



ARTISTS REFLECTING ON



A collection of essays featuring:

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A SERIES DEFINED: THE STATE OF SEMITIC COMMONWEALTH

by Jamil Khoury

Where politicians and diplomats fail, artists and storytellers may yet succeed. Not in ratifying a peace treaty between Israel and Palestine, but in building the sort of social and political connectivity that enables resolution. In the absence of healthy relationships, and amid the persistence of narratives that reproduce staticity, Malek Najjar, Corey Pond, and I have curated “Semitic Commonwealth,” a staged reading series comprised of six plays that explore the human toll of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Not with timelines, statistics, and SWOT analyses, but a laser sharp focus on the personal prices paid by those most affected.

To this end, we have assembled a team of distinguished playwrights of Arab and Jewish backgrounds: Ken Kaissar, Ismail Khalidi, Hannah Khalil, Motti Lerner, Mona Mansour, and Zohar Tirosh-Polk—all of whom have written plays that propel the discourse well beyond the predictable enmities and righteous posturing, the monotonous talking points and selective memories that have stifled progress for far too long. These plays do not march in lockstep, but are dynamic, original, challenging, provocative, complicated, funny, painful, and sometimes controversial. They are plays that explore themes of identity, justice, occupation, exile, history, and homeland with remarkable honesty and integrity.

“Semitic Commonwealth” is all about leaving one’s comfort zone. The plays vary widely in thematic content, dramatic structure, and time and place, and pose difficult questions without presuming to offer answers. They enable audiences to arrive at their own conclusions and they encourage dissent. We never set out to achieve balance or moral equivalency, nor to provide equal airing to “both sides” (as if there are only two sides!). This is not about rooting for one’s team. There’s no home court advantage, and no one is keeping score.

The only conscious parity exists in the identities of the playwrights. Three identify as Jewish and Israeli, while three identify as Arab (two are Palestinian, one Lebanese). Three are women, three are men, and I imagine that all six identify as politically progressive, judging from their conscious adherence to the inquisitive, self-questioning, and humanistic traditions of the left. These artists find truth and humanity in characters with whom they agree *and* disagree, and eschew the didacticism, polemics, and policing of thought that we can only associate with the worst of political theatre. No one is being force-fed a politic at Silk Road Rising, and we detest propaganda.

“Semitic Commonwealth” is not about legitimizing or delegitimizing. Such utterances as “There’s no such thing as a Palestinian,” or “Jews have no connection to the land,” or “My claim is greater than your claim” have no place in our discourse. We abhor the delegitimization projects that are so rife on the extremes. Nor is it a competition over who has suffered greatest and longest. It is not a normalization

campaign (normalizing military occupation and asymmetrical power) nor is it an anti-normalization campaign (opposing mutually beneficial cooperative relationships between parties on the ground). It is instead a series of thoughtful, well-written plays that can help us evolve.

So anyone looking for anti-Semitism and Jewish conspiracy theories or anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, Palestinian victim blaming or Jewish Holocaust denial, had better look elsewhere. If you're looking for stories that conflate Palestinians with terrorism or Israelis with fascism, we are not your storytellers. Ours is a space for neither the erasure of Palestinian displacement, nor what I call the "duality of Israeli exceptionalism" (Israel as exceptionally good or exceptionally bad). Rather, to borrow a popular adage of Silk Road Rising's, Jews and Palestinians are "neither angels nor demons but real human beings," with all the hopes and fears, challenges and complexities, triumphs and failures, that characterize being human.

I'm proud that Silk Road Rising has created a space that accommodates a spectrum of views on this issue. I'm proud that our audience includes passionate supporters of both Israel and Palestine. In fact, I'm awed that such ideological diversity has converged on our 85-seat theatre—a hard-won affirmation that our mission is working. Conversations over the years have revealed to me an audience that includes Palestine solidarity activists, Jewish community leaders, Arab journalists, Israeli diplomats, and, of course, Arab and Jewish theatre lovers! Our plays have been engaged by partisans of both the Birthright Israel and Palestinian Right of Return movements, by BDS organizers (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) and champions of Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel). And of course, our patrons even include those afflicted with what I refer to, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as "Israel/Palestine Exhaustive Stress Disorder."

Yes, there has also been pushback. Some of it ugly. For example, the Jewish audience member who complained about there being "too many Muslims" in the house the night he attended a show, or the Arab audience member who left an angry voicemail berating my "associating with Zionists," or the indictment of an Israeli Jewish playwright deemed insufficiently anti-Israel by some and insufficiently pro-Israel by others, and therefore "dangerous," "self-hating," and a "tool of the enemy" (could he be a double agent?). But on the whole, we've witnessed gratitude and relief that a theatrical space exists for the democratic exchange of ideas surrounding these difficult and contentious debates.

Perhaps it is the persistence of the above-cited pushback that vindicates the urgency of "Semitic Commonwealth." To varying degrees, all participating playwrights have combatted efforts to censor and vilify their work; which, for me, is all the more reason to be producing them. Furthermore, the pursuit of justice continues to be undermined by an absence of Palestinian voices in American theatre. As communities of theatre makers, we bear responsibility for perpetuating a deafening silence around Palestine, an inequity we should be addressing loudly and collectively. Many theatres are also reluctant to produce Israeli Jewish playwrights who question and challenge dominant narratives about Israel. The

three Israeli playwrights who've joined us on this journey care deeply about Israel and its future—in my book, they're Israeli patriots. And yet some have accused them of demonstrating “disloyalty.” These allegations not only sabotage artistic freedom, they impair the robust dialogue we so desperately need.

Truth be told, a plethora of opinions already exist within our audiences and they're primed for lively deliberation. I've spoken to people who envision peaceful, equitable coexistence between the two nations and people who envision a carefully managed truce; people who wish to expand Israel's borders and people who wish to dismantle Israel altogether; people with deep knowledge of the issues, and people who demonstrate profound ignorance and lack of empathy. I have been privy to testimonies about the deep love of homeland felt by both Palestinians and Jews. Those testimonies have moved and affected me greatly. I want Palestinians to be able to exercise their love of homeland with the same freedoms and rights that are enjoyed by Jews. No matter one's politics, I trust we can all agree on that.

By and large, I find that most theatregoers are eager to learn and be challenged. Our art form is both inspirational and aspirational. People attend theatre to be impacted, and I've yet to meet a playwright who doesn't somehow wish to make the world a better place. When you create art from your own subjective experiences, your truth can elevate others, and parallels can begin to emerge. Good theatre not only touches the heart and mind, but also the soul. On two unrelated occasions, I heard from a Jewish artist and a Muslim artist that the theatre is a “sacred space,” and that encountering a play is the spiritual equivalent of reciting prayers or attending a service. It's not my place to say one way or the other, but I find this an interesting idea to ponder.

I think it also important to consider the “constituent audiences” for whom “Semitic Commonwealth” holds particular appeal. Not to diminish or negate our other audiences (whose participation is vital) but to illuminate the diversity among Chicago's Arab American and Jewish American theatregoers. Our Jewish audience is decidedly the larger of the two. It is primarily Ashkenazi (U.S., European, and Israeli born), the majority of whom self-identify as cultural Jews or observant Jews (varying definitions of observance), and describe themselves as Zionist, anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, or post-Zionist. Many have also expressed ambivalence towards Zionism, or a conditional embrace of Zionism.

Our Arab audience hails primarily from Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. It includes immigrants as well as those born in the United States, and counts Muslims, Christians, progressives, conservatives, nationalists, secularists, and religionists within its ranks. They identify typically as Arab American, or by country of origin (often both), and pay widely divergent levels of attention to Palestine/Israel. For those not in the know, cultivating and expanding our Jewish and Arab audiences has been a high priority since our company's founding. Facilitating deeper engagement and greater interchange within and between the communities, well beyond the run of “Semitic Commonwealth,” is vital to our mission. Indeed, Semites have a home at Silk Road Rising!

So whether you view this conflict through a peace and justice lens and a human rights lens, as I do, or through a nationalist lens, a religious lens, an identity lens, an anti-colonial lens, a post-Holocaust lens, an American interests lens, an engaged learner lens, or any combinations thereof, Silk Road Rising welcomes you to “Semitic Commonwealth.” We need your voices and you need our stories—call it constructive codependence. Granted, we are neither naive nor self-aggrandizing enough to suggest that twelve staged readings of six plays at a Chicago theatre will suddenly change the immediate circumstances surrounding Israel/Palestine—but woe to him who underestimates the potential ripple effects of “Semitic Commonwealth.” Culture is destiny, I believe. As such, we are planting seeds to grow into roots that sprout narratives and shape new realities. Not swords into plowshares, but plays into plowshares. Ambitious and bold? We wouldn’t have it any other way.

PEACE IN OUR TIME: STAGING PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

by Michael Malek Najjar

In many ways I believe this “Semitic Commonwealth” project started thirteen years ago when Jamil Khoury asked me to direct his play *Precious Stones*. That play, which premiered at the Chicago Cultural Center in January of 2003, was the genesis of our collaboration which revolved around the seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For that production we cast two brave actresses—Roxane Assaf and Nicole Pitman—and asked them to play characters that they identified with culturally *and* characters they may have not identified with at all politically. This was a tall order, especially during the height of the second intifada which lasted from 2000 to 2005. It was during that production that we explored the possibility of “being in the other’s shoes” both figuratively and literally. Despite the highly political nature of such a project, the artists and audiences reacted positively and we had some very passionate and interesting dialogues surrounding that production.

Here we are over a decade later and, unfortunately, the situation between Palestinians and Israelis has further deteriorated. The Oslo Accords have all but collapsed, there has been a wave of violent attacks throughout Palestine and Israel, the Israeli occupation (of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights) continues into its fiftieth year, more settlements are being constructed, the separation wall has divided more land and families, and there is seemingly no end to the conflict that seemed solvable in 2000 after the Summit at Camp David. Furthermore, we’ve seen the rise of the so-called “Islamic State,” the horror of the Syrian Civil War, a fractured and devastated Iraq, the slaughter and displacement of millions of people, the mass migration of refugees, the destruction of many ancient shrines and archaeological treasures, and further conflicts between many of the ethnic, religious, and cultural groups that inhabit the region. Now the Trump administration has signaled that the United States will move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which effectively undermines any Palestinian claim to the holy city as their capital. There may be an even greater casualty due to this new administration—the two state solution. Several Israeli officials have celebrated the Trump victory because, according to Israeli Minister of Education Naftali Bennett, “the era of a Palestinian state is over.”¹

What can a collection of plays possibly accomplish in dealing with the ongoing Palestinian–Israeli conflict? What is the point of art when real lives are being destroyed on a daily basis? How can a play have anything important to say about such a tragic and impossible situation? The answer: perhaps nothing, or perhaps everything. Beyond the tragic loss of human lives, the greatest loss in this conflict is the loss of empathy for the other. Somehow, both sides have found ways to delegitimize and

¹ Andrew Blake. “Trump Win Means No Two-State Solution in Middle East, Israeli Official Says.” *The Washington Times*. 9 November 2016. Web.

dehumanize one another through war, propaganda, hate speech, and violent acts committed in the name of God, the state, or the homeland. This dehumanization has systematically destroyed the already tenuous relations between Arabs and Jews in the region, and has allowed heinous acts to be perpetrated on a daily basis. The extremists, it seems, have won the argument and the moderates are left hopelessly bereft.

The plays we are presenting here are an attempt by these playwrights and artists to *re-humanize* the other. The characters in these plays are, just like the rest of us, deeply flawed individuals. They often act out of their worst, rather than their best, instincts and intentions. However, this “Semitic Commonwealth” is offering audiences a glimpse into the world not as it is, or the world as it should be, but rather as a dream of life that might be. Can we not take time to examine the wrongs that have been committed, and find constructive ways that we might be able to go on living with one another? Is there a way we can rise above our past and envision a better future? These are the questions a “Semitic Commonwealth” poses and dares us to ask ourselves as citizens, as artists, and as dreamers both through the plays and the interactive dialogues that surround this event.

These six plays are written by six very different, yet very talented, playwrights. They each attempt to understand different aspects of this conflict. Ismail Khalidi’s *Tennis in Nablus* reimagines pre-1948 Palestine during the British Mandate, Zohar Tirosh-Polk’s *The Zionists* transports us back and forth from 1930s Europe to contemporary Israel, Hannah Khalil provides a kaleidoscopic overview of decades of the conflict in her *Scenes from 69 Years*, Mona Mansour’s *Urge for Going* dramatizes the lives of Palestinians living in exile in Lebanon, Motti Lerner’s *The Admission* is a compelling play that examines the complicated and painful history of the horrors of war and how history haunts the present, and Ken Kaissar’s *The Victims* dramatizes two abstract yet entwined stories that conclude with a cage and a dream. These plays speak to us as artists, as scholars, as Americans who have a vested interest in this conflict, and as people who are helplessly watching the tragic events in the Middle East unfold. We chose these plays because we believed in these playwrights and their desires to attempt to capture in words and images the joys, griefs, triumphs, and suffering of the Palestinian and Israeli people.

Each of these playwrights offers a deeply personal and very powerful message about the pain they feel with this ongoing conflict as part of their lives. For most Americans, the Israel-Palestine conflict is a distant problem that is brought to our attention whenever events there spiral out of control; but when you grow up in an Arab or Jewish household the conversation about Palestine and Israel is ever-present. Many American Jews have taken trips to Israel while many Palestinians have either visited their relatives in Palestine (when they are allowed), or have visited Palestinian refugees in the surrounding nations. Whenever violence breaks out those of Arab and Jewish descent are seized with a terrible feeling of helplessness and grief, something not shared by others around them who have no ties to the land.

Is a “Semitic Commonwealth” possible? Could there be a day when tourists book a high-speed rail tour that travels from Tel Aviv to Beirut, to Damascus to Baghdad, and other Middle-Eastern destinations? Can we imagine a time when all of us can look back at this Palestinian-Israeli conflict the way we look back on the Hundred Years’ War—a horrific era that eventually found a solution rooted in a European Union? Can we dare to envision such an ambitious future for the Middle East? Perhaps, if we remind ourselves that Europe itself was in ruin just seventy-two years ago, we might be able to imagine a time when these tragic conflicts are also a distant memory. It may take generations, but we must find hope now if that dream is ever to materialize. Until then we must fight for a vision of Palestine and Israel as a land of peace, not as a land of perpetual war. Perhaps if we dream it, it might come to fruition.

HUMANIZING THE “OTHER”

by Hannah Khalil

I'm sick of seeing Arabs on stage. Don't get me wrong; I love Arabs—hell, my dad's Palestinian, but why are we always portrayed in the narrowest way? Crying mothers, stone-throwing resisters, dead martyrs.

I saw a poster for an American-Arab comedian's show, the tag line: 'I'm not a terrorist—but I have played one on TV.' Smart, I thought, expose the stereotypes. Those same clichés got me writing in the first place: my heart ached for the fantastic Arab actors I knew who had to don a suicide vest at every audition.

Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman's *The Time That Remains* further inspired me. In it an old Palestinian man, depressed by life under occupation, routinely runs into the street in his PJs and douses himself in petrol. His neighbors take turns to gently take the matches away and lead him home. It's sad but, believe it or not, darkly funny too.

So, suitably fired (!) I started penning scripts showing very 'normal' Arab characters and I'm not alone; the other great writers in this “Semitic Commonwealth” series and Arab writers like Hassan Abdulrazzak and Hanan Al Shaykh reveal a common desire to myth bust.

Then, my first play about Palestine: *Plan D* was put on in London in 2010. It was based on testimonies of Palestinians who lived through the creation of Israel in 1948 and tells the story of what happens to one fictional family.

The thing that surprised and delighted me the most about that production was the fact that many people approached me afterwards—Palestinians in the Diaspora—to tell me their story: what happened to them, their family, what happens to them now, every day, living under occupation.

And what stories they were, full of pathos and drama and dark, dark, wry humour. What a resource I'd been gifted. But how to tell all these tales? So many . . . If I were to write each into a play, that would be my life's work.

I decided to try a patchwork approach, and undertook the joyous task of writing each of these stories as a scene. That was the easy part. More complicated was the assembly job that followed; placing the scenes in a structure that would give the sense of journey to an audience despite not having one central character and objective to follow. This shaping was a long and detailed endeavor, the work of five years of development, workshops and readings. Beautiful scenes that I loved were cut, the order changed and changed.

The title however was easy: the first draft of the play was titled *Scenes from 62* Years*, the number denoting the time that has passed since 1948, the asterisk signifying that the number will change. By the first production last year it was called *Scenes from 68* Years*. If you attend Silk Road Rising's reading you'll see *Scenes from 69* Years*. Of course my hope is that one day, when occupation ends, the number will become fixed.

That's one of my hopes. Another is that, in future, I won't be sick of seeing Arabs on stage because they'll be portrayed as actual, real people—as opposed to terrorists—at last.

SCENES FROM 69* YEARS: SNAPSHOTS FROM A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS OCCUPATION

by Michael Malek Najjar

You cannot like the word, but what is happening is an occupation—to hold 3.5 million Palestinians under occupation. I believe that is a terrible thing for Israel and for the Palestinians . . . It can't continue endlessly.

—Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, 2003²

How does one encapsulate sixty-nine years of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in one play? That is the momentous task Hannah Khalil has undertaken in her far-reaching, theatrical collage of scenes spanning the decades since the state of Israel was created, and the post-1967 occupation of Palestinian territories. Like her first major play titled *Plan D*, Khalil utilizes historical situations to create the dramatic backdrop for her dramas. *Plan D* was named after the Israeli “Plan Dalet” which, in the words of historian Walid Khalidi, “entailed the destruction of the Palestinian Arab community and the expulsion and pauperization of the bulk of the Palestine Arabs . . . calculated to achieve the military fait accompli upon which the state of Israel was to be based.” *In Scenes from 69* Years* (the asterisk denotes that the number can/will change with each passing year of the conflict) Khalil provides snapshots of various scenes based on Palestinian survivor stories. Her patchwork assembly took years of development, workshops, and readings. Ironically, if not unfortunately, the play began as *Scenes from 62* Years*. The intervening seven years have most likely provided even more stories from which to create scenes.

Khalil includes shopkeepers, children, translators, charity workers, taxi drivers, Palestinians in the West Bank, Palestinians living in the Diaspora, and Israeli soldiers. This diorama of the occupation gives audiences glimpses into the lives of Palestinians of all walks of life, desperately attempting to live through an occupation that is breaking their society. It also demonstrates that Israelis are also affected by this stagnating state of limbo where nothing changes except a constant hardening of positions, confiscation of lands, proliferation of checkpoints, and crushing of spirits.

Despite the serious topic, Khalil infuses her play with colorful characters, exciting and mundane situations, thoughtful dialogues, and even static scenes of everyday people waiting in line at checkpoints. She knows that decades of this ongoing situation leads to a wide variety of situations from shockingly violent to monotonously boring, some with dialogue and others only silent action. She provides us with portrayals of human interaction that refuse to sensationalize or exaggerate the daily lives of Palestinians. Like Caryl Churchill’s play *Love and Information*, Khalil takes us into the smaller, intimate moments that define a society.

² Wallace, Kelly. “Sharon: ‘Occupation’ Terrible for Israel, Palestinians.” *CNN*, 27 May 2003.
www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/05/26/mideast/

Like the old keys Palestinians keep from their lost homes, or the maps that remain proving Palestinian claims to the land, Khalil's desire to transform Palestinian stories into these dramatic vignettes is an act of testimony—a desire to not let the small and seemingly insignificant events of this ongoing occupation be forgotten or lost to history. Her method of storytelling is by way of postmodern pastiche—fleeting moments compiled in a way to allow audiences to both see the details of the smaller pictures while simultaneously zooming outward to gain a perspective on the entire work. What is the importance of this play? Perhaps a line uttered during the final scene says it all: “. . . so we know that you remember—so you don't forget—so you can tell everyone.” Given all of the death, suffering, and destruction of the past sixty-nine years, the least we can do is memorialize this ongoing tragedy.

FACING THE TRAUMA OF 1948

by Motti Lerner

The Admission was inspired by the Israeli Defense Forces' May 23, 1948 occupation of the Palestinian village of Tantura during Israel's War of Independence, and by the controversy between several Israeli historians who propose that, during the assault on the village and subsequent expulsion of its inhabitants, soldiers perpetrated a massacre on unarmed villagers. The play, however, is not a documentary. All characters and events are a fiction of the playwright's imagination. The play doesn't attempt to determine the historical validity of any one narrative of the Tantura occupation, nor does it present unequivocal facts with regard to what took place during the battle.

Set in Haifa in 1988, *The Admission* centers around two families, one Jewish, one Palestinian. Through their story we explore the suppression of the village's occupation—a process that took place in both Jewish and Arab societies. We also examine the circumstances that led to the resurgence of this suppressed trauma in our consciousness 40 years later. This examination stems from the belief that coming to terms with the events of 1948 is imperative for all involved. Otherwise, the rectification so crucial to our continued existence will not be carried out on either the political, personal, or social level, and we will be unable to recover from the collective trauma we've undergone.

The Admission was written in the hopes that it might encourage more fair, open, and empathic discourse among us, and that it would generate honest, unifying, constructive dialogue between the different sects of Israeli society. Such dialogue about this shared trauma would accelerate the process of appeasement with the Palestinian people living with us and next to us. I hope that this dialogue promotes, even in a small way, the founding of a joint society in Israel whose sects live side by side, in mutual recognition and acceptance.

While writing was completed as early as 2006, all plans to produce *The Admission* were ultimately aborted in spite of the interest expressed by several theatres in Israel. These repeated cancellations likely had to do not only with the theatre managers' fear of potential sanctions by the Ministry of Culture, but their concerns over an enraged public's reaction to this "deviation" from consensus in showing the forbidden story of the 1948 war.

The Admission at last premiered in spring 2014 under the direction of Sinai Peter at Washington D.C.'s Theater J. Following rave reviews, one of the largest theatres in Israel made plans to produce it in the 2015-16 season. But then, on March 17, 2015, the election of the Knesset took place—a new government was formed, a new minister of culture was nominated, and the production was cancelled. However, in early 2016, the Jaffa Theater in Tel Aviv decided to produce the play (again with Sinai Peter directing) which premiered in September 2016 and has since been playing regularly and with great

success, evoking intense public debates between Jews and Arabs striving to create a joint society in Israel.

THE ADMISSION: ACCOUNTING AND ATONING FOR THE PAST

by Michael Malek Najjar

Motti Lerner's searing drama *The Admission* is the attempt by a playwright of conscience to both account, and atone, for the past. The occupation and evacuation of Palestinian villages in 1948 has been well documented with over 400 villages depopulated during the process.³ For some, these expulsions were the aftermath of violent battles between Arab factions and the Haganah⁴ forces who began fighting one another shortly after the United Nations announced partition on November 29, 1947. Others believe Palestinians either left of their own volition or sold their lands to Jews. Still others believe this was a premeditated, Zionist strategy to rid the land of Palestinians. Regardless of these competing claims, the fact remains that during the 1948 War, up to ten thousand Palestinians and over six thousand Israelis were killed, eighty percent of Palestinians became refugees, and the bulk of these lands comprised the new Israeli state.⁵

Lerner's play attempts to address one of the most contentious issues regarding the 1948 War of Independence: did Haganah and Irgun soldiers commit atrocities when overtaking Palestinian villages? Lerner, who was born in the village of Zichron Yaacov, near the historic village of Tantura, remembers growing up hearing stories about a massacre of Arabs that happened there during the 1948 War. He says he changed the name of the village in the play to Tantur because the play is fictitious, and he did not want to blur the line between history and fiction.⁶ The play revolves around the contested history of the Alexandroni Brigade that, during the battle of Tantura on May 23, 1948, was accused of massacring 250 Palestinians. A scholar, Teddy Katz, wrote a Masters of Arts thesis about this event claiming the massacre occurred; however, after Alexandroni veterans sued him for libel and, through pressure from family and friends, Katz signed a statement declaring there was no massacre. Lerner read Katz's thesis and, based on that study and stories he himself had heard, concluded that there are many narratives that differ from one another. His solution to untangle these conflicting accounts was to write a play.

As I said earlier, we, theater artists, cannot bring about a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our challenge is to create a public discourse that will lead to achieving it. How do we do it if the public discourse is so superficial and if our spectators are so deeply prejudiced, so

³ Davis, Rochelle. "Mapping the Past, Re-creating the Homeland" in Sa'di, Ahmad H., and Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Nakba Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Cultures of History. Web. 56. Also see Slyomovics, Susan. "The Memory of Place: Rebuilding the Pre-1948 Palestinian Village." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 3.2 (1994): 157-68. Web.

⁴ The Jewish militia which was created to protect Jewish interests in Palestine in 1920. They were allied with the "Irgun" group in 1945. In 1948 the Haganah became Israel's army. "Haganah." *World Encyclopedia: Philip's. Oxford Reference*. 2004. Date Accessed 25 Jan. 2017.

⁵ www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/casualties.html

⁶ Holzel, Davod. "A More Honest Discourse." *Washingtonjewishweek.com*. 19 March, 2014.

deeply defensive, so deeply resistant to even hearing the narrative of the Palestinians? In other words, how do we transform our stubborn theater-goers into open-minded spectators who are capable of listening to the narrative of the “other”?⁷

Like other playwrights of conscience before him (such as Ibsen, Miller, and Soyinka), Lerner is attempting to dramatize historical events not for the purposes of historical accuracy, but rather to illuminate these events in a way that personalizes them, opening them up for reflection by contemporary audiences. This extraordinarily prescient play forces us to look back into the horrors of the past so we may, perhaps, turn to see the future more clearly.

⁷ Lerner, Motti. “The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict-The Challenge for the Israeli Theater.” *The writerintheworld.com/2016/04/13/motti-lerner-1/*

THE MIDDLE EAST OF OUR LIVES

by Zohar Tirosh-Polk

Sonya writes a goodbye letter, Morris makes one fatal decision, Sheila clings and doesn't let go, and the band rocks on. From Poland to Palestine, to Israel, and later to the U.S., The Zionists asks: Where is home? What is home? At what price? Who is Herzl? And, most importantly, what's in the box?

Born of first-generation Israeli parents and raised in Israel, I am a product of Zionism. I carry within me its genesis, its enormous promise, and, its current decline. *The Zionists* attempts to examine Zionism's vibrant, sweeping ideology, its turbulent history and current state in order to ask: how did we get here, and where are we going?

I realize that for some audience members of "Semitic Commonwealth" it would be easy to think of Zionists as evil; for others, Zionists are heroes, even martyred saints. While I am not looking to pardon anyone, you could say that trauma has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in shaping Israeli and Palestinian lives. By that I mean ongoing, haunting trauma that perpetuates itself and trickles down through generations.

I'm also not looking to anoint anyone either. As a theatremaker and not a historian (and even historians get many things wrong), I'm interested in the inner and outer forces that were and are in play, for actual individuals. What were the original Zionists truly after? Did they find it? Where do Israelis feel they have a choice these days? Do they feel trapped? Is there a way out? Or forward?

These are just some of the questions that characters in the *The Zionists* struggle to answer. As I see it, this is my role and my reason for writing plays: to pose and explore complicated questions about Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East. I try to inspire my audiences to see, think, hear, feel, and experience the region and its histories in complex, multi-layered, and sophisticated fashions. If everything on the outside is indeed a reflection of our inner selves, then what, I'm curious, is the "Middle East of our lives"? How do we deal with the war-torn regions within ourselves and our relationships? I think about the places where we are paralyzed, at a standstill, cruel to ourselves and to others—the "Occupied Territories" of our bodies, our hearts, and our souls, if you will. Only if we are courageous enough to look for the wounds, will we, perhaps, begin to heal them.

In 1980, Playwright Brian Friel, a Catholic, teamed up with Protestant actor Stephen Rae to start a theatre company called Field Day. Field Day would later strive to create a "Fifth Province" in Ireland, a new cultural space where dichotomies of Protestant/Catholic, Unionist/Nationalist could be renegotiated, and, perhaps, transcended. Many believe that Field Day's cultural contribution was the first stepping-stone toward making peace in Ireland possible. The readings of *The Zionists* in Silk Road

Rising's "Semitic Commonwealth" series, are my prayer that we may come to approach these awfully polarized subjects anew. May we be able to see with fresh eyes and an open heart, so that we can all one day, perhaps, find our way home. Inshallah, amen, peace.

**THE ZIONISTS:
TRACKING GENERATIONAL TRAUMA**

by Michael Malek Najjar

*Maybe there will be new bridges instead of walls
Maybe we'll learn to forgive
Maybe there will be no more fighting.
Maybe we'll learn to share
Maybe there will be—*

—Dory, *The Zionists*

Zohar Tirosh-Polk's *The Zionists* is an era-spanning, genre bending play that opens with Sonya, a Zionist, asking her Tateh what it means to be a Jew. In many ways, the play grapples with that question over three distinct periods—the 1930s-1940s in Poland, Palestine, and Israel; 2006 in Jerusalem; and 2007-2008 in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and New York City. Each generation has suffered in their own way—Morris, Shemel, and Sonya in the 1930s, Sheila, Avi, Asaf, and Dory in the 2000s, and Boaz, Dan, and Yoram in the late 2000s. All are haunted by the ghosts of the Holocaust, of the dead in the Arab-Israeli wars, and by the death that accompanies the occupation. A band, appropriately named *The Zionists*, occasionally interjects a hard rock song insisting “I’m HERE/I’m HERE/I’m HERE.”

Tirosh-Polk, a New York based Israeli playwright who was born in Brazil to Israeli parents, has seen her share of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She has lived through wars, intifadas, demonstrations, peace agreements, and she was even in attendance at the rally where former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. When asked why she writes plays, she responds,

I want to pose and explore complicated questions about Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East. I try to inspire my audiences to see/think/hear/feel/experience the region and its history in more complex, multi-layered and sophisticated ways. I’m also interested in the ways the outside is a reflection of our inner lives, and if that's true, I’m curious about the “Middle East of our lives.” How do we deal with the war-torn regions in ourselves? In our relationships.

The Zionists attempts to encapsulate lives that were lived before Aliyah, or the immigration of Jews from the Diaspora to Eretz Israel, during the early years of the newly declared State of Israel, and later with the descendants of the first generation who must contend with the beauty and heartbreak of living in a country that is constantly beset by wars and uprisings. As the character Sonya says, “Life isn't honey. Let me tell you, it isn't. Even here, in the land of.” The ghosts of the past are everywhere, haunting the characters; even the ghost of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism, appears by way of a posters, books, and dreams.

The play contends with the horror of those killed, crippled, and disappeared. Each generation has suffered loss—in the Warsaw Ghetto, in the valleys of Lebanon, in the cities of Palestine, and even in a bed in New York City. Tirosh-Polk says she is “trying to track the way in which trauma trickles down through generations or learn about the role of trauma within the arc of the Zionist idea.” Despite the hardships endured by all of the characters in the play, Sheila, the ex-teacher turned painter, reminds us that there is beauty everywhere, if only we would take the time to look for it, no matter how difficult that may be. Is this play a tragedy or a hopeful missive? I believe the final sounds heard in the play provide the answer.

WRITING PALESTINE'S INVISIBLE HISTORY

by Ismail Khalidi

Growing up, the period of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine (1936-1939) was always of great interest to me, both in terms of my own family's involvement (several of my relatives were imprisoned and/or exiled by the British for political activities during this period) and also in terms of its importance to the history of Palestine. In my research for what would become this play, I came upon a passage in a book by an Israeli historian in which he documents an instance of Palestinian prisoners chained at the feet and used as ballboys for the tennis matches of the British authorities. This image was striking to me in that it spoke to the cruelty, absurdity and overall mindset of the British Empire in particular, and imperialism more generally. It also struck me as echoing the brutality of occupation and incarceration today, whether in Palestine, Iraq or the U.S. Most importantly, perhaps, the image conjured a situation brimming with dramatic potential.

I knew almost immediately that this was the image and dramatic situation which I wanted to build my play around. How then, I asked myself, were the two prisoners in this scenario related? Did they like each other? Did they agree on what their predicament meant and how best to extract themselves from it? Ultimately the two prisoners/ballboys, as they came into being in *Tennis in Nablus*, are indeed related by blood, and yet very much at odds. This circumstance seemed especially relevant and timely considering the infighting that has long plagued the Palestinian national movement. Working outwards, a host of other characters entered into the world, from the British overlords to the Irish and Indian conscripts; the fearless Anbara, the kind but troubled Samuel Hirsch, and even the wandering ghost of Emiliano Zapata.

As I began to construct the play, the year 1939 struck me as a unique and meaningful entry point into the conflict, especially for an American audience that is totally unfamiliar with the real history of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. In fact, for most Americans, Palestinians, if they exist at all, only do so in opposition to Israel and therefore as a post-1948 phenomenon at best. At worst we are one-dimensional terrorists. To set a play before the creation of Israel and the accompanying dispossession of the Palestinians, seemed to me to be a crucial way to convey an important truth about Palestine: namely, that Palestinians did exist and were in fact struggling to achieve their freedom from a colonial power in the early part of the last century.

It was telling to me, for example, that in the U.S. the Irish and Indian struggles for independence in the 20th century are looked upon favorably and celebrated in art and mainstream culture and politics. Why then, should the Palestinian struggle against the same British colonialism during the same period not be afforded such consideration? To set a dramatic story infused with tragedy and comedy and peopled with compelling characters against this historical backdrop was hard to resist, and for me served, in part, as an act of reclamation and solidarity.

For at the heart of the question of Palestine are a plethora of issues that go far beyond Palestine. They include settler colonialism, white supremacy, imperialism, ethnic cleansing, human rights, international law, refugee rights, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia among others. It is my hope then that this play can be one part of a larger conversation in the theater, not only about Palestine and Israel, but about much more.

TENNIS IN NABLUS: MINING HISTORY FOR THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

by Michael Malek Najjar

Ismail Khalidi's *Tennis in Nablus*, labeled a "tragipoliticomedy," views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lens of historical fiction. The play, set in 1939 British Mandated Palestine, relies on hindsight for much of its effectiveness. In many ways, viewing the Palestinian situation during this period of time can bring clarity to this extremely complex issue. Although Jews and Arabs (Christian and Muslim) were being dominated under British rule, Palestinians believe it was a decidedly pro-Zionist British mandate which both trained and armed Jewish immigrants.⁸ Set in Nablus, the play offers a view of Palestine when Arab resistance was focused squarely upon the British during the period that Jews were emigrating from Europe at the onset of World War II. If there was any doubt about how the British administration viewed the citizens of their Mandated Palestine, British General Sir Walter Norris Congreve once wrote, "I dislike them all equally. Arabs and Jews and Christians, in Syria and Palestine, they are all alike, a beastly people. The whole lot of them is not worth a single Englishman!"⁹ It is Khalidi's view that British colonial rule was ultimately replaced by Zionist settler colonial rule and, later, Israeli occupation.¹⁰

The crux of the politics of the play is found in the British struggle to maintain control over Palestine, the European Jewish desire for a homeland during their persecution at the hands of the Nazi regime in Europe, and the Palestinian quest for freedom, dignity, and self-determination. From the European Jewish perspective, as voiced by Hirsch in the play, the situation for the Jews in Europe had become completely untenable. For the Palestinians of the time, embodied by Tariq, there is the burning question "Can we both live here? Or is it going to be one of us?" It can be argued that neither ultimately finds satisfaction.

All of the characters have compelling reasons to fight and die for Palestine during this period, yet peaceful coexistence is nearly impossible when radicals rule the day and when an imbalance of power denies the rights and freedoms of one side to ultimately benefit another. The moderates of the play are silenced by those who wish to seize power through violence and deception rather than coexistence. The playwright manages to humanize both sides through an intentionally Palestinian position. In the preface to their edited anthology *Inside/Outside: Six Plays From Palestine and the Diaspora*, Ismail Khalidi and Naomi Wallace write about the fact that Palestinian plays are often "culturally delegitimized, derailed and delimited by the Israeli-Palestinian 'conflict' wherein the Israeli perspective is always/already

⁸ For more about this issue see "The *Haganah* by Arab and Palestinian Historiography and Media" by Sarah Ozacky-Lazar and Mustafa Kabha. *Israel Studies*, 7.3 (Fall 2002), pp. 45-60.

⁹ Quoted in *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the Mandate* by Tom Segev. 1st American ed. New York: Metropolitan, 2000. Print. 9.

¹⁰ Khalidi, Ismail. Personal interview. 26 January 2017.

privileged.” It is their view that presenting both sides of this conflict in anthologies, for instance, is problematic because to do so limits and shapes free speech about Palestine, depriving the work of its right to be judged by its own merits, and because there is already an imbalance in the conflict that adversely affects the Palestinians due to their being the weaker party in this struggle.¹¹

The play’s decidedly melancholy ending presages the actual historical events following the failure of the Arab uprising which, according to Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi, led to five thousand killed, ten thousand wounded, and over five thousand detained. Khalidi writes, “. . . the suffering was considerable in an Arab population of about a million: over 10 percent of the adult male population was killed, wounded, imprisoned, or exiled.”¹² *Tennis in Nablus* sets the stage for the events of 1948 known as *al-Nakba* or “the catastrophe” by Palestinians. By dramatizing the situation that preceded the establishment of the State of Israel, Khalidi provides the historical context for the intractable situation we see now in Palestine and Israel.

¹¹ Wallace, Naomi and Ismail Khalidi. “Preface.” *Inside/Outside: Six Plays from Palestine and the Diaspora*. Edited by Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi, TCG, 2015, N.pag.

¹² Khalidi, Rashid. “The Palestinians and 1948: The Underlying Causes of Failure,” in *The War for Palestine : Rewriting the History of 1948*, edited by Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print. Cambridge Middle East Studies ; 27.

THE UNSPEAKABLE LOSS OF DISPLACEMENT

by Mona Mansour

The characters in *Urge for Going* are strangely closer to my heart now than they were when I first started working on the play. Now they live in two other plays as well; all three plays now collectively form “The Vagrant Trilogy.” But *Urge* was the first time I “met” them officially; the first of the three I wrote. Set in contemporary times (2003), in a refugee camp in Southern Lebanon, *Urge for Going* was written as my way of trying to understand the past and present of my father’s home country, Lebanon. What did it mean that outside my father’s village (near the city of Sidon), there were two Palestinian camps that had been in existence since 1948? What happens to those inside that kind of “permanent impermanence”? What happens to the family dynamic when someone tries to push against that enforced stasis? After finishing that play, I hadn’t imagined writing anything more about those characters.

Then later, in the Public Theater’s Emerging Writers Group, I was trying to decide what to write, and it occurred to me that I was very interested in the story Adham tells his daughter, Jamila, in *Urge* about his trip to London in 1967 as a young man just out of Cairo University, full of hope about his future. I knew I wanted that new play, called *The Hour of Feeling*, to end with Adham making the decision to go back to Palestine in 1967 as the war broke out. I needed the character to make that decision, so *The Hour of Feeling* would line up narratively with *Urge for Going*. But the younger version of Adham didn’t want to “join up” with his future self, stuck in a refugee camp. He essentially refused to go back to that fate. So from there the third play was born, *The Vagrant*, which imagines Adham’s life as it would be if he stayed in London and became a professor. There, he does well enough materially but has completely compartmentalized all connections to family, home and trauma, until all of that shatters and he simply can’t anymore.

So it’s a conditional trilogy. And I go into all this because seen together, what the plays speak to is the fundamental fact that there is a deep psychic cost of displacement. This is what has obsessed me through writing all of these plays about the imagined life of a Palestinian scholar: The place you escape to, if you’re “lucky” enough to escape, will never be home; you will never fully be of that place. Nor will you ever be “of” your homeland again, once displaced. I think about this more and more as the issue of migrants and migrations sets off elections, galvanizes the xenophobic right, and fuels visions of massive walls: At the beginning of every of those journeys is an unspeakable loss. In *Urge for Going*, it’s almost impossible for the characters to speak of this loss directly. Here, Wordsworth’s poetry steps in as Adham and Jamila say their goodbye: “The picture of the mind revives again/While here I stand, not only with the sense/Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts/That in this moment there is life and food/For future years. And so I dare to hope . . .” My hope is that that together, the plays will speak to the psychic effects of displacement not just for Palestinians, but for all of us.

URGE FOR GOING: DRAMATIZING "PERMANENT IMPERMANENCE"

by Michael Malek Najjar

Mona Mansour's *Urge for Going* is part of "The Vagrant Trilogy" she wrote which also includes the plays *The Hour of Feeling* and *The Vagrant*. While many writers have approached the situation of Palestinians living in Palestine, few have dramatized the situation of millions of Palestinians living in refugee camps scattered throughout the Middle East. These "permanent residences in exile"¹³ began following the suppression of the Arab uprisings of 1936-1939 but was hastened by the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and with the subsequent wars between Israelis and Palestinians. According to BBC News, the Palestinians comprise "one of the biggest displaced populations in the world."¹⁴ The resulting Israeli contention that all refugees should relinquish all right of return has only aggravated an already desperate situation. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), there are currently 450,000 Palestinian refugees living in twelve camps in Lebanon. Palestinians in Lebanon are denied the right to work in certain professions, are unable to claim the same rights as other foreigners living and working in Lebanon, and often live in abject poverty.¹⁵ According to *Al Jazeera*, "Today, Palestinians in Lebanon continue to suffer from draconian measures which the Lebanese state claims are there to prevent them from becoming permanent guests."¹⁶ To make matters worse, there has been wholesale slaughter of these refugees in their Lebanese camps such as the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982 and the suicide attack on the Burj el-Barajneh camp in 2015.

Urge for Going, set in an unnamed Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon just a thirty minute drive to the Israeli border, opens with Palestinians themselves debating how the crisis began with each citing historical facts to prove their position. Mansour's play highlights the fact that Palestinians in refugee camps found in Lebanon and Syria are living in a state of limbo—unable to become citizens of the nations to which they've been displaced, and disallowed from returning to their ancestral homes now found in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Regarding Jordan, prior to 1988 all Palestinian refugees were granted full Jordanian citizenship, however the 1967 refugees from Gaza were exempted from this citizenship. To make matters worse, many Jordanian Palestinians have lost their citizenship status, thereby rendering them stateless.¹⁷

¹³ Mona Mansour, "The Unspeakable Loss of Displacement." January 25, 2017.

¹⁴ Asser, Martin. "Obstacles to Arab-Israeli Peace: Palestinian Refugees." *BBC News*. 2 September 2010.

¹⁵ <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>

¹⁶ "Lebanon's Palestinian Refugees." www.aljazeera.com. 4 June 2009.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2009/05/2009527115531294628.html>

¹⁷ Gabbay, Shaul M. "The Status of Palestinians in Jordan and the Anomaly of Holding a Jordanian Passport."

Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs, 5 February 2014,

<https://www.esciencecentral.org/journals/the-status-of-palestinians-in-jordan-and-the-anomaly-of-holding-a-jordanian-passport-2332-0761.1000113.php?aid=23346>. Accessed 1 February 2017.

Urge for Going also focuses on the urge to flee the camps for a better life elsewhere. This urge to leave is strong given that life in the refugee camp is untenable: from lack of sanitation and electricity to beatings from Lebanese soldiers leaving family members physically and mentally injured. The only clear way out for this family is through academic opportunity, yet even Jamila knows that no matter how much one masters their intellect, “if you don’t have the innate talent, you won’t succeed.”¹⁸ For Jamila’s father, Adham, the opportunity to escape came when he was invited to London in 1967 to lecture on Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798.” Although the lecture’s reception grants Adham a fellowship to study in London, the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 forces his return to a homeland that is ultimately lost leaving him and his wife refugees in neighboring Lebanon. For his young daughter Jamila, however, the opportunity arrives thirty-six years later, when she tests for her Baccalaureate.

Palestinian American scholar Edward W. Said once said, “In a way, it’s a sort of the fate of the Palestinians not to end up where they started but somewhere unexpected and far away.”¹⁹ The play ends with Jul and Jamila reciting statistics about the painful situation Palestinian refugees face. According to the website *Visualizing Palestine*, ninety percent of Palestinians in Lebanon were born there and most are third-and-fourth generation. Only two percent have an official work permit while the rest face “biased attitudes & discriminatory labor laws.” Most are forced into precarious work and sixty-six percent live below the poverty line. Their average monthly wage is \$369 for men and \$305 for women.²⁰ “After more than 60 years Palestinian refugees are barred from numerous professions in Lebanon, including medicine, law and engineering because they are defined as foreigners.”²¹ Therefore, the family in Mansour’s drama, like many Palestinian families living as refugees for the past sixty-nine years, have a Hobson’s choice: either stay put in their refugee camps, or rely on the hope that a better life exists elsewhere. Mansour allows audiences to take a moment to empathize with those Palestinians who are living in the hopeless purgatory known as exile.

¹⁸ Mansour, *Urge for Going*, Unpublished playscript, 2011. 45.

¹⁹ Said, Edward W, Charles Bruce, Jimmy Michael, and Alon Farago. *In Search of Palestine*. Princeton, N.J.: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2005.

²⁰ “Palestinian Labour Force in Lebanon.” *Visualizing Palestine*, <http://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/palestinian-labor-force-in-lebanon-facts-and-figures>. Accessed 1 February 2017.

²¹ “Palestinian Labour Force in Lebanon Restricted Professions.” *Visualizing Palestine*, <http://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/palestinian-labour-force-in-lebanon-restricted-professions>. Accessed 1 February 2017.

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

by Ken Kaissar

Fear is the great impediment to dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Jews and Arabs alike are loathe to bring up the question of Israel or Palestine in the presence of the other, for fear that they might—god forbid—disagree with one another.

Let me save you the suspense. When it comes to the history of the Middle East in the 20th century, Jews and Arabs are certain to disagree with each other, if not about the entire narrative then at least about some aspect of it. But why are we so afraid to uncover that disagreement and talk through it?

The prospect of empathizing with the other is terrifying because we perceive that the needs of Israelis and Palestinians are mutually exclusive. Acknowledging that the other side has a legitimate point threatens to render our own narrative invalid. That fear tends to shut down all dialogue.

But Israelis and Palestinians understand each other better than most outsiders think. Both sides share a common goal, the struggle for the dignity of their own nationalistic identity. Israelis are told that they are merely European colonialists who have no business dwelling in the Middle East. Palestinians are told that they are a fictitious people with a fabricated history. These narratives deny each side the dignity of their histories and are completely unproductive to achieving a peaceful resolution. So stuck we will be, until we find the wisdom to abandon both of these inaccurate narratives.

We should be able to agree that both peoples are entitled to the dignity of their identities. Both deserve to live in peace and security under a state whose government is dedicated to their basic needs for a free and prosperous life. This is a goal that unites not only Israelis and Palestinians, but the entire human race. Who would claim that anyone is undeserving of such a promise? All we need is the courage to empathize with anyone who struggles to achieve it.

The title of my play, *The Victims*, raises a great many questions, the most prominent being who are the victims—Israelis or Palestinians? My answer, without being flippant, is both. For the last 70 years Israelis have lived under daily threat of hostile invasion and terrorist attacks. On the other hand, the establishment of Israel 70 years ago displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and rendered them homeless. Can't we acknowledge and empathize with both of these narratives? Does it really cost either side anything to acknowledge the suffering of the other?

**THE VICTIMS:
SYMPATHY FOR THE SUFFERING**

by Michael Malek Najjar

The full title for Ken Kaissar's play is *The Victims or What Do You Want Me To Do About It?* This playful subtitle gets to the heart of the frustrations most feel regarding the situation in Palestine and Israel. As outsiders to this conflict, we are constantly barraged by stories of death, violence, and political intransigence. Kaissar's main theme is victimhood, and the play asks audiences to remember that everyone claims the role of victims but the only thing that really matters is finding a way to achieve peace. According to Kaissar, "our sympathies should be with whomever is suffering . . . We should be concerned with the good and welfare of all people. There can be no peace unless all live in peace."²²

There are many identifiable characters in the play: innkeepers, restaurant owners, cell phone salesmen, soldiers, and police officers. However, there are also many ambiguous characters listed in the play: "Jadi, the frightened one," "Bassee, the tired one," "Paula: a peacemaker," and "Assav, the adversary." By providing these enigmatic descriptions, Kaissar refuses to allow directors, actors, and audiences alike the comfort of easily identifying who might be Israeli or Palestinian, protagonist or antagonist, right or wrong. The play forces us to see the characters as humans first, and as Israelis or Palestinians second. In his artistic statement for the play, Kaissar writes:

The prospect of empathizing with the other is terrifying because we perceive that the needs of Israelis and Palestinians are mutually exclusive. Acknowledging that the other side has a legitimate point threatens to render our own narrative invalid. That fear tends to shut down all dialogue.²³

In the play Kaissar also introduces a perspective not often heard in American plays about Israel—that of the Yemeni Jewish experience. The character David is a Yemeni Jew who was born and raised in New York, finds himself somewhat lost in Israel. He doesn't speak Hebrew well, doesn't know his way around Israel, and he learns that his outside perspective on this conflict is shaped more by the media than by facts on the ground. After fearing all Palestinians hate Jews, the character Mas'ud tells David,

Do you know what we hate, David? We hate living under Israeli occupation. We hate that the Israeli government targets Palestinian civilians. We hate that there is not a moment of peace for us. That there is no freedom. That's what we hate . . . Our fight is with the oppressive Israeli government. Not Jews.²⁴

²² Ken Kaissar, e-mail message to author, January 5, 2017.

²³ Ken Kaissar, "Artistic Statement." January 16, 2017.

²⁴ Kaissar, Ken. *The Victims or What Do You Want Me to Do About It?* Unpublished playscript, 2017. 56.

David also faces the harsh realities of the Israelis as well. Yael berates him for being a “peacenik” and judging Israeli society from afar. He also meets Palestinian Christians, Israeli Arabs, and Israeli soldiers serving their compulsory military service. Elad even raises the specter of American intolerance of Jews, a frightful premonition given the current political climate:

And where will you go when the Americans decide they’ve had enough of the Jews? . . . It’s happened everywhere else. Why wouldn’t it happen in America? Because America is some magical place where everyone is equal. Except for Blacks. Oh, and Muslims. And gays. So . . . you don’t think the Jews are next?²⁵

Is the play’s ending hopeful or hopeless? As he has done throughout the play, Kaissar refuses simple answers to such a complex and difficult situation. By employing humor, a complex variety of characters, biting dialogue, and shifting perspectives, *The Victims or What Do You Want Me To Do About It?* provides a fascinating perspective on such a perplexing quagmire.

²⁵ Kaissar, Ken. *The Victims or What Do You Want Me to Do About It?* Unpublished playscript, 2017. 89.

DIPLOMATICALLY SPEAKING: ENVISIONING A SEMITIC COMMONWEALTH

by Jamil Khoury

Semitic: Relating to the ancient peoples of southwest Asia who spoke the Semitic languages, primarily Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic, as well as their descendants and Diasporas.

Commonwealth: A nation, state, or political unit, or a union of constituent states, united by tacit agreement of the people, and established for the common good.

Semitic Commonwealth: A nation or state, or a union of states and/or jurisdictions, located within the territory of 1947 British Mandate Palestine, and predicated respectively upon Jewish and Palestinian national identities and self-determination.

In conceiving a staged readings series of plays written by Arab and Jewish playwrights, the words “Semitic” and “Commonwealth” conjoined rather seamlessly in my mind. We set out to use storytelling, and the work of six playwrights of conscience, to explore the human toll of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Eschewing the dictates of “balance” and “moral equivalency,” our aim was to illuminate the personal price paid by those most affected.

I’ve been known to suggest, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that the theatre company my husband and I co-founded, Silk Road Rising, is America’s only theatre company with a foreign policy. Or at the very least, a rather expansive definition of cultural diplomacy. Theatre makers can be policy wonks too. Chalk it up to my being an alumnus of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. But beyond the dramaturgical and aesthetic considerations of curating a play series, I’m compelled to ponder the political contours of my hoped for, yet hypothetical, Semitic Commonwealth.

I’m particularly intrigued by seven distinct scenarios, variations of which have been envisioned and debated by academics, activists, politicians, diplomats, and dreamers alike. But before presenting any bill of fare, I must clarify my decision to reference Jews and Palestinians, as opposed to Jews and Arabs or Israelis and Palestinians. If Palestinian nationalism foregrounds a specifically Palestinian national identity within a broader Arab world context, and Zionism foregrounds a specifically Jewish national identity within an Israeli state context, then the central plaintiffs in this trial are Palestinians and Jews. (Full disclosure: I’m generally wary of nationalism, but I fully recognize its potency and durability.) I’d be remiss not to add that there are other litigants to this discord, chiefly the United States, and also the European Union, the Arab and Islamic blocs, the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas, and increasingly Russia.

Suffice to say, both populations are growing and neither will “disappear.” So cynically speaking, they’re stuck with each other. Ideally that’s a good thing! The policy objective becomes one of reasonable

accommodation, advancing goals of mutual self-determination and self-defense, ending military occupation and asymmetrical power (Israel over Palestine), and achieving security, dignity, and a just peace. Resolution may be postponed, but it's still inevitable, and remains highly incentivized by the world community. If forward motion leads the way, these ancient Levantine communities are poised for a windfall of prosperity.

In a Semitic Commonwealth, policies that regulate immigration, right of return, and refugee resettlement would be equitable and mutually sustainable. They would not privilege Jews at the expense of Palestinians, but would enable livable environments, sensible development, environmental responsibility, territorial contiguity, and unprejudiced allocation of resources. The commonwealth would guarantee universal access to religious and holy sites, and the preservation and protection of antiquities and archeological sites. It should also be noted that whatever "end of conflict" agreement the parties arrive at, Jerusalem will likely serve as either a unified capital or a shared capital, be that one jurisdiction, two jurisdictions, or multiple jurisdictions.

As for the aforementioned seven scenarios, they are as follows:

1. **Two fully independent, sovereign, and cooperative states.** In this scenario there'd be a Jewish state with a fully-enfranchised Palestinian minority (Israel), and a Palestinian state with a fully-enfranchised Jewish minority (Palestine). Citizens of each state would enjoy equal rights under the law, regardless of ethnicity or religion. There'd be free movement of peoples and goods between both states, and Arabic and Hebrew would both be official languages.
2. **Federal or confederal states.** A union of states, either Israel and Palestine or Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. In a federal system, each state would be separate but united under one central government for purposes of inter-state and external affairs (somewhat akin to the United States). In the confederal system, each state would be separate and would exercise specified control over its internal and external affairs, under the umbrella of a centralized governing authority with inter-state and regulatory powers (somewhat akin to the European Union).
3. **A binational Arab and Jewish state.** This state would exist within a unified geographic territory (encompassing Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip), and would be the democratic homeland of both Jews and Palestinians, guaranteeing equal rights and responsibilities of citizenship to all. The two national communities would exercise far-reaching control over their respective internal and communal affairs (autonomy), but would govern jointly on matters of security, economy, diplomacy, national infrastructure, and land and resource management.
4. **A multi-ethnic, secular, democratic state.** A similarly unified geographic territory, with citizenship derived through residency, parentage, birthright, and/or naturalization, rather than ethnicity or religion per se. Citizenship would be constructed around the individual, as opposed

to national and religious group affiliations. Governance would adhere to the principle of one person, one vote. Arabic and Hebrew would be official languages and Palestinian and Jewish cultures would define the national identity.

5. **Two parallel states.** Again, a unified geographic territory in which two parallel state structures would coexist within the same borders, one for Jews and one for Palestinians. Citizens of either state could live anywhere they wish, including in the same building; but citizenship, voting, and governance of internal and communal affairs would correspond to national identity—Jews would be citizens of Israel and Palestinians would be citizens of Palestine. These parallel states would cooperate on matters of security, economy, diplomacy, national infrastructure, land and resource management, and in areas where laws and legal structures overlap.
6. **One homeland, two states.** In this scenario there would be two separate, geographically defined independent states, one Jewish and one Palestinian, with the combined territory of both states being recognized as the homeland of both Palestinians and Jews. In other words, Jaffa is in Israel but is also recognized as part of the Palestinian homeland, and Hebron is in Palestine but is also recognized as part of the Jewish homeland. Citizens of Israel could be residents of Palestine and citizens of Palestine could be residents of Israel, so long as they abide by local laws and respect the national sovereignty of the state in which they reside.
7. **A confederation of cantons.** A canton is defined as “a subdivision of a country established for political or administrative purposes.” Drawing on Switzerland’s canton confederacy model, the land of Israel/Palestine would be divided into dozens of self-governing cantons or districts that would correspond largely to demographic realities on the ground. A unifying central government would assume many of the roles traditionally ascribed to it in the confederal system. Arab and Jewish communities could conceivably establish separate national cantons, as could secular and religious communities. Arab cantons could be established along Bedouin, Christian, Druze, and Muslim lines. Jewish cantons could be established along Ashkenazi and Mizrahi/Sephardic lines, or along secular, national-religious, and Haredi lines.

Scenarios three, four, five, and seven all present opportunities for a bicameral legislature, with a Jewish chamber and a Palestinian chamber, or a tricameral legislature that would also include a joint Jewish and Palestinian chamber. The same logic could be applied to government cabinets and ministries. One could also imagine a Co-Presidency/Co-Prime-Ministership or a rotating Presidency/Prime-Ministership. Not to mention the potential for public and private sector joint ventures, and partnerships between cultural and educational institutions as well as civil society groups. Dreaming is an essential ingredient in these processes.

No doubt each of the seven scenarios contain elements both promising and problematic. And frankly, I don’t have definitive answers. I wish I did. What I do know is that a scenario that ends Israel’s occupation over Palestinians, that guarantees human and civil rights to all, is preferable to a status quo of

oppression, racism, terrorism, and pervasive insecurity. And while the Jewishness of Israel, in all its vivid pluralism, has been celebrated for decades, we must also be mindful of the rich Palestinian mosaic, one that includes Muslims, Christians, and Druze. In the Palestinian state context, efforts to privilege or elevate Islam over other faiths must be resisted. Shariah should not be the basis or inspiration for Palestine's legal system and judiciary (as is the case in Egypt, with devastating consequences for Egyptian Christians).

In a world where the concept of the nation-state is hardening in some places and dissipating in others, where religions and cultures continue to co-exist and separate, where nostalgia for past empires and lost territories challenges borders and complicates identities, where multicultural democracies are being frayed by nativism and xenophobia, and where statist autocracies struggle to concoct idyllic “national narratives”—in such a world, surely the great thinkers of Palestine and Israel can help us imagine creative new paradigms for governance and national expression. Notions of sovereignty and shared sovereignty, jurisdiction and joint jurisdiction, independence and co-independence, as well as peoplehood, citizenship, identitarianism, land control, and resource management are all due for serious updates and overhauls. I'm hard-pressed to think of a “better” conflict to yield new models for dynamic cohabitation.