

A STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION*

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JENIN REFUGEE CAMP**

**The text below was juxtaposed from multiple interviews taken with Juliano whilst he was alive. Occasionally names have been added for clarity*

I'm an actor, pretty successful. Successful, not good, good is up to you to judge. But successful at least by my salary.

My mother was Israeli, and my father was Palestinian.

I had one grandfather immigrating to Palestine kicking out my other grandfather and taking his place.

So I had a very bad navigation. I tried both sides... I joined the Israeli para shooters, and after three years, I tried to join the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Then I had two years in the Philippines with magic mushrooms in the jungle... *Gestures that his head is exploding...* and I lost all my identities.

I came back and said, okay, you have a gift. You are not only consciously un-nationalised, you are inside of yourself divided. Use it.

Now I live trying to implement what I think in my body, in my acts, in my daily life.

But to tell my story, I must begin with my mother.

My mother, you know she was coming from a very Zionist family.

In 1948, my mother joined the special forces, fighting for the establishment of the Israeli state, expelling the Palestinians from their homeland.

When she realised that what she had been told was a big lie, I am quoting her... that she was taking part in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, she decided to leave the Israeli army.

She joined the communist party. Here she meets my father, Saliba, a Palestinian Christian from Nazareth. He's handsome and she is beautiful and they fall in love. They get married and have three sons. And this is a big big scandal.

My mother's father was a socialist. He was treating the Arabs in the Galilee for free. He was a philanthropical person, loveable, till his daughter went to bed with an Arab. All his socialism collapsed, this animal came out of him. He threw her out of the house. Twenty-two years, he didn't speak to her. The community where she was born decided she could not enter. The animal of racism is covered there with a nice democratic discourse.

My mother obviously became an activist for the liberation of Palestine. She becomes anti-zionist. But let's be clear, because people get anxious when they hear this. Being anti-zionist does not mean being anti-jewish.

My mother educates herself to become a therapist through arts.

Then in the 80's in the beginning of the 1st intifada, she took her crafts and came to Jenin Refugee Camp.

My mother just appeared on the streets (of the camp), she has some paper, some pencils. She is a barefoot blonde woman, with a big white dress that looks like pyjamas from a mental hospital.

Slowly, day by day, people start to trust her.

Zakaria who I will tell you about later, his mother invites Arna to have coffee, and then she offers her house, and the project flourishes. And the kids can come and practice music, painting, reading and writing.

They received the Right Livelihood Award. And with the prize money built a small theatre in the middle of the camp called 'The Stone Theatre'. Being an actor, I took care of the theatre activities.

I succeeded in gathering a nice group of young people and we did a very good show.

In the mid 90's after the death of my mother from cancer, the theatre was closed down and I did not return to Jenin for five years.

In October 2001, Yousef, my acting student, drove a stolen jeep to Israel with his friend Nidal. When they reached the city centre, they opened fire on the people around them.

A few moments after the shooting started a nearby police patrol arrived at the scene. They shot Nidal dead whilst he was driving. Yousef jumped out of the jeep and was shot a few meters away.

Sorry... He was the joker of the group. He was the most charming boy, my best student, talented, amazing, beautiful, never practised violence in his life, and he does this.

Months later the Israeli army invaded Jenin Refugee Camp. For 10 days, the camp struggled to resist.

A few days after the Israelis lifted the siege on the camp, I went. I wanted to see what had happened to the children my mother had taught... my acting students... why Yousef chose a suicide mission... why some had joined the armed struggle...

I was happy to meet Zakaria Zubedi, the guy whose mother contributed the roof to build the Stone Theatre.

Zakaria's mother had been snipped to death and his brother killed. Zakaria had become a leader of the armed resistance and was now Israel's most wanted man.

I was lucky to be sieged with them for seven months and I did this film, Arna's children following whatever is happening.

Unfortunately, many of my students got killed in front of the camera, and the Stone Theatre was destroyed physically.

I left the Israeli society because I thought it was about time to get off the fence, and go and do something. And with Zakaria we started building The Freedom Theatre.

Its a venue to join the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation with poetry, music, theatre, cameras....

It offers the very basic elements of life, to children, to grown-ups, to women to men. Freedom. To say, to curse, to concentrate, to play, to create, first of all. And then of course, with all the tools that are possible, photography, drama therapy, computers, video cameras, lighting, whatever the person needs, just to flip away from years of occupation.

I am not going to pretend here to colour the situation. It's dark. No hope in Palestine. The maximum dream is about death.

Israel is pushing the Palestinian people into the stone age, destroying the cultural identity. Our identity as Palestinians was deliberately targeted, not only our cultural centres, the identity.

The Israelis knew to make us live on our knees sieged in these walls. To bring us into the tribal period of our existence. So we could not mobile ourselves for a different type of resistance.

Our responsibility as artists is to rebuild or reconstruct this destruction. Who we are? Why we are? Where we are going? Who we want to be?

The theatre is a place where people can think freely, test their thoughts and their desires and their dreams. A place where people can be equal in sex, equal in rights, a place where people can cooperate.

The theatre is not trying to be a replacement to the resistance. Arts cannot free you from your chains. But it can generate and mobilise the discourse of freedom, create debate, expose.

I dream that The Freedom Theatre will be a major force in generating cultural resistance, creating a political and artistic movement that raises its voice against discrimination.

The 3rd Intifada must be a cultural one.

* On the 4th April 2011 Juliano Mer Khamis was murdered outside The Freedom Theatre by an unknown masked gunman. The team at The

Freedom Theatre have continued Juliano's mission of cultural resistance despite repeated arrests and attacks by the Israeli Army.