

# How Does Khashabi Theatre Produce a ‘Dual Presence’ of Palestinian Urbanism? Ghosts and Memory in Its First Season, Haifa, 2015–2016

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*This article casts a spotlight on Khashabi Theatre, one of several independent Palestinian venues in Haifa. It explores Khashabi’s dramaturgical–performative discourse with ghosts, and thereby examines how it produces a ‘dual presence’ of Palestinian urbanism: the ghostly presence of victims of history who were uprooted from the city, and the presence of the contemporary community that, by converging at the theatre, plays a key part in the revival of urban leisure culture. The article discusses the particular location of the theatre in the city and the dramaturgical characteristics of the two plays staged in the first season. It also examines the objects and the actors’ bodies as elements that evoke and conjure up ghosts, and shows how artistic practice, which allows alternative places to be established, plays a key role in the struggle for the ‘right to the city’, which is also the struggle for the ‘right of return’.*

## Introduction

In a proposal submitted to the Palestinian Art: Visual Art, Theatre, Music conference held at the University of Haifa School of the Arts in February 2018, the artists Fadwa Naamna and Ruba Salameh explained,

Recently an interesting phenomenon has taken place in downtown Haifa. We are witnessing the formation of various Palestinian cultural platforms, established by collectives of artists operating independently – namely, without Israeli government support. This is undoubtedly a form of cultural resistance to the political distortion inherent in the structures and policy of Israeli institutions. These incubators allow Palestinian artists to create a ‘relative autonomy’ outside the political context that is imposed upon them. Nonetheless, they are still within the Israeli geographic and political context, as reflected in a reality of contrasts – such as paying rent or taxes to Israeli institutional or private organizations and dealing with the Israeli bureaucracy. Thus, their independence is not entirely absolute, but a pragmatic behaviour involving persistent situations of unease and confrontation.<sup>1</sup>

The proposal gave rise to the documentary *No Time to Celebrate*, produced by Beit HaGefen Art Gallery.<sup>2</sup> It explores the Palestinian cultural scene in downtown Haifa and follows the struggles of cultural producers, who at that time ran several independent platforms, including Kabareet, a club featuring various bands; an independent Palestinian film festival; the Fattoush bookstore; and others. The film

underscores and illustrates the claim of the anthropologist Nadeem Karkabi that Haifa has become the 'Palestinian cultural capital' in Israel. He explains that the far-reaching changes taking place among the Palestinian community in Haifa came along with the marginalization of the city in Israel's geopolitics, which opened a neglected space that allowed the rise of a Palestinian middle class in the city.<sup>3</sup>

This article sheds light on Khashabi Theatre (from the Arabic *khashba*, meaning 'wood' or 'stage') – one of the independent Palestinian venues in Haifa. Founded in the autumn of 2011 as Khashabi Ensemble, it has been based in an Ottoman-era building converted into a theatre since 2015, on the periphery of the Wadi Salib neighbourhood. The focus is on the theatre's first season, which opened on 1 October 2015. Through the study of memory, history and stories of the city, the ensemble members sought to restore Haifa's central status as a Palestinian city and to highlight the threats to this claim. The devised theatre workshops resulted in two plays written and directed by Bashar Murkus: *Sitt Bil-Auffah* (سِتُّ بِالْأَفَّةِ (a Palestinian lentil dish)) and *Sanat et-Taljeh* (سنة الثلجة, *The Year of the Snow*). Through these performances and the theatre building's specific location in the city, Khashabi Ensemble has conjured up the ghosts of the historic town, while fulfilling the possibilities and hopes of contemporary Palestinian Haifa. In addition, these two works highlight the fruitful tension in the theatre between the 'there and then' and the 'here and now'.

By exploring Khashabi Ensemble's dramaturgical–performative discourse with ghosts, I seek to examine how it reveals a 'dual presence' of Palestinian urbanism: the ghostly presence of victims of history who were uprooted from the city and the presence of the contemporary community that, by converging at the theatre, plays a key part in reviving Palestinian urban leisure culture. My proposed historiography is based on the affinity between the *right to the city* and the *right of return* enshrined by UN Resolution 194 in December 1948.<sup>4</sup> According to Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city comprises the right to freedom, the right to house and to reside, the right to artistic endeavour (*oeuvre*), and the right to take part in the city's formation.<sup>5</sup> This is directly pertinent to the Palestinian minority in Israel, which since 1948 has been denied the right to create a physical, cultural and economic urban space to suit its needs, culture and aspirations. Following Lefebvre, David Harvey pointed out that the right to the city is an active right to create and design the city's appearance to suit its residents' wishes.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Leoni Sandercock conceived of the notion of *the right to diversity* – namely recognition of the legitimacy and specific needs of minority groups, their legitimate presence in the public sphere, and their equal participation in the various specific aspects of life in the city.<sup>7</sup>

The interface between the *right to the city* and *the right of return* arises in studies that argue that the interpretation of the former can – and should – also include the right to memory of those uprooted from their homes. John Nagle refers to the collective memory loss inherent in the neo-liberal urban renewal efforts in central Beirut after the civil war that broke out in Lebanon in 1975. He links the right to the city with the notion of 'ghosts and haunted ruins' that impede attempts to bury the violent past, amidst the surrender to the temptation of modernization.<sup>8</sup> For him, the 'right-to-the-city' movements are types of ghost that have returned to the scene of

displacement and – unlike urban renewal initiatives – reveal what has been lost, thereby encouraging the city to be changed.

In his book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida coins the term *hauntology* to denote research that traces the origins of ghosts of culture. Hauntology, a cross between *ontology* and *haunting*, highlights a form of liminal existence between the living and the dead, and between those present and those absent, which allows Derrida to outline the *ethics of otherness*, and express the ontological status of those whose past is repeatedly projected onto the present. These ghosts, Derrida writes, must be exorcized not to chase them away, but rather 'to grant them the right ... to ... hospitable memory ... out of a concern of justice'.<sup>9</sup> (Derrida's thinking validated ghosts as a critical concept and paved the way to important theoretical developments in the field of theatre and performance.)

Joseph Roach, in *Cities of the Dead*, was perhaps the first to propose discussing ghosts in theatre through 'surrogation' performance or theatre, whereby the dead can speak freely through the bodies of the living. Several works on ghosts in theatre followed.<sup>10</sup> According to Marvin Carlson, 'the practice of theatre has been in all periods and cultures particularly obsessed with memory and ghosting'. The 'theatre's reuse of already familiar narrative material' and the (re)use of the bodies of actors and performance styles lead to the theatrical process Carlson calls 'recycling', which uses the past in a present moment of performance, for a 'ghosting effect'.<sup>11</sup> Alice Rayner argues that Carlson's idea about ghosting relinquishes any power that the ghost or haunting might hold. Thus, she believes, ghosts must remain in the 'realm of uncertainty', since they hover between what is known and 'the radical unknowing ... for what appears'.<sup>12</sup> Carlson's terminology and Rayner's terminology inform the approaches and questions addressed throughout this article about how the 'right of return' can be seen through activist theatre haunted by ghosts that express not only the right to remember but also a call to develop an alternative space and identity in the present and a different future through this memory.

A word about myself is in order at this point. I am a Jewish Israeli with leftist views (which, in Israel, means, among other things, advocating for equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, peace negotiations with the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories since 1967, social justice and gender equality). By dint of my national identity, I am involuntarily complicit in the ongoing discrimination of Israel's Arab Palestinian citizens and in the continued oppression of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. The members of the ensemble's founding team studied at the University of Haifa's Theatre Department. I have witnessed the formation and artistic development of the theatre since its inception. As such, I have not only watched the plays staged at Khashabi Theatre, but also been attentive to the theatrical language that Murkus formulated and the topics they chose to explore. The analysis presented here is based on archival documents of the reused theatre building, on press interviews and on my experience as a viewer and a witness. It explores the location of the theatre in the city, the dramaturgical directions, the objects and the actors' bodies as elements that evoke and conjure up ghosts, and how they produce a 'dual presence'. First, I will briefly explain why Haifa is a wounded city.

### Haifa as a wounded city

Karen Till defines *wounded cities* as cities that have undergone a historical process of physical destruction, displacement, personal and social trauma, and ongoing violence. The forms of violence that afflict wounded cities have persisted for decades and have long defined their social and spatial relationships.<sup>13</sup> The events that have left a gaping wound in the urban fabric of Haifa and shaped its planning in recent years occurred in April 1948 with the expulsion of the Palestinian inhabitants and the subsequent declaration of the state of Israel.

After the military operation to demolish the Old Town – an area extending from the city's eastern seaport to the slopes of Mount Carmel, comprising homes, markets, cafés, clubs and shops – the area became 300,000 cubic metres of mounds of rubble. As W. J. T. Mitchell explains, 'The expulsion of the local inhabitants is not enough – the landscape itself must be cleared of vestiges of them, their demands, and their history'.<sup>14</sup> Of a population of around 70,000, only about 3,500 Palestinians remained in Haifa, and they were relocated to the neighbourhood of Wadi Nisnas, inhabiting homes of Palestinians who had been deported or had fled. 'It's a horrific thing to see a dead city', Golda Meyerson (Meir) reported following her visit to Haifa a few days after its occupation.<sup>15</sup> Ariella Azoulay notes that visual materials illustrate the scale of the Palestinian calamity (*nakba* in Arabic).<sup>16</sup> Fig. 1 shows Haifa in the wake of a military operation that began in May 1948, as part of the Jewish leadership's determination to obliterate the Arab towns. It was intended that the refugees who had fled or had been



FIG. 1 View of the destruction of the Old Town. Photograph by Jim Pringel, public domain.

deported from these towns would have nowhere to return, and that those who remained would no longer feel at home.

Any Palestinian homes that were still standing were quickly deemed to be abandoned state-owned property. Within a few months, and with the municipality's encouragement, Jews (mostly immigrants from North Africa) replaced the Palestinian residents of Wadi Salib. Thus the Palestinian town was not only wiped out but continued to be destroyed and violently obliterated through seizure and appropriation. In the summer of 1959 hundreds of the neighbourhood's residents, fed up with living in abysmal conditions in the abandoned and crumbling homes with no infrastructure, staged violent demonstrations in the streets of the well-to-do Hadar HaCarmel neighbourhood. In their fury at their continued neglect and deprivation by the authorities, they threw stones, blocked roads, set cars on fire, broke shop windows and looted stores. Their protests brought to public attention the egregious gap between the living conditions in the posh neighbourhoods of Haifa's upper slopes and the disgraceful living conditions in the lower town. They prompted the mayor at the time to accelerate the relocation of all residents of Wadi Salib to apartment buildings in established Jewish neighbourhoods. Thus, as Yfaat Weiss points out, Wadi Salib was twice emptied of its residents.<sup>17</sup> By the end of this ten-year process, the neighbourhood had been entirely cleared. Many homes were demolished; others were sealed up to prevent squatting, abandoned and exposed to the ravages of time and vandalism. The neighbourhood became a site of ruins in the heart of town. It was both a terrifying and spectacular spectacle: a monument that no one had conceived, sprawling across the steep hillside like a tomb that refuses to disappear or assimilate into the city – a testament to what has vanished since April 1948.

In the early 1980s plans were drawn up for the conservation and development of Wadi Salib, including designs for an Artists' Quarter – the first conservation plan in Haifa.<sup>18</sup> The conversion of empty Palestinian neighbourhoods into a bohemian-style Old Town had already been done in Jaffa and in the Arab village of Ein Hud in the Carmel. Israeli culture sought to convert abandoned ruins into spaces for exhibitions and live performances and to repurpose desolate precincts into festival venues. Thus, for example, the Acre Festival of Israeli theatre was established in the early 1980s in the Crusader-age fortress complex of Ullamot HaAbirim (the Knights' Halls), after stripping it of all traces of its past legacy and Palestinian identity. In Wadi Salib, however, the high maintenance costs, the enormous investment required to develop a park, the buildings' dilapidated condition, and the comparatively low value of the land made the Artists' Quarter plan economically unfeasible, and it failed to materialize.<sup>19</sup> In the thirty years or more since, only a handful of buildings in the area have been conserved. Most are still standing empty.

Thus what was demolished once was demolished yet again. Since the 1990s, Haifa has been gripped by a frenzy of construction. Neglected areas in Wadi Salib have also been slated for new construction, and various projects have been established, such as HaRova ('the Quarter') – a building utterly divorced from the historical context of its surroundings. Countering the destruction of the Palestinian town and its ongoing erasure, various artistic works have heralded the return to the urban space and



FIG. 2 The then mayor of Haifa, Abba Hushi, looks on as the houses of Wadi Salib are demolished. Photograph by Dan, Photo Studio, public domain.

exposed the repressed memory – for instance a series of photographs by Khulood Basel Tannous that she took as a theatre student. These photographs were part of the Layers exhibition (2010), curated by the painter Yaakov Hefetz, one of the instigators and founders of the Pyramida Gallery.<sup>20</sup> As Basel Tannous explained in an email to me,

I saw them all, one by one, in my imagination, before the shoot. Only the last picture was entirely coincidental. In it, one sees a group of soldiers with a tour guide, who is explaining about the buildings that are destined to be built in 'a vacuum.' I asked my friend to approach them and leave the picture of my grandparents in a spot where it could be easily seen. I think it came out a powerful image, which for me closed the circle of my search for life at this particular location. In effect, it was the last picture in the entire set: after that, I really had no desire to take any more pictures.

### **Khashabi: an independent theatre established in Haifa in the shadow of a big scandal**

Khashabi Ensemble was founded in the autumn of 2011 by a group of students from the University of Haifa's Theatre Department, after staging *The Belli Belli Bel* directed by Bashar Murkus at the Acre Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre (earning him the Most Promising Director award). The play was based on excerpts from *Memory for Forgetfulness* by Mahmoud Darwish, in which Darwish describes a single day during





FIG. 3 Image of ghosts. A series of photographs at Wadi Salib. Photograph by Khulood Basel Tannous.

the Israeli siege of Beirut in August 1982.<sup>21</sup> Through a mosaic of memoirs, historical excerpts, song stanzas and a love story, a picture emerges of Palestinian life under fire and among bombed ruins. The stage language was inspired by *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. According to the production's programme,

With The Belli Belli Bel we will meet again, as in every year, on the same day, in the same place, at the same time, and pray that the sun does not go away. This is Beirut 1982, this is Nazi Germany – here, here, here is the nowhere and everywhere.<sup>22</sup>

After that production, Murkus and his partners – Henry Andrawes, Shaden Kanboura, Khulood Basel Tannous and the stage designer Majdala Khoury – decided to establish the Khashabi Ensemble. As Murkus explained,

We found that we loved working together and loved each other, which is the most important thing, to this day. We also realized that we had the same reasons for



FIG. 4 Image of ghosts. A series of photographs at Wadi Salib. Photograph by Khulood Basel Tannous.



FIG. 5 Image of ghosts. A series of photographs at Wadi Salib. Photograph by Khulood Basel Tannous.



making theatre, and that our important questions about what theatre is and how it is done are similar and even the same.<sup>23</sup>

The Khashabi project is led by members of the same age group, who went through theatre training together. Initially, they performed at theatre festivals or in collaboration with other theatres. For example, in July 2013, at the Masrahid Festival in Acre – a festival of one- or two-person shows in Arabic – they staged *A New Middle East*. Based on a play by Muataz Abu Salah, it was directed by Murkus, and jointly produced with the Oyoun Theatre based in Majdal Shams, in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. In it, Amal Kayse (Oyoun Theatre) played a woman who is buried alive, and Henry Andrawes (Khashabi) portrayed a faceless soldier. The stage action made the audience part of the burial event and the show won the Best Production award at the Masrahid Festival.<sup>24</sup>

In 2014, Murkus and his partners, along with actors of the Al-Midan Theatre in Haifa, took part in a study of political (national-security) prisoners in Israeli prisons. This led to the play *The Parallel Time* – written and directed by Murkus, based on the story of Walid Daqqa – a Palestinian citizen of Israel, who in 1987 was convicted of involvement in the abduction and murder of an Israeli soldier, Moshe Tamam. His legal battle to prove his innocence failed, and the military court in Lod sentenced him to life in prison. The play follows the legal battle of a character by the name of Wadia – a political prisoner serving a twenty-year sentence – for his right to marry his beloved Fida. At the heart of the plot is the 'Oud Pact' that gradually forms between the prisoners, who wish to build a musical instrument to play at the wedding of Wadia and Fida. Their conversations turn to how to obtain the materials to build the instrument, and how to form its round shape. Salah proposes using the wooden boards of a backgammon set. The act of converting these into an oud (a lute-like musical instrument with a pear-shaped body and short neck) represents a search for meaning, since a game whose sole purpose is to pass the time becomes a tool for artistic expression and thereby of resistance through art and culture. The round belly of the oud is also a metaphor for Wadia and Fida's ardent desire for a child. Wadia cannot resist the temptation to divulge the secret and calls Fida on a mobile phone that he has managed to keep hidden. Hiding in a toilet cubicle, he excitedly tells her about the Oud Pact. A guard enters the cubicle and overhears the conversation. Wadia's punishment is then powerfully conveyed, with Wadia bearing a heavy torture device on his back (like Jesus carrying the cross on the Via Dolorosa). After a surreal wedding scene – a groomless wedding, with Fida, veiled in a wedding gown and carrying a bouquet of flowers, and Wadia's cellmates, holding balloons, walking about in a circle – Henry Andrawes, who portrays Wadia, then emerges from behind the scenes and reads a letter from Daqqa – either in character, or as himself, the actor:

I'm writing to my son, who has yet to come into the world.

What is madness: that I am writing a letter to a dream, or that the dream becomes a dossier in the Shin Bet [Israeli Internal Security Service]?

You now have, my dear child, a security dossier in the Israeli Shin Bet archives – what do you think about that?

Will I stop dreaming my dream?  
 I will continue to dream, despite the harsh reality.  
 I shall seek meaning for my life, even if I have lost much of it ...<sup>25</sup>

In Diana Taylor's terms, the play removes Daqqa's letter from the archives and transforms it into a *repertoire* – that is, the play delivers it in a live, physical manner<sup>26</sup> – comprising *mise en scènes* of Daqqa's description of 'parallel time', and exploring the prisoners' relationship with objects, visits and hope. One such scene is a re-enactment of 'photo development' – Palestinian prison slang for lying on the bed, after a visit by one's girlfriend or wife, staring at the ceiling, and reconstructing intimate moments experienced during the visit. When such archival materials are performed, a reality is created – one which, according to Erica Fisher-Lichte, has transformative potential that helps establish a sociopolitical collective that engages in a creative endeavour.<sup>27</sup> Thus the play offers spectators an opportunity to participate in a liminal alternative reality, in which a prison becomes a creative site that infuses life with meaning.

In April 2015, after forty-four productions in Arabic, the play was staged for the first time with a Hebrew translation on the occasion of Palestinian Prisoners' Day.<sup>28</sup> But on the evening of the premiere Ortal Tamam – niece of the soldier whom Daqqa was convicted of murdering – led a protest demonstration at the entrance of the Al-Midan Theatre. Word of the protest reached the media, Facebook and YouTube, sparking a big scandal – such that eventually brought an end to Al-Midan Theatre's activity. Its cast, unpaid for months on end, tried to continue working voluntarily, but they were unable to hold out and left, one by one. This marked the end of an era of establishment-backed Palestinian theatre in Israel, in which the city's establishment recognized the right of all its inhabitants to culture, and theatre creators agreed to produce such culture with the state's financial assistance.

In the wake of the furore, Murkus was interviewed in the Hebrew media and said, 'I need to understand that I am not in a democracy, because this country tells me, "Bashar, you can't say what you want". I've now understood that, and from today I start to act accordingly.'<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in the summer of 2015 Khashabi members rented a building at 10 al-Khatib Street, and began converting it into a theatre. The Khashabi Ensemble is not supported by the Israeli establishment but by European civic organizations – including the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation – and local commercial and philanthropic bodies. The ensemble was registered as a non-profit in 2012, thus obtaining legal status. Since language is a key component of culture and identity, the plays are staged in Arabic with simultaneous English translation – an arrangement that also accommodates many Hebrew-speakers.

### **Haunted location: the theatre building as a manifestation of return**

The politics behind the location of theatres in Haifa is echoed in the theatrical events. In some instances, a theatre's location profoundly affects both the events and the theatrical content. Al-Khatib Street is situated on the city's eastern slope. At one end of it stands the

monumental Law Courts building (inaugurated in 2001); at the other, scattered dilapidated houses and buildings – some abandoned, some sealed and some serving as workshops. It lies at the edge of the Old Town, most of whose street names have been converted into Hebrew names alluding to Israel's pre-independence history. The entire area was formerly known as Jamaat al-Istiklal – after the mosque that was built there in the 1920s. Above al-Khatib Street is Paris Square (formerly Khamra Square); built in the Ottoman period, it was a major plaza during the British Mandate period. Unlike neighbouring streets, al-Khatib Street has not been given a Hebrew name – perhaps because it is merely a back alley, rather than a major thoroughfare – making it one of the few vestiges of an environment that has been symbolically and physically eradicated.

In January 2018 I met with architect Walid Karkabi, then director of the Conservation Department of the Municipality of Haifa, to uncover the 'archaeology' of the building that had been converted to serve as the Khashabi Theatre. According to Tobi Fenster, *micro-geography* – including what she calls the 'archaeology of an address' – is a methodology that allows for an alternative reading of space by analysing planning and legal documents in the building's files. These documents make it possible to trace the historiography of any given address from the period before 1948, through the 1948 crisis, to the present day.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Haifa and other 'mixed cities', they reveal the names of homeowners, building permits, correspondence with the authorities on various issues, and more.

According to a 1933 document, the theatre building belonged to Yusuf Khatib and Mohammed Ibrahim Khatib, members of a Muslim family belonging to Haifa's economic elite during the Mandate period. When they originally bought the building, it was a single-storey structure on a street known as 'New Street', as it lay beyond what was commonly called the 'Old Town.' Haifa City Council then decided to rename the street 'al-Khatib Street'.

None of the Khatib family members, it seems, remained in Haifa after 1948, and their family home was then declared 'absentee property'. In 1951 it was leased by one Eliyahu Bilaus, who received a permit to make changes. Today, the house belongs to a Hong Kong real-estate company with a legal representative in Israel, with whom the members of the ensemble arranged the rental. Before that, it had been abandoned for around ten years – and before that, it had served as a carpentry workshop and then as a restaurant. In the corner of the central space of the house there remains, to this day, a mural of cornucopias, symbolizing prosperity and wealth.

The building was converted into a theatre in the summer of 2015 with the help of members of the local community. When a building is remodelled in this way, periods and spaces appear to become entwined and to coexist: one is the new emerging structure, which is real in the physical sense; the other is the past and memories etched in it and associated with the various historical narratives of the city. Gay McAuley, who has studied the impact of theatrical works staged in 'reuse buildings', uses the concept of *matrix of sensibility*, coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to denote theatre as an urban practice that is rooted and emerges in certain buildings, urban ways of transport, social life and the politics of a given town, in support of

theatre culture.<sup>31</sup> Situating the Khashabi Theatre in the home of a displaced Palestinian family harks back to a Palestinian Haifa that no longer exists, of homeowners who became refugees overnight. This urban setting marks a return to an urban space that embodies the transition to the future in which Haifa's past is embedded. It is not a return in the form of conservation imposed 'from above' that reshapes the story; rather, it is a re-entry into Haifa's history – one that conveys presence, movement and creativity and unveils what has been erased and hidden. As a building with a multi-layered archaeology, the house triggers memory, reinforcing a sense of belonging and a claim of possession. Thus, by converting this particular structure on al-Khatib Street, the Khashabi Ensemble allow us to imagine both what has been erased and the future through performances about their actual and theatrical spaces.

### ***Sitt Bil-Auffah*: smell, taste, sound and memory**

*Sitt Bil-Auffah* – the production that marked the inauguration of the new theatre building – is a 'theatrical dinner' performed by actresses Shaden Kanboura and Khulood Basel Tannous. Based on the memories of their respective families, it began with the performers introducing themselves, addressing the viewers, welcoming them, and offering a blessing of Haifa, with the audience responding enthusiastically. They then drew back the large white lace curtain – a cross between a theatre curtain and a domestic one – that divided the stage from the auditorium. During the show, Shaden stood centre stage behind a heavy wooden table and prepared *sitt bil-auffah* – a traditional Palestinian dish that is customary during olive harvest season, consisting of bulgur, lentils and various spices.



FIG. 6 The entrance to Khashabi Theatre. Photograph by Henry Andrawes.

Using a kitchen as the dramatic space marks home as both a personal, private realm and a political one. As she prepared the food, Shaden's story blended with that of her grandmother as a child in the village of al-Bassa.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the endlessly chatty Shaden, Khulood played a taciturn character, who conveyed her family's stories through the fancy, stylish dresses her grandmother used to wear, which hung behind her as part of the stage set. During the performance Khulood put these on, one on top of the other, played the music her grandmother loved to listen to, and, in just a few words, spoke about her love of dancing. The empty, hanging dresses evoked the ghost of the grandmother which became presence through her granddaughter's body and the music.

The repeated lines voiced by Shaden in various forms during the performance expressed the geography of her identity, and the 'here and now' of her generation:

I am Shaden Kanboura  
 27 years, living in Haifa.  
 If I really want to define myself ...  
 an actress ...  
 hoping to become an artist ...  
 in love ...  
 fat ...  
 I need repair work ...  
 I need restoration ...  
 emotionally, mentally and physically.  
 I love cooking  
 and I love listening to music  
 and when I listen to music, I love to dance  
 OK ... seriously now  
 I am Shaden Kanboura  
 Kanboura and not Kamboura.  
 27 years ... living in Haifa.  
 An Arab in the State of Israel  
 I live in the State of Israel but I am Palestinian.  
 Politics has become the least of my concerns  
 right now ... It is a marginal thing for me,  
 not important ...  
 because far more important things still need clarification.<sup>33</sup>

The taste, smell and texture of the food and meal convey memories and spark personal, family and national memories. Through them we remember not only the food but also the place, the *mise en scènes*, and the profound emotions experienced at the time of the events. During the performance, the hall filled with the scent of fried onions and cooking lentils – casting the spectators in the role of household members, watching the food being prepared:



Nice smell, isn't it?  
 The best thing about cooking is when the smell begins to fill the house  
 and all the diners gather around and wait.  
 That's what our neighbour used to tell me.  
 She was an old woman when my mother died.  
 She used to make me sit beside her while she cooked for two hours  
 and say: Watch carefully.  
 And when the food was ready she'd let me taste it and say:  
 'Now go cook, and you have to get the same aroma and the same taste.'  
 She taught me how to cook and demanded I teach my children.

As though recounting a family story, Shaden remaps the geography of displacement, which she is a part of:

From Bint-Jbail we went down by foot.  
 We walked and walked  
 from one town to the other,  
 to Al-be'neh, to Al-Rama, to Abu-Sanan,  
 to Me'ely, even to Jish and Bir'im, all by foot.  
 They would say Israel is doing a patrol in one area  
 and we'd escape to someplace else.  
 Our shoes were ruined.

The voice representing the Occupation is dubbed by an imitation of an imitation, as Shaden ironically recounts, and emulates her grandmother's father, who used to shape his hair to mimic various figures, including Israel's first prime minister, Ben-Gurion, announcing Israel's independence – a ghost of the Palestinian Nakba:

Sometimes, while shaving,  
 he used to make different shapes with his hair,  
 Hitler's moustache, Elvis's sideburns.  
 But the funniest thing to me was when he used to pull his hair to the sides and imitate Ben-Gurion:  
 'I hereby declare the establishment of the State of Israel'  
 'Hevenu shalom aleichem [We've brought peace upon you]  
 Hevenu shalom aleichem,  
 Hevenu shalom aleichem,  
 Hevenu shalom, shalom  
 Shalom aleichem.'

At the end of the performance Shaden and Khulood handed out portions of the lentil stew, some prepared in advance and some cooked during the show, to members of the audience. On the opening night – which was also the theatre's inaugural night – we wandered into the street with our portions of lentil stew, stood around in groups, or sat on the steps. Groups came together and fell apart, amidst a medley of languages (Arabic, English, German and some Hebrew). The gatherings and the shared meal

created a sense of togetherness and embodied the recognition of belonging to a place that conveys the memory of the local community. Through the theatrical event the contemporary Palestinian community returned to a space that its members had been uprooted from – and thus what used to be hidden and repressed was present once again, belying the attempt to bury both the violent past and the urban renewal efforts in the present.

### ***The Year of the Snow: objects and ghosts***

The dramaturgy of *The Year of the Snow* – featuring Andrawes, Kanboursa and Basel Tannous – was based on memories of the residents of Haifa, the actors' immediate families, and on the historical study by Rabinowitz and Mansour of a snowstorm that hit the region in February 1950.<sup>34</sup> Their study included short videos that were uploaded online, in which someone enters the same living room, sits down and answers the question put to them by the invisible interviewer: 'What do you remember from the snow of 1950?' These videos prepare viewers for the encounter with a typical living room of the Palestinian bourgeoisie and respond to the repressed memory of the urban space. According to Manar Hassan, in both the Zionist and the Palestinian historiography and discourse, Palestinian society was *imagined* as a rural society that had not undergone substantial urbanization.<sup>35</sup> However, the Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bishara (1996) points out that modernization was, in fact, well under way in Palestinian towns before 1948.<sup>36</sup> 'The real tragedy happened to the urban Arabs', said Palestinian writer Emil Habibi. 'In Haifa, for example, they dispersed in all directions. They were entirely uprooted and disappeared. That's what happened to me, too.'<sup>37</sup>

*The Year of the Snow* captures the disaster that befell a family who remained in Haifa but were expelled from their spacious home to a small, cramped apartment. Their original house had been divided into twelve apartments, each housing a Jewish family. The play begins following the death of the mother and father, who failed to fulfill their dream of regaining possession of their stolen home. It focuses on the children: the eldest, Jamal – who collects items from the city's abandoned houses and streets in hope of selling them to raise enough money to buy back the spacious family home – and his sisters Mariam (who is waiting for her fiancé) and young Zina, who suffers from a respiratory illness. Their costumes, in keeping with the fashions in the British Mandate period, underscore their urban character: Jamal wears a tailored suit, Mariam an off-the-shoulder black dress with a plunging neckline, and young Zina a colourful dress. The stage action is marked by performative repetition. The play is not a realistic psychological story but modelled on the theatre of the absurd, with intertextual references to various iconic images of the modern theatre canon – such as *The New Tenant* by Eugène Ionesco, where objects are hoarded in a small room, ultimately suffocating its occupier. Similarly, the bird in a birdcage that Jamal finds and brings to Mariam as a birthday present echoes August Strinberg's *Miss Julie*. (Mariam roams the city with it and ultimately wrings the bird's neck.)

The set – designed by Majdala Khoury – features the highly cluttered living room of a middle-class Palestinian home at the centre of the auditorium, with furniture and items spilling out beyond the set into the theatre's foyer – reinforcing the theatre's domestic feel. The steps down to the front door of the house suggest a basement apartment, heightening the sense of impending, *unheimlich* (uncanny) peril, with all the interpretations and contradictory senses of that Freudian term – namely close, intimate and familiar, cosy yet terrifying. The placement of the spectators was also significant: they sat on bleachers on either side of the stage, with Arabic-speakers on one side and on the other viewers who needed translation through subtitles projected on a screen. Although this was done for technical reasons, it also separated the two audiences, allowing the non-Arabic-speaking spectators to gain a closer look of a gathering of the actual Palestinian community in the theatre, thus evoking the ghosts and the memory through the unconventional movement of objects and furniture.

While props in a production are actual objects that inhabit the theatre, they may also be markers of missing realities. The physical 'things' that repeatedly appear in the play become the essential ghostly mechanism. Jamal collects the objects offstage, effectively gathering the memories of their owners and making them present again, through stage action and words. When he first appears, Jamal brings in four chairs and then a dining table, arranges the chairs, and performs various ceremonial acts – gazing at the image of his father hanging on the wall, lighting a candle, turning on the old record player and playing classical music. He then brings in coffee tables, dressers, clothes racks, mirrors, picture frames and more. These generate action in the play and replicate the theatre mechanism itself, thus making them come alive. When Jamal feels that the father is 'looking at him', he removes the picture from the wall – but instead of hiding it, he places it on an empty chair at the table, centre stage. After Jamal removes the clock from the wall Zina continues to gaze at the spot where it used to hang, thereby making it still present. Similarly, the wristwatches that Jamal gathers invoke the city's missing residents. In the final scene, the objects fill the acting space: the living room has become a storeroom of mementos. The siblings sit, in frozen poses, around the family table. After a while, Zina walks up to the front door, looks outside and says,

They've come here and brought the snow with them ... The town's turned white, it's covered in snow ... I can't even see the streets any more ... And the houses are like sheets of paper ... Fresh pages ... Clean ... Nothing written on them ... Everybody can write what they like ... White ... Like a huge shroud ...<sup>38</sup>

She leaves. Jamal runs after her, and returns, carrying her in his arms, placing her lifeless body on a chair.

The objects and dramaturgy evoke the ghosts of the city, giving Palestinian urbanism a dual presence – both in imagination and during the theatrical event. The actors and objects that flesh out the ghosts of the former inhabitants of the historic town not only tell their stories but most particularly harness the theatre as a medium that enables the encounter with inextinguishable memories.

### Final remarks: haunted past and the return to Haifa

This article has sought to shed light on the first season of Khashabi Theatre, and how it created a 'dual presence' of Palestinian urbanism by exploring the history and archaeology of the house at 10 al-Khatib Street, which was reused and converted into the theatre. Located in a wounded environment that bears the marks of historical violence, the building highlights the injustice of the urban renewal process currently under way. Thus spectators are invited to take part in hopeful performative efforts. These are not only 'utopian performative', as Jill Dolan puts it, or a simplistic representation of a utopian future, but rather a social and aesthetic framework that turns participants into active partners in processes of change and political activism.<sup>39</sup> Before and after each performance some ninety people mill about on al-Khatib Street and thus bring the Palestinian urban space back to life. Al-Khatib Street has become a site of social gatherings and occasions, ranging from street parties to cultural events. At the theatrical event, the community is present and *becoming* – as Lefebvre dubs participation in the process of a city's emergence, through daily routine, art and culture. Theatre – as a cultural institution that has always been associated with cities and civic life, and as an artistic practice that allows alternative places to be established – plays a key role in the struggle for the 'right to the city', which is also the struggle for the right of return.

The return of the ghosts to the space from which they were uprooted was reflected in the productions of the theatre's first season. The smells, tastes and stories of *Sitt Bil-Auffah* and the objects and actions in *The Year of the Snow* conjure up not only what has been lost but also the tangible presence of loss. All these are gripped by the ghosts and require narrative and theatrical actions to rebuild their connection with their past. The qualities of theatre as a craft of time, material, action and process produce moments of repetition. This return is made possible through the actors, designers, director and audience, who come together and tell their stories – in a space of 'relative autonomy'. In this theatrical space, a 'dual presence' of Palestinian urbanism is being forged. As Bashar Murkus summed it up in conversation with Daniel Teehan,

When there is a theatre, there is a need for a café and for a bar. All of this is part of a generation that is redefining its connection to the city. My grandfather, he was afraid of Israel, he lived through the Nakba, he had this history and these memories. My father took this fear from my grandfather. Now for me – it's not inside me, I don't find it there, I'm not afraid, I'm here. Now you can see there's a new wave of people who are really finding a place to exist. They don't want to ever assimilate into the Israeli society, it's all about being here, it's being in your place, it's building your theatre, it's building your bar ... It's just to be. It's really to be.<sup>40</sup>

It is said that creating a theatre group is 'easy' – it is developing and maintaining it over time that is difficult. This was not the case for the Khashabi Ensemble. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, its founders managed to launch five new seasons, and were invited to perform at European theatres and festivals and gained international renown. It is quite possible that part of the theatre's international

success should be attributed to its practitioners' triumph in making a place for themselves, and their ongoing struggle to the right of the city while intervening in Haifa's urban space through the right to artistic expression.

## NOTES

- 1 I was one of the organizers of the conference, and the excerpt from the artists' proposal is in my possession.
- 2 Beit-Hagefen (House of the Vine) is an Arab Jewish centre established in 1963 by then mayor Abba Khoushi to promote coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Haifa.
- 3 Nadeem Karkabi, 'How and Why Haifa Has Become the "Palestinian Cultural Capital" in Israel?', *City & Community*, 17, 4 (2018), pp. 1168–88, here pp. 1175–7.
- 4 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 defines principles for reaching a final settlement and returning Palestine refugees to their homes and a right to the property they themselves or their forebears left behind. The UN General Assembly has reaffirmed Resolution 194 every year since 1949.
- 5 Henri Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City', in Eleanore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, eds., *Writing on Cities* (London: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 63–184.
- 6 David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27, 4 (2003), pp. 934–41.
- 7 Leoni Sandercock, 'Planning in the Ethno-culturally Diverse City: A Comment', *Planning Theory & Practice*, 4, 3 (2003), pp. 319–23, here p. 319.
- 8 John Nagle, 'Ghosts, Memory, and the Right to the Divided City: Resisting Amnesia in Beirut City Centre', *Antipode*, 49, 1 (2017), pp. 149–68, here pp. 155–6.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 175.
- 10 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- 11 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 7.
- 12 Alice Rayner, *Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xxii.
- 13 Karen Till, 'Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care', *Political Geography*, 31, 1 (2012), pp. 3–14, here pp. 5–6.
- 14 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Sacred Landscape*, trans. Rona Cohen (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2010), p. 77 (Hebrew).
- 15 Benny Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–9* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1991), p. 185 (Hebrew).
- 16 Ariella Azoulay, *Foundational Violence 1947–50: A Visual Genealogy of a Regime and Turning the Disaster into a Disaster from Their Point of View* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2009), pp. 9–22 (Hebrew).
- 17 Yfaat Weiss, *Wadi Salib: A Confiscated Memory* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2007), pp. 127–41 (Hebrew).
- 18 Hava Law-Yone, 'Haifa's First Conservation Plan: Artists' Quarter in Wadi Salib, Historical Exhibition Text', Pyramida Contemporary Art Center, 2018 (Hebrew).
- 19 Weiss, *Wadi Salib*, pp. 176–7.
- 20 The building that houses Pyramida – A Center for Contemporary Art in Haifa was built in 1954 by the Ministry of Education as a school to serve the children of immigrants to Israel – mainly from North African countries – who lived in the Wadi Salib neighbourhood. The school was closed in 1982, and in 1992 a group of artists founded Pyramida in the abandoned building. Its name reflects the architectural appearance of the building against the backdrop of the mountain slope.
- 21 Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2016) (Hebrew).
- 22 The programme is in my private archive.



- 23 Yair Ashkenazi, 'Director of the Play *The Parallel Time*: "I've Realized that I Am not in a Democracy"', *Haaretz*, 10 June 2015, p. 3.
- 24 Dorit Yerushalmi, 'What Is Being Seen on the Syrian Heights: On the Critical in the Artistic Endeavors of the Ayoun Theatre, Majdal Shams', *Theory and Criticism*, 42 (2014), pp. 257–79 (Hebrew).
- 25 Walid Daqqa, 'Letter to an Unborn Son – From a Prisoner Forbidden to Have Children', *Sicha Meqomit*, 23 April 2015. See <https://www.mekomit.co.il> (accessed 15 January 2023) (Hebrew).
- 26 Diana Taylor, *From the Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 28–30.
- 27 Erica Fisher-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 12–13.
- 28 This was the first time the theatre provided a Hebrew translation, the plays having always been in Arabic without translation.
- 29 Yair Ashkenazi, 'The Artistic Vision of the New Palestinian Theatre, Khashabi', *Haaretz*, 29 October 2015, pp. 2–3.
- 30 Tobi Fenster, *The Archaeology of an Address: Home, History and Ownership in the Planning of the Israeli Palestinian City* (Haifa: Pardes, 2021), pp. 9–19.
- 31 Gay McAuley, 'What Is Sydney about Sydney Theatre? Performance Space and the Creation of a Matrix of Sensibility', in Erica Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz, eds., *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 81–99.
- 32 According to the *Zochrot* website, the village of al-Bassa sat on the slopes of a rocky hill facing the Mediterranean, north of the Betzet Stream, nineteen kilometres north of Acre. In 1949, Israel established the Betzet *moshav* (cooperative farming community) at the site, housing immigrants from Romania and Yugoslavia, as well as a military airfield. See [www.zochrot.org](http://www.zochrot.org) (accessed 15 January 2023).
- 33 The play was not published. All quotes from the play by courtesy of Bashar Murkus.
- 34 Daniel Rabinowitz and Johnny Mansour, 'Historicizing Climate: Haifawis and Haifo'im Remembering the Winter of 1950', in Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss, eds., *Haifa Before & After 1948: Narratives of a Mixed City* (Dordrecht and The Hague: Republic of Letters, 2011), pp. 119–49.
- 35 Manar Hassan, *Invisible: Women and Palestinian Cities* (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017) (Hebrew).
- 36 Azmi Bishara, 'The Israeli Arab: References to Torn Political Discourse', in Pinhas Ginosar and Avi Bareli, eds., *Zionism: Contemporary Polemic* (Kiryat Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Book Publishing House, 1996), pp. 312–39 (Hebrew).
- 37 Emil Habibi, 'Like a Wound', *Politics*, 21 (June–July 1988), pp. 6–9 (Hebrew).
- 38 The play was not published. All quotes from the play by courtesy of Bashar Murkus.
- 39 Jill Dolan, 'Utopia in Performance', *Theatre Research International*, 31, 2 (2006), pp. 163–73, here p. 170.
- 40 Daniel Teehan, 'Bashar Murkus and the Making of Independent Palestinian Theater in Haifa', *ArabLit & ArabLit Quarterly*, 11 August 2016. See <https://arablit.org> (accessed 15 January 2023).

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