

Michael Walling

Achilles Comes to Palestine: Border Crossings' *This Flesh is Mine*

In April 2014, Michael Walling, Artistic Director of Border Crossings, worked in Palestine with a company of actors drawn partly from the UK and partly from the Ramallah-based Ashtar Theatre on a production of *This Flesh is Mine*, by Brian Woolland. Using the *Iliad* as a starting point, the play was set partly in a classical and partly in a modern world. In this article Michael Walling discusses how the production engaged with the contemporary Palestinian situation in terms of space, voice, and the body. He describes how the rehearsal process in Ramallah informed staging and textual decisions, and how questions of design, casting, and acting style came to carry political significance in relation to the Palestinian context, both as performed in Ramallah and in London. *This Flesh is Mine* was a co-production by Border Crossings, Ashtar, and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and was funded by the Anna Lindh Foundation, Arts Council England, and the British Council.

Key terms: *Iliad*, Ashtar, Border Crossings, Brian Woolland, promenade performance, space, voice, body.

The Space

WE PASS through the wall.

We are three British actors – David Broughton-Davies, Andrew French, Gerrard McArthur – and myself as director. The writer Brian Woolland will join us in a few weeks. Iman Aoun and Edward Muallem of Ashtar Theatre¹ have met us at Tel Aviv airport in their company minibus: its yellow number plates give them the rare privilege to drive on both sides of the Separation Wall. And now they take us through it.

The checkpoint at Kalandia is not a border. It stands between the Palestinian space known as 'East Jerusalem' and the Palestinian city of Ramallah. Nevertheless, between what are supposedly two areas of Palestinian West Bank territory broods this sprawling wasteland of concrete blocks, overshadowed by the Separation Wall. People queue for hours to be checked by the Israeli military. Many do this every day: they live in the West Bank but work in Israel, because that's the only way to feed their families.

The Israelis are young men and women, conscripts. Many of them are pale-skinned and fair-haired, contrasting sharply with the

prevailing brown of the Levantine landscape. They are heavily armed and slow moving, meticulous.

Beyond the checkpoint is the refugee camp. It has been here since *Al-nakbah* (Arabic for 'catastrophe' – the Palestinian term for the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948). Today, it is home to over ten thousand displaced people. In almost seventy years, it has put down roots – there are solid dwellings here, shops, and schools. And yet the air of provisionality and transience remains palpable. It is as if the people living here are themselves determined not to let it become in any real sense a home. For them, home sits beyond the wall, behind the checkpoint, in the lands from which they are now excluded, towns which most of them have never even seen. Many carry the keys to their ancestral dwellings with them wherever they go, as a reminder of their displacement and their aspiration to return.

In Arabic, the word for 'home' and the word for 'poem' are the same – *bait*. I suppose 'home' and 'poem' are similar in English too, holding within them the sacred 'om' sound that echoes through so many languages; but the discovery that in Arabic the words are



Above: Gerrard McArthur as Priam, Tariq Jordan as Hector. Below: Iman Aoun as Hecuba. Photos: Richard Davenport.



identical helps me to focus some of the thoughts that my time in Palestine has been provoking. It helps me to understand the huge importance of culture here.

The great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish writes in *A Cloud in My Hand* of the close identification between land and language,

the way in which the place and tongue of both are, or should be, central to the formation of human identity:

The place was prepared for his birth:
his grandfather's hill of sweet basil
with views to the east and west.
God's olive trees rising with the language.



But, for the Palestinian people, home is an absence. The *nakbah* of 1948, which drove so many from their homes, made land and its role in the creation of identity at best provisional. And so the role of the poem, the other side of *bait*, has become central to the creation and the preservation of identity. If Palestinian culture is undermined, then there will be no Palestine.

And so every cultural event, every educational event, every poem, play, and song, is an act of resistance and resilience. That is why, in total contradiction to the image

presented in the Western media, Palestine is probably the most culturally vibrant space I have ever encountered. Everyone you meet is deeply informed about history and art: everyone is actively engaged in the preservation and regeneration of culture. The young are proud of the learning they receive, and embrace their provisional status as a work in progress – their lives as a process of self-fashioning. It is extraordinarily moving. And very salutary to those of us whose cultures are being steadily eroded and commodified.

And so we come to Ramallah. Its name means ‘the hill of god’.

The Project

The project that took us to Palestine was a play called *This Flesh is Mine*,² which Border Crossings³ produced in collaboration with Ashtar. It had long seemed to me that, as a company dedicated to a theatre of intercultural dialogue, we should engage with the Middle East, but I was unsure how we could begin. When Brian Woolland suggested to me that we might work on a production that approached the politics of the region through the prism of the *Iliad*, it opened up the possibility of engagement without the pitfalls of simplistic moralizing. Mythology allows you to address the present without apportioning blame or picking over historical minutiae. It permits a purer, more emotional identification with the experience of prolonged warfare.

To begin with, we were not specifically thinking of Palestine. Our main development period was in Beirut, in collaboration with a company there called Zoukak.⁴ The workshops we undertook in our own country encompassed refugees from Syria and Iran. Always in our minds were the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq: in the latter part of the play, the search for Helen begins to seem like the quest for Saddam Hussein’s elusive Weapons of Mass Destruction – ‘a glamorous excuse for war’. We became fascinated with the way in which Achilles’ decision to withdraw from the war might move beyond the personal vendetta over the slave Briseis⁵ that is at the heart of the *Iliad*, and become close to the intense disillusionment felt by so many



Opposite page: Jumaan Short as Briseis. Above: Andrew French as Achilles, Gerrard McArthur as Priam. Below: Iman Aoun as Hecuba.

who are implicated in the conflicts in the region today.

Brian has written a series of three articles that discuss how the text of the play evolved, through workshop, encounter and rehearsal, from an initial idea about overlaps between Greek myth and the Middle East, to a complex, multi-layered drama.⁶ In this article, I want to complement that account by looking at the production we evolved through rehearsal in Palestine, and further developed in London, and at the ways in which space, voice, and the body came to generate further layers of meaning, both specific and allusive.

I knew from quite an early stage in developing the production that I didn't want to present this play on a conventional end stage. It seemed important to me that the audience should be in some way empowered and galvanized by the staging. Decisions of this kind are often made quite instinctively – or at least that's how I make them. It's only in retrospect that the meaning becomes clearer, and you realize how a creative or artistic choice has been informed by an immersion in research and context.

Looking back on the idea to present *This Flesh is Mine* in an open space, through which the audience could move freely, I can relate it to an increasingly important aspect of Border Crossings' work – the relationship of theatre to democracy. For this play, which looks at fallibility in leadership and seeks out the voices of the marginalized, it was essential to avoid any form of presentation that





Andrew French as Achilles, Jumaan Short as Briseis. Photo: Richard Davenport.

could be read as hierarchical. We needed to place our audience in a direct relationship to the action, so that they became a part of it, rather than its passive recipients.

Theatre is one of the few spaces left in our suspicious, divided, ossified world where you can encounter – not virtually or in a mediated way, but actually, physically, in the same room – people who are totally different from you. And you realize that they aren't that different after all. Theatre gives us a more fluid identity, allows us to be in someone else's shoes, recognizes that the other person's problem is our problem too. It offers us a shared space in a segregated society, public life in an age of privatization, participation in an era of passive consumption.

The Testbed Space

The trigger for the idea was our relationship with an extraordinary space in London called Testbed 1, which we had used for a

piece called *GAGA Samoa* in the 2013 Origins Festival.⁷ Testbed is a disused dairy beside a trendy bar and eatery, set back from the road near Battersea Bridge. It is also right next to Edge of Arabia, a gallery specializing in Middle Eastern art, which turned out to be showing the Palestinian artist Yazan Khalili at the same time as the production was on. Testbed is a brick and concrete vault, with a low ceiling in the area near the entrance, and a higher ceiling in the open space beyond. There is a separate area, ideal for dressing rooms, segregated by a rough metal wall. Metallic pillars with flaking paint compound the impression of a war zone. The space is harsh and intense, but also has a kind of sorrow, a sense of loss, a ghostliness.

Designer Will Hargreaves and I worked within this space to make it responsive to the play, and to take the audience on a journey into the heart of the conflict. They began in the area near the door, which we turned into

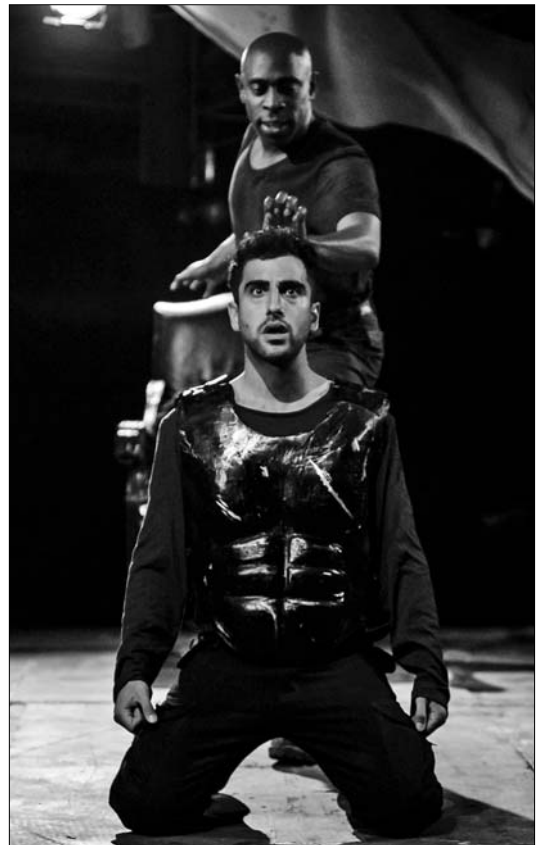
a sort of foyer, with long trestle tables and low, candle-like lighting. On certain nights – I wish it could have been every night – the audience ate Palestinian food here before the show. And suddenly, with a boom from the sound system and a lighting change, they were the guests at Agamemnon’s banquet, and Achilles himself was there among them, in the person of Andrew French, tearing in to David Broughton-Davies’s canny politician of an Agamemnon.

Talking about the performance at the Anna Lindh Foundation’s Manchester conference later in the year, Iranian consultant Amin Khosravi said that the security of the opening placed the audience, seated at tables, in their accustomed, distanced relationship to war. What followed – with the drawing back of a curtain concealing the larger space, and the audience being led into that open area, where they could sit close to the performance spaces, stand or move freely as they

wished – engaged them directly with the experience of the conflict.

There were two raked stages: one quite regimented, with some audience seating in rows around it, where the Trojan scenes were played out; one more fluid, surrounded by drapery, where Achilles brooded in his tent. Along the wall most distant from the entrance were stencilled portraits of fighters, before which Hecuba mourned her seven lost sons; and in the centre of the space, in the limbo of her captivity, Briseis stood alone, aware of her contested status as the theme of Achilles’ quarrel with Agamemnon, attempting to make some sense of who she had become, when even her own body seemed the property of others.

What was very exciting, watching the audience, was the realization that the experience of this space itself led to their making specific decisions. Because there were no assigned seats, and the audience was free to



Left: Iman Aoun as Hecuba. Right: Andrew French as Achilles, Jumaan Short as Briseis.
Photos: Richard Davenport.



move through the space, sitting or standing as they wished, their view of the events in the play was determined (quite literally) by where they stood. You could be close to one of the raked stages, intimately engaged with the scene; or you could take up a perch on a distant sofa; or remain in the first space, seated at a regimented table, deliberately detached from the unfolding action. You could lean on a pillar, sit on the floor, or move so that your viewpoint changed during the scene.

I hadn't planned this. I had thought that the audience would essentially move in a block between spaces – but what happened was much more interesting. Each audience member found her or himself watching not only the actors, but also other audience members – and became aware of tendencies to move with crowds; tendencies to stand back from action; tendencies to be very close and physically involved, or to sit back and observe. And this sense of what others were doing, which of course came to be read politically in the context of the play and the pro-

duction, led in turn to a questioning of one's own stance in relation to this unfolding war. Audiences thus became implicated in the piece's Middle Eastern resonance, whether by being detached or by being fully engaged. The play in any case problematized Achilles' 'liberal' stance as the man from the invading force who refuses to fight – and this knocked on into the audience.

The self-questioning that resulted was part of what made the production an exercise in democracy. A decision to be physically close to the violence and the grief, or a decision to distance oneself, acquired a political meaning. Is standing back and watching in fact a valid moral position? If we feel we have to engage, how can we do so with integrity?

The Ramallah Space

In Ramallah, of course, we did not have the Testbed space. To begin with, Iman and my assistant Rana Burqan took me on a tour of the city's public spaces, in the hope we might find an equivalent. We looked at open-air venues like the old city of Birzeit: we explored the possibility of performing with the audience on the large stage in Ramallah's arts centre. We even looked at a circus tent. But I came to feel that I was reading back into the Palestinian space what I was hoping to achieve later in London – and that this was the wrong way round to develop a production. What we needed to do was to find a way of making the production participatory and fluid for the audience in Ramallah, and then let that grow into the Testbed.

It proved a very valuable lesson – in the future we may well have to adapt the production to other spaces, and we know not only that we can, but also that there will be gains to be made and specific resonances to be found by doing so. Having abandoned our search for 'Testbed 2', we decided that our Ramallah performances should take place in Ashtar's own theatre building, where we were rehearsing. This smooth transition from rehearsal to performance allowed us to develop our relationship to space, and to shifts in space, without the usual sudden leap into a theatre.



Opposite page: Andrew French as Achilles, Tariq Jordan as Patroclus. Above: Gerrard McArthur as Priam, Tariq Jordan as Hector. Photos: Richard Davenport.

Ashtar Theatre has three public rooms, so the outer foyer came to serve as Agamemnon's space, and the audience's first base; the larger inner foyer with its bright stone floor as Troy, and the studio theatre itself as both Achilles' tent and Briseis' dark limbo. At the end of each scene the doors to the next space would open, often with the effect of revealing a powerful image towards which the audience would then move – most strikingly of all the body of Hector, laid out for burial.

Voice

On our first morning in Ramallah, Iman took me to see the tomb of Mahmoud Darwish. It is one of the two imposing, gleaming white memorials to shine out against the charred cityscape. The other, right by our apartment, is the mausoleum of Yasser Arafat. In death, Arafat has become more valuable to his people than he was when he lived. The corruption, the flawed personality, have been forgotten, and the tomb has transformed him into a symbol of re-emerging nationhood. In building a home of poetry, *bait*, the dead are precious.

The tomb of Darwish, looking out over the city from one of its hilltops, balances the militant stridency of Arafat's. It is equally huge and impressive – incredibly so for the grave of a contemporary artist – but contained within it is a small museum, which in

turn houses the poet's recreated study, and emphasizes the modesty of his life. Iman speaks of him with great affection: he used to drop in to rehearsals at the theatre, just to see how they were getting along.

It was Darwish who first drew the parallel between Ramallah and Homeric Troy, when in *Almond Blossoms and Beyond* he called his compatriot Edward Said 'the last hero in that epic, / defending the rights of Troy / [to share the story]'. For Darwish, Homer's epic is the history of the victors, the colonizing Achaeans, and so requires contestation in the fragmented poetry of his 'future Troy', the culturally inspiring city of Ramallah: 'No Homeric echoes for anything . . . / only a digging up of a comatose state / under the ruins of an encroaching Troy.'

No epics, then; but the shattered fragments of counter-narrative, calling on the audience to re-assemble them.

The Verse

Like Mahmoud Darwish, whose influence he acknowledges, Brian found himself turning to a poetic form as the way to explore the mythological resonance and status of the Palestinian conflict. More than half of *This Flesh is Mine* is in verse – a spare, taut, short-lined free verse, which compresses thought and provides a breath-based rhythm to endow it with muscularity.

Let me illustrate this by one example. In the scene where he is armed by Achilles, Patroclus says:

Through the roar of battle
I will hear your voice
as clear as when we lie together
in the still before dawn.

This is one sentence, a long one, covering four verse lines, with no punctuation. The verse provides the actor with a structure: if he aims for the last word of each verse line, and momentarily suspends the breath as that beat gives him the momentum into the next verse line, then he both conveys the sense of the lines and gives them the sensuous music they require. Add to that the internal rhymes and assonance, and the actor's voice becomes an echo chamber for the emotions: 'roar' and 'your', 'hear' and 'clear', 'your' and 'voice' – followed by the surprising, arresting short vowel of 'still', which so becomes the word towards which the whole sentence tends.

Language like this necessitated the presence of classically trained performers in the company. This was one reason for approaching Andrew French, whom I had first spotted in Trevor Nunn's Shakespeare productions at the National. I was also very keen to work with Gerrard McArthur, who is Associate Director of Howard Barker's company The Wrestling School,⁸ and a master of contemporary Jacobean. It transpired that Andrew had worked with Gerrard before, in Silviu Purcărete's production of *The Tempest*, when Gerrard was Prospero, and Andrew, recently out of drama school, was a spirit. Brian suggested David Broughton-Davies, whom he knew from work on the Caroline playwright Richard Brome.⁹

The Actors' Vocal Qualities

The charge generated through the coincidence of these classical but contemporary British actors with performers fresh from the siege of Palestine was intense. There were times when the particular phrasing skills and musicality of the British actors gave a new energy to the Palestinians' approach to text; for example in the scenes between Gerrard as Priam and Iman as Hecuba, or

between Andrew as Achilles and Emile André as Patroclus. But more powerful still was the way in which their accented English, clearly a foreign language however deeply understood, could cut across the classicism and demand attention for a different, immediately experienced reality.

In only the second scene of the play, as the audience flowed into the larger space, Razan Alazzeh as Briseis met them, whispering her lines in her Arabic mother tongue, at the same time as her recorded voice filled the space with the spare and insistent English text:

These feet are mine.
These legs are mine.
These arms are mine.
These eyes are mine.

The presence of both Arabic and accented English became a way to assert her Palestinian presence within our intercultural performance, and more broadly within the contested political space itself. Space, voice, and the body were all constituent parts in this ownership of the self.

Similarly, at the end of one of the scenes in Troy, Iman as Hecuba was left alone, knowing that her beloved Hector was about to die. Her prayer, her 'lullaby for the martyrs', was in Arabic – and the linguistic shift was intensely moving because it was so personal. English may serve as an international language, a medium for public discourse – but emotionally everyone lives in their mother tongue.

As the play went on, the classical world bled into a much more contemporary setting, verse gave way to prose, and the characters played by the Palestinian performers, particularly the two women, became more and more prominent.¹⁰ Their Arabic accents lent both a musicality and a specificity to the emerging clipped, rhythmic prose of the second act. For example, Briseis said to Achilles:

I had a dream. You and me. We were a long way from here. A house with a terrace on the slopes of a wooded valley. Olive trees. No bombs. Oleander. Lemons. No guns. We lie back and look up. No vapour trails. No planes. No rockets. Silent. Like this. A quarter moon rising in the evening sky.

And later, Hecuba:

Achilles the peacemaker? Is that who you are?
Achilles the aid worker, rescuing his pretty
little Trojan refugee? Go find Andromache.
She is wandering through the ruins. Looking
for the broken corpse of her child.

The Body

Just before the play was due to open in London, we heard shocking news from Palestine. Razan's fifteen-year-old brother, Mohamed, had been shot in the back by Israeli soldiers. It was 15 May, Nakbah Day, and he was part of a protest outside Ofer prison. The CCTV footage that subsequently emerged showed very clearly that neither he, nor his two friends who were also shot, posed any risk to the Israelis.¹¹ Mohamed survived, and told his story from his hospital bed. His friends were not so lucky. Nadim Nawara, seventeen, and Mohammad Salameh, sixteen, were both shot dead.

The incident received very little coverage in the Western media. When three Israeli boys were kidnapped on 12 June and killed shortly after, nobody mentioned that this was almost certainly an act of revenge. It was these deaths that precipitated the summer's assault on Gaza by the Israeli military, with over 2,200 deaths in seven weeks. Most were civilians: over 500 were children. A further 11,000 were wounded, and Gaza was reduced to rubble.

It is one thing to be horrified by such statistics. It is another yet to be closely involved with the families of those hurt in the violence. A war on our TV screens, a war discussed in print, stands at a remove from us. A war in the body is an immediate, visceral, lived experience. And, in the end, it is in the body that both politics and theatre take place. Hence the title: *This Flesh is Mine*.

The Dead and the Living

The characters in the play are mythic figures. They are also fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, lovers, brothers and comrades in arms. These relationships to one another are intensely physical – and so is the form of theatre itself, especially in a production that

breaks down the actor–audience divide. The fact that theatre is itself ephemeral, and that it signifies through the actor's physical presence, makes it by definition a space for the contemplation of mortality.

For most cultures, through most of history, the arts – music, dance, painting, theatre – have not been done for the living at all, but for the dead. Indigenous performances, African performances, Asian performances are dances for the spirits of the dead – ways to commemorate, to atone and to heal. Their purpose is to say that love continues, and that any pain or sorrow around the death needs to be purged. That the lives of those remaining will only return to a position of balance when the enduring pain has been expunged.

In a war zone, this might be seen as an overwhelming task. But that was not what happened for us in Palestine. Our Western culture has become very wary of death and the body: we live in constant denial of our mortality. In Palestine, where young people are under constant threat, death is more immediate, more of a companion. When this goes wrong, it can become fetishized in the figure of the suicide bomber; but most of the time its effect is to underline the preciousness and intensity of life, and the value to that life of the people who have gone before.

And so the body became central to the performance. Briseis, alone in her captive limbo, claimed her flesh as her identity. Hecuba mourned her sons by stamping in a bowl of water. Achilles generated an electric charge around the dead body of Patroclus, unable to touch the flesh that he had kissed but minutes earlier. Priam, stripped of the ornaments of kingship, knelt bare-chested before Achilles to beg for the body of his son. Time and again, the dead body, wrapped for mourning in the Palestinian tradition, took a central position on one of the raked stages. Achilles says to Priam:

You cannot see the body –
not until it has been made ready.
I will have the body washed, prepared
and anointed with oil.
When that is done, it will be shrouded
awaiting its return to Troy.

When you have seen the body, Priam,
then we will eat together,
you and I.

In Andrew's reading, 'the body' was something challenging and difficult for Achilles, an idea he needed to probe and question at every mention, exploring the mystery of physical existence as he prepared himself to face his own mortality. Then, the seeing of the body resolved into eating, the sustaining of the living body through an act of communion. The play began from a banquet, and early on there was real food in the centre of Achilles' space, occupying the very site where the body of Patroclus would later lie. It was also the site where, in the second act, Briseis and Achilles would make love in the early morning light.

In making the production so very rooted in the presence of the body, we of course drew attention to the actors as physical beings. That inevitably encompasses such attributes as age, race, and gender. That was another reason for casting Andrew, who is black: a group of actors who will, because of the project being a collaboration between companies from two countries, be seen as in some way representing contemporary Britain, cannot be entirely composed of white Europeans. A pluralist acting company has a lot to say when performing in a society that has been segregated and 'othered' by a colonial power.

Similarly, in Razan's performance as Briseis, the acknowledgment of an active sexuality in the body of an Arab woman was a very brave and powerful political statement. There was a physical charge in every moment she inhabited the space – an energy that came close to dance. At one point in rehearsals, we experimented with the possibility that she and Iman (playing Hecuba) might actually dance at the end of the play, but somehow this seemed to take their physicality away from the power of their signifying presence. The end of the play became about their simple physical occupation of the space.

For the Palestinian people, including the refugees in Kalandia, and the diaspora longing for return, their presence on the land is crucial. To abandon the space is to abandon the self. In the text, Briseis, whose family has been wiped out in the siege, is anxious to leave the homeland that has become a war zone. She sees Achilles as her 'ticket out of here'. Hecuba, a captive in Achilles' tent, insists that she should remain. 'You leave, and you abandon your self. You will be nothing.'

In the final moments, these two women were left alone. Hecuba had won Briseis over, and together they set out back into the ruined city of Troy. It was a space that Briseis had not entered at any previous point in the play – and now its raked stage, with a crater blasted at its heart, seemed at once holy and daunting. Hecuba, wounded, needed support as they climbed the rake together. Their journey was long, slow, physical, and tough. But they were home.

They had passed through the wall.

Notes and References

1. See <www.ashtar-theatre.org>.
2. London: Oberon Books, 2014. The play can be ordered online from <www.bordercrossings.org.uk/BookShop.aspx>.
3. See <www.bordercrossings.org.uk>.
4. See <<http://zoukak.org/>>.
5. Briseis is a captured female slave from the Trojan hinterland, whom Agamemnon steals from Achilles, leading to the latter's withdrawal from the war.
6. Originally published in *The Journal for Drama in Education*, Vol. XXX, Nos. 1 and 2, Vol. XXXI, No. 1. Also available online at <<http://thisfleshismine.blogspot.co.uk/>>.
7. See <www.originsfestival.com>.
8. See <www.thewrestlingschool.co.uk/>.
9. See <www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome/>.
10. It should be explained that, because of problems with visas, Razan and Emile were not able to perform in London, where their roles were taken by two UK-based Arab performers, Jumaan Short and Tariq Jordan. By this time, the production was in a fully finished state, and so the presence of these Palestinian actors remained very real. See <http://bordercrossingsblog.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/the-matter-of-visas.html> for fuller discussion.
11. See <www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/22/footage-palestinian-boys-shot-genuine-btselem>.