

Cultural Struggle is Our Ambition

Nidal Al Saleh made the following interview with Iman Aoun, an actress in *Al Hakawati* theater group, while she was visiting Cairo.

The Palestinian intifada is not only resistance by stones. Could you tell us about the role of cultural activities in confronting the Israeli occupation?

Before responding to your question, let me tell about the group itself and how it came into being. The Palestinian *Al Hakawati* theater group was created in the mid-seventies by a group of six people: the director, Francois Abu Salem, and the actors Jacky Lubeck, Edward Mualem, Amer Khalil, Nabil Al Hajar and myself, who were studying drama at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There are also other co-workers. The first play presented by the group was «The Father, Son and Holy Ghost,» about Arab women and especially Palestinian women. We aimed to say something about women and their position of social and economic subordination as it prevails in the Arab family, due to men's attitudes. Because of this play's enlightened vision it caused a storm of protest in conservative Palestinian circles.

Concerning our role in the struggle against the Israeli occupation, we don't believe in a theater of slogans. We tend to use symbolism and satire, not because we fear confronting the occupation, but we reject sloganism and rhetoric. It is true that our material is borrowed from the real life of Palestinians under occupation, but we seek to avoid mechanically copying this reality on the stage. We are not concerned about being direct, and Palestinians can no longer be aroused by rhetoric. We don't claim that we are fighting, although cultural struggle is our ambition. But we are part of the mass movement in the occupied territories, which is trying to restore the Palestinian land, heritage and right to live.

The martyr Ghassan Kanafani described the «cultural siege» imposed by the Zionist occupation on Palestinian Arab intellectuals. Surely this siege has intensified during the intifada. How do the occupation authorities deal with the work of your group?

Saying occupation means censorship. Our activities, like other cultural activities, are subject to the censorship of the military governor. Even the Hebrew theater faces this, but with the difference in the nature and form of censorship. For example, the Israelis consider Jerusalem, where we reside, as a united city. They therefore stipulate that we get permission from the military governor before presenting a show in Jerusalem or other Palestinian cities and villages. But we need two permits in the West Bank, one from the military governor of Jerusalem and another from the military governor in the area where we want to present our show.

Moreover, the Zionist censor tried to impose an Israeli name on our group. He asked us to use a name such as «Jerusalem Al Hakawati Group from Israel» or the «Israeli Al

Hakawati Group» on our program. However, we rejected this in spite of the pressure exerted by the censor on the printing house. When we found such a name on the program, we cancelled the performance.

How does the group choose the plays it produces?

To date, we have presented many plays. All of them were written by the group with the exception of Emil Lahoud's novel, *The Six-Day Sextet*, which we dramatized. In fact, all of us participate in preparing the plays which usually begin with an idea from one of us.

Does *Al Hakawati* create its own plays because none are being written in the occupied territories, or because you are seeking new dramatic methods?

Neither. Palestine does not have a theater tradition, but we don't write our texts just out of a desire for experimentation. We do it because we are very concerned with moving away from propagandistic art. The plays written in the occupied territories are characterized by direct agitation, and what we have presented is aimed at eliminating this. Politics pervades everything; Palestinians breathe politics, willingly or not. However, we don't believe that our battle with Zionism is a political one only, but a battle of existence. In our plays, we want to deal with Palestinian life with all its social and class aspects, without ignoring the political aspect.

How many plays has *Al Hakawati* presented?

We have presented many plays: Our first plays were «The Father, Son and Holy Ghost» and «One Thousand and One Nights of a Stonethrower» which was presented in 1982 and predicted the intifada. «An Eye for an Eye and a Tooth for a Tooth» dealt with our struggle against the occupation. «The Story of Kafr Shama» discussed the relationship between Palestinians in the homeland and those in exile, raising the following questions: Does the land exist in the heart and mind, or is it the tangible soil? And where is the linkage between the two? We also presented a play entitled «Ali of the Galilee,» among a number of the others.

Last summer, *Al Hakawati* was invited to perform in the US, but the invitation was cancelled for political reasons, causing strong protests in the leftist and Arab press there. Would you talk about that?

We were invited by the Republican Theater to present 15 performances. Everything was going normally, but after signing the contract with those in charge of the theater, the invitation was cancelled without reasons being given. Later we learned that Zionists who were financing the theater pressured those in