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Performance Activism in Nabi Saleh: The Collaborative Theater of Politics and Resistance

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Nazia Ejaz ▲
Red City, 2013
120 x 90 cm
Synthetic polymer
paint on canvas

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Mark LeVine is Professor of History and **Bryan Reynolds** is Chancellor's Professor of Drama at UC Irvine. Together they are writing *Art at the Edge: Creativity and Conflict in the Middle East and Africa*. In March 2015, they work-shopped their play *Nabi Saleh* (written/directed by Reynolds, dramaturgy by LeVine) at Cinema Jenin Theatre in the West Bank with the Amsterdam-based Transversal Theater Company and actors from the Jenin Freedom Theatre.

The research received funding from the University of South Australia's International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding (MnM Centre). The Centre is a response to the challenge set by one of Australia's most influential political and social figures: former Prime Minister, the Honourable Bob Hawke. Mr Hawke has made it his life's work to bring people from disparate backgrounds together to create common understanding in situations of dispute and confrontation. In fulfilling the mission set for it by Mr Hawke, the Centre focuses its research and community engagement activities on the triggers for prejudice that present barriers to dialogue. The vision of the MnM Centre is to be an internationally significant research centre, devoted to understanding and transcending the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, with a strong socio-cultural focus that fosters informed relationships between cultures and identities. The Centre provides a unique forum in which scholars and PhD students develop and disseminate ideas within the framework of a broader social justice agenda.

The MnM Centre consists of a diverse community of scholars who engage intellectually and practically in questions of identity, security, citizenship and belonging, contemporary culture and politics, urban and spatial organisation, extremism and Islamophobia. Wherever possible, the research of the Centre is made accessible to external stakeholders to provide opportunities to engage in dialogue with the aim of continually building greater understanding and influencing positive change. Mediums through which research is disseminated include publications, the media, public speaking engagements, academic conferences and the MnM Centre's public fora. Its staff members and students recognise that broad understanding will not come simply through distributing facts to the general public, but that beliefs and attitudes must change. As a result, they are committed to research that provides people of all cultural and religious backgrounds with the impetus to consider new ways of thinking about other members of their communities while addressing how Muslims, in particular, fit into contemporary communities and cultures. Thus the focus of the MnM Centre's work – its research, its collaboration with other programs and people at the University of South Australia, and its engagement with local and international partners and communities – is identifying ways in which different communities can, should and do encounter and interact with each other.

Performance Activism in Nabi Saleh: The Collaborative Theater of Politics and Resistance

If an image is worth a thousand words, how much is a video worth? Especially when it shows young children and their mothers fighting a heavily armed soldier—grabbing, punching, and biting him—as he attempts to detain one of the kids, whose arm is already in a cast from an injury caused by soldiers the week before?

Apparently, the video is worth 100,000 views its first day on YouTube, and over 3 million by the third.¹

The incident in question took place on a hill belonging to the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh. Every Friday since 2009 Nabi Saleh has become ground zero of the Palestinian strategy of “civil resistance” against the Israeli Occupation, one that is winning increasing international attention and support. Joined by other Palestinians, and Israeli and international activists, residents march from the center of the village to the hill, which they attempt, at least for an hour or so, to reclaim from Israeli control.

Israeli soldiers respond with tear gas, plastic-coated steel bullets, stun grenades, sometimes live ammunition and, as the video shows, physical assaults as the protesters attempt to march down the hill toward the road and the small natural spring for which the village is named.

The protests in Nabi Saleh and similar protests across the West Bank and East Jerusalem have revealed the raw face of the Occupation to thousands of Israeli and foreign activists in the last six years. Millions more have viewed videos from the protests.

After decades spent demanding that Palestinians stop violently resisting the Occupation, Israel and its supporters are hard-pressed to criticize the largely non-violent protests. About the only plausible criticism is that the protests are deliberately “staged” and the videos edited to show Israel in the most negative light.

Having spent the last five years studying the organization and aesthetics of citizen protest against oppressive power structures in the Middle East and Africa, we find ourselves in agreement with the description of the protests as “staged.” But the criticism of such staging reflects a misunderstanding of the history and practice of civil protest, which, from Gandhi's Salt March to MLK's march across Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge or Tahrir Square has succeeded in direct relationship to the creativity and planning behind it.

In the case of Palestinians confronting an exponentially more powerful foe, only the most creative and carefully planned protests, attracting the greatest possible media coverage and with the strongest narrative coherence, can hope to prevent Israel from gaining control of more land, the *raison d'être* of the Occupation.

So artfully is Nabi Saleh staged that we decided to create a play about the protests only minutes after our first protest began, before the tear gas canisters had begun to whiz overhead. Years of fieldwork in Iraq, Nigeria, Egypt and other high conflict societies hadn't prepared us for how a hill could become a

¹ Here is a link to a longer version, posted by Bilal Tamimi on YouTube, which shows the whole scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvJNYjzm9jk>

theater, with everyone—residents, activists, soldiers and settlers—cast in a play directed, for once, by the weaker side.

Indeed, those who criticized the protests as staged ignore that the Occupation is one of history's most scripted processes. From the legalisms used to expropriate Palestinian land and resources, to the “resistance” by settlers being removed from “illegal” outposts, to Israel's massively financed global propaganda—*hasbara* in Hebrew—machine, every scene is so well scripted it has enabled Israel to maintain the Occupation for half a century.

This is why Nabi Saleh is so important. As with all great theater, it transforms most everyone who witnesses it. Once you've caught a “performance” it becomes impossible to remain above the fray.

And yet, while the Tamimis stage the protest, the performance depends for its success on a minimum of cooperation, if not collaboration, with Israeli forces. They “own the house” and can change the sets, production values, and narrative structure when and as they see fit. They also control how long the performance continues, ramping up the barrage of “non-lethal” weaponry (which have killed protesters at Nabi Saleh) and bringing out the live ammunition when the commander on scene decides it's time to close the curtain.

Ultimately, however, neither side can stray too far from the script, although it's Nabi Saleh's residents who've shown the most skill at taking advantage of any improvisation—like a lone soldier crossing the battle line to grab an injured child.

And it's the Tamimi children who steal the show, with daughter Ibad literally winning an international award from Turkish President Erdogan for her fearless weekly performances, which inevitably involve her storming up to soldiers, fists clenched, unleashing powerful soliloquies against the Occupation and the latest injuries suffered by family members.

On the other hand, it was the soldier who was the biggest cipher in this performance: for the Palestinian side, he's the embodiment of the Occupation's brutality; for Israelis, he's a model of the continued restraint and courage of their military. It's such ambivalence that keeps the story interesting and the audience expanding.

Bassem Tamimi, father of Muhammad, whose broken arm defined the latest video, put it best to us: “Yes this is theater, but it's also our lives, and everything is at stake.”

The most fascinating thing about Nabi Saleh is that no one knows how the story will end. Will the protests lose their valence, becoming a version of the “person-to-person” meetings that brought Palestinians and Israelis together during the first Intifada with no real impact on the ground? What happens if Israel throws away the script, as senior politicians are demanding after the latest incident, and start shooting women and children as often happens elsewhere across the Occupied Territories? Or if Israel annexes the West Bank, as most members of Israel's last several governments openly call for?

The performance of Nabi Saleh has helped stop the expropriation of the village's land during the last several years. Such theater has yet to occur or been less successful in other parts of the West Bank, where the settlement enterprise proceeds without pause. It seems this show will continue its run for the foreseeable future.