

International Scientific Symposium of the 25th edition of Carthage Theater Days

(November 25 - 27, 2024)

Symposium Paper

Theatre, Genocide and Resistance: Towards a New Humanistic Horizon

In its contemporary era, Humanity has had bitter experiences with destruction. This latter has a material meaning, which involves demolition of streets, roads, buildings, institutions, headquarters, statues, and landmarks, along with the complete devastation of their contents. The aim of those who perpetrate destruction is to make life hard for people, to disrupt their communication, to break the bond that should unite them, and to reduce the continuity and harmony of their material and intellectual production.

Destruction, however, also extends to all sites of art production and circulation, giving it a moral significance and becoming part of an ethnic genocide that assassinates all human memories preserved by those arts, along with the repository of histories, the archive of current life, and the record of desired futures. It prevents the narration of local stories by artists rooted in their cultures and engaged with their peers from all areas of the world, across languages and cultures.

In this context, several texts, including the Roerich Pact (1935) and the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), serve as legal foundations for strong human and international opposition to all acts of cultural genocide and for seeking justice against them. Moreover, they affirm the human right to international protection against such crimes and the obligation to combat those who perpetrate them.

Despite the millennial history of genocide, some of which is known while some is silenced, modernity has elevated it to an unprecedented level in terms of planning, organization, and the development of technological means to facilitate its perpetration, exploit its outcomes, and promote it within international, regional, and national political agendas. These agendas include ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, erasure of memories, appropriation of tangible and intangible heritage, and the eradication of ethnic existence. These are the defining characteristics of the deliberate, total, or partial, extermination of a human group identified by its religious, racial, ethnic, or national identity, through systematic, sustained, large-scale, and targeted violence aimed at its extermination. While genocides have a history in modern Europe and the Global North, the atrocities witnessed in the colonized and semi colonized countries of the Global South over the past five centuries - from South America to Africa, Australia, and Asia - embodied a strict and systematic imperial capitalist plan to impose horrific destinies on their peoples and cultures.

In Gaza, since October 2023, the relentless wars aimed at erasing contemporary human cultures — previously seen in Bosnia, Croatia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur, Sudan, and elsewhere — have reached an unprecedented level through a Zionist criminal escalation. Evidences are proven through repeated massacres targeting children, women, and the elderly, as well as air and ground raids that have obliterated homes, schools, hospitals, archaeological sites, and religious, cultural, artistic, and academic institutions. The Zionist invaders of Palestine, even before the establishment of the Zionist entity through war, killing, destruction, and global imperial colonial support, have committed one premeditated massacre after another, carrying out acts of genocide — spatial, ethnic, and cultural — without any effective deterrence. In facing this horrific aggression, Palestinians stand as representatives of humanity in this bitter experience, bearing its weight, which necessitates deepening thought and reinforcing action in the realm of resistant art.

The theater holds boundless possibilities for engaging performance artists and their audiences in creating events, texts, and images that reconnect with life from within the heart of genocide and destruction. Indeed, theater, as an all-encompassing practice, spans from individual or collective creative writing to the performative act that mediates the relationship with the audience, culminating in the emotional and sensory interplay, where texts engage with other texts beyond the spectacle of performances. This immense capacity for resistance has always been inherent in theater. Throughout humanity's struggles against tyranny, oppression, and the violation of rights, theater has never been a passive witness. How many theaters have been founded on the Freedom principle and named after it? How many theatrical practices have helped sustain a people under siege, reinforcing their sense of self and inspiring them to take pride in the free, creative human spirit, especially when strongholds of resistance have fallen? How many theaters have been built, brick by brick, to represent their creators rather than their oppressors, to express their anxieties, convey their suffering, and radiate their hopes? How many theaters have brought together painters, musicians, poets, writers, philosophers, and social scientists to practice free creativity in the face of destruction, genocide, colonialism, and tyranny? Wasn't this philosophy behind the 'Theatre of the Oppressed,' which originated in Brazil during the 1970s and spread worldwide? Wasn't this the approach of South African theater artists who created anticolonial, anti-apartheid, and anti-genocide dramatic expressions as part of the 'Truth and Reconciliation' process in the 1990s? Wasn't this the philosophy behind 'Mashirika' in Rwanda (1998), which united people of diverse languages, cultures, national identities, and artistic experiences to establish a theater practice opposing genocide? Isn't this the spirit of the 'Freedom Theatre' in Jenin Camp (2006), to cite only few examples?

Resistance is the condition for human survival in the face of the enemies of humanity, and free creativity is the most significant event at the heart of this resistance. It is an event, but it is also a structure

and a social-historical process that regenerates life by bearing witness, recording history, preserving the archive of human existence, and creating possible futures. Therefore, theater, as both an event and a structure, is shaped by creators who denounce oppression, expose injustice, unveil crime, and provoke inquiry.

Genocide Theater works to create states of interactive awareness - both individual and collective - regarding tyranny, exploitation, dehumanization, racism, and discrimination by transcending the performer-spectator binary. While the theatrical script put words in actors' mouths, it also gives them the space to speak-out and perform in ways that silence genocide and destruction voices. As theater artists dress the characters they portray with masks, they simultaneously strip away White masks that prevent Black Skins from revealing themselves and confronting their enemies with unveiled faces.

In this critical juncture in Palestine, that the emancipatory human thought faces today, the necessity for an anti-genocide theater is more urgent than ever, aligning with a new humanistic horizon that seeks to reestablish the defense of free humanity. In theater, and on the stage, there is dialogue and the clash of words and ideas, a confrontation of viewpoints, a subversion of tyranny through humor, and a reversal of the 'inevitable' fate — rooted in free individuals crafting chosen destinies. The theater draws its core from classical and popular literatures, both ancient and modern arts, the human and social sciences, and from philosophies. In this sense, theater cannot fulfill this role unless it contributes to bridging the gap between the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Art, considering them as the collective knowledge of human beings about themselves - their past, present, and future aspirations - and viewing theater as a crucible for the arts, literatures, and disciplines concerned with Mankind and Society.

Therefore, several aesthetic and ethical issues arise that could serve as key topics for the 25th edition of the Carthage Theater Days Symposium, which will be held under the theme 'Theater, Genocide, and Resistance: Towards a New Humanistic Horizon':

1. The aesthetic specificities of practicing Genocide Theater and Resistance Theater in various societies during the colonial and consumer capitalist eras.
2. The ethics of depicting destruction and genocide on stage and transforming them into theatrical scenes.
3. The relationship between Theater and the Human and Social Sciences, which explore the memories of genocide and resistance and the social-historical construction of identities.
4. Genocide Theater and Resistance Theater and creation of possible futures.

Symposium Director : Mounir SAIDANI

Symposium Coordinator : Basma FERCHICHI