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Remembering Juliano Mer-Khamis

Monday 18 April 2011, by [KHALIDI Ismail](#), [MARLOWE Jen](#) (Date first published: 11 April 2011).

In 2006, the new Freedom Theatre [1] in Jenin Refugee Camp held an art competition.

“Don’t just go for the tanks,” Juliano Mer-Khamis, the co-founder of the theater, told the children-artists. “Hope. Where is the hope?”

A 12-year-old girl named Wafaa painted a mother pulling her son out of the ruins of a demolished home. Juliano gently admonished the young student, reminding her that the painting should represent hope.

“But there’s this red flower,” the girl said, pointing to a splash of color next to the rubble. “There.”

“I almost cried,” Juliano recounted. “So...hope is there. We have to pour water, pour water, pour water. And that’s what we do here.”

That hope was badly shattered on Monday, April 4, when Juliano was shot dead by a masked gunman outside the Freedom Theatre.

Juliano, the child of a Jewish Israeli mother and Palestinian Christian father, both communists, co-founded the Freedom Theatre as an outgrowth of his 2004 documentary film, *Arna’s Children*. The film depicts the art and theater program that his mother, Arna, established for children in the Jenin Refugee Camp during the first intifada. Juliano returns to the camp after the massive Israeli invasion of 2002, during the second intifada, when large swaths of it were bulldozed by the Israeli army. He wants to know: what became of the children from his mother’s program? Nearly all of them, he discovers, are dead. Several had been part of the resistance against the Israeli invasion. One had undertaken a suicide attack in the Israeli city of Hadera. Of the few that were still alive, one was killed during the course of the filming. *Arna’s Children* is a searing portrayal of how occupation destroys childhood. It also is a compassionate and complex portrait of Palestinian resistance, looking closely at both the cultures of violence and soumoud, or steadfastness, that arise in the wake of occupation. It is amid this destruction and hopelessness that Juliano captured some of the most haunting footage, tracking the trajectories of the young Palestinian men imprisoned in ghettos within ghettos. We see young children happily playing theater games in one scene only to see grainy footage of them years later, reading their final wishes before they enact their final scene: martyrdom.

Devastating as the film is, it manages not to stray into sentimentality or become a portrait of either victimization or vilification. It is a series of snapshots of the destruction of Palestinian society from without and within, a documentation of the thousands of daily nakbas, yet somehow manages to capture the dignity of those people whom Eduardo Galeano so aptly termed “the nobodies that aren’t worth the bullet that kills them.” It was from this film, and from these “nobodies,” that sprang the hope that is the Freedom Theatre.

Juliano initially did not intend to come back to Jenin after the release of the film. But, at a certain

point, he said, he felt responsible for his film. "I cannot just do films and go on," he said. "You do films with the purpose to change reality, at least to have some influence on it."

Juliano could have chosen to change reality without giving up his successful theater career. But, in deciding to build the Freedom Theatre from the ground up, he said, "doing this film changed my life. Suddenly, you are on a daily basis here. Suddenly, you are becoming part of the occupation in the sense of being occupied. Suddenly, my identity is boiling.... I go to Tel Aviv, I see this happiness, and bars and coffees and here [in Jenin] people living under total siege for years. I said, I can't handle this anymore. I did not want to sit on the fence. So, I decided to jump down to the refugee camp and here I am."

In partnership with Zakaria Zubeideh, one of Arna's former students-turned-militants, Juliano started the Freedom Theatre.

"The camp is alive," Juliano said upon constructing and opening the theater. "There is an energy, there is a spirit of cooperation, no matter what religion, no matter what nationality. As long as you join us fighting the apartheid, you are welcome."

Matters of religion and nationality were complex in Juliano's case. Much of the conflict was embodied in his own identity. In 2009 Juliano told Israeli army radio that he was "100 percent Palestinian and 100 percent Jewish."

Juliano represented the best of what it means to be Palestinian and to be Jewish. As Haaretz journalist Amira Hass recently wrote, he was the symbol of the dream of "binational resistance." He embodied the most multicultural, tolerant, generous and expansive elements of Palestinian identity. He simultaneously embraced the commitment to social justice, equality and intellectual exploration of a leftist Jewish artist/intellectual, the universal humanist who embraced dissent and the good fight.

Unfortunately, under the weight of the violence of the occupation, Palestinian identity has narrowed dangerously. Juliano was no stranger to this process, which found a foothold in the squalor of the camps.

"There is a new generation that lives in a discourse of religion, of tradition, of chauvinism, of patriotism, of violent relationship," Juliano once said. "The Israelis succeeded to destroy our identity, our social structure, political and economic. Our duty as artists is to rebuild this destruction. Especially the identity...who we are, why we are, where are we going, who we want to be."

Though the vast majority of the people in Jenin camp embraced Juliano, he knew there were those who objected to the work of the Freedom Theatre. "We are facing difficulties among our own society, and I say our own society because I feel I belong to the Palestinian society. And it's normal. Theater is change, theater is freedom. Theater is expression, not in the context of this religion or that political party. Obviously, it threatens the old guys, the conservative sections of the society."

This trend is partially a result of—and therefore Juliano is also a victim of—the larger violence of occupation.

"We are talking about almost 3,000 children under the age of 15 suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder," Juliano said of Jenin Refugee Camp. "This camp is sieged by electric fence, people cannot go out or in unless you have a permit. We have two gates, like a big prison.... People went back to the survival way of living, to the jungle...everybody for himself, because there's nothing left. There's no future, there's no hope...and people don't trust anymore, not even each other."

The Freedom Theatre provided a rare light in these bleak circumstances. Unlike many theater programs in the camps, where kids are permitted to create within the parameters of adult political messaging on Palestine, and are often limited to nationalistic re-enactments of victimization and resistance, the Freedom Theatre challenged its young actors and audiences from the start. Classics such as *Animal Farm* and *Alice in Wonderland* were reinvented as fresh, exciting, revolutionary theater, commenting with nuance on the occupation as well as internal societal oppression.

According to Juliano, “We hope that this theater will generate a political, artistic movement of artists who are going to raise their voice against women discrimination, against children discrimination, against unnecessary violence against civilians. To bring back the just cause...to bring back the discourse of liberation that was lost between Hamas and Fatah, between families, between factions, between interests, between the PA and Israel...and this is the real struggle!”

It’s difficult to imagine the future of the Freedom Theatre without Juliano. But Juliano himself once said, “At the end, there’s a feeling that the spirit is here. It’s already seeded. And it’s going to only grow, and I don’t believe that anyone can stop it.”

A masked gunman, ostensibly claiming to be defending Palestine, was trying to stop that very spirit on April 4 when he shot Juliano repeatedly at close range. But in the following message of Juliano’s young students, left as an epitaph after his murder, one can detect the red flower that 12-year-old Wafaa included in her painting of a mother pulling her son’s body out of the rubble:

“The revolutionary message will not pass away. It will come storming the yellow sands and the mountains covered by almond trees...from here, from the Freedom Theatre’s stage, where men were and are made to be free and engaged in the cultural revolutionary battle for freedom.... In thousands of silences only one voice is raising up; it’s the freedom fighters’, to whom you taught how to carry the cultural gun on their shoulders. Juliano, your mother’s children have passed away, your mother, Arna, has passed away and so did you—but your children are going to stay, following your path on the way to the freedom battle, and we will go on with your revolution’s promise, the Jasmine revolution.”

Juliano’s children

Ismail Khalidi and Jen Marlowe
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P.S.

* From The Nation:
<http://www.thenation.com/article/159842/remembering-juliano-mer-khamis?rel=emailNation>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/>