What I learned about empire in the West Bank
by Nathan Schneider | January 30, 2013

At the edge of the West Bank village of Faqqua, an Israeli soldier watches from the other side of the Green Line. (Left in Focus/Bryan MacCormack)

It took three vehicles to get to Jenin. The first and last were shared taxis that played pop music the whole way; the one in the middle was a bus driven by a handsome and solemn man with a big, religious beard, whose television played music videos memorializing martyrs. If the West Bank is shaped like an hourglass, Jenin is at the top of the upper bulb, where the sand is when it’s full. Thousands of years ago, the dusty city was named after its gardens, but more recently Ariel Sharon called it a “hornet’s nest of terrorism.”

My destination, a place called the Freedom Theatre, adjoined a refugee camp that was completely flattened by made-in-the-USA Israeli bulldozers during the Second Intifada. On the walls of buildings all over town were posters celebrating young men with big guns. At the time, one of the Freedom Theatre’s founders, Zakaria Zubeidi, was sitting in a Palestinian Authority jail with no formal charge. Before turning to theatrical resistance, he had been the local commander of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, which for a time put him at number one on Israel’s most-wanted list. A year earlier, a gunman murdered the Freedom Theatre’s half-Israeli co-founder, Juliano Mer-Khamis, in the courtyard where the final taxi dropped me off.

I had come for the inaugural tour of the Freedom Bus, a 10-day sequence of performances across the West Bank. The other internationals along for the ride made for a varied group, the main
factions being college students from the United States and retirees associated with the Swedish National Touring Theatre. The first night at our lonely hotel in Jenin, fatigue led me to fantasies of escape, of hiding back across the Green Line in Israel-proper, where for the previous day the half-Jew in me had felt the rare and guilty pleasure of being among my own.

For this tour, Freedom Theatre actors employed a method known as Playback Theatre — sort of a stepchild to Rogerian psychotherapy and sibling to Theatre of the Oppressed. The basic model involves an audience member telling a story from her or his life, which then the actors spin into an improvised skit. This process is supposed to honor the unsung experiences of ordinary people while inserting them into the collective lore of the community.

Every day the performance was in a new place — and place, it turned out, was the star of the show. We went to Faqqua, a village along the Green Line that had run out of water. The Playback performance happened right beside the border fence, where Israeli soldiers watched from the roof of a Humvee. On the other side of the fence were Israeli fields, irrigated with water siphoned out from under where we stood. There was a story about a grandmother beaten by settlers while she went to fill a jug for her family. Boys instinctively scampered toward the soldiers, but the elders tried to calm them: “Behave, so everyone knows Faqqua is the best village in the world!”

In Nablus, actors performed outside a home that had been bulldozed, crushing family members from three generations inside. The night we were at Nabi Saleh, a teenager arrived back from two weeks in an Israeli jail, and his friends honked car horns and shot off fireworks as his story became a Playback skit. There, for years without stopping, the villagers have marched every Friday to protest the confiscation of their land and their water. After the Playback, a group of children sang a song to Musfata Tamimi, who’d been killed a few months earlier by a tear-gas canister that hit him in the face. In Al-Walajah, the performance was at a house encircled by Israeli walls. We helped put out a brush fire with blankets and shovels on a parched hillside near Beit Omar. In the old city of Hebron, which has 500 or so Jewish settlers living in its central artery — guarded by 2,000 soldiers — the kids were so restless and stir crazy that we had to end and pack up early. One night the show was at a Bedouin camp tucked beside a highway, a place that was as foreign to the actors from places like Jenin and East Jerusalem as to the Swedes.
We saw more of the West Bank than most of its inhabitants have. Traveling means paying fuel prices few can afford, hours stopped at checkpoints, and the risk of arbitrary search and seizure. Common to each place we went were the stories of arrests, of detainment, of night raids, of settler attacks. The tellers tended to speak matter-of-factly, in a tone of voice dulled to the terror and misery of the contents. The actors took it on themselves to reclaim that feeling, to contort their faces in expressions as unmistakable and unforgettable as they could manage. The skits usually ended on a note of defiance, whether it was in the original story or not, with a patriotic song or the recitation of a Mahmoud Darwish poem. Our translator, whom we internationals listened to through wireless headsets, rendered the most often-sung song as having to do with making barbecue from the fire in one’s heart.

As we made our way among the winding, shoddy roads that Palestinians are allowed to drive on, the settlements were everywhere — on hilltops, around every turn, connected by their own sumptuous superhighways. I convened a contest among the other riders on our Freedom Bus about what science fiction terminology best described the settlements we kept seeing. “Death Star” or “Coruscant” from Star Wars seemed appropriate to their looming effect, but not their actual appearance. So I settled on, simply, “moon base.”

A moon base is, essentially, the perfect suburb. In contrast to its hostile surroundings, it is supposed to be clean, orderly, functional and white. Every inch is planned. Its inhabitants work together for a higher purpose. I imagine that life in the matching apartment buildings and townhouses and houses of the settlements is like that too. I imagine that there are a lot of recycling bins.

Space eventually leads one to time. They are closer than we think, and one doesn’t make sense without the other; light-years measure distance, and timezones dictate the hour. On the map of the West Bank, too, I began noticing traces of my own country’s history.
Consider the wall, winding around the settlements and native towns, effectively annexing land with so little faithfulness to the Green Line. Consider the Jewish-only roads connecting the settlements. See them, out the window of a bus that cannot access them, lined by massive concrete barriers, leading into tunnels under Palestinian towns and across bridges over Palestinian valleys. Consider the archipelago of Zone A, the paltry islands not under Israeli military control, where a so-called Palestinian Authority is built to fail.

Now consider the Louisiana Purchase, or the spoils of the Mexican-American War. The Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Trail of Tears, cowboys and Indians — the destruction of whole societies, gradual conquest in the name of security. Those hordes, those savages. Weren’t they scalping innocents and raiding wagon trains? Or were they shooting rockets?

We know this; this is familiar. The more I saw of it, the more the West Bank felt like home. I thought of the reservation where I’d been a few weeks earlier, in the far Northwoods of Wisconsin — its people cordoned off, "sovereign," out of sight. They’re sent to open-air prisons in the heartland and paid off with just enough fast food, liquor and casinos to keep them there and keep them quiet. The long history of warfare and forced migration keeps the reservations dotting the country broken, subdued. When the Israeli general who first laid out the post-1967 occupation of the West Bank wrote a book on his handiwork, he titled it *The Carrot and the Stick*.

This is possible. These are proven methods for subjugating a people and taking over a territory. They’ve worked in many times and places, and in Palestine they’re working now. The military occupation over that tiny patch of land only makes more explicit than usual the kind of subjugation that elsewhere goes by other names.

The arbitrary imprisonment that was so common among Palestinian boys we met reminded me of Mike, who has lived in my building in Brooklyn all his life, who didn’t come by for guitar lessons for a few months because he’d been locked up for doing the same stuff other kids in other places do but without much chance of consequences. Some people, because they are in the way of something valuable, are born suspects, guilty before they have a chance to be innocent. They paint graffiti on the walls to insist that their home is really theirs and kill each other to insist to themselves that they’re really still alive.

We know this; this is familiar. We call it stop-and-frisk or eminent domain. It should come as no surprise that the NYPD has been learning combat and surveillance tactics from Israeli troops in the West Bank, and it now has its own office in Israel.
The Palestinian Authority’s ghostly provisional capital of Ramallah — at the narrow point of the hourglass, where the sand passes through — is the exception that proves the rule of hopelessness. It is the place Palestinians are expected to accept as their capital instead of Jerusalem, which Israel annexed in 1967. Cranes and towers rise up out of the dust. There, our search for a network robust enough for a video conference with people trapped in the Gaza Strip took us to the basement of the headquarters of PalTel, the largest private outfit in the Occupied Territories. (Israel inhibits Palestinians’ access to bandwidth, along with everything else.)

In a room resembling the bridge of a starship we met with PalTel’s CEO. Unlike any of the villagers and activists and artists we heard from, he spoke as if a viable Palestinian state huddled alongside Israel were still a practical ambition. “We are capitalists!” he assured us, tugging with both hands at the lapels of his suit jacket. “All we are concerned about is making money.” He spoke of a future in which Ramallah would be like New York. He thought that would please us.

Such talk has appeal for some young Palestinians, those less attached to their grandparents’ skeleton keys and the dream of Return. Like children of neoliberalism everywhere, they seem disturbingly well-adjusted to the way of things, with an instinct for turning oppression into a business opportunity. They ask, before even knowing your name, if they can be your friend on Facebook. But there are also others among the youth: the ones responsible for the burning tires and dumpsters we passed by on the road out of Ramallah, calling for the downfall of Texas-educated Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

Wherever I went in the West Bank, my country was lurking in the background — framing the choices, making a little more bearable the slow dissolution of this society for those enduring it, and thereby making it possible at all. Along roads and among the crumbling old sections of towns, there were reminders of our handiwork: “Funded by the people of the United States of America for the benefit of the Palestinian people.” No such signs appeared on the Israeli soldiers’ rifles.
One afternoon after a seminar at Hebron University, I spoke with an activist about 30 years old, wearing glasses and a colorful button-up shirt, a member of the Hebron Defense Committee on the bottom bulb of the West Bank. His group had been helping people build traditional tent homes in Area C, where the Israeli military rulers won’t grant building permits to Palestinians, while the settlements keep growing. At one point he cut himself off mid-sentence, after he said the word “settlements” — “the colonies,” he corrected himself. “We need to rethink again the words that we use,” he said. “When you’re building something, you have to use the right words.”

There are so many words to learn, and to learn how to use correctly, depending on whom you’re talking to. I’ve been saying “West Bank,” for instance, but Israel’s prime minister refers to the same territory in biblical terms: “Judea and Samaria.” What other words are landmines? Is there a “security fence” or a “separation wall,” or a “segregation wall” or an “apartheid wall”? The towering concrete barriers and the settlements and the Israeli “Defense” Forces’ checkpoints are “facts on the ground.” When Palestinians can’t stand to name the country that took their land, they call it “’48,” after the year of the taking. This is a practice in “steadfastness,” in “popular resistance,” in preventing one’s own “normalization” to the presence of the colonizer.

The greatest feat of redefinition, though, is the ubiquitous umbrella word for all this intransigence, “conflict.” “The conflict.” But ask the land. What is taking place there right now is not so much a conflict as it is the process of expansion for which “the conflict” lends cover. Just before I arrived it was revealed that Mitt Romney had told some of his presidential campaign’s wealthy donors that the Palestinians aren’t interested in peace, so neither is he: “We sort of live with it, and we kick the ball down the field and hope that ultimately, somehow, something will happen and resolve it.”

If “peace” and “conflict” were really the issue, this could sound like commendable realism. But when expansion and dismemberment are the facts on the ground, the unstated “something” to which he knowingly refers, and which we only need to “live with” a few generations longer before it “ultimately” concludes, these same words become monstrous.

Second only to “conflict” in serving the purposes of the occupier is the truism of the situation’s befuddling “complexity,” followed in third place by the proposed solution of “dialogue.”
A villager in Khan al-Ahmar tells his story to Freedom Theatre actor Faisal Abu Alhayjaa. (Left in Focus/Bryan MacCormack)

There was a woman on the Freedom Bus, a middle-aged social worker from New York, who wanted to see Playback Theatre of this sort practiced by Israelis and Palestinians together, sharing their stories and thereby learning to coexist. She reported to me at one point, however, that she'd asked one of the actors about this idea, and the actor was not interested.

The Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said once observed of the many polite dialogues he participated in that, “as the weaker, less organized party, the Palestinians could not really benefit from the uneven exchange.” Under occupation, the likely effect of such productions is the further pacification of the losing side. The activists we talked with in the West Bank asked not for dialogue, but for more bodies at protests, and more boycotts, divestments and sanctions against the occupation.

Said described the problem of diplomacy — also a kind of dialogue — in geographic terms: “They had the plans, the territory, the maps, the settlements, the roads: we have the wish for autonomy and Israeli withdrawal, with no details, and no power to change anything very much.” On the Israeli concrete wall that lines the border of the Aida Refugee Camp, someone painted these words of Nelson Mandela’s: “Only free men can negotiate.”

I never actually went inside a settlement; our Freedom Bus’s green plates prevented it from going to one, though my own privilege would have allowed me to do so after the tour was over. I don’t pretend that what I saw could count as a complete picture, or even a fair summary of one. I would feel cautious about taking sides if there were any sides left to take after the settlements and the bewildering course of the wall.

The situation is complex, but it’s also simple. There is no doubt of who is building the wall or who is guarding the settlements. And what’s Jewish in me knows that the measure of justice is the purview of the weak — the widows, the orphans, the exiles, even the insurgents. Prophets never bring good news for kings.
It amazed me how much people in the West Bank complain about each other’s apathy and inaction. The complaints reminded me of activists at home, but the circumstances did not. This was a society with a single, undisputed problem, which just about every woman, man and child had resisted and suffered for doing so. While many of us till the field of our compassion so as to carry on in whatever happens to be our cause, the Palestinians’ “issue,” as they often refer to it in English, is reinforced and clarified by the geography they inhabit day after day. It’s in every roadblock and water shortage and bulldozed house and unaffordable liter of fuel. People deem it obviously pathetic that only a handful of villages mount weekly protests against the latest Israeli incursion by wall and by settlers — again and again for years on end, with whole families risking tear gas and bullets each time. Yet through the great waves of resistance and through lulls like the present, their situation only worsens.

At the end of the journey, our guide, tired and under the weather, muttered, “We are running out of time.” He spoke of his own activism in the past tense — and of his society in almost that way, too. The West Bank is an hourglass in more respects than its shape. You can watch the land disappearing before you, slowly but perceptibly. Space leads to time.

The night before my flight home, staying at an old convent in Jerusalem, I photographed all the pages of my notebook, transferred them from my laptop to the Internet and threw the notebook in the trash. I uploaded and removed all the pictures on my camera except those of holy places. All that was left in my suitcase were clothes, small ceramics, and an old Bible its pages marked at the various conquests of Jerusalem. I’d slept badly every night of the trip, my head worrying about what would happen on the way out at the airport and how to avoid whatever it was. One of the students on the trip had already been taken out of her wheelchair and strip-searched there the night before. Perhaps they got to see the Hebrew letters tattooed along her ribs.

I arrived at Ben Gurion with two friends from the bus. We thought it
safer to go through security separately, to tell our respective made-up stories and meet on the other side. First, I was put in the slow line with the suspicious young solo travelers and a group of Africans. But a woman came to me, took my passport and saw that my name was as Jewish-sounding as “Nathan Schneider.”

“Do you know Ivrit?” she asked, using the word for Hebrew in Hebrew that most people who don’t know Hebrew don’t know.

“I studied it for a year in college,” I replied. It was ancient Hebrew; I can read the letters and translate archaic grammar, but I can’t speak a word.

She went off to her superiors for a few moments, and then opened the barrier and let me go through to get my boarding pass. No further questions.

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