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***Twenty Years of Theatre Reportage for Peace: Teatro di Nascosto inform the global community of the realities of living in Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan and Syria.***

***By Carrie Westwater***

Each year in Volterra independent artists and journalists from across the globe come together as the International Community of [Teatro di Nascosto](#). Their aim? To develop ways to mediate the lived experiences of those who live in areas of conflict; as peace orientated, non-affiliated sharers of information.

Theatre Reportage and the work of *Teatro di Nascosto: Hidden Theatre* is not 'theatre activism'. It is something more; something else. Overtly political in its practice the International Group, made up of actors, journalists, film makers, humanitarian workers and musicians (among others) are led by Artistic Director Annet Henneman. Under her direction, for over twenty years, they work together to extract narratives of oppression that are not heard or are 'hidden' from a lack of representation of indeed censorship. They are advocates for those without a voice. When they are not together, they are often on the front line, as journalists reporting what is happening from the perspective of an ordinary citizen, as play workers attempting to preserve the humanity of traumatised children and as actors pursuing a means to properly represent their friends and families. In their work, they come together for peace through Henneman's Theatre Reportage, and have done since 1997.

During intensive workshops, led by Henneman the International Community develop vital skills in non-language-based communication and empathy, self-awareness and resilience. They eat together, sleep in the same room and are only allowed "one shower in three days", to understand what it is to live without water; without the luxuries we often take for granted. This work builds a sense of trust, and all without universally speaking the same language. The actors and journalists come from Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Palestine, Germany, Belgium, Uruguay, Italy, Holland and the UK. However, the language they do share is effective, they have a language of listening, a subtle language of emotional connectivity in their united belief and shared goals.

They all individually hope to give agency to the silenced and condemned voices of innocent civilians, men, women and children. These are the people who choose to stay in their ravished and unstable lands, to stay and make change and rescue their cultural heritage. They are the people who hope that life will return home. The people they wish to represent are what the "West" may describe as 'would be refugees', but they are simply, in the greatest of ways just people. They are, I would say, the hidden 'truth-stayers' who wish to execute their human right to live in their home territories; to provide for their children; to experience and retain their own culture, and they do so in abject fear and constant danger.

What I have witnessed working with Teatro di Nascosto in this way is a tried and tested working model of anti-capitalist, true intercultural living. A big claim, I know, but one that is worthy of Annet Henneman's practice, developed over two decades. Social justice is at the heart of this work and its use of the arts poignantly traverses time and geographical space. It dramatically comes back to the oldest forms of theatre as an inclusive model for teaching; as moral education; as a tool for representation and cultural sharing and it harnesses an ability to increase empathy between actor and audience: between one individual person and another. It is storytelling in testimony, which strips back the artifice of theatricality, exposing the true identity and experience of the subject through a shared communion.

But this doesn't 'just' happen. Through seemingly simple steps and concrete guidance from Henneman, the group learn to navigate alternative (or should I say forgotten) methods of communication. They develop a sense of joint purpose through an increased awareness of each other's experiences, through trust and open expression. Henneman is undoubtedly influenced by her contemporaries, many of whom she has performed and trained with, such as Dario Fo, Jerzy Grotowski, Judith Molina and Eugenio Barba. However, the distinct journalistic flavour of Henneman's work comes from her extensive ethnographic research and skilled ability to compose theatrical works and monologues which dissolve the space between actor and audience, re-sensitising all involved with the realities of war. The theatre reportage environment asks both actor and audience to experience the shoes of someone else. We cannot walk the same steps as another, but we can feel how it may feel to do so. Through a process of improvisation, physical and vocal 'awakening', guided re-connection (to those around us) through active silence, rapid disorientation techniques (to recalibrate the senses) and relocation into new dramatic spheres, Henneman asks the actor to reposition themselves into the shoes of the victim of war.



Photo credit: Julia Bauer. Image of Artistic Director Annet Henneman

The skill here is that Henneman never appropriates the experience but represents it through human instinct within the parameters of researched realities. All given with explicit permission by the very people who cannot represent themselves. Through monologues and site interventions Henneman deconstructs theatre, coming away from mere portrayals of events and instead exhibits that one must not hide in the safety of un-reality, but immerse oneself in the meta narratives of real clothing (not costumes), real stories (not creative writing), real lighting states (no spotlight, no set, no stage) and to always project authentic music with the courage of love and laughter.



Phot credit: Julia Bauer. Image of the performance of "Here Their Voices" by Annet Henneman (2012)

Over two decades of interventions through art Teatro di Nascosto realize their aims by performing at conferences, seminars, theatres, and staging actions such as [The Dream Lottery](#) at the parliamentary buildings in Brussels (2016) and *Dreams from Beyond* at Pisa Train Station and Volterra Square (among many other sites) in 2017. More recently performances of *The Catwalk* have been seen in shopping centres in Basra (2018) and Baghdad and during the Covid-19 Global Pandemic a series of important live zoom conversations have been streamed from Palestine after the ceasefire, reporting on the continued devastations.

*Dreams from Beyond* is a meditation on the thoughts and dreams of Asylum Seekers who died at sea, attempting to find refuge in Italy. The staging in Volterra was situated directly before the company met with the Mayor to discuss the welcome of refugees to the city. Each action is followed by talks to move societies towards a space of peace.



Photo credit: Carrie Westwater. Image of members of the International Group from Teatro di Nascosto: Jood Kilani, Alex Etchart, Moritz König and Dana Abbas.

Much of Henneman's work is live and situated in spaces of political resonance. However, in the age of digitalisation Teatro di Nascosto have developed multiple platforms to enable those living under oppression to be heard. One of these projects during the Pandemic has found a space on [YouTube, as zoom conference calls](#) from areas of conflict, such as Palestine. It was here that Palestinians could explain the levels of oppression they experience unencumbered by the political economy of state sponsored media. They discuss the isolation of having just one hour of electricity a day and the effect this has on the ability to communicate outside of their immediate vicinity. They also explain that with only one hour a day of power the water pumps stop working. They also tell the stories of friends shot at close range and the horror of continued fear alongside the global misunderstanding of the ceasefire celebrations: the people were not dancing and singing as a victory chant, but in relief they were still alive.

This web-based communication allows people to speak for themselves. Why, is it needed? Because it is necessary to share uncontaminated, un-censored, non-biased information and broadcast this directly from areas of conflict, communicated by the very people who experience their daily lives *in* war. Teatro di Nascosto is furiously independent from any funded affiliations. They stand independently from any associations that may adversely control their message and they are diligent in their efforts to remain so. In an aim to make seen and heard the critical reality of war; suffered by innocent families, workers and communities struggling to maintain some remnant of normal human co-existence, this means that they work voluntarily. For each member knows that the rhetoric the Western audience receives does not connect to the very real human experience they have witnessed, because this experience is rendered more often than not, invisible.

Teatro di Nascosto makes this visible.