

## **A Review of the film "We Are Here"**

Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) in Gaza talked to Ali Abu Yaseen, director of the Ashtar Theater in Gaza about the film "We Are Here". The film, which was produced by RLS, featuring seven young actresses and actors from the area - explores what it means to live in Gaza. Occupation, siege and war form the backdrop but the film also considers issues of love and the importance of theater and art.

### **What did you like the most about the film?**

To me, the film painted a very expressive, deep and tragic picture; there are also a lot of things to be read between the lines. The treatment of the children's monologues in particular, was remarkable, the directors focus on presenting the transformation of youth across time, from childhood to early adolescent shed heartbreaking light on the dreams of little children, in contrast to the dialogues of older children. I thoroughly enjoyed the exchanges between the young kids - their expressions of culture and language. I also liked how they articulated their most inner feelings, which represent the feelings of all Palestinian children and youth whose dreams are broken on the doorstep of oppressive reality, of political conflicts and occupation.

I enjoyed the music, the angles of the shots taken in the areas destroyed after the last war and the presentation of the beach. A lot of people take photos of Gaza's beach, but the director framed it as if it were located in a very prestigious place in Europe. It was very striking and very beautiful.

I also liked how the film presented female actors - Gaza has successful actresses such as Yasmeen, Heba and Yasmeen Abu Amr who challenge the world's perception of us as they see Gazans enabling women as equal members of society. Surviving social traditions still affect the success of females, but we prove that women are gaining progress, finding themselves, and finding color in life.

### **Can you please tell me about the production stage of the film?**

I think it took a lot of effort and time, because the director was keen for the film to articulate the full range of issues and aspects that make up modern day reality in Gaza, such as the political situation. Although it features the stories of young people, she also tries to expose the viewer to the general psychological, social, political and geographical atmospheres the children live through. I liked the different angles she worked through to present such complex and harsh realities in tandem with the universal simplicity and beauty of children's inner worlds. She could have taken the easy way out and simply conducted interviews with





the youth, but she chose to pay double efforts to achieve her vision. I believe this is because she loves Gaza and feels with Gazan children.

That's why I loved how she expressed Gaza's geography and its children. Usually, filmmakers and directors who present the Palestinian case in their work choose to show romantic old vintage houses, while Gaza's houses now are in fact as modernized as in any other country. That she presented the beauty of Gaza sends out a message to the world that people portrayed in films, and in all forms of art that are directed to the world, deserve to have decent lives.

**You were the one who called the actors and actresses during the film, and told them who did and who didn't get permission to enter the Erez crossing to reach Ramallah. How hard was it for you to tell them this? And how did you handle it?**

The point is, I don't treat them as a trainer whose work with them finishes when a program ends. Even after graduation, I still maintain relationships with the children I have trained. The trainees need to feel that I'm there for them and that I'm supporting them. Whenever any of them picks up the phone to call me, I do respond and try to help.

I especially try to support them psychologically. I try to work through and work out their negative energy through trainings and other activities.

It's fine, however. It is right that we have a lot of dreams, but I wish that they could travel like other actors. Actors from other countries have the freedom to travel around the world. They have the ability, the privilege to travel

and participate in festivals and shows in international events when they need and when they want to. I do hope that one day soon Gaza's actors will be able to travel, experience, represent Palestine, fulfill their dreams and develop their artistic skills to become great actors.

**What do you think the film lacked?**

I'm not a filmmaker, but this film was special. I felt good about it because it allowed me to see my team growing into successful actors and actresses. Sometimes the trainer doesn't always see his trainees' faults, but in the film, I could spot them all, which helped me work on enhancing their performances. I consider this film a very rich and significant documentation of the present times and challenges for me, for Ashtar and for the RLS. It is a very important piece of work for the history of Palestine, a necessary illustration for the world – which needs to see real life in Gaza.

A lot of people around the world imagine Gaza as an old, un-modernized and anti-modern city, so certain audiences will be astonished to see actors and actresses who speak good English. Those people need to know that Gaza has successful and talented youth who love theatre and love life.

It is important, when making a film, to focus on a specific topic so as to present the clearest picture possible. It is excellent that the film focused on the monologues of the children, with a secondary focus on their suffering, their dreams and development, their theatre work, their language and the photos from Gaza.

**Do you think the film will succeed in sending out a message to the world? And are you satisfied with it?**

I think it's a yes to both questions. The film's message is directed outward towards the wider world. I'm very satisfied with this message because it is unique. It is a humanitarian message, not a political one. There are a lot of political messages sent through films, but this is the first time a fundamentally humanitarian message is sent out because it's generated through its actors. Actors are the most peace loving people. Added to that, they are children.

This message is a 1,000 times stronger than a



political speech. Children's voices are always more honest and because of that, more powerful.

The film presents combinations of times of peace and times of war, of love and hate, of theatre and filmmaking. Reflecting this multiplicity, the film itself is a mix of cinema and theatre forms, moving between film scenes and scenes from theatre performances.

Viewers from Gaza told me that it made them cry, though they're citizens of Gaza and obviously familiar with life here, so imagine how other people from the world will view it? Indeed I am sure it will have a great effect worldwide.

**As a Palestinian artist, what is your message to people of the world who will see the film?**

If they do see it and are moved by it, I hope that they sympathize with us and act as a supporting voice to our case. I hope they act to help us achieve an independent peaceful country, because all of our sufferings are caused by the Israeli occupation.

We are the last occupied country in the world. I can't believe that we are living in 2017 and there are still people who occupy other people's countries. If we Palestinians who are occupied reject oppression, how can the free people of the world accept this for us?

How is it possible that we have been defending our right to be free for 70 years, while the whole world acknowledges this right for us? The last report by UN which suspended the settlements

in the West Bank is a key marker and a critical legal decision that assures our rights.

We shout out for the free souls of the world to save us. Save Palestine's children, artists and talents.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is one of the major institutions of political education in the Federal Republic of Germany. RLS serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as a research center for progressive social development. It is closely affiliated to the German Left Party (DIE LINKE). The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine has supported partners in Palestine since 2000, and established the Regional Office in Ramallah in 2008. Today, the office is in charge of project cooperation with partners in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip as well as in Jordan.

Let's talk about Gaza is a collection of interviews from people of Gaza about their personal daily life experience. It describes the sociopolitical and economic situation of the people in Gaza. Views and opinions expressed in the interviews are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily represent the views of interviewer/organization.

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