

Lecture in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece

November 11 and 12, 2006

For the Hellenic Theatre/Drama and Education Network

Theatre and Existence - Laughter and Therapy

By Sharif Abdunnur

It is surreal to be here today. The world truly has only one constant, that is change. Four months ago I was quietly working on projects in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in the south of Lebanon when all of a sudden the bombing started. In three days we were working under the bombs and in a week we had 200 children to take care of. Within another week we had more than 300 children, and then another 150 youth and much more. And just as quickly as it happened, in 33 days, it was over. All the refugees and displaced families went to their destroyed villages and homes. We followed them, literally through unexploded bombs and mines: to their villages or what remains of them to work with the youth and train trainers. A few weeks later and now I am here. It is just amazing.

I do not know whether I would assume myself lucky or unlucky. Whether it is divine providence that I have survived and been able to help others and now have found a voice to a wider audience through you; or whether I am unlucky to have been a witness to such horrors and pain. Nonetheless I am honoured to have been able to relieve some pain from these children: to be of help. And although I am flattered and honoured to be here: I am not naive I know that what is in the spotlight today most likely will be forgotten soon enough. This is the nature of the world constant change.

Time may not heal all wounds but our attention must move to new things constantly that is the nature of the world. That is why I have focused my goals in life not on remembering the past but rather on learning life skills from it. The skills needed to survive, the skills needed to lead a life with as much love and laughter as possible. I do not propose to erase pain or tragedy, but I hope to help others find ways to cope and adjust and focus on the positive in their existence.

A bit about me. I am a product of war; I grew up in 1982 as a 5 year old boy in the middle of the conflict of the Israeli invasion of Beirut. I learned at a young age to

laugh and replace fear with chuckles of laughter, to replace pain with love. I learned from the freedom fighters, and my mother and brother. I learned from them when with their guns slung on their backs they would play football with me, then would run out fire at the planes coming in for air-strikes and then run back and continue playing. I learn from them when they were injured in the hospital and they would still take the time to crack jokes through their pain, they still took the time to make me laugh. That is how I survived through my laughter and their love. Unconsciously I learned what I now find to be the true essence of human existence - the ability to connect with others, love in all its forms: whether for a stranger or for your intimate partners.

At an early age I joined volunteer work in Palestinian refugee camps. I found myself in others. I found my self image in the eyes of those who bonded with me. Those who allowed me to help them and in truth they helped me. Now I work in juvenile prisons, with children who are abused, drug abandoned and with kids and adults from Palestinian Refugee Camps and the like.

This is my background this is why I do what I do now. This is why under the bombing I did not leave. This is why I do not run: because I know that true love flourishes under the horrible influence of hate and the value of life appears most clear when constantly under the threat of death.

This last summer, when Israel invaded Lebanon, we had more than 200 children from displaced families living around a main theatre in Beirut. So in an effort to lessen the effects of the war and trauma on these children and families we decided to run various workshops. We opened the theatre and ran drama therapy workshops from 8 in the morning to 11 pm and some days even later. A reporter made a joke at that time which I loved: he said that I make the perfect model father: you are single, you have no house, no money, no job, and you have 300 kids!

This is an experience in my life that will never be repeated as the odds are the situation will never reoccur in such a dramatic and beautiful way. Yes beautiful. For nearly 4 weeks I had more than 200 kids. Myself in collaboration with the NGO Al Jana ran these workshops from early morning to night. I poured my heart and my whole existence into these children and this space which came alive with their

laughter which would drown out the sounds of the air-strikes and constant bombing. When my house was hit and when I suffered personal tragedy and pain these kids gave me strength and energy and reason to continue. To have them their in my life helped me as much if not more then I helped them. To all those who work in this field and truly care I think this will be a common reality: we are just not sure if we are helping them or they are helping us or both.

We ran workshops with children from 4 years old to 17 year old. The older children became assistants to help me deal with the growing number of children. And volunteers poured in from all places to help. I trained more than 192 youth, social workers, and relief aid personnel to deal with these children and use various methods from drama therapy to assist with all of this.

When we started we had kids from all over the country, various ages, religious and political backgrounds. Some were not traumatized or even affected, while others were severely traumatized. We had six kids in particular that were extremely traumatized. Maya a 5 year old, who you see on the screen behind me, was one of them. Maya would not speak or even make contact, and if you tried she would burst into an uncontrollable fit of tears and sobbing and retract even further into her isolation. As the days passed she and the other 5 would stand behind me or simply grab the leg of my pants as I gave workshops. Maya at times would stand and grab my leg for a good 10 hours in one day as I taught workshop after workshop. Finally two weeks later while playing a drama therapy game she spoke! She said she wanted to play.

The game was two kids on stage one acts like they are a chair and the other a table. I play the drunken cop. I ask what the chair and table are they made of and a whole bunch of goofy questions and once they get into character I ask them why they are in the street instead of being home. They would then in character answer why they want to go back home. This is the short description of the exercise but it is adorable because children truly believe and play. And once they do they separate themselves form their pain and problems and they can speak about them as if it is someone else's problem. She gets up and plays the chair and says a phrase that I will never forget. The most adorable 5 year old ever says: 'I want to go home to die!'

To cut a long story short after we sit and speak with her for a good three hours I learn the story. She was at a neighbour's with her dad when the air-strike hit their village and buried her mom under the rubble in their home. They were not able to even dig up the body and bury it because they had to run away immediately. Now all she wants is to go home crawl under the rubble and die next to her mom.

This 5 year old endured pain and shows wisdom and beautiful power in the face of all this. But that is not the only reason I mention her. I also mention her because she is a symptom of what good intentions and lack of knowledge result in. The reason she wouldn't speak was because people kept asking her to repeat her story, and every time she did she felt pain so she didn't want to speak anymore, because she felt pain every time she spoke. She was being indirectly forced to relive her pain every time and she was not yet ready to handle this. Now as you can see in the video, she is playing this was 10 days after that exercise.

Every day Maya got better and we got worse. You see the day after this adorable 5 year old spoke she then wanted to be carried all the time. Which was a pleasure for me and my assistants. We all loved to carry her. She was the sweetest 5 year old and the most loving. Every day 2 hours or so she would ask us to let her down and she would run and play for 5 to 10 minutes and then come back and ask to be carried. Everyday she would spend more time playing and less time being carried. We were so proud to see her healing herself and learning to be a child once again. Two days before the war stopped we were devastated. She would run up to us and ask us to carry her, the minute we picked her up and before we could hug her, she would then quickly say: 'okay enough put me down put me down.' We needed the hugs not her, she was getting stronger and better, but we now were addicted to the affection.

You see she doesn't really need us, she needs guidance, she cures herself, we facilitate, we open the door and we show her she is safe, we try to stop the pain long enough for her to find her own strength and cure, so to speak.

As the workshops continued the older youth wanted to do work of their own form this emerged the idea of doing adult workshops leading to a play. I adopted the name

Laughter Under the Bombs as the title for the workshops and the play itself. It was the most suitable name and a literal interpretation of what was happening. You are watching in the background the actual first performance. That is the actual show being performed while planes soar over the building. This audience risked their lives, literally, to be there that night and watch this and laugh together.

The play that emerged was under the concept of healing the community not just the performers. The play was about a troupe that was rehearsing a play in the middle of a war. The play was about a group of young adults in a local cafe. As the play started quickly the problems arose, due to the war actors were missing. So the director comes on stage as part of the play and asks the audience to volunteer to replace the missing actors. And so out of the tragedy of missing actors the fun and laughter emerges. In the various scenes: an old friend's reunion, love scene, news reporter interviews - through all of them various members of the audience volunteer to improvise their lines. On stage the 14 actors who are trained refugees of various ages from 5 to 17 allow audience members from all ages and areas to join them on stage and relieve their pain and laugh together. That is the magic of the theatre: even from tragedy we bring life and laughter.

The play opened for two nights: both nights literally having leaflets dropped from airplanes that the area would be targeted for bombing. Nonetheless the theatre was full, packed from wall to wall: 500 seats with more than 650 people in the audience. I sent out a wide call through friends that I wanted the audience to come in from all over the country. And we were successful, every religious faction and area in the country risked their lives under the bombing and rove down. All sat next to each other regardless of their religious or political animosity for each other. They laughed together; they felt the pain and relieved it thru their smiles and the clapping. This was the ultimate success. To have them forget their differences, and have their laughs drown out the sounds of the air strikes overhead. Let their eyes focus on the stage and not on the doors which sometimes would bulge open due to the air pressure from the strikes.

By the way, if you notice in the video, the actors all have numbers. This is because in the country where I live we have 17 different religious sects, and many political

parties and militias, as well as huge differences in economic and social class. Wars have been fought over all these reasons and this is all still recent. So when you say your full name, you can immediately tell: what religion, area, political inclination, background and such about the person. So we use numbers. This way the audience and actors focus on what brings us together. What makes us common. Our humanity; our emotions, our common sensations, what every single religion, sect, country, class has felt: pain, fear, love, laughter, misery and happiness, what makes us human, our ability to connect by means of these feelings, our only true common ground.

I could lecture about the details of my technique or on how we would divide the hours. But I rather stress on what I believe is the secret to the success of this. The secret to why we still have theatre today even when we have competition from all these digital medium. Why we still yearn for the live experience. Because it is the essence of who we are. We all act that is our only means of communication so far. We act out our thoughts and emotions: we connect by sharing other people's lives, their misery and joy, their sorrow and their pain. We live not in isolation, but in community. We see our true reflection not in the mirror but in the eyes of those who look at us. We find our love in the hearts of others.

Theatre intensifies life, it adds life to life. It gives you more of who you are; it allows you to be truly honest and intimate, private on a large scale. Theatre allows us to have a private intimate relationship with hundreds if not thousands. It gives us hope to truly connect. The love you find with your family or loved one, this one on one relationship is beautiful and if you are true and honest and genuinely care then you will find that same intimate connection with the hundreds in your audience. You will live that intimate relationship but with hundreds.

In one night you would have hundreds of love affairs, you would connect, share your energy and life, leave stronger and more complete. You would become one with so many. This is the essence of life. This is the magic which is real theatre, to add life on to life, to live a hundred times more in a few simple hours.

That is why TV, DVD, Cinema, Internet cannot kill theatre. The magic of who we are, this is theatre. We are social, we are expressive, we are human. We only exist

when we connect. We only see through the eyes of others. Theatre is about being alive.

Finally I advise you to take theatre workshops, read theatre books, watch plays, enjoy others. Theatre training will help you become who you are, discover yourself, and more importantly learn how to connect with others. This is why I teach theatre, this is why I use drama therapy, this is why we are here, this is why no matter what happens we will always act, we will always perform, and we will always watch, because that is who we are - human!

Thank you for your kindness and willingness to share and listen.