

“I am free” a play that shocks audiences in Palestine and Morocco

Artist Valantina Abu Oqsa amazes the audience and brings them to tears with her performance

Palestinian artist Valantina Abu Oqsa returned to Haifa last Sunday coming from Morocco where she presented her play “I am free” in Rabat and in Martel in Tatwan north of Morocco. The play had opened back in mid-January 2011 on the stage of Ashtar theater in Ramallah.

Valantina wrote “I am free” and directed it. In the play, she is a Palestinian prisoner while actor Hussein Nakhleh plays the role of an Israeli interrogator. Through her vision as playwright and director, Valantina presents the interrogation room in one of the interrogation rounds that resembles very closely what happens in real life according to spectators in Ramallah who have experienced interrogation and imprisonment; so real that former women prisoners cried and said ‘we could almost smell the prison cell” while others said “it seemed as if you were truly there with us, as if you knew exactly how we felt”. The audience talked about the brilliant performance of the actors while the performance itself amazed and shocked the audience with its boldness and the detailed facts that were presented for the first time on the stage. The play was considered as a first of its kind by all standards, but particularly in terms of providing details of what Palestinians go through in the Israeli occupation prisons, especially women.

Abu Oqsa derived credibility for her work through research, studies, interviews, and live testimonies of many former prisoners over a period of almost one year. Valantina then chose Nizar Al Ghoul as assistant director and Ni’meh Zaknoun, as lighting expert. It is worth noting that the play is independently produced and was supported by a large number of individuals and national organizations.

Abu Oqsa and Nakhleh had traveled to Morocco on 19 January 2011 upon the invitation of the Palestinian Prisoner Club and the Committee for the Conference on Palestinian Prisoners to perform as part of the cultural program of the international conference for solidarity with the Palestinian political prisoners. The program included also a performance by the Lebanese artist

Marcel Khalifeh and the participation of Zahi Wahbi, the Lebanese poet and media figure, as well as the famous Palestinian poet Sameeh Al Qassem in separate events and on different evenings.

There were several remarkable reactions to the play, for example, the Moroccan audience gave the actors a standing ovation following the end of the performance coupled with long applause during which tens and tens of spectators came up to the stage in a show of appreciation and amazement at the impressive quality of the performance and acting and asked Valantina and Hussein for their signatures and to take pictures with them. Valantina who brought tears to the eyes of women during and after her performance heard the words of praise for the struggle and steadfastness of the Palestinian people and particularly the Palestinian woman.

In a very significant and valuable reaction to the play, the prominent and very well known thinker Dr. Ahmad Qattash said in a letter to Abu Oqsa “ Valantina and Hussein excel.. how closely intertwined is culture and politics, creativity and noble causes. Aristotle said in the past that art is a personal feeling that seeks the abstract to eliminate the ugliness and the mistakes. Brecht, however, pointed to the social function of art and described it as a sensibility and interaction with people’s causes while expressing them at the same time. “I am free” was a display and an illustration of all aspects of art from Brecht’s perspective. The performance could not have reached this aesthetic brilliance and the acting could not have soared to this level had it not been for the deep feeling and the reformulation of the scenes to match the vibrations of the heart and the mind in terms of acting and directing. It would not have been possible had it not been for the complete support to the message and main idea of the play. Valantina and Hussein, your performance was so real and so honest, you have crossed Dante’s Purgatory but through an experience of steadfastness, defiance, and achieving freedom that you Valantina had so well understood, you understood the philosophical dimension of freedom as “the awareness of the necessity and its use” to defy the oppressor and hold steadfast in front of all kinds of torture.

The opening of the play was like a rehearsal, but in the first performance, the level was elevated to new heights and came closer to 90%-95% of the optimal performance. You have captured the hearts of the spectators and the roles of

the prisoner and the interrogator were complementary to each other. In the second evening, the minor flaws of the first performance were addressed and the play reached a climax. I expect that further creative capabilities will emerge in the following performances.

It is very courageous and bold to address some of the scenes with such sensitivity and seriousness. Any roughness on the stage is only a reflection of some of the things that take place in the cells of the 'liberal' occupation in terms of language and immoral and racist actions. You cried Valantina, and Hussein enacted the role of the villain! However, from the audience seats, the spectators were swept away by amazement and complex sentimental reactions. Onward and forward"

It should be mentioned that the Palestinian, Moroccan, and Arab media in general have acknowledged the work and continue to write about it. Performances in Palestine and abroad will resume as of mid-February 2011. The schedule of performances can be accessed at www.valantina-abu-oqsa.net