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SEARCH

The earth speaks Arabic

By Amina Elbendary

In my heart and my eyes there is nothing

Except Palestine

I am the thirsty one and nothing will quench my thirst

Except Palestine

And no land will carry me

Or carry my next step

Except Palestine

Despite the media frenzy that has surrounded the Aqsa Intifada, despite the gory images of the wounded and the dead on television screens across the globe, despite the popular demonstrations, many Egyptians have been bitterly disappointed -- justifiably so -- at what they deem the inept response by Egyptian intellectuals and cultural institutions to the calamity taking place in the occupied territories and live on a television screen near you. It's scandalous, they argue, that while college and school students -- children, really -- daily demonstrate against the brutality and violence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, intellectuals -- supposed members of the cultural and political vanguard -- have done practically nothing. If you spend some time reading the daily and weekly papers you might come across an item about a gathering, a sit-in here or there, condemning the violence, vowing to never normalise relations with Israel till all occupied lands have been liberated. Pressed to comment, "intellectuals" have tended to reproduce their redundant, oft-repeated slogans of times passed, only sharpening the sense of inadequacy and impotence felt by the rest of us.

In the midst of this, rather quietly, a group of "intellectuals" put on a performance at the National Theatre in support of the Aqsa Intifada.

Rushdi El-Shami, actor at the National Theatre, was sickened by the images he watched daily on the Palestine Satellite Channel. He wanted to do something. But what?

"I have no weapons to fight with," he says, "I am an actor." And that, indeed, is his weapon.

El-Shami quickly thought of producing a play in support of the Intifada, but he failed to find a director willing to work for free. So he decided he would direct it himself and he chose Fouad Haddad's collection of poetry entitled, *Al-Haml Al-Filastini* (The Palestinian Pregnancy). The title, of course, is symbolic, implying as it were that **the cause is at once a weight, a burden to be carried, but one that promises a birth.** Essentially a collection of different poems, these were made



**The Bearer of Burdens,
by Suleiman Mansour**

into a performance of sorts in 1985 while Haddad was still alive.

Fouad Haddad's poetry remains popular with many Egyptians, not least because of his use of colloquial Egyptian Arabic, in which familiar phrases and expressions are used innovatively to render new meanings. Haddad's poetry also has decidedly religious undertones which appeal to the sentiments of many. He used traditional forms to make untraditional statements. He is perhaps best remembered for his diwans *Al-Aragoz* and *Al-Misahharati*. The misahharati is a traditional Egyptian character, a jongleur of sorts, who walks around the streets during Ramadan, chanting traditional verses to the beat of his drum in order to wake people up before dawn. Haddad used the symbolic function of the misahharati -- waking up sleeping people -- and the traditional mawwal verse to make critical social and political statements. The religious function of the misahharati also adds resonance to his verse. *Al-Misahharati* was put to music and sung by the late Sayed Mekkawi and is rerun by Egyptian television throughout Ramadan every year.

*Misahharati, a soldier of this earth
A drummer, each beat a prayer
I long for my song like a father whose child,
embraced by Al-Quds appeared, on the path
Teach me God thirst and hunger
Make tears for my eyes
Make ribs for my heart
Make me, in pulse and breath, the voice of the martyr
A Palestinian vein, a planted tree,
Earth root branching in the nights --
Heard by an uncle in every town.
A refugee's wounds never heal*

Al-Haml Al-Filastini is a collection of essentially Palestine and Jerusalem-related poems from different diwans by Haddad, including *Al-Misahharati*. Amin Haddad, the poet's son and a poet himself, remembers the 1985 performance as one in which his father experimented with the poems, producing poetry on stage. With no stage movement that performance was an adaptation of traditional *sira* (folk epics and tales) performances, where the rawi or narrator is centre stage, accompanied by groups of chanters in the background. Haddad Junior has continued his father's experimentation with this and other texts, while the idea of poetry performed on stage (or an evening of poetry as they call it) has continued to evolve and metamorphose.

Fast-forward, October 2000. The performance had to be arranged quickly, in time to comment on the escalating events, to make a new statement. And it had to be made with a minimal budget. El-Shami knows that at that point had he asked any of the famous stars to take part, none would have refused. "But that would have been anti-climactic," he believes. "It would have defeated the purpose. There are horrible things happening, and it would be ridiculous to have stars standing up on stage repeating serious lines of poetry." This is why El-Shami chose to cast children -- the same ages of the children falling victim in Palestine. Amin Haddad adds that "it

is these children, the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s that now have to adopt and carry the cause of Palestine." It is this generation that has to carry Palestine to term.

And indeed, it was a brilliant choice. It gave the evening an air of innocence, of hope, of family. It also drove the message home more sharply. Haddad's highly charged poetry sounded even more satirical and subversive when playfully sung by a little girl :

*Cowboy dynamo
Herding his sheep
Hung a banner across the countryside:
Let America
Colonize you --
Honourable woman with an honourable cause*

With a cast composed of children and teenagers, Haddad and El-Shami proceeded with a new interpretation of *Al-Haml Al-Filastini*. Using mostly the same poems as the 1985 production, they added more singing and included more "performers." Amin Haddad played the central rawi-like figure himself. Many of the poems were performed to the accompaniment of music; many of the lines were divided among the performers to create the semblance of dialogue. With a minimalist stage setting, the performers made a strong and sharp statement. Dressed in black t-shirts and Palestinian hatta they performed to a background screen, at times carrying video footage of the *Intifada* (by now painfully all too familiar), and at times displaying a painting of Al-Aqsa mosque, its dome radiating with light. The cast also included the choral group of the Rose El-Youssef print shop. This same group had also volunteered in Fouad Haddad's production in 1985. Indeed, this production was totally a volunteer effort. And in only 12 days, with nine rehearsals, the group managed to "do something." El-Shami knew it worked when right after the finale, a member of the audience chanted out loud In my heart and my eyes there is nothing/Except Palestine.

The chosen verses were highly charged and politicised, the performance refined, domesticating the charge. Perhaps it was the children, perhaps it was the mood of the performers who volunteered their efforts not to make a media hit but to make a political statement that avoided hollow slogans. The audience seemed relaxed and at ease, not necessarily of the "theatre-goer" variety, mostly families with their children. They were familiar with some of the songs performed and sang along:

*The earth speaks Arabic and from Hattin
Answered the call of Palestine's Quds
Your origin is water, your origin is mud
The earth speaks Arabic*

Al-Haml Al-Filastini stands out as an independent effort to support the Aqsa Intifada by a small group of politically committed intellectuals with a practically non-existent budget. It remains very much an Egyptian performance, the cast is all Egyptian and the verses themselves are full of Egyptian nationalist rhetoric. Yet Fouad Haddad's poetry with its Muslim religious undertones is also brilliantly suited to the cause, the plight of Al-Aqsa mosque. In this inspiring -- if amateurish -- theatre piece the performers managed to reach out and draw in the audience to their cause so that, at least for this night, the earth did speak Arabic.

*The last item on this bulletin
Is the command to*

*Weapons and troops
To shoot
On everything that moves
[...]
The last item on this bulletin
Says: "And one person has died ...
At least."*

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