

BEYOND THE WALL

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My Time in Gaza

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Dedicated to Haneen, Eran, Salam, Noa, Doa, Dvora,
Jamal, Ali, Talya, Mohammed, Rafat, Rami, Miriam,
Shlomit, Jan, Jackie and many others

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FOREWORD

In 2003, I was invited by the Palestinian theatre school Theater Day Productions to offer trauma care to their students. Founded by the Dutch Jan Willems and his American wife Jackie Lubeck, TDP trains young Palestinians to become actors, drama teachers and filmmakers, producing hundreds of performances a year for all the children in Gaza.

I started to work with four actors in Hebron in 2003. In 2004, I visited the Gaza strip for the first time to guide a group of eleven actors. In 2005, my third visit, I worked with eighty actors, drama teachers and childcare workers; the fourth and fifth year there was a group of fifteen men and eight women, and the sixth year I worked with the same previous group of eighty actors and drama teachers, including the entire staff of the school. During this sixth visit, I had three co-trainers with me. Our visit took place three months after the bombing nicknamed *Operation Cast Lead* in early 2009.

In 2014, I returned to Gaza after the bombings in July and August that lasted fifty-one days. In 2018, I gave a final workshop to thirty Palestinian journalists.

Every year I wrote an article about my experiences in Gaza with these brave, creative, warm-hearted young actors, who created performances for the thousands of children in Gaza. Almost no article was placed in the mainstream media in the Netherlands. Even though the media was full of reports about Gaza, I had the impression they didn't want to see it. Really see it. Maybe the image I revealed of the people in Gaza was too personal, too intimate, too human. The newspapers were more interested in stories about massacres, perpetrators, terrorists and Hamas fighters, not about ordinary people.

Slowly I began to understand how the media helped to maintain the one-sided image of the war: a different people with a different religion. One morning, a BBC journalist came to my breakfast table at a hotel in Gaza City and asked if I knew any victims he could film. There was one minute left in his documentary film and he was looking for some footage of incidents, Hamas fighters or maybe mothers of terrorists. I suddenly realised how war is being created, also by ourselves.

Since the attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, Gaza has been in the media more than ever. Realising most people never visited Gaza and don't have any idea of what life or people in Gaza are like, encouraged me to write down the stories of my time there and give the people a face and a voice. Because they are ordinary people, just like us, living in a bizarre and often horrendous reality.

Writing this book became all the more important as I gradually realised that Gaza as it was will never return. The land and its people are destroyed. Completely destroyed. Occasionally, I would desperately search on Google maps for the hotel where I stayed. Or for the theatre where I had worked with so much passion. The theatre has been bombed and nothing seemed left of the hotel. Nothing but sand and dust.

This book consists mainly of diary excerpts, stories and articles I wrote about my time in Gaza. Part 1 of this book covers the years 2003 (Hebron, West Bank), 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 (Gaza). After that, I didn't visit Gaza for five years and returned in 2014. I posted the diary excerpts from this last year directly on Facebook and many people read along while I was working in Gaza.

Part 2 describes the period I spent on the Israeli side. After my experiences in Gaza, I realised that it was time to offer trauma

care to the other side of the wall as well and thereby learn the other story. I gave various men's workshops, lectures and meetings and got to know Jewish society from the inside. In addition, I became close friends with many Israelis. They invited me to their homes, to their parents, their friends, to their synagogues and their rituals. The outcome of my work on both sides of the wall was that I started to love both peoples, both cultures and both religions.

In Part 3, I describe the events after October 7, 2023, when the Hamas attack took place. In January 2024, I started a campaign together with Dutch friends in order to help Salam, a friend from Gaza who is a doctor. She wanted to set up a medical clinic and asked me for financial help. Within a few months we raised 40,000 euros. We also supported Ali, one of the actors from 'TDP, who had set up a soup kitchen, and some more individuals struggling with debts due to the war.

Meanwhile the story I had to tell suddenly seemed to attract attention in the Netherlands. Several articles I wrote were published in the national newspapers *Het Parool* and *NRC*. In addition, many articles found resonance on Facebook.

In Part 4 the book concludes with a short story, 'The Olive Tree', which is inspired by the many stories I heard in Gaza. It is written from the perspective of a Palestinian young man, Youssef.

What kept me going during the months of destruction and horror after October 7 were the personal contacts with the people in the field: both friends from Gaza and brave Israelis who spoke out against Prime Minister Netanyahu's regime.

I dedicate this book to all the heroes I met in Gaza, who continue to believe that play and stories are a better form of

communication than violence and guns, and to the many people on the Israeli side, who continue to believe in and hope for peace and stick their necks out to achieve reconciliation.

When I asked an Israeli what the word Gaza means, he explained the following to me. In Hebrew, the word *Oz* means 'strength'. However, if you refer to a woman it becomes *Aza*. Since the G is a soft G and dropped in the pronunciation, you now know the meaning: Gaza means 'feminine strength'. Could it be that, symbolically speaking, we don't want to see the power of the feminine? Could it be that we barricade her with walls, that we bomb her and try to silence her? Is that the message of Gaza that we don't want to see, or can not see?

At the time of writing, more than 50,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, more than 100,000 injured and the bombings have left some 40 million tonnes of debris. 80 percent of the agricultural fields have been burnt down, 31 out of 36 hospitals have been destroyed and most houses and towns are completely in ruins.

The Gaza I have known is no more. This book is a diary of a lost love. A love beyond walls.

Ton van der Kroon

May 2025, Amsterdam

PART 1

'Men turn as they pray to the holy place.

To Layla's home I turn my face.'

Ahmed Shawki

LAYLA

Hebron, West Bank, 2004

'I miss her. She is my great love. But she doesn't speak to me anymore. She doesn't touch me. I don't get it. She doesn't appreciate me. How am I supposed to go on?'

The Palestinian man looks at the ground, distraught.

'Women... I don't know what to do with them.' Muhammad is silent.

'I don't trust them,' says Ihab, another Palestinian. 'I am always afraid they will manipulate me. You give them a finger and they take the whole hand. They want everything from you, getting married, having children, buying expensive clothes. I don't buy it. I'd rather blow myself up.'

'Yes, that sounds better,' agrees Raed.

'Fine, if you guys want to blow yourselves up, I'll go for a stroll through Hebron and visit Abraham's church,' I respond. 'What about you, Amer?'

Amer looks at me. 'You go to the grave church and I'll go to Amsterdam to grab a terrace.'

I am working with four Palestinians in a theatre hall in Hebron, in the West Bank. The four men, aged 27, 29, 35 and 45, are all

actors at Theater Day Productions, a theatre school that offers Palestinian actors a three-year drama training, after which they create theatre performances for children. The management of the school, Jan and Jackie, a Dutch man and an American woman, invited me to give a training course, because the group was getting stuck. Not on artistic level but on a personal level. Knowing the recent history of the Palestinian people it doesn't surprise me. The war trouble, the constant threat of danger and the poor living situation often make it impossible for them to create theatre.

I am used to working with men, digging into their souls, meeting their pain. But this is the first time I get to work with Palestinian men. I wondered beforehand whether it would be different from what I know. But now that I am here, I notice that there seems only little difference between them and men in the Netherlands or Belgium. Here too, we talk about relationships, sex and communication problems. We laugh, we cry, we dance, we sing and we mourn the things we have lost, the things that are impossible, the things that hurt, the things that make us feel powerless. Both them and me. For three days we live at the cutting edge, between life and death. We talk about war and walls, about fathers and sons, about wives and lovers. Our playing field is the world.

'I am going crazy here. Soon we will all become Majnun,' sighs one of the men.

'Majnun?' I ask.

'Majnun is a man gone mad. Majnun and Layla.'

'Who is Layla?'

'Layla is Majnun's great love, but he is not allowed to marry her. The situation is hopeless.'

'And what happens to them?'

‘A great battle ensues over who gets to marry her, ending in a great massacre. In the end she is married off to another. Majnun goes mad with love, he moves into the desert and can think of nothing but her. When she dies he is finally able to lay down on her grave and the two lovers are united.’

‘That sounds like an Arabic version of *Romeo and Juliet*,’ I say.

‘Exactly, they can’t have each other until they died.’

At the end of the first day, driver Omar comes to pick me up and take me from Hebron back to the flat in Jerusalem where I’m staying. For three days I commute back and forth. There is Arabic music on Omar’s radio. Suddenly he turns it off.

‘A checkpoint,’ he explains and puts on his shiny sunglasses.

‘Don’t say anything.’

An Israeli soldier stops us.

‘Hey, you don’t remember me?’ says Omar in Hebrew. The soldier looks at him. ‘From the army!’

The soldier looks puzzled and beckons us to drive on. Omar turns the radio back on and takes off his glasses. Alright, that’s solved.

‘So what if they find out you are not an Israeli?’

Omar smiles and shows his gleaming teeth. ‘You know... You need to live.’

‘I want lots of women,’ he continues, ‘and lots of money.’

‘Why? Do you have too many hormones?’ I laugh.

‘Yes. I want to have a lot of women.’

‘Is that possible?’ I ask.

‘Yes, if you have enough money.’

‘But can’t you just sleep with a woman without marrying her?’

I cautiously suggest.

His face tightens. ‘Dangerous,’ he says. ‘Very dangerous.’

‘But have you ever done it?’

He smiles broadly and turns up the radio.

‘Listen, my favourite music.’

The Arabic music blares through the car and I understand one English sentence in the song: ‘*Majnun, I love you.*’

The next morning, we drive back from East Jerusalem towards Hebron. We find ourselves in a traffic jam at the end of the city in front of a red traffic light.

‘What are we waiting for?’ I ask after ten minutes.

‘This is a crossover.’

‘Yes – so?’

‘The other road is Israeli and goes to the settlements. It’s being guarded by the soldiers.’

I watch the situation. The Palestinian traffic light turns green for one minute, then the Israeli traffic light turns green for ten minutes. We are still in the Palestinian traffic jam. Hardly anyone is driving to the settlements. I’m trying not to get irritated; after all, I’m only here for twelve days. Some cars and taxis in the traffic jam turn around. So does Omar.

‘I know another way,’ he says, ‘through West Jerusalem. West is Israeli, East is Palestinian,’ he explains, showing me the situation during the rest of the drive. One road is Israeli, the next Palestinian, one hill is Israeli, the next Palestinian, here is a Jewish village, there a Palestinian village. This is an abandoned field of Palestinians, but they can no longer go to their pasture because of an Israeli road and checkpoint there.... And so he continues. Suddenly he slows down, opens his window and starts honking at a village where a group of men is standing.

Idiot, I think, why would you provoke up here?

‘Israeli?’ I ask.

‘No, Palestinian. I have an Israeli number plate; that’s why I make contact, otherwise they’ll pelt my car with stones.’

‘Ah... I see.’

Day two at the workshop. I am working with a story called *The King and the Water of Life*. A king is dying and his three sons go in search of the water of life for him, guarded by a beautiful princess. The four actors choose their roles according to the situation in their own lives: Amer becomes the king who wants to be child and runs across the stage in nappies. Completely Majnun. Ihab is the prince, playing the king's third son. Raed is the princess who portrays hatred and bitterness in a black sari. The fourth role is a small but wise man who shows the prince the way at a crossroads. The first two sons in the story ignore the little man at the crossroads; one chooses the left road, one the right road. Both roads lead to a dead end. Prince Ihab needs to choose differently. But how?

'You cannot get the water of life until you marry her,' the little wise man tells Ihab. Ihab decides to seduce the princess. But the princess does not want to be seduced. She is angry.

'You must give me the water of life,' he says, 'otherwise the king will die.' But no matter how hard he tries, the princess only becomes more hateful, more threatening, more dangerous. Ihab becomes desperate.

'You see, women are impossible,' I hear him rant.

In the end, he drags the princess to the king, half raping her. 'Give me that water of life, bitch.'

They fight and fall to the ground. The little wise man looks at the spectacle pitifully. King Amer doesn't seem to recover from the water of life. He is still playing with the poo in his nappy.

After 1,5 hour the game is over. Everyone is exhausted.

'It's not working. Why isn't this working?'

'You didn't listen to the little wise man,' I explain. 'You needed to marry her, not rape her. That's why she got ugly.'

'But I seduced her, didn't I? Then she should listen, shouldn't she...?'

Everyone is lying on the ground, eyes closed.

‘Feel the weight of your body and relax. Picture yourself lying in a beautiful open meadow, hearing birds.’ I instruct with a calm voice. ‘Suddenly you wake up and see a beautiful woman coming towards you. She reaches out to you and helps you up. What can you do to free her from her curse? How can you free her from her evilness, from her hatred and bitterness?’

Tears were streaming down some cheeks.

Amer is the first to speak. He tells how he chose theatre when he was a boy. The theatre was his beloved, his Layla. He was totally committed to the Palestinian cause. Until one day during a performance he got a knife at his throat from his own people. They said he had to stop playing, this was not appropriate. He messed with the Palestinian cause: too much humour, too much play, too much fun. This was not what Allah wanted. This was a serious matter. After the incident, he fell ill; he couldn’t eat, couldn’t drink and ended up in hospital. For six months he balanced on the edge of life and death. He no longer wanted to live. His soul had been raped.

The boys are silent when Amer shares his story. They have known him as their theater colleague and director for seven years, but they didn’t know this story.

‘But I wanted to live,’ Amer continues, ‘and I decided to play again. I didn’t want to die.’

Deep sobs come from his big belly.

‘I was almost killed by my own people. But I will never let myself be killed again. I will keep playing.’

He looks up and suddenly looks like a great leader. A leader who speaks to his men, who touches their hearts, who animates them before they go into battle. The men look at each other. The king is alive! One by one, the other men start telling their stories too. About what keeps them busy in their daily lives. About how they get stuck in the misery of war. Always that