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"Drama provides a powerful opportunity to ask questions about whose stories have been customarily told, whose have been accepted as truth, and to redress the balance by telling alternative stories or stories from different perspectives. It is this understanding that narratives can be changed that lies at the heart of practice in Applied Drama." (Helen Nicholson). Discuss the politics of change in relation to Applied Drama practice in Sites of Conflict.

In this essay I will examine both Israeli and Palestinian theatre projects that attempt to effect change by challenging received stories and telling alternative stories or stories from different perspectives. I will focus first on three Palestinian plays described by Hala Nassar, showing how they preserve fading memories, and challenge Israeli and international perceptions. I will explore Israeli community theatre, conducted with underprivileged Jewish groups, to shed light on the oppositional nature of such plays and to illustrate some of their limitations. I will claim that alternative stories often become new orthodoxies and entrenchments, drowning out other issues and voices. I will turn to applied drama projects that bring together Jewish and Arab Israelis, weaving together complex and often conflicting voices to form an integral vision that is true to all participants' pain without resorting to facile utopian solutions.

### **Methodologies and literature review**

Having identified my area of interest, I was initially faced by a lack of direct access to primary works. Thus the majority of my source material is taken from academic journals that I accessed via the internet. I was pointed towards these articles by Professor Sonja Kuflinec from the University of Minnesota, whom I emailed to ask for direction, having discovered online that she is writing a book about theatre, facilitation and nation-forming in the Balkans and the Middle East. I augmented this essay's theoretical foundation with my reading of Ken Wilber, and used works by Helen Nicholson and James Thompson to place it in the context of Applied Drama in

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Sights of Conflict and the wider field of performance studies. Finally I drew on my own experience as writer, director and facilitator of a drama project bringing together Jewish and Muslim teenagers in London.

I am aware that my views and approach are coloured by my own Jewish background and identity, the time I have spent in Israel and my accordingly privileged position. As Professor Kuflinec pointed out to me, the preponderance of Israeli or Jewish-American writers on the subject of reconciliation projects, and the comparative dearth of Palestinian and Arab Israeli voices, is a sign of the power dynamics operating in the region. I have therefore done my imperfect best to give due emphasis to a strong Palestinian viewpoint, in the shape of Hala Nassar's account of the history and mission of Palestinian theatre.

### **Terminology**

I mean to take a broad view of what constitutes "Applied Drama", including verbatim plays and full-scale productions as long as they are chiefly concerned with representing, and effecting change in relation to, communities' stories. As regards the different national and ethnic groups, I follow Ellen W. Kaplan: 'In keeping with widely accepted nomenclature, I refer to those with Israeli citizenship as either Arab Israelis or Jewish Israelis. When referring to inhabitants of Palestine, i.e. those who reside in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, I identify these people as Palestinians' (Kaplan, p. 182). The exception to this is in reference to the plays described by Hala Nassar, where I consistently use the term "Palestinians", in order to honour the national character of the productions noted by Nassar himself.

### **Oppositional Palestinian theatre**

Conflict – of narratives, desires and ways of seeing – is itself at the heart of the dramatic form. It is for this reason that drama in wartime is a high-stakes, political activity. Drama is a vehicle for storytelling and, as James Thompson remarks, ‘storytelling is a vital and widespread activity that generates the disputed narratives that often sustain the conflict’ (Thompson, p. 25). Not only drama but *all* storytelling takes on special significance in times of war. The violence, chaos and loss brought about by war leaves a “vacuum of significance”, circumstances defying comprehension.<sup>1</sup> This vacuum, and the human desire for meaning, proliferate narratives, explanations and analyses. On the one hand these can give comfort, identity, meaning and purpose. Such storytelling can knit together parts of the human and collective psyche fragmented by war and bloodshed, bringing wholeness and integration. On the other hand, as previously noted, these narratives often sustain the conflict, both drawing from and adding to the grand narratives of war. Governments are well aware of the importance of narrative and storytelling: hence their massive emphasis on propaganda, public relations, spokespeople and presentation. These narratives smooth the fragments of everyday events and battles into justifying structures of meaning, easing their circulation into public arenas and, vitally, fostering support for those views and future actions (Thompson, p. 33).

The same integrating function that heals risks concealing or denying aspects of reality and individual experience that “do not fit”. Mass storytelling reaches back into

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Creating, circulating and listening to stories in these circumstances is a process of shaping meaning out of the difficult to comprehend.’ Thompson 2005, p. 25.

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the mythical past, looks to an imagined collective future<sup>2</sup> and interprets the present accordingly. In the specific context of Israel and Palestine, just as in other conflicts, that temporal continuum incorporates religious foundation myths and epic narratives of identity. The Proclamation of the State of Israel explicitly references the Land of Israel as ‘the birthplace of the Jewish people’ and ‘the land of their fathers’ where ‘their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed’<sup>3</sup> According to Ted Swedenburg, Zionist settlers ‘launched a massive project aimed at revealing an originary Jewish historic inscription in the landscape’, renaming places according to Biblical names, establishing Biblical history museums and funding archaeological digs.<sup>4</sup> Contesting this are Palestinian stories of ownership of, connection to and living on the land.<sup>5</sup>

That is not to say that *national* Palestinian narratives do not exist, but they require recovering and reconstruction. Haka Nassar sees Palestinian theatre’s task as the ‘struggle to (re)create a national identity’ (Nassar, p. 16). He claims:

As a minority culture within their own historical territory, Palestinians have manifested hybridity as a means to claim lost territories and space, to reconstruct the historic memory of their homeland, and to construct a vision of their future community [...] Moreover, the reconfigured storyteller fashions these different sources into a peculiarly Palestinian theatrical form. (p. 20)

Whereas Jewish narratives of nationhood and the land appear to be ready-made, relating to foundational texts that are conventionally “received” and claim to be

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<sup>2</sup> At least it is “collective” for those identified as members of the community. “The Other” does not share in the national destiny, except perhaps as supporting cast.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Proclamation of the State of Israel,’ in Mendez-Flohr and Reiharz, pp. 629-30.

<sup>4</sup> Swedenburg, Ted, ‘The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier,’ *Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 1, 1990, pp. 18-30, quoted in Nassar, p. 26

<sup>5</sup> The stories, in this case at least, are not mutually exclusive, but they directly compete as *claims* to territory.

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continuous,<sup>6</sup> the Palestinian vision requires creativity, active engagement and artistry. This is not due to any inferiority or contentiousness in the narrative or narratives themselves – all national narratives are constructed, even if they seek to hide it. Rather, it is a response to the suppression or disintegration of inherited forms due to occupation, what Nassar calls ‘Israeli attempts to obliterate their [the Palestinian people of Acre’s] heritage, culture, and history’ (Nassar, p. 26). Palestinian artists must find, recover and weave together both the content of their collective stories and the cultural forms used to relate them. Fittingly, it is the cultural tradition of the storyteller, the *hakawati*, that has become the predominant Palestinian theatrical mode of expression. Not only did the storyteller ‘used to wander and perform across the Arab world’ (p.16) but is also a direct and versatile way of relating events, experiences and political messages.

As generations of Palestinians are born in refugee camps and Israeli occupation perpetuates an ongoing reality, one of the major roles of the storyteller, and of Palestinian theatre in general, is to gather, revive and preserve memories and stories that are at risk of dying out. In the context of Israeli cultural domination, these are the ‘alternative stories’ not ‘customarily told’. *The Alley*, performed at the Second Jerusalem Theatre Festival in 1992 and in Berlin in 2001, is an example of this kind of theatre. According to Nassar, ‘the female *hakawati* travels through the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, telling significant political stories in which she admonishes the spectators to remember’ (p. 25). The play tells the stories of five Palestinian women who lived through the events of 1948 and are now living in Israel

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Exiled from Palestine, the Jewish people remained faithful to it in all the countries of their dispersion, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return and the restoration of their national freedom.’ ‘Proclamation of the State of Israel,’ in Mendez-Flohr and Reinharz (eds.), p. 629.

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– in other words, the stories of women who can remember and bear witness to the cultural upheavals caused by the conflict and occupation, having lived through them first hand. In the course of the play, Samia Qazmouz al-Bakri, its writer and performer, also evokes scenes from her own early life in Akre. She leads the audience on visits to Han al-Umdan (the famous lane at the centre of Acre where Palestinian children gathered during the feast of Ramadan) before declaring that Han al-Umdan ‘is closed right now and the keys are with an Israeli company for urban development’.<sup>7</sup> Similarly the audience are told of al-Ahli Cinema, and the Egyptian artists who once played there. Again al Bakri informs the audience that al-Ahli Cinema no longer exists. She describes its beautiful interior before reminding them it was demolished and replaced with a branch of the Israeli National Bank (Nassar, p. 26). It reveals the stories that are hidden to visitors of contemporary Acre and that may fall from the memory of its Palestinian inhabitants. Palestinians who do remember the cinema and the Han al-Umdan may experience something of its atmosphere and detail again, through the storyteller’s art. This experience can serve as motivation and encouragement to rebuild their Palestinian culture. In the absence of real power, memories and stories may be the next best thing, conjuring a felt link to a vanished past. *The Alley* also performed to Israelis, confronting them with stories not ‘customarily told’ in Israeli discourse and challenging their received truths with an alternative truth, all the more real because it emerges in a verbatim script (p. 27).

Nassar looks in detail at two other examples of Palestinian theatre, both of which attempt to ‘redress the balance’ of Israeli hegemony by telling ‘alternative

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Bakri, Samia Qazmouz, *The Alley*, Palast Theatre, Berlin 2000, quoted in Nassar, p. 25.

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stories or stories from different perspectives’. When *Alive from Palestine* (2002)<sup>8</sup> was performed at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the play began with the actors’ emerging from beneath mounds of crumpled newspapers from around the world. One reviewer described the newspapers as ‘apt and ever present reminders of the extent to which real lives are submerged within, disguised and distorted by overwhelming media coverage.’<sup>9</sup> Both of these plays toured to large audiences in either Europe or the United States. As movement and travel in and out of the Palestinian Territories is heavily restricted by the Israeli authorities, such tours constitute attempts to reach out to people who have little opportunity to hear such stories and who rely on the mass media for most of their stories.

In the case of *We are the Children of the Camp* (2000)<sup>10</sup> the intention is even clearer. The play is performed by children of Aida refugee camp but ‘clearly the play is targeted at an adult audience’ (Nassar, p. 33). The scenes depict children playing in the alleys of the camp and trying to get to and from school, but also stories told to them by their parents and grandparents about life in their different villages. These are stories the children could not themselves have experienced. As links to the play’s audiences they are the story-bearers of multiple generations. ‘By informing them [the audience] of the reality of Aida,’ Nassar writes, ‘al-Rowwad appeals for the international – in this case American – community to intervene and put an end to the daily suffering’ (p. 33). Thus stories are granted real significance. By telling a

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<sup>8</sup> Playbill, *Alive from Palestine: Stories under Occupation*, 2002, referred to in Nassar, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Hurwitt, ‘Palestinians tell their side in “Alive,”’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 July 2002, quoted in Nassar p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Abu-Srou, *We are the Children of the Camp*, Al-Rowwad Children’s Theatre, Charter Oak Cultural Center, Hartford, Connecticut, 2005, referred to in Nassar p. 32.

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“different story” the Palestinian theatre groups hope to increase leverage in the international political arena and change “facts on the ground”.

### **Oppositional community-based theatre in Israel**

Thus some examples of Palestinian theatre deliberately voicing stories to achieve change, within the Palestinian community, within Israeli society and via international audiences. Such theatre can be placed in a tradition of oppositional theatre, speaking truth(s) to power and despite oppression. This is what Richard Schechner calls “excoriating theatre”, community theatre which represents ‘avant-garde and disruptive voices’. He distinguishes it from community theatre that is “celebrating”, which ‘honors the dominant culture and “celebrates the community, even when painful.”’<sup>11</sup> In ‘Whose Play Is It? The Issue of Authorship/Ownership in Israeli Community Theatre’ Shulamith Lev-Aladgem traces the history of Israeli community-based theatre and the ‘struggle over what the performances mean’. For the municipal sponsors, community-based theatre is part of the state’s community planning and development programme and is ‘a means to reduce cultural, social, educational, and mental disadvantages within such groups [as ethnic minorities, battered women, prisoners, and the handicapped]’. For the participants, community-based theatre has been seized as an opportunity to challenge the perceived order and resist integration. The question is ‘whether the production reflects or contests the state’s hegemonic order’ (Lev-Aladgem, pp. 117-8).

A good example of this conflict around the meaning of Israeli community-based theatre is *Joseph Goes Down to Katamon* (1972/73), directed by Arie Itzhak

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<sup>11</sup> Schechner, Richard, ‘Believed-in Theatre,’ *Performance Research*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 76-91, 1997, quoted in Lev-Aladgem, p. 126.

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and produced by the Community Theatre of Katamon. The production was created and performed by *Mizrahi* Jews, originating from the Middle East and discriminated against by the dominant *Ashkenazi* (Eastern European) Jews. By using the Biblical story of Joseph to depict their underprivileged lives in an area notorious for neglect and crime, they took a story fundamental to Israel and embedded in the national consciousness, and “turned” it to tell their own underrepresented stories. The municipal authorities embraced the project as a means of ‘rehabilitating streetwise young people’ (p. 119). Nevertheless, the young people used the production to protest their conditions and spark social resistance. There was conflict over the final production. One of the scenes, depicting a brutal prison rape, notably disturbed audiences.

The municipal delegates, mostly the Ashkenazi and the ultra-Orthodox, who rejected the overall oppositional tone of the performance, took advantage of the local audience’s agitated reaction and asked Itzhak to cut the scene. Even though the performers supported Itzhak’s opposition to changing the scene, after long arguments, he gave in realizing that the alternative was that the show would be closed. (p. 119)

This was, essentially, a dispute over whose story is told and the tone of the telling.

The Ashkenazi elite were happy for the participants’ stories to be represented, as long as they did not threaten the stories that supported their own power and as long as they did not cause too much commotion.

It is important to note that among the groups participating in Israeli community-based theatre, the ‘ethnic minorities’ referred to by Lev-Aladgem do not include Arab Israelis or Palestinians. Besides its conflict with the Palestinians, Israel is a country of sharp internal divisions. With rapid Jewish immigration after the Second World War and the State’s establishment, integration of its various groups and

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cultures, each with their own needs and norms, has been extremely difficult. Again, trying to co-opt numerous stories into over-arching national narratives can do violence to certain groups' accounts and interests, and privilege some over others. The underprivileged groups attempt to tell their stories that "do not fit", creating a cultural battleground over their right to be heard. Lev-Aladgem does refer to Arab Israelis, as they are mentioned briefly by a Mizrahi character in *The Other Half* (1974): 'The difference between me and an Arab is only one small grade' (p. 122). The Mizrahim were, at the time, understandably occupied with their own struggles and the two minorities were fighting for the same small pool of resources. Lev-Aladgem notes, 'the Mizrahim generally accepted the Zionist-Ashkanazim ethos in negating the Arabs' (p. 124).

Is it possible that Israeli Arab and Palestinian theatre has managed to articulate a more authentic community voice as a result of its exclusion from the Israeli municipal agenda? Certainly it has retained and developed its excoriating tone, while Israeli community-based theatre has known periods of predominantly celebratory productions. From 1982 to 1985 Yossi Alfi, who had directed the highly oppositional *The Other Half*, modified his vision and staged a number of performances on "universal themes" such as love, success, and interpersonal relationships', productions that were 'integrative and not confrontational [...] more like festivals than protest theatre' (p. 125). Unlike Palestinian or Arab Israeli groups at almost any point, the Mizrahim were hopeful their situation would change with Israel's first Likkud government.

However, while Palestinian theatre and community-based drama has remained fiercely oppositional (certainly towards Israel), the occupation has dominated its discourse at the expense of the Palestinian's own internal issues. As Nassar puts it:

Because the primary agenda for Palestinians (artists and otherwise) is to “stand and fight” the Israeli occupation until “the land is no more occupied,” issues such as patriarchy, the marginal status of women, the corruption of the Palestinian National Authority, the rise of political Islam, the phenomenon of suicide bombers, and even taboos in Palestinian society are presently placed on hold. (Nassar, p. 24)

In other words, in the politics of change, alternative stories may only be heard pertaining to certain issues. In response to the crushing Israeli national narrative, it is the search for a Palestinian national narrative that has dominated its people's social and cultural expressions, eclipsing or even silencing a host of other, nuanced stories.

### **Collaborative partnerships and an integral approach**

I would like now to turn to Applied Drama projects bringing together Jewish Israelis with Arab Israelis. Do these collaborative partnerships constitute, for the Arab Israeli participants, an example of the “celebrating” form of community theatre, reflecting rather than contesting the state's hegemonic order? Or do they have *their own way* of asking whose stories are being told?

The strategy of excoriating theatre is to speak truth to and about power, to speak out with anger, frustration, clarity and force, when the oppressing regime(s) would rather the subject remain demure, tolerant, incoherent and weak. Its goals are to humanise the stories' “owners”, restoring their power through the act of telling and be heard by the “right people”, increasing pressure on the international governing bodies that can directly affect the political situation. However, within this dynamic, as

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noted above, new stories are ‘customarily told’ and begin to dominate popular discourse. I would argue that applied drama projects can question which stories are told at a number of levels. Projects aimed at Palestinian society itself, or at Palestinian and Israeli groups together, face a different set of customary stories and must employ different means to question them.

These means, according to Ellen Kaplan, are the use of personal story and ‘oscillations between empathy and distance’, so the theatre ‘destabilizes entrenched viewpoints, elicits a polyphony of voices, and asks us to inhabit positions we normally eschew’. It can, she claims, “become a productive vehicle for personal and social change” (Kaplan, p. 171).

Kaplan describes a three-day training session she attended in Givat Haviva, in central Israel. The sessions were run by City at Peace, ‘the Israeli affiliate of a Washington, DC-based organization that engages teens in intensive theatre workshops, drawing out stories to explore differential power, oppression, stereotype, and group identity.’ The three days ‘were designed to train [Israeli Jewish and Arab] teams from participating community centers, who would then recruit teens for full productions locally’. In her descriptions, certain mechanisms and applied drama techniques stand out whereby change may take place within such groups. For example, participants played a “basic mirror game” with ‘pairs working across [...] basic coordinates of identity: gender, age, ethnicity’ (pp. 174-5). The leaders alternated until Paul Griffin, the facilitator and US Director of City at Peace, asked the pairs to continue without a leader. Explicitly, this was a model for sharing power, moving from a hierarchical to a ‘horizontal’ way of expressing power. Warm-up

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exercises were then followed by discussions about violence and its roots in power differentials. Thus games and exercises were a way of approaching power relations *by analogy*.

In order to examine power and ask questions of the stories that help prop up structures of oppression, it is often necessary to take an indirect, tangential approach. Carefully chosen games and exercises enable participants to *experience* the reality of power differentials by reframing them in a non-threatening, playful context, removing them from loaded issues of identity and personal investment. As Kaplan recognises, ‘direct political discussion is rarely productive in so heated an atmosphere’ (p. 179).

When I directed *Holy Chutzpah* (2007), a play featuring both Jewish and Muslim teenagers from London, we experienced moments of awkwardness and uncertainty when political views were directly expressed during a game of “The Sun Shines On”. In this game, participants stand in the middle of a circle and declare something about themselves. All participants who share that characteristic or opinion must change chairs, leaving one participant in the middle again, ready to declare something new. I chose this game because it promised to cut across the obvious ethnic and religious lines of identity, and reveal new alliances and patterns within the group. It would show the *fluidity* of identity, play with different configurations, and ultimately create a unified group bound by no singular definitions of identity. The game was largely successful – the young people enjoyed playing it and the group was quick to show signs of bonding – but it also offered the opportunity for the expression of the ‘stories customarily told’. Having been to enough rehearsals to feel safe enough to express potentially controversial opinions, one Jewish teenager declared, ‘I believe

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the [2006] Israeli war in Lebanon was justified.’ The reactions from the Muslim teenagers were discomfort, awkward shifting and outright exclamations of protest, while the Jewish teenagers looked unsure whether to move. There then followed “equivalent” statements from the Muslim teenagers, until I deliberately moved the group away from statements that would divide us along traditional lines of enmity by introducing a statement I felt we could all agree with: ‘I want peace between Israel and Palestine.’

In retrospect, exposing the teenagers to opposing opinions they would not usually hear might have done some good as a ‘general relativiser’ (Thompson, p. 29). But the setting, I believe, was unlikely to achieve such an outcome. If discussion of these “defining” issues and grievances is to be direct, principles of ‘nonjudgmental, nonadversarial listening’ need to be established, in order for each participant to be impacted by the other’s stories. “Compassionate listening”, a technique developed by Gene Knudsen Hoffman, ‘allows each individual to express her own story, without privileging anyone’s pain or asserting a single narrative as truth’. Rather, if all the stories present in the room are heard and honoured, there is an acknowledgment ‘that everyone is in possession of a partial truth’ (Kaplan, p. 177). This is what I would call an “integral approach”.<sup>12</sup> It is not pure relativism but rather understands that the whole picture contains a spectrum of conflicting and complementary viewpoints. It takes into account these dynamics and attempts to weave together an overarching narrative that is not violent or singular but preserves complexity.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘In this Theory of Everything, I have one major rule: *Everybody* is right. More specifically, everybody [...] has some important pieces of truth, and all of those pieces need to be honored, cherished, and included in a more gracious, spacious, and compassionate embrace.’ Wilber, Ken, *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality* (Boston: Gateway, 2001), p. 140.

Kaplan, referencing Miki Flockemann's work in South African theatre, goes on to distinguish between two types of community performance featuring Jewish and Arab Israelis. Productions can be "utopian", easily reconciling "contradictory or fragmented realities," or they can be "grounded," exploring 'how symbolic and cultural meaning is made of ordinary and even traumatic experience'.<sup>13</sup> The key is including differing, even contradictory narratives without seeking prematurely to resolve the tensions between them, rather remaining true to their broken and partial nature. This 'allows us to imagine utopia, yet acknowledge the particulars of its absence, as we grope toward transformation'.

In representing and having others represent their stories on stage, participants and audience-members may attain both empathy with, and distance from, their own stories, allowing "a space in which creativity flourishes" and personal narratives can be reconfigured, helping reconstruct collective identity (Kaplan, p. 181). Both the empathy and the distance are necessary for people to go beyond their *entrenched positions*. Without empathy and the reassurance that they will be heard, with the possibility of action to address grievances, individuals will be hard pressed to give them up. They will shout louder and continue to negate positions seen to be in conflict. Without the distancing that can be achieved by the creative process, seeing others represent one's own story, and the repetition of stories with agency and imagination, groups and meetings containing communities of identity who perceive themselves to be in conflict will continue to argue from entrenched viewpoints. I have

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<sup>13</sup> Flockemann, Miki, 'The Aesthetics of Transformation: Reading Strategies for South African Theatre Entering the New Millennium.' *South African Theatre Journal*, no. 15, 2001, pp. 25-39. Quoted in Kaplan, p. 183.

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been part of too many ‘debates’ that have turned into competitions in claiming the greater victimhood.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, with specific reference to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, I have shown how oppositional theatre in sites of conflict is a means of “speaking truth to power” and giving voice to stories often lost or denied by the imposition of external national narratives. I have used a number of Palestinian theatre productions to illustrate this, showing how their messages are deliberately catered to rebalance the stories that are ‘customarily told’. I have also shown how these alternative stories can themselves come to dominate a local discourse. That is not to deny that oppositional and excoriating theatre is a vital form of challenge in situations of power inequality and oppression. It must be accompanied by self-reflection and freedom from personal and communal orthodoxies. Thus with the example of drama work carried out between Jewish and Arab Israelis I have gestured towards an “integral approach” to the politics of change, one that allows individuals the distance, empathy and creativity to reconfigure their own traumas and entrenched stories.

