

Go to Gaza, Drink the Sea

Written by Eileen Fleming

Friday, 13 March 2009 14:57 - Last Updated Thursday, 19 March 2009 00:36



"Go to Gaza, Drink the Sea" is a theatre piece and artistic collaboration between writer-director Justin Butcher of "Scaramouche Jones" and "Madness of George Dubya" and Ahmed Masoud director of "Ila Haifa" and the founder of Al Zaytouna Palestinian National Dance Company.

"What do you see when you visit a mosque? What do you pick up after bombs have rained on your house and killed your children? What images did you see on television, girls' shoes, baby shoes, and hundreds of men's sandals in the dust of the bombed mosque? And what do you throw at George Bush?"

Go to Gaza, Drink the Sea is performed by a Palestinian and British cast in rapid response to the horrific events in Gaza that unfolded before the eyes of the world, the play gives voice to personal testimonies coupled with searing film images and ear-shattering sonic sounds, that bore witness to the dignity, courage and suffering of the people of Gaza.

Go to Gaza, Drink the Sea, is a heartfelt tribute to the people of Gaza and what they are forced to endure on a daily basis as the rockets, guns and phosphorous burn into and destroy their

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lives. It is not a political tract; it is a statement of what was going on during those unimaginably horrific weeks, along with Israeli spokesmen, grieving parents, and a terrified teenager trying to dance some joy into her new life.

On entering the dark and gloomy space of the theatre in north London the first thing you see is a mountain of shoes, piled high, grey and dusty, and the symbolism that comes to mind is obvious; we are entering a tragic zone, and it is this pile of shoes which has exercised the minds of the Jewish Chronicle critic John Nathan and the Time Out London critic Andrew Haydon; they say it just isn't right to replicate a scene of shoes piled high – that iconography belongs to the museum at Auschwitz and to the slain Jews of Europe. Working hand in hand it seems with Nathan, Haydon wants to draw our attention to the review in the Jewish Chronicle. He says the play is “propaganda and specious justification for Islamist terrorism.” Nathan provides the tiresome counterblast that the play is simply antisemitic.

The British Federation of Zionists objected to the shoes iconography and the Jewish Chronicle put the boot in on their behalf. It is a pity that these organisations and critics do not possess the calm and humanity of a Primo Levi who suffered in the concentration camps to write enduringly about life afterwards.

Justin Butcher is 39 and able to make up his own mind about what metaphors to utilise in his works, “the echo of the iconography upset some critics, the annihilation of an entire people on an unspeakable scale in Europe in WW2 is not the same violence of the State of Israel against the Palestinians. But, Gaza is five miles wide and 25 miles long with one and a half million people blockaded by land, sea and air, inviting parallels with the Warsaw Ghetto – and we have to remember the Yom Kippur war when instructions went out to the soldiers to kill the children.

“I am accused of being one-sided but in a case like Gaza you have to take a position. When I decided I was going to try and do this play in early January as the bombs rained down on the civilians of Gaza I met my friend in the Amos Trust, a religious charity which campaigns on behalf of the Palestinians. He knew Ahmed Masoud, a Gazan writer who was doing a PhD in London on the connection between Irish literature and Palestinian literature (inevitably comparisons of exile and struggle) and I realised I knew his wife from whom I buy oil from Palestine.

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“What was happening in Gaza provoked a great sea change in the West towards Israel, especially among Christians who always showed blanket support for the Holy Land. I sense a great need for change among them. I am a religious man and my teaching tells me that I have to reach out to the vulnerable, and with my plays it is a twin track thing, I have my humanitarian goals in life, my sense of purpose, why we are here, justice and peace and creativity alongside my passion for theatre and from time to time these things come together in a very conspicuous way, confirming me as an artist.

“The best art exudes a sense of generosity even when theatre confronts dark episodes. You can let people into a world of hell, of violence, pain and despair and somehow, if the work is created with a mindset and attitude of generosity it can be an enriching experience and engages people through participating in a mysterious way. For Ahmed and me one of the key things we had in our minds to achieve was the sense of a public mourning and ritual – a good funeral gives people a moment and a place set aside in which to commemorate the person.

Also, the news media is so transient and is soon gone; we wanted to keep in mind the families that had so many members among them wiped out, to give people a space and a time to dwell on these events without the language of noise, and television. Theatre is like a church, it sets aside a time where people can gather and experience things, encounter the profane as well as the sacred, and was made poignant here with Ahmed’s indignity, not the indignity of just being bombarded but nobody taking account of it. In a theatre in London the audience enacted a moment of grief and remembrance.”

Justin’s influences range from the Classics, which he read at Oxford and which naturally incorporate the Greek Tragedies, and Shakespeare to Italian farcical Commedia del Arte, and Dario Fo. In the Madness of George Dubya he had tried to emulate Fo’s style.

“Fo believed that if you want to write about a situation of injustice you should choose comedy rather than tragedy – if you get people laughing it engenders a bubble of wind in the audience which is uncomfortable, if you simply give them a tragic catharsis they come away from the theatre able to do nothing.

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“Having said that we did not choose comedy for the Gaza play, but we did use an Englishman with a Lancashire accent as our Virgilian guide with reference to Dante’s Inferno, a shadowy in-between figure who came through the tunnels and had contact with the outside world, purveyor of food, medical supplies, weapons, and of course, death, all was possible. We were accused by the critics of demonising Israelis. I have to say that as a Christian I regard myself as a beneficiary of the Jewish spiritual heritage, the early church was Jewish, and my own children have ostensibly Jewish names.”

Proof of the play’s success was the presence of packed houses every night and on one night 50 people had to be turned away; the capacity of the small theatre was 120. More than 20% of any night’s takings go to the Al Ahli hospital in Gaza.

The play will be at the Edinburgh Festival in August and there are plans for a tour of the United States including New York and the West Coast and a tour of Canada. No doubt more accusations of anti Semitism and accusations of the misappropriation of shoe iconography will be raised.

For me, the shoes had everything and nothing to do with Auschwitz; they are symbols of Islam too.

What do you see when you visit a mosque?

What do you pick up after bombs have rained on your house and killed your children?

What images did you see on television, girls’ shoes, baby shoes, and hundreds of men’s sandals in the dust of the bombed mosque?

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The shoes in the theatre were covered in dust and the protagonists entered through them. In a tragic and moving pieta the hero Sharaf, who joined Hamas -a political organization democratically elected- lies with his grieving mother, and dies on top of the shoes, his Palestinian flag held proudly aloft.

Sharaf did not glorify terrorism. He died protecting and fighting for his country. So too have more than 1,300 human beings mostly women and children.

Go to Gaza, Drink the Sea, 17th February-14th March, Theatro Technis, London More info: <http://www.gotogaza.wordpress.com>

Writer-Directors, Justin Butcher and Ahmed Masoud



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