CRIMINOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Vol 7(1) 2025
ISSN 2506-7583
DOI 10.26395/CE.2025.1.23

ASHTAR Theatre's *The Gaza Monologues*: Documentary Theatre as Counter-Archive of Palestinian Life Under Occupation and Genocide

Roaa Ali
University of Manchester, Institute for Cultural Practices
roaa.ali@manchester.ac.uk

Priya Sharma
University of Manchester, Institute for Cultural Practices
priya.sharma@manchester.ac.uk

Keywords: Palestine, theatre, Genocide, performance, witness, testimonial, archive

Abstract: In highlighting ASHTAR theatre's *The Gaza Monologues* project, this article examines the role played by documentary theatre to witness, remember and make visible Palestinian voices. Through personal testimonies by young writers Mahmoud Balaoui, Amjad Abu Yasin, and Heba Daoud, the monologues bear witness in a time of media silence. As international legal frameworks refuse to recognise Palestinian lives, we argue that *The Gaza Monologues* serve as a counter-archive documenting the testimonies of a population living under occupation, siege and genocide. Performed worldwide since 2010, *The Gaza Monologues* transforms theatre into a vehicle for truth-telling, global solidarity and visible accountability in the face of ongoing erasure.

Mahmoud Balaoui
The Hour in Gaza is Different than the World
(2014)

Every day we hear about Gaza in the news, not because our economy is booming, and not because we have one of the World's Wonders, and certainly not because of our strong aviation industry. All countries have entered Guinness Records, we did too. We have the highest record of the longest war against civilians and the most intense cry of a mother moaning her children.

Time in Gaza is not like the rest of the World; the hour in Gaza is made of 60 martyrs and 3600 injured, and the minute is made of 60 destroyed houses while the second is 60 cries of moaning mothers. One night in Gaza during the war is equal to a hundred stories of the One Thousand and One Nights fable.

At night when it's dark, the sky is lit by falling rockets, roaring above our heads, and the night becomes a bright day.

A mother is sleeping next to her young children who ask her: "Mother, what is this sound, is it bombing? Mother, we are afraid." The mother, unable to soothe her children, starts to tell them a story about 'Hassan the Brave', so they could sleep in peace. However, the children no matter what you tell them, they will only think of death and destruction for that is all they see.

The next day, her son goes out, he hears an explosion; he remembers last night's story and trusts that Hassan the Brave is dead, that Hassan has become a Martyr. He rushes back to his mother and tells her: "Mother, Hassan is dead. All our little adventures together, all our memories have vanished. How can I go to school after Hassan has died? Mother, Hassan is dead."

Before she answers her son the mother receives a phone call from the Israeli army: "you have 30 seconds to leave your house." 30 seconds?! What can she do in 30 seconds? What can she take? And who should she inform? Should she run away with her children? Or should she tell the neighbors? The mother stands in the street and starts to scream: "Hey people, our house is going to be demolished, our house is going to be destroyed." 30 seconds later, everything became deadly silent!

Gaza is remaining, Gaza will never die, even when her children die. Their names will be written in history books for their children and grandchildren. If you ever Google Gaza, you will see pictures of destruction and devastation, and one day, you might see my picture among the killed ones, during one of these wars against Gaza.

- Mahmoud Balaoui (2014), *The Gaza Monologues*, ASHTAR Theatre.

As Konrad Suder Chatterjee (2025), Communications Manager and Resource Developer at ASHTAR Theatre, observes, this monologue situates Gaza's temporality against the outside world, exposing how war and blockade distort time, waiting, and survival. Like this mother's intimate everyday experience, violence structures even the smallest unit of time.

This is a fitting entry into ASHTAR Theatre's *The Gaza Monologues*, a project that since 2010 has documented life under siege, occupation, and genocide through the voices of Palestinian youth, men, and women. Founded in Jerusalem in 1991 and now based in Ramallah, ASHTAR, led by Iman Aoun and Edward Muallem, has long seen theatre as a vehicle for justice and pedagogy. For Aoun, the project arose out of necessity:

> Living under occupation, when we are constantly under threat of losing our lives and our narrative has been jeopardized and shunned down, when the first assault took place on Gaza by the Israeli Occupation, I wanted the world to know the reality in the voice of our children and to create solidarity among the young people throughout the world with our young theatre students. Because I believe in the power of theatre to create change and because I believed that the children of today are the leaders of tomorrow. (Aoun, 2025)

From its beginning, then, the project was designed to counter erasure: to serve as both archive and repertoire, documentation and action. It transforms theatre into a form of testimony that resists silence, demands recognition, and insists that Palestinian voices be heard. Each monologue is therefore both a personal account and a political act, weaving memory, grief, and survival into an enduring counter-archive; one that stands in defiance of the impotence of legal accountability and the persistent refusal of dominant frameworks to acknowledge Palestinian suffering and harm.

Here, theatre takes up the task law refuses: naming, remembering, witnessing.

Law's Failure and the Ungrievability of Palestinian Lives

Martha Minow (2000) stresses that courts are inadequate to address mass atrocity: they cannot restore destroyed communities or repair psychic wounds. The urgency of *The Gaza Monologues* is sharpened by the failures of international law. In the absence of legal frameworks that account for the genocide of Palestinian lives, the project functions as an art-based framework for witnessing and accountability—preserving Gaza's narratives since 2010 and standing as testimony against erasure, insisting on recognition where legal institutions refuse.

This statement echoes a wide body of critical scholarship. Judith Butler (2016) theorises ungrievability as the condition in which the deaths of those excluded from international recognition and protection fail to register as losses within dominant global frames. Noura Erakat (2019) demonstrates how law is weaponised to perpetuate "colonial continuity," denying Palestinians sovereignty or protection. Achille Mbembe (2003) describes Gaza as an archetype of necropolitics, where populations are governed through infrastructures of death.

The current war on Gaza has made visible "the prevalence of the idea of the dispensability of Palestinian life in European and American political and media spheres. This widespread tolerance of the dehumanisation and existential negation of Palestinians is the result of decades-long discourse and systematic construction of Arabs in ways that deny them humanity and legitimise their ungrievability" (Ali, 2024). As Aoun herself insists: "Documentary Theatre as *The Gaza Monologues*, is holding the narrative and the stories of the people in Gaza since 2010 and for many more years to come. It is a form of documentation, and accountability. The more the atrocities are widening, these stories become a strong witness in the face of reality and humanity" (Aoun, 2025).

Art as Counter-Archive / Counter-Evidence

The Gaza Monologues exemplifies what Diana Taylor (2003) terms the repertoire: embodied practices that safeguard cultural memory where official archives collapse or refuse to speak. Each monologue is not merely a record but a performative act of truth-telling, generating meaning through the very act of narration (Felman & Laub, 1992). Read through Jacques Rancière (2004), the project reveals its political force: by disrupting dominant regimes of visibility, it brings into public consciousness lives otherwise silenced, redistributing the sensible and demanding recognition.

ASHTAR recognises this duality. As they note: "The aim of the reading of the GMs since 2023 is to raise international awareness and ask the people to act against the genocide. Theatre is a strong means of action when it is used in the proper place and time" (Aoun, 2025). The project has circulated globally, performed at demonstrations, universities, and community events. It is an international call. By inviting communities worldwide to stage and circulate *The Gaza Monologues*, the project transforms art into a collective global tribunal—mobilising solidarity, enlisting new witnesses, and demanding accountability in the face of legal and political failure.

Amjad Abu Yasin - November 10, 2024 *The New Gaza Monologues* by ASHTAR Theatre, read by Luke Monday, *In The Now Productions*.

Amjad Abu Yasin
I Am Not Jesus to Take All the Sins of the World
10/11/2024

My last letter... I really wish it's the last one

I'm not Christ, to bare on my shoulders the sins of humanity and I don't have the power to forgive all humanity.

How is it logical, that for being Palestinian, we have to endure a doomed fate since the beginning of creation. That the world blames us for all its guilt and anger.

From the beginning of time. Palestinians are destined to suffer, to roam and to die.

No one is spared, not the weakest or the strongest of us, nor the most villain or the prophet.

400 days have passed, I've seen in them children wishing to die from what they are experiencing. When every time I hear a child wishing to die, everything in me dies. I've also seen kids clinging for life and a lot of bodies and a little life.

It seems that the world doesn't want to open its eyes to what's happening to us; it's choosing to be blind so it doesn't feel guilty. Ignorance is better than truth. But there are who see and listen and read these words and hear them. You are our last hope.

Million of stars light our skies, but aren't able to give light to a bombed family under the rubble waiting for its fate.

Not a year passed since last October, it seems like centuries. Day after day we are using our minds when this war ends I wish that I find the courage to call myself human again. Regardless of their efforts to strip us from our humanity, I resist it. I don't wish this pain we are enduring on any other people.

A few months ago, a school next to us was bombed. Tons were martyred. I still smell blood and death. I started picking parts from the ground, me and others. After minutes the schoolyard turned into a mountain of human parts. For a few minutes I was inside Hell.

I used to hold children's hands and play with them on stage, not carry their missing parts. Their hands and their legs are spread on the ground with wires.

The children were spread everywhere like clothes waiting to dry, but I no longer feel anxious. I was feeling calm.

All the world's leaders said, this war had to stop and I believe them all. Every time I hold a hand or a leg or see a dead body, I believe them. For a year I have been believing them all that the war has to stop and I still believe them.

It's a good thing and a bad thing to be a Palestinian. Because you know the truth about the world. Human rights and all these principles that the world has been talking about, it doesn't apply to everyone. Only the strong ones, they invite whoever they want and for us, the unlucky ones, we aren't invited to this feast.

> **- Amjad Abu Yasin, I Am Not Jesus to Take All the Sins of the World (November 10, 2024), *The New Gaza Monologes* by ASHTAR Theatre.**

Abu Yasin's testimony, written during the 2023–24 genocide, articulates survivor guilt and the moral burden imposed on Palestinians to endlessly bear suffering. As Konrad Suder Chatterjee (ASHTAR Theatre, 2025) notes, it is a recent text that powerfully foregrounds witnessing and the imposed moral burden, intersectional in its concerns and opening multiple conversations and angles. The Christ metaphor within it exposes the expectation that Palestinians embody sacrifice while the world absolves itself. His vivid description of carrying children's severed limbs, "I used to hold children's hands and play with them on stage, not to carry their missing parts", stages the unbearable transformation of theatre from play to horror.

This resonates with Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's (1992) claim that testimony is always marked by the impossibility of full transmission: it attempts to speak the unspeakable. Abu Yasin's words are also accusatory, directed outward to an international community that repeatedly declares "this war must stop" while it continues. ASHTAR highlights that the monologues have been taken up internationally in demonstrations, where they stirred emotions, raised awareness, and shaped the ideas of participants. Abu Yasin's monologue therefore operates not only as an intimate confession but also as a tool of mobilisation.

The story of Heba Daoud (young woman's voice)
Gaza October 29, 2023

We were all together in one house, but no place was safe. In fact, there is no single safe place in all of the Gaza Strip… You could say there were at least 50 missiles. 50 missiles they fired at us and we were waiting our turn to die. In fact, we thought it was our turn, and every missile that fell was heading directly towards us! For at least half an hour death was in front of our eyes, plain death […]

I climbed over the pile, into the saloon; There were no human features anywhere! In the living room the pile was on top of the men, on top of them all. There was no one there. There was no one raising their voice. There was no one living […]

Nine martyrs in the house. Nine martyrs, nine. Among them is my niece, a 28-day-old baby. She was born during the war and died during the war; we obtained her death certificate before her birth certificate […]

I saw death, I saw death. My husband is suffering from severe psychological trauma. Really severe psychological trauma… I have seen death with my own eyes. I try to look like I'm okay in front of them [my family] but inside, I'm completely broken. I'm completely shattered internally […]

> **- Heba Daoud, *The Gaza Monologues*, 2023, ASHTAR Theatre. Read full monologue here.**

Heba's testimony can be heard in her own voice through the audio recording available at the bottom of this **page**. Listening to her words underscores the visceral power of her story, transforming text into lived voice. Daoud's voice brings us into the domestic sphere, narrating the collapse of a home under bombardment. Her account dramatises the gendered labour of protecting children and holding families together amid terror. The imagery of cracked ceilings, trembling relatives, and whispered prayers captures what Ann Cvetkovich (2003) calls an "archive of feelings," where trauma is stored in intimate detail. Daoud's story also connects testimony with transnational solidarity: her survival depended on

networks of donors, sponsorships, and medical support in Egypt. Thus, the monologue bridges embodied endurance and global mobilisation.

Read together, Balaoui (2014), Abu Yasin (2024), and Daoud (2023) trace a decade-long arc of testimony through an intersectional lens that considers the gendered and classed dimensions of genocidal harm. Balaoui situates Gaza in distorted temporality, Abu Yasin stages survivor guilt, and Daoud records gendered domestic survival. The continuity is striking: from 2010 to 2024, Gaza has endured repeated assaults and writers have defiantly continued to create new monologues. As ASHTAR notes, "as Gaza was undergoing a war every two years, the Gaza Monologues were never stopped" (Aoun, 2025). The project thus forms a longitudinal counter-archive, documenting recurring violence and sustaining memory.

ASHTAR's Praxis: Theatre as Infrastructure of Survival

ASHTAR Theatre's practice is not limited to performance. It provides psychosocial interventions, financial support for trainers, and continuity for displaced youth. As they describe: "ASHTAR is in direct daily contact with all the writers in Gaza and those who had been displaced… They were able to do psychosocial intervention inside Gaza City and displaced refugee camps… helping the trainers survive financially for a short while" (Aoun, 2025). In this sense, ASHTAR embodies both cultural and material infrastructure: sustaining community, providing care, and preserving dignity.

The Gaza Monologues functions as an art-based framework of justice. When law is complicit in violence, theatre preserves the record; when international institutions refuse to acknowledge Palestinian lives as grievable, performance insists on their humanity and worth. Janelle Reinelt (2009) reminds us that the power of documentary theatre lies in its ability to connect spectators to an absent but undeniable reality, borrowing the structures of the courtroom to anchor its truth-claims. *The Gaza Monologues* embodies this potential, staging testimony as counter-evidence and positioning global audiences as jurors in a tribunal of witnessing and accountability. As Aoun (2025) affirms, "the children of today are the leaders of tomorrow": the project is not only a repository of memory but also a rehearsal for the futures Palestinians continue to imagine and demand.

Beginning with Balaoui's account of time reconstituted in martyrdom, moving through Abu Yasin's survivor's guilt, and Daoud's gendered endurance, *The Gaza Monologues* stand as counter-archive, counter-evidence, and counter-tribunal. They record temporality, grief, and survival while ASHTAR circulates them as acts of pedagogy and solidarity. Where law erases, theatre remembers. Where institutions fail, art mobilises. Where lives are deemed ungrievable, these monologues insist on their value. *The Gaza Monologues* is therefore more than theatre: it is a living archive, a form of justice enacted through words, bodies, and performance. They have spoken. The question remains: as witnesses, what will we do?

Anyone can join this act of witnessing by requesting to read or perform the monologues through ASHTAR's registration form **here**.

There are other calls to action people can take, that include:

- Boycotting companies implicated in arming Israel. There is a full list here and more information about the BDS movement: **https://www.bdsmovement.net/Guide-to-BDS-Boycott**
- Donations to organisations on the ground in Palestine such as **ASHTAR Theatre**, **Operation Olive Branch** and **PAL Humanity**.

Bibliography

Ali, R. (2024). The Ungrievability of Palestinian Life. *Collateral*. https://www.collateral-journal.com/index.php?collision=99

Aoun, I. (2025). Interview by email with Roaa Ali and Priya Sharma, 19 August.

Balaoui, M. (2014). *The Hour in Gaza is Different than the World*. In *The Gaza Monologues*. ASHTAR Theatre.

Butler, J. (2016). *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Verso.

Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *An Archive of Feelings*. Duke University Press.

Daoud, H. (2023). *The Story of Heba Daoud*. In *The Gaza Monologues*. ASHTAR Theatre.

Erakat, N. (2019). *Justice for Some: Law and the Question of Palestine*. Stanford University Press.

Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*.

Routledge.
Mbembe, A. (2003). "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40.
Minow, M. (2000). *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*. Beacon.
Rancière, J. and Rockhill, G. (2021). The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible. London: Zed Books.
Reinelt, J. (2009). "The Promise of Documentary." In Forsyth, A. & Megson, C. (eds.), *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Suder Chatterjee, K. (2025). Interview by email with Roaa Ali and Priya Sharma, 19 August.
Taylor, D. (2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press.
Yasin, A. (2024). *I Am Not Jesus to Take All the Sins of the World*. In *The New Gaza Monologues*. ASHTAR Theatre.

Roaa Ali is Lecturer in Creative and Cultural Industries in the Institute for Cultural Practices at the University of Manchester. As a Cultural Sociologist, Roaa's interdisciplinary research explores race, creative and cultural industries (CCIs), access inequality, and the politics surrounding marginalised cultural production. Passionate about issues of racial and social justice, Roaa explores how culture influences social change and the production of race within cultural contexts and organisations.

Priya Sharma is Lecturer in Arts Management and Cultural Policy in the Institute for Cultural Practices at the University of Manchester. Her research interests include British South Asian identity, race and gender on social media and anarcho-feminist politics.

How to cite this article (APA– 7th ed.):

Ali, R. & Sharma, P. (2025). ASHTAR Theatre's *The Gaza Monologues*: Documentary Theatre as Counter-Archive of Palestinian Life under Occupation and Genocide. *Criminological Encounters.* 7(1). 229-236. https://doi.org/10.26395/CE.2025.1.23

© The author(s), 2025 | Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.