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Israeli peace activist leaves behind legacy of creative rebellion

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy



Juliano Mer Khamis (Photo by Bryan Schell and available under a Creative Commons license.)

APPRECIATION

A masked gunman fatally shot Israeli-Palestinian actor and peace activist Juliano Mer Khamis April 4 as he was leaving the theater he had co-founded in the Jenin Refugee Camp, located in the Palestinian Territories.

The 52-year-old director, who had just finished discussing a production of *‘Alice in Wonderland’* with a colleague, stepped out to take his one-year-old son home with the babysitter when his assailant fired five times at close range into Mer Khamis’ vehicle, killing him and slightly wounding the babysitter. The child, sitting in his lap, was unharmed.

The murder of the much-loved Mer Khamis has shocked his students and colleagues as well as artists and

peace activists around the world. That he was killed on the 43rd anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a devastating irony for, like King, Mer Khamis understood freedom is essential to peace and expressed this conviction creatively and courageously.

Five years ago, Mer Khamis left a highly successful acting career in Israel and moved to Jenin Refugee Camp, one of the most besieged communities in the West Bank. During the second Palestinian uprising, the camp was a hotbed of militancy and endured several Israeli invasions.

It was in this war-ravaged locale that Mer Khamis, along with many others, built the Jenin Freedom Theater to promote Palestinian cultural resistance to the Israeli occupation. The theater, which began in a UN warehouse, has blossomed into a thriving cultural center.

In addition to annually staging several productions, it offers a co-ed, accredited degree program in drama, classes in photography, filmmaking, and journalism and workshops in drama therapy. Its students include former militants and petty thieves, as well as children traumatized by political and domestic violence.

The Jenin Freedom Theater was the most optimistic place Massachusetts storyteller Jay O'Callahan and I visited during our tour of the West Bank in December 2009. Elsewhere in the Palestinian Territory, the stifling effects of the Israeli occupation were pervasive. But in Jenin, we met young people who felt 'free' enough to contemplate their future and discuss taboo topics.

One young woman, looking slightly exhausted from a day of classes, talked of plans to pursue a degree in theater. The school's young film instructor showed us an excerpt of his short documentary examining the cultural practice of ostracizing young women suspected of engaging in premarital sex.

After our tour, Mer Khamis, a wonderfully warm and charismatic man, insisted we stay for lunch and invited O'Callahan to perform for an afternoon drama class.

'I am not naïve about the power of art to transform,' Mer Khamis later told me. 'I know the strength of art and its weaknesses. But culture is more than a performance or exhibit. It is the structure of a society, its relationship, the mobilizing and cooperating together, the reviving of values that we Palestinians believe in. It is reconstructing the discourse of liberation.'

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Mer Khamis' life and work defied the many boundaries that have been so harshly drawn in Israel/Palestine. Born and raised in Nazareth, he was the son of an Israeli-Palestinian Christian father and an Israeli-Jewish mother. Rejecting the conventional label of 'Israeli-Arab' he described himself as 'both Palestinian and Jewish.'

As a young man, he served as a combat soldier in the elite Paratroopers Brigade of the Israeli Defense Force, and then became an actor. His first film was 'The Little Drummer Girl' (1985), an American adaptation of John Le Carre's thriller on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2002, he was nominated for best actor at the Ophir Awards, Israel's 'Oscars,' for his performance in 'Kedema.' More recently, he was in the newly-released 'Miral.'

While his acting career was taking off in Israel, Mer Khamis often accompanied his mother Arna Mer, an educator and political activist, into Jenin Refugee Camp where she taught arts and academics to children denied schooling because of an Israeli curfew. Mer built the Stone Theater within the camp where her son

directed plays.

The project was more than a pedagogical experiment or act of charity. Mer and her volunteers worked in the camp during the first intifada. Stone-throwing Palestinian children were often at the forefront of that struggle. The Israeli educator knew the tanks and curfews, used to silence them, damaged imagination and bred bitterness.

‘There is no freedom without knowledge. There is no peace without freedom. Freedom and peace are inseparable,’ Mer once said.

The project ended when she died of cancer in 1995. Five years later, the second intifada erupted and the camp became the epicenter for the uprising’s worst violence. The Stone Theater was reduced to rubble during an Israeli incursion.

In his award-winning documentary ‘Arna’s Children,’ Mer Khamis chronicles his mother’s work and the tragic fate of his troupe of young actors. All became militants or suicide bombers during the second Palestinian uprising. Only one, Zakeria Zubeidi, survived. The former leader of Jenin’s notorious Al Aqsa Brigade, Zubeidi is now co-manager of the Freedom Theater and advocate of cultural resistance. .

The destructive trajectory of his former students’ lives and an unbearable discontent with the Israeli establishment prompted Mer Khamis to return to Jenin and resume his mother’s work.

‘I had no more role [in Israel] as an artist or political activist,’ he said.

A fierce critic of Israel, he was also not afraid to tackle what he called ‘the ghetto mentality’ and ‘dictatorship of tradition’ that had developed among the occupied.

‘We are a sick people,’ he said. ‘The oppression of women, the lack of tolerance, the violent relationships among people, the crowded living spaces which deny individuality, being disconnected from the outside world, this creates illness.’

Such disease needed the healing light of creative expression, he believed.

But this artistic outspokenness has been costly. Someone tried to burn the theater down during its run of George Orwell’s ‘Animal Farm.’ The play’s final scene showed a Palestinian Napoleon collaborating in Hebrew with an Israeli officer.

Mer Khamis and Palestinian director Nabeel Al-Rae received death threats. Performances scheduled in the West Bank city of Ramallah were cancelled. Although extremely popular within the community, the theater has come under criticism from a conservative minority who fear its Western volunteers and artistic perspective are corrupting Jenin youth.

Palestinian officials swiftly condemned Mer Khamis’s murder on Monday. Jenin Governor Quadr Moussa, who recently endorsed the construction of the New Freedom Theater in Jenin City, Mer Khamis’ latest project, promised to find the perpetrator ‘regardless of his identity.’

Mer Khamis, he said, ‘was a resident of the Jenin refugee camp and helped to build Palestine.’

On Wednesday, Agence France Presse reported a Jenin militant had been charged with the crime.

Yesterday, two thousand people attended Mer Khamis’ funeral procession. It was an appropriately borderless event which began in the Israeli city of Haifa, where he once lived and worked, then processed

past Jenin en route to the kibbutz where he was buried.

"We will continue to celebrate your path until we die," chanted his students who were granted permits to leave Jenin and say farewell to their teacher.

Israeli director Udi Aloni, who taught film at the Freedom Theater described his friend as "the sole sane voice in this insane place."

"[T]he Palestinian struggle has lost a brilliant, charismatic and courageous fighter for justice and freedom," wrote Palestinian peace activist Iyad Burnat. "His art was inseparable from his political commitment. The dignity and humanity which his art sustained were just as important to Palestinian resilience as his explicitly political work."

Mer Khamis is survived by a wife, who is pregnant with twins, a daughter and his baby son. One eyewitness reported that as the actor was being shot, he struggled to use his body to protect the child. It was a characteristic act for a man who wholeheartedly gave himself to the whimsical, dangerous work of nourishing the imagination of Palestinian children.

Violence can be an effective silencer and I am sure Mer Khamis' slaying has left many people who care about the future of Israel/Palestine feeling directionless. But I don't want to believe five bullets will conclude the story of the Jenin Freedom Theater, already a tale of gritty resurrections. After the mourning has subsided, I hope the art and music will resume.

This show of hope and creative rebellion *must* go on.

[Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is a freelance writer from Worcester, Mass. and member of the Sts. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker community there.]

Editor's Note: For a video of Mer Khamis explaining his theatre in the Jenin Refugee Camp, see below.

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