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Review: GUERNICA, GAZA: VISIONS FROM THE CENTER OF THE EARTH. By Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi

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GUERNICA, GAZA: VISIONS FROM THE CENTER OF THE EARTH. By Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi. Directed by Emile Saba. Ashtar Theatre, Ramallah. 10 October 2024

Guernica, Gaza: A Surreal Exploration of Resilience and Humanity Amidst War at Ashtar Theatre in Palestine

مش مفروض الطير يكون مقيد، مثل ما الإنسان مش مفروض يكون محاصر

-حمزه، غويرنيكا، غزة (١٧)

A bird is not meant to be grounded, just like a human is not meant to be besieged.

-Hamza, Guernica Gaza (17)

What does it mean to make theatre in times of genocide? As the ongoing genocide in Gaza has persisted since October 2023, this question has weighed heavily on the minds of many artists. While some international artists make the choice in their artistic praxis to engage with or distance themselves from what is happening in Gaza, theaters within Palestine face a starkly different reality. For them, the question is not whether to respond, but how and when to continue their artistic practice—and what message that work must convey in the face of such devastation. Ashtar Theatre Board Member and playwright Naomi Wallace reunited with her long-time collaborator, Palestinian playwright Ismail Khalidi to write a play specifically about Gaza for Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah in the Occupied West Bank

Guernica, Gaza: Visions from the Center of the Earth was directed by Ashtar Theatre's Artistic Director Emile Saba and premiered on 13 July 2024, with five initial performances. I attended its second series of productions, which began on 10 October 2024, in their Ramallah space. Though Khalidi and Wallace wrote the original text in English, Alice S. Yousef translated it into Arabic for Ashtar Theatre, and all performances have been staged in Arabic.

As the performance began, ominous music filled the intimate seventy seat theatre. At the same time, a striking video projection of a human eye spanned three strips of screens, overlaid with shifting faces—presumably those of the characters. The three projection screens formed a fragmented visual space: stage left featured a short and torn panel about two to three feet long, while the center screen, positioned slightly upstage, stretched from the ceiling to the floor. On stage right, another screen extended from the ceiling and draped onto the floor. Throughout the performance, abstract images filled these surfaces, layered and overlapping, creating a dynamic collage that echoed the fragmented, multi-layered imagery emerging from the play's text. The visuals and projections added a haunting, surreal dimension to the performance, deepening the emotional and symbolic impact.

The play tells the stories of five characters from Gaza: Yara, a young surfer and her father, Antar; Yamen, a young man with PTSD and his older brother Hamza, a resistance fighter; and Bilal, a beekeeper. While the brothers occasionally talk to each other, all of the characters appear to exist more in each other's memory than in the present moment. However, Saba's staging made it clear that they sense each other's presence. Throughout the play, the audience experiences fragments of the characters' lives that create a kaleidoscopic view of life in Gaza during the genocide.

Wallace and Khalidi were inspired by the Picasso painting *Guernica* (1937), which was created after the small Basque town of Gernika in northern Spain was bombed by Nazi Germany and Italian Fascist air forces during the Spanish Civil War on 26 April 1937. The attack on Gernika was one of the first aerial attacks of its kind and was used as a testing ground for death and destruction from the air, in much the same way new weapons of war are being tested in Gaza. Picasso's *Guernica* "articulated the terror of it so potently that the picture has become almost synonymous with a sense of outrage and condemnation. Merely possessing a reproduction of it in Spain during the Franco era was an imprisonable offense." [1]

Guernica scholar, Anthony Blunt, divides the painting into two groups, one made of humans and one of animals. The latter group consists of the bull, wounded horse, and bird. The group of humans consists of a dead soldier and several women, one of whom holds her dead child.[2] Many of these images were brought to life in indirect ways in the play penned by Wallace and Khalidi.

Like the painting from which it takes its name, *Guernica, Gaza* illustrates the importance of the interspecies relationship between humans and animals. Through juxtaposing human and animal figures, both pieces vividly convey the violence and destruction from which no one, human and animal alike, can escape. Both art objects reflect on the fragility of life and the senselessness of conflict, emphasizing that violence spares no one. The human-animal connection immediately recalls Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's dehumanizing remark on October 9, 2023, when he said, "We are fighting human animals and we will act accordingly." [3] While Gallant's rhetoric toward Palestinians is not new, *Guernica, Gaza* challenges this narrative by highlighting how Palestinians extend their compassion to all forms of life around them, including animals:

YAMEN: When I first heard those two words, 'human animals,' I couldn't get them out of my mind. Do they mean that we are animals that are human? Or humans that are animals?

HAMZA: Animals and humans are two separate things.

YAMEN: But they're afraid of the bombs like we are. The dogs hear the drones and wet themselves. They whimper. A 'human animal.' Maybe it means we are inside the animals and they are inside us.

يامن: اول مرة سمعت كلمة "حيوانات بشرية" ضللت افكر فيها. هم مفكريننا حيوانات اصلها بشري؟ ولا بشر اصلهم حيواني؟
حمزه: الحيوانات والبشر اشيين منفصلين.

يامن: بس الحيوانات بخافوا من القنابل مثلنا. بشخوا تحتهم لما يسمعون الزنانات، بيرجوا... حيوانات بشرية معناها انه الحيوانات عايشة فينا واحنا عايشين فيهم كمان.

This exchange with Yamen (Fadi Murad), a character who appears to have PTSD (though it is never directly stated), and his resistance fighter brother Hamza (Norsan Qwasmeh) suggests that the struggle for survival for both groups is interconnected. Yamen is obsessed with sewing other animal parts back onto injured animals, even contemplating attaching animal limbs to himself if he becomes injured. Compassionately played by Murad, Yamen's mind blurs the lines between human and animal suffering, viewing their fate as intertwined.



Image 1: Yamen (Fadi Murad) with his brother Hamza (Norsan Qwasmeh) behind him; Photograph by: Yasmine Omari, Courtesy of Ashtar Theatre

The play also uses insects as metaphors for the endurance and the fragility of life. Bilal, the beekeeper, played with nuanced care by Tamer Tafesh, shows deep consideration for the lives of his bees. He exhibits empathy over the destruction of their hives and fears for their future; so many farmers have been killed, their land destroyed, which means that there is less pollen for the bees, and the hive count has dropped to its lowest point ever. The destruction of the bees' hives parallels the bombing of human homes, underscoring the shared suffering of all living creatures in conflict. Despite the devastation, the bees and other animals symbolize resilience. Bilal clings to the hope that he can protect his last hive, moving it to safety, even considering building an underground refuge for the bees, away from the drones. Even though he is hungry, he refrains from harvesting the honey so as not to deplete the hive. Bilal emphasizes their role in pollination, without which humanity would struggle to survive, and contrasts their harmony with the violence around them:

Did you know the buzzing of the wings of a hive is in the note of C? Science suggests that this note melts away your worries, eases tensions, fights stress, and treats trauma. That's why beekeepers have the highest quality of life and lifespan of any profession.

A drone buzzes overhead. He ducks. The drone makes an ugly barking noise.

That buzzing and barking is definitely not in the key of C!

بتعرف يا غالي، إذا بتعمل موسيقى على زنار الخلية، رح تلاقي الأزيز على نوتة ال دو؟ العلم بيقول إنه هالصوت بيخفف التوتر، وبيعالج الصدمات وبيهدئ الأعصاب. عشان هيك مربى النحل عندهم أجمل حياة وأطول عمر، بتتخيل؟ نحن مبسوطين كثير بهالسيمفونية اللي بتطلع من أوركسترا الفليهارومنية تبعت النحلة على نغمة ال دو.

In the above excerpt, Bilal describes the sound of the drones or "zenanas" as barking, while Yara later describes them as mosquitos from hell. The drones burn their unnatural buzz into the ears of Gazans, reminding the audience of the inescapable presence of surveillance and fear that they face when they're overhead. Months ago, several commentators noted that the aerial images coming out of Gaza made the Palestinians there look like insects. By contrast, in *Guernica, Gaza* it is the military weaponry that becomes the insect reference.

The stark contrast between the natural world and the unnatural elements of war is also evident in how water appears in the play. Water, typically a source of life, has long been a contested element in Gaza, with Palestinians receiving limited amounts of running water. While the Mediterranean offers Palestinians a glimpse of freedom, Israel limits Palestinian access to the ocean to a narrow zone. This creates a paradox where the natural landscape, instead of nurturing, mirrors the captivity imposed on Gazans. Despite these circumstances, Yara (Sasha Asbah) is a young surfer, initially taught by her father Antar (David Tannous), though she eventually surpasses his surfing ability, fearlessly facing rip currents with a deep knowledge and respect for the power of the ocean. Yara was killed in the war; at the beginning of the play, her father enters the stage carrying Yara, much like the mother carries the body of her murdered child in Picasso's *Guernica*. We see her reminisce (from beyond the grave) about her short life. Surfing provided her with a sense of freedom, her sole opportunity to experience childhood. She powerfully reenacts these memories for the audience.



Image 2: Antar (David Tannous) carrying Yara (Sasha Asbah), an image that is mirrored in Picasso's painting *Guernica*; Photograph by: Yasmine Omari, Courtesy of Ashtar Theatre

Even after her death, Antar imagines her still alive, surfing the waves, suggesting that water and surfing represent an enduring spirit that cannot be easily destroyed. He clings to her memory, imagining that if he can call out to her, she might return, bringing to the forefront the hope that love and memory can bring someone back, even if only in spirit. Despite the fact that she has died, Yara addresses the audience, her vigor for life haunting the viewers who have seen too many young children like Yara lose their lives before they have even really begun.

Through his staging, director Emile Saba skillfully blended the real and the surreal, creating a space where the beauty and pain of the characters are experienced for 80 minutes, and where the characters haunt the viewers, as witnessing a genocide should haunt us all. The actors break the fourth wall, directly addressing the viewers as they move fluidly from scene to scene, drawing the audience into a surreal world, created by Yasmine Omari's video and lighting design, that is both familiar—the Gaza seen in daily news—and abstract. The production relies on the ensemble's ability to tell their stories with sincerity and truth, without succumbing to intense emotions these stories elicit from the audience.

Guernica, Gaza, the creative collaboration between Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi, delivers a powerful and moving portrayal of the cost of war. Through compelling characters, vivid imagery, and a unique fusion of the real and surreal, the play draws attention to the devastating impacts of genocide that stand out from the media we consume daily. With poignant performances and a visually arresting production, *Guernica, Gaza* challenges dehumanizing rhetoric and offers a profound reflection on resilience, memory, and the shared vulnerability of all living beings, humans and animals alike, amidst violence. This play serves as a timely and necessary artistic response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, urging audiences to confront the horrors of war while holding onto the enduring hope that Gaza will, sometime soon, see peace.

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About The Author(s)

Marina Johnson is a Ph.D. candidate in TAPS at Stanford University (M.F.A in Directing, University of Iowa). Her dissertation research focuses on Palestinian performance from 2015 to the present. Johnson is the co-host of *Kunafa and Shay*, a MENA theatre podcast produced by HowlRound Theatre Commons, and they are also a member of Silk Road Rising's Polycultural Institute. Johnson's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Theatre/Practice*, *Arab Stages*, *Decolonizing Dramaturgy in a Global Context* (Bloomsbury), *Milestones in Staging Contemporary Genders and Sexualities* (Routledge), *Women's Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance, Volume I: Performers* (Bloomsbury). Prior to her Ph.D., she was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Beloit College for three years. Select recent directing credits include: *The Wolves* (Stanford) *The Shroud Maker* (International Voices Project), *Shakespeare's Sisters* (Stanford), *The Palestinian Youth Monologues* (Stanford), *Five Lesbians Eating a Quiche* (Beloit College), and *In the Next Room* (Beloit College). www.marina-johnson.com

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