

Al Hakawati Theater

in Occupied Palestine

THE PALESTINIAN THEATER MOVEMENT

The following article is based on an interview with Francois Abu Salem, director of the Palestinian theater group *Al Hakawati*, while the group was touring Europe. The interview appeared in the Lebanese newspaper *Al Safir* on November 1, 1986.

Al Hakawati is a very distinctive experience in Arab theater. The members of this group attempt, through their artistic work, to achieve an ambitious project: Defining the features and identity of an alternative Arab theater that will stand out as avant-garde in this era, and at the same time, have the Palestinian heritage deeply rooted in it.

The experience of *Al Hakawati* is exceptional if only because of its location in occupied Palestine. This imposed a state of isolation on *Al Hakawati*, at least initially, but there is no doubt that the group has accepted the challenges imposed by occupation and isolation and turned these into motivations for development. *Al Hakawati* had to start from point zero in posing questions and treating thought-provoking issues, despite the difficult conditions. The issues the group has dealt with have exposed it to continuous persecution by the Zionist authorities. Last year, their center in Jerusalem was closed down several times, and director Francois Abu Salem was summoned for interrogation by the authorities. In addition to being made to feel alienated in their own homeland,



Francois Abu Salem

the members of *Al Hakawati* have had to endure and overcome continuous attempts to isolate them from their primary audience, the Palestinian community.

The first independent experiments in Palestinian theater date back to the mid-sixties. *Al Hadeth* (Contemporary) Theater in Nazareth began in 1965, and *Al Nahed* (Awakening) Theater began in Haifa in 1969. These were modest experiences that were subjected to all forms of harassment which deprived them of the opportunity to establish themselves firmly and develop. Eventually, they died out.

The emergence of the theater movement in occupied Palestine coincided with the tumultuous political developments of the late sixties and early seventies - the June War in 1967 and the resulting occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the rise of the armed Palestinian resistance, and the exposure of the Arab regimes' impotency. In particular, Black September 1970 in Jordan, when the regime unleashed a wholesale massacre against the Palestinian people and revolution, contributed to the maturation of the Palestinian theater movement both in terms of its themes and independent identity. The features of Palestinian theater emerged more clearly with the establishment of *Balaleen* (Balloons) Theater in occupied Palestine. Then more groups were born: *Sandouq Al Ajab* (The Amusement Box), Dababees (Pins) and *Al Masrah Al Jamei* (The University Theater). Though none of these groups lasted a long time, they represented a new form of production based on collective work and sharing of expenses. Every member of each theater group participated in designing the costumes and sets, and in acting and directing the plays.

Scene from «1001» Nights

