

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dreaming of Shakespeare in Palestine

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5 In September 2011, I travelled to the Palestinian Occupied Territories to participate
in an internship with the Al Kasaba Theatre in Ramallah. As part of my internship I
was invited to attend rehearsals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with students of
the Drama Academy Ramallah. Directed by Samer Al-Saber, with movement and
10 choreography by Petra Barghouthi, the production premiered as a work in
progress in Palestine before touring to Essen, Germany, where it was presented as
part of an Intercultural Shakespeare Festival organised by Folkwang University. In
this paper I draw on post-colonial theory to offer some observations about the
various strategies of syncretisation that the production seemed to employ in order
15 to localise, indigenise or 'Palestinian-ise' Shakespeare's text. My analysis will
attempt to illuminate some of the Palestinian cultural specificity introduced by the
syncretic approach as well as offer some assessment of the potential and uninten-
ded impact that this approach might have engendered.

Background: dreaming of introductions

20 In September 2011, I travelled to the Palestinian Occupied Territories to participate
in an internship with the Al Kasaba Theatre in Ramallah. According to its website, the Al
Kasaba Theatre and Cinematheque is a non-governmental and non-profit cultural
organisation established in 1970 in Jerusalem. The theatre later relocated to the city
of Ramallah in June 2000. It aims to promote the cultural life of Palestine and to
25 facilitate creative exchanges between local, regional and international artists through
the production of its own theatrical works as well as hosting performances and arts
events. Located in the heart of Ramallah city, the Al Kasaba Theatre stands as the only
professional and fully equipped multipurpose theatre in the entire territory of
Palestine. In October 2009, Al Kasaba Theatre signed a partnership agreement with
30 Folkwang University for Music, Theatre and Dance in Essen and the Acting
Department in Bochum, Germany, to establish a professional academy for theatre
arts in Ramallah. The Drama Academy Ramallah is hosted by Al Kasaba and offers a
three-year Bachelor of Arts in Drama that provides training to produce a new
generation of Palestinian actors.

35 Students enrolled in the BA complete a mixture of practical and theoretical study
across a range of modules such as 'Acting Methods', 'Body and Movement', 'Voice
and Speech', 'Theatre History' and 'Textual Analysis'. Within the Acting Methods
module students are introduced to the Stanislavski system and the Michael Chekhov
technique.¹ Established by Germany faculty and Palestinian instructors educated in
Israel, the curriculum generally emphasises Western methods of actor training and

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Western theatre history – with the majority of plays covered by the syllabus taken from the standard canon of ‘modern’ European drama (Al-Saber 2014, 9).² There are immense benefits to the partnership between Folkwang University and the Drama Academy, particularly in providing educational opportunities to Palestinian students whose rights to travel and education are severely restricted by the Israeli occupation. However, the partnership also echoes the trend of setting up satellite campuses, or ‘outposts’ in Asia and the Middle East, such as New York University’s liberal arts campus in Abu Dhabi. Lim (2009) describes such outposts as part of a Western colonial legacy, which ‘marks the return of the colonial metropole seeking new sources of income and educative subjects’ (28). Folkwang holds a key distinction in its attempt to develop a Palestinian institution and to do so without financial profit. In the resource impoverished context of occupied Palestine, it is imperative that the Folkwang/Drama Academy partnership is celebrated given that it provides crucial cultural and pedagogical opportunities to Palestinians. However, it is also important to bring some critical attention to the kinds of transactions underscoring such a partnership, particularly given the perceived ‘civilising’ missions of Western campuses in the Middle East (Al-Saber 2014, 9).

As part of an internship supported by the Australia Council for the Arts, I was invited to attend rehearsals of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with students of the Drama Academy Ramallah. I arrived at the Drama Academy just before production week. The production had been in rehearsal for about four weeks, and the cast had a fortnight before they would present the work as a public viewing and invite feedback from the audience and the Palestinian theatre community at large. The cast would then fly to Essen, Germany, to present their work as part of an intercultural Shakespeare Festival organised by Folkwang University. Other than performing as Lysander in a High School production in Jordan, I was not that familiar with Shakespeare’s play. I was both curious and a little dubious about spending my internship with Al Kasaba and the Drama Academy watching students workshoping one of the Bard’s plays. I knew my time here was short and was expecting it to be challenging, but my dreams of travelling here to be engaged in theatre had not ever entertained the possibility of workshoping Shakespeare in Palestine.

Upon my arrival at Al Kasaba Theatre I met the director of the Drama Academy’s Shakespearean production Samer Al-Saber. Al-Saber is a lean man with a mischievous smile who seemed energetic, friendly and approachable. His hands were speckled with discoloured spots, a de-pigmentation condition known as Vitiligo that produces white patches of skin. It looked like he had dipped his hands in fire, and reinforced the impression that he was ‘hands on’ both in his approach to theatre and to life. As we walked into the theatre to watch the set-up for rehearsals taking place, Al-Saber provided some contextualisation of the Folkwang/Drama Academy partnership and explained some of his own impressions of the German–Palestinian cultural relations informing the international project. According to Al-Saber, the relationship between the Ramallah Academy and Folkwang University could be characterised as a development project. While there are immense benefits that stem from such a partnership, development ‘aid’ projects in Palestine may also be underscored by colonial tendencies. In his article exploring the impact of Western Aid on Palestinian Civil Society in general, Challand argues that development programmes funded by international Western donors are often pervaded by neo-orientalist themes. According to Challand (2008), in practical terms this may translate into programmes funded

by donors that conceive of local recipients as void of any form of democracy, and therefore reinforce the idea that 'certain values have to be "exported"' (411–412). Al-Saber noted that other Western cultural ventures in Palestine have often implied that a project's success could be measured in the redirection of Palestinian youth from 'throwing stones' to more productive stage activities. He was also acutely aware of the implications of the funding arrangement between Folkwang and the Drama Academy and how this might inform expectations about the Palestinian involvement in the Shakespeare Festival that the students would be participating in. For Al-Saber (2014), these expectations prompted him to ask: 'Are foreign sponsorships of cultural productions directed at alleviating trauma or subduing Palestinian resistance?' (11).

Dreaming of translations

As we sat in the theatre auditorium waiting for rehearsals to begin, Al-Saber explained that he had been recruited late as a director on the project. The first script had been a translation of the text into colloquial Arabic known as *ʿAmmiyya*. Colloquial Arabic varies according to geographic locations throughout the Middle East. The colloquial translation into Palestinian dialect was completely devoid of the Shakespearean poetry and imagery, and after being recruited onto the project Al-Saber set about re-translating the text in order to reintroduce some of Shakespeare's poetic language in classical Arabic or Fusha. In this way the production can be usefully characterised as a translation/adaption – or what Michael Garneau has concisely termed a 'tradaption' (cited in Salter 1996, 123). James Bulman (1996) suggests that translation is a key post-colonial strategy that 'subverts the authority of Shakespeare's text' (7). As the rehearsals began, I wanted to discover how the director and the cast would be working to subvert the authority of the text and translate it into the current Palestinian context – to make the play their own. Watching the rehearsals it became clear that in many ways the production was incorporating a fairly conventional psychological realist approach to the acting. Al-Saber's approach to directing was methodical, focusing on the motivations, desires and obstacles that the individual characters face. Yet while Al-Saber insisted on 'telling the story' of the play, a phrase he repeated more than once, faithfulness to the narrative did not extend to the some of the perceived English cultural elements imbued in the text. There was an absence of any attempt to explore Shakespeare's text by examining the cultural, historical or social context out of which it emerged. At the start of the project, Hans Dietrich-Schmidt, Professor for Directing and Dramaturgy at Folkwang University, had given the students a presentation, which, according to Al-Saber, gave a basic overview of the script and emphasised elements of sexuality and eroticism in the play. The cast had also participated in a short workshop with Professor Brian Michaels, director of the Intercultural Shakespeare Festival that covered elements of dramatic structure. In rehearsals, however, as far as I could tell, there was no attempt to explore meanings in the text with recourse to European theatre history or the English origins of the play in **sixteenth** century Tudor England.

James Bulman (1996) comments on a common feature underscoring Shakespearean productions, the idea that an actor serves merely as a conduit for Shakespeare's voice – much like a ventriloquist's dummy – and argues that such approaches are 'analogous to the belief that there is immanent meaning in his text which productions should try to discover, the belief that Shakespeare "can speak for

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himself" with transcultural authority' (7). As Denis Salter (1996) points out, such beliefs are particularly problematic for actors in post-colonial societies. For them, 'Shakespeare's texts often function as foreign objects that articulate imperialistic values of domination' (114). In the context of the ongoing colonisation of Palestine, the acting approach as exhibited in rehearsals at the Drama Academy in Ramallah seemed uninterested in letting Shakespeare 'speak'. Rather it was as if the cast were more focused on finding their own voices, and finding ways of letting their bodies speak through physical explorations and staging.

Al-Saber, who had received Suzuki and Viewpoints Training with SIT Company, brought a particular eye for physical movement to the blocking. He also worked closely with Petra Barghouthi, the movement coach and choreographer, to explore several scenes by focusing on the bodies and physical expression of the actors. This approach can be interpreted as part of a post-colonial imperative underscoring the production as a tradaption. Bulman (1996) explains that translation can work 'to deny Shakespeare his language altogether, to liberate performance from the text', enabling directors to 'explore the plays more freely, to focus more imaginatively on visual elements of performance – on physical over verbal expression' (7).

Dreaming of honour killings

As rehearsals continued, I was introduced to Petra Barghouthi, the movement coach for the Drama Academy and choreographer on the production. Barghouthi entered the auditorium while rehearsals were under way and despite a large 'no smoking' sign on the wall, sat on the stairs, lit up a cigarette and sipped Arabic coffee from a plastic cup as she watched the rehearsals unfold. Barghouthi explained some of the concerns she had with the Shakespeare play-text: 'It's English. What does it have to do with Palestinian experience? We have to find a way to make it relevant', she explained. This concern was reflected in several creative choices taken by the director, choreographer and cast, which worked to localise and indigenise Shakespeare's play. Rather than forcing students to 'orientate' themselves to the 'west' and the perceived 'Englishness' of Shakespeare's play – the production instead encouraged students to engage with the realities of Palestinian identity and the Palestinian landscape and cultural geography around them.

There were several ways the production-orientated Shakespeare's text to provide commentary on the realities of Palestinian cultural life. An example of this approach emerged early in ACT 1, Scene 1, when Egeus (Muayyed Oudeh) entered the stage shoving his daughter Hermia (Jasmin Shlalda) in front of him with his walking stick and forced her to prostrate herself on the ground in front of the Duke Theseus (Muayad Abdalsamad). In the scene, Egeus is intent on seeking the Duke's assistance to admonish his daughter and force her to comply with his will to marry his chosen suitor Demetrius (Feras Abusabah). At first glance the staging of the Drama Academy appeared to be a fairly conventional interpretation that is in keeping with common themes of patriarchal control in Shakespeare's text. As Diane Dreher (1986) observes, Egeus' treatment of Hermia is characteristic of representations of fatherly love in Shakespeare's plays, where 'fathers all too often love addictively, seeking to satisfy their needs for security, sensation, and power by dominating their daughters' (165). Dreher (1986) argues that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus' language reveals 'the extent to which he perceives his daughter Hermia as valuable property,

transferring title to her as one would a piece of real estate' (49). However, in the Drama Academy's rehearsals, a small but important feature of the costuming lends a particular cultural specificity to the scene that prompts a particular Palestinian reading of the gendered power relations. In the staging, Egeus is dressed in traditional *Abayeh* or loose-fitting cloak made of wool which is now commonly associated with rural, or more precisely, the tribal Bedouin populations of Palestine and the region (Figure 1). As a result, Egeus' demand that his daughter Hermia marry Demetrius becomes a simple but powerful commentary on traditional arranged marriages – a practice that while abhorred by the majority of Palestinians still occurs in some tribal parts of Palestinian society. A report published in 2010 by the Palestinian Women Research and Documentation Centre cites police reports documenting a total of 46 women killed in the name of honour between 2000 and 2005. The report also cites a recent opinion poll revealing that 74% of the Palestinian population supports an amendment to current laws that allows for honour killings (Chaban 2010, 7). According to Rawdah Baseer, head of the Palestinian Women's Studies Centre, under current law a man who kills a relative is either pardoned, given a suspended sentence or six months to three years imprisonment which is reduced further after appeal (Nazzal 2012). Given this context, Theseus' warning to the reluctant Hermia that her fate will be 'Either to die the death or to abjure forever the society of men' (I.1.65-66)³, becomes in the hands of the generally urban, educated



Figure 1. Egeus (Muayyed Oudeh) dressed in traditional *Abayeh*. The inclusion of the simple costuming device provides commentary on traditional arranged marriages and honour killings, a practice that while abhorred by the majority of Palestinians still occurs in some tribal parts of Palestinian society. Credit: Author.

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and liberal cast, an indictment on the very real threat of violence that reluctant brides can face in the form of 'honour killings' and family abuse.

Dreaming of syncretisation and decolonisation

As exemplified through the simple use of the traditional *Abayeh* or cloak, the production and the creative strategies enlisted in rehearsals resemble syncretic theatre. Described by Gilbert and Lo (2002) as subcategory of post-colonial performance, syncretic theatre generally involves 'the incorporation of indigenous material into a Western dramaturgical framework, which is itself modified by the fusion process' (36). As Balme (1999) suggests, the strategy of syncretisation is one of the most effective means of 'decolonising' the stage since it is creative and liberating in the way it combines elements from Western and indigenous cultures as a response to 'what is perceived as a peculiarly Western tendency to homogenize, to exclude, to strive for a state of "purity", whether it be racial or stylistic' (8).

In the following sections I focus on two particular scenes during the Drama Academy's rehearsals for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where the syncretic approach to 'decolonise' the play appears to introduce indigenous Palestinian experience and specificity into the production. In my analysis I will attempt to illuminate the significance of these Palestinian cultural elements as well as point to some of the challenges that might have emerged as a result. Within the Palestinian context, a syncretic approach that localises a 'western' text like Shakespeare and introduces 'indigenous' elements can appear to have constructive as well as potentially detrimental, or least unintended, impacts.

The Indian Boy

One of the more troubling Orientalist aspects of Shakespeare's text normally excluded from being presented in production is the reference to an 'Indian Boy' that the fairy queen Titania has taken as her attendant. The changeling sparks king Oberon's jealousy and becomes the catalyst for the rivalry between the fairy royals. Although referenced in the play, the Indian Boy does not normally appear in productions. He has no lines and functions merely as a prop to create dramatic tension during Oberon and Titania's first meeting in the play. Post-colonial theorist Shankar Raman (2001) describes the Indian Boy's simultaneous presence and absence in the play as an erasure of colonial subjectivity and race, reflecting 'the historical difficulty in the sixteenth century of conceiving the ethnic other except as the filled space of western, imperialist desire' (247). Similarly, post-colonial critic Ania Loomba (2000) suggests that the struggle between Titania and Oberon over the Indian Boy can be read as a reference to the early phase of English imperialist expansion with the child designated as a prized colonial commodity.

In the Drama Academy production, Al-Saber's approach to dealing with this curious Orientalist figure was to include the Indian Boy as a silent character in the performance. The Boy, played by 23-year-old Jihad Al-Khateeb, wearing a green loincloth draped around his waist and a length of purple material wrapped around his head in the shape of a turban, wanders forlornly onto the stage to sit or stand dejectedly as commanded by his fairy queen (Figure 2). After rehearsing the encounter between Titania and Oberon in which they quarrel over the Indian



Figure 2. Petra Barghouthi (centre) holds a dagger and choreographs a dance sequence to explore the gendered power relations between the fairy royals but which also connects to a Palestinian tradition of female sword dancing. The Indian Boy (Jihad Al-Khateeb) wearing a loincloth around his waist can be seen sitting forlornly on the right. Credit: Author.

245 changeling (Act II, Scene I), Al-Saber paused to give notes to the actors and to
compliment Jihad on his acting. 'You are doing fantastic work', he tells the young
actor, 'please continue doing exactly the same thing'. Jihad looks confused and
confesses 'I don't really know what I am doing, I feel lost'. Al-Saber responds, 'this is
exactly what we want. Please keep doing exactly the same thing'.

250 At first glance the choice to represent the Indian Boy onstage seems to me to
reaffirm rather than subvert Orientalist fantasies of eroticism and exoticism often
embedded in Western notions of India and the East. However, as the cast discuss the
blocking and the various implications of the scene with the director, it becomes
apparent that the choice seems to be responding to a feeling of resentment among
255 the Palestinian cast to a perceived cultural imperialist agenda associated with being
forced to engage with Shakespeare as part of the intercultural project initiated by
Folkwang University. As part of this international project, the Palestinian production
would be presented in Essen, Germany, as part of an intercultural Shakespeare
Festival organised by the University. The festival would feature five productions of *A
Midsummer Night's Dream* presented by the international partners of the project
260 including, Folkwang University of the Arts, Drama Academy Ramallah, Columbia
University (USA), Shanghai Theatre Academy, and Romania's Lucia Blaga University.
According to the University's website, the festival format would involve each of the
participating groups performing their own productions over a two-week period

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before culminating in a joint production comprising an assemblage of scenes featuring all the actors from the participating institutions, and in which 'all language barriers are dropped'.⁴

In this apparent gesture to the synthesis of cultural difference, the international Shakespeare Festival might be understood as involving a shift from conceptions of the syncretic (with its focus on the post-colonial, the culturally specific and the indigenous), to conceptions of the intercultural, or more specifically, the 'transcultural'. According to Pavis (1996), the transcultural 'transcends particular cultures on behalf of a universality of the human condition' (6). Similarly, Gilbert and Lo (2002) contend that 'transcultural theatre aims to transcend culture-specific codification in order to reach a more universal human condition' (37). Moreover, Bharucha (2000) contends that the transcultural involves 'distance from, if not resistance to, the realities of history, political struggle, and, above all nationalism', and expresses an abiding discomfort with the 'apolitical/asocial and subtly orientalist premise' underlying this form of cross-cultural practice (27). The Palestinian cast who experience severe travel restrictions were excited by the prospect of travelling internationally to present their work. Any misgivings that might have been fuelling feelings of resentment among the cast were not related to opportunity of participating in an international project per se. Rather, I suspect this resentment might have been linked to certain anxieties about participating in a transcultural Shakespeare Festival that gestured towards a universality of human experience that threatened to transcend (and ultimately ignore) the realities of Palestinian life and struggle.

In addressing these anxieties and resentments, the director's decision to include the figure of the Indian Boy onstage appears to be a useful intervention to address the perceived 'apolitical' nature of the transcultural Shakespeare Festival. For the Palestinian director, the inclusion of the Indian Boy as a character replete in Orientalist garb may have been a way to comment on the continuing invisibility of the Palestinian narrative and experience. As Palestinian scholar Edward Said has observed, this invisibility has been aided by the discourse of Orientalism, which has 'an entrenched cultural attitude towards Palestinians deriving from age-old Western prejudices about Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient'. For Said (1980), this attitude inspired Zionist views that dehumanised Palestinians, reducing them 'to the barely tolerated status of a nuisance' (xiv). Read within this context, the figure of the silent and lost Indian Boy becomes a symbol of the invisibility of the Palestinian narrative and the ongoing Palestinian struggle against cultural and political imperialism.

The inclusion of the Indian Boy becomes a way to not only highlight the Orientalist themes in Shakespeare's text usually normalised through concealment, but it also functions as a subtle challenge to the perceived cultural imperialism of participating in the larger intercultural project instigated by Folkwang University. The choice of the Orientalist garb and the decision to situate the Indian Boy as a 'racial other' may represent a desire on behalf of the director to highlight the perceived privileged position of the intended 'western' audiences in Germany. Post-colonial theatre scholars Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins draw attention to the authoritarian and 'imperial' gaze implicated in the action of watching theatre. This gaze allows audiences to 'watch over other(s)', which, they point out, is 'precisely what characterises "looking relations" between the coloniser and the colonised' (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 248). Moreover, the authors also note how the racially distinct body is often designed to be *overlooked* on the stage, in two senses of the

word: 'to be examined more fully than other signifiers as an object of curiosity *and* to be rendered invisible as an object of disregard' (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, 207). The presence of the Indian Boy might be understood as a political strategy to alert audiences to their 'authoritarian gaze' by making these normal viewing conventions apparent and exposing how imperialism functions to deny colonial subjects their full humanity.

When Spivak (1985) asks the now influential and rhetorical question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', the answer that is revealed in the director Al-Saber's decision to represent the Indian Boy is a resounding 'no'. Indeed, in her writing Spivak challenges the assumption that colonised peoples can adequately represent themselves within the established terms of Western political discourse, in order to recover a lost or silenced, definitively 'subaltern', speaking position. As Bignall (2010) explains, Spivak 'insists that the colonised individual is never a stable site of resisting agency, being always already inscribed with multiple, at times contradictory, sites of identification' (74). As Robert Young comments:

It is not a question, therefore, of being able to retrieve the lost subaltern subject as a recovered authentic voice who can be made to speak once more out of the imposed silence of history, because that subject is only constituted through the positions that have been permitted. (2004, 207)

In this way the presence of the Indian Boy in the Drama Academy's production points to the limits of achieving agency within the western colonial discourse that seems to underscore the forced engagement with Shakespeare as part of the intercultural project initiated by Folkwang University. Yet despite the presence of this character, the production explores Palestinian agency and cultural resilience in other ways.

Dreaming of sword dances

One of the ways that Palestinian agency and cultural resilience is explored in production is through the choreography. In the rehearsals, the enmity between Titania and Oberon was staged in a choreographed dance sequence that not only explored the gendered power relations between the fairy royals but also imbued the production with Palestinian cultural specificity. Attempting to find ways to make the text more relevant, Barghouthi decided to include a dance sequence that was based on an anecdote told to her by her grandmother. Her grandmother's story concerned a Palestinian cultural practice that has been neglected and forgotten. According to Barghouthi, her grandmother had spoken of a dance practice that was often conducted at weddings in which intending male suitors would attempt to steal a scarf or shawl from a female in the crowd. The woman in turn would draw her dagger or sword and the couple would be joined in a dance.

In his seminal work on Palestinian dance *Raising Dust* (2010), Nicholas Rowe details academic accounts of dance in Palestine which began to emerge in the writings of foreign observers by the end of the nineteenth century. Rowe highlights a particular female dance practice that became less prominent in subsequent histories of dance in Palestine involving movements with swords. According to Rowe, sword dances featuring women appear to have been common as both a social practice and a tourist curiosity at the time. In particular, Rowe documents the observations of Hans

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Spoer, a traveller to Palestine in the early 1900s who provides an account of a Bedouin wedding and describes a sword dance as a competitive performance:

A favourite game is for the young men, with arms interlocked, to form a circle before a young girl who holds in each hand a drawn sword. She stands some distance from the fire with her back to it. Stepping slowly towards the men she sways gracefully backwards and forwards, whirling the swords above her head. The young men, swaying rhythmically and singing simple words of invitation ... beat the ground in measured time with their feet, and seek to drive her backward towards the fire, while she defends herself with swords. (cited in Rowe 2010, 52)

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According to Rowe, sword dances involving women are also briefly documented in the work of anthropological researchers in the two decades after the 1920s. Tawfiq Canaan (1931) suggests that such dances are part of a cultural ritual, a dance game with prescribed expectations:

In some Bedouin tribes a girl, who must be agile and supple, dances and leads a row of men with a sword, setting the rhythm. The men try to touch her and so beshame her ... [sic] while she has the right to hit the aggressor with her sword, even if it wounds him. (cited in Rowe 2010, 64)

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While there appears to have been a tradition involving Palestinian women dancing with swords, the tradition seems to have been discontinued in the twentieth century. The Drama Academy's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* became a cultural laboratory to explore this lost tradition. By incorporating her grandmother's story as a way to frame the enmity between the royal fairy couple, Barghouthi was able to encourage the cast to engage with a lost performance tradition that illustrated sophisticated cultural notions around gendered power relations (Figure 2). The Drama Academy rehearsals became a way to rejuvenate the cultural practice in the Palestinian cultural imaginary through performance.

While Barghouthi's choreography and approach to the staging of the fairy couples' enmity may exemplify a productive and agential outcome of the syncretisation process, other attempts to introduce indigenous Palestinian experience and specificity into the production may have been more ambivalent or uncertain in their impact. In this final section I focus on the Mechanicals and the moment in ACT V, Scene 1 when they present the play of the young lovers Pyramus and Thisbe as part of the royal wedding celebrations. One thing I remember vividly about the high school production of the play that I was involved in years ago while studying in Jordan was how funny the mechanicals were and how hysterical the final scene is in which they present their play for the royal couple. What struck me as deeply incongruous about the Drama Academy production was how unfunny this scene was in rehearsals. It was not simply that the scene was unamusing, but rather that it was devoid of comedy. During rehearsals the actors seemed uninterested (or incapable) of exploring the comedy of their characters' lines and antics. As for those of us sitting in the auditorium watching rehearsals – no one laughed. Moreover, rather than being a conscious choice by director and cast, this lack of humour, I contend, may have emerged as an unintended consequence of the syncretic process that introduced Palestinian cultural specificity into the scene.

Dreaming of the 'vile' wall

In the play that the Mechanicals stage for the royal wedding party (ACT V, Scene 1), Peter Quince (Husam Alazza) introduces the cast of players including young Pyramus (Majdi Nazzal) and his love Thisbe (Ramzy Hasan), and describes Snout's (Mahmoud Shawish) role in playing 'that vile Wall which did these lovers sunder' (V.1.131). In the Drama Academy production, this description takes on a very urgent significance, referencing the eight-metre high concrete wall that separates Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories. Israeli authorities justified construction of the 'security wall', which is connected by a system of observation towers, as a security measure to prevent **would be** suicide bombers from entering Israel. However, the wall penetrates deep into areas beyond the borders of the 'Green Line', annexing Palestinian land, denying Palestinian farmers access to fruit orchards and olive groves and severely restricting the right of movement of local Palestinians.⁵ In 2004, Special Rapporteur to the UN Commission on Human Rights Professor John Dugard, reported that the construction of the massive separation wall:

violates important norms of international humanitarian law prohibiting the annexation of occupied territory, the establishment of settlements, the confiscation of private land and the forcible transfer of people. Human rights norms are likewise violated, particularly those affirming freedom of movement, the right to family life and the right to education and health care. (UNHCR 2006)

In rehearsals, the explicit reference to the 'separation wall' might have threatened to overshadow the humour and comedy of the Mechanicals' play, and the cast seemed to struggle to find the humour of the scene. In several debriefing sessions following work on this scene, both chorographer and director seemed concerned about the lack of comedy. We discussed why the cast of Mechanicals, who were all particularly funny and continually joked with each other during rehearsals, seemed to struggle to find the humour of the scene. I wondered if the overt reference to the separation wall might have overshadowed the ability of the cast to find the humour of the scene. Here was an example, perhaps, of how the introduction of Palestinian cultural specificity may have worked to overburden Shakespeare's play to produce unexpected consequences.

Dreaming of work

The failure of humour might also be attributed to the struggle the actors encountered in identifying with the characters they were portraying due to the stigma associated with menial labour within the context of Palestinian society. In the play, Egeus describes the men who have been rehearsing the tragedy Pyramus and Thisbe as 'Hard-handed men that work in Athens here, which never labored in their minds till now' (5.1.72-73). As Dowd (2010) notes, Egeus' disparaging comments 'rely on a distinction between manual and intellectual labor that was intimately linked to ideologies of social status in medieval and early modern England' (185). Similarly, Parker suggests that the mechanical was a familiar term of class distinction in the culture contemporary with Shakespeare, one used repeatedly as a term of contempt. According to Parker (1996), 'as a term synonymous with the mean, vulgar, and unlettered, the mechanical [...] was associated with the material as something placed

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at the bottom of a hierarchy, to be governed or ruled' (86). The associations of the mechanical with menial labour remained within the Drama Academy production. In the Arabic script, the term 'mechanicals' was translated as *Umal*, which literally means workers but most often in the common parlance within the Palestinian context, connotes manual labour and the associated class distinctions in keeping with Shakespeare text.

In a recent article published in 2014 on the online Middle-East media site *Al-Monitor*, Jihan Abdalla explores the contradiction of Palestinians working in Israeli settlements. Abdalla (2014) notes that the West Bank suffers from a 23% unemployment rate, and that over 20,000 Palestinians are employed in Israeli settlements, with thousands more working without permits. An ironic result of the occupation is that Palestinians are mainly employed in unskilled or low-skilled jobs in Israel, where the wages are at least 70% higher than the average wage in the West Bank (Flaig et al. 2013, 144). Abdalla (2014) argues that 'the reality that Palestinian labour in Jewish settlements at once cements the Israeli occupation and helps feed Palestinian families is a paradox that is not lost on average Palestinians'. Although some within the Palestinian community would view working in Israeli settlements as a practical necessity, others would condemn this employment as immoral complicity that contributes to the ongoing Israeli occupation.

The high rate of unemployment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the necessity of working in Israel under exploitative conditions are realities of life in Palestine that the cast of the Drama Academy were persistently aware of. Barghouthi suggested that at least two of the Palestinian cast had secured work in the past as labourers on Israeli settlements. This may have significantly impacted on their ability to identify and empathise with the characters they were portraying. The stigma surrounding 'work' in Palestine may have frustrated the Palestinian cast's attempts to engage with the Mechanical characters of Shakespeare's text.

Dreaming of Palestinian cross-dressing

The lack of humour in the scene may have also been compromised by the director's decision to dress the male actor playing Thisbe (Ramzy Hasan) in a traditional Palestinian embroidered dress (Figure 3). It should be noted that a comic tradition of male drag exists in the Middle East that can be traced in Egyptian comedy film popular throughout the region stretching back to the 1950s and 1960s (Hamam 2012, 194). Despite this, I believe the traditional Palestinian embroidered dress held a particular cultural specificity that seemed to inhibit the possibility of humour.

The traditional Palestinian embroidered dress is a potent symbol within the Palestinian national imaginary signifying a particular attachment and belonging to the land. As Najjar (2007) explains, 'each area of historic Palestine has a different type of dress, distinguished by the unique embroidered fauna and flora it carries' (269). Commonly associated with peasant women, the traditional embroidered dress of Palestine symbolises an attachment to the land and has become an important symbol of the Palestinian struggle. In rehearsals, as a result of the simple inclusion of the traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, the scene the Mechanicals stage for the wedding celebrations that is billed as 'very tragical mirth' in the text (V.1.57) became more tragedy than comedy. The inclusion of the Palestinian traditional dress seemed to transform the image of the inept Thisbe pining over the death of her lover



Figure 3. In the play that the Mechanicals stage for the royal wedding party (ACT V, Scene 1), the use of a traditional Palestinian embroidered dress transforms the image of the inept Thisbe (Ramzy Hasan) pining over the death of her lover Pyramus (Majdi Nazzal) into an image of a Palestinian mother mourning the death of her son.

Pyramus into an image of a Palestinian mother mourning the death of her son – an image that has been burned into the consciousness of Palestinian life and witnessed countless times on nightly news broadcasts. The traditional Palestinian embroidered dress retained a particular cultural specificity, or weight, that may have pierced the syncretic process enlisted by the production. This may have prevented the cast and audiences attending rehearsals from engaging with the comedy that might usually accompany male drag.

Conclusion: waking dreams

They tell me: If you see a slave sleeping, do not wake him lest he be dreaming of freedom. I tell them: If you see a slave sleeping, wake him and explain to him freedom.

Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931)

In this paper I have offered some observations of attending rehearsals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with students of the Drama Academy Ramallah in 2011. I have provided some examples of the syncretic approach enlisted in the production to incorporate Palestinian cultural elements into the performance. I have drawn on

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post-colonial theory to try and make sense of the creative choices and efforts made by the director, choreographer and the cast to localise, indigenise and 'Palestinian-ise' the Shakespearean text.

510 In this paper I have also attempted to draw attention to subtle but important distinctions between the syncretic approach inherent in the production, with its focus on the post-colonial, the culturally specific and the indigenous, and the imperative of participating in an intercultural and transcultural Shakespeare Festival, with its focus on the universal and the synthesis of cultural difference. In his 'director's notes' Al-Saber emphatically declared, 'Shakespeare's work is not universal', and went on to explain the rationale behind his approach to staging Shakespeare's text:

520 If the starting point for this production were a group of Palestinian acting students in a nation under occupation, what might the production look like? How do the restrictions of the minimal requirements of a festival, the foreign names and ideas in the story, the conceptually Western play text and the harsh realities of Palestine intersect on the stage in front of the audience? Should we stop ourselves from being lost in the fantasy or must we embrace it? (Al-Saber 2011)

525 Al-Saber's words resonate with the syncretic approach to the performance that I have attempted to trace in this paper. While the syncretic approach that I have sketched provides opportunities for the Palestinian cast to engage in a performance-making process that speaks to their cultural reality, I have also attempted to highlight some of the challenges involved in such an approach. When the Drama Academy students were required to contend with the Palestinian reality of life under ongoing occupation, the reference to the separation wall and to 'work' and unemployment threatened to overshadow the creative process and inhibit the exploration of comedy in Shakespeare's play. This does not mean that the students were incapable of engaging with the harsher aspects of Palestinian life or the reality of living under occupation. Neither does it mean that they were unable to respond to this reality in laughter or with comedy. Rather it points to an ambiguity in the syncretic model involving cultural transactions with the indigenous or the local.

535 As I finalise writing this paper I find myself still questioning the extent to which the inhibition of humour, even if unintended, was inappropriate or even detrimental the overall creative process. Although the reference to the separation wall, the stigma surrounding work and the Palestinian traditional dress, may have all produced unintended consequences that overshadowed the humour in Shakespeare's text, perhaps this is appropriate given the ongoing material conditions of the Israeli occupation that the Palestinian cast were forced to endure. It is difficult to 'dream' when living in a nightmare. But it is also important to respond to the injustices of the Israeli occupation and speak truthfully about the Palestinian reality. Like the sentiment expressed in Gibran's words above, I am left wondering whether it is perhaps better not to dream of Shakespeare in Palestine if this creative engagement resembles sleep.

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Keywords: Palestinian theatre; drama academy Ramallah; syncretic theatre; post-colonial Shakespeare AQ2

Notes

1. Recent revisions to the curriculum have also seen the inclusion of Jacques Lecoq Method as well as a module on 'Acting in front of camera'. See the Drama Academy website for information: <http://www.dramaacademy.ps/page-27-en.html>
2. It should be noted that despite the perceived Eurocentrism of the curriculum, the majority of the Academy staff are Palestinian theatre professionals and teachers. It should also be noted that the 2014 graduate student production featured an adaptation of the novel *Men in the Sun* by Palestinian writer and political activist Ghassan Kanafani, which was adapted and directed by Bashar Murkus.
3. All quotes from Shakespeare's text follow *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Trevor Griffiths ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
4. For more information, refer to the Folkwang University theatre website: <http://www.folkwang-uni.de/en/home/theater/courses-of-studies/acting/shakespeare-projects/shakespeare-festival-2011/>
5. The 'Green Line' is the internationally recognised border separating Israel from the Occupied Palestinian Territories created following the ceasefire in 1949.

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