

Palestinian theater calls for international performances of the play *The Gaza Monologues*

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The Ashtar Theater, a non-profit Palestinian ensemble, based in Ramallah on the occupied West Bank, has issued a call for international readings and performances around the world of the play, *The Gaza Monologues*, on November 29.

The Gaza Monologues was written and first performed in 2010 by Gazan youth who participated in an Ashtar Theater program. The play is made up of 33 monologues by Gazan young people, describing their lives before, during and after the murderous attack of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on Gaza in 2008-09. Its first performance took place on the Gaza Strip in 2010.

The Gaza Monologues presents the hopes and trauma generated by—and also a critical analysis of—the mass destruction known by the Israeli state as “Operation Cast Lead,” which involved 22 days of bombardment by air, land, and sea. The violence left more than 1,300 Palestinians dead, including 220 people killed on December 27, 2008, and wounded over 5,000.

In its appeal issued last week, the Ashtar Theater stated that the group, “due to the horrific war taking place in Gaza, is launching an urgent request to all its friends and theater makers around the world to publicly read or perform *The Gaza Monologues* on November 29th, 2023, the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People—a significant day for those who value justice, equality, and freedom for the Palestinian people.”

The theater noted, “Tragically, these Monologues are still accurate today. They are highlighting the horrors, hopes and resilience of the courageous Gazans to a wider audience, bringing out the voices of children and people in Gaza.”

This is a call to the youth of the world. Since

2010, *The Gaza Monologues* has been performed by thousands of high-school and college students internationally. Dozens of performances can be found on YouTube and any reading of the play shows the deep connection of Palestinian youth to young people around the world. The piece demonstrates empathy for the suffering of the Palestinian people, as well as horror at the violence that has been visited on them. There can be little doubt that those who participated in or saw a performance have been changed forever.

This is the type of information and art that the authorities in many of the imperialist countries, especially Germany and the United States, are attempting to suppress. A production of *The Gaza Monologues* would be all but unthinkable in the largest school district in the United States, New York City, for example. New York’s Chancellor of Schools has specifically banned discussion of events in Israel-Palestine in schools and has attempted to muzzle educators even outside their jobs.

When students protest, as they did last week in the borough of Queens against a Zionist teacher, they are slandered as “antisemitic,” by right-wing mayor Eric Adams, who is now busily cutting over a half billion dollars of the education budget.

Sections of the play can be cited here (as translated by Fida Jiryis from Arabic) to give a glimpse of how the piece communicates the thoughts and feelings of Palestinian youth.

One youth, Anas Abu Eitah, 14 years old in 2009, goes to the mosque during the war, and sees the “closest friend in my life Mohammed wrapped in the flag of Palestine and torn into pieces.” He adds, as “I was leaving the cemetery there was heavy bombing, I

felt that the angel of death was following me and not leaving me alone, but thank God I'm still alive."

A girl, Rawand Ja'rour, speaks. She was 12 at the time of the war. After the bombing, she says, "I started having terrifying dreams. All night I have a conflict within myself, between desire to sleep and fear of nightmares... Sleep became a monster hiding behind my eyelids." Rawand wants to be an actress and her wish is that she "could live in a civil, democratic society with peace, and twenty cinemas, and keep watching movies and flying in my imagination and dreaming."

The social catastrophe of the Israeli attack of 2008 is highlighted by one youth, Amjad Abu Yasin, who is 16. He says, "The war came and went and we're still living it. The victims are always the poor people who have nothing to do with anything. Even when there's an earthquake or a flood in any country, the victims are the poor people, as though there's a universal conspiracy against them. ...For positions and interest, the leaders and powerful people commit slaughters and crimes without batting an eyelid or feeling any guilt...poor people get poorer and sick ones sicker."

And there are 30 more voices that speak out. Translation into several languages can be found on the Ashtar Theater's Gaza Monologues website.

The theater was founded in Jerusalem in 1991 by Edward Muallem and Iman Aoun, who remains its artistic director. Its mission is "to promote creativity and commitment for change through a novel combination of specific training and acting programs and services and professional theatre performances."

As Aoun noted in a 2016 comment about the development of *The Gaza Monologues*, "It is hard work and a difficult duty, especially when daily life is a continuous struggle under occupation. Our daily commute from Jerusalem to Ramallah is tripled in time every day with the presence of checkpoints and the separation wall. Our youth are not able to travel to Jerusalem, and many of them have never even seen the city because they can't get permission to do so from the occupation. We have not been allowed to travel to Gaza since 2005, and our students in Gaza cannot leave the Gaza Strip to come to the West Bank, so we can only see them over Skype. We're able to work with them that way on daily basis thanks to technology.

She went on: "The Israeli occupation makes it almost impossible for us to reach our audiences in Galilee as

we used to prior to the Oslo Agreement. Travelling abroad is another challenge that we face every time we are invited anywhere, because we have no access to an airport and we need to travel via Jordan, which is not just time-consuming but expensive."

The theater has not only survived the Zionist occupation, but also attacks by right-wing Palestinian vigilantes who attacked a public puppet parade sponsored by the theater in 2022, for "'homophobic and color-phobic' motives."

The Gaza Monologues should be seen and performed wherever possible on November 29. In the face of the openly genocidal aims of the Zionist state now creating mass death and destruction scores of times more intense than in 2008-09, it is necessary to understand how the youth of Palestine are reacting to—and fiercely opposing—the attack.



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