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Putting It in Writing: Interviewing the Top Palestinian Director in London

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During my Mizzou Reporting in London Semester, I interviewed and wrote about many fascinating people. One of them was Francois Abu Salem, the Director of El Hakawati, the only professional Palestinian theatre

troupe active in the 1980s. I met Mr. Abu Salem at the Riverside Studio in Hammersmith, London, around the time of his troupe's performances there of "Mahjob, Mahjob".

Putting It in Writing—Interviewing the Top Palestinian Director in London, by David J. Marcou, USA.

Francois Abu Salem is still, I believe, one of the top Palestinian theatre directors, and perhaps still head of El-Hakawati, the West Bank Palestinian theatre troupe I saw perform at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, London, in autumn 1981. I interviewed Mr. Abu Salem there for an hour, around the time of his troupe's performances of 'Mahjob, Mahjob'.

Mr. Abu Salem is the product of a cross-cultural marriage. His mother was French, his father Palestinian. The cross-currents generated by his upbringing revealed themselves, too, in London. 'Mahjob, Mahjob' is the tale of a Palestinian man in Israel, or should I say a Woody-Allen-type figure in a land otherwise much in need of humor. The fact that the playwright-director tries in his play to have his troupe bridge the gap between Palestine and

Israel says a lot about what some people in the Holy Land and outside it, too, are still trying to achieve for Israel-Palestine, i.e., peace.

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Interviewing Mr. Abu Salem was a fascinating experience. Firstly, he was very patient answering my questions, which

mainly dealt with how he was trying to find a way toward peace in the Holy Land, without suggesting war is the best strategy. The anti-hero Mahjoob was accidentally dropped on his head as an infant by his over-excited father. He goes through many more indignities as an adult, including exposure to American culture, and is made somewhat the fool, no doubt, for his pains.

Mr. Abu Salem smoked his cigarette and drank iced tea, while we chatted in the front hall of Riverside Studios that morning, with sunlight beaming in from the overhead windows. He was a handsome-looking man, modestly bearded if I recall right, and on the slender side, who consulted with one or two of his actors, when they briefly interrupted us. What struck me most about this director was his reasonability. He didn't seem like a hysterical bomb-thrower in the least, though his plays may have thrown implicit cultural bombs at both sides. More to the point: He seemed a man of peace.

As we talked, I thought about the British press, which at the time was sympathetic to both sides in the Holy Land, though it may also have taken Donald McCullin's then-current photobook with Jonathan Dimbleby's text ('The Palestinians') to make Londoners think more about Palestinian complaints.

The long and the short of it is: El Hakawati, the only professional Palestinian theatre troupe active in the 1980s, was doing groundbreaking work, but when I sent my story to the Milwaukee Sentinel, admittedly out of the blue, it did not publish my report. It wasn't a bad report at all, though I'd only been in journalism about a year. I would go on, from 1991-2006, to freelance regularly for the later-merged Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and I always did my

best for that paper, including in 1981.

London was an intriguing place in the autumn of that Royal Wedding year, but I felt strongly that many people had their hearts in the right place then. I may have been mistaken a bit, though, because the older Picture Post-style journalism of the 1940s and 1950s, had been replaced by the more hit-em-in-the-teeth-style that Picture Post hadn't trotted out much. The Sunday Times Magazine's increasing social conscience had a bit to do with that, but more than that was the increasing role of the tabloids in deadening the culture to finer things. It was a deadening the world could have done without, though the social conscience part is always called for.

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