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Book Review

***But Abu Ibrahim, We're Family!* by Lee Perlman, reviewed by Ari Roth**

A theater lover and engaged Middle East observer approaches *But Abu Ibrahim, We're Family!* with excitement and trepidation. The title invokes jocularly - a daring thing, given the ponderous tone often accorded the subject of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Yes, there is a place for incisive irony in the theater, although the Israeli equivalent of 'Some of my best friends are Arabs' may strike the followers of news from frontlines of the conflict as slightly tone-deaf.

The first cause for hesitation is one of dated humor. The title comes from an exchange in the satirical play *Hummus Chips Salad*, produced a decade ago at the Acco Festival for Alternative Theater, which joins an examination of three other important but not new works, giving rise to the concern that the plays may have lost their relevance. Plus, given the breakdown in collaborative joint ventures between Palestinians and Israelis, not to mention the collapse of a credible peace process and the acceleration of cultural boycotts both within Israel (artists refusing to perform in the settlements) and without (BDS run amok), and with more extreme Resistance Art moving to the forefront of cultural conversations, a waft of nostalgia blowing through this four-play consideration raises the final unnerving question: Can a book about older plays speak to our moment?

So it is exhilarating to report how misplaced these concerns turn out to be! From the first pages of Lee Perlman's magisterial introduction straight through to the finish, we see Perlman the cultural observer, theater scholar and peace-building reporter bring a trenchant, dynamic engagement with these lively, unruly productions, recounting the process of their inception, development, and rehearsal, coupled with incisive interpretations of indelible moments within each work. This precise theatrical chronicler bestows status on each of these cornerstones from the political theater scene. These productions stand the test of time, and Perlman confers on each a magnitude of achievement that had been fading, along with our memories of how vitalizing each of these intercultural collisions were and remain today.

While the four plays are now 10 years old (the others include *Plonter*, *Elef Laila V' Laila*, and *Longing/Ga'aguim*), Perlman's analysis, in establishing the context in which of these plays was created, is very much up-to-the-minute; in fact, it feels like these discussions were written about a month ago! We see a sharpness of contemporary critique that pits the present against the sense of possibility that pervaded approximately a decade ago, demonstrating how these plays succeeded in building upon an aspirational belief while falling short of achieving their more politically substantial and transformational ends, given the structural asymmetries in how each of

these collaborations unfolded. Perlman brings his experience in international peace-building through the arts to provide a non-Western perspective on the ambition to create a utopian reality in the rehearsal room.

These productions also constituted what Palihapitiya coined in the Sri Lankan context, an 'oasis' or 'created space', when theater artists bring people into spaces not to tell them what to think or do, but to nourish their capacity to think for themselves, feel for themselves and take ethical action - in which communities can reflect, mourn, empathize with the other, acknowledge injuries done, and feel respected and empowered.

Yet the utopia has its limitations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, as dramatized and parodied in *Hummus Chips Salad*, these joint productions often re-created Jewish-Israeli dominance, replicating, to various extents and in different ways, the existing asymmetrical power relations between Jewish and Palestinian citizens in Israel.

This is the rub that Perlman is aware of throughout. In the efforts to build an intercultural encounter of equity and parallel experiences, lingering inequity between Israelis and Palestinians remained in the room, and a certain impurity of ideological intentionality circumscribed the success of the venture. Yet the story of this volume is that of plays that perhaps could almost not be produced anymore - not in 'anti-Culture Minister' Miri Regev's Israel [writer David Grossman description of her title - ed.]. It is also true that these plays reflect a profound but limited breakthrough, emblemizing the need for an ongoing peace-building process, while underscoring the inefficacy of any initiative launched from a position of power disparity.

Perlman reminds us of how extraordinary the act of theater making can be; what it activates within the community of creatives who've been assembled. "In these productions, Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians share a stage and essentially wage the conflicts between them non-violently," Perlman tells us, and then he goes on:

These productions both represent and reflect the conflictual relations between these two national groups, in which these theater artists deal with and embody in their rehearsal processes and performances the complexities of these relations, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the internal Jewish-Palestinian rift within Israel. They do so by attempting to understand, present, often satirize and transform these conflicts on stage.

Perlman stresses the great good that came from these collaborations, noting that they "serve as a tentative model of shared citizenship in the work place demonstrating how Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians can work together in professional settings, through ongoing negotiation toward equality within the present political situation." The most pronounced case of the seemingly contradictory dimensions of joint productions is that of *Plonter*, "which critically and often bitterly dramatized and satirized multifaceted dimensions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The ensemble's creative collaborative process, including their 'political discovery' and character and dramatic development, were shared and embraced by the Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian theater artists alike."

Yet Perlman is again quick to point out that *Plonter* was created in a "cultural hegemonic institution - the Cameri Theater whose management structure and interests did not reflect the Jewish-Palestinian shared sphere." Perlman points to the stark contrast between the behemoth Cameri and the infinitely more modest Arab-Hebrew Theater of Jaffa, where *Ga'aguim* (or *Longing*) was created, and where *Elef Laila V'Laila* (an adaptation of the classic *A Thousand and*

One Nights) was developed and presented. The more egalitarian mission and infrastructural operation with which the Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa has shared space and collaborative creation mirrors that of the Acco Theater Center, so deeply embedded in the mixed Palestinian and Jewish community of Acco. The Cameri Theater, in Perlman's sharp analysis, both shines a spotlight on a daring, disarming theatrical shot across the bow "amplifying minority voices while focusing attention on the hypocrisy of security initiatives carried out most aggressively and, ultimately, violently while giving rise to a paradox that lending voice to the 'other' was actually one of the ways allowing the Cameri Theater to maintain its power as a hegemonic cultural institution embodying the dominance of Ashkenazi Jewish-Israelis' the theater actually contributed to the legitimization of the state whereby these joint productions serve government needs, as well."

Finally, it's wrong to think that *But Abu Ibrahim, We're Family!* is about four plays only. In describing the history and production ethos of each of the theater companies that produced the plays, Perlman teaches us about many other productions that paved the way for, or ran successfully in the wake of, the trail-blazing plays discussed. In so doing, he gives us a fuller sense of the controversies and ambitions that define excellent and vitally necessary theater companies that roll from one intense production to the next, accumulating a body of work that speaks more capaciously and broadly than any singular production might. For each one of the other 12 plays mentioned, Perlman could have elaborated on how each was made, but such an encyclopedic set of studies would have required a much longer book. Perhaps what we have here is Volume One of a more inclusive accounting of the vigor and heroic aspirations of the cultural protest movement embodying dissent in the most complex and vibrant of entities.

Perlman's work is a handy, readable and insightful publication centering on four powerful shows that bespeak an even richer cultural scene that's increasingly under attack from its own government and under siege from international supporters of BDS who dismiss such Israeli-Palestinian collaborations as forms of appeasement, normalizing a pernicious occupation. The author gives evidence that these four plays once showed us how to make art of the most supple and vigorously debated issues and, in so doing, modeled a behavior of valiant citizenship, cleansing candor, and a constructive way of creating restorative justice through narrative and emotional impact. While none of the plays dismantled the occupation or transformed the cultural realities in Israel/Palestine, they remind us that bravery begins with visioning, while its actualization only comes from seeing an endeavor through to its end. These important artistic achievements, brought to new life in this lively retelling, bring us hope and inspiration to continue in a manner where we have recently faltered: to renew our commitment, strengthen our stride and resume the difficult journey forward.

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