

## Time Interrupted in Hannah Khalil's *Scenes from 71\* Years*



Israeli soldiers burst into a Palestinian home in the middle of the night, hurling orders for the residents to “stop filming.” A young Palestinian woman skypes her cousin in London and nervously asks if the cousin can send her a used iPhone. A Palestinian militiaman in 1948 trains civilians how to wrap bandages, realizing that his young boy has already seen enough injuries to be an expert. An older Palestinian musician visits his former, confiscated home and meets the current resident, a French immigrant who reports feeling belonging for the first time in his life ever since he moved into the house.



Lawrence Radecker (left) and Kal'el E. Lopez (right) learn first aid in 1948. Photo Credit: Najob Joe Hakim.

These are some of the scenes from Hannah Khalil's *Scenes from 71\* Years*, which had its U.S. premiere in April 2019 with San Francisco's Golden Thread Productions. Each scene, rarely longer than 5 minutes, depicts a circumstance between 1948 and the present, introduced by images, videos, and year numbers projected onto a surface resembling a border-wall center stage. The production, directed by University of Oregon professor Michael Malek Najjar, stages Palestinian experiences as spliced, interrupted, and juxtaposed vignettes that make clear how the Occupation attempts to render Palestinians' time not their own.

Khalil's structure of multiple short scenes has enjoyed success in contemporary British works like Nick Payne's *Constellations* and Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information*, which director Michael Najjar cites as a reference point. As with the creators of these other works, Khalil, who is Palestinian-Irish, shares an interest in how digital media and technology affect contemporary experiences of time. As the "stop filming" command in the first scene suggests, video informs the way Palestinians, particularly those in diaspora, experience the Occupation, and documentation provides an opportunity to preserve testimony in the face of erasure. Khalil assembled her first play, *Plan D*, based on video conversations with Palestinians who survived the creation of Israel in 1948. *Scenes from 71\* Years* similarly draws on Skype interviews, personal conversations, and digital archives, the last of which find their way into Erin Gilley's ambitious projection design.

More than speaking to life in the shadow of digital media, the production's fragmented structure underscores people's experiences of time in the face of occupation. The urgency of escaping teargas at a demonstration precedes the unending boredom of waiting at a checkpoint. The delay to get on a computer at an internet café precedes the need to cram every bit of meaning into a precious Skype call. Polar extremes of time exist side-by-side, and Khalil's structure creates an unwieldy, disjointed temporality reflecting the often-disorienting experience of occupation. As storylines disappear only to resurface later in the performance, the production creates a series of interruptions that make clear the mechanisms that Israeli forces have used to impose absurd timescales upon Palestinian life.

While the impact of colonial forces is severe, *Scenes* draws some comedy from the situations' absurdity. When a young boy tells an older man that Palestine has been liberated, the man packs up his stuff, ready to return to his homeland before the boy reveals it was a prank. The moment is funny, but it underscores the duality of the Occupation as seemingly both temporary and permanent. Khalil writes that one of her influences was Elia Suleiman's 2009 film *The Time That Remains*, which also centers on Palestinian experiences of time under occupation—the daily habits of living in the shadow of a tank, the repeated rituals of hope and despair, and the dark humor emerging from it all. The film's title references not only the time that remains in each human life but the time that remains until Palestinians gain sovereignty. How can Palestinians conceive of time as something more than waiting?

*Scenes* makes much of this motif of waiting in a series of scenes at a checkpoint. In the first, a food vendor begs an IDF soldier to let his car through before his goods spoil; the imposed timescale of occupation conflicts with the natural timescale of food's perishability. In a second, characters simply wait wordlessly, and the audience experiences the tedium along with the characters. In a third, a man starts singing and gets the whole line to join in but only until an Israeli soldier silences the crowd for being too unruly.



An ensemble of Palestinians sing to pass the time in line at an Israeli checkpoint. Photo Credit: Najob Joe Hakim.

As a counterpoint to these scenes at the checkpoint, several vignettes depict women at the beach celebrating before an upcoming wedding. As they snack and drink tea on the sand, two IDF soldiers come to inspect their food, pressuring them into leaving. As the women linger and talk, their decision to stay becomes an act of resistance. One of the soldiers eventually physically attacks one of the women as they refuse to leave. The two male soldiers make it a point to prove to the Palestinian women that their time (and space) is not their own. Palestinians have to “kill time” when waiting for moments of greater freedom, but Israeli militarism kills Palestinian time when Palestinians do try to celebrate.

One absurdity of time in the face of enforced waiting is its tendency to collapse different eras. Political theorist Achille Mbembe describes neocolonial time as an “entanglement” of seemingly disparate eras and dynamics. From the sides of the stage in Najjar’s production, actors in twenty-first century garb watch a vignette from 1948. Those from 1948 watch the next vignette from 1967. Whereas colonial logic attempts to impose a sense of linear time (in which the colonial power attempts to bring an allegedly “backward” people into a “modern” lifestyle), in *Scenes*, time is not linear but rather a hodgepodge of repetitions. Khalil writes, “the overall feeling should be that whatever the date—1948 or 2008—the situation for Palestinians remains the same.”

Despite having costumes hung on hooks on the sides of the stage, most costume changes happen offstage,

and the costume changes onstage rarely receive attention. As such, the Brechtian potential of these costume pieces and the actors' presence don't fully pay off amidst the play's many moving parts. Nevertheless, the costuming's interplay of eras creates a sense of intergenerational spectatorship. In a final scene, on Land Day, several generations of Palestinians visit the village from which Israeli forces displaced them in 1948. After the oldest living member of the family repeats his memory of the *Nakba*, the family asks their youngest member to repeat it: "so we know that you remember—so you don't forget—so you can tell everyone."

Michael Malek Najjar describes his production of *Scenes* as an act of "testimony," and the play presents a wide variety of scenes and events from Palestinian life and history. However, in the execution, much of the vibrancy necessarily gets lost. A dramatization of Palestinian protestors getting teargassed pales in comparison to audiences' imagination of the real thing. Too often, epic scenes like this are crammed against the wall-like backdrop, which acts as a projection screen and unfortunately forces all the action downstage. The production could have pushed the dynamics of tempo and rhythm even further but instead kept scenes at a similar length. What if it had let us wait even longer in silence at a checkpoint before throwing us into the frenzy of soldiers' threats? What if the audience had felt the speed and urgency of a man trying to catch an Israeli taxi to Nazareth to see his ailing father? *Scenes* tried to squeeze so many scenarios into an already-full 110-minute production that it never gave each element the attention it would need to hold our interest.



Rasha Mohamed (left) and Ayla Yarkut (right) in a dispute over the blockade in Gaza in *Scenes from 71\* Years*. Photo Credit: Najob Joe Hakim.

One can understand this urge to present so many situations in light of the dearth of Palestinian self-representation in U.S. theatre. Khalil laments the indignities of Arab and Arab-American actors asked to perform stereotypes: “my heart ached for the fantastic Arab actors I knew who had to don a suicide vest at every audition.” In response, Khalil, a Golden Thread Resident Artist under commission at Shakespeare’s Globe, the RSC, and the National Theatre of Scotland, focuses on “humanizing the ‘other’” and presenting stories that are relatable on a human level. One of the challenges that the script runs into, however, is that it presents situations more than it presents characters. An audience member might connect to a character’s circumstance, but the audience doesn’t stick with characters long enough to see them as fully formed. As theater in the U.S. develops more Palestinian and Palestinian-American representation, there might be room for a playwright like Khalil to develop her characters rather than feeling a burden to represent Palestinian life in general.

“One wonders why Palestinian narratives are so politicized in the United States,” says Golden Thread Artistic Director Torange Teghiazarian. “So many productions and art exhibits have been cancelled. What is so threatening about the lives of Palestinians? About their music, laughter, and language?”

Indeed, staging Palestine in the U.S. theatre has been an often-difficult endeavor. In 2006, New York Theatre Workshop cancelled its production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* in a flurry of controversy. In 2015, Washington, DC’s Theatre J ousted artistic director Ari Roth after longstanding disputes over his insistence on producing pro-Palestinian plays with or without the company. In 2016 and 2017, the Freedom Theatre of Jenin’s *The Siege* never made its way to the Public Theatre despite attempts to include it in their programming (echoing an earlier cancellation by the Public of El-Hakawati’s *The Story of Kufur Shamma* in 1989).

In the meantime, Broadway has made space for J.T. Rogers’s *Oslo* and David Yazbek and Itamar Moses’s *The Band’s Visit*, which respectively reduce the Arab-Israeli conflict to interpersonal animosity and withhold Palestinian perspectives entirely. The work of staging Palestinian stories in the U.S. has fallen mostly on bold regional leaders including Chicago’s Silk Road Rising and Ari Roth’s new company, Mosaic. The latter has continued to bring work to DC advocating for justice in Palestine, including Izzeldin Abuellaish’s *I Shall Not Hate* and *Wrestling Jerusalem* and Mona Mansour’s *Vagrant Trilogy*.

In the Bay, having produced work by Middle Eastern artists for over 20 years, Golden Thread is foregrounding Palestinian stories this season with *Scenes from 71\* Years* and with its children’s production, *Leila’s Quest for Flight*, inspired by Palestinian folktales. In a climate of skittishness about discussing Palestine in American theater, Golden Thread is showing its leadership.

As right-winger Benjamin Netanyahu is re-elected in Israel promising to annex West Bank settlements, Donald Trump recognizes Israeli claims to the Golan, and Ilhan Omar gets lambasted for any comment she makes on Palestine, the U.S. needs stories from Palestinian artists. Khalil’s *Scenes* underscores that Palestinian freedom and Jewish Israeli freedom may ultimately be linked. Parallel scenes depict a young Palestinian man asking his mother to study in London and a young Jewish Israeli woman resisting her parents’ pressure to study at Oxford. The Palestinian man wants to provide for his family even if it means leaving his homeland; the Israeli woman wants to stay and fight in the West Bank for Palestinian sovereignty. Both characters feel a weight from occupation and continued settlement, and both could

benefit from that weight being lifted.

If you've been wondering about the asterisk in the title of *Scenes for 71\* Years*, it's there for a reason; the title changes each year that passes since 1948. Khalil's first draft was *Scenes from 62\* Years* and has had its number grow in the years since. Khalil writes, "my hope is that one day, when occupation ends, that number will become fixed."

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Arab Stages

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**Table of Contents:**

**PART 1: Toward Arab Dramaturgies Conference**

1. [A Step Towards Arab Dramaturgies](#) by Salma S. Zohdi
2. [A New Dramaturgical Model at AUB](#) by Robert Myers.
3. [Dancing the Self: A Dance of Resistance from the MENA](#) by Eman Mostafa Antar.
4. [Traversing through the Siege: The Role of movement and memory in performing cultural resistance](#) by Rashi Mishra.
5. [The Politics of Presenting Arabs on American Stages in a Time of War](#) by Betty Shamieh.
6. [Towards a Crosspollination Dramaturgical Approach: \*Blood Wedding\* and \*No Demand No Supply\*](#) by Sahar Assaf.
7. [Contentious Dramaturgies in the countries of the Arab Spring \(The Case of Morocco\)](#) by Khalid Amine.
8. [Arab Dramaturgies on the European Stage: Liwaa Yazji's \*Goats\* \(Royal Court Theatre, 2017\) and Mohammad Al Attar's \*The Factory\* \(PACT Zollverein, 2018\)](#) by Sarah Youssef.

**PART 2: Other**

9. [Arabs and Muslims on Stage: Can We Unpack Our Baggage?](#) by Yussef El Guindi.
10. [Iraq's Ancient Past as Cultural Currency in Rasha Fadhil's \*Ishtar in Baghdad\*](#) by Amir Al-Azraki.
11. [Amal Means Incurable Hope: An Interview with Rahaf Fasheh on Directing \*Tales of A City by the Sea\* at the University of Toronto](#) by Marjan Moosavi.
12. [Time Interrupted in Hannah Khalil's \*Scenes from 71\\* Years\*](#) by Kari Barclay.
13. [Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin, eds. \*The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine\*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2018. Pp. 417](#) by Rebekah Maggor.

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