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Cover Artist
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RAMALLAH CONTEMPORARY DANCE FESTIVAL

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Up three flights of stone stairs and into a room floored with tile. Skylights splash a faint glow on a row of chairs filled with scholars, dancers, choreographers, educators and members of society. Evenly spaced, they face a long table on which sits a microphone and a unopened bottle of water. In the corner, a digital translation station with wireless headphones for the taking. Arabic and English reverberate off the angled ceiling, echoing in around and through one another. The "performer" takes his/her seat behind the table and gently adjusts the mic to suit the proportions of his/her body. We all sit to listen. It is about being given a voice and a time to be heard.

The subject: Dance and Society.

The place: Palestine.

The occasion: a three day conference hosted during the 2011 Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival intended to survey the undeniable relationship between dance and social change.

As history has proven, when all else is stripped from a human including the right to even be defined as such, (they) still, despite it all, have (their) physicality; perhaps the most profound enunciation of existence. But in what ways can physical presence be cultivated, encouraged, and shared? And how do we ensure that it (dance's dissemination) too does not become a colonizer of bodies? The conference on Dance and Society held April 28th – May 1st 2011 by the nongovernmental community based organization Sareyet Ramallah set out to

create a dialogic improvisation that would lead to some possible answers. Refreshingly, a similar structure and ethos pervades the entire three week festival: open dialogue of perspectives, free exchange of ideas, exploration into the vast possibilities of mobilization and, most importantly, celebration of the immense power of movement-- allowing people to be heard despite the lack of a shared verbal language.

Now in its 6th year, the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, initiated by Sareyet Ramallah, invites international dance companies to perform and experience life inside the walls of the West Bank. The companies from Spain, France, Tunisia, United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, and Japan that were a part of this year's festival were not merely asked to dump a performance on an audience one night and then whisk away to another city never to have really visited the place nor the people. Rather, the organizers of the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival requested that participating companies reside at the same local hotel, stay a few days, and share in communal meals. Here, conversations and everyday exchanges are strongly encouraged. The RCDF facilitates such relationships, not in an effort to adhere to some "diversity" quota but out of absolute necessity. As a people currently under occupation, Palestinians depend on the circulation of visitors, in and back out, to maintain their presence and contribution to a larger society and the human community. However, it must be stated that the festival is not designed to bring "culture" to the iso-

lated people of Palestine under occupation. What the organizers hope will happen as a result of hosting the international artists, this article being a case in point, is that the festival will reach beyond Ramallah to the countries whose artists were given the opportunity and time to actually see. Pure and simple, the festival was established to share in the honoring of a body's presence. As the 2011 RCDF program notes, "The festival came and remains an emphasis that the aesthetic action is an aspect of will and life and perpetual motion."

It is no small coincidence that the festival began shortly after the Second Intifada and the construction of a 25 foot wall that now envelops much of the West Bank. Despite such a closed space, a mentality of openness ensues. And it is this mentality and the spirit of the festival's organizers that encouraged us to sit together to question and reconsider the obstacles society may place against particular bodies in particular places. Dance has a long history of being the bearer of a people's self-worth. For many a silenced community movement has been the material of maintenance when everything else is stripped away. What then, we may ask, is in the nature of dance that makes it such a valuable tool in maintaining the eminence of human presence, of respectability? How can we utilize it as a tool in such a way? How do we cultivate that understanding in a society without imposing a Eurocentric aesthetic or form? All of these questions and more set the stage for the conference:

Taoufiq Izzediou taps the mic; he

moves it closer to his body, then looks up. He will perform his solo, *Alief* tomorrow at the Al Kasaba Theater as part of the festival but today he sits to offer his ideas and thoughts on contemporary dance in the Arab world. His first words, guaranteed to hold the audience's attention, declare his disbelief in "contemporary" dance. Choreographer/dancer/thinker—Taoufiq Izzediou is Moroccan, Arab, French, Berber. The issue, in Taoufiq's eyes, is not the assumed contentiousness of contemporary dance in the Arab world; he believes that the real issue is the constant misconception of what constitutes "contemporary". As Taoufiq, with his numerous labels, knows more than most, the body has the capability to house multiple histories and seemingly contradictory identities. *Moroccan, Arab, French, Berber, Male, Dancer, Thinker, Artist*. Even his body that, now, sits in quite a contemporary manner in front of his current audience, has the knowledge and kinesthetic awareness of other traditional/social forms, they still reside somewhere deep within his make-up and always will. If they made themselves known at this precise second, would he no longer be considered of the moment, no longer a "contemporary" artist? The word "contemporary" in dance, Taoufiq asserts, has lost all connection to the literal meaning of the word as it has become more closely aligned with a Eurocentric aesthetic of innovation.

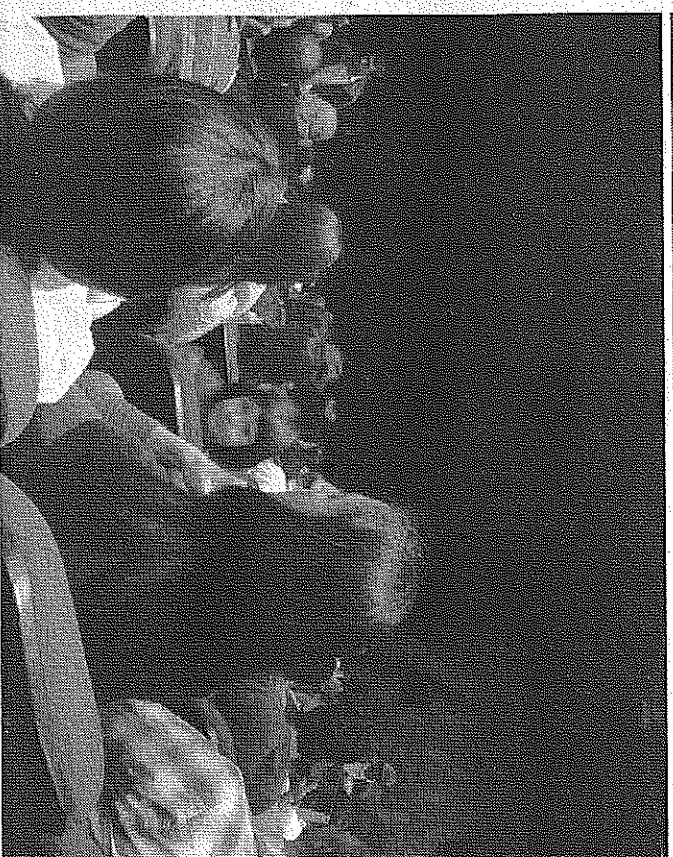
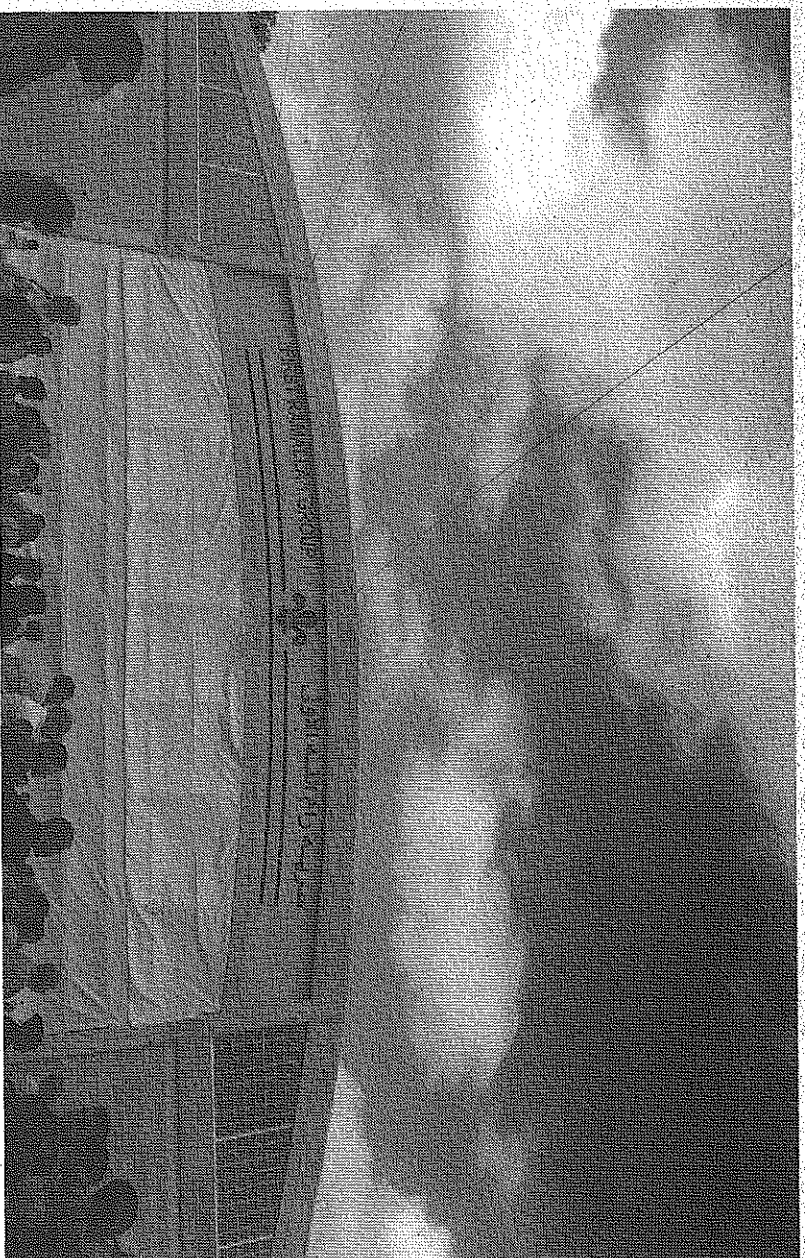
After taking a slow slip of water Taoufiq proposes his idea of "dance du jour" (dance of the day), an approach to movement that insists on presence in all its

Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival (RCDF) organized by Sareyet Ramallah – First Ramallah Group launched in 2006. Each year the festival invites over 15 international dance companies to perform in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. As the festival's mission statement notes, "RCDF aims at promoting dialogue and cultural exchange between the Palestinian people and the peoples of the world."

In addition to the performances, open workshops are given by the visiting companies. In 2011, the festival continued to expand its programming beyond performance by offering three week workshops on "Dance on Camera" and "Dance Film Techniques." This year's festival also saw the addition of a three day conference on "Dance and Society," invited scholars, directors, and educators gathered to discuss the past, present and future of dance in the Arab world and, in particular, Palestine.

RCDF is part of the Masahat Contemporary Dance Network whose members include Magamat Dance Theater in Lebanon, Tanween Dance Theater Dance in Syria and The National Center for Culture and Performance Arts in Jordan. Together they organize the contemporary dance festivals that are held in the four countries each year.

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temporal connotations. It is about being honest to the body you have at hand, about allowing your body to physically research and perhaps answer proposed problems. Taoufik does not wish to have preconceived notions when entering the studio of what may or may not be "contemporary," so he treats his body and desired course of action differently each and every day. For Taoufik, we can only continue moving with questions that beg more questions. And so he asks, "Why this dance (debkeh) for these people (Palestinians)?"

Hands raise. There is much to say.

Placing down his headset, Nicholas Rowe, author of *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine* enters the conversation. Prior to writing his book, Nicholas spent 8 years in the occupied territories of Palestine. Spending much of his time with local dance makers and keepers of the traditional dance form known as debkeh, he became well versed in the scenes of both the "folk" and "modern" forms. Nicholas, too, points out that the categories are not mutually exclusive. As he eloquently states in *Raising Dust*, "Being denied the label 'contemporary' can feel like being denied a collective cultural visa to the twenty-first century; rejecting the term 'modern' can appear to be an obstinate yet doomed refusal to accept the passage of time. Together they reinforce a sense that colonized and politically marginalized populations cannot define their own cultural modernity." What Nicholas insists is that they do and they must. When the traditions that help define your person-

hood are encroached upon, threatened to be closed off by each cement slab erected, the priority becomes making your particular presence known, not the affinities of another. What Nicholas hopes to see is a dance scene in Palestine built from the ground up.

Enter Noora Baker, dancer with Palestine's El-Funoun Dance Troupe and Farah Saleh, dancer with Sareyet Ramallah Troupe for Music and Dance: The two final speakers take their seats at the table. They are here to balance the exchange and let it be known that hyper political awareness can be just as detrimental. After all improvisation did not come from the West.

Noora Baker scoots her chair in and takes a moment to gather her testimony. She begins. Noora's first opportunity to dance on stage was prevented by the imprisonment of her entire family during the First Intifada. The year was 1989. It would not be until two years later that she would have the chance to perform debkeh on stage. By this time her feet had grown too big for her shoes. She danced barefoot (note: debkeh is not "traditionally" danced barefoot) Another obstacle came during the Second Intifada. Noora was 19. Because of the strict and often violently enforced curfews Noora and fellow members of the Palestinian debkeh troupe could not make it to the dance halls for rehearsal. During this period they were not permitted after a certain time to leave their homes or even set foot outside.

Noora motions her hands back and

forth as though, swiping the chairs aside and explains that during the Second Intifada they would simply meet in one another's living rooms and clear away the furniture. Because the maintenance of their traditions was threatened they held on tight. The traditional form of debkeh, typically danced at weddings and celebrations, morphed into the bearer of their strife as the productions set for the stage took on a more narrative structure. New forms of debkeh continue to developed through the simultaneous desire for preservation and revolution.

"There is no pure form," Farah Saleh, a dancer with Sareyet Ramallah Troupe for Music and Dance, continues. It is not important what you call it, whether it is in its "pure" form or not. What matters most to Farah and the other dancers of Sareyet Ramallah—the opportunity to move as they wish. Under the direction of Khled Elayan, the dancers of Sareyet Ramallah Amal Kharib, Farah Saleh, Yazan Iwediati, Salma Alaya, Shatha Totah, Lama Alaya, Adel Mashriqi, and Jumara Dabis created *Sandwichet Labaneh*. The program notes:

War: waged in the name of humanity and for humanity, when humanity is the only victim. Images become mere cosmetic tool for the lenses. Searching for meaningless merchandise among useless international aid packages, men and women are asked to be action figures. White phosphorus is our new white Christmas.

The work itself performed during the festival and was just as poetic. Each

dancer took the stage as an individual as most of the movement was of their own making, yet the understanding of their shared Palestinian heritage was clear.

From his seat on the side of the room, Khled Elayan stands and echoes the dancers' testimonies, "just because we open up does not mean we will lose what we have." As director of the Sareyet Ramallah and the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, Khled strives to offer a space where something other than isolation is an option. He reiterates the sentiment that contamination by other dance forms should not be feared. There is already a danger of being boxed in as a Palestinian, nothing needs to be done to further that, especially not in dance. The important thing to investigate, as Taoufik urged, are the movements that aid in what is desired to be said and how the body desires to be seen. Khled thanks everyone once again for coming and returns to his seat.

Soon this tile floor will be replaced by Marley and a sprung floor. Plans are on the way to have the current conference room converted into a studio/performance space. Words and thoughts will be mixed with moving bodies but the discussion and open dialogue will remain. All we can do as dancers in our society is try new things and make other possibilities known.

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