

***Relationships Reimagined: Analyzing
International Partnerships With
Palestinian Theatre to Highlight the
Potential for Greater Impacts***
Jordan Buck

International collaboration and support for Palestinian theatre can compromise its effectiveness as a tool for resisting Israeli occupation. Furthermore, the integration of principles from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and the recentering of Palestinian narratives holds the potential to overcome challenges within international collaboration. This will ultimately enhance support for Palestinians' ongoing struggle for liberation. After providing historical context, the paper will focus on Palestinian theatrical activities occurring after the signing of the Oslo Accords, a series of private negotiations intended to impose a two-state solution. The paper will then detail the pros and cons of international funding for and partnerships with theatrical endeavors in Palestine, and make recommendations for improving such partnerships in the future.

Given that this paper will discuss how international collaboration with Palestinian theatre affects its efficacy as an avenue for social change, a brief historical overview of its development before and in the beginning stages of these partnerships will be provided. Rather than focusing only on the dramaturgical aspects of Palestinian theatrical performances, this paper also examines instances of collaborative theatre making in Palestine to better understand their local and global manifestations and perceptions, and how to more intentionally carry out future efforts to provide the best possible outcomes for Palestinians.

Historical Background of Palestinian Theater

The modern theatrical activities in Palestine have taken inspiration from folk traditions such as shadow theatre, *hakawati*, *maqama*, and even *dabka* dances (Snir 2005, 2). These public storytelling and performance traditions were not necessarily limited to Palestine, as the evolution of cultural production was more or less in line with that of the rest of the Ottoman territories (Fig. 1) during the several decades before the Empire's demise. Additionally, Palestinian theatre at the time drew much of its influence from visiting theatrical productions which toured around the greater Levant (Nassar 2006, 17). It wasn't until about the 1930s, when the British Mandate for Palestine was in full swing, that "an explicit political consciousness" emerged from within Palestinian society, and was reflected in theatre (Nassar 2006, 17).

There was pushback from British authorities, who sought to prohibit any political messaging in theatre performances. Artistic growth was further crippled by the atrocities of the *Nakba*, the Arabic word referring to the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their land in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The aftermath of the war brought further barriers to artistic production. Notably, the obstacles of displacement and foreign rule, whether by Egypt's control over the Gaza Strip, Transjordan's annexation of the West Bank, or Israel's occupation of pre-1948 Palestine (Fig. 2). These events effectively stripped away Palestinian cultural autonomy, and the immense trauma of displacement and occupation shifted most Palestinians' priorities away from artistic production. It is noted by Reuven Snir, a historian of Palestinian theatre, that during this period, "The few attempts to accelerate the development of local theatre under Israeli rule were part of the authorities' scheme to create a sort of 'positive' Arab culture which would head off the increasing drive for Palestinian nationality" (Snir 2005, 167). Many scholars point to the post-1967 Arab-Israeli War era as marking the continuation of professional Palestinian theatrical development. This was due in part to Israel's territorial gains in the war, which placed the Gaza Strip and West Bank under Israeli occupation (Fig. 3), uniting Palestinians in these areas under a common political cause. Despite constant efforts by Israeli forces to restrict the activities of nascent theatre troupes, Palestinian theatre continued and evolved (Snir 2005, 102).

Theatre groups grew in a more professional sense during the early 1970s, and in 1971, al-Balalin was founded: a group that set the precedent for various companies to follow (Snir 2005, 103). Al-Balalin's work was extremely influential as it divorced the tradition of using classical Arabic in plays, a practice they disseminated through touring productions in the West Bank and Jerusalem (Varghese 2020, 27). Efforts during the 1970s to create a national Palestinian theatre proved to be unsuccessful. However, six years after the founding of al-Balalin, a handful of its members collaborating with Palestinian theatre makers in Israel, would form the al-Hakawati theatre troupe (Snir 2005, 130). Named for the traditional Arab storyteller, al-Hakawati slid into the foreground of the world of Palestinian theatre, becoming the very first company to receive major funding. They were allotted \$100,000 from the Ford Foundation in 1983, allowing them to lease a performance space (Varghese 2020, 29).

Simultaneously, the Ford Foundation was "the first international agency to fund theatre in the 'developing world'" (Nicholson 2021, 5). Just a year later, al-Hakawati debuted the Palestinian National Theatre, providing a space for other theatre companies to develop and perform works (Varghese 2020, 29).

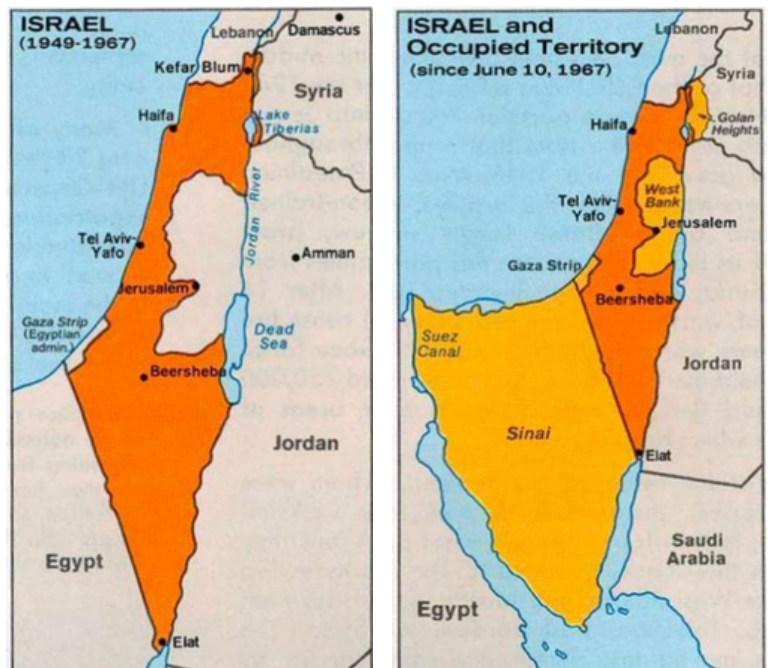
Unfortunately, following the beginning of the First Intifada in December 1987, Israeli authorities cracked down even further on Palestinian theatrical works than they had in the past. One instance of this censorship was Israel's ban on al-Hakawati performances in Gaza and the West Bank, rendering the company's material inaccessible to its main audience at a time when their politically subversive activities would have had the greatest impact. Eventually,

and despite impassioned efforts to bypass Israeli restrictions, the suppression of their activities would lead to the breakdown of the original al-Hakawati troupe (Snir 2005, 159). Yet the Palestinian National Theatre remained, and more groups emerged, including the al-Kasaba Theatre and Ashtar Theatre, the latter of which was created by members of al-Hakawati (Snir 2005, 160). Around this time, Arna Mer-Khamis, a former member of the elite Israeli Palmach unit of the Zionist paramilitary group, Haganah in the 1948 war, was inspired to establish the Stone Theatre in Jenin Camp as she watched schools across the occupied territories be shuttered by Israel (Varghese 2020, 52).

Sadly, many children who found refuge and healing in the Stone Theatre were killed in militant actions during the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, and the theatre ceased to exist as Palestinians were once again thrust into an existential conflict (Arna's Children; Nicholson 2006, 13).



Figure 1: Map showing decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1174-1914, accessed from maps.com



Figures 2 and 3 show Israeli occupied Palestine before and after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Accessed from In Issues in the Middle East, Atlas, First edition, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 1973.

Between the two intifadas, Palestinian theatre faced serious impediments to its practice. However, as the post-Oslo Accords era began to mature, international financial support for Palestinian theatre expanded, marking a drastic shift from the volunteer-centered efforts of the past and increasing the influence of foreign organizations in the development of theatrical works. This transformation has laid the foundation for Palestinian theatre as it is known today. The relationship between local Palestinian theatre companies and the various organizations who support them, and the tensions, benefits, and obstacles that ensue, are what this paper will examine further, beginning with some shortcomings of these relationships.

Challenges Posed by International Funding and Collaboration

Due to the financial support offered by organizations outside of Palestine, theatre companies often have to reshape their ventures to better suit the interests of the organizations and donors (Nassar 2006, 37). These interests are typically centered around “development,” focusing on the economic elements of occupation. However, this theme tends to ignore the realities of the occupation in Palestine and issues such as freedom of movement, land and water rights, political autonomy, and the right of return for refugees (Nicholson 2021, 9). This viewpoint imagines that theatrical endeavors in Palestine act as a stimulus for further economic growth on the ground, which can aid in addressing the humanitarian crises facing Palestinians. However, Israel’s own discriminatory policies are the principal reason for the conditions in the first place; the very existence of their state relies on such policies to retain power over the occupied territories. An aid strategy which fails to address the state apparatuses responsible for carrying out these policies is doomed to fail. In fact, this neo-liberal aid framework supports the interests of the Israeli state as it undermines efforts for political solutions in Palestine, allowing the occupying government more time to advance their colonial project (Nicholson 2021, 10). The conception of Palestinian theatre as an agent of social or political change is therefore invalidated.

While Palestinian theatre troupes emerged for the purpose of confronting Israeli occupation and ultimately achieving liberation, the “NGO-ization,” as Nicholson calls it, threatens these principles. Those funding Palestinian theatre don’t share these sentiments, and instead focus their efforts on “‘issues’ framed as ‘projects’: women’s rights, drugs awareness, sexual health, children’s empowerment, co-existence with Israel, non-violence, and so forth” (Varghese 2020, 31). Once more, these “issues” are divorced from the larger political conditions under which they surface, despite also being important to Palestinians. From the point of view of funders, many of the obstacles to achieving progress lie not within the Israeli state apparatus, but in Palestinian society, which, measured against their standards, is “intolerant” and “backward” (Nicholson 2021, 14). True liberatory and revolutionary ideals are then replaced with what are deemed globally acceptable values, backed up by human rights-centered messaging (Nicholson 2021, 11). Ironically, this messaging is regarded as valuable by Western nations, many of whom are participating in their own forms of structural oppression against minority groups. It could be argued that this is merely a blind spot and not an intentional reinforcement of neocolonialism, but even so, that reinforcement is one of its outcomes. Revolutionary language becomes warped and co-opted through these partnerships, as is the case with the Freedom Theatre, which “has been branded through militant terms such as ‘cultural intifada’ and ‘cultural resistance’” (Nicholson 2021, 13). While these terms may have initially reflected the intentions of the theatre, their descriptive accuracy becomes less clear in the presence of an international audience.

Furthermore, Palestinian theatre companies are often forced to partner with companies residing in donor countries, which tend to be in the global north. These connections prevent possible partnerships in other colonized places where they “have far more in common historically and politically” (Varghese 2020, 121). Another

concept that enables this dynamic is the assumed necessity for Palestinians to be “rescued” from their perceived helplessness by so-called progressive societies abroad, a designation which nations in the global south are rarely granted. This dynamic establishes a clear hierarchy wherein Palestinians and their struggles are fetishized, and international backers position themselves as saviors and arbiters of progress.

Palestinian theatre companies have been forced to sacrifice their sociopolitical inspirations for the preferences of foreign funders, but it is not always the case that companies submit to these pressures. For example, the al-Rowwad Theatre located in the Aida refugee camp rejected a funding opportunity for the development of a project promoting the awareness and prevention of HIV. This rejection was because the company believed the project was centered on the funding organization’s greater global interests as HIV is nowhere near a widespread issue in Palestine, and the project would therefore waste time and resources they could use to better serve their community (Varghese 2020, 47). Another example of local pushback can be found in the boycott of al-Kasaba Theatre by other Palestinian artistic organizations after their bilingual production of *Romeo and Juliet* received funding from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1994 (Varghese, 36). This boycott was successful as al-Kasaba theatre did not pursue these types of collaborations again. These instances demonstrate how, despite pressures from the foreign entities that fund Palestinian theatre, efforts exist to resist their influence, and there remain further opportunities for dialogue and opposition by Palestinian theatre makers.

Positive Manifestations of International Relationships

Apart from the dependence of Palestinian theatre troupes on foreign financing, another element that confuses the relationships between Palestinian theatre participants and their international collaborators is that many times these efforts *do* lead to efficacious outcomes for Palestinians. International reception of Palestinian opposition to oppression and progress towards Palestinian aspirations has been improved by these partnerships. One such example can be seen in the Ashtar Theatre’s *The Gaza Monologues*. This production is a collection of monologues developed from children’s personal accounts of life in the Gaza Strip and initially premiered in 2010. The violence experienced in each of the children’s lives is not glossed over, nor is its origin in the Israeli occupation. The play was well received internationally, in large part due to its simultaneous performance in 21 different countries. It eventually earned the acclaim of the United Nations, which hosted two performances at its New York headquarters, reaching an incredibly large audience (Varghese 2020, 78). Another example can be seen in the Freedom Theatre’s *The Siege*, which toured in the UK and received wide international attention after being reviewed by various media outlets (Santos 2018, 105). The play followed the story of the 2002 Israeli siege of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, and, for many people outside of Palestine, debunked the myth that religion lies at the center of the decades long conflict (Santos 2018, 105).

In addition to these cases, foreign partnerships allow Palestinian theatrical activities to provide direct benefits for Palestinians in the occupied territories. By making sense of their experiences through performance, participants in *The Gaza Monologues* were reported to have achieved some level of psychological recovery from their mental ills after the most recent war (Varghese 2020, 79). Along with its international performances, *The Gaza Monologues* was performed by various theatre groups in Jerusalem and the West Bank, fostering connection despite the blockade on Gaza (Varghese 2020, 77). Theatrical activities practiced locally in the occupied territories can engage community members who might otherwise ignore their potential as a form of resistance. Varghese (2020) goes on to highlight the function of the work to assert Palestinian humanity and cultural identity, combating the narratives of the prevailing Zionist society which seek to erase or deny the existence of Palestinian society.

A theatre practitioner associated with the Freedom Theatre held events in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh for its citizens to engage in theatrical production. This inspired resident Manal Tamimi to approach the theatre with the interest of creating a play about the frequent local protests held against Israeli authorities (Varghese 2020, 126). Tamimi insisted that the production tour different villages to showcase Nabi Saleh's sustained resistance to occupation. Rather than just the creation and process of the work providing emotional benefit, the play is also used as a vehicle to inspire resistance and resilience through the identification with a widespread, collective Palestinian struggle (Varghese 2020, 126). The creation of a theatrical space for Palestinians to express their interests then helps to strengthen both community bonds and protest efforts. The result of the protests' transmutation can be understood as a form of protest in its own right. This demonstrates the capacity of local theatre endeavors to adequately feature and take into account Palestinian interests in their work. Beyond works of theatre, community-integrated efforts can provide advantages for Palestinians, like how al-Rowwad Theatre functions as a performance space, temporary clinic, recreational facility, vocational and artistic training center, and educational center (Varghese 2020, 46). The generation of shared community spaces, whether temporary like the touring performances of Tamimi's play, or more permanent as in the case of al-Rowwad theatre, juxtaposes the harsh realities of occupation with imagination.

When international funding allows Palestinian theatre makers to prioritize the perspectives of Palestinians on the ground, greater material, emotional, and social achievements will follow. For example, the case study of the Freedom Theatre demonstrates the positive impacts of their community-led theatre approaches (Santos 2018, 99, 109). These types of interactive, community-led approaches exist in other theatre companies as well, and seem to be particularly effective.

Recommendations for Future Improvements in Collaboration

To theorize how a more calculated approach to international collaboration with Palestinian theatre could be realized in the near future, one can consider Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (or TO). TO is a method of creating and analyzing theatre by using direct engagement of both actors and spectators to advance socio-political change. A principle encompassing all subsets of TO is the importance of "the analysis of the gap between what is and what could be" (Howe 2023, 85). Theatre of the Oppressed has already been utilized in some productions by Palestinian theatre groups, notably *The Gaza Monologues* and *The Freedom Ride* (Varghese 2020, 77, 82). Part of its success in these instances is its ability to address that "many practitioners of theater for social change fetishize oppressions and condescendingly construct reductive notions about the everyday lives and, more specifically, the capacity for humor and pleasure of oppressed peoples" (Howe 2023, 92). This fetishization frequently occurs when international collaborators have an outsized role in the final products of Palestinian theatre making. This effect leads further into the discussion of the importance of centering Palestinian voices when carrying out collaborative theatre making, and the necessity of developing an open dialogue between Palestinians and their collaborators.

For such a dialogue to occur, it is in the best interest of both parties to start the conversation at the very beginning of the endeavor, before any major decisions have been made. This practice has been utilized by Palestinian theatre artists to successfully imbue upon their collaborators "an understanding of the Palestinian context" (Varghese 2020, 122). In one instance, foreign members of a collaborating production crew visited the West Bank to witness the occupation for themselves, which deeply informed conversations between the parties, and helped to build what Varghese refers to as "shared languages," which he defines as "the ways in which a group forges common aesthetic, methodological and political vocabularies

to encourage and maintain meaningful collaborations" (2020, 139). These languages may take the form of specific rehearsal tactics such as material generated through performance, the adoption of specific vocabulary to understand the work, and particular collaborative games and exercises which promote ensemble-building (Varghese 2020, 139, 141). Constructing a mutual understanding of the dramatic work at hand allows for conflicts and misunderstandings to be more easily navigated and can also eliminate power imbalances between participants.

Another strategy originating from Theatre of the Oppressed is legislative theatre, which encompasses "theatrical techniques to generate solutions to real-life problems through public forums to make or amend laws in a democratic and participatory manner" (Saeed 2015, 6). This creates dialogue between members of a community, and with political and legislative entities and institutions. This method was utilized in an initiative called "the Legislative Theatre Project for Women in Afghanistan," which began in 2010. The project culminated in a written report compiled from the community forums and activities, which illustrated the recommendations and ideas of the participants. This report was presented and discussed in a number of meetings with legal and political organizations where it was further developed and eventually delivered to the Afghan parliament (Saeed 2015, 18). Though not much follow-up occurred after submission, the project's impact and potential for similar projects in the future cannot be ignored (Saeed 2015, 18). Similar outcomes could occur for Palestinians if such initiatives are implemented in their theatrical and community spaces.

Previous Scholarship and Common Conceptions

The majority of modes of Palestinian cultural production are often overlooked by scholars, and Palestinian theatre is no exception. Some scholars assert even fiercer criticisms, describing this unique tradition of cultural production as never having existed. This perspective fails entirely to recognize the legitimacy of earlier forms of theatrical activity which later evolved into what we know today as Palestinian theatre. Additionally, it ignores the significant obstacles posed by the loss or nonexistence of detailed archives due to the Israeli occupation's theft and destruction of such resources (Nassar 2006, 17). Compounding these challenges are the cultural differences between the Arab and Western worlds in regard to their artistic conceptions of history, knowledge, and theatrical production. For example, while many cultural groups find validity in non-written oral histories, others find them to be illegitimate. In instances when scholars do recognize Palestinian theatre as a subject worthy of further study, they often gloss over the earlier or more traditional iterations of Palestinian theatrical activities, such as hakawati storytelling traditions. They instead prefer to focus on contemporary pursuits which more closely resemble Western theatrical works. Even in the broader landscape of theatre within the Arab world, it has been said that Palestinian "theatre never really developed professionally and artistically, and survives on adaptations and borrowings," although adaptations are a common element of nearly all global theatre making (Nassar 2006, 17). There has been a lengthy and ongoing process of Palestinians developing a shared history and identity that is reflected in all elements of Palestinian society, including cultural productions such as theatre.

In spite of these challenges, scholars have increasingly engaged with the topic of Palestinian theatre, not only by exploring its early history and beginnings, but also by investigating the manners in which it confronts Israeli military occupation, interacts with theatre makers and audiences internationally, and affects the emotional wellbeing of its participants. The aforementioned obstacles, however, limit the scope of discussion on the topic to the more established and well-funded Palestinian theatre companies which tend to be the subject of previous scholarly inquiries. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the impact and legitimacy of other, less documented theatrical endeavors in Palestine which are increasingly

being studied in their own right.

Conclusion

Despite Palestinian theatre facing major impediments since the time of the British Mandate, it was ultimately able to flourish, in part due to international funding. However, this brings its own set of challenges, as Palestinian theatre companies are coerced into abandoning their personal sociopolitical aspirations in favor of the ideals of donor countries. This abandonment can be circumvented by prioritizing Palestinian perspectives, creating opportunities for greater benefits on the ground. The implementation of principles from Theatre of the Oppressed can further heighten the effectiveness of Palestinian theatrical activities, especially when effort is made to follow through on the manifestations of projects such as legislative theatre. Any of the above-mentioned endeavors must take into account prevailing attitudes towards Palestinian theatre, and Palestinian society as a whole.

The humanization of Palestinians via the purposeful centering of their voices allows power imbalances to be dismantled and the prevalent fetishization of Palestinian struggles to be addressed, making way for more authentic collaborations. Rather than accentuating possible economic development opportunities, international aid organizations and funders should promote projects that take into account the political reality in Israel/Palestine. Nassar explains the desires of Palestinian theatre makers best, saying, "I realized that Palestinian theatre artists constantly question the role of their work. They do so, however, not on the basis of whether it is original or authentic, but rather in terms of what is effective in countering the cultural annihilation under the present occupation" (Nassar 2006, 16). These changes in priorities have the potential to pave the way for theatrical activities which may have a higher likelihood of improving material conditions for Palestinians. This potential was previously demonstrated through the Legislative Theatre Project for Women in Afghanistan (Saeed 2015, 17). Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure the direct impact of theatre on a material level, and more projects are needed to further explore specific outcomes for Palestinians. It cannot be ignored that the oppressive societal conditions for Palestinians place limits on this work; however, the potential for global solidarity to amplify the impact of Palestinian theatre is immense, and may situate it as a robust tool in the continuing struggle for liberation.

Artists have the responsibility to achieve ends beyond mere entertainment, and Palestinian theatre artists encapsulate this spirit in their creative undertakings. Any artist wishing to build solidarity through collaboration with Palestinian practitioners should affirm their values and ambitions instead of attempting to shape them. Furthermore, artists have the opportunity to learn from Palestinian creatives and seek to understand how they might shape the realities of their own communities. By committing to these interests, artists can evolve their practices to better suit the increasing urgency of socio-political threats, especially in Palestine.

References

- Daniel, Mer, Trabelsi, Mer, Juliano, Trabelsi, Osnat, Pieter Van Huystee Film & TV, Production Company, Film Platform, Film Distributor, and Ro*Co Films Educational, Publisher.
- Ana's Children*. Academic Video Online. 2004.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvtzDPdHeeU>.
- Decline of the Ottoman Empire 1174-1914 -- Ottoman Empire, Spain, France, Switzerland, Austria, Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Italy, Albania, Hungary, Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, Crete, Arabia, Iraq, Russia, Georgia, Egypt, Israel, Libya, 1999. Santa Barbara: Maps.com. Accessed March 2, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Howe, Kelly. 2023. "Beyond Survival." In *Theater and Human Flourishing*, Theater and Human Flourishing, 2023. New York: Oxford University Press.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/10.1093/oso/9780197622261.003.0005>
- Saeed, Huma Empowering Unheard Voices through 'Theatre of the Oppressed': Reflections on the Legislative Theatre Project for Women in Afghanistan—Notes from the Field, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 7, Issue 2, July 2015, Pages 299–326, <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/10.1093/jhuman/huu0>
- Nassar, Hala Kh. "Stories from under Occupation: Performing the Palestinian Experience." *Theatre Journal (Washington, D.C.)* 58, no. 1 (2006): 15-37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069777>
- Nicholson, Rashna Darius. "On the (Im)possibilities of a Free Theatre: Theatre Against Development in Palestine." *Theatre Research International* 46, no. 1 (2021): 4-22. doi:10.1017/S0307883320000553
- Santos, Madalena. "Palestinian Narratives of Resistance: The Freedom Theatre's Challenge to Israeli Settler Colonization." *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 96-113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2016.1206698>
- Six small maps: Israel in Biblical Times*. Scale not given. In *Issues in the Middle East, Atlas*. First edition, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 1973.
- Snir, R. *Palestinian Theatre*. Literaturen Im Kontext ; Bd. 20. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2005.
- Varghese, Gabriel. *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank*. 1st ed. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30247-4>