



# Gaza blues

In a bustling main street of Gaza City children, on their way home from school, stop outside the Dar al-Jallah cinema to pick up strips of discarded film, and study them against the harsh sunlight. This is the closest these Palestinian children are likely to get to seeing a movie for the foreseeable future. The cinema had only recently been taken out of mothballs after years of inactivity during the Intifada. But in riots last autumn it was ransacked by Islamic fundamentalists. And given the present economic and political climate in Gaza it is unlikely that it, or any other cinema, will open its doors to the public—which is now starved of public entertainment.

Home-grown Palestinian culture is having a hard time surviving. Close to three decades of oppressive Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has crippled most forms of cultural life. Closures, curfews of the occupied territories, bans on foreign travel, shut-downs of university campuses, and harsh economic conditions all played their part. But the Intifada also led to self-imposed restrictions on entertainment, which was deemed “unseemly” during such a period of bloody national struggle. By the early 1980s the few cinemas and other public places of popular culture that

existed in the occupied territories were boarded up, most never to reopen. Palestinian cultural life was dealt a further blow in 1990, when rich Arab states cut off their financial aid to the PLO because of Yasser Arafat’s support for Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait.

The initialisation of the so-called peace process between the PLO and Israel has provided some relief, mainly to the one million or so Palestinian inhabitants of the Gaza strip. With the partial evacuation of Israeli troops last spring, and the introduction of limited autonomy in Gaza and Jericho, there was a sense of collective relief—albeit brief. The hated nocturnal curfews were lifted, weddings were again celebrated in as much style as could be afforded, and bathers frolicked on the undeveloped Gaza beaches. On the West Bank, the second Palestinian arts and culture festival went ahead last summer with good attendances, despite attempts by radical Islamic groups to scupper it.

But the Intifada generally left the Palestinians tired, sad and depressed, says Khaled Edayka, director of the Popular Arts Centre in the West Bank town of El Bireh. “Palestinians in the occupied territories suffer from cultural insularity, and it is an uphill struggle to educate them—

especially given the severe financial restraints, and other obstacles, such as travel restrictions that are imposed by Israel,” he explains.

The faltering peace process, while causing further frustration and suffering for the Palestinians, is also throwing up new and complex issues. Throughout the Intifada contacts existed between Palestinian artists and intellectuals and their progressive Israeli counterparts. Now, many Palestinians are rejecting the “co-existence” and “dialogue” between Israeli Jews and Palestinians that has been so much in vogue since the signing of the Oslo accord. Dr Azmi Bishara, who teaches philosophy at the West Bank university of Bir Zeit, warns against Israeli cultural hegemony, and rejects the token inclusion of Palestinians as a “fig leaf for fund-raising purposes”. Projects such as the Palestinian-Israeli co-production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which has travelled to several European countries, is a case in point.

Sliman Mansour, a prominent Palestinian artist and the director of the newly established Al-Wasiti art centre in East Jerusalem, was scheduled to participate in one such project. It involved a group of Arab and Jewish sculptors creating “Peace Sculptures” in an Arab village within Israel’s borders, as part of the *Arab Culture Month and Book Fair*, sponsored by the Israeli authorities. Mansour recalls how, instead, Israeli soldiers used to raid Palestinian art exhibitions, confiscating paintings containing red, green, black and white, the national colours of Palestine.

Since the Intifada came to an end there has been a sense of loss of direction and purpose, even spirit, among Palestinian artists. “For a long period much Palestinian art was very empty,” says Mansour. Today, many Palestinian artists are turning inward to strengthen their own national identity, a trend that is also reflected in the growth of Palestinian dance and music.

Intellectuals, such as Dr Bishara, complain that the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza remain very provincial. “Much more like Amman, and much less like Cairo or Beirut.” There are no cafés, no cinemas, no cultural clubs; people are “shocked and choked”. The flourishing video rental shops are another reflection of the dire straits of Palestinian cultural life under occupation. What better to do when under curfew than snuggle up with a *Rambo* video?

There is a Ministry of Arts and Cultural Affairs for the areas under self-rule. But as yet Yasser Abed-Rabbo, the minister in charge, hasn’t much of a budget and even less of a cultural policy. As the Palestinians’ long and hard battle for a sovereign state continues, cinemas somehow don’t rank high on their list of priorities. ■

While the stones of the Intifada are now still, building blocks for a culture beyond nationalism and peace projects are proving difficult to assemble. **Reuben Löwy** reports on Palestinian cultural politics

“Stone and Metal” by Daoud Al-Hayek (b. 1948): beyond protest art, the uncertain shapes of an imagined future