



"Abu Shaker's Affairs '99"
Ashtar Forum Theater
production, Ramallah,
Palestine, spring 1999.

With her husband, Edward Muallem, **Iman Aoun** is Co-Artistic Director of Ashtar Theatre, the company they cofounded in 1991, as well as its Public Relations Manager and a performer. As she described in her contributions to the online dialogue among the authors in this volume, her career has followed a trajectory typical of those who have not come to community cultural development work through academic training—that is, total immersion in on-the-job training:

I started my career in theatre back in 1984 with the internationally known Palestinian theatre company El-Hakawati. At that time I did not have any theatre training or education—how would I, when Palestine has not one theatre school up till now? With Hakawati I participated in all its

productions: acting, improvising, sewing, sweeping, dancing, traveling, assisting the administration—basically everything that was needed. The group was my home, my school, and theatre was and still is my lifestyle.

Woven through Iman's essay are the problems of a community under siege, struggling with identity and autonomy:

In Palestine even the baby in its mother's womb is politicized, this is our destiny. So as we say here, we breathe politics and eat politics with our daily bread—but wait a minute, social politics aren't the same. Our society has many taboos and prohibitions especially when it comes to women's issues. This is why we started in 1997 our Forum Theatre productions.

The latter part of this essay describes an annual Forum Theatre series, "Abu Shaker's Affairs," that has allowed the theater to raise troubling questions for Palestinian society in a safe forum—a project received with great enthusiasm, and one that has enabled Ashtar to reach remote areas and rural villages where inhabitants had never before seen theater.

Interspersed with the essay are excerpts from an interview with Iman conducted by Arlene Goldbard on November 27, 2001.

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Different Art Forms, Mutual Concerns

by Iman Aoun
Translated by Fatin Farhat and
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Since An-Nakba (Arabic for “catastrophe,” used in reference to the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948) and the subsequent creation of the State of Israel, Palestinian culture has played a prominent and significant role in the preservation and crystallization of a Palestinian identity in the face of the occupation. Through folklore, art, poetry and literature, culture has been essential in expressing an attachment to the roots of popular culture and helping to rebuild confidence.

Ashtar, our Palestinian nonprofit organization for theater production and training, was founded in Jerusalem in 1991. When Ashtar was established, theater in Palestine suffered from an acute shortage of professionals in all fields. At the same time, a great need for creativity and self-expression among young people in Palestinian schools was identified. Ashtar’s founders wanted to offer these youth, growing up in the wake of the first Intifada (uprising), a voice, a chance to express their feelings of frustration and to search for opportunities for growth and development in a very restrictive period of our history. In this essay, I want to show how different cultural domains played significant roles in shaping the sociopolitical awareness of our community, and treat the particular dilemmas and challenges of community cultural development under conditions of occupation, exploring some of the ideas, influences and approaches that shape our work in particular and other such work in Palestine. To begin, it is necessary to set the context.

Prior to An-Nakba, major Palestinian cities served as a nucleus for Arab culture. For example, the creation and multiplication of publishing houses and literary journals reached its apex in 1929. The reality of pre-1948 cultural institutions refutes claims that Palestine was a land without a people to a people without a land, used by Zionists to attract Jewish immigration. In the aftermath of An-Nakba and the forced emigration of Palestinians in 1948, the city as an entity and the city culture disappeared from Palestinian society. Consequently, culture began to revolve around rural society, which in turn introduced its own folkloric elements which came to predominate, although they did not represent the true original Palestinian culture.

Palestinians were dispossessed and forced to emigrate to numerous host countries. Those of rural background settled in Palestinian refugee camps in the Arab world. The camp dwellers stressed the revival of their cultural heritage both as a group survival strategy and as an obstacle to attempts to assimilate them into host countries. As a result, the homeland became a cultural project manifested through literature, other arts and creativity, formed according to the collective dream of the dispossessed.

CREATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE FACE OF SUBJUGATION

Palestinian culture—the infant of the catastrophe—was constructed by authors and artists over a half-century of forced emigration, exile and occupation. This culture continues to be the most sensitive and controversial issue with the Other (Israel in relation to Palestine). The struggle centered on the land in myth and actuality. The Other enacted its myth on the Palestinian land, spreading it all over the world while the Palestinian reality was reduced in both history and geography to mythic confines defined by its author. As a location, Palestine has become divided between a new politico-geographical reality with a unified cultural history and the place of exile in which the homeland was packed and transported in a suitcase.

Many poets, authors and artists broached the subject of this homeland struggle in their writings and artistic works. They articulated national concepts and feelings of the Palestinian public. Their creative works centered on the formation and structuring of national symbols, so that Palestinian literature often used symbols to epitomize the lost homeland. The most important of these symbols was that of the Palestinian hero, a substitute for defeat and conquest which befell the people as a result of An-Nakba and the loss of the homeland.

Palestinian poets and poetry were instrumental in developing the thinking and approach of the Palestinian public in all its sectors and locations, crystallizing popular political aspirations. The famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish played a significant role in this context, going beyond the Palestinian horizon to gain international acknowledgement. Consider this description of the

impact of Darwish's writing by Jordanian poet Muhammad Abeid Allah, former professor of Arabic literature at Philadelphia University:

Mahmoud Darwish caused me surprise and amazement... he occupied me and filled up my spirit as he did to my colleagues and to my entire generation. Darwish formed a distinguished mark in our consciousness from childhood. We grew up with his poems and memorized many of them... dictated them in our notebooks, planted them in our spirits, to dream of flourishing in a more beautiful and noble world similar to the one whose features are drawn through the poems that enchanted me. Mahmoud Darwish's poetry backed us and preserved our souls from defeats. Chanting and poetry lifted up our souls and supported them. Darwish, significant fabricator of our mood, taught us the rituals of Palestine. His poems that were transformed into melodies of lyrics have become a part of our daily rituals that point toward him and toward an unknown Palestine to those born in the Diaspora. Palestine's image remains alive within us through the poetry that was planted in our souls strongly and vitally. Darwish inherited the land of language, and recognized that "land is inherited as language" and "language is inherited as land." Thus, through Darwish we have acquired the alphabetic rhyme of homeland and language.¹

¹Muhammad Abeid Allah, "Poets," *House of Poetry Magazine*, Edition 4-5, Summer 1999, p. 259.

Similar to other Arab societies, Palestinian culture takes immense pride in its Arabic language, which due to its ties to Islam and the Quran's linguistic miracle is considered sacred. Eloquence and rhetoric are the strongest and most prominent creative productions in the entirety of the Arab civilization, and language has played a significant role in Palestinian popular culture.

Thus language in Palestinian culture plays a significant role in shaping the minds of the people. For Ashtar, language is a collective proposition for self-affirmation; it's a voice, an emotion and an act of the body. Ashtar's production "Of Soil and Crimson," for instance, focused on the history and the origins of the cultural conflict with the Other. We delved into the original mythology of our ancestors the Canaanites and the way that the Hebrews, arriving centuries later, mixed facts and fiction in their accounts of the Canaanites. Thus, competing mythologies about the land underpin conflicts over the contemporary history of Palestine.

Another inspiration to the community was Naji Al Ali, a Palestinian caricaturist whose first drawing came to light in the Ein El-Halweh refugee camp in Lebanon in 1963. Naji Al Ali voiced the concerns of the poor and the oppressed, expressing their anger and sorrows, declaring he had lost faith in rotten Arabic regimes and economic elites, thus gaining numerous enemies. Over the quarter-century of Naji Al Ali's visual commentaries on the daily news of Arab politics—particularly the Palestinian problem—people got accustomed to reading the daily papers backward, starting with the last page featuring his caricature that accurately, honestly, realistically and scandalously depicted the political reality of each day.

Naji was simple, popular and direct. This is why people have memorized his words, chanted his slogans and personified his drawings into theater. He was considered a mentor to Ashtar, especially for his critical thinking. His example guides us in raising a generation of young actors to have a critical eye and voice and a strong social and political awareness.

Handala (from *handal*, a bitter plant) is one of Naji's main characters, exemplifying his people's suffering and defining the meaning of exile. This miserable, poorly dressed, barefooted child observes each new event from a distance. He is seldom actively involved. He captures childhood's innocence, allowing him to express his views and anger openly and freely. Here's how Naji Al Ali defined Handala:

Handala was born at ten years of age and will always remain ten. At ten, he was forced out of his homeland and he will remain ten until he returns. Then he will start growing. Nature's laws do not apply to Handala. He is an exception since a homeland's loss is an exception. Matters will revert to normalcy when he returns home. I introduced him to the reader and named him Handala, the symbol of bitterness. At the beginning, I introduced him as a Palestinian child. However with the development of consciousness, he acquired a national integrity and a universal human horizon. He is the witness of this undying age, who entered life forcefully and will never leave it. He is the legendary witness and this character is immortal. It was born to live and challenged to survive and go on.²

²Daod Ibahim, *Naji Al Ali: An Artist Not for Display* (Ramallah: Al Yarmouk Organization for Culture and Media, 1989), p. 61.

Akin to Handala, the child who never ceases scrutinizing the world around him, Ashtar Theatre keeps faith with Naji Al Ali by breaking all social and political taboos and raising all suppressed issues in our society, breaking the silence and raising the voice of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized.

Arlene Goldbard: Ashtar feels it needs to be critical of problems in Palestinian society, and from what you've said at the conference, some Palestinians don't like that. Could you tell a little bit about your experience?

Iman Aoun: Since we started our public awareness program with Forum Theater in 1997, we've been raising difficult topics that the society hesitates to reveal. Earlier, we always touched on sociopolitical problems, and society viewed our approach positively except when we criticized Palestinian politics.

When we criticize the occupation, we receive the public's approval. But when we talk about our own problems, the public gets irritated.

As we started using Forum Theater to criticize the social order, some groups were aggravated. Some influential social figures denounced our work as we have broached sexual harassment and incest.

Sometimes when people are watching these plays, they would stop us and protest: “This is not right! You are exaggerating!” As Forum demands, we turn their rage to the advantage of the play. Even if they were negative, at some point they would still receive us with respect at subsequent performances. So it’s not really a hostile relationship; but when they do not like something we present, they do say that out loud.

AG: So it takes courage for you to continue to persevere against this opposition.

IA: Of course it takes courage, but somehow it also needs diplomacy. We’re not trying to offend our society. What we’re trying to do is to open up discussions and to say that although we are the same people we might be different, we have different opinions and what we perform and the way we work is only to say that we need tolerance along with the different attitudes. This is the message that we are trying to convey.

Our own organization, Ashtar, developed without the continuity that could have been a natural process in other places. The Palestinian theater, which started during the rise of Arab theater in Lebanon and Egypt, was unable to sustain what should have been its natural growth and development due to the various political catastrophes that befell it. Its roots started in Christian missionary schools built during the 1850s, then spread through the fertile fields of the Jerusalem, Jaffa, Bethlehem and Haifa schools, and also through YMCA and Moslem Brotherhood clubs and into legitimate theaters.

During An-Nakba of 1948, thousands of innocent civilians fled to safety. The Palestinian Diaspora began, with people displaced all over the world. The literary leaders and cultural icons in Palestinian society emigrated from their homeland, and the theater movement, which had reached a peak of its prosperity in 1948, was unable to regroup until the 1970s, when theater in the West Bank and Gaza Strip began to revive.

Ashtar was the first Palestinian theater program geared toward theater development and training. We are actively engaged in research and experimentation with artistic elements, tools and techniques, continuously developing ideas and methods, cultivating a critical soul. We understand our work as part of the march for transformation and evolution of the Palestinian nation.

Ashtar’s main activities can be summarized into two categories: first, providing drama-training courses to those who wish to engage in the world of theater either as drama teachers or as actors. We are gradually increasing our role in

Palestinian schools, giving children the chance to discover new horizons through drama lessons. We recognize that drama is a valuable tool in developing the students' capability of using and expanding their imaginations, creating stories to help them express their hidden talents and portray personal experiences.

Second, Ashtar is engaged in producing plays that are either performed by its students or by its professional actors. One of our aims is to promote and present these plays both locally and internationally, reaching all the sectors of Palestinian society in their own places. Toward this end, we produce three types of theater: school theater is primarily directed toward the students; professional theater is directed to theatergoers and produced in cooperation with local, Arab and/or international theater groups; and finally, for the past five years we have been working on Forum Theater with community groups and organizations in Palestine, particularly producing and performing an annual serial entitled "Abu Shaker's Affairs."

WHY THEATER? ASHTAR'S SOCIOPOLITICAL ROLE

Forum Theater, based on Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, is an alternative form of theater that allows the audience to influence the outcome of the play. The audience views the play once without any interruptions, then the play is re-performed and audience members are given the chance to participate in the direction of the story by stepping in and providing alternate behaviors, choices, actions and wording. The productions provide an open forum for those voices that are usually overlooked or ignored by the community to express their views through developing alternate strategies to combat oppression.

This type of interactive theater works as a continuous awareness campaign and an alternative discussion forum. In general, a Forum Theater performance is based on social and cultural particularities of the region, spoken in Palestinian dialect and performed anywhere: at the village meeting place, in a hall or even in a classroom. It reaches out to all levels of society all over the country. Spectators are asked to step on-stage to act out their own suggestions directly. They can even suggest additional scenes and characters to be played by themselves or other members of the audience, with the aim of changing the sequence of the original play in service of the protagonist.

The dynamics that arise from the audience are considered important elements of the Forum experience. Indirectly, while focusing on the objective of directing characters on stage, the audience is going through certain democratic processes—listening to each other without interruption, observing someone else's suggestions performed on stage and proposing other active and effective suggestions. Armed with strategies that were enacted on the stage, audience members begin to acquire new coping mechanisms to use in daily life and new keys to problem solving.

This Forum Theater series has a strong impact on the Palestinian community, helping to foster the skills necessary for active and democratic participation in shaping society. Given the opportunity to intervene in the outcome of the performance, audiences respond eagerly to this challenge and express their satisfaction in the presentation. Ashtar's Forum Theater is an example of community cultural work where action toward social change takes the lead.

Increasingly, we consider Forum Theater one of the essential pillars of Ashtar's work. In particular, the annual series of "Abu Shaker's Affairs" plays an important role in fulfilling Ashtar's aim of making theater reach all sectors of the Palestinian society, giving life to theater in areas where theater has never reached before. "Abu Shaker's Affairs" is a community-based project using theater as a vehicle to engage diverse groups in a form of conflict resolution and teamwork, raising awareness of contemporary issues such as democracy, human rights and the environment. Each annual production in the series acts as a mirror, providing Palestinians with a reflection of their community's changing needs, problems and realities.

The series is set within the context of a Palestinian family—Abu Shaker's—presenting critical issues through the lives and experiences of his family members.

Subjects that Ashtar Theatre has tackled through the five "Abu Shaker's Affairs" series were family violence, early marriage, child labor, water shortages, trading with rotten food, land confiscation, collaborators (Palestinians who work with the Israeli intelligence agency) and even taboos such as incest.

The reaction to "Abu Shaker's Affairs" has been overwhelmingly positive, with the show increasing in popularity each year. Over the past four years, demand has grown steadily from groups wishing to have their issues tackled in the play, as well as from grassroots organizations prompting us to raise some of the problems they confront.

Given that Ashtar is a group of theater makers and not development workers or actual victims of a social problem, Ashtar's team enlists the assistance of both local organizations and international experts in Forum Theater to develop each year's episode of "Abu Shaker's Affairs." We work closely with community groups and organizations to research and develop the issues and present them in a realistic and responsible manner, thereby distinguishing our work from the other Forum Theater work in the region, which is seldom grounded in community collaboration.

Ashtar conducts three stages of formative research in the development of each “Abu Shaker’s Affairs” script. The first stage is a review of any existing relevant literature; this is followed by focus-group discussions with social workers, counselors or other knowledgeable sources; finally we interview people to obtain case studies—for example, victims of incest, child laborers and so on. In developing each play, Ashtar seeks true-life stories that provide insight into the nature of the problem and its plausible solutions.

In the theatrical lab, the team explores and shapes the ideas and the material collected from various sources. The artistic team is then ready to develop the skeleton of the production through discussions and dramaturgical work. Improvisation helps to create the text and build up the show.

Rehearsing, the group uses a number of exercises that are essential to the creation of the work:

1. Exercises exploring concepts of power, leadership, dominance, submission, status and oppression. Working in pairs or in groups, participants find postures associated with chosen themes.
2. Image theater techniques: the director offers a topic, and the group improvises a still image around it, exploring power positions and ways of breaking or supporting this power. The image changes slightly every time the group assesses the strengths and weaknesses it embodies.
3. Exercises to explore personal life-journeys of the characters, train Jokers (facilitators between the actors on stage and the spectators) in the skills necessary to lead the “spect-actors” (spectator/actors who rise from the audience to play a role) in democratic interventions as they seek change.
4. Character development work, creating a life story for each persona, based on the material collected in the field.
5. Re-improvisations of scenes and text.
6. Rehearsing the specific roles of actors, the Joker and the spect-actors.

The following synopsis is an example of one of the “Abu Shaker’s Affairs” Forum productions in 1999:

Abu Shaker oppresses everyone around him. He mocks Shaker, his handi-capped son, exploits his nephew and harasses his sister-in-law, all in addition to having sexually abused Mashael, his niece, when she was a child. He bought his sister-in-law Katmeh’s silence over his incestuous affair. Now, Abu Shaker proclaims that Mashael is disgracing the family’s honor by studying at the University and wanting to work. He forbids his son Shukri to have a relationship with her.

Shukri confronts Mashael with his father's accusation, and Mashael confesses to her cousin that she is indeed not a virgin, but that she loves him and has no one else in her life. Yet she challenges him to have the courage to ask his father about his allegations.

In response, Abu Shaker urges his son to kill Mashael, using her younger brother Hafeez, who is at a loss about what to do.

Faced with these circumstances, Katmeh, Mashael's mother, finally raises her voice to request the killing of Abu Shaker, which should have been done eight years ago for his disgraceful action.

The annual "Abu Shaker's Affairs" series is key to Ashtar's work, because it enables us to reach groups that are not otherwise very accessible due to social, cultural, economic, political and, at times, psychological barriers—for instance, women, youth, the elderly, the disabled and the poor. We also involve actors who would not otherwise have an outlet to use their talents. These efforts express our policy of making Ashtar's services accessible to all members of Palestinian society regardless of economic or social status, particularly those who are on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. We believe that the poor, who struggle to fulfill their basic needs such as food and shelter, are entitled to a place to discuss their own social problems. In this light, Ashtar reaches them and motivates them.

The "Abu Shaker's Affairs" series usually targets youth—students in private, public and UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East) schools, universities and summer camps. Young people are not so fixed in their attitudes, values and behavioral patterns as older people and are therefore easier to influence. Other target groups are women in villages, rural areas and refugee camps all over the Palestinian territories.

As the performance depends fundamentally upon the intermingling of audience members, Ashtar insists, whenever possible, on performing for mixed-gender audiences. An audience member once commented, "Men may not realize that they are oppressors. They as well as the oppressed need to have their consciousness raised." However in some villages, due to social restrictions, separate performances are organized for males and females.

Ashtar has become a model of Forum Theater in Palestine. In Nablus, for instance, some young women aged 17 to 21 who had seen "Abu Shaker's Affairs" and who normally do not have a chance to learn acting used the form and the themes to develop their own play along the lines of Ashtar. The Women's Affairs Technical Committee, a national women's rights organization that has been a supporter of Ashtar Forum Theater, then rented a

public hall for them in Nablus on International Women's Day, and the play was performed in front of a large audience. Another group of young women, from Dehesha refugee camp in Bethlehem, copied a production of "Abu Shaker's Affairs" and performed it at the camp. The impact of Ashtar's Forum productions is growing by the year.

With every year's new production, Ashtar is able to see increased involvement of audience members, especially those who have seen a previous "Abu Shaker's Affairs" episode and speak of the impact that the previous performance has left on their lives. Indeed, the behavioral changes promoted by Ashtar are subject to centuries-old traditions, restrictions and social boundaries. Yet the spect-actors' involvement in scenes provides them with a strong embodied memory that will be evoked when they face similar real-life situations. For Ashtar to have this impact, people need to have a follow-up, something beyond viewing one single performance. We therefore try to return to the same groups to perform subsequent versions of "Abu Shaker's Affairs," presenting a new episode every year.

In this year's "Abu Shaker's Affairs 2001," Ashtar focuses on problems that cropped up during the current Intifada: poverty caused by the continuous closure of the Palestinian territories, the expansion of child labor and the escalating risk of increased numbers of collaborators. This production is aimed at students 13 years and older. Daily performances were given at schools for the last few months to immense reactions from the spect-actors.

Shaker, the protagonist, is 13 years old, the oldest son of a family of six kids. His father lost his job as a construction worker in Israel due to the recent Intifada and is unable to find an alternative job. His mother is a passive woman who cares for him but does nothing to protect him. Shaker had to quit school in order to sell chewing gum to feed his family. His only friend, Anwar, whose father is a national activist, is a spoiled child who refuses to lend him money, boasting instead of having to move residence for security reasons, because his father is wanted by the Israelis. In great need of money, Shaker, convinced by two gang members, steals a radio from a car. He is caught red-handed, as he did not know that this was a setup. At prison the Israeli investigator treats him gently, showing him sympathy, and succeeds in turning him into a mole (collaborator). The deal is that he should provide information about wanted persons in his neighborhood in exchange for payment. The first piece of information Shaker gives is the new address of Anwar's family, receiving a large sum of money in return. A few days later, a rocket hits Anwar's house, not killing his father but Anwar himself. Shaker is confused, in pain, and sorry for his action. He asks for the help of the audience.

AG: Ashtar started after the first Intifada, and you've been there through the entirety of the second Intifada so far. How have the uprising and the response to it affected the theater? What's it like to be there?

IA: It is very difficult on all levels; but for theater, if we weren't working with children at schools, we would have been forced to close the theater long ago, because people cannot move from one city to another, including Ashtar's team.

On the other hand, usually when we do a Forum play, we travel a lot with it to other urban and rural areas, to places where usually they don't go to theater, or theater doesn't reach them. We are not able to do this, these days, because we're literally stuck in one place. We have our theater in Ramallah, and actually we cannot leave Ramallah. Except when one has to travel abroad, then we have a special permission to leave one's own city and the country. Some months ago a group of theater people from Gaza had to be in Hebron for a theater workshop with Dutch directors; to be able to attend the workshop they had to travel to Egypt then to Jordan and get through the Jordan River into the West Bank to Hebron. That was the only way to reach from Gaza to Hebron, which is less than 50 miles. What an absurdity!

Besides, whenever there is an Israeli military incursion, everything closes down, so we sit at home. If we have performances, we can not perform. The last time the Israeli tanks invaded Ramallah, soldiers were occupying our apartment and tanks were just in front of our house and theater. We weren't able to reach the theater at all, we were stuck. Students were not able to go to schools either. Life was just one stalemate.

Due to the Intifada, we had also to modify our production's planned themes. Our Forum Theater topics for this year should have been tackling drug addiction, yet we had to deal with collaborators, a topic that poses a great threat to our society. Current conditions have their own dictates on what we can and should do.

ASHTAR AND SOCIOCULTURAL CHANGE

In an attempt to trace the effectiveness of Forum Theater on Palestinian society, an evaluation was conducted in February 2001 by Dr. Edward Green at the request of Care International, a partner organization of Ashtar Theatre in the Forum Theater program. It focused on the "Abu Shaker's Affairs" series, and the following results were found:

From the evidence gathered in the evaluation, those exposed to an Abu Shaker performance of the past three years almost always liked the method, and found it far preferable to traditional, didactic pedagogic methods, such as the active-teacher/passive-student model. As one teacher commented spontaneously, “This play is equal to a month of classes using regular teaching methods; students learn much more by participating, rather than just listening, and the Forum Theater method gives the audience a sense of power.”

A woman, after seeing the performance of “Abu Shaker’s Affairs 2000,” declared that none of her own daughters would be forced into early marriage.

Another woman told how she resisted a man who touched her on the bus; in fact she slapped him in the face. She would not have done that kind of thing before. “Abu Shaker’s Affairs ’99” gave her the courage to stand up for her rights.

A refugee woman in Jordan commented, “Seeing ‘Abu Shaker ’99’ helped me not accept sexual abuse as normal, as ‘just the way things are.’”

Another told of a man in her neighborhood who used to make obscene gestures to local women. He even exposed himself. She got together with her neighbors and armed herself with a stick and began to look for this man. The exhibitionist was never seen again.

One woman stayed at the home of a female friend for a whole week in order to help her with an abusive husband. She commented, “We as women can act differently now, and we can help each other.” Seeing “Abu Shaker’s Affairs” gave her the motivation to act like a “volunteer social worker” at these times.

Corroborative evidence of changed behavior was also found. For example, a lawyer who runs a legal service for refugee women in Jordan reported that significantly more women came for counseling after they saw “Abu Shaker’s Affairs ’99,” and she had evidence that the Ashtar performance motivated them to use legal services. Moreover she observed changes in attitude and behavior in the direction taught by Ashtar. This lawyer now uses stories from Abu Shaker in her legal service work and even in court.

In another example, “Abu Shaker’s Affairs ’99” was shown to a group of disabled people, in cooperation with an NGO that works with the disabled. This audience picked up on the play’s sub-theme that the disabled have a right to, and ought to, find and hold employment. The head of this NGO testified that many more handicapped people associated with his NGO actually got employment after viewing “Abu Shaker’s Affairs ’99.”

In still another example, members of a labor union were represented in one of the “Abu Shaker’s Affairs ’99” audiences, one theme of which was illegal child labor. Viewing this play empowered union members to confront an employer’s association with threats that they would send letters of warning, and eventually take legal action, if employers continued to hire illegal child labor.

From the above one could tell that giving a platform, a voice and a chance for the marginalized and the oppressed to express themselves and actively take part in the formation of their destinies help [shape] a more democratic, free and productive society.³

³Dr. Edward Green, “Evaluation of Popular Theatre in Palestine” (Jerusalem: Care International, May 2001), printed document.

After 10 years of continuous and dedicated work toward social, psychological and political development and change in our community, educators and officials are now seeking the cooperation of Ashtar Theatre in setting future national strategies for theater education and drama training in Palestinian schools.

The second major program of Ashtar’s work, as mentioned earlier, is drama in the schools. This adds a new dimension to our involvement in the community and highlights the role we play in creating public awareness within Palestinian society. Ashtar works with students in rural areas, in public, private and refugee-camp schools, using drama techniques to stimulate the students’ creativity and to help them explore themselves through verbal and nonverbal communication. Young boys and girls manage by the end of a workshop to reach a stage of free exploration of their senses, utmost use of their bodies and spontaneous response, entering into free-association and creative improvisations that reveal stories and subjects from their daily lives and concerns, such as the impact of occupation and Israeli settlements on the day-to-day functioning of the Palestinian community, including the loss of land, house demolitions, water pollution and hindering access to free movement through sieges and check-points. Ashtar uses Forum Theater techniques such as image theater and improvisational skills in working with these children.

Our current major problem stems from the continuous closure of the towns and villages in the Palestinian territories which restricts all movement between them, thus severing communication with our urban and rural audiences. This has left us with a limited number of schools to work with in our immediate vicinity.

Thus, the conditions under which we work are dire. As of the end of 2001, and since June 1967, Israeli occupation authorities have expropriated 79 percent of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip territory. Of these areas, 44 percent were taken for “military purposes,” 20 percent for “security” reasons, 12 percent for “public use” and 12 percent because the owners were “absent.” Notwithstanding

the Oslo Accords of 1993, Israel has continued to expand settlements; since the signing of the Declaration of Peace in September 1993, the settler population in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has doubled to 200,000 and over 280,000 dunums of land have been confiscated, in addition to 282,000 trees that have been uprooted in the West Bank alone.⁴

AG: What is Ashtar's vision of the Palestinian society you hope to be working toward, the relationship with your neighbors you hope to be working toward? Is there a sense of the cultural reality you would like to help bring about?

IA: We are striving for a free and a democratic society where pluralism, in the different domains of life, is accepted and practiced.

Because we have lived for years in a cultural ghetto under the Israeli occupation, and were cut off from the natural cultural flow with the Arab world, we are trying now to establish our presence on the theatrical arena of the Arab countries. Therefore we are stimulating coproductions and cooperative projects with various Arab theater companies in Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco, though these projects have been seriously affected, due to the new ghettos imposed on us by the Israeli government.

We always cooperated with those who share our vision and working methodology. We work a lot with Europeans, and we have also worked with Americans. With Israelis, we haven't worked, and we don't think the time has come to do so. First, we have to accept the existence of one another. As cultural people, we have a very powerful impact on our societies, as expressed throughout my essay. We just have to be sincere with our public, as we are continuously under the spotlight. ...

"Life without freedom... is like a body without soul, and freedom without thought... is like a disturbed soul; life, freedom and thought are three hypostases in one self that never perishes."⁵

⁴"Agenda," *PASSIA-Diary 2001* (Jerusalem: Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, 2001), p. 257.

⁵Michael Naima, *Joubran Khalil Joubran: The Complete Work* (Beirut: Sader Publishing House), p. 416.