



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

USUALLY when you say 'Palestinian,' what Americans think is 'war' and 'terrorism,' Amer Khalil, one of six actors recently in New York with the Palestinian theatrical troupe El-Hakawati, told us. "But the Palestinian people are like all the people in the world. They have artists, they have lovers. So the first good thing is just that the audience shows up and sees that there are Palestinian actors and there is Palestinian theatre."

Joe Papp, who originally booked El-Hakawati for the Public Theatre, abruptly dropped the engagement for fear of controversy, but the group was eventually invited to perform at the Dance Theatre Workshop, in Chelsea. The play the company put on there, "The Story of Kufur Shamma," recounts the forty-year search of a Palestinian man for the family and neighbors he lost in 1948, when his village was destroyed by war. After seeing it, we spoke with Mr. Khalil, a bearish, bearded man, who plays the role of fool to the unhappy hero, and also with the director and co-author of the play, François Abu Salem, and his wife and fellow-author, Jackie Lubeck.

We asked if the company members had been surprised when Mr. Papp cancelled.

"I must say, I was more surprised when he invited us," said Mr. Abu Salem, who is slight and intense. "But we weren't coming with a political point of view. It wasn't meant to be a play with a message or a theme. Jackie and I wrote it only because we happened to meet in life a man who was unable to adjust to the present time. He had lost his village, and we went through the whole process with him of going back and looking and remembering what was there."

Mr. Abu Salem told us that he was born in Bethlehem, of a French mother and a Palestinian father; was trained as an actor in Strasbourg; and in 1970 settled on the West Bank. There he began creating plays and eventually established El-Hakawati, the only professional Palestinian theatrical company. Ms. Lubeck—who acts in the play and, as far as we could tell, speaks fluent Arabic—is Brooklyn-born, of Russian-Jewish ancestry. She told us she dropped out of college in 1972, set off travelling, and wound up in Jerusalem by chance.

"When we met, Jackie was involved in a women's theatre company," Mr.

Abu Salem recalled. "It was a small company, and Jackie was doing lights. I can't understand how they chose her to do that, because she has difficulty with even a Walkman or an Instamatic. I kind of saved her. Her speakers weren't working, and I showed her how to fix them. And she said"—Mr. Abu Salem hesitated—"something nice to me, so I invited all the company for dinner. Jackie stayed in my house, and she never left. That was in '75."

"'You're gorgeous,'" Ms. Lubeck said. "The first two words I spoke to him were 'You're gorgeous.' He was so shy—he was there with a matchstick trying to fix my tape recorder. I took one look at him and fell in love with him. So I stayed."

We were curious. Had she said "You're gorgeous" in English or in Arabic?

"Who spoke Arabic?" Ms. Lubeck said. "I spoke Brooklyn. I learned Arabic from being exposed to it on the street, the same way I learned Hebrew. The first time I acted with El-Hakawati, I replaced someone who lived in Jericho, on the West Bank. It was difficult for her to be out at night, so I filled in. She had the role of a mute woman. It was quite convenient."

Was it a special pleasure for her



to have El-Hakawati performing in her native country?

"You bet. How could my parents possibly have guessed that Palestinian theatre—so ridiculous to their ears—would surprise them so? They thought the play was beautiful. They related to it and were moved by it. They came to Atlanta when we performed there, and my mother folded kaffiyehs and helped us pack."

We asked about the name El-Hakawati, which means The Storytellers.

"Around the Mediterranean, storytelling was for a long time the only way people could share their histories," Mr. Abu Salem said. "Arabs have a tendency not to be very visual—we are all hearing and thinking. There is no tradition of theatre in Arab culture. In 1971, when I started creating plays, there wasn't a single person on the West Bank who thought he would one day become an actor. I must tell you that Nabil"—Nabil El-Hajjar, who plays the obsessed hero—"is a professor of mechanical engineering. We've persuaded him to take a whole year off, because we think he can become an actor. But Palestinians have no schools for that, and we are so cut off from the rest of the Arab world. It's very difficult. Our next project is to create a little school in East Jerusalem for the performing arts."

We said that much of the humor in the play reminded us of American Jewish humor.

Mr. Abu Salem's eyes lit up, and he leaned forward. "Well, where are Jews from?" he said. "The usual colloquial expression for Jews in Arabic is *ibn'amm*—'cousins.' Obviously, there are even more similarities now, because now the Palestinians have a diaspora, too. I can't imagine how much closer people can be."

We asked who came to see El-Hakawati in East Jerusalem.

"Lots of foreigners," Mr. Abu Salem said. "The Israelis themselves—the average theatregoers—don't really come to East Jerusalem. It is still very much two cities. There is no wall, as in East Berlin, but there is still a drastic separation. And recently, with the *intifada*, people are afraid to come. Even with very close Israeli friends of mine, when I invite them to come I have to go and meet them on the West side and drive them to East Jerusalem in the

car. The Israelis who have seen the play have been very moved and have not uttered a word of protest. They've said things like 'It's a very important and painful play for us.' We wish there were Israeli theatre companies who would have the same effect on us. Israeli theatre is much richer than ours, but the Israeli writers who have tried to touch the contemporary reality of relations between Arabs and Jews haven't gone deep enough. They either feel sorry for us or feel sorry and guilty. They haven't gone very far toward understanding the transformation they have been through as a colonizing country."

He lit a cigarette, and went on, "Our next play is about the Crusades—about strange and unexpected encounters of Oriental Muslims and Christians with Europeans. We're trying to bring more understanding not only between Israelis and Palestinians but between the Middle East and the West. I'm terrified of the idea that we can go back to so much intolerance. Well, it has never stopped, really. But what happened with Rushdie last year, these little signs—they are signs of what is hidden on both sides, how each perceives the other. I can't stand that sectarianism, that exclusivity. I don't like the idea of a state that is solely Muslim or solely Jewish. I've always thought that the separation they're talking about for the future—the two states—is pragmatic but in the long run a not very productive or generous kind of solution. I think the Israelis have got to rediscover that they belong to the Middle East—where they've always belonged, you know? We have got to be together again, and live together."

Novik and LaGuardia

AS the race for City Hall began heating up, along with the temperature, we decided that a talk with



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somebody who had worked for Fiorello LaGuardia—arguably the most independent and most incorruptible mayor or our city has ever elected—might give us some perspective on the current crop of candidates. We settled on Morris Novik, an eighty-six-year-old retired radio executive, who was Mayor LaGuardia's director of communications from 1938 to 1945, and who continued to produce a weekly radio show with him until LaGuardia's death, in 1947. Mr. Novik, who divides his time between Westhampton Beach and the city, has spent his life in politics and in public-service radio. He grew up on the Lower East Side, helped to found the American Labor Party in 1936, and currently functions as a kind of elder statesman in what is loosely called the reform movement. He was in town not long ago to present the annual LaGuardia award to a graduating senior of the LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts (a school that the late Mayor had a hand in establishing), and he agreed to talk with us about his former boss over lunch after the ceremony.

"Students of government praise LaGuardia as a great reformer and a brilliant politician," Mr. Novik told us. "But many ordinary citizens remember him as the man who loved to conduct the Goldman Band in Central Park and as the mayor who gave them practical advice about everything from world affairs to the price of tomatoes in his Sunday broadcasts. He was one of the first politicians to understand and use radio—he used the microphone to teach, to entertain, and to unite the various ethnic groups in the city. He could talk directly to many of them, because he'd lived in Europe and he spoke six or seven languages—Italian, Hungarian, Croatian, German, Yiddish. He was a warm, short-tempered, enormously energetic, emotional man, who would cry when something affected him deeply, but he was also a shrewd politician, who picked the best commissioners he could find, regardless of party, and didn't hesitate to fire anybody who didn't measure up to his high standards. Working for him was exciting, exhausting, and lots of fun. When I got home to Long Beach in the evening, my phone would often ring around dinnertime, and it would be the Mayor. He might have an idea for a radio talk on some civic issue. He