

Harakat Productions presents



Asra (أسرى): Stories of Palestinian Prisoners

Creative Project Brief

Brief Description:

Despite thousands of Palestinians being arrested under the Israeli occupation, we hear little about the stories of Palestinian prisoners and how they endure and resist Israel's carceral system. Using puppetry and audience participation, this documentary theatre production explores the experiences of Palestinian prisoners and the importance of *thaqafah* (ثقافة) or culture, and the sharing of literature, poems, and songs as practices of resistance and liberation.

Aims of the Production:

- To challenge audience’s preconceptions of political theatre through innovative approaches to the genre of documentary theatre.
- To move audiences emotionally and intellectually by facilitating audience engagement with stories often made invisible in public discourse in ways that enhance the humanity and dignity of Palestinians.
- To connect with and sustain communities of solidarity through the arts by providing opportunities to enhance experiences of connection, belonging and cultural citizenship.
- To address potential feelings of frustration, alienation, and disconnection by providing opportunities for marginalized communities to exercise their cultural rights.
- To create a safe space guided by tikanga to share in grief in order to facilitate catharsis and healing.



Figure 1. Asra as part of the Auckland Fringe Festival 2024 featuring two puppets created by puppet designer and fabricator Paul Lewis.

Fast Facts:

Presentation	A documentary theatre production using puppetry and audience participation comprising a cast of a six, including a Director, Stage Manager, three performers and a vocalist.
Audience	Anyone touched by the ongoing Palestinian struggle. Anyone with an interest in documentary theatre and puppetry. The production is intended for mature audiences as it contains depictions and representations of violence, torture and hunger strikes.
Run Time	The production is around 60 mins followed by a 20 minute facilitated dialogue guided by tikanga to enhance cultural safety.
Touring	A studio or intimate space allowing audiences to interact and enter easily into the playing area. A simple set comprising a table with two chairs. A projector and PA system with mic for musical accompaniment. The production uses simple props that are easy to transport in a large container.
Video explainer:	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9pRE9bIwms&t=2s

Production Background:

- June 2024. Harakat Production successfully awarded the Creative Impact Fund 2024 to develop Asra for a public showing.
- *Asra: Stories of Palestinian Prisoners* was presented as part of a development season at The Basement Theatre in Auckland as part of the Auckland Fringe Festival | Ahurei Mōwaho o Tāmaki Makaurau from 3-7 of September 2024. The production was directed by Rand Hazou, and performed by Acacia O'Connor, Ahmed Youssef, and Rand Hazou. Puppet fabrication and direction by Paul Lewis. Musical direction by Eva-Maria Ghannam Produced. Stage Management by Ariana Williams. Lighting Design by Jazmin Whittall.
- *Asra* was awarded the *Taurima Vibes – Tāngata Mōrehu Award 2024* from the Auckland Fringe Festival.
- *Asra* is set for a second phase of Creative Development in April 2025 before hopefully launching on a national tour to select venues and communities.

What audiences have said:

- *“Heavy matters presented with incredible restraint and precision.”*
- *“Anyone looking to utilise art to help hold space for the world’s grief in their body, I highly recommend going to see this show Asra”*
- *“I really feel like this is what theatre is meant for. And puppets also! We consume so much about Palestine but I really urge you to see this show by these diaspora artists here and now and show up for them in a tangible way.”*
- *“If you’ve found it hard to engage this show makes it extremely easy. Humanity feels like it’s slipping as we become desensitised. This show was simple, poignant and beautiful, and in the words of the people themselves.”*
- *“A moving and powerful night about Palestinians in Israeli prisons, the treatment, abuse and dehumanisation they are faced with and imprisoned for no other reason but being Palestinian. Amazing show....”*
- *“Thank you for last night and this beautiful emotional show.”*
- *“Surreal, but grounding. Incredible.”*
- *“Stories & voices that deserve to be heard.”*
- *“Absolutely incredible and powerful performance. Highly recommend.”*

Conceptual Background

According to a recent UN report, generations of Palestinians have endured widespread and systematic arbitrary deprivation of liberty under Israeli occupation. Since 1967, over 800,000 Palestinians, including children, have been arrested by the Israeli military in occupied East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Albanese, 2023, p.19). Before October 7th 2024, there were around 9,400 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli Prisons. These included 200 child prisoners as well as 3,661 held under 'administrative detention' - a procedure that allows Israeli occupation forces to hold prisoners indefinitely without charge on undisclosed information (Addameer, 2024).



Figure 2. Rehearsals for the Auckland Fringe. The production features five stories of Palestinian prisoners that are presented using a Bunraku-style puppet.

Despite the statistics, little is known in wider society about the lives of Palestinian prisoners or their struggles inside Israeli jails. Little is also known about the importance Palestinians in prison place on engagement with *thaqafah* (ثقافة) or culture, such as literature, poetry, and songs. For Palestinians in prison, engagement in *thaqafah* becomes a practice of resistance intended to “reinstatement, reconstitute, and reaffirm ‘Palestinian-ness’” (Nashif, 2008, p. 83). An important example is the story of Doreen Tatour, who was arrested by the Israeli military for writing a poem and spent 97 days in prison before she was placed under house arrest for two years and eight months (Baroud, et. al. 2019).

In the Arabic language *captivity* (أسر) refers to the capture of prisoners of war and is an explicit term for prisoners taken by a foreign power or in a colonial context. Palestinian prisoners detained and arrested by the Israeli military occupation are referred to as captives, *asra* (أسرى) (Kutmah, 2023). This designation seeks to ensure that the status of Palestinian detainees conforms to the definition of prisoners of war and civilians under the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

This production explores a range of documentary materials and testimonies of *asra* or Palestinian prisoners to examine the experiences of being held within Israel’s carceral system. The production provides a space for sharing marginalised Palestinian stories, a mode to celebrate the ability of art to humanise, and a method to acknowledge the importance of culture within struggles for liberation. While the documentary materials in this production will inform audiences about the human rights violations of Palestinian prisoners under international law, the focus of this production is on hope. *Asra* tells the human story of Palestinians surviving despite captivity. *Asra* is production about the struggle to reclaim humanity.

Artistic Vision and Key Ideas:

- 1. Documentary Theatre:** The 'documents' that this documentary theatre production incorporates include a transcript of an interview conducted by writer and journalist Mark Bowden with Michael Koubi, a former chief interrogator for Israel's General Security Services or Shabak. The production has been given permission by Mark Bowden to use the original transcript of the interview he conducted. This project also has been granted permission to use the testimonies of five Palestinian prisoners sourced from the book *These Chains Will Be Broken* (Baroud, et. al. 2019).
- 2. Puppetry:** This production primarily utilises a Bunraku (or half-life size) puppet designed and fabricated by Paul Lewis. A single puppet is used to represent the stories of the five Palestinian prisoners, emphasising the pliability and vulnerability of the prison 'characters'. The physical requirements of handling the puppet and coordinating their movements enhances a sense of care and respect the stories being shared while also providing a sense of theatricality and a physical language as integral modes of engagement for audiences.
- 3. Audience Participation:** A key aspect of the production is the use audience participation in key moments. The audience participation is invited by asking members to sit in allocated seating prior to the commencement of show as a means of eliciting consent. Audience participation is central to exploring the idea of 'being captive' to certain politics or conventions, but also to test the audiences' responsibility to care for the stories shared in production. The production examines the extent to which audiences may become implicated in the uncovering or the ongoing invisibility of Palestinian prisoners in public discourse.



Figure 3. An innovative aspect of the production is the use of audience participation. Here an audience member is invited into the playing area to engage directly with the puppet. As part of the Auckland Fringe Festival 2024.

Creative Team:

- **Rand Hazou (Director).** Rand is a Palestinian theatre facilitator and scholar who has delivered theatre workshops for youth in Palestine for the UNDP. In Aotearoa he has led teaching and creative projects engaging with prison, aged-care, and street communities. In 2023, he co-directed *Un-Welfare State* for Hobson Street Theatre Company, a documentary theatre production exploring the welfare system in Aotearoa. In 2019, directed *Ngā Pātū Kōrero: Walls that Talk* (2019), a documentary theatre production using masks exploring wellbeing in prison that was staged at Auckland Prison, Paremoro. In 2017, he directed *Puppet Antigone* at Auckland Prison using Bunraku-style puppets.
- **Ariana Williams (Producer/Stage Manager).** Ariana [Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Tūwharetoa] is an actor, a teacher of Māori Performing arts and an emerging producer. Ariana is a graduate of Ngā Mana Whakairo a Toi, Bachelor in Māori Performing Arts from Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi. She has performed in productions led by Te Pou Theatre, Auckland Theatre Company, Hine and Hawaiki TŪ. She has worked on productions as an assistant producer for Te Rehia Theatre's *Front Yard Fest* and as assistant stage manager in Katie Wolfe's *The Haka Party Incident*. Most recently, she was assistant stage manager for Auckland Theatre Company and Te Pou Theatre's *Hyperspace* directed by Tainui Tukiwaho.
- **Acacia O'Connor (Performer).** Acacia [Ngāti Porou, Tainui] is an accomplished writer, director, actor and teacher. She graduated Toi Whakaari in 2017 and has worked extensively across theatre and film. Her credits include performing in *Racists Anonymous* (2021) with Te Pou Theatre, directing *The Trials* (2023) for Auckland Theatre Company's Youth Company. She was recently Artistic Producer of *The Gaza Dialogues* (2024), a sold out mini cultural festival held at The Basement Theatre engaging with Palestine. Acacia is organising a Palestinian cultural 'Festival of Sumud' alongside many others at Te Pou Theatre in December this year.
- **Ahmed Yousef (Performer).** Ahmed is an Egyptian actor and writer. A graduate of Unitec (Bachelor of Performing Arts), Ahmed's theatre credits include *The Girl On A Train* (2022) at The Court Theatre and as Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* (2023) with the Pop Up Globe. Ahmed's television credits include Amazon's *Lord Of The Rings; Power Rangers* and *When We Go To War*. More recently he was featured in the Neon series *Miles From Nowhere* (2024) as Farid.
- **Eva Maria Ghannam (Vocalist and Music Director).** Eva is a mezzo-soprano who is deeply connected to her Arab and Lebanese heritage. Originally from Lebanon, she was a member of the Antonine University Choir from 2008 until her

move to New Zealand in 2017. Her extensive repertoire includes religious oriental church music, as well as works by Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, and more. She has performed internationally in prestigious locations, including Carnegie Hall and St. Peter's Basilica. Since relocating to New Zealand, Eva Maria has proudly represented the Arab and Lebanese communities on several prominent occasions, including the Rugby League World Cup (2017) and the FIBA World Cup Basketball Asia Qualifier (2018). She continues to honour her cultural roots through her performances, including her role in the development season of *America Rex* (2018), directed by Dione Joseph, and various community fundraisers.

- **Paul Lewis (Puppeteer/Puppet-Maker).** Paul is an actor and singer with more than seven years' experience as a professional puppeteer and puppet-maker. He was a puppeteer in residence for over four years at Auckland's Whoa! Studios, as well as designing, fabricating, and performing puppets for the TV show *Custard's World*. His credits as a puppeteer and puppet-maker include Stu, the mascot for New Zealand telecommunications company Slingshot; and as lead puppeteer for Bobby, the gopher boy hybrid in the Netflix adaptation of *Sweet Tooth*. He was part of the puppeteering team for the animatronic puppet version of *M3GAN* (Blumhouse Studio) and is currently filming the movie version of *Minecraft*.

Primary Contact:

Rand T. Hazou – Director

T: 021642414

E: rand.t.hazou@gmail.com

Insta: <https://www.instagram.com/rthazou/%7C%7C>

References:

- Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association (2024). Accessed 5 April 2024: <https://www.addameer.org>
- Albanese, Francesca (2023). "Arbitrary deprivation of liberty in the occupied Palestinian territory: the Palestinian experience behind and beyond bars: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967 (A/HRC/53/59). *Human Rights Council*. Fifty-third session 19 June–14 July 2023. Accessed 5 April 2024: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session53/advance-versions/A_HRC_53_59_AdvanceUneditedVersion.pdf
- Baroud, R., Jarrar, K., & Falk, R. (2019). *These Chains Will Be Broken: Palestinian Stories of Struggle and Defiance in Israeli Prisons*. SCB Distributors.
- Kutmah, Ayah (2023). "Prisoner" and "Captive": Defining Positionality and Conceptualizing Carceral Regimes in the Arab World'. *MENA Prison Forum*. 1 February 2023. Accessed 5 April 2024: https://www.menaprisonforum.org/blog_detail/61/
- Nashif, Esmail(2008). *Palestinian political prisoners: Identity and community*. Routledge.