

# Acting Archives Essays

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## Theatres of War in Gaza\*

«Gaza is like a small box...  
and we, locked inside, are the matches».<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Writing about Palestinian theatre, with a particular focus on the productions from Gaza, and about the desperate efforts to continue producing art since October 2023 is no simple task. We, as observers, find ourselves emotionally and intellectually engaged in this genocide, which has its origins in the colonial policies of the preceding century. We do not want, nor can we, pretend to replace the voices of those who are living this tragedy firsthand. The writing of this article has been accompanied at all times by the daily documentation and news reports from Gaza, which, by their very nature, demand a respectful silence.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is essential to speak about what Gaza was, what has been destroyed, and how theatre artists—both men and women—share the fate of tens of thousands of people whose personal and professional lives have been turned upside down.

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\* La traduzione italiana del presente saggio può essere consultata al seguente [link](#)

<sup>1</sup> Iman Aoun et Théâtre Ashtar, *Les monologues de Gaza: la jeunesse de Gaza raconte ses histoires de guerre et de siège (...)*, Gaza 2010), translated by Marianne Weiss, Paris, Éditions L'espace d'un instant, 2013, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to a wide range of media channels, a number of publishing initiatives have been undertaken to provide a platform for the expression of testimonies from Gaza. See Akram Musallam and Abdul-Rahman Abu Shammaleh, *Gaza raconte son génocide: Récits et Témoignages*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2025 (<https://www.palestine-studies.org/fr/node/1656796>, last accessed 14 May 2025); Aldo Nicosia (ed.), *Ho ancora le mani per scrivere*, Rome, Edizioni Q, 2025; Antonio Bocchinfuso, Mario Soldaini, and Leonardo Tosti (eds.), *Il loro grido è la mia voce. Poesie da Gaza*, Rome, Fazi, 2025.

## Memory

The phrase in the epigraph is derived from the well-known play *The Gaza Monologues* by Iman Aoun's Ashtar Theatre (*Masrah 'Ashtār*),<sup>3</sup> which in turn is taken from the text *Yawmiyyāt Ghazza (Diaries of Gaza, 1971)* by Palestinian playwright Muin Bsiso (*Mu'in Bsisū, 1926–1984*). In his *Diaries*, written in the aftermath of the *naksa* following the Six-Day War of 1967, Bsiso describes the city where he was born as «a matchbox bearing the name Gaza Strip».<sup>4</sup> Bsiso is particularly renowned for his poetic oeuvre. He is regarded as a pioneering figure in the realm of Palestinian resistance literature and theatre. Despite residing in the diaspora since 1967, he has consistently maintained profound connections with Palestine and Gaza.<sup>5</sup> Bsiso is the author of three verse dramas, *Ma'āsāt Guevara (The Tragedy of Guevara, 1969)*, *Shamsūn wa Dalīla (Samson and Delilah, 1970)*,<sup>6</sup> and *Thawrat al-Zanj (The Zanj Revolt, 1971)*, as well as numerous shorter works. In these texts, following the dominant trend in Arab theatre of the time, Bsiso merges the political message with the evocation of elements of Arab historical heritage, as in the case of *The Zanj Revolt*, in which the author compares the fate of the Palestinians to that of the slaves

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<sup>3</sup> Ashtar Theatre, one of the main centres for production, creation, and actor training in Palestine, was founded as a non-governmental, non-profit association in Jerusalem in 1991 by Iman Aoun (*Īman 'Awn*) and Edward Muallem (*Idwār Mu'allim*), two prominent figures on the contemporary Palestinian theatre scene. Since 1994, it has been present in Gaza with a children's theatre school and a program of social and therapeutic theatre. In 1995, following the Oslo Accords, Ashtar left Jerusalem and relocated to Ramallah, the capital of the Palestinian National Authority <https://www.ashtar-theatre.org/> (last accessed 14 May 2025). See also: Emmanuelle Thiébot, "Ashtar for Theatre Production and Training: la délicate (in)dépendance d'une compagnie palestinienne," *Double Jeu*, no. 17, 2020, pp. 143–152.

<sup>4</sup> Mu'in Bsisū, *Yawmiyyāt Ghazza. Muqāwama dā'ima* [The Gaza Diaries: A Permanent Resistance], Beirut, Dār al-Fārābī, 2014<sup>2</sup>, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Bsiso, born into a Christian family, began publishing his first poems in 1944. In 1947, he became involved with a group of communist militants from the National Liberation League in Palestine in the Gaza Strip. In October 1948, he enrolled at the American University in Cairo to study journalism. In March 1955 he led demonstrations in the Egyptian capital that brought to a conclusion the plan to resettle Palestinian refugees in the Sinai Desert. He then spent several years in prisons between 1955 and 1957, and again between 1959 and 1963, where he met his wife, Ṣahbā' al-Barbarī, one of the first female communist militants from Gaza (see *Sahbaa al-Barbari, Light the Road of Freedom*, ed. by Ghada Ageel and Barbara Bill, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2021). The war of 1967 compelled him to undertake a permanent diaspora, leading him to reside in multiple countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, and the United Kingdom. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982, he establishes the periodical *al-Ma'raka (The Battle)*, which was named after his first publication. He passed away in London in 1984, and his family was denied permission by Israel to bury his remains in Gaza.

<sup>6</sup> Bsiso's play *Samson and Delilah (Shamsūn wa Dalīla)* was published in Italian in the anthology *Palestina dimensione teatro*, alongside works by Ghassan Kanafani and Emile Habibi, edited by Concetta Ferial Barresi (Salerno: Ripostes, 1985).

from the eastern coasts of Africa who revolted against the Abbasid caliph in tenth-century Baghdad. In his other works, Bsiso draws parallels between the Palestinian issue and revolutionary struggles in Latin America, or transposes biblical tales into a contemporary era.

The origins of modern Palestinian theatre are inextricably linked to the artistic milieu of the region since the late 19th century. However, this artistic expression was abruptly halted following the Nakba of 1948.<sup>7</sup> The rebirth of Palestinian theatre occurred in the second half of the 1960s, when dramatic art – along with other cultural forms – emerged as a means of resistance against occupation for the inhabitants of the Occupied Territory, the Gaza Strip, and for the citizens of the so-called “1948 Territories”, meaning those within the State of Israel. This artistic expression functioned as a medium for asserting their rights and identity, particularly in the context of the occupation.<sup>8</sup> In the decades that followed the military occupation, the limits imposed by the Israeli authorities on Palestinians’ freedom of movement and expression, censorship,<sup>9</sup> the frequent arrests of intellectuals and artists, and the lack of financial resources rendered theatrical activity increasingly difficult, and increasingly dependent on international aid. This phenomenon gained significant traction in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords of 1993, when the economic and political dynamics of the Territory and Gaza, guided by the international community, particularly the European Union, began to profoundly impact theatrical activity, both in its objectives and its artistic practices. Since the 1990s, in fact, Palestinian theatre has been characterised by a form of internationalisation that is expressed in numerous exchanges and collaborations of various kinds. Given the historical and political ties with European countries, these collaborations are primarily Euro-Palestinian.<sup>10</sup> To this is added the proliferation of NGOs and other non-profit associations that focus especially on younger generations. Consequently, theatre has become an essential component of the lives of young Palestinians, particularly in contexts of crisis, such as the recent conflict in Gaza. This engagement is characterised by a focus

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<sup>7</sup> Ḥusayn Maḥmūd al-Asmar, *al-Ḥaraka al-masraḥiyya fi qiṭā’ Ghazza: wāqi’uhā, wa mu’ayātuhā, wa āfāq taṭawwurihā* [The Theatrical Movement in the Gaza Strip: Reality, Data, and Prospects for Development], Gaza, s.e., 2010. An excerpt can be found in <https://www.diwanalarab.com/في-المسرحية-الحركة> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Samer Al-Saber, Yana Taylor, “Reflecting on Palestinian Theatre: A Resilient Theatre of Resistance”, *Performance Paradigm*, 10, 2014, pp. 94-103.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Slyomovics, “‘To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound’: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship.” *TDR*, 35, 2, 1991, pp. 18-38.

<sup>10</sup> Astrid Chabrat-Kajdan, *Quand le théâtre écrit la question de Palestine: Enjeux des processus de (co)création européen-palestiniens*, Thèse de Doctorat en Art de la Scène, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2023, p. 34.

on the participation of girls and women in various creative activities. Indeed, in recent decades, theatrical experiences in Gaza have focused above all on social theatre conceived to play a therapeutic role in a context of war and occupation, or on documentary theatre that attempts to reconstruct historical memory where no archives remain. These endeavours are all within a decidedly complicated internal political context and weighed down by an extremely severe lack of economic resources.<sup>11</sup>

Bsiso's experience is only apparently distant from the most recent productions of *ghazzāwī* theatre. However, as Esmat Elhalaby reports, the bombings on Gaza following the attack of 7 October 2023, also affected the artistic and literary legacy of Bsiso. His archive, assembled by Bsiso's wife since the days of Beirut and subsequently entrusted to his son Tawfiq in his apartment in Gaza,<sup>12</sup> was threatened by the bombings:

As in previous Israeli airstrikes, [Tawfiq] carefully, albeit hastily, packed his father's papers, including drafts, notes, letters, books, and pens. He wrapped in blankets the paintings made by and for Muin that usually adorn the walls of his Gaza apartment. He stuffed the archive of one of the greatest Palestinian writers into several suitcases and placed them at the door of the house. He wondered how he would manage to carry everything down the more than ten floors separating him from the street. His wife and children had been evacuated a few days before and had joined the rest of the family in the southern part of Gaza. He remained alone in the apartment, in the northern half of the Strip, densely populated, condemned to destruction by the Israelis. [...] Last week [20 October 2023] I spent an hour talking with Muin's son about his father. Shortly after ending the phone call, I saw on Twitter that the building where he lived had been hit and was in flames. I couldn't reach him by phone, and I feared the worst. On the tenth attempt, the phone rang and my friend answered, shaken. The apartment next to his had been struck. He had taken three bags with the most precious material of his father and had rushed down the stairs. He did not know whether it was just a warning missile, whether the building would be razed, or whether his end had arrived. He feared that the fire would spread to his family's apartment. The apartment survived, and so did the archive, once again.<sup>13</sup>

Bsiso's archive has been transferred to Amman by his son and his family, a city where Tawfiq has promoted numerous initiatives related to his father's works.

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<sup>11</sup> The Central Archive of Gaza was destroyed in December 2023. Nadda Osman, "Israel-Palestine War: Israeli Forces Destroy Central Archive of Gaza City," *Middle East Eye*, 7/12/2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-israeli-forces-destroy-central-archive-gaza-city> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Enas Alsaffadi, *Palestinian Archival Impulse: The Giant Among the Spikes of Wheat: The Archive of Muin Bseiso*, PhD Thesis, New York University, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Esmat Elhalaby, "Our Siege is Long", *Public Books. A Magazine of Ideas, Arts, and Scholarship*, 27/10/2023, <https://www.publicbooks.org/our-siege-is-long/> (last accessed 8 May 2025).

## Places

The Gaza Strip, which is approximately 40 kilometres in length and less than 10 kilometres in width, is home to over two million Palestinians. This space was enclosed by physical barriers, including walls and fences that reached over six metres in height. Access to the Mediterranean Sea, which historically served as a channel of communication and sustenance, was subjected to a permanent naval blockade. Approximately 50% of the population was constituted of minors under the age of 18, who had lived throughout their lives under the conditions imposed by a prolonged military siege, conducted through land, sea, and air operations.

Before the 2023 war, the Gaza Strip was a significant cultural hub, boasting a vibrant theatrical scene despite the constraints imposed by the occupation.<sup>14</sup> As stated in the Fourth Preliminary Report on the Cultural Sector's Damages, published by the Ministry of Culture on 11 February 2024,<sup>15</sup> there were 76 registered cultural centres, in addition to other institutions, organisations, and associations operating in the cultural sector. Gaza boasted three large theatres and several other spaces dedicated to theatrical performances. A total of approximately 80 libraries were registered, categorised as either public or located within public, private, and non-profit institutions. The sector also included 15 publishing houses and bookstores. In 2022, approximately 220,000 individuals participated in cultural activities, constituting 12% of the Strip's total population.

Since October 2023, almost all cultural infrastructures, including schools, universities, museums, libraries, archaeological sites and historic buildings, cultural centres, and theatres, have been destroyed.<sup>16</sup> The aforementioned report of 11 February 2024 documented 32 institutions and cultural and artistic production centres that had been bombed.

This is not the first time that bombings have targeted cultural institutions. The destruction of the prestigious Sa'īd al-Mishāl/al-Mishal Cultural Centre dates back to 2018. This structure functioned as a cultural landmark for Gaza,

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<sup>14</sup> See the following article written a mere six months prior to 7 October 2023: Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, "al-Masrah quwwat al-filastīniyyīn al-nā'ima li-hifẓ al-huwiya wa nashr al-thaqāfa. Taḡārib" [Theatre, the Palestinians' soft power for preserving identity and spreading culture. Experiences], *'Arabi21*, 2/3/2023, <https://arabi21.com/story/1497206/الناعمة-الفلسطينيين-قوة-المسرح-تجارب-الثقافة-ونشر-الهوية-لحفظ> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>15</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13Ig3uc1vWFzWZqQeRjzTeutNPt-dGt50/view> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Hamdan Taha, *Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Gaza*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Policy Papers, 2024 <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655123> (last accessed 8 May 2025).

providing a space for various artistic and cultural activities, including a library, artistic associations, dance and music companies, and a theatre. The building, which was founded in 2004 and named after a Palestinian businessman, also functioned as a recreational centre for children affected by the wars of the last decade.<sup>17</sup> In 2019, the headquarters of the Māyk lā salkī (Wireless Microphone) company, a Palestinian youth social, cultural, and artistic initiative founded by Bāsim al-Dīrāwī, were destroyed in Israeli army bombings. The company used art as a tool of social justice and participatory democracy.<sup>18</sup> Since then, members of the association have been compelled to work from their homes or from spaces that have been made available to them.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the 2023 war, the first theatre to be destroyed on 30 October, was that of the Orthodox Cultural Centre, inaugurated in September 2021 in the Tel al-Hawa neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup> The institution was conceived as a multipurpose and multi-faith centre for theatre and dance, as well as for sports, music, and training activities. It was bombed while hosting approximately one thousand displaced persons.

The same fate was suffered by the most important theatre in Gaza City, which was located within the Rashād al-Shawā Cultural Centre. The theatre was named after the mayor who governed the city from 1972 to 1975. The inauguration of the centre, which took place in 1988 in the al-Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City, represented a significant cultural development, as it was the first cultural centre to be built in Palestine. The establishment of this centre played a crucial role in alleviating the cultural isolation experienced

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<sup>17</sup> On the relationship between Palestinian theatre and traumatic responses in contexts of military and political violence, see: Ben Rivers, "Narrative Power: Playback Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Occupied Palestine," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, pp. 155–172; Guido Veronese, Federica Cavazzoni, "Theater of Resistance. Il teatro come forma di resistenza in bambini e adolescenti in Palestina / Theater as a Tool of Resistance Among Children and Adolescents in Palestine," *Educazione Interculturale*, vol. 15, 2017, pp. 32–46.

<sup>18</sup> <https://thetanknyc.org/calendar-1/theatreingaza> (last accessed 12 May 2025).

<sup>19</sup> The company's most important work is *Lawēn rāyḥīn* (*Where Are We Going?*), which was also performed online during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the concerns and aspirations of Gaza's youth, with a majority expressing a desire to emigrate from the Strip in search of a better opportunities, within a context characterised by high levels of unemployment and a perceived lack of prospects for a brighter future, as a result of the ongoing occupation and the internal political discord between the Fatah and Hamas movements. <https://fanack.com/ar/culture/features-insights/gaza-youth-initiative-promoting-community-theater-through-cyberspace~160186/> (last accessed 12 May 2025).

<sup>20</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20240515114900/https://www.cairo24.com/1893771> (last accessed 12 May 2025).

by the inhabitants of the Strip.<sup>21</sup> The theatre hall had a capacity of between 1,000 and 2,000 spectators, and its library boasted a collection of over one hundred thousand volumes. On 23 November 2023, the Centre, which had previously provided shelter to thousands of displaced persons, was destroyed by an Israeli aerial and artillery attack.<sup>22</sup> In the same month, the theatre within the Palestinian Red Crescent Cultural Centre was bombed. It had previously been destroyed on 15 January 2009, and subsequently rebuilt, boasting very high standards in terms of sound quality, lighting, and stage technologies.<sup>23</sup> Since its foundation, the venue has hosted thousands of performances and concerts.

The Holst Theatre was destroyed on 19 July 2024. The institution was established under the aegis of the General Directorate of Cultural Affairs, which was founded in 1996 through a grant from the Norwegian government to the Municipality of Gaza.<sup>24</sup> The centre had implemented various programmes aimed at residents of the densely populated areas of Daraj and Tuffah, located respectively in the northwest and northeast of Gaza's Old City. In collaboration with the Ġam'iyat Basma li-l-Thaqāfa wa al-Funūn (Basma Society for Culture and Arts),<sup>25</sup> the centre organised theatre writing courses for young people.

The headquarters of the non-profit association Ayyām al-Masrah (The Gaza Theater Days Production - TDP), a highly active organisation, was also destroyed when occupation forces raided the al-Jalaa area, in the northwest of

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<sup>21</sup> The centre's website is still active: <https://gaza-city.org/cultural-centers/rashad> (last accessed 8 May 2025). On the destruction of the theatre, see: Louis Brehony, "Two Palestinian Artists Condemn Israel's Destruction of Gaza's Iconic Theater," *Palestine Chronicle*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/two-palestinian-artists-condemn-israels-destruction-of-gazas-iconic-theater/> (last accessed 14 May 2025); Shereen Falah Saab, "End Stage: Israel Has Completely Erased Gaza's Theater World," *Haaretz*, 22 January 2025, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2025-01-22/ty-article-magazine/.premium/end-stage-israel-has-completely-erased-gazas-theater-world/00000193-6905-d584-a9df-fbff45c60000> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>22</sup> <https://gazaculturalsector.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/4259> (last access 14 May 2025).

<sup>23</sup> [https://gazaculturalsector.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/4184#:~:text=يقع المركز لجمعية الهلال بناير /كانون الثاني 15 يوم الأحمر](https://gazaculturalsector.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/4184#:~:text=يقع%20المركز%20لجمعية%20الهلال%20بناير%20/كانون%20الثاني%2015%20يوم%20الأحمر) (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.mogaza.org/news/bldy-ghz-adr-r-tsyb-mrkz-holst-lthk-fy-bfaal-ksf-l-htl-1/15013> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Basma, directed by Nāhid Ḥanūna, is an independent non-profit organisation founded in the Gaza Strip in 1994 that operates in the cultural and artistic sector, with specific focus on theatre, acting, and psychosocial support. The main objective of the organisation is to contribute to the development of the Palestinian community through the implementation of cultural, educational, and recreational activities, as well as through the provision of psychosocial support services aimed at children, youth, women, and people with disabilities <https://basmaorg.org/ar> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

Gaza City.<sup>26</sup> The theatre hall of the Budhūr/Semi (Bozour Culture and Arts) association located in the Nuseirat refugee camp, is now unusable.<sup>27</sup> The same applies to the Ġam‘iyyat Hakāwī li-l-thaqāfa wa al-funūn (Hakawi Association for Culture and Arts)<sup>28</sup> whose theatre, located in front of al-Quds Hospital, was vandalised by the IDF.

In addition, the disruptions caused by theatrical endeavours undertaken by civil societal organisations must be acknowledged. A case in point is that of al-Bayādīr li-l-Masraḥ wa al-funūn (al-Bayader Association for Theater and Arts), a non-profit organisation founded in 1994 in Tel al-Hawa by a group of young artists, mainly aimed at young people and children.<sup>29</sup> The Ġam‘iyyat al-Shubbān al-Masīḥiyya (Young Men’s Christian Association),<sup>30</sup> a Christian association directed by Ilyās al-Ġilda, was also compelled to suspend its activities due to the bombings that damaged many of its spaces. The spaces within these buildings that remained available for use has been converted for use as shelters for displaced families.

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has had a significant impact on the operations of theatrical institutions that were established in the Occupied Territory but have a strong presence in Gaza. Two examples will suffice. The first of these is the historic Freedom Theatre, which is based in Jenin,<sup>31</sup> but is very active in the

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<sup>26</sup> Since 2018, Ayyām al-Masraḥ has been carrying out collaborative projects with COSPE. <https://theatreday.org/> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

<sup>27</sup> Buzour was founded in 2019 by a group of women specialised in the field of theatre and the arts, committed to empowering their local community by providing cultural and artistic programs aimed at all segments of Palestinian society. Their programs had engaged nearly 8,000 women and over 15,000 children and youth through the production of 38 theatrical performances <https://www.bozourtheater.org/ar> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

<sup>28</sup> The association, founded in 2013 by a group of young artists and civil society activists from Gaza and directed by Muḥammad Abū Kuwayk, has shared images of what happened to its headquarters: [https://www.facebook.com/HakawiPS/?locale=ar\\_AR](https://www.facebook.com/HakawiPS/?locale=ar_AR) (last accessed 12 May 2025).

<sup>29</sup> al-Bayader is a non-governmental organisation founded in 1994 by a group of young artists who primarily focus on youth and children. <https://www.facebook.com/albayadertheater/> (last accessed 12 May 2025).

<sup>30</sup> The association is part of the international YMCA network. [https://www.facebook.com/ymcagazaofficial/?locale=ar\\_AR](https://www.facebook.com/ymcagazaofficial/?locale=ar_AR) (last accessed 9 May 2025).

<sup>31</sup> Arna Mer-Khamis, an Israeli citizen of Jewish origin who was married to a Palestinian, founded the Stone Theatre in 1987. This unique cultural and political project was launched with the aim of supporting the children of Jenin. The theatre marked the beginning of a unique initiative and was completely destroyed in 2002 during the Second Intifada. In 2006, her son Juliano Mer-Khamis assumed the role of perpetuating her legacy by establishing the Freedom Theatre (<https://thefreedomtheatre.org/>). In the year 2011, Juliano was assassinated in Jenin by an individual whose identity remains unknown. See: Elin Nicholson, “The Freedom Theatre and Cultural Resistance in Jenin, Palestine,” in S. Brady, L. Mantoan (eds.), *Performance in a*

Jabalia Refugee Camp. Since October 2023, the company has faced one of the most challenging periods in its history. In addition to the aerial bombardment of Gaza and Jenin, the Israeli authorities arrested the director Mustafa Sheta (Muṣṭafà Shattà), releasing him after 15 months of detention. His work follows in the footsteps of Arna and Juliano Mer-Khamis, with a focus on providing children and youth in Jenin to «experience moments of beauty, freedom, creativity, situations far from oppression in which they can grow as human beings».<sup>32</sup>

Finally, in a statement published a few months after the commencement of the war, Marina Barham, founder and director since 2005 of the non-profit organisation Masrah al-Ḥāra (Al-Harah Theater) based in Beit Jala,<sup>33</sup> and member of the Board of Directors of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM), provided updates on the situation in Gaza, calling on «IETM artists and partners to demand a ceasefire».<sup>34</sup> Marina Barham denounced the increasing difficulties imposed by EU authorities in allowing Palestinian associations access to foreign funding. This situation has been further exacerbated since October 2023, when numerous funded projects were canceled, rendering the associations' activities virtually impossible at a time when support for the civilian population was more urgently needed than ever.

### **Doing Theatre in Gaza after 7 October 2023**

Finding spaces and ways to organise any kind of theatrical activity amid rubble, tents for the displaced, and constant movements from one area to another, while merely trying to survive, seems something absolutely surreal, ephemeral, and superfluous.

As previously stated, for many decades theatre companies in Gaza and the Occupied Territory, in addition to adult theatre programming, have undertaken projects aimed at the most vulnerable segments of the population,

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*Militarized Culture*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 66–78; Ola Johansson, Johanna Wallin (eds.), *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*, New Delhi, LeftWord Books, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Michele Giorgio, “Jenin. La resistenza culturale del Freedom Theatre”, *Pagine Esteri*, 7/5/2025 <https://pagineesteri.it/2025/05/07/medioriente/jenin-la-resistenza-culturale-del-freedom-theatre/> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

<sup>33</sup> The Al-Harah Theatre produces performances for both adults and children and has extensive experience in using theatre and playwriting to help children and youth cope with the trauma resulting from armed conflict and the complex living conditions in Palestine. <https://alharah.org/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.ietm.org/en/news/updates-from-al-harah-theater> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

starting with children and youth, who are most exposed to violence.<sup>35</sup> In contexts such as Palestine, theatrical activity is understood to transcend the purely artistic and cultural dimensions. Theatre artists, in fact, consider theatre as one of many tools to cope with life under occupation, to challenge contingent situations, and as a means of resisting violence through the production of art and beauty. Furthermore, during periods of truce, theatre has played a fundamental role in the process of cultural recovery and reconstruction, serving as a platform for undertaking a process of collective healing and social fabric restoration. With respect to Gaza, it is important to acknowledge that the population has been continuously exposed to violence since the First Intifada in 1987, the Second Intifada in 2005, and the wars with Israel in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Nevertheless, since October 2023, a number of theatrical initiatives have been organised inside refugee camps. Finding spaces and ways to organise any kind of theatrical activity amid piles of rubble, tents for displaced persons, and perpetual movement from one area to another, while simply trying to survive, might appear utterly surreal, ephemeral, and superfluous. In an article published in the journal «al-Majalla», director ‘Alī Abū Yāsīn and actors Muḥammad Sha‘shā‘a and Muḥammad al-Maṣrī recounted their experiences. These experiences were dominated, as would be expected, by concern for their own lives and those of their families, but also by a strong sense of frustration. Confronted with the destruction of theatres, ‘Alī Abū Yāsīn stated: «Every time we try to rebuild Palestinian culture, [the occupation] destroys what we have built, and so we must start over again».<sup>36</sup> With regard to the bombing of the Holst Theatre, Muḥammad Sha‘shā‘a declared: «There are many stories tied to the daily life experienced in that theatre, on its stage and within its walls, all things that today have been erased».<sup>37</sup>

With regard to the significance of maintaining theatrical activities during wartime, the three artists hold divergent views on the subject of international aid and support which, at the outbreak of the war, aid was still able to reach theatres in Gaza. While Abū Yāsīn and Muḥammad Sha‘shā‘a believe that international support for Palestinian theatre should not be interrupted even

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<sup>35</sup> Najla Nakhle Cerruti, *La Palestine sur scène. Une approche géocritique du théâtre palestinien* (2006-2016), Thèse de Doctorat, Institut National des Langues et des Civilisations Orientales (Inalco, Paris), 2017, pp. 54 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Ḥusām Ma‘rūf, “Masraḥiyyūn fī Ghazza yarwiyūn yawmiyātahum khilāl al-ḥarb” [Theatre Artists in Gaza Narrate Their Daily Lives During the War], *al-Majalla*, 1 September 2024, <https://www.majalla.com/node/322064/مجتمع-ثقافة/ومسرحيون-غزة-في-مسرحيون-ومجتمع-ثقافة/> (last accessed 12 May 2025).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

during periods of war, and that external funding is vital in the hope of quickly resuming theatrical activity. In contrast, Muḥammad al-Maṣrī adopts a decidedly critical stance on this issue,<sup>38</sup> arguing that «theatre sponsorship follows the standards and regulations of the international community, which have long limited Palestinian freedom of expression». Finally, he emphasises the importance of theatre resuming its activity immediately after the end of the war, even without waiting for theatres to be rebuilt: «We have worked hard in the past, without having theatres equipped with lights and sets. Theatre work in Gaza has always been in crisis under occupation, yet we have managed to keep it alive».<sup>39</sup>

Among the first companies to resume activity at the end of 2023 was the aforementioned Ayyām al-Masrah (*The Gaza Theater Days Production* - TDP). The company's primary objective since its establishment has been the promotion of theatre projects for young people.<sup>40</sup> The company organised theatre workshops in Rafah, Khan Younis, Nuseirat, Deir Balah, and other areas of southern and northern Gaza. These activities persisted until the "humanitarian zone", which came into effect in September 2024, remained in force.<sup>41</sup> Muḥammad al-Hissī,<sup>42</sup> artistic director of TDP, and his artists continued to offer open-air theatrical performances, reaching audiences unable to move due to mobility restrictions, among the tents in refugee camps where public spaces were transformed into theatrical settings. The primary focus of their work was the valorisation of storytelling as an expressive tool, with the

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<sup>38</sup> Astrid Chabrat-Kajdan, *Quand le théâtre écrit la question de Palestine : Enjeux des processus de (co)création européen-palestiniens*, pp. 108 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Ḥusām Ma'rūf, "Masraḥiyyūn fī Ghazza yarwiyūn yawmiyātahum khilāl al-ḥarb", cit.

<sup>40</sup> "TDP wants drama, theatre, and creative activities to be a regular part of the lives of young people in Palestine, so that they can find their individual voice, their sense of self, and discover their creative life; in stimulating these activities TDP aims to provide the foundation for a peaceful development of Palestine, one with respect for human (children's) rights and civil society. TDP tries to realize this by working with the formal education systems and local organizations working with and for children and young people". <https://theatreday.org/ontdp/vision-mission/> (last accessed 9 May 2025).

<sup>41</sup> The workshops were organised with financial support from COSPE <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ayb2XoeRwJM> (last accessed 10 May 2025).

<sup>42</sup> The company's most recent work, presented in February 2023, is entitled *The Story is Sick*. The project, which began with a workshop involving 23 actors on the art of storytelling, gathered the voices of three generations of Palestinians from Jaffa, Haifa, and all across historic Palestine. Laura Silvia Battaglia, "The unstilled voice of Gazan theatre," *Index on Censorship*, 2 August 2024, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/the-unstilled-voice-of-gazan-theatre/> (last accessed 14 May 2025). The work was also presented in Italy at the Conventino Caffè Letterario in Florence in September 2023. See Chiara Cruciati, "Il teatro di Gaza in Italia: «L'amore ai tempi dell'oppressione»," *Il Manifesto*, 8 September 2023.

objective of providing a platform for women and men to share their personal experiences before and after the conflict, as well as their aspirations for the future. The performances were therefore based on representations of daily life and on the collective development of possible solutions to practical problems within the community. A further project, undertaken in the Deir al-Balah refugee camp, dealt with *Nuzūh (Deportation)*, a work about the redefinition of places in a context where reference points no longer exist and it has become impossible to give concrete shape to any idea of individual and collective space.<sup>43</sup> The troupe's activities became increasingly complex in the period preceding the commencement of the most recent invasion, a development that coincided with the arrest of a company member and the death caused by a bombardment of actor Aḥmad al-Shawā upon his return from a performance.<sup>44</sup> During the first year of the war, the Basma association delivered three theatrical performances, including *Fāṭūrat waṭan (The Bill to Be Paid to the Homeland)*, about the daily struggles of women in Gaza. In collaboration with UNESCO, the association also created a space where Gaza's children took part in puppet theatre workshops, in a safe environment that helped them overcome pain and recover from trauma.<sup>45</sup>

### Doing Theatre on Gaza After 7 October 2023

In contexts similar to that of Gaza, as evidenced in Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt during the revolution of 25 January 2011, theatre plays a pivotal role as a documentary archive. In the Palestinian context, the preservation of historical memory, and of the identity as a nation, has been a recurring theme in all literature since the Nakba of 1948.<sup>46</sup> Theatre, then, assumes the responsibility of recording current events or first-hand accounts of the direct protagonists, where archives are no longer extant, have been

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<sup>43</sup> These activities are available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h7gGJSen\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h7gGJSen_8) and <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C74PCEyoZj6/> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>44</sup> Fāṭima al-Zahrā Saḥwīl, "al-Masraḥ fi Ghazza: fann al-baqā' fi zaman al-ḥarb" [Theatre in Gaza: The Art of Resilience in Times of War], Institute for Palestine Studies, 22 April 2025, <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1657242#:~:text=لمسرح شكل لعد=في وثائق، وأمل قطاع في المستقبل>. (last accessed 10 May 2025).

<sup>45</sup> Another project is a collection of 19 plays for young audiences written by Jackie Lubeck and based on stories told by children from the Gaza Strip and the Occupied Territories. The production of these theatrical works was undertaken by Theatre Day Productions (Masraḥ al-Ayyām) and staged in Arabic. Jackie Lubeck, *To the Good People of Gaza: Theatre for Young People and Theatre Day Production*, edited by Samer Al-Saber, London, Bloomsbury, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Simone Sibilio, *Nakba. La memoria letteraria della catastrofe palestinese*, Roma, Edizioni Q, 2012.

disseminated, or, most critically, have been destroyed.<sup>47</sup> An emblematic example of this tendency is provided by the *Gaza Monologues* by the Ashtar Theatre. Since from October 2010, this production has engaged over 2,000 young people from around the world. These participants have performed the monologues in more than 80 cities across 40 nations, and the production has been translated into 18 languages thanks to international funding.<sup>48</sup> The genesis of the work was the 2009 Gaza conflict, during which, for about a month, aerial bombardment resulted in significant civilian casualties, injuries, and damage to infrastructure, including schools. The Ashtar Theatre project began by asking children in Gaza to write monologues about their direct experience of the airstrikes. The company then proceeded to select the monologues and stage them in Ramallah, where they were performed by their authors.

The troupe has always maintained a high level of activity in Gaza, notably establishing a segment of the International Theatre of the Oppressed Festival in 2007. In July 2024, Ashtar Theatre presented in Ramallah the theatrical work entitled *Guernica, Gaza: Visions from the Centre of the Earth*, a surreal exploration of resilience and humanity in a context of war.<sup>49</sup> The original English text was written by Ismail Khalidi and Naomi Wallace, and translated into Arabic by Alice S. Yousef, the language in which all performances were staged. The direction was provided by Emile Saba.

The play, which is loosely based on Picasso's painting, tells the story of five characters who, although seemingly unrelated, are actually connected to each other, all of whom are survivors of a hellish war scenario. They are Yara, a young surfer, and her father Antar; Yamen, a young man with PTSD, and his older brother Hamza, a resistance fighter; and Bilal, a beekeeper. The text employs a hallucinatory approach to explore the consequences of the

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<sup>47</sup> The Nakba Archive, for instance, was established in 2002 with the objective of documenting and commemorating the experiences of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon after the Nakba of 1948. The archive contains a substantial collection of video interviews with first-generation refugees from over 150 Palestinian villages and towns. The interviews are available in Arabic through the database of the Palestinian Oral History Archive (POHA): <https://www.nakba-archive.org/> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>48</sup> Najla Nakhlé-Cerruti, "Les Monologues de Gaza: Une démarche à vocation thérapeutique et collective", in In V. Bontemps, J. Al Hussein, N. Dot-Pouillard, A. El Sakka (éds), *Penser la Palestine en réseaux*, Diacritiques, Marseille, 2020, pp. 236-253.

<sup>49</sup> The composition and production of the work took place during the repeated bombardments of Gaza in the period between 2023 and 2024. Its realisation was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Consulate General of Spain in Jerusalem and the Global Giving charitable fund, and was sponsored by AFAC (Arab Fund for Arts and Culture). <https://tzkrti.com/en/events/1696> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

massacre on the victims and witnesses. It also addresses the themes of loss, hope, resilience and the dehumanisation of Palestinians. In addition, it offers a critical reflection on the correlation between state-sponsored violence and its repercussions on the entire ecosystem of the region.<sup>50</sup> As with the painting from which it derives its name, *Guernica, Gaza* serves to illustrate, inter alia, the significance of the interspecies relationship between humans and animals. Through the juxtaposition of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, both works vividly convey the violence and destruction from which no one—human or animal—can escape. The inevitable reference to the dehumanising comment by Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, «We are fighting against human animals», and to the statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, «This is a struggle between children of light and children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle», is pertinent.<sup>51</sup> The performance challenges the aforementioned rhetoric by highlighting how Palestinians' relationship with their land is not based on ownership, but rather on compassion for all forms of life that surround them, including animals.

YAMEN: When I first heard those two words, 'human animals,' I couldn't get them out of my mind. Do they mean that we are animals that are human? Or humans that are animals?

HAMZA: Animals and humans are two separate things.

YAMEN: But they're afraid of the bombs like we are. The dogs hear the drones and wet themselves. They whimper. A 'human animal.' Maybe it means we are inside the animals and they are inside us.<sup>52</sup>

The text by Ismail Khalidi and Naomi Wallace is not only a testimony to the reality of Gaza, but a powerful portrait of the cost of war, and offers a profound reflection on memory and the vulnerability shared by all living beings who are victims of violence.

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<sup>50</sup> On the impact of occupation policies on Gaza's ecosystem, see Shourideh C. Molavi, *Environmental Warfare in Gaza. Colonial Violence and New Landscapes of Resistance*, London, Pluto Press, 2024.

<sup>51</sup> See Lamia Moghnieh, "On Trauma/Resilience and Psychological Suffering: How Can the Palestinians be Rehumanized?", *UntoldMag*, 20/2/2024, <https://untoldmag.org/on-trauma-resilience-and-psychological-suffering-how-can-the-palestinians-be-rehumanized/>; Ghassan Abu-Sitta and Rupa Marya, "The Deep Medicine of Rehumanizing Palestinians", *Yes Magazine*, 1/11/2023, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2023/11/01/medicine-palestine-israel-hospital> (last accessed 14 May 2025).

<sup>52</sup> Marina Johnson, "Review: GUERNICA, GAZA: VISIONS FROM THE CENTER OF THE EARTH. By Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi", *Arab Stages*, 16, 2024, [https://www.theseagalcenter.org/\\_files/ugd/5d130b\\_a48616f66f14440e807e442885f94a5c.pdf](https://www.theseagalcenter.org/_files/ugd/5d130b_a48616f66f14440e807e442885f94a5c.pdf) (last accessed 14 May 2025).

While *Guernica, Gaza* portrays the tragedy of war from a collective perspective, other authors start from their personal experience. This phenomenon, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent Arab theatre, particularly in works related to migration and diaspora experiences, can be understood as a means of providing a platform for the voices and experiences of individuals who are not only observers of history but also active participants in constructing its narrative.

This is the case of Hossam al-Madhoun (Ḥusām al-Madhūn), who was born and trained in Gaza. Al-Madhoun is an actor, author, and founder of Masrah li-l-Ġami‘ (Theatre for Everybody) in 1997, along with Jamal al-Razi (Ġamāl al-Rāzī) and Marianne Bloom.<sup>53</sup> It was in 1992 that he first encountered theatre, at the Ansar detention centre in the Negev desert, where he participated in a project intended to benefit detainees. Following his release, he enrolled in a training programme at the Ashtar School. This experience marked the first step in a journey that, with his company, led him to create a series of theatrical performances staged not only in Palestine and other Arab countries, but also in Europe where he participated in numerous festivals.<sup>54</sup> Since 2009, Hossam al-Madhoun has been working in partnership with Az Theatre, a UK-based organisation founded in 2004 by Jonathan Chadwick that carries out community-based projects called “Performing Arts Inspiring Activism”. Their collaboration began with the ten-year project Gaza Drama Long Term, which included a reading of Arrabal’s *Guernica* tied to scenes of contemporary life in Gaza, staged in 2010.<sup>55</sup> In the same year, the two institutions initiated the project *Gaza: Breathing Space*, an initiative aimed at improving the lives of Gaza’s youth and to stimulate an international dialogue on the use of theatre and the impact of violence on future generations.<sup>56</sup> In May 2015, they mounted the production entitled *Gaza: War and Peace*. The work, an adaptation of Tolstoy’s novel, was performed at the al-Mishal Centre theatre in Gaza and Khan Younis. The performance was also presented abroad in an awareness programme that used online public video events broadcast simultaneously between London and Gaza. The objective of this initiative was to break the isolation imposed on the residents of the Strip. The project

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<sup>53</sup> Marianne Blume, Houssam El-Madhoun et Jamal El-Rozzi, “Theatre for everybody : théâtre pour tous à Gaza”, *Études théâtrales*, 2000, p. 123-128.

<sup>54</sup> Since 2013, al-Madhoun has been engaged as Child Protection Officer for the Ma'an Development Centre, an NGO based in Gaza that provides psychosocial support, counselling, recreational activities, and case management for child protection.

<sup>55</sup> <http://aztheatre.org.uk/gaza-drama-long-term-2/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>56</sup> Subsequent to Jonathan Chadwick's visit to Gaza, a documentary was produced on the subject of the project: <https://vimeo.com/349300248> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

culminated with *Here There Everywhere*, staged at the P21 Gallery in London in November 2017. Al-Madhoun's most recent collaboration with Az Theatre, which took place in 2022, concerned the adaptation of Slawomir Mrozek's *The Emigrants*. The play deals with the theme of individuals compelled to leave Gaza and the devastating consequences of renouncing one's homeland, home, and hope. Al-Madhoun experienced something similar in 2023, when he had to leave his home in Rafah to get to Cairo with his family.<sup>57</sup> The last one was not the first conflict he had witnessed. Indeed, during the 2014 Gaza war, as part of the War Stories project conducted by Az Theatre and Theatre for Everybody since 2002,<sup>58</sup> Hossam al-Madhoun sent a total of 34 messages June and October that were collected in two blogs respectively entitled *What a Surprise! Gaza under attack*<sup>59</sup> and *No bullets or blood, just pain*.<sup>60</sup> This occurred while Theatre for Everybody and Az Theatre were launching their collaboration on the first Arabic theatrical version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. During the 2023 war, Theatre for Everybody and Az Theatre worked together on a project of collective listening entitled *Messages from Gaza Now* to share al-Madhoun's testimonies from Gaza. The messages, transmitted by al-Madhoun during periods of blackouts and bombardment from October 2023, provide a detailed account of the circumstances experienced by displaced individuals under forced evacuation and families under total siege.<sup>61</sup> The central theme of the narrative is Hossam's own story, who, due to being separated from his daughter, engaged in completing her studies in Beirut, finds himself facing the challenges and difficulties of daily life together with his wife and elderly mother. Through this narrative, the audience is immersed into a critical geopolitical context, witnessing the massacre of an entire population and the potential challenges for the future order or disorder of the world. His testimonies from the war scenario were the subject of collective readings, the first of which, titled *Gaza Now: Message from a Dear Friend*, was organised by Az Theatre in London in December 2025. The project was brought to Italy by actress Iante Roach, who made significant efforts to facilitate this process. It

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<sup>57</sup> Fleur Hargreaves, "Gaza theatre-maker Hossam Madhoun navigates transient new life in Egypt", *Middle East Eye*, 31/12/2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gaza-theatre-maker-hossam-madhoun-navigates-egypt-life> (last accessed 15 May 2025). As confirmed by al-Madhoun himself, the situation of those who have fled from Gaza to Cairo is extremely precarious, as there are no protection programmes for refugees, nor the possibility of obtaining residence permits or engaging in any kind of employment.

<sup>58</sup> <http://aztheatre.org.uk/?s=war+story+> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>59</sup> <https://aztheatre.org.uk/what-a-surprise-gaza-under-attack/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>60</sup> <https://aztheatre.org.uk/no-blood-or-bullets-just-pain-05112014/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>61</sup> <https://aztheatre.org.uk/another-day-messages-from-gaza-now/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

was presented in January 2025 at Teatro Bellarte in Turin under the title *Gaza Now: Portraits from Hossam* by Fertili Terreni Teatro, Evergreen Fest Tedacà together with Theatre for Everybody. The readings were also replicated in Rome, Milan, Naples, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Siena, Rimini, Ponte-in-Valtellina, Rispeccia, and at the Migration Festival in Turin.

Currently, Theatre for Everybody and Az Theatre are collaborating to organise a series of events between London and Cairo, entitled *Palestine: Repair & Return*, hosted at the P21 Gallery and online.<sup>62</sup>

### **We Are Not Numbers**

The most recent conflict has caused the deaths of tens of thousands of people, including numerous intellectuals, writers, musicians, artists, actors, and directors, as well as cultural workers.<sup>63</sup> In December 2024, PEN International launched the project “War on Writers: A Look at Writers Killed in Gaza”, documenting the cases of 23 writers and poets who were killed between October 2023 and September 2024, making this war the deadliest for writers in recent history.<sup>64</sup>

As early as February 2015, a project had been initiated with the aim of not reducing Palestinians to mere victims to be counted. The initiative We Are Not Numbers / Naḥnu Lasnā Arqāman (WANN)<sup>65</sup> was initiated by American freelance writer and activist Pam Bailey of Euro-Med Monitor.<sup>66</sup> During a mission to Gaza, she decided to mentor a young resident of the Strip, Ahmed Alnaouq (Aḥmad al-Nā‘ūq),<sup>67</sup> who had lost a brother and several close friends

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<sup>62</sup> The messages are collected at <http://aztheatre.org.uk/hossamsstory17forpublicreading/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>63</sup> Zeina Jamaluddine, Hanan Abukmail, Oona Sarah Aly, M. R. Campbell, Francesco Checchi, “Traumatic injury mortality in the Gaza Strip from Oct 7, 2023, to June 30, 2024: a capture-recapture analysis”, *The Lancet*, 405, 10477, pp. 469–477 ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)02678-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)02678-3/fulltext)). The researchers utilised a range of data sources to estimate the number of fatalities resulting from traumatic injuries in the Gaza Strip during the period from 7 October 2023 to 30 June 2024. The findings of this study suggested a substantially higher figure – amounting to more than double – when compared to the numbers typically reported by media outlets.

<sup>64</sup> [https://www.pen-international.org/war-on-writers-gaza-cases-?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR5\\_VAnPd1HafaV64GV5CInFzlK8hRTPbg5RkaHYsIF2TCNZX0xsLkjYdIFmQ\\_aem\\_\\_7A7b\\_lo814khZSyxtqwx](https://www.pen-international.org/war-on-writers-gaza-cases-?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR5_VAnPd1HafaV64GV5CInFzlK8hRTPbg5RkaHYsIF2TCNZX0xsLkjYdIFmQ_aem__7A7b_lo814khZSyxtqwx) (last accessed May 15, 2025).

<sup>65</sup> <https://wearenotnumbers.org/> (last accessed 15 May 2025).

<sup>66</sup> Pam Bailey lived and worked in the Gaza Strip in the period following the Israeli attacks of 2009, until she was expelled and banned by Israel. She is currently resident in Washington.

<sup>67</sup> Alnaouq was born and raised in Gaza, where he obtained a degree in English literature from Al-Azhar University. He is currently resident in London. WANN has been instrumental in fostering creativity and writing among Gaza’s youth, providing a platform through which they

in an Israeli airstrike. Bailey encouraged Alnaouq to document his his experiences, a gesture that ultimately led to the creation of WANN. The project's objective is twofold: firstly, to restore names, faces and lived experiences to those killed in Gaza in recent decades; and secondly, to provide educational support related to writing for young people in Gaza.<sup>68</sup> The 2023 war has also claimed numerous victims in the artistic field. In order to avoid the reduction of these individuals to mere statistics, it is imperative to remember some of them: the actress and pioneer of theatre in Gaza, Inās Muḥammad al-Saqā (1970–2023), killed together with her three children; the very young Talā Ba'lūsha (2007–2023) member of the Asayel Watan Folk Dance Group; 'Āhid Abū Ḥamada (1999–2023), Nūr al-Dīn Hajjāj and al-Hārith al-Barāwī, Aḥmad al-Shawā and two other young actors, Muhannad and Linā, all members of the Ayyām al-Masraḥ (Theatre Days Production) company; the actor Muḥammad al-Salik from the Budhūr/Semi (Bozour Culture and Arts) association; two artists from the Hakāwī Association for Culture and Arts in Gaza, 'Amrū Marwān, actor and theatre trainer, and one of its founders and main leaders, Muḥammad Zaqqūq Khaṭṭāb; the television actor 'Alī al-Nasmān, and Ghāzī Ṭālib, who revived the art of traditional storytelling.

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can share their personal narratives and experiences. In 2020, WANN launched the Hebrew and English language website *We Beyond the Fence*, with the objective of furnishing Israelis with access to a compendium of articles, poetic compositions, and personal memoirs that pertain to life in Gaza. See: Ahmed Alnaouq, Pam Bailey (eds.), *We Are Not Numbers: The Voices of Gaza's Youth*, Hutchinson Heinemann, 2025 (Italian translation: *Non siamo numeri. Le voci dei giovani di Gaza*, Rome, Nutrimenti, 2025).

<sup>68</sup> The compilation of these narratives was undertaken by one of the organisation's founding members, namely the writer and university educator Refaat Alareer (Rif'at al-'Ar'ayr), who tragically lost his life in Gaza on the 7th of December 2023. See: Refaat Alareer (ed.), *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza*, Washington DC, Just World Books, 2014 (Italian edition edited by L. Lo Russo, Rome, Lo Russo Editore, 2015); *Gaza Unsilenced*, Washington DC, Just World Books, 2016.