

## Gaza, War, and the Theatre

The hand of Israeli oppression and destruction has spared nothing in Gaza—not even its magical sea, whose waves and fishermen I’ve spent my life contemplating, whose stories of sunken ships I’ve memorized, whose fish I could name by heart. At night, I hear it weep for Gaza and all that has befallen her.

We once had a theatre overlooking the sea, called the **Mas’hal Theatre**. It was destroyed five years before the war. Only **Al-Shawa Theatre**, the largest, most important, and oldest theatre in Gaza remained. But it too did not survive this war, just like **Al-Hilal Theatre**, which was erased from existence 14 years ago. They are determined to erase my life, my memories, and the beautiful, dreamy details we lived through.

Just a few days ago, I walked past Al-Shawa Theatre and remembered how it was built while I was a student at **Al-Karmel Secondary School**. In 1984, I was performing plays there—writing, directing, and acting in them with fellow students. Everyone was guessing what this magnificent building under construction was—some said it was a home for Gaza’s mayor Haj Rashad Al-Shawa, others said it was a palace for King Hussein, and someone even claimed it was a CIA center. We were all in awe of it, myself included—I hadn’t even turned 18.

Years passed, and in 1990, fate had it that the first play ever performed at Al-Shawa Cultural Centre was titled “*The Oil Lamp*”, and I was one of its stars. All tickets had been sold in advance, but when the time came, the hall was empty. I went out searching for the audience. Where were the people who bought the tickets?

Suddenly, I saw a crowd standing in front of the traffic department building, gazing at the theatre from afar. I felt that the building’s grandeur made people hesitant or afraid to climb the stairs and enter. I even saw some friends to whom I had sold tickets. I told the director to go speak to them, and he did. Eventually, they entered, marveling at the high walls and the large portrait of Haj Rashad Al-Shawa that adorned the hall.

We entered the theatre hall, lifted the plastic sheet off the stage for the first time—it was slippery with oil and made movement difficult and dangerous. After the national anthem and a minute of silence for the martyrs, the curtain rose, and the play began. It ended with a standing ovation. The director, Saeed Al-Bitar, said, “Looks like they enjoyed the show.” I replied, “No one was watching; they were too mesmerized by the theatre itself.”

These are fragments of our beautiful memories—now destroyed by the occupation. That theatre was always a magical place. Recently, I walked by with my wife, and all that remained were parts of a single wall and the beautiful staircase. I sat on the steps, a tear falling from my eye as I contemplated our fate as theatre artists—doomed to face war every two years, to see our theatres destroyed, our dreams and hopes vanish every two years. War after war—as if it’s our destiny to build while they destroy, to live while they kill.

Oh, comrades of the journey—I bid farewell to some of you as martyrs, while others still lie beneath the rubble. Where are your voices that once filled the stage with joy, pain, whispers, and

screams? You fluttered across the stage like butterflies. You've broken our hearts, and we can no longer bear the pain and anguish of losing you. Over 30 artists we've lost in this war—I knew each of them personally. No words of mourning can express what I feel for you.

I've always said: I didn't choose my name, my homeland, or my family—but I chose theatre freely. Theatre artists across the world are my big family—I love and belong to them.

Still, I cannot liken what's happening in Gaza now to theatre—for theatre is joy, awareness, culture, sophistication, humanity, beauty, and construction.

But what's happening in Gaza now is the complete opposite—famine, destruction, brutality, murder, starting with humans and ending with buildings. The general scene of Gaza is a **scenography of massive devastation**—crafted by Israeli and American hands with utmost hatred and vengeance. It reflects the level of cruelty one human can inflict upon another.

We feel like we're living in a massive jungle where all values and principles we've heard about have collapsed—democracy, human rights, women's rights, children's rights, the Security Council, the UN, and international courts that only act against the weak. For nearly two years, we've been annihilated before the world's eyes—a world that remains largely silent, except for some free voices here and there, some European countries, and very few Arab nations who stood by their humanity and by us. They're the ones who give us a bit of oxygen to survive and reinforce our resilience.

What's flowing in Gaza isn't just blood—it's flesh fused into cement, souls wandering in search of loved ones, minds lost forever, children hiding in tents with no idea why they're alone after losing their entire families.

What's happening in Gaza bears no resemblance to any drama ever produced, even by the greatest production companies. This is the ultimate scene of savagery—indescribable even by the most eloquent words. Simply put: it cannot be described. After this war, it will take decades to research, understand, and analyze what happened. Its impact will remain for generations.

Congratulations, dear artists—you have proven in this war that you, along with writers and journalists, are the noblest, the bravest, and the truest to humanity. Your solidarity with Gaza and its people—despite the high price many of you may pay—has been a beacon of justice.

Messages continue to pour in from artists around the world—strengthening our resolve, raising their voices: **“Stop the war, the killing, the starvation, the siege. Freedom for Gaza, for Palestine, for its people.”**

Yes, I have every right to be proud of my belonging to the community of free and genuine artists. This war has proven that the values we present on stage—freedom, slavery, democracy, oppression, love, hate, peace, beauty, mercy, brotherhood—are not just slogans. They are beliefs etched in our hearts.

How proud I've become of you, my theatre family. You've strengthened my resilience and helped me survive. Be proud of yourselves amid this deafening global silence in the face of genocide. You've shown that we live in a world ruled by the law of the jungle—**the strong devour the weak.**

But no matter how much they conspire against you, noble theatre—you will remain the **father of all arts**. You will never be defeated or destroyed. You will return—stronger and more beautiful, like true knights do. For thousands of years, you've endured, watched over by **Aristotle, Plato, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Brecht, Stanislavski, Augusto Boal, and Saadallah Wannous**, and thousands of theatre greats who have left us in body but live on in their magnificent writings—keeping the flame of theatre alive and lighting the path for generations to come in search of freedom, beauty, liberation, and the meaning of what it is to be—and remain—**human.**

**Wait for the three knocks of the stage. And watch the show.**

**Ali Abu Yassin**  
**August 18, 2025**