

# Sahmatah

## Awakening History

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*Edward Mast*

An old man enters, poking around on the ground with his cane, looking for something as he mumbles:<sup>1</sup>

GRANDFATHER: This was Ibrahim El Khalil's house. This was Ahmad Khalil's house. So Asad Zidan lived...here. The Mukhtar's house must be in this area...or maybe...over there... Ah! Here it is.

A young man, Habeeb, has been sitting in the audience and now speaks:

HABEEB: What? The Mukhtar's house?

GRANDFATHER: No. This is Abu-Adel's house. Your uncle.

HABEEB: I always thought my uncle was from Haifa.

GRANDFATHER: *(Continues to search the ground)* Your uncle is from Sahmatah. He will always be from Sahmatah. So are you.

HABEEB: I'm from Sahmatah?

GRANDFATHER: Yes.

HABEEB: Grandpa, I never even saw Sahmatah.

GRANDFATHER: You're seeing it now.

HABEEB: All I see is a hill covered with pine trees.

GRANDFATHER: We never had pine trees. They planted pine to hide the village...

At one point, the Grandfather asks an audience member to move aside, since one of the buried homes was under that chair. The audience giggles nervously. They think that the old man is idly puttering among old stones. The young man in the play thinks so, too. In a little under one hour, the young man and the audience will come to understand that those scattered stones are all that remains of a village called Sahmatah, where that old man grew up and lived until the village was destroyed.

There are some Palestinians in the audience, many of whom have hardly ever spoken aloud of their history of exile. For some of them, this performance will change that.

1. Loutuf Nuwayser performs as the Grandfather in *Sahmatah* atop the buried village (1998). (Photo by Fouad Awad)



The play, titled *Sahmatah*, was performed in Seattle and around the Pacific Northwest in 1996. In 1998, *Sahmatah* traveled to Israel/Palestine, to be performed on the actual stones of the village itself.

The project began five years ago.

### *If your heart might fall for this*

In May of 1995, I got a phone message from Hanna Eady, a Palestinian American whom I had met only once, the day before. The mutual acquaintance who had introduced us knew I was looking for ways to collaborate with Palestinian theatre artists. Hanna's phone message asked if I would consider collaborating on a playwriting project, and he suggested we "get together and talk, and you can see if your heart might fall for this."<sup>2</sup>

I had recently met with some Palestinian theatre directors in East Jerusalem. I learned about the obstacles they must regularly overcome to present serious theatre to their people. Not only must they endure censorship and a lack of support by the Israeli government, but also a total lack of university theatre programs and other training resources within the Occupied Territories. A culture like that of today's Palestinians—urban, secular, educated, politicized by years of oppression—is ripe for theatre, but Arabic culture, while rich in literature, music, dance, and other arts, has no tradition of theatre as we know it. I came back to the U.S. committed to finding ways for American theatre artists to collaborate and share skills with Palestinians. And so I came to meet Hanna.

Hanna was planning a trip to Israel/Palestine that summer with the purpose of video-interviewing Palestinians from the Occupied Territories and inside Israel Proper. His proposal was to turn this material into some kind of theatre script. In my work as a playwright, I have grown cautious about committing to material I haven't seen; but still I was interested, and we agreed to meet when he returned with videotapes.

Hanna came back at the end of summer and his idea for the project had changed; he had, in that short time, discovered his own history. Hanna had learned about *Sahmatah*.

### *Growing up Arab in Israel*

Hanna is from the village of Buqayah, in the Upper Galilee inside Israel Proper. On the maps of Israel the village is called Peqiin, or Ancient Peqiin, because New Peqiin is now a Jewish settlement built on land originally part of Buqayah. The village has been inhabited for millennia and, recently, a cave was discovered with ceramic coffins, skeletons, and artifacts that date back seven thousand years. Hanna grew up there, in a small community of five different religious groups: Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Druze, Jewish, and Muslim.

Hanna was raised, therefore, as a citizen of the state of Israel—unlike the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Over time, I learned from Hanna that the situation of Palestinians “inside” is both different from and similar to the situation in the Territories.

The school system for Arabs inside Israel is dominated by pro-Israeli and Jewish curriculum. Arab children learn Jewish history, the Hebrew language, and Hebrew literature. They learn the Torah by heart, as well as many other passages from Jewish teachings. As they reach college age, many Palestinian young people speak a unique mixture of Arabic and Hebrew, which their parents find difficult to understand. Hanna reports, “We would find ourselves avoiding conversation with old people, and when it happened, it would be awkward and loud as if with a stranger who’s hard of hearing”:

I learned everything about the Jewish history of pain and suffering along with one class about Arab history, summarized for us in a book—written by a Sephardic Jew—full of barbaric, warlike heathens out to destroy the Chosen People and throw them into the sea. There was no mention of us, the Palestinians, so I grew up thinking that we were part of the new Israeli state, a part of the new invention, and since we were new, we had no history. Since 1948 we had been forced to become workers and employees of the growing Israeli country. They gave us something we were afraid to lose: cash. We spoke Hebrew, we drove cars, and once a year we celebrated the Israeli Independence Day by singing in the streets, waving the blue and white Israeli flag.

Amazingly, it was only after Hanna came to the U.S. in 1981 that he met with Arabs who freely called themselves Palestinians. Hanna had run up against the lack of theatre training for Arabs in Israel, so he had come to the University of Wisconsin to pursue theatre studies. One day, in a class discussion, he described himself as Israeli, and was taken aback when a classmate insisted that he should call himself Palestinian.

In 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon, a group of Palestinians met on the Milwaukee campus to make a list of which of them were going to fly back to Lebanon to join the Palestinian fighters against Israel. Hanna remembers sitting in his room, frozen: “I did not know what to say, or how to think. My name did not go on the list and I did not go to Lebanon. I stayed in Milwaukee and got very sick, very depressed, to the point of suicide. A few days later I found myself on a plane flying home.”

Hanna stayed in Israel most of the summer. He watched the destruction of Lebanon on TV; he listened carefully to the casualty reports for the names of Palestinians and Lebanese, particularly his university friends who had left the Milwaukee campus to join battle. But only Israeli casualties were reported. Twenty-two thousand people were killed by Israeli forces. Hanna: “If I had raised my hand to put my name on that list, I could have been among them.”

That summer, when Hanna returned to Israel, the border to Lebanon, now controlled by the Israeli army, was opened up for the first time since 1948.

Some relatives returned from Lebanon to visit, and Hanna met people that he had known nothing about. This was the first time Hanna learned that a large part of his family had been forced out of Palestine in 1948. This was 1982; Hanna was 25 years old:

I returned to the U.S. with so much rage and anger. I carried these realizations like a nightmare. Where do I go now? And how can I compensate for all the past, and re-wash my brain to get the full truth, the full life? I was about to get married—to a Jewish woman. The anger prevented me from forgiving and forgetting; I was compelled instead to search for justice.

Hanna became active in dialogue groups and peace movements, while pursuing his career as a director and drama teacher. He attended the MFA Directing Program at the University of Washington and still lives in Seattle with his wife and three children.

Hanna was hopeful, as were many others, when he heard news of the 1994 Oslo Agreement which purported to address the various obstacles to peace and to outline a process for creating autonomy and self-determination for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. But like many others, he felt even more betrayed when he came to understand the true nature of the agreement. Among its many failings, the agreement made no mention of the two million refugees who are still waiting to return to the homes from which they were driven in 1948.

Hanna felt he needed to take some action: “I raised enough money to buy a quality video camera, and decided to take a trip back and document stories of my people, before they all disappear.”

### *The hilltop where peace begins*

At the airport I was picked up by my neighbor, Fahid. We talked about Oslo, about the famous handshake on the White House lawn between what he called “two war criminals.” After two hours in the car we were driving by Jewish settlements in the north, Maalot, Kafar Ha-vradeem, Hosen on the right. Fahid looked up to the left and pointed to a hill covered with pine trees and said: “Here, in Sahmatah, not on the lawn of the White House, peace starts.”

Fahid had grown up next door to Hanna in Buqayah. They were best friends. Fahid’s father, Abu Soheil, described himself as a refugee. Hanna had always been puzzled by this: how could Abu Soheil be a refugee when he lived in Buqayah? He had never gotten the answer, because he had never asked. Now he asked and now it became clear. Abu Soheil was a refugee from the village of Sahmatah, which is one mile away from Buqayah, on the next hilltop to the west.

Even with limited exposure to the history of the 1948 war, Hanna had heard the name of Deir Yassin, a village near Jerusalem in which Israeli soldiers had massacred over 200 civilians. This event had always been discussed as an isolated and regrettable incident. The truth that Hanna now learned was more appalling. Deir Yassin was one of 418 Palestinian villages that the Israeli army destroyed in 1948 and 1949. Many inhabitants of those villages were forced to leave the country, but some found refuge in neighboring towns that were spared. Almost a million Palestinians were driven out, and the number of refugees has grown to almost three million today, most of whom now live in refugee camps. About 250,000 are internal refugees, still living inside Israel and in

some cases not far from their destroyed homes. Some of them still carry keys to the houses from which they were suddenly and violently expelled.

Sahmatah was one of those villages. In a series of attacks beginning in late October 1948, Israeli troops killed or drove out all the inhabitants of the village. Some survivors fled the country, others made their way to Tarshiha, Fassuta, Haifa, or Buqayah. (Buqayah, having a large population of Christians and Druze, was not targeted during the war.) Immediately after the war, Jewish immigrants were brought in to live in the abandoned houses of Sahmatah. The settlement called Hosen was built nearby. When Hosen was completed, the immigrants moved there and the remaining buildings of Sahmatah were blown up by Israeli army engineers. Other settlements have since been built on farmland which once belonged to Sahmatah. The Sahmani—people of Sahmatah—were never allowed to return to their village. Abu Soheil has lived for over 50 years in Buqayah, within eyesight of his village, but had never been back there in all that time.

It is worth noting that Sahmatah was outside the borders of the U.N.-designated Jewish state. By May 1948, when the state of Israel was declared, the highly trained and well-armed Zionist forces had completely quelled all Palestinian resistance inside those borders that the United Nations had recommended. When Syria, Jordan, and Egypt declared war—in response to the wave of Palestinian refugees already streaming into their countries—the Israeli forces used this to justify attacking and conquering land that the U.N. had envisioned for a Palestinian state. The new Israeli government followed up with a twofold propaganda campaign: that they were outnumbered, and that the Palestinians were ordered to leave the country by their own Arab leaders. The story of the armed Israeli attack on civilians in Sahmatah, and the forcible expulsion of the Sahmani, contradicts both of Israel's claims.

Hanna was shattered, not only by what he was discovering, but also by how little of the truth he had understood. He immediately decided to focus entirely on the story of Sahmatah.

### *The interviews*

He began by documenting on tape the story of what happened on the first day the village was hit. In 1948, Abu Soheil was a young man in his early twenties. He's now a father of six children, all married and with children of their own. The interviews consisted of a few individual sessions with him and other older people, and later with him and his children and grandchildren. Some of the stories were being told for the first time. The whole family, especially the younger members, sat listening with amazement as Abu Soheil spoke about running and hiding from Israeli soldiers, his wife carrying their newborn baby on her back.

The stories were mostly sad, but Hanna also asked about the times before the war.

I wanted a taste of the peaceful time before the creation of the state of Israel. The Grandmother went on telling the story of their wedding, and the relationships between people in Sahmatah, especially between Muslims and Christians. They lived in harmony until 1948.

Sometimes the interviewees were aware of the camera, but when an argument got going, the camera was forgotten. There were heated discussions between husbands and wives about their children's futures. For example: In recent years the Israeli government had offered the people of Sahmatah government land elsewhere where they could build homes using government loans; they

would pay no rent for 49 years but ownership would revert to the Israeli government after that time. Returning to rebuild in Sahmatah was not offered as an option. Yet the former occupants of Sahmatah have legal documents—in Turkish, Arabic, and Hebrew—that show who owns land and how much. Some of them, such as Abu Soheil, continued to pay property taxes to Israel for years after 1948 in order to keep their claims alive.

The adult sons were against abandoning the right to build in Sahmatah and being debtors to the government. Their wives, on the other hand, were desperately looking for any immediate solution to the problem of living space. Where would their children live? In 49 years, they said, things might change; but the husbands were saying, “In 40 years you are back to square one, you have nothing, and meanwhile the government will have buried Sahmatah.”<sup>73</sup> Some of the kids were giggling and saying that they didn’t want to get married, or have children, and one shouted “Never! Only in Sahmatah.” This earned him a smile and pat on the back from his grandfather.

Hanna wanted to hear some of the stories on-site in Sahmatah. He made plans with Fahid and Abu Soheil to invite Sahmani refugees who now live in different parts of the country. They came from all over: Buqayah, Kufer-Samea, Fassutah, Haifa; older men, mostly, but women and some children too. They all met by the steel gate in the barbed-wire fence around Sahmatah, which is now used for pasturing cows and horses. A Jewish settler from Tsoorial nearby keeps the key to the lock, and they had arranged to meet him there. They waited a while for some who were coming from far places, and meanwhile Hanna managed to tape the excitement and the warmth of the Sahmanis meeting each other: the kisses, the hugs, the tears, and the long handshakes. An older man stared at a child, trying to figure who his father was by his looks and the features on his face: “Your father must be so and so, right?” “No, that’s my uncle.”

When all had arrived, they walked up a dusty and very rocky road, following Abu Soheil, who was the eldest and was reputed to have the sharpest memory. All Hanna could see were rocks and patches of dirt; but Abu Soheil pointed to the sides of the road and rolled a list of names: “This is Ahmad Khalil’s house, this is El haj Hashim’s house...” After a while, Abu Soheil realized that Hanna and the others were not seeing the same thing he was seeing. He stopped and said, “You must realize that we are walking on top of the village, over the roofs of the homes. The village was destroyed and buried by the Israeli army with bulldozers.” He pointed into a hole in the ground and said, “Do you see the arches of a large living room? We are on top of the house.”

They spent the day hearing stories of the bombing, the massacres, the torture, the fear that forced the people finally to leave the village and scatter across the Middle East.

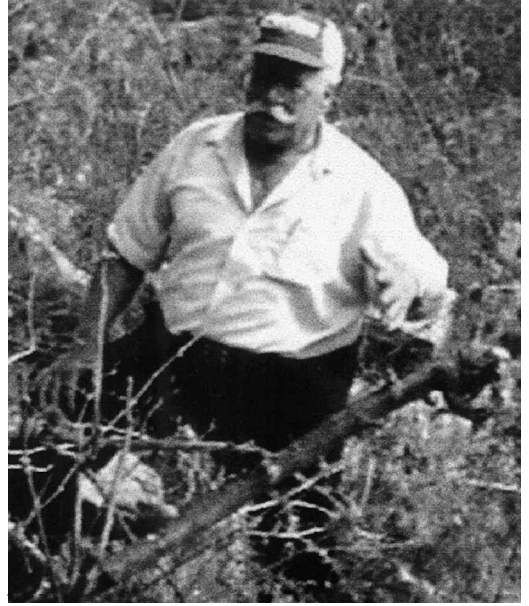
At one point Hanna’s group separated and split in several directions. Each was looking for the location of his home. Abu Soheil helped many locate where their homes used to be, though somehow he could not find his own.

The day came to an end at the cemetery site. The graves looked shabby, as if vandalized. Most tombstones were missing, and the above-ground grave structures were destroyed. They sat under tall pine trees, drinking coffee and cold water. A man named Wajeh Sumaan, the head of the Sahmatah Association, stood and recited a poem about coming home.

Hanna made one more trip to Sahmatah while he was there. Abu Soheil had not found the site of his home, so the next day he and Hanna packed cold water and drove back, this time without a key. Some of the grandchildren came along, and they all climbed through the fence. Abu Soheil poked with his cane everywhere among the ruins, examining clues. He moved so fast that Hanna lost him more than once. They were about to give up; Hanna was idly filming

the grandchildren playing, when they heard Abu Soheil shout “I found it!” He rushed up to find Abu Soheil standing on a pile of stone, supporting himself by a twisted branch from a tree that made its way out of the rubble. Abu Soheil said: “This is our house. I was born here. I was baptized here. I got married here under this tree.” He was weeping by then. “Those people, the settlers, they don’t have to leave. They can stay. I just want the same thing: a chance to come back and rebuild what’s left.” He looked up in the direction of the settlement and called out: “Let me live here just like you!”

Abu Soheil talked to Hanna about his childhood, described the house, the tree, the well, the yard, the neighbors, the Church...: “As we walked back toward the gate where we had left the car, he went back to naming the people who had lived on both sides of the road. At one point he started talking to them as if they were present. He could still see them standing there in front of their homes.”



2. & 3. Above, Abu Soheil on the hillside of Sahmatah at the moment he found the location of his original home. Below, Abu Soheil (far right in baseball cap) watches as Loutuf Nuwayser (far left) and Mysera Massri perform Sahmatah—a fictionalized version of his own story—on the same hillside. (Photo 2 courtesy of Hanna Eady; photo 3 by Fouad Awad)

### *Creating Sahmatah*

When Hanna came back to Seattle, he could hardly tell me one thing at a time, he was so overwhelmed with the whole experience. He told me about Abu Soheil poking the ground of his village for the first time in decades, recognizing the remains of a neighbor's house. Instantly I could see a play in this. We didn't know what form it might take, but I suggested at that moment that we begin the play with that old man, entering with his cane, poking the ground, asking an audience member to step aside for a moment while he inspected a particular spot.

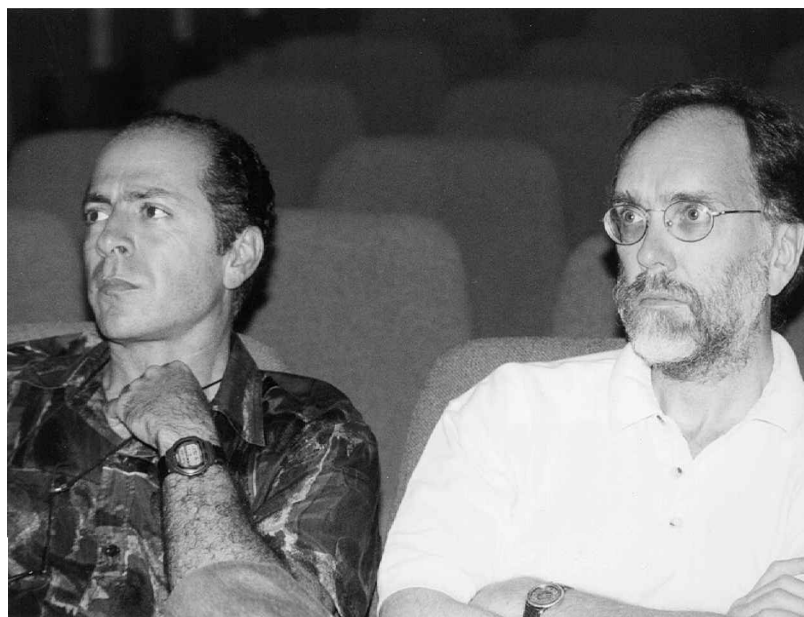
All the videos and transcripts were in Arabic, of course, so the first task was getting some material into English so I could read it. We experimented with having some of it translated, but this was slow, costly, and not very fruitful, so I encouraged Hanna simply to start writing in English: scenes if he had ideas for them, translations of the transcripts if not.

Over several weeks, as Hanna came up with more passages, we brainstormed several theatrical formats. Some of these were large-scale, docudrama style; but finally we came to a structure that reflected two stories: the destruction of a peaceful village, and the uncovering of that long-buried history by Palestinians of Hanna's generation. We developed two central characters: an old man who remembers the destruction of the village, and his grandson who has been away at college. The grandson, like many young Palestinians inside Israel Proper, has been raised without any real knowledge of his history or heritage. He is anxious to forget the past and assimilate into Israeli society as much as he can—even to the extent of joining the Israeli army:

HABEEB: If I get a service record, I can get an education, I qualify for permits, I can maybe get a job good enough that I don't have to slave all my life the way my father does. Maybe I build a house for him to own and not rent all these years, and one for you next door. That's what I'd like. The war's over, Sidi. There's peace now.

This grandfather and grandson come to Sahmatah. They take a pleasant walk over a meadow of pine trees and scattered stones. But as they walk, the memory of the place rises from the ground itself, and the grandfather leads his

4. Edward Mast (right) and director Hanna Eady cowrote the original English text of *Sahmatah*. Here, they conduct a rehearsal in Israel/Palestine. (Photo by Fouad Awad)





grandson through the appalling story of the destruction of Sahmatah, and of the people that once lived where nothing but Israeli-planted pine trees now grow.

From this start, I began dramatizing some of the passages Hanna had translated, reworking some of the scenes he had written, and writing the overall story of the grandfather and grandson. I heard that he had details from a wedding: I suggested and wrote a wedding scene as a final, oddly positive memory. I delivered scenes to Hanna, who rewrote them, pointing out to me, for example, that my wedding had Muslim details but that the village would likely have had a Christian wedding. He gave them back to me, and I rewrote them again. Slowly the play took its final form as a two-character one act. Hanna's nonprofit political organization, New Image Theater, produced the play on a small scale, with Hanna directing. Together we taught the American actors the tongue-splitting Arabic pronunciations, including the slightly aspirated "h" in Sahmatah. *Sahmatah* premiered in March 1996 at the Northwest Conference on the Middle East, followed by a four-week run at the Open Circle Theater, a small theatre in Seattle.

The play was well reviewed in Seattle: "Two characters, Habeeb and his Grandfather, peel away the layers of Sahmatah's history like an onion [...]. It is a universal weeping that could just as easily be for the Cherokee Nation or the people of Bosnia" (Penn 1996)—and we were invited to perform the play in Vancouver and Portland on large and small stages, in coffee houses, and in classrooms.

Hanna insisted that each performance of the play be followed by a forum, since one goal of the play was to create a safe place for Palestinian Americans to tell their stories. He asked people he knew in the Arab community around Seattle to come and be, in effect, featured speakers. At first, people responded with caution and doubt. Palestinians in this country have grown accustomed to silence, disbelief, and censorship. Some of them just want to move on with their lives, instead of being constantly identified as troublemakers. Several agreed to come and watch the play, without promising to step forward afterwards.

Watching the play effected them in a way they had not expected. This hidden history enacted publicly, with an American audience watching sympathetically: these were astonishing experiences for people who had learned to be quiet out of self-preservation. And so, after many performances, audience members suddenly volunteered to come onstage with us and speak, telling stories of waking up in the night to the sound of loudspeakers on Zionist military trucks, broadcasting that they should get out now or else; stories of those same trucks parading through the streets with Arab heads on posts; stories of homes in Jerusalem that still stand but cannot be visited by their original owners. The Arab community in the Northwest is not exceptionally large; Hanna knows many members quite well, yet he himself was surprised more than once to hear an old friend say, "I was there in 1948":

HABEEB: But you never told me about any of this. Why not?

GRANDFATHER: (*Gazes at him a beat*) If someone stole your pants, would you run down the street showing off your naked legs? If your wife were raped, would you shout it from the rooftops? Anyway, it's not like we were special. It was the same all over Palestine. Four hundred villages. Same story everywhere.

Some months later, I suggested to Hanna: It's a small play. Why not translate it into Arabic, and see if you can direct it at a theatre in Palestine?

### *Return to Palestine*

We set about looking for opportunities, and we first approached the organizers of a conference in the West Bank titled Fifty Years of Dispossession,

scheduled for June of 1998. The organizers were enthusiastic, and even though this didn't finally work out, it was enough encouragement for us to pursue the project.

Our successful contact came with the Arab Theater of Israel, one of the very few Palestinian theatres to receive any support from the government. The Arab Theatre of Israel was going through changes, including changing its name and hiring a new artistic director; so our proposal was met with enthusiasm but delay. It took several months—and several lapses into despair—before the theatre agreed to host a production of this little project.

There were choices to be made about translation. The Arabic language exists in many forms, notably what are labeled “classical” and “colloquial.” Classical Arabic is the language of the Koran and of the Arab empire. It has a rich literary and oral history, and is still used for most novels, newspapers, and even many public-speaking events. Classical Arabic has the further advantage of being understood all the way from Morocco to Iraq. Colloquial Arabic—also called “local”—consists of the many regional dialects, which vary from country to country and within countries. All Arabs are accustomed to writing and reading Classical Arabic but speaking a local dialect. The dialects vary widely: a Moroccan will often not comprehend a dialect from Iraq. The Classical has been the accepted vehicle for literature in the Arab world for centuries. Only in this century have any efforts been made to write in the local dialects, which can be difficult even to transcribe.

What, then, does one use on the stage? If characters speak in Classical Arabic, they will not sound like humans speaking. But if they use a local dialect, the play may not be accepted as literature—and may not be understood by Arabs some distance away. For the century-long history of modern Arabic drama, this question has plagued playwrights, and various solutions have been tried, including the use of a smoother local Palestinian dialect called “BBC Colloquial.”

When it came to translating *Sahmatah*, I had a strong preference. The play is an immediate experience about real people, and I felt strongly that it should be written in the local dialect of the village itself. Arabic literature is in a phase parallel to that of literature in Medieval Europe, when Latin was the accepted literary language from England to Italy. Medieval and Renaissance literature exploded when pioneers like Dante wrote in local dialects like Italian, though they were scorned by many for doing so.

Hanna agreed instantly and eagerly. The dialect of *Sahmatah* is similar to that of his hometown, and he studied his audiotapes of the *Sahmanis* themselves. He had to invent ways to transcribe the sounds phonetically—and we anticipated trouble in persuading actors to speak in a language that might sound too plain and mundane for the stage.

We scheduled the production for August so Hanna could bring his children with him. Little did we know that August of 1998 was going to be the hottest summer in Israel/Palestine in 37 years.

The theatre's new name is Masrah al-Midan. “Masrah” means “theatre.” “Al-Midan” means both a battlefield and a meeting place or forum. The new artistic director, Fouad Awad, planned to have *Sahmatah* as the opening show of his first three-show season; so he had big plans for our little play. We discussed possible revisions, mainly based on the change in public awareness over the two years since it had been written. When we performed the play in 1996 for an American audience, the destruction of the 418 Palestinian villages was not widely known history. Our play could serve simply to inform an audience. In 1998, the situation was different. The profusion of 50-Year Anniversary events in Israel had caused a backlash of awareness among Palestinians inside Israel, reminding the older generation of the painful facts of their dispossession, while startling the younger generation with a history they had not

fully understood. Newspapers referred frequently to the 418 villages and they had become a focus of everyday conversation. Artistic Director Fouad Awad felt that the play now needed to take steps beyond simply informing: that we needed to propose new ideas, new actions, new conflicts.

We considered these ideas, and ultimately added a new element to the script, based on Hanna's own life. Hanna's wife, Karen, is a Jewish woman from California. They met at the University of Haifa, and their relationship was a source of huge turmoil for both their families. Hanna and Karen endured years of suffering before convincing the families to allow the marriage. In the revised play, the grandson not only wants to join the Israeli army, but now also has an Israeli fiancé. He has approached his grandfather to ask for approval. The fiancé is never seen in the play, but this allowed us to suggest some possibilities of reconciliation. This reconciliation, however, must be based not on forgetting the past, but rather on remembering and acknowledging, and even more:

HABEEB: She wasn't there 50 years ago. Her parents weren't even there. What can any of them do?

GRANDFATHER: They can stop denying it. That girl and her parents and all the rest of them: they can stop pretending it never happened. They can't bring the dead back to life, but they can admit what happened and that it should not have happened.

HABEEB: Is that all?

GRANDFATHER: Admitting it is something. And maybe someday they could do one little thing, one small speck of a thing which may or may not change anything but might still be worth the doing. One tiny thing: they could ask forgiveness.

Fouad still hankered for more conflict, more debate, maybe even more characters. We stuck to our guns, however, insisting on the integrity of the world of the play. We realized that we were dealing with a fundamental difference between theatrical styles. Theatre in Arab countries, still a relatively young art form, is heavily influenced by European theatre styles of the first decades of this century, and so tends toward debate, allegory, and spectacle. The Arab style of acting, drawing on rich traditions of storytelling and oral poetry, can appear declamatory to eyes trained in naturalism. American actors are taught to look behind and beneath the simplest of dialogues. Arab actors are more accustomed to the shaping and delivering of beautiful speeches. Our play is a simple thing, intimate and visionary in style. When they first read our script, the Palestinian actors found it banal to the point of invisibility. They wondered if the audience would notice that they were performing at all. (This, of course, was one of the qualities we were looking for.)

The two of us could only be in the Middle East for a limited amount of time, so we agreed that Fouad would cast the two roles in the show before we arrived. Thus the actors could start learning the script, and rehearsals could begin as soon as Hanna arrived in the country. Fouad found two actors, and told Hanna over the phone that the actor who would play the Grandfather "is very good: when he looks at you with his eyes wide open, he scares you." Hanna was dubious. "I wanted someone nice, not someone scary."

Rehearsals, with Hanna directing in Arabic, got underway right after our arrival in early August. The older actor turned out not to be scary at all, even with his eyes wide open. Loutuf Nuwayser is a well-known performer in Israel, very resourceful and full of emotional life. He responded enthusiastically to Hanna's suggestions that he tone down his usual style and find the truth

and depth in each moment. The younger actor, Mysera Massri, is also well-trained but is part of a younger generation of actors who react against the sometimes high-flying, rhetorical emotionalism of previous Arab acting. So Hanna had the interesting challenge of reining in one actor while lighting a fire under the other.

The process was difficult, even painful at times. The Grandfather carries the bulk of the play, and at times we had to stop and allow the actor to recover from a particularly intense moment. Reliving the atrocities of Sahmatah in 1948 was not something the actor could do lightly. In one scene, a father tries and fails to save his son from execution by an Israeli soldier. In one rehearsal of this scene, the actor broke down into sobs and could not stop. Hanna had to break rehearsal and take him aside, giving him time to pull himself out of the horrible moment he had been living. In an unfortunate move, someone from the theatre who heard about the incident leaked the story to the press. We read about it in the newspaper the next day. Hanna was angry both at the invasion of privacy and at the potential for such a story to create the wrong kind of expectation in the audience.

I had to watch all this in Arabic, of course. Luckily, my partner Linda Bevis was along on the trip. Linda spent two years in the West Bank as a lawyer working with a Palestinian human-rights organization, and she spoke enough Arabic to keep me whisperingly apprised of the topics of conversation. I had wondered if I would be able to perceive the specifics of the work they were doing on the script. I needn't have worried: I was so well acquainted with the dialogue that I had no difficulty understanding the choices the actors were making.

When rehearsals started, neither of the actors had been to Sahmatah itself; they didn't even know where it was. Hanna was concerned to make the landscape of the destroyed village real and concrete in the minds of the actors. He arranged for a visit, and asked some of the people from Sahmatah to show them around. They met there on a Sunday. The actor playing Grandfather met the grandfather from Sahmatah on whom his part was based. The company was shown around the site of the village and then rehearsed a few scenes there. By the end of the day, every story, every pause, every word was so real, Hanna wondered if any script could possibly do justice to these events.

The actors were listening and recording everything the Sahmanis said on audiocassette. They went away and studied their dialect, earnestly joining the effort to use the colloquial onstage. The actors frequently commented on how amazed they were at discovering the subtext of the words. The tightness of the text, saying more with fewer words, was almost shocking to them. They were very open to the use of improvisation to create unwritten scenes or moments as exercises to help understand the characters.

All this while, I was delivering playwriting workshops for local Palestinian writers. I had been daunted by the challenge of teaching a writing class to people with whom I shared no language, but I took the risk because I was so excited by the chance to share some skills. The many talented writers there have little opportunity for training in playwriting, so anything I could do was a start. I was given a translator, but as it turned out, all my students spoke some English, enough for us to muddle through. One of them, a young director named Saleh, had written two plays already: both, as was common there, in Hebrew. Like Hanna, Saleh grew up as an Arab inside Israel. He was therefore accustomed to writing in Hebrew. I encouraged him to try writing in Arabic, and he was eager to do so, but a little frightened of it: he was so out of practice writing in his native tongue.

Since Hanna had not done theatre work in Israel for 17 years, he and I both had to get used to the Arab approach to time and rehearsal. Punctuality is not prized in the Middle East, nor is rehearsal etiquette quite the same as ours.

Since regular telephone lines are difficult and expensive to acquire, almost everyone in Israel carries a cell phone. (They call them “belly-phones,” from the Hebrew “palla,” meaning “miracle.”) It was not uncommon for an actor to walk offstage during rehearsal to answer a phone call. Furthermore, we rehearsed eight hours a day, six days a week, without knowing where or when the play would open. Masrah al-Midan does not have a regular theatre space. Since Palestinians are unused to attending theatre, the theatre instead goes to them. Shows tour around the country, with dates and locations announced only slightly in advance of performances. The project was news: every day we saw articles and photos in Arabic newspapers, yet none of them told when the shows would be, nor how to find out. They were considering an outdoor opening, or perhaps opening at a theatre in Haifa or Nazareth, or perhaps in the small theatre space in Shefa’amer where we were rehearsing (and where we would ultimately have an invitational preview). Hanna and I were scheduled to leave on 22 August; we hoped the show would open before then. This was all very unsettling to our American-trained sensibilities.

From the very beginning, Hanna had dreamed of performing the play on the site of the village itself, to give something back, some recognition, some gift to the people of Sahmatah. Ultimately that dream became a reality: it was decided that the play would open on Friday night, 21 August, in Sahmatah. The people of the village would secure a permit for the performance to be held there.

We continued making revisions in the script, learning small and large aspects of local sensibility, trying to make the play more honest and reflective of the people there. And we kept dealing with the record 108-degree heat, which made our air-conditioned rehearsal hall a popular place to spend time. Rehearsals lasted three weeks. We performed a preview for a small invited audience, and then prepared to perform at Sahmatah.

### *At Sahmatah*

To my eyes, Sahmatah is a wooded hill with ruins that look ancient, hundreds of years old. Brown mud bricks; the arch of a doorway; irregular paving stones. Crusaders? Romans? I had to remind myself that 50 years ago, some of Hanna’s neighbors lived there, and some of them still have keys to the doors that once filled those ruined doorways.

We didn’t know it at the time, but the survivors from Sahmatah and their children were navigating a tangled legal web during our whole stay in Israel, trying to get a permit to have a public event at the site. A week before we scheduled the opening, they told us they had gotten permission. In actual fact, they only got the permit two days before we opened. An unusual optimism had carried them through. For weeks beforehand, members of that community had been visiting the site, clearing brush and stumps and jagged stones away from the spot where we had chosen to perform. Of course they were excited



5. Hanna Eady (left), Mysera Massri (center) and Loutuf Nuwayser rehearse Sahmatah. (Photo by Fouad Awad)

about the performance, but this was also their first chance in 50 years to invite people to their village. It was a homecoming party as much as a theatre event.

Each day brought some new mention of the show in the various Arab newspapers. I continued to be unsettled by the lack of any reference to where or when or how one might contact the theatre. Hanna was getting used to it, and he assured me that this was the usual style: the word would go out at the last minute, and everyone in the nearby villages would know. I couldn't help wondering if our cast of two might outnumber the audience.

In the blistering, oppressive heat, we walked up the narrow path to the hilltop several times in the week beforehand to pace out how the show would adapt to the outdoor location. The clearing was surrounded by fig and almond and olive trees, with the arch of the church door—the only structure still standing—visible like a bombsite some ways off in the background. The audience would face inward, toward what had been the center of the village. Behind them, the hilltop sloped down and gave a clear view of Maalot, an Israeli settlement on a slope across the valley. In the script, the characters refer to another settlement, Hosen, in a slightly different direction, but we quickly decided to aim those comments at the settlement that was so highly visible.

The play brings actors and audience into intimate contact, so I shuddered to think how the performance would creak under the weight of microphones and a restless outdoor crowd. We tested the body-mics the day before opening night, and to my surprise they sounded fine. Performance was scheduled at 6:00, so in Arab time we imagined we'd start between 6:30 and 7:00. This meant the sun would be low, behind the audience but illuminating the actors by shining right in the actors' eyes. "Good," they said. "Perfect."



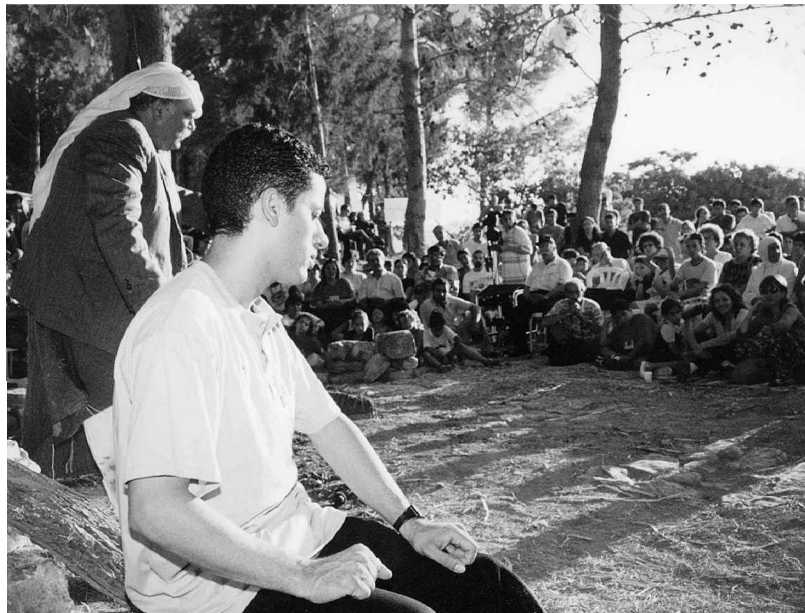
The afternoon of the performance was plenty hot, though not as record-breaking as many previous days. The actors had met there in the morning for a light rehearsal, and the crew had been on the site all day. By the time we arrived at 5:30, the winding dirt road that led up the hill was lined with parked cars. Word had indeed gone out: there were already a hundred or so people there. It had become something of a media event: several video crews were setting up, and reporters from large and small journals kept approaching Hanna and myself with microphones and little tape recorders. Students from my playwriting workshop were there, including some who had come to the preview two nights before. Several sympathetic Israelis were in attendance as well. There were blankets for sitting on the ground, and behind them several rows of those white plastic garden chairs which were appearing everywhere I looked in the Middle East.

As time for the performance approached, several seats in the front rows of chairs were occupied by older men and women. They were identified to me as refugees from Sahmatah. The head of the Sahmatah Association rose and welcomed the audience, which by then numbered over 200, many standing behind and around the performance area. There were no lights to go up or down. There was simply quiet, and the sound of light wind, as the actor playing the Grandfather scabbled his way through the brush, poking at the ground with his cane.

GRANDFATHER: This was Ibrahim El Khalil's house. This was Ahmad Khalil's house. So Asad Zidan lived...here. The Church is over in that direction, and this was El Haj Hashim's house, and here was his son's house next to it. And his brother, over here. The Mukhtar's house must be in this area. Ah! Here it is. Excuse me...

6. & 7. Loutuf Nuwayser as the Grandfather in Sahmatah performs within arm's reach of the audience. (Photo by Fouad Awad)





I stood behind an older man who smiled and nodded, recognizing some of the names. When the actor playing the Grandson entered through the audience, having run up the mountainside, looking for his grandfather, some looked askance at him, wondering if he was some sort of troublemaker disrupting the show.

It was not the ideal performance of the play. The microphones, which had worked perfectly the day before, now began to go on and off when the Grandfather moved part of his elaborate robed costume. The video cameramen, apparently used to filming sports events, squatted, knelt and lurched about the stage right next to the performers, dragging their long cables with them, until Hanna threatened to throw rocks at them if they didn't stop. The edges of the stage were vague, and a couple of children chose to move over and sit on a log that was part of our staging pattern.

But the actors stepped over the children, or sat next to them and talked across them. The audience giggled at the story of an old man trying to harvest a special olive out of a too-tall olive tree, and was silent when the olive harvest became the first air raid target in the vicinity. They were within arm's reach when the young man stood with eyes closed and felt the memories of disaster surge up from the ground through his feet, into his whole body. There were tears and averted eyes when the two actors became a father watching his son murdered by an Israeli soldier. Near the end, the young man—awake now to the truth of what had happened to his village before he was born—asked his grandfather: "What do you want them to do? They can't undo the past. Do you want them all to leave? All pack up and leave their country?" The Grandfather replied: "No. No. I don't want them to leave. There's room for all of us." And he stepped away from the stage, into the audience, up onto a chair, and called out across the valley to the Israeli settlement still visible in the late sun: "There's room for all of us! Don't go! Don't go! Stay here and live with us. But LET US LIVE HERE! LET US LIVE HERE! LET US LIVE HERE!"

On a stage, in a theatre, this moment is not always the high point of the play. In Sahnatah, it became the reason for doing the play at all.





8. & 9. Loutuf Nuwayser as the Grandfather, and Mysera Massri as Habeeb perform *Sahmatah* (1998). (Photo by Fouad Awad)

Afterwards, there were speeches (in Arabic), and flowers, and even some embossed brass plates for Hanna and me. When Hanna spoke, he said a few words and then broke down briefly in tears. What he was saying, I later learned, was quite simple: “For making this happen, I want to thank all the people of Sahmatah, all our neighbors...” And for him, at that moment, the word “neighbors” was simply too full: of people he had grown up knowing and not knowing, of people who had lived in exile, with silent memories, whose history was awake now at last, and who were, for the first time in 50 years, performing the simple, common, life-sustaining act of welcoming guests to their home.

### Epilogue

At this writing, *Sahmatah* is still being performed in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Ramallah, and elsewhere in Israel/Palestine. Hanna returned in July 1999 and saw the piece at a festival in Jerusalem. There are plans to tour to Egypt, Jordan, and Europe. It is a small piece, easy to keep in the theatre’s repertory, and the response has been overwhelming. From a review in *El Maqal* newspaper:

*Sahmatah* is a work of art that speaks of the harsh and painful truth [...]. If we forget the truth, what’s alive in us will die as well; we will lose our deep existence in time. [...] I am Sahmatah, and forgive me if I say: Sahmatah [...] is all of us. (Azar 1998)

### Notes

1. All quotes from the play are from Mast 1999. An earlier version of this article appeared in *The Link*, February–March 1999 32:1, published by Americans for Middle East Understanding.
2. All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from conversations with the author, held between April 1996 and April 2000.
3. All quotes by Sahmanis are quoted from conversations with Hanna Eady between May 1995 and April 2000.

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**Edward Mast's** plays and solo performances have been seen in New York, Chicago, Seattle, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oxford, Tashkent, Jerusalem, and other cities. Recent productions include *The Million Bells of Ocean* (1998) and *One Day Only* (1998) at *American Theater Company*, and commissioned adaptations of *Prometheus Bound/Unbound* (1999) at the *Bailiwick Theater* and *An Enemy of the People* (2000) at *Stages Theater Company*. His new play for young audiences, *Sundiata*, will co-premiere this fall at *Open Eye Theater* and *Berkeley Repertory Theater*. Several of his plays have been published; other publications include a book of poems, *Suzy and Her Husbands* (*Still Waters Press*, 1999), and *The History of Eastern Europe for Beginners* (*Writers & Readers Inc.*, 1997).