

## THE START OF AL HAKAWATI

*Al Hakawati* theater was established in 1977, by a group of amateurs organized by Francois Abu Salem. *Al Hakawati* owes its Arab and international fame to the play «Mahjoub, Mahjoub» in 1981, but they had produced two other works before that: «In the Name of the Father, the Mother and the Son» in 1978, and «Bread and Salt» in 1979-80. In 1982, *Al Hakawati* produced «One Thousand and One Nights of a Stone Thrower», and filmed some scenes of Emil Habibi's play «Al Mutasha'el». They produced «Ali of Galilee» in 1983, and «The Story of the Eye and the Tooth» in 1985. *Al Hakawati* ventured to establish a theater and culture center in Jerusalem, named the Arts and Theater Center.

«One Thousand and One Nights of a Stone Thrower» is a good example of the group's innovative style and Palestinian essence at the same time. Though *Al Hakawati* means storyteller, the group's stories are not told in a traditional narrative way. Rather they employ pantomime and special effects to get their point across. Though about the Palestinians under occupation, «One Thousand and One Nights of a Stone Thrower» is neither didactic nor propagandistic in style. Rather the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors is to a great extent conveyed by the structure of the play and the set. The stage has two levels. On the upper one reigns the governor. On the lower one are the people, including the stone thrower, upon whom the governor is trying to get his hands. The message comes across through the way the play unfolds more than from dialogue.

Director Francois Abu Salem himself chose his Palestinian identity. He is the son of the Hungarian surgeon and writer, Loran Gaspar, who held French citizenship, and came to Palestine to work. Francois was born in a village near Bethlehem and grew up in Palestine with his brothers, until his father was expelled by the Zionist authorities, and the family went to live in Tunis. However, Abu Salem chose the land of Palestine, its people and language. Moreover, he challenged himself to play a leading role in the young and growing theater movement. He started as an amateur with *Balaleen* and went on until establishing *Al Hakawati*. *Al Hakawati* distinguishes itself by being a Palestinian theater group that includes artists of Muslim, Christian and Jewish religion. They work side by side for a dual cause: Palestine and theater.

*Al Hakawati's* latest presentation is called «The Slaves' Banishment». It is directed by Radi Shahada and based on an idea by Ibrahim Al Khalili. The play portrays Palestinian Arab workers in Israeli factories and some in the factories of wealthy Palestinians. During the lunch break, the workers gather,

expressing their common troubles, hopes and aspirations. They are all looking for somebody to sympathize with their problems, and to defend their rights.

## PERFORMING IN THE VILLAGES

Though *Al Hakawati* has now toured extensively abroad, its first performances were in towns and villages of Palestine where an exceptional experience was created in terms of introducing new national cultural forms and audience participation. Francois Abu Salem describes *Al Hakawati's* experiences performing in the villages:

«We had very close relations with our masses, regardless of their liking theater or not. We are not affiliated with a specific political group, which enabled us to maintain close relations with different people in different areas. In the Galilee, for example, the political tendencies are public and very intense, but we were able to work with everybody and bring opposing groups together in our shows. We don't claim that we unite them, but we bring them together in joint work if only for a week. This is exactly the role of the theater we aspire to.»

The cities have traditionally been the domain of the theater and fine arts, but *Al Hakawati* has broken out of these narrow confines and performed in villages before audiences with no previous involvement with theater. Abu Salem relates the details of such experiences: «When we travel to perform in one of the villages, we stay there for days. Usually we are confronted with very difficult circumstances. In most villages, there is no stage. We take a school yard or the village square. This in itself gets us into trouble with the occupation authorities who try to pressure us to prevent us from performing.»

«These problems, however, really gather the villagers around us. All come to help us overcome the obstacles. For instance, the young men and women help us build the stage.... In one incident, I remember that we needed the school yard for the performance. Although we had a permit from the authorities to perform, we needed a permit from the Education Ministry to use the school yard. The school superintendent received a telegram from the officials in the Education Ministry to stop us from using the school yard, because performing there was 'a sort of agitation.' It was during the summer vacation and the Education Ministry had no authority over the vicinity, but the authorities used the school budget as a form of pressure. Since the play had become the event of the year for the people in the village, they all pressured the superintendent to get a permission for us to use the school yard.»

«Building the stage is another difficulty we were always confronting. It takes days of hard labor to build one,

and to fix the lighting and sound systems. Our financial resources were very limited, and the stage, for example, requires a certain kind of wood that is costly. We don't own a portable stage that is big enough. In one of the villages, a few people took apart the roof of their home to build a stage, and everybody worked all night to build it. Everyone in the villages shared the experience with us.»

«We eat and sleep in the people's homes when we are performing in their villages. We live among them for days, and a very warm relationship is established among us.»

Abu Salem also described the people as an audience: «Our audience is definitely spontaneous. People don't watch the shows with a critical view. They may applaud when they are not supposed to, or comment in a loud voice and interrupt the actors; some may not understand the meaning of the sound or light effects. A lot of them stand behind the stage throughout the whole show to see what goes on behind the curtains... Moreover, a huge number of children come to our shows. In the Galilee, the children arrive before all others. Many run away from home and hide until the show begins. Children are always more spontaneous than adults. They just forget everything around them and surrender themselves to the magic of the show.»

«In Jerusalem, our audience is more intellectual. They give us their comments and critiques, and we benefit from this. In the villages, our people's spontaneity is our only criterion. They either get interested or bored. They wait for the show to end to talk to us and to celebrate. In some villages, women come to the shows; in others, women are the majority of the audience, and in still others, only men attend.»

## PERFORMING FOR ISRAELIS

Abu Salem was asked if it was one of *Al Hakawati's* purposes to bring Israelis and Palestinians together through the theater. He prefaced his answer by giving a picture of the reality of living in occupied Palestine: «There aren't any meetings between the Palestinians and the Jews, that are worth mentioning. There are some meetings between intellectuals... between us and certain Jews who are supportive of our cause, but not on the level of the ordinary audience. What the Zionist authorities try to depict about Jerusalem as a united city, is a big lie. The city is split into East and West. The two parts are separate and isolated from each other. Israel has built huge apartment buildings and universities on the hills of East Jerusalem, but that part of the city is kept completely isolated from the West. A person living in East Jerusalem doesn't have to buy so much as a match from West Jerusalem. Therefore, there aren't many Jews who come to see our shows. If we want an