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CULTURE

Kufur Shamma Explores Palestinian Past

by Daoud Kuttab

While the focus of attention these days has been on the occupied territories as the 20th year of occupation rolls around, performing artists have again shown that they have a political mind of their own.

Members of the Nuzha'el Hakawati theater troupe are forcing the public to pay attention to problems that many Palestinians had almost forgotten about. Hakawati's latest production, *The Story of Kufur Shamma* talks about the 350 Palestinian villages which were destroyed and removed from the map by Israel and about what happened to the original residents of a particular village. By focusing on these villages and on the Palestinians in the diaspora, Hakawati in a sense is trying to tell us something much deeper than what most journalists and politicians are debating these days. Hakawati is forcing the general public to remember the nearly three million Palestinians living in the diaspora; who think, talk, and yearn to return to their villages, orchards, olive trees, and the style of life they were used to. *Kufur Shamma* doesn't convince us that these people are ready to give up their present lifestyle and try to return, but does convince us that this feeling exists and that there are people who want to return, no matter how much the odds are against them.

The Making of the Play

Before talking about the play it is important to talk about the making of the play, which is a story of its own. Producing a successful Palestinian theatrical production in the occupied territories has never been easy. Although many of the usual problems with the authorities over the text are not a problem for Hakawati because of the style of the play, other problems, including finances, text, and actors has always been a problem. As in all of their plays, *The Story of Kufur Shamma* deals directly with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But the troupe is able to do this successfully without ever mentioning the term Israel or Palestine, Jew or Arab.

The troupe was not as successful in avoiding politics during rehearsals. Once, as they were working out-of-doors, they found themselves in the middle of an Israeli firing range.

For music, several Hakawati members traveled to Egypt where Sheikh Imam created the play's songs for them.

As far as finances are concerned, the problem is a bit more complicated. With the absence of a government or a cultural support fund, Palestinian theatrical groups have had to find their own ways of raising money. Financing theatrical works, however, has become easier after the establishment of the Nuzha'el-Hakawati theater in Jerusalem, and as a result of the many contacts Hakawati has made during its many tours in Europe and throughout the world. The Geneva-based Welfare Association and the Ford Foundation in New York have become among the major supporters of Palestinian theater.

Text

The Hakawati troupe has depended mostly on collective creation among its

actors and director to produce its plays. This method was used because of a lack of playwrights, and because of the need to produce plays which reflected the experiences of the actors themselves. This method, however, couldn't be used for *Kufur Shamma*. Although some sections of the play take place in Palestine, the entire play talks about experiences that none of the actors have ever had. The problem was further exasperated by a split in Hakawati itself. Some of the troupe's veteran actors were not involved in this production, but were making plays of their own. Of the original troupe only two actors were involved in *Kufur Shamma*, in addition to director Francois Abu Salem. Veteran actress Jackie Lubeck took on the assignment to write the play, and started producing a text based on research, conversations with Palestinians who used to live in villages before they were destroyed, and transcripts of improvisations done by the troupe. But Jackie wrote the play in English. Abdel Karim Samara translated the text and Palestinian writer Muhammad Batrawi then Arabized it. Batrawi gave it the appropriate Palestinian dialect and added local jokes and proverbs that would be natural for the characters.

Actors

With the absence of some of Hakawati's veteran actors the search was on for adequate replacements. Imad Mizero, a veteran Palestinian actor, took the lead role of Walid. Amir Khalil, a technician at the Nuzha'el-Hakawati theater and a long-time friend of the troupe, did wonderfully well in the role of Kufur Shamma's crazy personality. Kawash, veteran Hakawati actor Edward Muallem took on his usual dozen roles. The remaining cast included Iman Aoun, Jackie Luback and Ismael al-Dabagh.

The Play

The Story of Kufur Shamma is a play about an imaginary Palestinian village located somewhere near Lydda. The play opens when Walid, accompanied by his friends, arrives at where Kufur Shamma had been located. His friends urge him to tell the village's story. Walid begins by talking about when he left his pregnant wife, his brother, the mukhtar, and the village to go to study. The catastrophe of 1948 is described metaphorically. Gypsies visit. Kawash, the town madman, imitates them and accidentally kills the mukhtar. There is confusion and the noise of what might be an offstage battle. When Walid returns with his B.A., only Kawash is left.

Walid and Kawash decide to look for the Kufur Shammans. The rest of the play covers the adventures of Walid and Kawash as they collect other people on the way. They work at a stone quarry where they meet Nijme, a woman dreaming of becoming a cinema star. Further north the group, now three, reaches the refugee camps in Lebanon, where they go from one camp to another looking for their lost kin. In the process they meet a young Palestinian fighter, Karim, who falls in love with the stories about Kufur Shamma and with Nijme. A short love scene takes place between Nijme and Karim, the



A scene from Kufur Shamma.

first ever on a Palestinian stage. Later the group, now four, meets Hajaleh, a divorcee turned matchmaker who becomes the emotional support for Walid, who is looking for his long-lost wife. The group travels to the Gulf where they meet a wealthy sheikh they are told was originally from Kufur Shamma. The sheikh refuses to admit his origin and kicks the Kufur Shammans out but Karim shoots him for his decision to deny his birthplace. Before he dies it becomes clear that he is Abu Fageze, the servant of Kufur Shamma's mukhtar. As he dies, he says the word 'Massachusetts.' Walid does not know what it means.

In the desert the group meets Abed, a Nabulus businessman who agrees to join the group in searching for Kufur Shammans. He explains what 'Massachusetts' means, and Walid decides to go there.

The next venue is Massachusetts USA, where it seems the rest of the Kufur Shammans have ended up in. Walid and company are welcomed by their former villagers. But the life in America seems to have worked out well for most of them and, with the exception of Muhammad Ali, they refuse to return.

Walid and his five new friends obtain Greek passports and are able to travel to Israel. They arrive in Kufur Shamma to find that the village is razed; the only thing left is the gravestone of the village mukhtar, Zaki.

Art vs. Politics

It seems that controversy is a trademark with Hakawati plays and *Kufur Shamma* is certainly no exception. Religious people are unhappy with the love scene. A few people left the hall in protest the day I attended, immediately after the love scene.

Political zealots have a number of complaints about the play's depiction of the PLO fighters and leadership. Karim is portrayed as a naive and vulnerable youth. Karim's superior (who appears a lot like Amraf in the play) appears to have no sense of humor and no ability to communicate with the newcomers from Palestine. In the US, Palestinians are portrayed as having lost much of their language and desire to return while they hold on to memories and to their neatly folded keffiyehs.

Some Palestinians living in the occupied territories complain that Kufur Shamma seems to have been created for an outside Palestinian or foreign audience. Maybe some don't want to accept that Palestinians in the diaspora are no different from residents of the occupied

territories. The idea that many Palestinians are not committed to the Palestinian problem comes as a shock to many. But it is the truth. And the more quickly we realize this and take this fact into consideration, the better we will be. Many are unhappy with the presence of a crazy person in the play. They feel the negative connotation is unnecessary.

While these controversies will no doubt be debated over and over, certain aspects about *Kufur Shamma* seem worthy of note. What *Kufur Shamma* has done, more than many Palestinian plays, is present the Palestinian case in normal human terms. Although Palestine and Israel are not mentioned you can feel the Palestinian presence in every character — in their moves, idioms, sufferings, and aspirations. And this human language transmitted to us by the stories of nearly a dozen individuals tells the whole story with its good and bad, its joy and sadness. If there are many negative aspects then maybe they are worth noting and discussing. Maybe a deep and thorough investigation and critique of our past and present can provide us with the answers we have been looking for in response to the situation we are in.

Other comments

Having a Palestinian play written in English and then translated needs to be thought about critically. Is there a need for such practice? Is it the result of a lack of Palestinian writers? Are Palestinian writers unable to communicate with theater directors in order to produce the type of texts a director needs? Some of the problems in the text can be seen in the natural biases found in it. Would a Palestinian writer's love scene have been presented the way we saw in *Kufur Shamma*? Are the experiences of the playwright during tours in Europe and some Arab countries reflected in the play? Are these experiences representative of the situation of Palestinians living in the diaspora?

Other questions also arise. How could Walid not have known about the troubles facing his village and, in essence, the entire land of Palestine at the time of the creation of the state of Israel? What research has the writer/director done on the PLO to be able to judge its members' thoughts, actions, and responses to certain conditions?

The above notes notwithstanding *Kufur Shamma* is an important, enjoyable and thought-provoking production. The artistic aspect, as usual, can be noted on a level with any international production.

