

## ***The time we lost***

*A conversation with Rimah Jabr*

"This morning, I received a message from my sister. There was a funeral procession in Nablus last night. The Israel Occupation Army rolled into the streets. People started throwing stones. Fifty-two people were injured, one died. Today, the army has closed the whole city down."

Rimah Jabr sighs. Speaking from Toronto, where she has lived since 2016, the Palestinian playwright says: "That's how it is. Every day. When you're there, you don't really feel it. Until you manage to travel outside and reach other places. Then you realize just how much time you have lost."

Rimah lived in Palestine for thirty-two years. The need to regain that lost time is the driving force behind her astonishing productivity. In 2012, Rimah was invited to Brussels by the KVS (the Royal Flemish Theatre) and the Qattan Foundation for the production of *Keffiyeh / Made in China*. She went on to graduate from the RITS performing arts academy in Brussels and to write four theatre plays, in which she also performed, before moving to Toronto for love. There, she wrote and performed in *Two Birds*, *One Stone*, with her Jewish-Canadian friend Natasha Greenblatt, and is now creating a new production, *Broken Shapes*, alongside visual artist Dareen Abbas.

*Infini #5* is the result of a collaboration with Decoratelier, a Brussels based collective/workplace led by Belgian scenographer Jozef Wouters and dramaturge Jeroen Peeters. After its first presentation as part of the performance *Infini 1-15* at the Brussels KVS in 2016, it will now travel to Ghent (BE), Lisbon (PT), Ostend (BE) and Ramallah (PS).

"I was 30 years old when I took part in my first theatre workshop," Rimah Jabr, now 38, says. "I had always written, but only in private. I came to theatre work very late. As a result, I don't want to lose any more time. I still consider myself to be at the beginning of my career. That might explain my productivity. And I'm not a patient person in general. When I sit down and write, I don't have the patience to edit. I want it to be perfect from the very first version, which is impossible, of course – so only now am I learning to calm down, to be patient and really work on the text."

It's hard to imagine this furious impatience when you sit down in the theatre and hear Rimah read the letter that carries *Infini #5*. Her voice sounds calm and introspective. Addressing Jozef Wouters, who had asked her to write to him about her reasons for choosing the theme of tunnels and endlessness, she sounds as if she is thinking out loud. Aided by time and distance, she is able to reflect upon the time she has lost, living in Nablus, a large Palestinian city on the West Bank: thirty years of life under a system designed to undermine any sense of normality.

"Personally, I prefer to think this: that nothing of what we live is real," she says in her letter. A striking observation, to me as an outsider: Palestine seems to be the most real place in the world. "If you try to imagine the situation there," Rimah goes on to explain, "and then one day, you actually come, you will be shocked. I saw it happen to Jozef, when he visited me in Nablus. Everything is so real, that you will feel it cannot be true. It's too close to fiction. It's as though you have ended up inside a movie or a novel. But if you live your daily life in a situation that's so hard to cope with, your mind starts trying to find a way out of this reality. Because if you would really allow yourself to reflect upon the life you are living, over and over again, I don't think your brain would be able to take it. It's simply too much. It forces your brain to switch off. And you need to jump out of this situation, just to help you handle the impossibility of it all."

Rimah first met Jozef Wouters at his Decoratelier in Brussels. He had invited her, together with a wide range of other writers, theatre makers, visual artists and architects (I was one of them), to respond to the question: "Which spaces must we show in the theatre today?" Each conversation resulted in an

*infini*: painted backdrops, raised and lowered on pulleys, as a horizon for the imagination. The complete experience, named *Infini 1-15* and first presented at the KVS, was so striking that it was selected for the Flemish Theatre Festival as one of the highlights of the season. And Rimah Jabr's work might well have been the most memorable of them all.

During that first conversation, her immediate choice of landscape was: tunnels. Later, when Jozef visited the West Bank and Nablus for the first time and witnessed the wall, the checkpoints, the brightly lit and heavily guarded settlements on the hilltops, the confined life inside the Palestinian cities, he asked her again: Why tunnels? Rimah replied with a letter that speaks to us about the endlessness, the feeling that you can continue forever without seeing a light in the distance, the weight of the world that is moving around up there, somewhere above you.

For those of us living outside of Palestine, it might be hard to imagine the claustrophobia of life in a country where a simple trip from one side of the city to the other, let alone from one city to the next, will always confront you with roadblocks, where the Israeli army can allow you to pass or keep you waiting at will. "The fact that you're not allowed to travel, of course, robs you of your dignity. Just like the fact that they make you lose time. In Belgium, when the train is ten minutes late, people get mad, because they're late for school or work. Imagine that someone else is totally in control of your time. And on top of that, it really is a game of life and death. At the checkpoint you are standing face-to-face with a young person who is carrying a machine gun. To reach your destination, you need the permission of this young guy or girl. And although this person is stealing time from your life, you have to keep quiet and smile. A sudden move or an angry face might cost you your life. It's this mix: they are paranoid but possess the power, you are angry but trying very hard to remain rational."

"There are so many examples. A soldier ordering a man to dance, otherwise he wouldn't let him pass; the man danced. A woman delivering her baby in her husband's car at a checkpoint, because they were not allowed to cross and reach the hospital, no matter how much the husband begged. The 'hole', a spot at the checkpoint below street level, where men are forced to sit for hours, forbidden from talking to anyone, while their papers are being checked. Those checkpoints are not really a security check; they are part of a systematic way to humiliate people, keep them down and spread fear."

Writing the letter for *Infini #5*, in response to the questions Jozef kept asking her, Rimah Jabr started to realize how these experiences have shaped her work so far. "Everything I have written is about people being stuck in a situation. *Two Ladybugs* is about three young people in a coma, who meet each other in that world beyond life. One of them is an Israeli soldier who shot the other two. *The Prisoner* is about someone who remains mentally stuck even after he is finally released from jail. My third play was about a couple holed up in an apartment that is about to be destroyed by the Israeli forces. It has everything to do with the life I have lived, growing up in Nablus, the checkpoints, the lost time, feeling lazy and helpless, unable to do anything about anything."

"In Nablus, you feel you're not achieving anything, because the absence of a normal system won't allow you to do anything. It is not the lack of time – we always had a lot of time, doing literally nothing, sitting at home, eating, watching television. It's more about the time that has been wasted for all these years. Because on any given day, the city, the shops and the school could be shut down – just like Nablus has been shut down today. As a kid, we used to cheer whenever there was another curfew. No school, just staying home for another week. Later on, this emptiness becomes almost like an addiction."

Rimah has always given herself a physical presence in the plays that she has written and produced. In *Infini #5*, she is very present, too, but this time it's only her voice. "People can hear me. My voice is there. I don't have to appear in person. The stage is already so beautiful to watch. This is not about me or my personal story. It's about letting people feel and experience the endlessness, while they are listening to my description. They will see a cathedral of palm trees, inspired by the *Bosco di Palme*

(1754) by the Italian architect Giovanni Carlo Galli-Bibiena.” Jozef Wouters suggested this etching and his team at the Decoratelier went through the painstaking process of copying it thirteen times, each version slightly smaller than the one before. All they needed was paper, glue, tape – and time, hours and hours of time. The result: a scenography built just for the eye of the viewer. It leaves no space for actors. And as Galli-Bibiena was the one who pioneered a vanishing point that is slightly off-centre, the gaze of the spectator is caught in an endless perspective. “It looks open, but you cannot see where it ends,” concludes Rimah. “It’s all about following this view, trying to find the way out and forgetting that you tried, and then trying again, carried along by a feeling of perpetual hope. There is no end, you don’t arrive anywhere, but you keep on walking.”

*Chris Keulemans (traveling writer and journalist based in Amsterdam, participant in Infini 1-15)*