

Gaining dignity through theatrical work

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In the Palestinian city of Nablus, 40 students shine on stage in the performance DIGNITY. They have no theatrical background, and they have been working only four days with this performance. Along with the 40 actors, an orchestra of Norwegian and Palestinian musicians are playing. The students express a feeling of empowerment and pride, as they become the symbolic olive trees on stage. The trees have become an important symbol of the Palestinian roots and their struggle to blossom again. Through the theatrical work, the students have been given a chance to express themselves in ways they have never done before. They can communicate emotions that words cannot describe. Their expressions are strong and give them a voice they did not know they had.

The project is initiated by the University of Stavanger, Norway, and the friendship society Nablus-Stavanger. The friendship between the two cities has been growing since 1996, always focusing on connecting people at grassroot level. This particular performance came about as three drama and theatre teachers involved themselves in the work of the friendship organization.

The process behind the performance was influenced by the aesthetics of Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed. His longtime friendship and partnership with Paolo Freire contributed with the ideas of emancipation through dialogue. Dialogue in this context can also be a bodily expression. This paper will explain our work with the Palestinian students, and discuss how theatrical work can be emancipating for youth living under restriction. The idea of 'trying to take away the dignity of somebody will result in the loss your own dignity' has colored our work, and stands out as a mantra for the meeting between people. Gaining dignity through theatrical work starts with the respect for yourself, and seeing yourself as a contributor to the society. Through the emancipating theatre exercises and collective ensemble work, the students express their feelings, ideas, fears and hopes.