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**Lucy Powell went to Bethlehem to see the music**

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The open-air theatre sits

Palestinian territories from neighbouring Israel. Instead of a changing room there's an army watch-tower behind the stage. In lieu of a set, there's a swath of angry street art decorating every contentious inch of wall. And if the production needs lighting, normal procedure at this venue is to hack into the domestic supply of neighbouring houses and pay the owners in cash for the privilege.

"To make theatre here is a form of beautiful resistance," explains AbdelFattah Abusour, the ebullient general manager of the theatre. Abusour, who is also the president of the Palestinian Theatre Association, has rebuilt Adala's theatre since in the past five years, after it was demolished at the behest of the Israeli Army. When the dividing wall was erected in 2005, Abusour painted a section of it white and projected the first Palestinian film festival on to it. Since then he's been devising shows with mothers and local children about their lives, which have tainted the West Bank and beyond.

"Theatre is one of our most powerful means of self-expression," he says. "It's a way for us to narrate our own version of our stories. I wanted to show this other side of being Palestinian, that we are not only blowing ourselves up. We are also human. We do want to walk at our children's funerals. We need these children alive, creating, happy, in love. That's what this theatre is about. We're in the business here of building hope."

This is the theatrical fighting talk. But how, exactly, might the Bard weigh in? "It's a full-on assault on the senses," says Powell. "The Tempest is full of ideas of exile and power, territorialisation and resistance."

Shakespeare's enigmatic, ambiguous story of Prospero, the autocratic, exiled Duke of Milan, brewing magical storms and shipwrecking his enemies on his island is, says Holmes, "laden with tropes that resonate massively in this place".

Holmes's initial contact with the West Bank was Juliano Mer-Khamis, the Arab-Israeli theatre director and founder of the Freedom Theatre in Jenin. "Until one day in April," Holmes recalls, "Juliano walked out of his theatre with his kids, got in his car and was shot dead. We think by fundamentalists. Since then the Freedom has been attacked on all sides and it became impossible for us to play there." But Holmes didn't contemplate abandoning the tour, which will have visited East Jerusalem and Nablus in the West Bank, as well as the Israeli city of Haifa, before pitching its politicised tent in the Church of St Giles, Cripplegate, in the City of London, tonight for a month.

It was important to Holmes that both Palestinians and Israelis could see the production because, he says, "to me, theatre is all about communication, trying to have the most vital, complete and inclusive conversation possible in any given time and place". His previous productions include the verbatim plays *Fallujah* in 2007 about the Allied troops' siege of the Iraqi city, performed in a disused bus and *Katrina* in 2009 about the aftermath of the New Orleans hurricane, in a warehouse in Southwark, South London.

For The Tempest Holmes also wanted that conversation to happen



**Acting up a storm:** above, Nabil Stuart as Caliban and Nathalie Armin as Stephanie (a repugned Stefano) in *The Tempest*; right, Ruth Lass as Ariel. Top right, the audience at the Adala camp, Bethlehem, in the shadow of the wall

between the cast. His production boasts actors of international Muslim, Jewish and Catholic descent, though the production doesn't draw its race lines clearly. Prospero's servant, the ebullient spirit Ariel, for example, is played by the Jewish actor Ruth Lass, who lived in Israel when she was 15.

Standing on the stage in Bethlehem, Lass feels the cast, "extremely privileged to be on this side of the wall because so few Israelis can come here. And of course I also feel terribly sad and frustrated to see what's happening here, as many Jews are."

Rachel Lynes, who plays Prospero's daughter Miranda, is also part Jewish. She was determined to remain "firmly on the fence" in her judgement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but, she says, squinting up at the lowering wall abutting the stage, "it's been almost impossible to stay there because far, we haven't met a single Israeli outside the airport."



And there, three cast members with Muslim surnames were detained for a humiliating three hours" by Israeli security, says Omar Elertan, the assistant director, whose father is Palestinian. "Growing up in the West, all this stuff gets blown out of you," he says. "You arrive here and all they want to know is—'who's your father? What's your religion? It's totally medieval."

In the London incarnation of *The Tempest*, he says, he was to play a Jewish sojourn in the Levant, and Holmes is a modern (and western) dress production. The big draw for London audiences is that he claims to have recreated, for the first time in its 400-year history, the original soundscapes of Shakespeare's last play, the result of two years of research with Emily Holmes, its musical director, into the play's first performances. The music of *The Tempest* is so pervasive, Holmes says, that "it's almost like a character we've been missing all this time." But because the cast couldn't find a Baroque lute in Bethlehem, and what music there is being sung by Ariel, that draw for local audiences will simply be Shakespeare. In the event, it proves draw enough. The theatre in Adala is full to overflowing with an audience demographic whose age, Arts Council

England would be thrilled to note, averages about 8. Once under way, it's difficult to gauge the level of engagement with the text. A moving scene of deliciously ebullient children effectively draws out all but the very best of actors. In less lively subtleties, however, deliver a synopsis before each act. Amid the cacophony, mayhem there are some electrifying moments. When Nabil Stuart delivers Caliban's protest against his enslavement by Prospero — "I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own king" — he leaps off stage and punches the dividing wall. But it isn't clear whether the frisson that runs through the audience is thanks to Shakespeare's peculiarly portentious poetics, or fear that the actor might be shot by Israeli soldiers thinking that he is trying to scale the wall.

By the night's end the smattering of adults in the audience declare themselves thrilled with the production. Samal, a 56-year-old haker from Bethlehem, says that "the acting was very, very good," though when asked whether he thought it was about Israel and Palestine, he replies only "No". Amir, a philosophy teacher from the University of Bethlehem, describes the production as "excellent and quite topical", and Aid, a 22-year-old pharmaceutical student from Jerusalem, declares himself extremely grateful for the experience of this, his very first play, though when pushed he couldn't exactly say what that experience was. She was not alone there. "That was mad," says Lass, staggering off stage, colourfully. "An exciting history of intercultural connection" a bunch of rich Europeans, talking incomprehensibly in tartic pentameters in the Palestinian territories? Only Holmes, enigmatic, undemonstrative and entirely unapproachable, seems unimpressed.

"Just the fact that we're here is an extraordinary, inclusive cultural act," he says, smiling quietly. "That act leaves traces, here and in us. Whenever I make a piece of theatre, in London or in Bethlehem, it's an experiment, a new conversation. You just have to keep on starting these conversations, again and again. Where they go isn't up to you."

*The Tempest* is at St Giles, Cripplegate, from tonight to Oct 20. Box office: 020-7346 8891 (barbican.org.uk)

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**Through the barricades**



**The Vagina Monologues (1996)**  
Eve Ensler's play brings women's politics to the stage in an accessible way. The production has been staged internationally, and a television version was produced by HBO.

In 1998, Ensler and others launched V-Day, a global non-profit movement to end violence against women. The production has raised more than \$75 million for women's anti-violence groups through profits from the production.

**Othello (1997)**  
Patrick Stewart played Othello in the Shakespeare Theatre, Washington DC, in Jude Kelly's "photo negative" production which reversed the racial make-up of the cast. Stewart was a white Othello playing

abroadside a mainly African-American company.

**Hamlet in Belgrade (2001)**  
Nato bombs had been falling on targets all over the city only two years before the National Theatre took

their production of *Hamlet* (starring Simon Russell Beale in the title role) to Belgrade. At the time, almost immediately after sanctions were lifted, the performance was described locally as "the most important cultural event in Serbia in the past 40 years".

**Fidelio on Robben Island (2004)**  
Ten years after the fall of apartheid in South Africa, a remarkable production of

Bethoven's prison opera was staged in the same jail where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for more than 20 years, an island fortress off the coast of Cape Town. The dialogue was cut to a bare minimum and supplemented by recordings from key speeches given by Mandela that were broadcast from the real prison with the tower. Notices off were supplied by sequels and penquills, while the powerful South African-born soprano Elizabeth Connell sang the role of Leonore.

**The Great Game, at the Pentagon (2011)**  
This series of plays on Afghanistan's history, which originated at the Tricycle Theatre, North London, was performed for the Pentagon in February this year, with the help of agencies including the British Council. Policy and decision makers, government officials, injured service members, veterans and their families were among the audience.

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