhere to and does not choose except that which helps to subdue the body with an aim to attain a natural power that drives it in conformity with the theatrical role dictates without having to have recourse to hard or dangerous exercises that could drain the body, young or old.

Productions

Forum Theatre

Forum is an interactive form of theatre that was developed out of the theories of leading Brazilian director Augusto Boal, notably the 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. The actors perform the play, and a problematic or challenging social situation is presented to the audience. Then, through the facilitation of the 'Joker,' the audience is invited to intervene in such a way as to change the dynamic of the situation. The tyrannical character remains essentially as s/he is, but through experimenting with different responses to that behavior the audience, now 'spect-actors' (no longer merely passive spectators but actors, active instigators of change), explore new behavioral possibilities. By acting out problems of direct relevance to their lives, the audience under-goes a transformative and transcendent experience; they are given the safe space in which to rehearse and test these new responses to old problems. They then gain the courage to go away and try out these ways of dealing with their issues; Forum theatre is life-changing.

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 seven Forum productions covering the topics of early marriage, incest, expired food, living with disability, child labor, collaboration and other hot issues.

Accordingly,

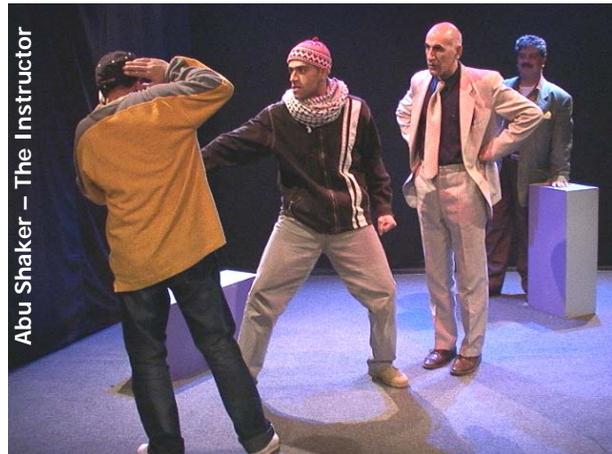
- **373 shows were conducted**
- **58, 200 people were reached in 55 villages, 17 cities and 9 refugee camps in Palestine and in Jordan**

Abu Shaker – The Instructor



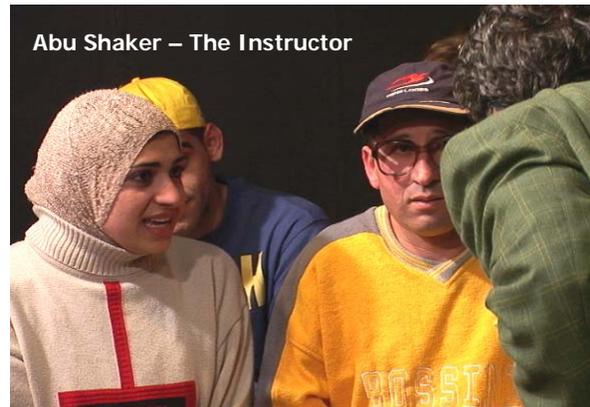
The Ashtar creative team are directly and actively involved in work on the ground, and the themes are selected accorded to the social needs manifesting themselves most strongly at that time. The theme of the play this year is about the vicious circle of violence that was observed to be growing in schools,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

The action centers around three main protagonists; Abu Shaker, the Arabic language and physical education instructor, who regards his stick almost as an integral part of his body, and his right to use it freely as, if not divinely ordained, then at least sanctioned and required by centuries of tradition and precedence. Principal Fouad is results-oriented; he stakes his personal reputation on that of the school, and approves whichever techniques graduate the most

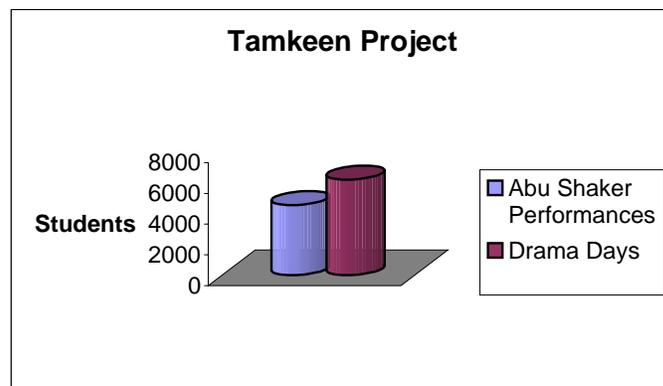


students. Samir is the newly-appointed social worker, whose job is to look after the welfare of the children, to improve their conditions and acquaint them with their rights and responsibilities. The other main characters are the three students Ali, Firas and Munther. Samir's job is particularly frustrating as little respect is accorded to him, as the tyrant Abu Shaker steam-rollers and pooh-poohs his recommendations, dragging the spineless Principal Fouad in his wake. Samir's challenge is to stand his ground and remain true to his beliefs and principles, not only for the sake of his own dignity and integrity, but also as an example to the children, the victims (and sometimes perpetrators) of violence.

The play was developed in two stages. During the pre-production, development stage Barbara Santos, the General Coordinator of the Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil, came to Ashtar to run a workshop on Forum techniques. Barbara also directed the initial performances while she was with us, during this phase, which was made possible by the support of Tamkeen. This funding covered not only the workshop and development stage, but also the first thirty performances. It is of the utmost importance that the Forum plays are accessible by all sectors of society, and do not exclude the least advantaged ones.

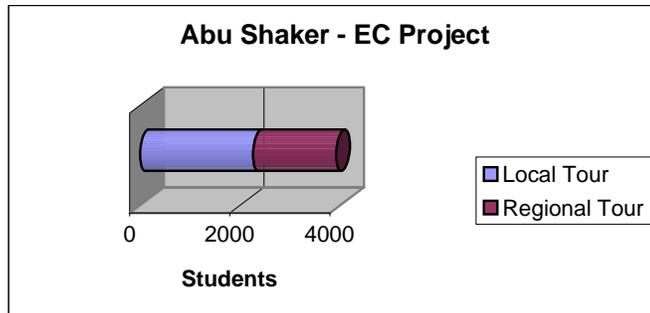


For this reason we would like to express our thanks for this support, which made it possible to keep the performances free of charge, and thereby open to all members of the community. These initial performances



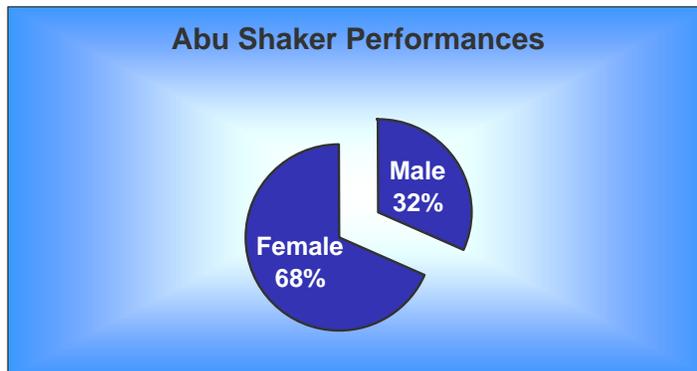
reached an audience of some 4,500 students in Ramallah and Bethlehem

areas (the middle and south of the West Bank: we had hoped to target the Nablus area also in the north, but severe travel restrictions made this unworkable).



The second phase, which comprised fourteen performances here in the West Bank and a Jordanian tour of a further seven shows, was funded by the European Commission. Around 4,000 students were reached in this stage.

We would also like to express our thanks for the fruitful cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Education, the UNRWA headquarters especially the Education Department and the principals of the various schools. Their time, effort and understanding contributed immeasurably to the success of the program.



The Earth Gods'

The current performance 'The Earth Gods' marks Iman Aoun's debut in professional direction. She adapted it from Gibran Khalil Gibran's penultimate work, a tri-partite colloquy in poetic form. Aoun's adaptation shifts the focus from the human attributes of the gods, as with the original text, to the human potential for embodying divinity. Her inversion is affirming and empowering: it speaks of that divine spark that resides in all of us, which is nurtured by certain attitudes and behavior and extinguished by others.

Using the trope of three gods of the earth, Gibran had explored a simplified range of psychological responses to situations of disempowerment and apparent hopelessness. For Aoun, the three 'gods' become human ideals or ideologies. The first and second of these represent the dualism of Oppressor and Oppressed, whereas the third transcends this cycle. By shifting our focus from the ills of the world—both natural disasters and man-made ones—to our own propensity for creative self-expression, we grow closer to realizing our potential or ideal.



'The Earth Gods' is an experimental production, which deals with issues very much still relevant to the Palestinian situation today. Aoun's adaptation 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.

Aoun's approach to the piece is innovative and daring, and it sparked a lively discussion among its Ramallah audience. The western conception of time is a linear and climactic one (it travels in only one direction, it begins and it ends). She builds her piece on an eastern cyclic time, a time that never began and never ends, a time that *always existed*. And yet the piece is very much situated in modernity, in terms of both form and content. Thus her piece eschews the traditional plot-based approach: in it there is no 'beginning, middle and end' structure, no climax.

The piece recently completed a regional tour, starting with special school performances in Ramallah on 5th and 6th November for college students, given during school hours and preceded by preparatory assignments on the language and style of the piece. Other performances were given in Jerusalem on 15th and 16th November, Bethlehem on 21st and 22nd, which were part of the Ramadan Nights program. An international and another local tour is planned during 2004.



Overview

Ashtar is committed to broadening the horizons and the opportunities available to Palestinian youth by providing access to an integrated program of drama training. Almost half of the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza are under the age of seventeen years. They constitute an important, yet critically under-served sector of our society. They are the future, and it is of paramount importance that they receive the attention they deserve, that their skills and talents are recognized and nurtured, that their voice is heard. 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. 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.

Drama Days

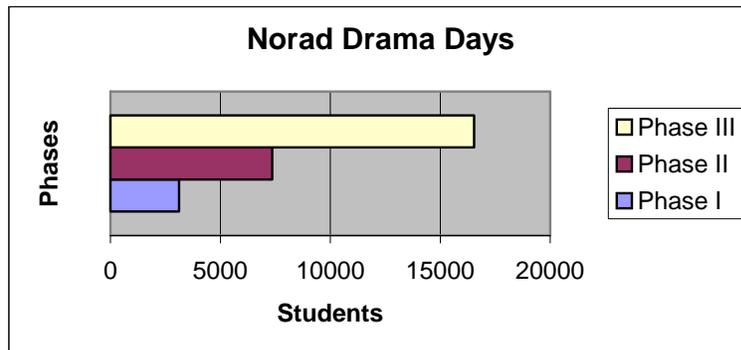
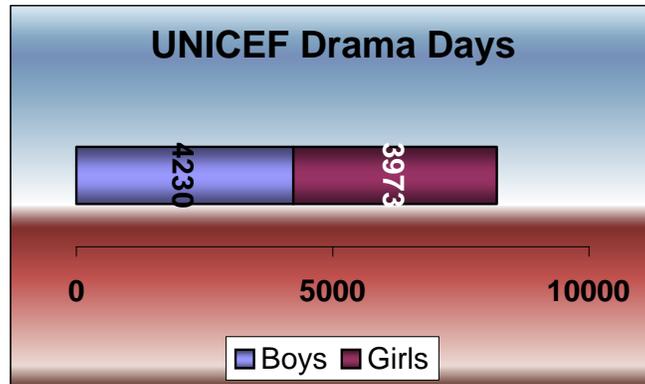
The Ashtar program of Drama Days evolved over three clear stages; the project first came about as an emergency response to the heavy incursions of the Israeli military in the spring of 2002 (the Ijtiyah). Many of the youth were severely traumatized during the violence and fear of this period, and in addition to this they were prevented from exercising their right to an education, due to the long and total curfews of that period, which prevented them from attending school for over forty days. Tensions were rife as whole families were cooped up under one roof, with no outlet for the energy of the younger family members.

These sessions provided an opportunity for the youth to release some of that stored-up tension and frustration in a safe and supportive environment, and give voice to their justified anger over the crimes committed against them, individually and collectively. Initially the structure was very loose, providing a basic introduction to drama

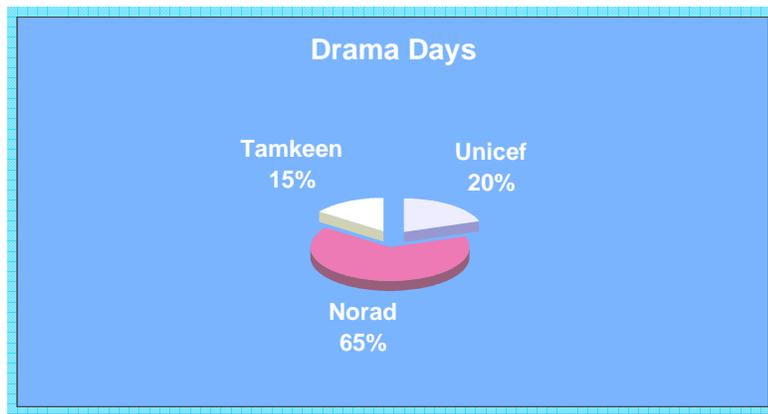
techniques through a range of exercises and games. This was due to the nature of the circumstances; during this period there were sudden curfews and equally sudden lifting of curfews. Sometimes the city or parts of the city would open unexpectedly between the hours of 1pm and 3pm, or 3pm and 6pm, or an announcement from the roving Israeli jeep would be made to that effect and then later retracted inexplicably. At other times a workshop would be in progress when the area would suddenly come under fire or shelling, and the class would have to immediately disband. These factors influenced the structure of our implementation greatly.

By the spring of 2003 the nature of Israeli offensive activity had changed, assuming a different, less overt form once more, which allowed the structure of the workshops to evolve to the level

of a curriculum in drama training. The Drama Days carried out from February through to May 2003 were made possible thanks to the support of Unicef and Norad.



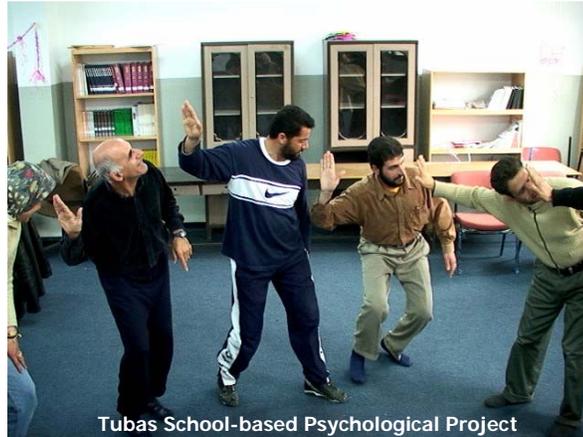
Again, supported by Norad, the program has now entered a third stage with an even more clearly defined curriculum and tightly-packed schedule; the Ashtar team of five actor/ trainers have seen over 25,000 students across some 50 schools since the program began. All the classes are visited, through all the grades, twice a year. The time allotted was doubled at the request of the schools; the exercises and techniques have had a clear and positive impact on the attention span (which very typically suffers in war situations), as well as radically enhancing performance across the general (National) curriculum. Pens and notebooks were distributed; the notebooks have pages for the student to write his/ her timetable, notes and homework, as well as including a sentence or phrase for each day on the usefulness and benefits of drama to the individual. In the second semester of the third phase (January-May 2004) posters for the classrooms and a special designed drama teaching manual will be distributed.



The whole project, throughout its lifespan, from inception up to the current incarnation, has been tailored and developed according to the needs and demands of those it is designed to serve. Ashtar hopes to be able to continue to listen to and cater for the community in this responsive and flexible way, moving ever forward to new horizons and greater achievements.

Tubas School-based Psychological Project

In cooperation with the Danish Red Cross and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, Ashtar has been conducting intensive workshops centered in Tubas, as a part of their "Children Affected by Armed Conflict" Program. The project conducts workshops to identify



drama as a tool for in psycho-social relief, reaching schools across five towns and villages in Jenin area. Ashtar have been training 40 government teachers participating in the project, and attending the monthly follow-up sessions with the Red Crescent monitors.

This project was preceded by a workshop conducted over a three-month pilot phase, which was devised by Edward Muallem following his visit to a parallel scheme in Bosnia, also run by the Danish Red Cross. The scheme has been very successful in using drama to address the psycho-emotional problems of children living in war/ conflict situations.

A manual was produced at this stage, and the current one is a developed and revised version. The development process rested on close communication with those involved, including regular Parent meetings.

The feedback from the staff on the ground has been very positive; the children's work initially reflected almost exclusively darkness and violence, symptoms of traumatic experience when, for example, their father is arrested, brother injured or house demolished. Such injustice and inhumanity must never be politically 'normalised', and the negative psycho-emotional manifestations of the children are quite simply a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. However, such levels of traumatising are not sustainable, so the project continues its work in addressing the needs of these most vulnerable members of the community.

To further that end, Ashtar have produced a manual of 19 drama exercises for use by the implementation team on the ground, in order to ensure the sustainability of the work.

The work is now in its second stage, which is longer term (one year), and centers around training the trainers and putting in place the structure for continuity. The revised manual is one of the features of this sustainable aspect of the project.

Drama Teachers Training Program (DTT)

Set up to create a permanent presence for drama in schools, Ashtar undertook the training of a core group of sixteen teachers in drama techniques and skills, which they were able to take back to their schools and implement. The most suitable way of doing this was by setting up school-based drama clubs, which acted as an ideal forum to introduce and practice new ideas. The project was co-funded by EED-Germany, Heinrich Böll and Ford Foundation.

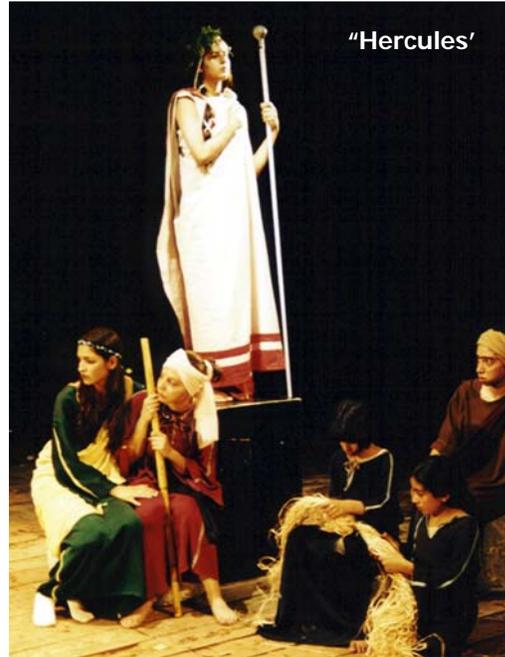


July 2003 saw the graduation of twelve of the first team to complete Ashtar's two-year Drama Teachers Training Program, under the auspices of the Ministry of

Education. Each graduate teacher presented his or her own play as a part of the examination process. In the graduation ceremony itself students of the summer Drama Club presented their final performance piece, which was taken from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

Drama Clubs

A one-off Drama Club was run by Ashtar at **St. Joseph's School** in Ramallah, at their special request. At the end of the training the group of tenth-graders staged a performance of Euripides' "Hercules' Children." The play was performed on 19th and 20th May, under the direction of Iman Aoun, Ashtar's artistic director, assisted by Shadi Zomorrod, an actor/trainer and with lighting and sound by Ashtar's Attallah Tarazi. It was an unqualified success, with overwhelming public feedback and numerous requests from the other schools that the same training and opportunity be offered to their students. Ashtar hopes to steadily increase their capacity sufficiently to cater for such public demand in the future.



A small group of **Birzeit University** students also requested drama training at the intermediate level. This was conducted between the months of April and June, culminating in the performance of a short sketch at Ashtar theatre, attended by friends and family.

Also by popular demand, **Drama Clubs at Ashtar** continued during the summer. The course was attended by around twenty old students and newcomers, and also culminated in the performance of a short sketch. The original group expanded and was divided into two groups for the summer and three for the winter for the period of one year, each having ten to twelve students, and covering Beginners and Advanced levels.

Teachers' Training

In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Ashtar also carried out a four-day intensive training in drama curriculum from the first through to the fourth grade. Following Ashtar's formulation and submission of a drama training curriculum, the Ministry invited us to train teachers in its implementation prior to the start of the new academic year. Workshops were carried out over four days—a day for each grade level—in parallel for both the Bethlehem (with 22 teachers) and Ramallah (with 13 teachers) areas. Feedback forms from the teachers and the trainer were later submitted to the Ministry with suggestions for the future modification of the curriculum, which is still in its bedding-in stage.

'Fawanees' – a Children's Musical – An Ambitious Project

Ashtar was invited by the National Conservatory of Music (NHC) to lead the drama workshop and direct their musical show that involves 65 students between 9 and 14 years of age, drawn from various schools.

Fawanees"- A children Musical



'Fawanees' is a musical based on Ghassan Kanafani's children's story 'The Little Lantern.' The lyrics were written by Waseem Al-Kurdi, and the music consists of 28 pieces composed by Suhail Khoury. German musician will execute the instrumental distribution along with Suhail Khoury. 'Fawanees' will be co-directed by visiting Swedish director Fernando Nope (trainer of our DTT Program)

Edward Muallem will provide theatre and drama training for the cast and Philippe Andrieux from France, who has a long record of professional relationship with Ashtar Theatre, will be responsible for the light designing.

The opening of 'Fawanees' is scheduled in August 2004, in the newly-built Cultural Palace Theatre, Ramallah, with the participation of the Norwegian Orchestra and Arab and Palestinian musicians of distinction.

Conferences and Workshops

In the last week of May we were joined for the third time by British theatre practitioner Mojisola Adebayo for an intensive six-day workshop on the '**Rainbow of Desires**,' drawn from Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed.' Mojisola lives in Ireland, and works on a freelance basis internationally. She is an expert in the field of Forum theatre, with professional connections to Dublin Youth Theatre, the (Irish) National Theatre at the Abbey and the School of Drama, Trinity College, University of Dublin.

'Rainbow of Desires' is the collective name used to describe a growing collection of interactive games, exercises and theatre techniques that help to explore and eradicate oppression that has become internalized. Although most oppression in the Palestinian context is very clearly external in nature, there remains much that we can do by working through our reactions and responses, internal and otherwise, to such oppression: 'The oppressors greatest weapon is the mind of the oppressed' (Che Guevara). Fifteen mental healthcare and social work professionals took part in the workshop, along with the Ashtar team. This was the first time these techniques have been taught in Palestine, and we received feedback from the participants that it has had an important impact on their work allowing them to reach out in new ways and offer effective new tools with which to resist and eliminate the damaging and disabling effects of tyranny. In addition to this, the Ashtar creative team have added another key component to their range of acting and training skills.

In July, Artistic Director of Ashtar, Iman Aoun, attended the **'Conference of Arab Children'** in Jordan, organized by the Nur al-Hussein Foundation. She took with her a group of students nominated by Ashtar at the request of the Ministry of Culture. She trained them in a theatrical sketch, entitled 'Checkpoint,' which discussed one of the most prominent features of Palestinian experience under occupation. The piece was then performed before the Jordanian royalty and officials.

Theatre Conference: 100 Artists Project - Belgium

Iman also visited Brussels on November 28, for a conference on 'Theatre in Palestine.' This conference was organized as a part of the cultural exchange that evolved around the "100 Artists to Palestine" project, which facilitates the visits of foreign artists to the occupied territories in order to exchange ideas and express their solidarity. The project grew out of an initial contact between the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) and the Palestinian Art Organizations' Network in Ramallah. Over the last year a number of European Artists have visited Palestine, a different group every three months, to act as eye-witnesses of the existing political conditions and daily Israeli oppression of ordinary Palestinians, and also to establish and strengthen relations with the local art community.

Other visits

In May Edward Muallem, General Manager, made a visit to Stockholm, Sweden, in order to follow up on the DTT program and to do further networking. During his stay he worked with DTT trainer Fernando Nope on the text of the drama training manual, making further revisions.

During the summer, Shadi Zummorod, an actor and trainer, attended the second workshop on acting in Tunisia, which was followed by conducting performances in France. On the other hand, Muhammad Eid, an actor and trainer, participated in the Second Theatre Summer Camp "Body, Speech, Myth" in Athens, Greece during the month of August.

Other Achievements

A new look for Ashtar's Website

This summer the redesigned website went live. For latest news and information please visit us at: <http://www.ashtar-theatre.org>

Workshops in schools on script of 'The Earth Gods'

Visits were made to local schools to meet with teachers and explain the concept behind 'The Earth Gods' and request the teachers give their students (10th to 12th graders) assignments on the background of the piece; the life and thought of Gibran Khalil Gibran as well as attention in class to difficult words and meanings in the text itself. This was done in preparation for the series of special school performances of the piece in Ramallah in early November, which brought together students from different colleges. The atmosphere in the auditorium on the day was one of almost palpable excitement, which will assuredly leave an indelible mark on the memory of many of the participating students.

Theatre Sport

In cooperation with the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) Ashtar organized a televised Theatre Sport evening during the month of Ramadan in November. Theatre Sport is a competition between two teams in improvisational acting, judged by the audience.

The teams, made up of university and college students, are given situations around which they improvise, and then the audience vote on their performance according to set criteria. All participants received training in the basic techniques of improvisation prior to the event.

The initiative was received with great warmth and enthusiasm, and it is hoped that further Theatre Sports events will be organized early next year, in response to popular demand.

Evaluation of 'Forum Theatre' with CARE International

CARE International-West Bank Gaza's involvement in **Ashtar's** Popular Theatre Project began in July 1999. The project was designed to be implemented over a three-year period, although a one-year extension was obtained due to activities necessarily postponed because of the intensity of the political situation. An evaluation had been produced by Edward Green at the end of the first phase.

In September, two international consultants David Silver and Marco Weeks worked on a second evaluation. They employed a participative approach, involving members of the Ashtar team; apart from the series of meetings Care also provided a workshop for Ashtar on the techniques and methodology of the evaluation process. This combined effort resulted in a full and comprehensive assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the project, along with a series of recommendations for continuation and improved implementation of the technique. We also have developed as a part of this shared process a series of three questionnaires for use in the on-going evaluation work, to help us assess, track and record behavior change, progress and future needs.

The feedback from key informants—from the women's groups, student organizations, NGOs and schools—was very positive. Among the main recommendations were that there should be more performances, more time spent before and after the shows in preparation and discussion, and that there should be greater access for government schools, and that the public performances should continue to be free. Ashtar is actively seeking the funding that will enable this. The report is available in full upon request.

Future Activities

Theatre of Oppressed

Barbara Santos, General Coordinator of the Centre of Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO) will be invited again in March 2004 to conduct a two-week workshop on "Formation of Theatre of the Oppressed Multipliers". This project will be started on a new partnership with CTO-Rio and Care International.

Performances

A series of 'Abu Shaker – the Instructor' performances is scheduled for 2004. In addition, as 'The Earth Gods' has successfully completed its regional tour, plans are underway to take it on tour in Europe and America, in addition to additional local performances in 2004.

Drama Days

There are a further twenty Drama Days scheduled for the second term, as a follow-up to previous visits. At this stage the teaching manuals and posters will be distributed.

Drama clubs

The Drama clubs are always very much in demand, and despite the financial and logistical difficulties arising out of life under occupation, always fully attended. We will continue to provide this important outlet for the youth of Ramallah and other reachable areas to the best of our capacity.

Cultural Memory Codes: Iowa University, USA

During 2004, Iman Aoun is invited to Iowa University to run a series of improvisation workshops the themes of ethnicity, memory and alienation. The idea of cultural memory codes will be explored: do we receive cultural memories from our ancestors? What is the meaning of an ethnic cultural background in a globalised society? Where do we consciously suppress our culture in order to fit in, and where does our original culture express itself without our realizing after being alienated from it. The workshop will end with a small presentation that will be shown twice.

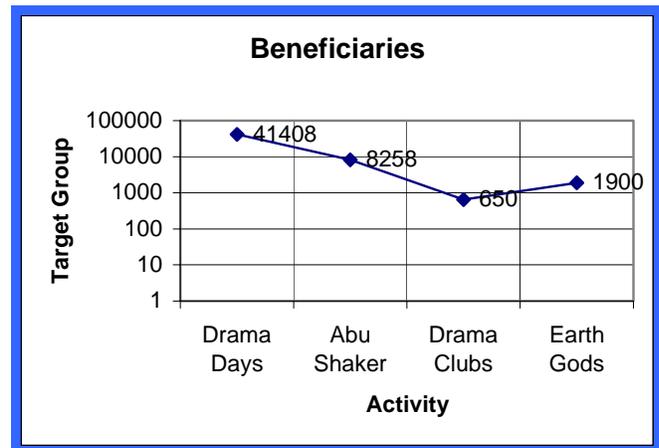
Evaluation

The importance of evaluation to successful projects implementation and completion is evident. Accordingly, we at Ashtar usually conduct both internal and external evaluations of our activities in order to achieve effectively our objectives. Feedback from our target groups and partners is also highly considered. This is done through questionnaires, meetings and joint activities.

Ashtar succeeded in conveying its message, both through the performances or the drama training, to the selected target group. Participation in such activities has a direct positive influence on the students, for instance, and has no doubt provided them with a variety of personal and social skills that are essential to the development of a cohesive and healthy society. Also, by working together, students were exposed to a new experience that offered them the opportunity to listen to each others and appreciate each others view points, express themselves freely and fearlessly and cooperate together. Moreover, it increased the cultural awareness on social issues and provided the participants with new strategies to face the ever-compounding challenges of life and proposed new keys to problem solving.

One of the main obstacles that faced the team in implementing activities was the mobility and movement restriction between cities and villages in the Palestinian Territories. For instance, touring with Abu Shaker or conducting drama days in the north area of the West Bank was the most

difficult to achieve within the current ongoing crisis and military closures enforced on the territories. Therefore, activities were conducted to the audience that can be reached as a strategy to coop with the closure policy and the restriction on free movement of Palestinians.



Share with us our Success Stories

One of the schools' principles asked the team-indirectly-to stop the discussion after the show, that is giving them few minutes to finish, as the students were so much involved with the case presented in the play and started talking about incidents at their own school. The team did not consider his note and insisted to continue.

This year, Abu Shaker succeeded in attracting the teachers and the school social workers to participate with the students and go on stage, in an attempt to work together on a positive change.

One can obviously see the difference of the students' behavior when they enter the theatre to attend the play and when they left.

As soon as the play started, many of the students in several performances, started mentioning that is exactly like "our teacher xxx" or "that is exactly what is happening with us", etc..., which emphasize the importance of the issues presented.

Most classes suffer from lack of concentration. Students cannot focus with the trainers on concentration exercises, such as attentive listening and repeating phrases. On the other hand, the difference is clear towards the end of the class, as students' attitude totally changes: they concentrate in a better way, they are calm and cooperative, opposite to the beginning of the session.

While conducting a drama session in one of the schools, there was a handicapped child, where the trainer insisted on his participation and encouraged him. The student appreciated this step and was so excited about his participation in front of the all the class.

Children were contented that there is someone who is interested to listen to them and ask for their opinion.

The students were so much involved with the drama session that they want to continue even if the school bell rang indicating that the class is over.

Both the students and the school administration were satisfied with the program as some of the schools consider themselves “forgotten” as nobody is offering them any chance to participate in such activities.

Also, students were surprised to see a teacher without a “stick”, at the same time, he is asking them to call him by his name without using the title of “teacher”.

Some of the students were shy and do not want to interact, while others were making too much noise, but by the end of the class, both groups changed: everybody participated in the drama session.

At one of the schools, students at the end of the drama session gave the trainers some personal souvenirs such as pens & medals, so as to keep remembering them and come again to visit them the next year.

The students liked so much the notebooks and pens as they can use them everyday and it also reminds them of this unique experience.

Also, at one of the classes, there was a handicapped girl that was a bit isolated but the trainer insistence on her participation encouraged her and gave her confidence in her abilities.

Epilogue

Some twelve years ago... when Ashtar Theatre was still a project on paper, its initiators did not think that in a dozen years they will be running an organization that reaches out some 35.000 student a year.

Through its different programs: Drama Days inside the class room, Drama Clubs – as extra curricular activity, and Forum Plays for higher school students; Ashtar Theatre, was able to set an individual relationship with a wide range of students in various cities, villages and refugee camps in the West Bank. If this indicates any thing at all it will show the dedication and the clear vision of the Ashtar team who believe that theatre is a strong psycho/social empowering tool, and that it is their responsibility thereafter to perch theatre, in the course of the people's life system.

More so, theatre in Palestine could not have been nourished without the continuous exchange of knowledge and of practice that takes place whenever Ashtar Theatre host a visiting director/trainer, or when its members participate at international workshops or festivals. These dialogues give place for new ideas to be developed and stimulate latent quests and aspirations to be exposed.

When we think we like to think aloud, when we act we want to be in the light, when we feel we express, and when we imagine we go for realization.

Dear friends and supporters we believe the time has come we think together, and act side by side to realize the upcoming dreams. Tune in for our next set of ideas and programs.

Iman Aoun
Artistic Director

Main Supporters and projects

- The production of Abu Shaker's Affairs with a local tour
A series of drama days
Tamkeen / 2002-2003
- Abu Shaker Local and Regional tour
EC / 2003-2004
- The production of "Earth Gods"
American Consulate / 2003
The Ministry of Culture / 2003
- Drama Teachers Training Program
Ford Foundation / 2001-2002
Heinrich Boll Foundation / 2001-2003
EED Germany / 2001-2002
- Drama Days Project
UNIICEF / 2003
NORAD / 2003-2004
- Drama Book Project
NORAD / 2003-2004
- Promotion of Popular Theatre Project
CARE International / 2004

We would like also to thank:

- Al Qattan Foundation
- Cultural Centers Network
- Emerzian Printshop - Jerusalem
- IETM
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Culture
- Miraat Media – Jordan
- Nur Al Hussein Foundation- Jordan
- Palestinian Red Crescent Society
- Retno Hotel – Ramallah
- Roberto Cimetta Fund
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- UNRWA
- WACC

Financial Status

Ashtar, as a local NGO that depends mainly on fundraising since it does not have any fixed revenue, continues to face a lot of difficulties in this aspect. For the last few years, the annual income was very fluctuated depending on the projects and the political stability.

The year 2002 witnessed a number of emergency intervention programs, which were successful and met the needs of this stage.

Total income in 2002	\$364,000
Total expenditure in 2002	\$320,151
Surplus	\$43,849

On the other hand, during the 2003, the emergency projects in addition to some others were better formulated and structured which attracted additional funds. Bu at the same time, the expenditure was relatively higher.

Total income in 2003	\$425,248
Total expenditure in 2003	\$534,690
Deficit	(\$109,442)

