

**‘To be creative is to exist’: Rejecting Resilience, Enacting *Sumud* in the cultural resistance of ASHTAR Theatre**

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## **‘To be creative is to exist’: Rejecting Resilience, Enacting *Sumud* in the cultural resistance of ASHTAR Theatre**

This article problematises the concept of ‘resilience’, and the globalised power dynamics which lie behind a narrative of overcoming adversity in the context of Palestinian Theatre. By exploring the work of ASHTAR, specifically focusing on the artist Iman Aoun, this paper examines the lack of political and practical solidarity revealed in languages and agendas of resilience. This analysis of practice is set within a theoretical framework of border navigation, space and place, and of modes of resistance where the Palestinian concept of *sumud* is foregrounded as an indigenous lens to view the infrapolitical resistance of the West Bank arts community.

Keywords: applied theatre; Palestine; conflict theatre; resilience

*Earth is pressing against us, trapping us in the final passage.  
To pass through, we pull off our limbs.  
Earth is squeezing us.*

Darwish, 1982

On August 9th, 2018, the Said al-Mishal Centre for Culture and Science in Gaza was demolished by a targeted Israeli airstrike “in the most severe escalation of hostilities in the region since 2014” (Balousha, 2018). The curves of the collapsed building fanned out far into road. The five-storey structure had been home to the Gazan office of ASHTAR<sup>i</sup> Theatre. The company has been embattled, under-resourced, heavily policed and fighting for some sort of survival throughout its 29-year existence. ASHTAR has been praised for resilience in the face of difficult making conditions, applauded for resourcefulness in working with less, but this valourisation of endurance, continually performing your own survival, makes for a fragile future.

## **Introduction**

This article seeks to problematise the concept of ‘resilience’, and the power dynamics which lie behind laudatory narratives of overcoming adversity in a contested political sphere like that of Palestine. I shall interrogate the term, and the wider pervasiveness of the ‘resilience agenda’ (Keelan and Browne 2020, 460), through the theatre practice of Palestinian artists, focusing on ASHTAR Theatre. In attempting to understand the specific nature of this volatile cultural context, I examine the often-pernicious practice of transferring social responsibility by categorising embattled others as ‘resilient’ and ‘resourceful’, as perpetual survivors. This article critiques the lack of political and practical solidarity often revealed in languages of ‘resilience’ and ‘resourcefulness’, linking this deficit in ethical imagining to the curtailing of

artistic imagining. ‘They want to tell us how to be ‘resilient’’ mourns Iman Aoun of ASHTAR theatre in our interview, ‘Can you believe it? They don’t understand the meaning of the word’(Aoun 2017). By turning over the uses of the word resilience in connection to the work of ASHTAR, this article finds its way to the Palestinian concept of *sumud* and uses this as an indigenous lens to view the infrapolitical resistance of the West Bank arts community. This analysis of practice is set within a theoretical framework of border navigation, concepts of space and place, and modes of resistance articulated in applied theatre practice.

My research is built on an ongoing creative and academic relationship with ASHTAR Theatre, specifically documenting the work of the Artistic Director, Iman Aoun, as part of my wider exploration of the work of Ariadne ‘a global collective of women making social and political theatre to inspire change’<sup>ii</sup>. In our interviews, Aoun reflected on living in an occupied society where every act of theatre, every artistic endeavour is by necessity a political act of will, an expression of freedom, and a defiance against conditions that attempt to dehumanise. ASHTAR produces professional plays and tours internationally, and from their studio in the West Bank, the company run a training school and deliver an outreach programme centering Theatre of the Oppressed methodologies. Using practitioner interviews, observations of practice, and reflections on our creative work together, I seek to elucidate something of the relationship of applied theatre with conflicted spaces and embattled communities through the example of ASHTAR’s work in Palestine and worldwide. This article is informed by my study of the work of other regional arts companies, derived from my connection to the Palestinian Performing Arts Network<sup>iii</sup>, and therefore I attempt to reflect something of the wider perspective and shared concerns of other local theatre makers. This article doesn’t have scope to draw on assessments of Palestinian artists working in

Israel, nor of Arab-language theatre in Israel or Arab-Israeli theatre, though recognises the precarious situation for many Palestinian artists in Israel whose lived 'resistance' is to confront the narratives of an equal 'co-existence' through their creative practice.

This article offers a space and place to record and reflect upon the uniquely 'site-specific' perspectives of Palestinian theatre makers I have met and worked with in recent years. This short article cannot hope to provide any meaningful historical or socio-political diagnosis of the contested lands of the Levant, and in its focus on the perspective of Palestinian artists does not seek to denounce alternative viewpoints, nor disavow other sufferings caused by the nexus of ongoing conflict. However, nor can it claim to be fully impartial about human rights violations happening in Palestine. This article acknowledges the arbitrary arrests and repression of critical or questioning voices by the Palestinian Authorities which govern the West Bank, and more violent punishment, detention and torture by the *de facto* Hamas administration of the Gaza strip where the leadership has sought desecularisation and strict control over civil society (Amnesty International 2019). And, as I highlight later in the article, there are issues of the censorship (intentional or via negation) of female, queer, disabled voices within and from Palestinian communities. However, this is in the asymmetric context of the apparatus of illegal Israeli occupation, extrajudicial killing of unarmed Palestinians, routine implementation of 'administrative detention', and restrictions on freedom of movement. In December 2019 the International Criminal Court concluded war crimes have been committed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)<sup>iv</sup> and investigation would 'serve the interests of justice' (Bensouda 2019). This article examines how this political complexity interprets resilience as applied by exogenous powers, and how the locative conflict magnifies every pernicious application of

‘resilience’, using the framework of Palestinian social and cultural resistance to highlight the human cost of the ‘resilience agenda’.

### ***Resilience as return to shape***

While partly concerned with an understanding of ‘resilience’ as an ability to withstand and absorb oppression, reflective of the need to ‘accommodate’ and ‘adapt’ (Evans and Reid 2013, 85) this commentary is also grounded in ideas of ‘returning to shape’ and ‘resuming the original position’ evoked by the etymology of the word ‘resilience’. When talking about theatre made in Palestine, it is inevitable that issues of space and place knock persistently at the sides of any conversation or act of creation. The notions of land rights, border management, zones of occupation, and the physical and psychological transactions and transistions between these categories are ongoing and dynamic preoccupations. The history and sequencing of the settlement of the Palestinian Territories is an endlessly disputatious space, but as a *de jure* sovereign state declared by Yasser Arafat in 1988 and recognised by the United Nations in 2012, it more resembles the shard remnants of a plate smashed heavily upon the floor, rather than the uninterrupted land mass outsiders might imagine of a country. In one of our interviews Aoun herself describes the cartography of Palestine as ‘like Swiss cheese. Full of holes, where the people fall through all the time’ (Aoun 2017). Physical space, and the safety, security, and sustainability of that space, are of daily consequence to Palestinians. In this way, Henri Lefebvre’s directive that space will reveal the ‘secrets of the State’ (Lefebvre, et al. 2009, 102), the aysmmetries and imbalances of the conflict are displayed, mapped out in the region’s topography. Having travelled around the West Bank, this article aims to record my own witness to the ways in which the ‘infrapolitics’ (Scott

2006) of every quotidian and pedestrian action is inflected by overarching questions of the right to space and the multidimensionality of making of place. I am interested here in the enactment of what J. Nicholas Entrikin calls the ‘betweenness of places’ as the meeting point for the subjective and objective space, the place where the existential individualistic meanings and ‘naturalistic qualities’ of geography encounter one another (Entrikin 1991, 6-7). In Palestine the topography is defined by all sorts of ‘betweenness’, between ridges and valleys, between zones, between settlements, between checkpoints, a State sitting among, against and between. In between all of which, the return to shape, the resumption and resolution of the original position is a fragile hope and costly endeavour; resilience is called for by international voices but cannot be fully realised in the present patterning of enclaves scatter-shot across the Palestinian Territories. Places in Palestine where ASHTAR performed in 1993 are no longer defined within the present borders and boundaries, places where they toured in 2003 are no longer accessible (Wilson 2015, 359), places where ASHTAR worked in 2013 are crowded in on all sides. The fragments will not reconcile.

The ‘resilience agenda’ was encoded and enshrined into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and framed the requisite action needed to be taken by a country to obtain development aid. The Palestinian National review of SDGs in 2018 is strewn with ‘resilience’ vocabularies, some statements aligning with the ecological understanding of the term, but other usages relating to education and health, where ‘poverty reduction relies on rebuilding the resilience of the poor and vulnerable households’(State of Palestine 2018, 72). Not to denigrate the efforts of the Palestinian Authority, rather in taking a philological approach to examining the ‘globalising’ and colonial projection in the tenets of the international community, I am questioning the practical logistics of being ‘resilient to poverty’. In 2016 the UN Development Programme organised the ‘Palestine Resilience

Conference - From Sumud to Transformative Resilience’ where they promised guests the opportunity to ‘review and reinvigorate the Palestinian resilience conceptual, programmatic, operational, as well as policy framework’ (United Nations Development Programme 2016). Sumud is an indigenous Palestinian term spanning conceptual and practical resistance; an activity of relentless persistence, hope against hopelessness, of a determination to stay on the land. Although the conference programme rhetoric does ‘support the project of Palestinian self-determination’ (ibid) and might claim to be embedded within locative cultural and social specificities, the idea of moving *away* from *sumud* toward an imposed Western agenda of ‘resilience’, does not inscribe partnership models of working; it incorporates rather than collaborates with the subject people it claims to support. It bats away the question of land rights. Whilst many invested stakeholders are in agreement that current development initiatives lack efficacy in Palestine, I concur with Keelan and Browne when they denounce this neoliberal rhetoric as ‘ethnocentric’, criticising international organisations calling on Palestinians to ‘acquiesce and adapt to their lived realities, rather than seek ways of shaking them off.’ (Keelan and Browne 2018). They strongly link the adoption of ‘resilience industry speak’ to the kinds of budgetary incentives connected with meeting the SDGs, noting that the delivery of the message as though from sagacious senior to indolent child is a confidence trick played out with the grimmest of consequences, ‘it is an exercise in hypocrisy for the international community to call on Palestinians to develop resilience whilst systematically undermining their capacity for resistance’ (ibid).

Aoun acknowledges international partnerships have been vital to their financial and reputational preservation, but unsurprisingly intricate with ideological and behavioural obligations (Al-Saber and Taylor 2014, 96). They have been asked, as resilience always asks, to do more with less. ASHTAR has endured multiple difficulties to *resist* closure, with

resulting impacts on the proliferation and dissemination of their output. To explore this idea, and to reveal something of the human cost of resilience, of living a life of betweenness, of absorbing difficulty, I am going to try to make an image, a portrait of the artist.

### **Performing Humanity**

I have a photograph of Iman Aoun wrapping her arms around a large old oak tree that sits alone in parkland at the University of Essex. The brilliant blue of her shirt is contrasted with her pomegranate-red silk scarf; the fluency of the fabrics contrasting with the cracked open clefts of the tree. She is crying. She cried for a considerable time on that walk. I was disconcerted, anxious, uselessly flitting around the edges of complex emotions and experiences I could neither comprehend, nor fix. Afterwards we wrote about our experiences on the walk and Iman spoke about the trees<sup>v</sup>; their great age, their long standing, their rootedness. All of which she mourned in her own life, all of which contrasted with the precarity and turbulence and dis-placed nature of her country. Over 25 years later, despite a professional theatre portfolio, a training school, prolific community outreach work, international collaborations, and high-profile invitations, her company sometimes still felt tenuous; their continuation was fragile. If ‘resilience’—to draw on C.S. Holling’s conceptualisation of the term—is about a system’s ability to recover equilibrium (whether by return or adaptation) after a natural or anthropogenic perturbation (Holling 1973, 17-18), then ASHTAR Theatre are in a situation where the instability of the Palestinian Territories makes resilience indisputable by continued existence, and yet also ontologically impossible. For Evans and Reid, ‘Resilience is premised upon the ability of the vulnerable subject to continually re-emerge from the conditions of its ongoing emergency’ (Evans and Reid 2013,

87). They contend the ‘collective amnesia’ of asking these vulnerable subjects to accept living in dangerous landscapes leads to a deleterious state of ‘perpetual wakefulness’ (ibid.). Iman’s palpable grief and exhaustion shows the impossibility of resilience. The dangerous landscape imprints somewhere on the body. The body absorbs. The body replays. The artists absorb. The artists replay. The theatre keeps making theatre, but it cannot *resume* as it did before. The equilibrium tilts and limps. ‘I was jealous of the trees’ Iman says, ‘their roots ran from the outside all the way to the inside’ (Aoun 2017). Reflecting on the impossibility of this in her homeland, Iman tells me that in Palestine the trees are thinning, that the country is losing its nature, that the trees are cut down as punishment (Hass 2018).

Iman Aoun is an actor with a lightning rod to emotional states. The text translates itself onto her body as completely as water fills a bowl. From seeing her first UK performance as the Duchess of Gloucester in *Richard II* at the 2012 Globe to Globe Festival (Lyn Gardner recording that Aoun, ‘railing for justice and revenge, is a woman for all time’), to her mesmerising performances with UK theatre company Border Crossings, I felt I witnessed a performer with access to a complex and rich repository of felt and expressive experience, who understood ‘suffering’. But then, perhaps, artists from ‘troubled parts of the world’ are often read through this lens, imbued with certain backstories, political preoccupations, with existential suffering. This perception hovered over the Globe’s choice of Shakespeare’s play of stolen lands, power-broking and political machinations for the Palestinian company at the festival (Irving 2012). Artistic Director, Dominic Dromgoole noted at the time that ‘it took a Palestinian company to show us what the play’s really about’ (Dromgoole 2012). ASHTAR Theatre had themselves proposed *The Taming of the Shrew*. To begin here, before discussing their work in Palestine, is not to prioritise international standing, but rather to hold in my thoughts Aoun’s words about the ‘situationality’ of her work and the encoded messages about the liberatory politics of different spaces and places

when she says ‘to perform in Palestine is an act of resistance through existence, but to perform in London is an act of existence on the artistic level’ (Aoun 2016). To show ‘artistic’ survival is also to perform political ‘resistance’ on an international stage. Yet, this consciousness-raising is not without cost; to reassert your ‘humanity’ by these means, is to be defined by the dominant power.

Speaking about participating in the Globe to Globe Festival, Aoun emphasised ASHTAR’s public relations mission was to ‘convey our message of love... to communicate with Londoners that we are a lively nation that strives for justice and peace’ (quoted in Irving, 2012). Her words here are intended to reassure the world that the Palestinians are more than terrorists, more than victims, more than bodies at borders, to publicly perform what Edward Said described as ‘the socially acceptable narrative’ of Palestine (Said 1984, 34). This tension of crossing borders to switch between exogenous and indigenous scripts is picked up by Rania Jawad, who identifies the penalty in the imperative to ‘perform the universalizing of Palestinians into the category of human’ when in contrast ‘the world, of course, need not perform its humanity’ (Jawad 2014, 36). As we progress through this examination of the neo-liberal application of ‘resilience’ in relation to Palestinian Theatre, I will continue to look at the interplay of resilience and resistance in the region, beginning to animate the Palestinian term ‘*sumud*’ as a more agentic, active and endogenous concept that more accurately describes the steadfast opposition to occupation.

### **The art of return**

ASHTAR Theatre was established in 1991 in Jerusalem, initially as Palestine’s first theatre training school. Gradually, over the course of three decades of existence, the company has

developed four ‘streams’ of work: Drama Training, Professional Productions (earlier called Experimental Theatre), Festivals, and a Theatre of the Oppressed community programme (Ashtar Theatre 2018). Working in the rehearsal room with Iman Aoun is to be with fierce wit but reverence for the act of theatre-making, with someone who has deep understanding of stagecraft and an expansive range of performance modes and techniques. Nothing escapes her attention; she is an imposing presence and a director who is both exacting and nurturing. Aoun’s stance reflects her political project, to ‘plant the seed of resistance and hope in young people’ (Aoun 2017) and to ‘develop critical thinking skills’ where ‘through our theatre and drama work we protect our cultural identity’ (Ashtar Theatre 2018).-I shall consider what it might mean to ‘protect a cultural identity’ under these fractured circumstances, and furthermore why this act of ‘protection’ is undermined by the term ‘resilience’ but illuminated by the term *sumud*. Here I try to disentangle the dialogic encounter of ‘resilience’ and ‘resistance’ as related to *sumud*, remaining vigilant to the neutralising impact of resilience as an imposed substitute for resistance when used by exogenous actors to shape progress in the Palestinian Territories.

Aoun’s long career as a professional actor and director has taken her around the world, first as one of the early members of Al-Hakawati Theatre<sup>vi</sup> (this group ‘was my home, my school’ (Goldbard and Aoun 2002, 319)), before going on to found ASHTAR Theatre Company with her partner, Edward Muallem in 1991. This was the time of the First Intifada and Al-Hakawati, an organisation at this stage beginning to splinter under different artistic visions (Slyomovics 1991) was touring in the US, after also performing extensively in Europe (Al-Saber 2016, 143). Aoun recalled there was discussion about Al-Hakawati remaining in Europe, ‘living, perhaps, in France’, but in 1989, with the death-toll escalating back in Palestine, and reports of appalling levels of civilian casualties, she felt Europe ‘was not our place... we could not really talk to our people from Europe, if we want to talk to our

people, then we have to be among our people. So, we decided to come back' (Aoun 2017). The Palestinian evocation of *sumud* was amplified in the late 1970s in opposition to occupation and incursion, and this idea of steadfast perseverance can be understood as both a static resistance of 'holding the land', and as a more active form of resistance articulated by the Palestinian writer, Raja Shehadeh. The 'way of the samadin' offered a pragmatic third way between 'submissive capitulation...and blind, consuming hate' (Shehadeh 1982, 38) prioritising non-violent opposition that does not traduce an individual's dignity. Though this malleable word has been purposed to cover different phases of the military occupation, the genesis of *sumud* was concerned with stemming the waves of emigration from Palestine, and elision of people into surrounding territories. *Sumud* ennobled the idea of not seceding the geography, staying put, a steadfast commitment to the land. The decision to 'come back' and be 'among the people' in the creation of ASHTAR can be read as an act of *sumud*.

ASHTAR are now a dominant force in Palestinian theatre, not just for the thriving theatre academy offering drama school training for young performers but also the eclectic range of professional theatre shows they produce, their international touring work and collaborations. ASHTAR have produced over 30 plays, averaging one per year of their existence (except during the most difficult years of the Second Intifada). The range of their work, radically transforming the narrow black-box space of the ASHTAR studio, is testament to Muallem and Aoun's theatre craft. In keeping with the origins of the name of the company, the professional productions of ASHTAR have consistently drawn on mythological subjects and counter-posed these with modern-day preoccupations of the Arab world. Some early works owe a debt to the European avant-garde theatre they were leaving behind, whereas plays such as *Martyrs Are Coming Back* (1996), explored cultural libraries closer to home. ASHTAR have staged pointed and pacey comedies such as the arch *The Right Move* (2018) and also emblematic and fiercely poetic pieces such as *I am Jerusalem* (2009). 2010's

collaboration with UK artist Mojisola Adebayo, *48 Minutes for Palestine*, presented a steadily escalating pantomimic showdown of ‘a struggle for space and power’ between a young woman and an older man who arrives with a suitcase ‘dishevelled and close to death’; the characters locked into ‘a forced marriage that neither of them wants, in a place that neither will leave’ (Ashtar Theatre 2010). Whilst the title of the play tied the work to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the substitution of spoken text for allegory meant that the play was also able to be read as illustrating other conflicts, Lynette Goddard suggesting the play speaks to multiple incidences of contemporary migration and colonisation (Goddard 2019). For ASHTAR’s revival as *Oranges and Stones*, the locative nature of the conflict was more explicitly signalled. The title became more poeticised, but the titular images are symbols that burn bright in the Palestinian imaginary. The word ‘Jewish’ now appears unparenthesised in the extra-textual material, the literature starkly expressing the subjugation of the female figure portrays ‘the reality of persecution in Palestine’ (Ashtar Theatre 2017). When Muallem and Aoun played the warring couple for the revival, performing with quicksilver synchronicity, they wanted to ensure that the political meaning would sing to the local audiences and also would be unmistakable in the international spaces it travelled to such as Brazil, South Africa and Poland. As we repeatedly see, Aoun stands on both sides of a dual mission, to ‘internalise the dialogue’, to ‘talk to our people’ (Aoun 2017) and to *appeal* to the outside world. However, this doesn’t extend to dialogue with the Israelis<sup>vii</sup> of the region:

I’m not for violence, I’m for real dialogue, but it has to be a dialogue, not between the master and the servant, but [...] on equal terms. And so, the dialogue cannot sustain unless there is a mutual interest in the dialogue [...] I found that my mission is much more towards my people, much more than crossing the border and talking to the Israelis (ibid).

Perhaps we might struggle with this red line. Isn’t ‘dialogue’ and reaching shared understanding the ‘mission’ of socially engaged theatre, after all? We could consider the

transformative work of organisations that work across these borders, Combatants for Peace, or the Compassionate Listening Project as templates of dialogic models. Aoun found that engaging in similar projects in the 1990s would not address the issue of territory and movement inequalities, that organisers wanted to work as though from a clean slate, begin in no-man's land. This was her red line. In relations with Israel, the Western media and the international community frequently praise the Palestinians with the language of resilience, for their capacity to 'absorb'. To help articulate the geographical and ideological 'double-bind' both Palestine and its artists are within, we can again take up Evans and Reid's thesis when they argue, 'the tragic irony of resilience is that it renders problematic precisely those populations which are *at-risk* in order to permit their veritable containment and keep separated from those for whom resilience is seldom entertained.' (Evans and Reid 2013, 97). A recent UN Security Council statement that 'daily violence against Palestinians has reached unprecedented levels' (United Nations Security Council Press Release 2019) included a codicil call for 'restraint' and to 'refrain' from retaliation. The prioritisation of restraint over active resistance reflects what Jawad describes as 'the performance paradigm used by US political brokers to "normalize" Palestine and Palestinians into the 'civilized' world of nation-states' (Jawad 2014, 44), asking Palestine to perform what it is not, what it cannot be when the geography of the country cannot find a stable shape.

Aoun's position, shared by many Palestinian theatre-makers, was forged in a crucible of multiple violences. Both Aoun and Muallem have experienced detention at the hands of Israeli forces, both have been physically harassed and intimidated, denied permits to produce, to travel, and in one frightening incident at the Separation Barrier had to plead with Israeli soldiers to take a gun away from their young daughter's head. This latter episode hauntingly echoes comments Aoun made in a 2002 essay: 'In Palestine even the baby in its mother's

womb is politicized, this is our destiny’ (Goldbard and Aoun 2002). Indeed, ASHTAR’s experimental adaptation of Kahlil Gibran’s *The Earth Gods* (2003), directed by Aoun, vibrated with political resonance at the time of the Al-Aqsa Intifada extolling the infrapolitical action of refusing to exist as a construct of the oppressor, but also urging audiences to break free from ‘prisons of thought’ that saw conflict as a necessary part of their future (Ashtar Theatre 2003). ‘All theatre is political in Palestine’ she laughingly tells me in one of our interviews together (Aoun 2017). For Aoun, the 1993 Oslo Accords, which demarcated the contested space into a ‘two state solution’, were the ignition point of her resistance practice. Not only her stance on Israel, but *also* firing an urgency to speak to her own people about the jeopardies of not challenging their own regime, the manifold ways in which the Palestinian Authority were assisting a process of ‘internalising the violence, so that the oppressed becomes the oppressor: I saw our own people oppressing the weaker ones in society ... and we want to help them break the cycle’ (Aoun, Theatre. Conflict. Change 2017).

### **Challenging orthodoxies**

Writing on Palestinian Theatre in *Acts of Conflict*, Musleh asserts ASHTAR’s aim to empower Palestinian communities, ‘working to build people’s capacity for self-reflection, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-expression, and tolerance of difference’, but that this work is consistently challenged by a situation where ‘people’s priority is achieving liberation from occupation rather than working on issues internal to Palestinian society’ (Musleh 2011, 119). Resistance to addressing the internal social agenda towards greater incorporation and respect for a range of voices, a ‘tolerance of difference’, impacts those at the margins of Palestinian society. LGBTQ+ people – ‘there are no gay people in Palestine’, I was wryly told -- disabled people, those with mental health problems and women facing gender-based

violence and honour killings can be seen to be largely excluded from social and cultural discourse in the West Bank, and especially the Strip (Amnesty International 2018, 293-294).

For ASHTAR Theatre the impact of this social conservatism on their cultural work was revealed starkly when a performance of *Enheduanna* in December 2019, performed by Aoun's daughter, Ashtar Muallem, was stopped mid-way by a disapproving Dean at the An-Najah National University venue. It was announced the piece—a solo work using aerial silks and interpretative movement—was 'against the morals' of the Nablus establishment. The irony of the suppression of this piece, reanimating early Sumerian mythology of a female poet to address contemporary repression of women, and presented at the closing ceremony of a campaign highlighting violence against women, was not lost upon the performer Ashtar Muallem who rapidly came to national attention. But whilst in the following days ASHTAR theatre clustered fellow Palestinian artists to muster mutual opposition to this censorship, many respondents on social media were scathing of the 'explicit' nature of the performance, with some denouncing it as 'a decadent body show and not an art show'<sup>viii</sup>, an interpretation derived not from the textual content, but rather from Muallem's dress and deportment as a circus artist and performer. This resonates with some of the censure that greeted ASHTAR's early community work, with Aoun recalling, 'Some influential social figures denounced our work as we have broached sexual harassment and incest... they would stop us and protest: "This is not right! You are exaggerating!"' (Goldbard and Aoun 2002, 323). In this light, Musleh's conclusion that ASHTAR's efforts to 'broaden the mechanisms of resistance and resilience... [are] difficult to sustain due to the continuous presence of Israeli soldiers in Palestinian towns and villages' (Musleh 2011, 118) can be seen to be complicated further by the pernicious actions of the region's own cultural and ideological gatekeepers, social beliefs about relative human value, the tension between religious and secular spaces, as well as

irreconcilable demands to display appropriate forms of ‘resistance’ and ‘resilience’ to the watching world.

Figure 1. Ashtar Muallem in *Enheduanna*, 2019. Permission granted by ASHTAR Theatre.

The shift towards internal critique was controversial for ASHTAR, to undertake the project of building a questioning and liberated civil society when the precarious tectonics of the Occupation were still in flux. ASHTAR Theatre began to incorporate the methodology of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal in 1997, around the time when the charismatic founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed method (TOP) was on a globe-trotting tour of festivals, productions and celebrations of his work. And it was the book that launched a thousand applied theatre workshops, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992), that found resonance at ASHTAR: ‘at the start we played with games, because playing is a beautiful thing, because we needed that. It gives you space to be child-like and to laugh, to regain your sense of laughter, happiness and hope’ (Aoun 2017). I want to connect these ideas of the value of laughter, the lived practice of hope with the concept of *sumud*, as the retention of part of the psyche not given over to anticipating the demands of the occupier. *Sumud* can be understood as having ‘irreverent disregard’ (Rowe 2016, 39), creative resistance continually picking at the status quo, rather than bending to accommodate the situation implied by the imposed neo-colonialist discourses of resilience.

Aoun contends that TOP lexicon has special resonance in the Palestinian context; seeing the dialogic framework of Forum replicating a cultural lean towards debate – ‘we argue it through. It’s in our DNA’ -- (Aoun 2017). Their Forum plays have spanned issues that speak to Palestine’s negotiation with the occupation, but also indigenous problems. From

the earlier *Abu Shaker* series of works (2000 onwards), where a repeating ‘everyman’ character allows social problems to be explored through a domestic lens, to later pieces such as *The Right and the Bracelet* about inheritance laws (2011) and *Machine and Hammer* on labour rights (2016), ASHTAR have used the incremental reveal of Forum to show the human cost of social conservatism. Topics have included drug addiction, gang culture, sexual harassment, and the effects of social media, as well as ‘taboo’ subjects in Palestine such as child rape and incest. The company has also made Forum theatre about issues deemed important by international funders which pontificate from a distance that the Palestinian people adopt the ‘aura of positivity’ inherent in the resilience agenda (Keelan and Browne 2020, 459), thereby descaling the need for international assistance by locating problems with the people themselves. Aoun recalls the speciousness and condescension of a particular project, *The Story of Ein El Safieh* (2008), recalling ‘We did one commission about water and we hated it. We wanted to do water and politics. They said, “No politics. We want you to tell people how to use water.” How can we tell the people how to use water when they don’t have it?’ (Wickstrom 2014, 78). This impasse means the Forum work of ASHTAR is sometimes obliged to frame social issues as endogenous instead of underscoring the wider political frameworks and exogenous power structures that prevent a truly agentic *polis*.

It could be suggested that in inviting the ‘spect-actor’ to offer solutions, ASHTAR are complicit with an illusion these are matters the Palestinian people can fully control within their space. Claims Boalian Forum offers ‘facile remedy’ and ‘reductive’ distillations of compound problems (Hamel 2013, 415) which reject ‘developing increased understanding of the complex social and material relations in capitalist society’ (O’Sullivan 2010, 90) are well understood critiques of the practice. However, ASHTAR have arguably dynamised Boal’s epithet of ‘a rehearsal for revolution’ to their specific location. In their paradigm, Forum is a becoming, a preparative practice to ‘become more socially and politically aware’ (Ashtar

Theatre 2012), where each domestic action and endogenous transformation provides material ‘resource’ for a revitalised Palestinian State. This is why Aoun feels ASHTAR’s applied work has been most successful when they incorporate this theatre mode into extended residency relationships with communities, such as their returns to Al-Jiftlik in the Jordan Valley (Ashtar Theatre 2018). In 2015, they produced the Forum play *The Court* with young people from the Ghor region about the social tension of Palestinian labour in Israeli settlements, simultaneously training them as actors and facilitators whilst exploring their lived issues (Ashtar Theatre 2015). Conceived as a ‘street theatre play’ replicating the debates of the town squares, this performance moved between declarative and symbolic ‘Image Theatre’ work, to animated discussions between enmeshed characters. ASHTAR’s ongoing work in this beleaguered and contested region spans years, attempting to network the dotted communities that are further enclaved in Netanyahu’s attempts to create a permanent eastern border between Israel and Jordan (Rasgon 2020). A borderland to make a new ‘betweenness of places’. A buffer zone. Resilience as a term deployed by disaster preparedness initiatives encourages the development of ‘buffering capacities’ (Timmerman 1981, 20). Misapplied, resilience demands that it is people who buffer the blows.

Figure 2. *The Court* performed in the Jordan Valley 2015. Permission granted by ASHTAR Theatre.

***‘Gaza is a match-box, and we are the matches inside it’: Gaza Mono-Logues (2010)***

The shape of the Palestinian Territories is further complexified by the geography of Gaza, an isolated strip of land that sits by the sea, disconnected entirely from the West Bank, borders

perforated by a complex system of tunnels. The Oslo Accords impossibly envisioned Gaza and the West Bank as a 'single territorial unit'. 25 miles long and 6 miles wide, Gaza has been regularly referred to as the world's largest 'open prison' (Varghese 2020, 7) and is inaccessible to most Palestinians from the West Bank. ASHTAR circumnavigated the problem of connection, by setting up a satellite office in Gaza City, working with local artists to offer drama training to the Strip's young people. It was then a desperate situation to receive reports from these young people of the horrors of the Gaza hostilities in 2008, when Israeli forces launched 'Operation Cast Lead' which in 28 days saw the death of 1,400 Palestinians and some 300 children (Amnesty International 2009). These words, dispatched from Gaza were transformed by ASHTAR into the play *Gaza Mono-Logues*, 'to make,' as Aoun states:

the voices of our children in Gaza heard and let at least their monologues travel to known places and be heard from people outside their prison Gaza... Because we did not want to speak to ourselves, we spoke to the world. Thirty countries around the world believed in this voice (Aoun, *The Gaza Mono-Logues* 2010).

ASHTAR orchestrated a theatre-based political action that saw the *Gaza Mono-Logues* performed simultaneously on October 17th 2010 by over 1500 teenagers acting as proxy bodies and 'voices' for the Gazans in more than 50 cities in 36 countries across the world, including Germany, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, China and in the US, where it was performed a month later at the UN Headquarters in New York. In their discussion 'Reflecting on Palestinian Theatre', Al-Saber contended the 'unfiltered' *Gaza Mono-Logues* 'were stories that humanised the Palestinians' with Taylor supposing the 'verbatim' nature of the work performed at the UN must have 'cut through in some way, that a fictional play cannot' (Al-Saber and Taylor 2014, 98). However, Jawad remained more critical of the UN endeavour, denouncing performing to any epistemic community where Palestinians are subaltern,

wherein petitioning international solidarity by ‘bringing Palestinians into the picture as humans, the humanitarian frame takes the place of anti-colonial politics and imaginaries’. (Jawad 2014, 36). We might also read ASHTAR’s performance here as intentional abjection, deliberately playing upon the colonial paradigm to make the case. Resisting with the means possible. Planting their feet on others’ lands in order to be seen. The New York location saw a mixed group of young performers from several partner countries, as Aoun stated ‘on behalf of the authors, who were unable to attend because of the blockade still imposed on them’ (Aoun 2010), with Cox crystallising this as a process where ‘the stories can be mobile when the bodies cannot’ (Cox and Aoun 2017). As Fateema Atallah, one of the young people involved in the project painfully records in her monologue ‘Gaza’s fish ran away... but the people were not able to.’ (Ashtar Theatre 2010). Indeed, rehearsals for *Gaza Mono-Logues* were conducted by Skype as Aoun could not travel to the Strip, liaising instead with her Gazan colleague, Ali Abu Yassin, delivering the youth theatre workshops he contended were ‘keeping the thread of hope that our children will live a better life in their homeland’ (ibid). We can locate the ‘value’ of *hope* as an alternative to ‘resilience’ in ASHTAR’s work. Hope is conceived here not as a theological practice of assuming trust in an outcome, but rather as the persistent recognition of *want*, itself an expression of *sumud*.

Abu Yassin was to work again with some of the monologue authors in his 2016 version of *Romeo and Juliet*, a provocative animation of the tensions between Hamas and Fatah on the Strip, staged at the Said Al-Mishal Centre in Gaza City. Abu Yassin was working for ASHTAR when Al-Mishal was razed to the ground by an Israeli airstrike in August 2018, ‘transforming the five-storey building into dust, crumbled concrete and twisted steel’ (Balousha and Holmes 2018). Playscripts, photography exhibitions, poetry books, crockery from the café, the sirenic red velvet seats of the auditorium were all now

unsalvageable from the rubble. ASHTAR theatre was also severely impacted by the explosion, losing \$50,000 worth of equipment in the bombing. Hazem Balousha reporting from Gaza City in the days after the bombing, noted Al-Anqa'a (the Phoenix), a dance troupe teaching traditional Dabke 'joined hundreds of others to perform in the rubble of the building as a show of strength and solidarity' but the artists had reached their capacity to absorb, to accommodate, to rise again: 'Our memories have vanished now' said troupe leader, Mohammed Obaid, 'I don't know if we can create new ones' (ibid). For Abu Yassin, the response was manifold: 'When I look at the destroyed building, I can see my laughter, tears, screams and dreams buried under the rubble,' adding it was a 'theater for the poor... I trained many actors and artists here, it was like our second home... We felt free and alive at al-Mishal' (Abu Yassin 2018). And yet, despite the irrevocability of the destruction in Gaza, the resilience agenda rolled onwards. CAFOD worker Claire Grant lamented of the situation 'Aid agencies always talk about making people more resilient – but what does that really mean... in a situation such as Gaza, the reality is that regardless of our efforts, we cannot remove the ultimate risk' (Grant 2014).

### **Conclusion: From Resilience to *Sumud***

The term *sumud* has morphed to span cultural resistance and the maintenance of traditions, to economic resilience via micro-enterprises and to 'ideational resistance (maintaining a sense of hope, endurance, and normalcy)' (Larkin 2014, 136). This infrapolitics or 'everyday resistance' (Richter-Devroe 2011, 33) – the daily praxis where subordinate groups challenge and subvert the power of the oppressor – is in the act of rebuilding a home, making the wall a space for art, is singing and playing music in front of Israeli soldiers, and having the choice to

go and choosing to stay (Malik 2013). It is running a theatre company in Palestine. Indeed, infrapolitics are a set of micro-performances, Scott's 'hidden transcripts', the 'discourse that takes place "offstage", beyond direct observation by power holders' (J. C. Scott 1990, 2-4). *Sumud* is the infrapolitics that builds the structures and conditions for the visible political actions to take place. Some of the shift in meaning and social timbre of the term has been attributed to the longevity of the conflict, with daily rhythms imposing themselves over decades of occupation where people have to get jobs, fix their cars, buy groceries, carry on living. Larkin succinctly frames the situation, noting that urbanite Palestinians 'may be more concerned with their standard of living than with the state in which they live' (Larkin, 2014, 163). This adaptive capacity of *sumud* away from agentic resistance towards more pedestrian praxis of continuation has meant sharp criticism of the neo-liberal recolonisation of the term; allowing individualised pursuits of betterment to be recorded as *sumud*, as opposed to collective action. Further to the polysemy of the term resilience, *sumud* can be seen to exemplify 'all the tensions and contradictions of polyvalent strategies of everyday Palestinian survival' (Larkin 2014, 137). Borbeau and Ryan (2017) use the Palestinian National Liberation movement as a case-study to respond to (amongst others) Evans and Reid's critique of resilience, offering counter-argument that 'reducing resilience to a neoliberal product provides an incomplete and biased understanding of resilience in the context of world politics' (Borbeau and Ryan, 222). They contend resilience has been ignored as a processual term that offers 'transformability' and is in 'mutual assistance' to resistance. They see the term *sumud* as interchangeable with resilience (ibid. 230), offering a sharp reminder that some resilience discourses in the field of international relations and conflict studies see subjects as apolitical and discount daily-lived practice as quiescent. But to claim a certain neutrality for the word resilience as largely misappropriated in political dialogues, is also an act of erasure of the use of resilience as a 'continuation of the colonial mindset' (Keelan and

Browne, 460), Furthermore, I believe there is an elision here of *sumud* as an endogenous and specific practice with the exogenous application of a ‘resilience agenda’ that discounts hegemonic culpability in maintaining structural inequity and violence. Palestine cannot reshape itself through its resourcefulness alone. I argue throughout this article that resilience asks for an inexecutable elasticity that overcomes the breaks, whereas the ‘staying put’ of *sumud* is a geographical stamp on the terrain, to willingly, knowingly, place your feet onto shifting sands.

There are Palestinian academics who deploy the term resilience; Musleh uses the term in her description of ASHTAR’s work, but in her amplification of the term *sumud*, she is in a place of shared dialogue rather than reasserting the coloniser’s narrative:

[ASHTAR] are offering Palestinians non-violent ways of resisting occupation and oppression - ways that increase the humanity and agency of Palestinians rather than harming them and perpetuating suffering. They have taken the concept of *sumud* so deeply rooted within the Palestinian culture, and embodied it through the arts of theatre and performance. They embody *sumud* by maintaining a high quality of work, by refusing to jeopardise the artistic quality of their performances (Musleh 2011, 118)

To conclude, we can see how ASHTAR as one group of Palestinian Theatre makers across the Palestinian Territories, problematise the notion of resilience. Prevented from living fully in a State becoming an archipelago of its former self, and yet still under the directive to ‘forbear’ from the international community, their work exemplifies the indigenous word *sumud*. To return to the principles of ‘ecological resilience’ and to Walker and Holling’s elaboration of resilience as ‘the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks’ (Walker 2004), it is clear ASHTAR have persisted, have duly ‘reorganized’,

through their near thirty years of theatre-making. However, there have been profound ‘disturbances’ in the function, structure, priorities, and identity of the company and these have mitigated against the company remaining ‘essentially the same’, absorbing this turmoil into their art. How could a theatre company witness the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the ramping up of hostilities over annexation and settlements, the 2014 Gaza conflict and the destruction of their art making spaces, and remain ‘essentially the same’? Holling and Walker describe the forces of ‘resistance’ as the ‘difficulty’ (ibid) inherent in these changes to the ‘system’; ASHTAR, like many Palestinian theatres have purposefully created pockets of difficulty against an assimilation to the globalised dominant narratives. ASHTAR Theatre continue to offer creative resistance, have demonstrated *sumud*, and offer hope by instilling those virtues in the next generation of Palestinian artists.

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<sup>i</sup> In this article, I follow the company's own naming protocol, with ASHTAR written as fully capitalised, apart from when I quote other authors.

<sup>ii</sup> For more information please see [www.theatreconflictchange.com](http://www.theatreconflictchange.com) and [www.projectariadne.com](http://www.projectariadne.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Palestinian Performing Arts Network - <http://www.ppan.ps>

<sup>iv</sup> Whilst the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a term used by the UN, the EU and the ICC, I largely use the term Palestinian Territories. I acknowledge that academics using OPT in their research is an act of solidarity, but this article tries to reflect the terminology used by the artists I met and worked with.

<sup>v</sup> Footage of the 'silent walk' led by Dijana Milosevic of Dah Teater, and the subsequent creative response is available in the films of the [www.theatreconflictchange.com](http://www.theatreconflictchange.com) portal, a documentation of the AHRC GCRF funded project 'Tales of Winter and Spring'.

<sup>vi</sup> Al Hakawati (The Storyteller) came into existence in 1977 as the first professional Palestinian theatre under Israeli military occupation, the theatre remains active, but significantly altered, under its current name, the Palestinian National Theatre.

<sup>vii</sup> I am deliberately reflecting Aoun's use of terminology here. This communicates her political stance that any Israeli settlement in the region is an expression of participation in a 'illegal project' and therefore, in common with a number of artists I spoke with in the region, she purposefully does not always make a distinction between the actions of the Israeli government and the inhabitants of Israel.

<sup>viii</sup> The Facebook comments to the BBC report are overwhelmingly in support of the academic who halted the performance. Many news clips and resulting comments can be found on ASHTAR's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ashtartheatre/>