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Photo: Daniel Grimm

Free Advice and an Interview with Farah Saleh

by Nicole Bindler

tD writer Nicole Bindler interviews Palestinian dance artist Farah Saleh after her performance of her new solo “Free Advice” at New York Live Arts as a part of the [Live Ideas Festival](#). Saleh was born in Syria in 1985 in a Palestinian refugee camp. She moved to Jordan in 1990, and then to Palestine in 1996 after the [Oslo Accords](#). In 2003 during the [Second Intifada](#) she had to go to Italy to finish her studies there. In 2009 she decided to go back to Palestine and use Ramallah as a base for her choreographic and curatorial work. Bindler has written several pieces on Palestinian and Israeli dance and politics for *tD*: [Archiving Occupation, Identity, and Resistance](#) (2016), [Women](#) (2015), [Jewish American Choreographers Grapple with Zionism and the Nakba](#) (2015), [Palestinian Dabke Makes it to the Annenberg](#) (2014).

Making Dance in Palestine

Nicole Bindler: Tell me about the work you do in Ramallah.

Farah Saleh: I started working with a contemporary dance company, [Sareyyet Ramallah](#), which has organized the [Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival](#) every April since 2006. I teach, perform, choreograph, and help coordinate the festival with Sareyyet. I’ve also worked with [A M Qattan Foundation](#) which organizes a performing arts summer school. They also produce performances, and I’ve taken part in two of them, one of which was [Badke](#), a Palestinian/Belgian co-production presented in the Live Ideas Festival this year.

In 2011 I started spending half of the year touring in Europe. For the past year I’ve been in the U.S. teaching at Brown. I’m returning to Ramallah after this semester. It’s been my dream for a long time that Palestinian artists curate the local dance intensives and festivals—instead of internationals or foundations—so that the learning is Palestinian artist-led. I think there are a lot of qualified Palestinian teachers and choreographers. It’s not enough to just have outsiders come make work on us. In addition to my own choreography, I’m co-curating a summer 2016 intensive with Sara Christophersen and Helle Siljeholm in Ramallah with these goals in mind. There will be eight Palestinian teachers and three internationals teaching somatics, floorwork, ballet, Axis Syllabus, contact

improvisation, light, set, and costume design, dramaturgy, and some political/artistic discussions. It's a mixture of theory and practice with more traditional techniques and alternative ways of moving the body.

NB: It sounds like your curation is about empowering Palestinian artists, rather than having institutions make all the decisions about your community.

FS: Absolutely. We've always learned a lot from these international intensives and collaborations, but it's time for us to decide what to learn and the context for learning. My intensive is open to international dancers so they can come, dance with us, and also learn about the political situation. Because of course many people say Tel Aviv is the dance capital of the Middle East, and we want to provide another capital in Ramallah.

The April Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival funding depends on support from consulates and inevitably, the consulates shape some of the curation because they're the ones giving the financial support. This is why we're creating a mini-festival of performances at the summer intensive, to have more curatorial control and to bring experimental work that's shown in alternative spaces on a smaller scale.

NB: Ramallah already seems like it's becoming a major hub for contemporary dance in the Middle East. What do you attribute this growth to?

FS: The Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival has played a huge role. Many internationals who came to perform have returned to do co-productions. The dancers in Ramallah have begun to make their own work, perform abroad, then come back and teach what they've learned.

NB: It sounds like all the activities in Ramallah are very homegrown and artist initiated.

FS: Yes, but very few dancers earn a living from dance. It's a growing concern of ours. We're trying to figure out how to build a sustainable cultural economy in Palestine, one where more people will pay to see performances.

NB: How do artists in Palestine make a living?

FS: They have day jobs. But now some touring co-productions with European companies such as *Badke* allow 10-15 dancers (which is relatively very few) to earn their money by performing. Others teach dance and have freelance projects as dancers.

NB: Where do the financial resources for dance come from? Does the [NGO economy in Ramallah](#) contribute to the Festival's success?

FS: No, the NGOs don't contribute funds. A M Qattan Foundation (considered our Ministry of Culture) funds artistic projects all over Palestine. The money for the Festival comes from consulates and the European Union who support international companies coming from abroad to perform and teach.

The role of Palestinian Dabke

NB: Do you think the use of Palestinian [Dabke](#) in *Badke* represents a positive, unifying force, or a coercive joining?

FS: For me it's both.

When I was little I learned ballet in Jordan. When I moved to Palestine there were no ballet classes, so I took a few Dabke classes. It felt fake to me. It didn't have anything to do with the Dabke I enjoyed at weddings and birthdays. It was like a commodified representation of our real Dabke with high jumps and muscular lines. It didn't speak to me.

During the creation of *Badke* we talked about our relationship to Dabke and I explored my distance from it. The Dabke felt genuine to

me in *Badke* because it resembled the kind of authentic dancing that happens at weddings, but it was still oppressive sometimes because it felt like an imposed collectivity. I needed my individual space to reflect on things, to express my own feelings, movement, etc. For the Belgian choreographers, it was a way to bring to light Palestinian strength, a coming together, resisting systems of domination, looking for happiness and normalcy in an abnormal situation.

Reclaiming Feldenkrais

NB: You mentioned earlier that you're reclaiming Feldenkrais. Can you speak more about this?

FS: In the 40's Moshé Feldenkrais was involved in the [Haganah](#), which later became the Israeli Defense Force. He worked as a personal trainer for [Ben Gurion](#), Israel's first Prime Minister. One of his famous quotes was: "I want to teach Ben Gurion how to [stand on his head](#), so Israel can stand on its feet." I've taken many Feldenkrais classes while touring in Europe. I think it's a very beneficial technique that makes you understand your body in a deep way. I want to do the Feldenkrais training, and use it as a counter discourse of what Feldenkrais means for Palestine and Israel. I want to use it to empower Palestinian bodies. This is my counter narrative of Feldenkrais.

Body as Archive

NB: Can you talk about your "body as archive" work?

FS: I'm investigating the idea of artist as archivist. The body contains counter archives or counter narratives from the official narrative. At the moment my husband's work and mine intersect in an interesting way. I'm working on the body as an archiving tool and he's researching human shields; the body as a weapon.

My question is how can artists contribute to change by problematizing social and political memories? I'm interested in latent stories or invisible stories of Palestinian history that were never officially archived or deliberately obscured. I'm archiving the gestures of the actors of these stories using historical archives that were documented, personal testimonies, and imagination.

One of my body as archive projects is a video dance installation called [A Fidayee Son in Moscow](#). It archives gestures of Palestinian children at an international [boarding school in Russia](#) during the 80's. They were sent there by revolutionary parents. It was a school that hosted many kids of the Left from all over the world. So, some Palestinian children were sent there, one of whom was my brother. They were exposed to Communist values and I was interested in unearthing this story through the gestures of the students.

My second video dance installation called [Cells of Illegal Education](#) is about civil disobedience at Birzeit University during the [First Intifada](#) (see [video](#)). All the schools and universities in Palestine were closed during the First Intifada by order of the Israeli military. Any students or teachers who disobeyed by gathering to learn or teach were labeled "cells of illegal education" by the Israeli military and were persecuted, put in prison, or their houses were destroyed. This illegal teaching, called "popular education," was organized in unconventional places: teacher's houses, outdoor spaces, or classrooms of the schools that they broke into.

Performing *Free Advice*

NB: At your performance of *Free Advice* at [New York Live Arts](#) you used video of your moments in public spaces with your "Free Advice" sign interacting with passersby as a way of contextualizing how you got the material for the dance. This also gave the audience a sense of our role and set us up for the participatory nature of the dance. Then at the end you showed us a video of us watching you in the beginning. It brought it all full circle in terms of demonstrating how you gather material for the piece by doing the piece. What was one of your strangest Free Advice encounters? The neo-Nazi rally in Vienna sounded pretty wild. You were in the middle of the pro and con rallies. Did you speak to any Nazis?

FS: Two of them approached me. They were like: "What are you doing here?" I was like: "Oh, it's an art project. If you have advice

about art and society, please share, and if you need advice I can advise you,” and they were like: “Go away!” But I had substantive conversations with the Anti-Nazis. It was interesting because at demos you hold signs and I had a sign but no one knew what I represented. It’s funny to be in the middle.

NB: It shines a light on how simplistic messaging can be at protests even if the issue is very complex. If you bring in messaging not based on the argument at hand it could be very unsettling.

FS: Absolutely.

NB: Any other unusual or surprising interactions while performing Free Advice outdoors?

FS: People were contradicting themselves every two seconds. This happened in every country. One example is when Palestinian men advocated for shedding marital conventions, and then in the next moment said contemporary dance is not acceptable in our society.

NB: It was fun to see how you were kind of scooping people up with your Free Advice sign. Your directional intention seemed so clear that everyone followed. You were very warm and disarming. People wanted to come along. Everyone said yes. When you touched people’s feet they took off their shoes. When I was writing you pushed a ball in my direction and I interacted with the ball even though I needed to be writing. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do with the ball, but I just said yes. Some of your instructions were vague at times and it forced me to look at my responses to your prompts. It was like a mirror: If you roll a ball toward me and all you say is “Hey!” I’m left to grapple with my choices. It felt like a psychological experiment. And then of course some of your instructions were crystal clear—move this way if you believe this thing—etc. The political questions about the one state vs. two state solution, and the [cultural boycott of Israel](#) forced us to decide how public or private we want to be about our politics. It felt like an opportunity to look at my responses and learn about myself. What was your process for creating the questions?

FS: The audience questions, and my dance actions were all devised from my Free Advice sessions on the streets in various cities. I transformed the advice exchanged between me and the people I met into my movement and instructions for the audience. The marriage proposal part where I put a ring on an audience member came from the conversation I had with the Palestinian men on the street about marriage conventions. Taking the shoes off was about getting rid of things that we don’t need and conversations I had about consumerism. If we have ten pairs of shoes maybe we only need three. The balls represented the conversation I had with passersby about being happier in your life, being present, and not always rushing.

There was a long discussion with three older Palestinian men who believed in a two state solution, as many elders still do. The question about boycott was present in many discussions I had. In my investigation about my role as both an artist and activist I find that the cultural boycott of Israeli institutions is one of the things I’m drawn to very strongly. As a strategy I think it really works.

Free Advice, Farah Saleh, New York Live Arts, March 23, <http://newyorklivearts.org/event/free-advice>; *Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival*, April 11-26, <http://sareyyet.ps/festival16/>; *Sareyyet Ramallah Dance Summer School*, July 31-August 13,.

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