

Creating Justice

Human Rights and Art in Conversation

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Chapter 4

Performance

A conversation between Iman Aoun and Toni Shapiro-Phim

Iman Aoun is a theatre maker. In 1991, she cofounded ASHTAR Theatre (www.ashtar-theatre.org) in Palestine, where she is now the executive director. As an award-winning actress, she has acted in and directed many plays in Palestine and internationally; received recognition for her work from different countries; written and published articles on Palestinian theatre and participated in writing two manuals on theatre training; and been a panelist at various international conferences and world summits. She is an international theatre trainer who specialises in 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. In 2003, she initiated the Euro-Palestinian project 100 Artists for Palestine, and in 2010, The Gaza Monologues, a global project that raised voices of the children of Gaza and advocated for their rights. She also initiated The Syrian Monologues – stories of Syrian Refugees told internationally and was a coordinator in Palestine of the V-Day campaign 'One Billion Rising' from 2014 to 2016. She is a board member of The Palestinian Performing Arts Network and other local arts organisations. Toni Shapiro-Phim is Director of the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts and Associate Professor of Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation at Brandeis University (United States). She is a curator, filmmaker, researcher, writer, educator and cultural producer whose work in both community-based organisations and academic settings focuses on the arts in discrete regions of the world, particularly in relation to war, genocide, displacement, conflict transformation, climate justice and gender concerns. Her documentary film, Because of the War, received the 2018 Elli Köngäs-Maranda Prize for 'superior work on women's traditional, vernacular or local culture and/or feminist theory and folklore'.

Note from the authors: We held this conversation in December 2021. The genocidal war against Palestinians continues.

Toni Shapiro-Phim (TS-P): I know we've had chances to speak before, each time about just one discrete initiative or project – whether ASHTAR Theatre, or UNESCO, or some other entity. I'm excited to be in conversation with you again today to talk about theatre and displacement more broadly.

I noticed that in your email messages, Iman, at the very bottom near your signature, it says 'ASHTAR Theatre is a nonprofit NGO founded in 1991, in Jerusalem, with a scope of work that covers the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At ASHTAR, we look at theatre as a tool to free our society, ignite awareness, create internal individual freedom, and invest in culture as a generator for social change and political liberation'.

I wondered if today we could speak about both internal freedom – like, what are you aiming for in that regard, through your theatre work – and culture as a generator for political liberation. What does that mean in practice? Maybe we could start with the notion of internal freedom?

Iman Aoun (IA): Being there since 1991, at the turn of the first Intifada – a time when we believed there would be a free and autonomous country, and a sovereign nation – had encouraged us to work with our youth, the next generation. We had to lay the foundation for them of what freedom means. We introduced them to free thinking and helped them form their actions and dreams. To be a free person is to listen to yourself, to understand your emotions, your thoughts and to respect yourself and others. To be able to open up towards the other and their differences. To be truthful to yourself and your ideas, dreams and emotions. That is the freedom within that we were looking for. We aspired to be strong beings, clear and sensitive beings, who were aware of themselves and their surroundings. To achieve all that we used different theatre techniques.

For us, Theatre of the Oppressed and drama in general are about the transformation of people. It's always about helping the person leap from one step to a higher step, to become more enlightened, more emotional and more aware. A person who is critical, sensitive and asks deep questions of life. Transformation became one of our aims. To transform our students and audience, we have to give them tools to know themselves better in order to be able to break the taboos that are affecting their lives.

We are surrounded by taboos; sexual relations out of wedlock are taboo; to question God and religion is a taboo; to support LGBTQ rights is a taboo; to talk freely about politics is becoming a taboo. But with theatre comes freedom, where you are encouraged to break all the boundaries, to break out of the frames of education, family and politics. In theatre you are invited to look for new spaces in your mind, body and soul, and elaborate them and find your inner voice and ideas without constraints or taboos.

TS-P: Does this happen in rehearsals and workshops, as well as in performances?

IA: Yes, of course. First of all, our students have a long period of training. When they study at ASHTAR, they do so for four years in a row. They start when they are between twelve and fourteen, when they're still forming their life philosophy. They'll still be questioning their identity and their knowledge. It is then that we try to provide them with the ability to start to discover and ask the questions, through exercises, bodywork, voice and imagination. They also start to get into groups and form new dynamics. They begin to deal with each other differently from how they do at school, or at home, for they find themselves protected in a very sheltered space, where there is no criticism, no objection, no stigmatisation of their thoughts. They are free to propose different ideas and think freely. There is always an open discussion, an open debate that comes with every single play that they delve into.

They have to research every idea that they are working on; if the play is about capitalism, or social inhibitions, or about women – whatever the play is about, they need to do their research to understand the background of the play. They go into a process of learning and growing into the subject, but they don't grow completely until they perform. That first encounter with the audience and the ideas brings them to a new level. They encounter this kind of strength from what they've been learning, gathering, experiencing inside this safe haven, this room that is called the rehearsal room. Then it all opens up and gets brighter within the performance. So yes, it is the rehearsal and the performances that bring this kind of transformation to these young people.

TS-P: Wow, you're taking me back, Iman, to an experience I had with young people in 1989, which also engaged with performing arts. These were refugees from Cambodia, in a refugee camp. This was following the genocide in their homeland and amidst an ongoing war. When I arrived at this camp called Site Two, which was the largest Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand, I found individuals and groups of people who, having lost almost everything – loved ones, homes, livelihoods, a clear sense of the future – were nonetheless choosing to make dance and music and theatre a priority. This was even though they were grappling with the ongoing trauma and legacies of the recent past – including four years under revolutionary rule, which involved starvation, overwork, disease and the death of between a quarter and a third of Cambodia's entire population.

Inside that camp on Thai soil, the Cambodians were stateless, stripped of their rights and, in many ways, their dignity. They were considered illegal entrants by the host country and were in constant danger because the camp was in a war zone. Multiple Cambodian political factions, each with its own

army, were vying for control of their homeland. Artillery shells often fell in Thai territory. Plus, if camp residents stepped outside of the barbed wire fences, they might be shot by Thai guards or step on a landmine laid by one of the fighting armies.

Yet they made performance a priority, and thousands showed up to watch their fellow refugees perform on outdoor stages. In the particular section of that particular camp where I was (I had initially gone to do research and then ended up collaborating with the artists on a project to document their creativity amidst horrible precarity), one of the dancers had been part of Cambodia's royal dance ensemble before the revolution and another was a folk dancer, a graduate of the University of Fine Arts. Together, they taught hundreds of young people, making sure the children got extra food rations for participating. It was, in some ways, a momentary escape from their terrible surroundings, creating beauty and focus and connections with the spirits, with the past and with their homeland, through performance.

What you were saying made me think of this because I feel like what I was witnessing in that Cambodian refugee camp was both a hope for return – they spoke about a future back in Cambodia where this cultural knowledge could be applied – and also a nurturing of a kind of internal freedom. I mean, artillery shells would fall indiscriminately, so even if they were performing on an outdoor stage and thousands of people were watching, when artillery shells fell, the performers would run for cover, members of the audience would look for their children and all jump in trenches for protection and then, when the shelling stopped, they would return – both those who had been watching and those who had been performing – to finish the show. They were reaffirming some kind of individual as well as collective beauty and control in the face of ugliness, violence and chaos.

Recently, I talked to Voan Savay, the dancer I'd worked with most closely in the refugee camp thirty years ago. She told me that, as she reflects on it now, she was putting cultural knowledge into those young bodies, so that if she died (because there was no guarantee that anyone in those circumstances would make it), the cultural knowledge and dignity would live on in the next generation. And she was also driven to nurture the growth of individuals who had a sense of themselves, and a sense of their right to explore, imagine and live, you know, full, complex lives. She started to document her work in the refugee camp in writing, and then, with me, in video, so that there was a record of what they did in the 'forest', as they called it, away from their homeland. The Palestinian and Cambodian situations differ dramatically. But it's this notion of exile, danger or rightlessness confronted by the aesthetic, moral, spiritual and political potency of particular art forms, I think, that is similar.

IA: Yes, absolutely. But whether they are the Cambodians, the Syrians or the Palestinians who had to flee twice or three times, or even the Palestinians who keep moving in Gaza from one neighbourhood to another due to the attacks on them by the Israeli occupation, it's all the same. It's changing, it is flipping the trauma into drama. It's making the trauma more of a creative impact in order to keep their humanity alive. Because during the trauma, the first thing that we lose is our humanity. Either we are forced to lose it, or it starts to decay from inside because of fear and anger.

With drama and creative work, you start to mend your inner self, you start to regain your balance, you start to understand that despite everything, you're still alive and you have to maintain the humane aspect of your being. I guess that's what art means to us. This is why theatre, drama and art are most valuable when you are most in need of it. That's why plays come usually with a conflict because the conflict is the essence of theatre. If there is no conflict, then why would you need to present a play, why would you need to make theatre? It is that friction of who we are and who we strive to be, of who we need to become.

TS-P: Who we strive to be or need to become – I can visualise that rip, that wound, that trauma, that eats away at one's own humanity, exacerbated by the messages one gets from the outside. People who had lived in that Cambodian refugee camp for ten years spoke about feeling like animals in a zoo in the eyes of others. Outsiders would come in and look, journalists took pictures, politicians made what were often empty promises, and then left, while the camp residents remained. Yet those who were displaced were, on their own terms, reaffirming their own humanity, their own dignity, as I observed, through dance, music and theatre, as a way to then be able to imagine a different kind of future.

I'm wondering about that other statement at the bottom of your email. It says that 'culture is a generator for political liberation'. You just talked about individual, internal freedom, but what about culture as a generator of political liberation? What does that mean, in practice, for ASHTAR Theatre, for your youth?

IA: Culture is a generator of political liberation, because it has the power to challenge dominant narratives, promote diverse perspectives and empower marginalised communities. It provides a sense of togetherness. This kind of togetherness is a foundation, and it keeps us clear in our direction. Because after so many years of occupation, you start to lose your roadmap, your sense of direction and your strategy. Although we know that what we want is our liberation and freedom, how to get there becomes a little blurry. So, cultural work, art and theatre, keep the people alive, and keep the direction clear. It's the light at the end of the tunnel. This is the first level.

The second level is about international connections and the creation of bridges: When we talk, you and I, or when we invite other companies to our international festival, we create bridges. When I'm invited to speak over Zoom or if I go to visit another festival or conference, that's a bridge created. These bridges generate awareness, because if you don't know me, you wouldn't know what's happening in my country at the level of the people in daily life. When you start to hear people's first-hand stories and not the news, you understand their challenges, resistance, fights, aspirations and dreams, then a true bridge starts to be built. When we exchange, theatre and culture become a force for political change.

TS-P: Right, maybe it's, in part, that first-person testimony.

IA: Exactly. On the third level, comes solidarity: when people start to write about the Palestinians and their culture – books like this one – this is also another way to reach people who do not know us in person, yet they will read about us, they will listen and contemplate. All these levels should create change. Once you know, you cannot un-know. You cannot say, 'I do not know'. Culture, in this case, serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and political mobilisation, fostering solidarity and demanding social and political change, and it will help people to choose their politicians accordingly in their respective countries.

TS-P: I remember, Iman, it might have been the very first time you and I met, it was on a Zoom call with UNESCO, and we were starting that project looking at ethical practices with the arts in areas of precarity or vulnerability. You said – I don't remember the exact words, but something to the effect of – 'nobody wants to be a refugee', reminding us that we must pay attention to what we are ultimately moving towards. We must be moving towards liberation and towards not creating circumstances where people are put in these situations again. I have spent decades collaborating on projects with people who are in situations of exile, displacement, these kinds of precarity, in part because, as a US citizen, I'm responding to what the United States has instigated or fostered or supported around the world; in part, because my great-grandmother on one side and grandparents on the other were refugees; but also because I am a member of humanity. For years I've worked closely with women who were refugees from Liberia, and one has said over and over again, 'I don't pray for anyone, not even my worst enemy, to be a refugee' because of the erosion of dignity, and of choice, let alone safety. I just remember your statement so clearly; it helped us focus our conversation that day, reminding us that no matter what the arts initiatives were, no matter how creative, no matter how brilliant, if they weren't working towards changing

some of the underlying systems or ways that people treat each other, we were left to perpetuate people's inhumanity to one another.

IA: Absolutely. I told you before we started that I just came back from Tunisia. I was at Carthage International Theatre Festival. There was a conference for three days with many people talking about theatre and the COVID pandemic – theatre in the difficult times of COVID and post-COVID. One of the papers was about the challenges facing theatre in the future with the development of the Metaverse. When you were talking about refugees – we will all be refugees in cyberspace very soon. We're going into a zone where we will lose a lot and be lost. To be a refugee is to lose your sense of belonging, your choice, your voice, your power and your foundation.

Mark my words, we will all be refugees soon. We will lose our rights, because we were not part of its creation. It will be accelerated much more than what we would think of as individuals. Many of us will fall into the trap of becoming refugees there.

TS-P: At your conference, among your colleagues, was there any hope or imagination that theatre could play a role in keeping us from falling into that trap?

IA: Well, all of them I guess, they were fighting to keep theatre as a counterweight. But for me, that's not the point, to tell you the truth. Theatre will continue to be, that's for sure. But if we want to compete, if we want to understand the game, we have to be in the middle of the game. We have to be able to change the game from within. We cannot change the game from the outside. If we continue to change the game from the outside, we will be forgotten soon. Unfortunately, that was my point, but my colleagues were against going into the cyber world and doing theatre online and all of that. For them, it doesn't work this way. For me, it might. I think that's the way we should really try to make a difference. Look at TikTok – if you present something there, young people will see it. But if we say no to TikTok, we will become history, we will become like the very beautiful old books that are kept on shelves in libraries that people seldom pick up, because if you want any information, you just click a button and it's yours.

TS-P: So, is ASHTAR working in that realm now?

IA: We're trying, yes. Since COVID, we started to go into more online presentation and filming – short films, even films that look like Forum plays. We present the film, then we open up the debate and we try to discuss the issues raised. I mean, it's not really Forum Theatre, but it's still an open debate. We

try to keep up with the minds of our youth, we learn from the younger generation. We try to follow their needs, but we also try to give them whatever we can from the old knowledge. We want them to be standing on strong foundations, and when they go into this unknown, very fast world, at least they know that they are well equipped with knowledge.

TS-P: What does ASHTAR mean?

IA: ASHTAR is the name of the Goddess of Love, Fire and Fertility, at the time of the Canaanites, the Sumerians and the Phoenicians.

TS-P: Do all the young people in ASHTAR Theatre, in your company, taking the workshops, learn about Ashtar the Goddess?

IA: Yes, they know who she is; they know a little of her mythology, but they do not study her extensively, and not everybody has a strong connection or interest in knowing the mythology. It depends on their age; the more they grow, the more they become aware of and engaged with that mythology.

TS-P: I'd like to ask, Iman, two questions: What are you most afraid of, if anything, and what you are most hopeful about, if anything?

IA: Maybe what I'm afraid of and what I'm hopeful for is the same thing. And this is very strange. I am afraid of the future, because I know that what it will bring won't be easy. I'm certain or quite certain, that there will be very strong leaps and changes of who we are, how we're going to be. I believe that AI will take up much more space in our life. Countries might disappear, nations might disband, identities might vanish. We will go into an era where there will be the masses and those who control the masses, which is a little bit like now, but now it's not as sharp as it's going to be later. And that's my fear. It's also my hope that, because of everything we've been going through as individuals, countries and people in this melting pot maybe something dramatic will happen, and a rebirth will emerge. So that's why it's fear and hope at the same time and going in the same direction. But if I think of the existing time, I will say, I really fear that all that we have built at ASHTAR would be lost, because there could be another big war that will lead to a great loss of our heritage. My aspiration is that our successors, the young people who have been studying at ASHTAR, will continue the path. At the moment, I'm on the verge of a new big project. If it works, then that will be great – hopefully it will. I'm creating an art village in the Jordan Valley.

TS-P: What and who do you envision being in this village?

IA: An academy for theatre, circus and social environment and agriculture, it will be a residency for artists from around the world to come to Palestine to explore and work with the local community. Students will live in the village; they will study and cultivate the land.

TS-P: Beautiful. Are you actually working on that now?

IA: Yes.

TS-P: When you're talking about your hope that's related to your fear, you hint that maybe something cataclysmic will happen and the new thing will be so much better, so much more humane. Have you read or heard about the essay that Arundhati Roy wrote, called 'The Pandemic as a Portal'? It was that same notion, that with all of these horrors, all the inequity, oppression and violence laid bare by the pandemic, with everything that's been there now magnified, what if this is a moment to turn it all upside down? What if this is the moment that we tell ourselves that when we get out of this pandemic, we want something different, we don't want to go back to how it has been? What if we could harness this outrage at the way things are and make constructive, lasting change?

IA: I wish we could. Yeah. I wish we could, but you're saying, 'What if we, what if we,' and I was thinking that there's no 'we' and that's the problem. There's no 'we' at the moment, in this period. At the moment, there is you and I, that is a 'we'. But there are no collective masses who are going into movements. There is no turning of the tidal wave. The world is boiling, yes, but the 'we' is about to evaporate.

TS-P: That's a powerful metaphor. I'm thinking of the murder of George Floyd and how all over the world people protested against pervasive and systemic anti-Blackness. All over the world. Amazing solidarity, real creativity, real anger from communities. And now? In the United States, at least, very little has changed.

IA: The strongest drive for human beings is fear, then anger. Why are people who are bankers or those who design policies not guided by fear and anger?! They are able to create ideas for years from now. The UN is talking about 2030 and planning for 2050 at the moment. The global strategies of UNESCO and the different UN branches have been gathering thinkers, activists and ideas, to draw the roadmap for 2030. Yet we don't feel it on the ground, do we?

TS-P: In my limited sphere, very little.

IA: I don't see any real development, at least not in Palestine. All that I see is money spent here and there, or even wasted here and there. I'm sure this happens everywhere around the world. Wasted money. There is no real willingness to make global development. The poor are getting poorer, and the rich are getting richer.

TS-P: Thinking back to your statement that anger and fear are motivators for action, there are young people angry and fearful about the climate crisis, some of whom are doing amazing things. At the same time, at least here in the US, it's very obvious that fascist White supremacists are fomenting fear and anger so that they can hold onto, or dig in even deeper with, their kind of oppressive control of humanity.

IA: Yeah. It's really strange. Human beings are so complex. We are completely destructive and constructive at the same time. We have this duality, this dichotomy in each and every one of us and it's perplexing. You cannot really mend the harm we do, and it has been like this probably since forever. But with fewer people around the world, you feel it less. Now, we're getting double the people and double the miseries probably. The world is shrinking in terms of information and space; sitting at home, you can know what is happening around the world, in the blink of an eye. So that's the way it is.

TS-P: I so admire how, amidst the surrounding reality of danger and loss, you are nurturing life and doing community-affirming cultural work inspired by Ashtar the Goddess of Love, Fire and Fertility, that, as you were saying earlier, helps to pave a path for Palestinians towards freedom.

IA: Thank you. I also think that no matter where we are, whichever country we're in, we are governed with a mentality of ownership. A patriarchal mentality of ownership, possessing, grasping and having, a continuous fight for power and control. Before that, when the world was matriarchal, it wasn't about power, devouring, controlling, owning; it was about sharing, giving, embracing, participating. We have lost all of those things.

TS-P: Except, I think, in some Indigenous and other cultures, where there's an acknowledged interdependence with each other, and with the natural world.

IA: Of course, but I'm talking about the present collective 'we'. Even when a woman is running a country, she does not govern according to her female perspective, she governs according to the patriarchal rules, as the capitalist economy is totally aligned with patriarchy.

TS-P: Indeed. Within ASHTAR, are you modelling something different? Are you creating something different?

IA: Things are not black and white. In terms of the way we develop our programmes and the way we deal with each other, yes. But we also have a certain hierarchy at the theatre. I mean we all work as a big family, but there are distinct roles and responsibilities. What we do is that we share the vision and the daily burden. There are no boundaries between us. We are like a family – even the students, they feel like they are at home. Everybody that enters ASHTAR Theatre feels that this is like a home. It's not a rigid organisation, there is no boss, though there is a person in charge. We all feel that we are one, especially when we work on a production. When we do our International Youth Festival, the students become part of the idea, the thinking process and the implementation, like a harmonious concert. There are always new ideas, and we have to learn together how to make them, because we have to build the big collective 'we'.

TS-P: Yes, that's one of the takeaways here: we have to build that 'we'.

IA: I think theatre can create an important and interesting wave of change in our lives. Therefore, theatre needs to get out of its comfort zone and closed buildings, into the minds and hearts of people; in the streets, online and into all the different corners of life.