

A Dream of the Sea

Bread and Puppet Theater and Ashtar Theatre stage a parade on the Ramallah side of the Israeli wall

BY LISA SCHLESINGER

Parade volunteers gather in the parking lot of the International Academy of Art Palestine before the performance of *The Courage Play*.

LISA SCHLESINGER

FIRST ITEM OF BUSINESS: WHO WILL BE ON the Jerusalem side of the wall, and who will be on the Ramallah side?

Iman Aoun, artistic director of Palestine's Ashtar Theatre, and I are collaborating on a performance that we know from the outset will be difficult, if not impossible. It is slated in October 2009 as part of El-Hakawati Company of East Jerusalem's first international street-theatre festival, called the Jerusalem Every Which Way Festival. (In Arabic and French, the festival is also known as *Al Quds Al Saba Tatajalla* and *Jerusalem dans tous ses états!*) The hosting organization, founded in 1977 (by a group of theatre artists, including current member François Abu Salem and Edward Muallem, Aoun's partner and Ashtar's managing director), is the home of the Palestinian National Theatre. Aoun and I are imagining a well-known play adapted and performed on both sides of the nine-meter-high wall between Jerusalem and Ramallah.

The two cities, about seven miles apart, are separated by the Qalandia checkpoint as well as a stretch of Israel's 220-mile-long concrete, razor-wire and electric security fence. We envision some characters in our performance on the Jerusalem side and others on the Ramallah side. We will transcend the wall however we can, we decide, maybe with live-feed video.

We discuss the possibility of inviting Peter Schumann and his Vermont-based Bread and Puppet Theater to be part of the performance. If they agree to participate, there may be other ways to make it visible to all. I remember photos of the

bearded Schumann and his enormous puppets on towering stilts. Ashtar Theatre has hosted the well-traveled troupe once, and my collaborator Aoun wants to bring them back to work with students of the International Academy of Art Palestine. Most of the academy students have West Bank I.D.s, because they are citizens of the Palestinian Occupied Territories—thus they cannot go to Jerusalem, so we know our entry into the festival will have to be performed in Ramallah.

Flash forward: A couple of months later at the Arts in the One World Conference at the California Institute of the Arts just outside Los Angeles, I watch Peter Schumann perform *The University of Majid*, a *cantastoria* based on e-mails from playwright and activist Ed Mast about the case of a young Palestinian man arrested and detained in an Israeli military prison. In a *cantastoria*, the performer tells or sings a story while interacting with a series of images. Here Schumann plays the fiddle and recites text (Mast's e-mails) inscribed on 7 large and 80 small flower paintings. After the performance, Mast and Schumann suggest that Clare Dolan and Genevieve Yeullaz, two longtime Bread and Puppet company members, might want to return to Ramallah to perform and lead a workshop.

We move on to Glover, Vt., for a weekend of Bread and Puppet performances and one by children visiting from the Bethlehem's Aida Refugee camp. Five of us—performers Dolan and Yeullaz, Schumann, Mast and I—sit down over a meal to discuss the upcoming festival project. We decide a performance along the wall or at the checkpoint is too danger-

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Genevieve Yeullaz rehearses the dance of the olive trees with International Academy of Art students.

ous. Dolan suggests a parade. By telephone, Aoun agrees. Two months later the actors and I fly to Ramallah.

On the flight, I read an article in the *Herald Tribune* about the Goldstone Report, commissioned by the United Nations, which

accuses both Israel and Hamas of war crimes in Gaza in January '09 and demands investigations. The Israeli government threatens to halt the peace process if the U.N. forces them to investigate.

DOLAN AND YEULLAZ MEET WITH

15 students in the courtyard of the International Academy of Art Palestine and show them, using DVDs, how Bread and Puppet parades juxtapose images to create a story. The students collectively decide what they want their parade to be about: a trip to the sea. Although it is less than an hour's drive from Ramallah to the sea, most of them have never been there. As West Bank citizens, the students don't have access to the sea, and even if they had the permits required to get there, the journey could take days because of indirect routes, checkpoints and road closures. The students envision blue waves, clouds, fish jumping—and obstacles, too: checkpoints, the wall, soldiers.

Each day Dolan posts a "to do" list on a piece of cardboard and the students work on building puppets in sequence. In the parking lot three students papier-mâché strips of

newspaper onto the cardboard form of an olive tree holding a baby, increasing the puppet's strength layer by layer so it will stand upright. The show calls for three trees, but we run out of glue and may not have enough to finish the third. Mahmud is out scouting the city to find more. In the meantime, some students design and paint flags. While the flags dry, some students smoke cigarettes, others flirt, check cell phones, make coffee. Dolan takes a group next door to gather bamboo sticks for the flagpoles and clouds.

Yeullaz makes patterns for fishing boats, then cars, clouds and waves. Some patterns have several sections that are assembled into three-dimensional puppets to be worn by the puppeteers. Our goal is to make 100 puppets for 100 participants. A parade needs to proceed with energy and mass—a trickle of people does not have the same effect. The festival organizers have promised nearly 100 participants, but so far there are no firm commitments.

In Palestine, the first winter rain comes some time in October. Today is Sukkot, a Jewish holiday of the harvest during which people stay outdoors in temporary dwellings. Often tensions rise during this holiday, and this

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year they are exacerbated by conflict over the Goldstone Reports. Yesterday fundamentalist Jews entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and there were demonstrations in the streets. Last night there were clashes at the Qalandia checkpoint.

This morning Ramallah is quiet and the sky is blue, but there are a few clouds gathering. If it rains on Sukkot it is good luck for the Jews, someone says, and an hour later there is a downpour. We race to collect the puppets we have just painted, stashing some pieces in the narrow hallway, others in the gallery. Paints smears, glue melts. Because the cardboard is thin, some of the waves warp and are ruined. Once everything is inside, we take inventory. Some pieces are beyond repair, but not too many. Then, as suddenly as it started, the rain stops.

BREAD AND PUPPET PERFORMANCES

are open for audience participation. Volunteers rehearse with a core group of puppeteers for several hours to learn how to use the puppets. The Arts Academy students are now the core group of puppeteers. We gather in the central courtyard of the Boys' Friends' School up the road. Shadi and Fadi Zmorrod, brothers who



From left, students Ramzy Asad, Razan Ekramani, Reema Al Tawi, Iman Suleiman, Ayed Arafa.

started the first Palestinian circus company, Circus Behind the Wall, have brought their strongest tumblers, jugglers and stilt-walkers from cities all over the Occupied Territories to parade with us. The students' friends and neighbors and school classes have also come. When the scouts join us, we will have close to 100 paraders!

Dolan straps on her stilts and puts on

her long white gown: She becomes a towering angel. Everyone gathers around. The way a parade works, Dolan calls out, is that we create moving images that tell a story, kind of like a dream. In this parade we will show a dream of going to the sea. Dolan introduces the volunteers to the clusters of images—a school of fish, small boats, cars, clouds and rain, playing-card soldiers, doors that form a wall, two large peace birds hovering over everyone. Choose the puppet you would like to wear, Dolan says, and together you'll create the movements and sounds that bring the puppets to life.

Several children volunteer to be fishermen in the boats, and everyone watches as they walk with a rocking motion, pause, cast out for fish, pull in their rods and rejoice at the fish they've caught. The clouds float in the air at the tops of bamboo sticks. Blue rain, cut from garbage bags, streams down, obscuring the puppeteers. Orange fish bounce up from behind lulling blue waves. The cars drive forward, halt to a stop, honk, spin and drive on. The doors march in militaristic tread then clamp shut. When they open by turning sideways, soldiers rush through, spears raised. The stilts circle, dip their wings and dance. They are magical; everyone applauds.

Finally, someone lifts the peace bird's head, two others take a wing each, a fourth holds up the tail. They run and the bird takes flight. Once everyone knows his or her part, the groups go to separate areas of the courtyard to rehearse. When the big rehearsal is over, the core group of puppeteers gather in the courtyard to rehearse *The Courage Play*, one of Peter's *cantastoria*. It will be performed in Arabic at the end of the parade. Beaming, the students now see and understand how

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the images become powerful once they are embodied and are set in motion.

But now we must have a sobering discussion. There have been nightly clashes at the Qalandia checkpoint; each evening they have gotten more extreme. Last night two people were wounded; two others were arrested. The point of a parade, Dolan tells the group, is to share joy. If someone is critically wounded tonight in the clashes, we will not be able to share joy. The students are silent. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, this silence is everywhere, always, under the noise. It's not the calm before the storm, nor is it the *waiting* that everyone spoke of on my first visit here. But its name is obvious: Oppression. It comes from living under occupation. Someone else in the group speaks: Of course, she says, if someone dies, we can't have a parade.

PETER SCHUMANN SAYS THEATRE should be seen by many people. It should be cheap and accessible. In *Bread and Puppet*, the height of the puppets and stilts creates further visibility. We have come to terms with the idea of performing on the Ramallah side of the wall, although

the message of the play is intended for all.

After one last afternoon rehearsal at the Arts Academy, the puppeteers and volunteers walk the puppets up the street to Manara Square, the city center. Police block off the streets, now jammed with people. Press photographers climb on cars and statues. The parade starts with the scouts' band. Behind them Dolan leads the winged-angel stilts down Jerusalem Street; then come the clouds, then the soldiers and the doors. Now the tumblers, now the waves, their fish jumping. After all, both peace birds fly, their wings spanning the width of the street, heads high, tails streaming.

All the struggles of putting the performance together vanish. Men come out of the shops. Teenagers run after us. "What are you doing?" Mothers step into the street with their children. Cell phones snap photos. Hundreds, maybe a thousand people line the streets and follow us. What is this? Joy.

At the end of Jerusalem Street, there is the wall. The puppeteers put on wings and point to the illustrations of the *cantastoria*. Rhythmically, they shout out words from Schumann's *The Courage Play*:

Naked courage
Courage to fight
Courage to get up from the mud
Courage to see
Courage to plant what's missing
Courage to destroy when necessary
Courage to think
Courage to rethink
Courage to give up
Courage not to give up
Courage to speak
Courage to decide
Courage to knock at the door
Courage to knock down the door
Courage to fly

A child picks up a pair of courage wings and is about to steal them. Yeullaz catches her. "Do you want them?" The child nods. "You can have them." Yeullaz helps her put them on, and the winged-girl runs off. ☒

Lisa Schlesinger is a playwright and essayist who lives in Iowa and Chicago. She is currently working on a fourth collaboration with Palestine's Ashtar Theatre, *The Gaza Monologues*.

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BY CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON

The Majestic Theatre in San Antonio, Tex., built in the 1920s and restored 60 years later by a team led by Shepardson.

JOHN DYER PHOTOGRAPHY

ONE NIGHT IN 1985 AT THE WILSHIRE THEATRE in Los Angeles, Ray Shepardson was roaming backstage at a Shirley MacLaine show. He was there to say hello to the venerable star of stage, screen and television who had won an Academy Award for *Terms of Endearment* the previous year.

Shepardson was living in Los Angeles while planning and supervising the \$5-million restoration of the 2,300-seat Wiltern Theatre. That night, he was “playing it big time,” he explains, entertaining several major agents and all decked out in his best suit and tie, replacing his usual work garb: sweat pants and T-shirt or runner’s warm-ups. He had even earned the nickname “The Towel” because of the omnipresent towel draped around his neck to stanch perspiration in the hot, dusty environs of dilapidated historic theatres that he’s made a career of restoring.

Suddenly, a towel flew through the air and smacked Shepardson in the face. “Where’s *your* towel, Shepardson?” MacLaine bellowed. Recalling the incident today, Shepardson simply says of his famous friend, who has performed at a number of the theatres he has refurbished, “What a great lady.”

For the past four decades, Shepardson, 66, has traveled the U.S., sometimes working as a theatrical booking agent, more frequently directing preservation efforts for nearly 40 historic vaudeville and movie theatres built primarily during the 1920s, from Atlanta to Seattle, Louisville to Los Angeles. Each year, roughly five million people attend films and live theatrical events in the opulently gilded pleasure palaces that he has returned to their original luster. While he has

overseen a total of \$250 million in restoration, he estimates that it would cost more than \$2.5 billion to reconstruct all of those buildings today.

Over the years, “The Towel” is just one of many monikers Shepardson has acquired. In fact, when you talk to people who know Raymond K. Shepardson in any of his capacities—as preservationist, restoration guru or producer—abundant colorful descriptions get tossed about like a performance artist’s word salad: genius, visionary, lunatic, innovator, headache, divine madman.

“RAY LOVES THE THEATRE ITSELF—THE ARCHITECTURE, the bones—and he’s very respectful of its history and its soul,” says L.A.-based Rick Marcelli, who has managed a number of acts Shepardson has booked, including David Copperfield and Shields & Yarnell. “But he also loves variety entertainment and live theatre.”

A native of the Seattle area, where he grew up on a dairy farm, Shepardson caught the bug for producing while attending Seattle Pacific College. Raised in a deeply religious family—his grandmother was an authentic Holy Roller—he had originally contemplated studying to become a minister, because “church is such a highly theatrical setting that requires a lot of acting,” he quips.

Instead, he chose to major in anthropology and became the college’s first male social chairman. In this capacity, he scheduled the first secular programs on campus by booking a young John Denver, or Jewish or Mormon members of the