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**Alive From Palestine, “Stories Under Occupation”, ARTICLE, The New
York Times, June 27, 2002**

A clipping from the New York Times featuring an article on al-Kasaba Theater and Cinemathque's production, 'Stories Under Occupation'.

REVIEWS AND NEWS

THEATER REVIEW

A Plea for Recognizing Humanity Everywhere

By BRUCE WEBER

NEW HAVEN, June 26 — Newspapers almost smother the seven performers in "Alive From Palestine: Stories Under Occupation," a plaintive, almost supplicating new work at the Long Wharf Theater here. The show is a presentation of Al Kasaba Theater, a Palestinian troupe from Ramallah making its timely American debut through Saturday. And the news is not just in the air, but on the stage. The set consists of mounds of crumpled newspapers — newspaper igloos, almost — and the actors, for their monologues and sketches, emerge from beneath and behind them. This is a fragile and rickety village, hardly protective, hardly safe, hardly a haven for people who live there.

But the metaphor is more complex than that. The villagers are also prone to snatching broadsheets from the mounds, reading them and passing them along. In the final moments of the show they level the mounds, grabbing handfuls of newspapers and tossing them in the air, until the stage is awash in a sea of crumpled papers. It's awfully effective stage language, an eloquently wordless lament that for most of the world — for Americans in particular — the Palestinians are living and dying only in the newspapers.

It's certainly true that the news-flavored view of the Palestinians in this country is largely unsympathetic, yielding a uniform impression of a vengeful, intractably angry population. That this portrait is unfairly reductive is Al Kasaba's reasonable and morally forceful argument. And the show's series of monologues and sketches, deftly knitted together by the director and designer Amir Nizar Zubli, constitute a plea for recognition of the humanity behind this simple facade; to that end, the show is meant to illustrate the daily strain of living under a constant threat of harm, the agonizingly preposterous alterations affected in quotidian existence by the perpetual presence of an enemy.

The show is part of the Seventh International Festival of Arts and Ideas here, and predictably it has touched off a squall; demonstrators at the show's opening on Tuesday held up signs protesting the group's appearance and passed out fliers presenting "an alternate view" of the conflict in the Middle East.

Pro-Israeli theatergoers will undoubtedly feel an occasional finger in the eye; Palestinians killed by Israelis are referred to as martyrs, and at one point a Palestinian confronting an Israeli pilot describes looking into the face of evil. And though the show is not blatantly political, it does refer to Ariel Sharon's inflammatory visit to Temple Mount in September 2000.



Cast members of Al Kasaba Theater's "Alive From Palestine" at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven

ALIVE FROM PALESTINE Stories Under Occupation

Director and designer, Amir Nizar Zubli; lighting by Mu'az Jubeh; general director, George Ibrahim. Al Kasaba Theater. Presented by the Seventh International Festival of Arts and Ideas, New Haven. At the Long Wharf Theater, 222 Sargeant Drive, New Haven.

WITH: Georgina Asfour, Khalifa Natour, Imad Farajin, Kamel El Basha, Husam Abu Eiseh and Mahmoud Awad.

Illustrating the strain of living under a constant threat of harm.

But the company has chosen not to make any reference to Yasir Arafat or to suicide bombers; that seems politically prudent, if not chicken hearted.

Still, there is little in the show that is likely to inflame anyone in any new way. Instead, what we hear from the stage is a terrible helplessness and sadness and an anger that is provoked by what feels like oppression. Whether you think they are oppressed or not, the stories they tell are those of legitimate experience; this is what it feels like to be an

ordinary Palestinian now. And with that in mind, "Alive from Palestine" is valuable theater.

Given its news-from-the-front quality, it is also poignant and occasionally quite touching. It isn't, however, particularly surprising theater; the use of the newspapers is by far the most intriguing element of stagecraft implemented here. Otherwise the stories told by the actors — all of whom are professional and for the most part admirably understated in their anguished roles — are full of the irony and pathos you would expect.

In one story a young man whose father was an impoverished tinsmith and for whom tin is the symbol of everything that holds him back unloads the family business only to realize that bombs are demolishing so many houses that quickly erected tin homes will be in demand. In another story a couple exchange war detritus — a bullet, a gas canister — as love tokens. In a third story a man addresses the book bag of his son who has been killed by a bomb; going through his son's belongings, he says he will pass them along to the boy's younger brother.

"I'm sorry, my son, forgive me," the man concludes. "I forgot you were my only child."

The show is performed in Arabic, and the subtitle translation is occasionally suspect, making one wonder whether the several moments, like this one, that slip into heavy-handed-

ness are being attenuated. In any case, the show is at its most effective when it is not being ponderous, but clever and even humorous, as in a skit in which a suitcase is personified and speaks lamentingly to its owner.

"Why can't I be like a normal suitcase?" asks the actor who is wearing a case on his head with a cutout for his face. (The program does not distinguish the identities of the performers.) "Arriving at a clean airport, being put on a cart by a perfumed lady." This dream, which includes a delightful unpacking in a luxury hotel, stands in opposition to the suitcase's actual existence, which it describes as "eviction, expulsion, sun, dust, soldiers pointing guns at me."

By the end of this 70-minute show, what has become painfully evident is the quality of a life that Palestinians have come to accept as normal. It will move even an audience hostile to the Palestinian cause — or at least it should — because it reminds us that no one should have to live this way.

"Believe me, what you have seen, it is a little of much," said George Ibrahim, Al Kasaba's general director during a panel discussion after the performance.

"We want people to listen to us differently," he said. "The image of Palestinians in the United States is of terrorists. It is not like the newspapers you are reading. Imagine yourself being news, and you will understand the rest."