

A PLACE TO FLY

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*If a shorter version of this text is required, please cut the sections marked with **

NOVEMBER 2022 - The Boy With The Golden Heart Is Gone

It was the first shock... Mahmoud just 17 years old... the first child from The Freedom Theatre to be killed.

He was returning from school when the army entered Jenin. Children started throwing stones, so he joined them. Immediately, the sniper took his life.

When I found out, I collapsed. The news of his martyrdom hurt my body and brought me to tears.

Mahmoud, you were very dear to me.

I knew your face as a child, soft without a beard, even as you grew up trying to show in every way that you were a man... A man with a big heart and a child full of kindness.

I think of you coming to the stage and joining the workshops to have fun and play. I know you loved to be at the theatre, even as you carried a cigarette and pretended not to care.

Naughty, causing chaos, your heart was big enough to embrace the whole camp, its streets and its homes.

That is what hurts the most, the boy with a golden heart is gone.

May God be with you Mahmoud. I thank you for passing through my life and being my student.

NOVEMBER 2022 - Breaking The Barrier of Fear

Without warning, Mustafa Sheta the Producer at The Freedom Theatre, informed me that the Israeli army had entered Jenin Camp.

I was in a workshop with the children, and I fell into thoughts of how I would manage with them whilst hearing the voices of people screaming in the streets.

At the theatre, we teach kids all the artistic skills so they can better express themselves. So they understand their human rights and cultural rights. We believe that young people can impact the way the whole society thinks.

That day in the workshop, as the situation worsened with the sounds of explosions, shots and clashes, I decided to inform the children that we must help each other feel safe.

Together, we broke the barrier of fear and worry to defy all circumstances, even as the electricity cut off and plunged us into darkness.

JUNE 2023 - Between Our First and Second Martyrs

A few months ago, we lost our baby Mahmoud, and today we lost Sadeel.

She was 15 years old, shot in the head by a sniper in the courtyard of her home. Maybe they targeted her because she was documenting what was happening... Maybe...

Between our first and second martyrs six months and nineteen days...

Between our first and second martyrs, pain is renewed, loss repeated, and my memory bursts with features of your face.

In the corners of the theatre, you are still there. Every time I step on the stage, I remember you.

How you laughed and played and the stage would carry your dreams and imagination. You were always present with me in training, always

ready for mischief, making others determined by your smile and kind features.

Between our first and second martyrs, my eyes saw the funeral of Sadeel turn into deafness, unable to speak or express.

The eyes of family and school friends, filled with anger and sadness, their voices with the screams from the pain of your loss.

Which of our children is next? We are all targeted by the sniper.

May God have mercy on our martyrs, our loved ones, our children...

JULY 2023 - Joy and Happiness

During the invasion, the theatre was bombed. We were all afraid.

After three days, the army withdrew, and we learned the building was not directly hit, but the courtyard outside was destroyed.

The courtyard... where all the neighbourhood kids gather. The space where they laugh and play, without anyone telling them *shhhh*.

Despite the theatre being targeted, the children insist on returning.

Families contact me and ask: *What are you doing? Why do they always want to come to the theatre?*

It is simple... here there is joy and happiness without conditions.

The invasions affect them very much, and they can't convey their emotions at home.

So, despite the risks, they return to the theatre because it is a beautiful space that embraces their dreams and creativity.

An oasis, away from the disasters they are exposed to.

A place where they express their feelings, speak about their cause and laugh as they find themselves.

***AUGUST 2023 - Creating in The Darkness**

We were meant to do training outside today, but we decided to stay indoors, because the Israelis might invade the camp at any moment.

We try to continue creating in the dark atmosphere under the heat of gunfire.

We try to plant hope in the hearts of the children. Yet, they live in constant tension as they face ongoing threats to their lives.

We always feel this danger...

It's the current situation of the theatre... the whole camp... the whole country.

***SEPTEMBER 2023 - Warning Sounds Of Sirens**

At 10:30 in the morning, everything was good. People were at work and students in school.

I was at my front door about to leave for the theatre, when the warning sounds of sirens began.

Bulldozers and jeeps passed as people went crazy, trying to escape to their homes or find a safe place.

Mustafa called me:

The occupation army is everywhere. They have surrounded the theatre. I'm with Isra and we can't leave...

and then he says *I'm hungry...* and we both laugh.

For hours Mustafa and Isra were held captive in the theatre, like hundreds of others stuck in their workplace, and thousands of children trapped inside schools.

After this, we decided we must move to the rehearsal space in the city. It has become too dangerous to be inside the camp.

How can we deliver the rights of children? Every day, they are arrested and killed and all people are silent.

NOVEMBER 2023 - I Think They Are Targeting Me

They entered my house. They destroyed everything. They put us in one room, even the children, telling us to be silent.

I think they are targeting me because of what I do in the theatre.

It's a long street and there are many houses, so why did they come specifically to my home?

I feel anxious. I feel they will take me one day.

NOVEMBER 2023 - Destiny

The most challenging experience is to realise that Yamen, who was once right there with you in the theatre, playing, laughing, and quarrelling, is now a martyr.

I was shocked when I heard that he had joined the Jenin Brigade.

He was 16 years old.

I contacted his family because I needed to know his story.

I discovered he simply didn't want to live anymore.

He wrote a letter by hand asking everyone for forgiveness... that he was sorry.

These emotions are just too big for a kid.

Too many children in Palestine want to end their lives.

That is why he joined the resistance: it is a certain death.

At the theatre, we are trying to change their minds, so they understand other choices besides martyrdom. We think with them about where they want to be in the future. How they can determine their destiny. That there are different ways to resist - not just with a gun.

But inside me, I have bad feelings; I feel annoyed.

I become everything in their lives. I am the mother, the sister, the mentor and the teacher.

I am also facing all these invasions as I'm trying to help young people.

The situation is very difficult and all these pressures keep coming on me.

I've reached a point where I don't want to hear anyone's story. I am exhausted.

DECEMBER 2023 - Dangerous Ideas

One piece of news can flip all scales, and you remember you are in danger of being arrested just for an idea, workshops with children, culture and art.

This morning, the Israeli army broke into Mustafa house, put his family in one room, tied him up, and took him in a jeep.

Mustafa Sheta, the Producer of The Freedom Theatre, put in the pocket of the Israeli army.

At the theatre, the soldiers smashed everything, they arrested Tobasi, the Artistic Director and later Jamal, one of the acting students.

May Allah release you all as soon as possible.

***DECEMBER 2023 - The Heavy Burden Of Absence**

Today is Saturday, I'm supposed to meet Mustafa about work with the children.

Today was supposed to be laughter, you telling us a climate change joke, and discussions about our daily lives.

Today, we're supposed to switch from our reality and talk about future workshops and what we will do for Eid.

I am asking tomorrow, how will we operate normally without you?

Your absence is a heavy burden.

May God return you to the corners of the stage as soon as possible.

JANUARY 2024 - Seeds

These children in The Freedom Theatre are an army.

Despite everything happening, the invasions, the destruction of the theatre and Mustafa still imprisoned... the children keep coming back.

Two days ago, the Israelis invaded in the evening and didn't leave till seven in the morning. By eight the kids were gathered at the theatre, wanting to go on a trip to the park.

I wish with all my heart to give them everything.

If I get killed or something bad happens, I want everyone to take care of these children. They are more important than anything else.

They are the seeds and will grow up to give their fruits, to give everything positive implanted in them, to society.

Don't be afraid; this generation will be leaders in all circumstances and challenges.

Mustafa Sheta has been given six months of administrative detention - imprisonment without charge or trial. This can be renewed indefinitely.