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A funny thing happened on the way to the checkpoint: teaching stand-up comedy in occupied Palestine

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Abstract

This article considers ideas about the performance of personal stories in stand-up comedy that emerged during a teaching and performance project in a refugee camp in Palestine. After experimenting with a range of stand-up techniques and approaches, participants created public performances sharing their experiences of life under military occupation.

Suggested key words: Stand-up comedy, Palestine, autobiographical storytelling, performance, Mark Thomas.

“A joke implies that anything is possible.” (Mary Douglas, 1978, p.108)

In 2009, UK performer and activist Mark Thomas walked the length of the 723 km separation barrier between Israel and the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, speaking to people on either side of the wall and of the Israeli occupation.¹ Thomas began his career as a stand-up comic on the UK alternative comedy circuit in the 1980s and became known for his socially engaged live performances, radio and television work and writing. He regularly creates comedy-theatre shows, which are a rich hybrid of autobiographical stand-up storytelling and political theatre.

While walking the wall, he visited and made links at the Jenin Freedom Theatre (JFT), a theatre and community-based cultural centre in a refugee camp in the northern Palestinian city of Jenin.² This article explores some of the ideas and questions about the performance of personal stories in stand-up comedy that emerged when he invited me to devise a series of workshops and travel with him to Jenin to deliver them in 2016/17.

The intention was to work for around a month with a group of young Palestinians and, at the end of the course, stage two stand-up nights that would, hopefully, launch a comedy club in the city. As a white, British, female teacher and practitioner

who has worked in higher education in the UK for 20 years, the idea raised all sorts of pedagogical, creative and ethical questions. At first glance, comedy might not seem the most appropriate form of artistic expression for this unremittingly troubled region and, frankly, one might ask (as several people did before we made the journey) what possible use could this kind of cultural intervention be?

During our introductory visit to Jenin, however, we shared many laughs with our hosts and it became clear that Palestinians *really* get irony. Their everyday lives under occupation are so steeped in bitter, tragic and comic ironies that stories filled with humour and disbelief spill out of them in every conversation. Nonetheless, there is no Palestinian tradition of live stand-up as audiences in the US or the UK would understand it and I was not at all sure how well the course I deliver to undergraduates in the UK would travel to the region or translate into Arabic.³ Most concerning was the possibility that, in this undeniably religiously conservative place, we would be faced with a level of censorship (or required self-censorship) in direct opposition to the fundamentals of the stand-up form.

Though I remained apprehensive about how (non)transferrable my teaching methods and sense of humour might be, the idea for the project was not entirely unthinkable. After all, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has noted, “all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur” (1978, p. 98) and, according to Joanne Gilbert, stand-up comedy is “a cultural barometer” (2004, p. xvii). I was confident that, at the very least, we would hear a range of illuminating stories about life in Palestine. Furthermore, we all experience the daily role humour plays in drawing groups and communities together. Larry Mintz believes that “the *experience* of public joking, shared laughter, and celebration of agreement on what deserves ridicule and affirmation fosters community” (1988, p. 73). He adds that the role of the comedian is “leading us in a celebration of community”. (p. 74) As well as reflecting and affirming audience perspectives, at its best comedy can also confront us and ask us to embrace demanding truths or troubling information; metaphorically disarming us as we laugh.

Our primary intention when we arrived in Jenin was to cultivate such an atmosphere of community, openness and fun. We had 12 students, eight men and four women (which felt like a victory in itself, given how challenging it can be for women in Palestine to take part in mixed activities and to appear on stage). Several participants were current students or graduates of the Jenin Theatre School so had some experience of performing, though not of writing or performing stand-up; two were teaching artists at the school; others had little or no experience of performance.

Performance risks

The workshops took place in the theatre and in a rehearsal space in Jenin city used by the theatre school. While facilities were basic, we had everything we needed: a microphone, stand and amplification, electricity (most of the time) and (always) plenty of strong coffee. There were a few notable distinctions between Jenin and my usual teaching environment at Middlesex University in London. Firstly, freedom of movement is restricted throughout Palestine and temporary checkpoints often appear without warning or explanation, so student excuses for their lateness are often actually true! Secondly, freedom of public expression is far from an assumed right in this context, so while my fears about censorship were quickly allayed within the workshops, what could be said in the rehearsal room could not necessarily be repeated in public performances. Finally, gunfire – usually (but not always) celebratory - is an unremarkable evening soundtrack in the refugee camp.

Performers and those who write about them frequently refer to ‘risk’ in performance.⁴ Sometimes this relates to actual, physical risk, for example in some body-based performance art practices. Other applications of the term are more metaphorical, perhaps an articulation of the psychological or emotional risks of onstage ‘failure’ or the possibility of professional embarrassment or humiliation. In the professional stand-up lexicon, this notion is taken to its extreme with the ultimate bad gig being commonly referred to as ‘dying’. Rarely in contemporary performance is this word applied as a literal off-stage risk to the performer as a result of the nature or content of a performance. However, this becomes less

inconceivable in a region where public behaviour and utterances are closely scrutinised and judged, and community events and activities are often charged with unpredictable cultural and political tensions. We were hopeful that some of these tensions could find their way into our students' comedy, which as Gilbert notes "affords insights into power relations". (2004, xvii) Indeed, the more taboos there are in any context, the more jokes there are to find. Nonetheless, it was evident that the project could potentially involve a level of real-world jeopardy for a few of our participants. For some Jenin audience members, key conservative religious and cultural values – perhaps further entrenched by the military occupation - were unshakeable and there were ideas and viewpoints that simply could not be articulated publicly.

Consequently, though the methods of teaching stand-up techniques and approaches were similar to those I deliver in the UK, particular attention was required around the potential need for self-censorship, along with careful consideration of the concept of comic licence in this context. Comic licence, what Mintz calls 'the comedian's traditional license for deviant behaviour and expression'. (1987, p. 88) is the process by which comedians are granted permission by their audience to bend and sometimes break rules in ways that, in other contexts, would be unacceptable. This potential audience willingness to suspend disapproval is central to the possibilities offered by comedy. In Palestine we were dealing with a far more conservative set of publicly shared values and had audiences who, though absolutely ready to laugh, were not necessarily familiar with the conventions of the stand-up form. So, in this context, the comedian's special dispensation to say "the unsayable" as Thomas puts it, was in some doubt. (Cited in Double, 2014, p. 295)

Truth in comedy

In order for audiences to grant comic licence, they need to be convinced that a comedian shares their values, has *ownership* of his/her material (i.e. has earned the right to joke about the issues s/he talks about) and that a level of authenticity or truth is evident in the performance. In modern stand-up, audiences tend to assume that what a comedian says on stage is, more or less, the truth. With the exception of

character-based performers, or those whose comic style favours the delivery of multiple one-liner jokes, the majority of comedians since the 1970s have written their own material based directly on their own experiences. In the 21st century a tendency to do so in a more sustained way has marked a formal shift into stand-up autobiography as performers apply a comic lens to their lives – not simply as the set up for a joke or to provide personal detail that adds a sense of veracity to their material – but to create extended narratives rooted in highly personal stories. For example, the 2017 joint winners of the Edinburgh Festival Comedy Awards, Hannah Gadsby and John Robins, both performed autobiographical solo comedy shows about difficult experiences.⁵ In Hannah Gadsby's show, *Nanette*, she considers the limits of comedy as a form of autobiographical storytelling, arguing that the conventions of stand up have required her to be too selective in her re-tellings of traumatic events in her life; 'truth' has often given way to self-deprecating punch lines that she now believes obscure the parts of her stories she should be telling about her resilience and survival.

For the participants in Jenin and for many in their audiences, comedy offers alternative possibilities. The need for Palestinian resistance and advocacy against the injustices of the occupation can result in a potentially paralysing sense of collective duty for each new generation. Young Palestinians are raised in the certainty that their community's common stories of suffering, resilience and the struggle for freedom *must* be told and, though our participants recognise this as a given, for some it is worn as a heavy cloak of responsibility.

For people living in situations in which they have what Samuel Janus describes as “no other “recognizable” form of power” (1981, p. 167), humour can be a particularly potent form of expression. The workshops encouraged participants to tell personal stories centring on their families, their home towns/villages and their daily experiences. These prompts revealed details of their lives under occupation but also of their idiosyncratic responses to them. In performance terms, we also got to know each student's on-stage persona as they offered individual versions of a shared lived reality. Some were born and raised in Jenin camp or one of the 18 other refugee

camps on the West Bank, some came from the city, some from rural communities. What they share is that they - and their parents and even grandparents - were born into a displaced community: Palestinian identity is defined by the events of 1948, by the subsequent loss of their homes and land and by 70 years of waiting to return to them and resisting the Israeli occupation.

Some of our students are old enough to remember the 2002 Battle of Jenin during the Second Intifada (uprising) and told stories of loss and grief, of encounters with the foreign media reporting (at best) partial 'truths'. "This isn't the story we are looking for, little boy" one student recalled being told when he replied to an eager Western journalist that, no, he was not searching for his father or his mother in the rubble of his home in the days following Israel's destruction of 400 hundred homes the camp, but for his Playstation.⁶ It was, he informed us, the first such console in the camp and he had been the proud owner of it for just a few weeks before the battle, during which he was "the most popular kid in the camp". This story was told with a wry, knowing smile. Young Palestinians are far from naïve about media interest in their cause and - though incredibly welcoming and hospitable - are understandably sceptical about Western visitors, particularly well meaning but ill-informed charity workers. One memory that sparked universal hilarity was of some European volunteers who were "disappointed" to discover that the refugees had mobile phones. Apparently, this did not fit their picture of a "proper refugee". (Thomas, 2018, p.44) Our participants are part of a generation whose tales are shared instantly via social media, where they are exposed to news from around the world with no checkpoints, no walls. As such, though they are passionately proud to be Palestinians, it can be frustrating to be cast as eternal victims in the Palestinian story. The jokes and stories they most enjoyed laughing at together were those that mischievously subverted this inherited victim status, or teased foreigners (including us) for stereotyped assumptions and expectations.

Their delight was evident as we asked them not to recount earnestly stories of suffering and hardship but to access their unfiltered and candid responses to their circumstances: the experience of making comedy as well as appreciating it can be a liberating experience. They discovered that stand up creates a space to acknowledge

and celebrate our flaws and vulnerabilities and that often the least appealing versions of our selves are far funnier than our noblest qualities. Our shared project inadvertently became an exploration of ways of rewriting the narrative of the Palestinian refugee to take account of this generation's experience. They enjoyed ridiculing the hypocrisies and contradictions they observed in Palestinian society, dispelling misconceptions about their identities as Palestinians and finding imaginative ways to retell stories of encounters with Israeli soldiers from a comic perspective. In his list of things that annoy him, Alaa Shehada, noted that he dislikes seeing "a beautiful female Israeli soldier" because "I feel I want to get arrested." (Thomas, 2018, p. 43) Representing difficult lives, tragic stories, painful experiences as comedy allows us to, as Sophie Quirk puts it: "respond to pain and misfortune with defiance, laughing at troubles rather than suffering from them." (2015, p. 33) Comic inversions and subversions can be highly effective tools of defiance and the ironic application of unexpected or even inappropriate comic attitudes to apparently tragic events can offer revelatory insights.

Comic attitude

It is frequently a comedian's shift in *attitude* to an idea or event that turns it into comedy and, in Jenin, this technique enabled some students to access their personal stories in ways they had not previously attempted. A useful starting point to demonstrate the potential impact of comic attitude is a performance exercise involving two lists: one is a list of activities such as digging the garden, cleaning the toilet, gymnastics, presenting the weather forecast. The second is a list of attitudes: e.g. depressed, hysterical, apologetic, seductive, furious. Students select examples from each list and consider and play with the juxtaposition of paired activities and attitudes. They then choose a few combinations to perform for the class. The humour in this game emerges when the audience recognises a mismatch between the attitude and the activity.⁷ The effect of this is aligned to the incongruity theory of humour, which according to John Morreall, suggests that amusement "is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate in some other way." (Morreall, 1983, p. 15) One performer, Nabil Al-Raee, portrayed a depressed weatherman who could barely be bothered to point at his imaginary map

as he sighed heavily and morosely told us that it would be extremely sunny tomorrow in the north, the south, the east and the west. He shrugged and scowled, muttering that this really did not matter, that it is irrelevant in the larger scheme of things: it's all pointless and we are all going to die anyway.

Another performer's response to this exercise formed the basis of the material for her 10-minute comedy set performed at the end of the course. For the original exercise teaching artist at the theatre school, Micaela Miranda, chose to perform 'arresting someone' as her activity and 'apologetically' as her attitude. The resulting characterisation immediately struck a chord with the other participants who clearly found her performance hilarious. We later learned this scenario had personal resonance for her and she extended it for her set as a comic re-imagining of the traumatic night when Israeli soldiers woke her household and dragged her Palestinian husband away. She 'flipped' her real attitude to the event, re-telling the story as a celebration. So, the soldiers she embodied became charming and overly apologetic and were banging on the door because the couple had "won" the Israeli lottery, a jeep, and an all expenses paid trip to the beach.⁸ In the later public performances for Palestinian audiences, for whom visits from the Israeli military in the night are not uncommon and are never good news, the laughter this re-imagined scenario elicited was both cathartic and politically charged.

This idea of comic attitude can be usefully considered alongside Bertolt Brecht's theory of *gestus*. For Brecht, a performer can communicate the underlying social attitude of a performance text to an audience through a combination of physical gestures, words and actions. According to Berliner Ensemble actor, Ekkehard Schall, *gestus* is "the stance that someone takes towards a situation" which "does not always agree" with the meaning expressed in the text. (Schall, 2012, pp. 68-70). For him, all texts can be manipulated in this way and "The truth is concrete' means that it asserts itself either perceptibly or covertly." (ibid.) In Micaela's performance, the truth asserted itself covertly through her sustained use of irony and the audience's recognition and appreciation of it.

Comedians are well versed in adopting an ironic 'stance' towards a given subject and, in presenting this kind of ironic 'truth', the performer's presence *as performer* mediates the ironic attitude. While Brecht intended audiences to be aware of the actor's presence and history, in terms of the 'concrete truth' of a given character, in the *comic gestus* I am identifying here, the comedian is able to slip in and out of attitude far more fluidly and, once the audience have laughed, to return to his/her own 'voice' as comedian. The Palestinian audience knew that this performer was not being flippant but deadly serious about the situation, that she was actually terrified and desperate when her husband was taken; and that her embodiment of an entirely inappropriate and exaggerated attitude was a form of comic revenge on the individual soldiers and the regime they represent. She gave the soldiers sickly smiles, behind which a lingering hate-filled threat of violence was still discernible. In an instant, all at once, she demonstrated the soldiers' apparent attitudes and the hints at their menace, combined with her own presence, her memory of the lived experience and her 'real' relationship with the soldiers to form her *comic gestus*. The mix of anger and comic release she and her audience felt as a result of her reframing the event as a joke was audibly palpable in the huge laughs she received for this section of her act.

Micaela's material was an individual (sub)version of a commonly shared experience. Another student also created a hybrid representation of a specific local experience, which the audience happily colluded in. This is an extension or extrapolation of the truth of the experience that, once more, encourages the audience to consider a situation in an alternative way. This performer, Faisal Abu Alhayjaa, was born in the Jenin refugee camp and in this set he creatively misremembers with the audience the collective experience of extended periods of enforced curfew in the camp and connects this with increases in the Palestinian birth rate:

Everybody got sexy in the curfew. Everyone. Even my father and he is over 70...[mimes putting on aftershave] Even my mother [mimes getting dressed]. (Thomas, 2018, p. 89)

Faisal also tells the audience that the word "makloubeh" became the secret code word for sex:⁹

*So we are having dinner and my father looks at my mum and says,
“We will cook makloubeh tonight, huh?”
And my mother would laugh and get shy [acts coy] and say,
“Yes, when they sleep.” (p. 90)*

Meanwhile, Faisal tells us, the Israelis notice the rising Palestinian birth rate. At this point, he offers snapshot characterisations of two confused and furious Israelis trying to work out the reason for the population spike:

“Why are there so many of them? Why are they sexy? We have to stop them being sexy. We have to do some research about what the Palestinians eat that makes them sexy. Humus? No. We eat humus, too. We invented humus! Oil. Oil? No that is too sour. Falafel? No falafel makes you fart, it doesn’t make you sexy’.” (p. 91)

Finally, they work out that, of course, forcing Palestinians to stay in their homes at night *and* cutting off their electricity is the reason for the massive increase in birth rate. Furious, the soldiers return to the camp and demand everyone leaves their houses.

*They come to my home again. My father opens the window,
“No. We can’t come out. We are making makloubeh. Tonight it’s a special one: full of meat.” They come to my home, they pull out my father and my mum starts to shout: “You took the land, you took the sea, you took everything but you cannot take our makloubeh!” Then all of the districts come together out in the streets and with one voice shout:*

“WE WANT THE CURFEW!... WE WANT THE CURFEW!... WE WANT THE CURFEW!” (ibid.)

Faisal encouraged his Palestinian audiences to chant this phrase with him in Arabic. In this moment, a collective alternative representation was created through the interaction of the performer and the audience. This is akin to Helen Nicholson’s adaptation of Paul Ricoeur’s idea of the “imaginary space” created by storytellers for “thought experiments”. (Nicholson, p. 66) In this ‘experiment’ the audience joined together to chant precisely the opposite of what they would normally expect to think or say about a curfew. Consequently, not just Faisal’s attitude to it, but the symbolic significance of the curfew itself was ‘flipped’ as it became a weapon against

the quotidian humiliations of the occupation. This collective re-imagining of the narrative of the inconvenience and oppression of curfew again offered an opportunity for a shared celebratory release of defiant mischief and a reversal of lived reality: in this alternative version the Israelis are the victims and the butts of a Palestinian joke.

Stand-up storytelling

Both Micaela's and Faisal's stories highlight the complex relationship between truth and fiction in performance, between what Deirdre Heddon refers to as "experience and its representation". (Heddon, 2007, p. 31) The creation of any type of autobiography involves a process of selection and editing, interpretation and adaptation and, inevitably "autobiography often blends the fictional with the real, and over time life histories are rehearsed and become fictionalised." (Nicholson, 2014, p. 68) Comic representation, too, is form of autobiography: life stories viewed through a comic lens that brings them into focus in ways that are no more complete and no less truthful than other autobiographical genres.

Walter Benjamin suggested that storytellers make "connections between life as it is, and life as it might be" (Nicholson, 2014, p. 66) and, as Faisal and Micaela demonstrate here, comedians also signal these links. However, they make different use of stories, and rarely relate an entire narrative without digression or interruption. Right here, right now - rather than the 'world of the story' - is where the comedian wants his/her audience to be. Hence, to keep stories 'in the moment', the continuous present tense is often used. Comedians also regularly digress and refer back to their audiences directly, rather than asking them to step completely into an "imaginary space" as storytellers commonly do. Often, the imaginary space in comedy is created not via a temporal or geographical shift but through a cognitive shift into unlikely or outrageous or incongruous ideas, ideas that are, literally, laughable: Israeli Defence Force soldiers who apologise to people as they drag them away and Palestinian refugees who demonstrate *for* the curfew. In order to appreciate such shifts, audiences need to be highly competent at reading irony, recognising truth and gauging the difference between the two.

In Jenin, truth and fiction were frequently combined in the workshops and the performances as the students created material about their obsessions, anxieties and aspirations. They tackled issues of racial and sexual identity; disability and the lack of access; love and desire and the pressures on men and women to marry young and start families; the grossly unequal pay differentials for men and women and other gender inequalities in Palestinian society. As we suspected, several of these subjects could not be directly mentioned much less joked about in public performances in Jenin, and we were reminded throughout the project what was likely to be disapproved of or deemed unacceptable. Indeed, several audience members offered their extremely vocal opinions (in person) after each performance.

Consequently, the blending of reality and fictional accounts became necessary for reasons other than the formal considerations of creating a comic narrative or editing to ensure a laugh on a punch line. What Michael Jackson, reflecting on storytelling in crisis zones, describes as “violations of lived reality” emerged. (Cited in Thompson, 2005, p. 6) Such violations can bring potentially radical and alternative ways of perceiving the truth and in some contexts they are, paradoxically, the *only* versions of the truth that can be told. Combining comic truths and fictions and a mix of performance forms - poetry, song and character work with autobiographical storytelling and stand-up - allowed most of our students to negotiate with their audiences to create a “safe space” (Nicholson, 2014, p. 68) in which to express their ideas. The need to do so to some extent confirmed our early concerns about censorship and, for one participant, this delicate negotiation was so challenging that she chose not to take part in our second show in Jenin. However, these experiments in creative self-censorship enabled other performers to assert their authentic comic voices and, as suggested earlier, metaphorically disarm their audiences as they laughed. Raneen Odeh, for example, channelled her feelings of anger towards male bosses and the gender inequalities she has experienced through a series of grotesquely inventive and hilarious male characterisations. By doing so, she was given licence to engage in a far more radical critique than a direct attack on men, spoken as a woman, would have allowed. Though a few audience members evidently

disapproved of some of the values our students represented, many people from the camp and the city attended the performances, including lots of women and young people. Their appreciation and collective laughter reconfirmed just how potent, liberating and celebratory comedy can be as an expression of community. Best of all, despite the many challenges of sustaining creative projects in the region, since Mark and I returned to the UK, the Jenin Comedy Club has begun to stage regular comedy nights and continues to attract new performers and new audiences.¹⁰

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Notes

- ¹ Thomas wrote a book about the experience in 2011: *Extreme Rambling: Walking Israel's Separation Barrier. For Fun*. London: Random House.

² According to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, around 14,000 people currently live within the 0.45 sq km of Jenin Refugee camp, which was established in 1953. (unrwa.org)

³ Visiting comedians of Palestinian descent, mostly artists from the US, including Maysoon Zayid, Amer Zahr and Ray Hanania have performed in the region.

⁴ See for example Etchells, T. (1999) *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*. London: Routledge and Johnson. D. (2012) "Intimacy and Risk In Live Art." In Heddon, D. & Klein, J. *Histories and Practices of Live Art*. (pp. 121-147) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Hannah Gadsby's, *Nanette*, 2017, includes material about her experience of growing up lesbian in Tasmania and refers directly to the problems of turning personal trauma into comedy; in *The Darkness of Robins*, 2017, John Robins recounts his painful break-up from comedian Sara Pascoe.

⁶ UNRWA figures. (unrwa.org)

⁷ I am indebted to my former colleagues, Huw Thomas and Arthur Husk for many of the exercises and ideas mentioned here that were developed during our teaching together at Middlesex University.

⁸ The beach for Palestinians is, of course, among the most contested and symbolically significant of all their Israeli-occupied territories. The majority of Palestinians under the age of 30 have never seen the sea.

⁹ For the English version of his act, he notes that this is a very popular Palestinian dish of rice, vegetables and chicken. 'Makloubeh' means 'upside down' in English, which refers to the fact that it is served by upturning the cooking pot at the table.

¹⁰ Two performers from the project, Alaa Shehada and Faisal Abu Al Alhayjaa, visited the UK to work with Mark, theatre director Joe Douglas and me to develop and then perform as part of Thomas' critically acclaimed show about the project, *Showtime From The Frontline*, which toured for three months in 2018. Alaa and Faisal are now back in Jenin staging comedy nights and working on a show telling the story of their experiences in the UK.