

## Book Review

**Kristin Flade, *The Good Pain?: Applied Theatre and Social Circus in Palestine Today*. Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2018, ISBN: 978-3709203378 (pbk), pp. 260. Price: £13.07.**

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Kristin Flade's book hovers between different artistic and aesthetic versions of the political reality in the Palestinian West Bank. Both her personal experience and her responsibility as an applied theatre and performance critic are embedded in *The Good Pain?: Applied Theatre and Social Circus in Palestine Today*. Writing in a mixed style of a work journal, creative writing, interviews, reports, performance reviews and critical commentary of her field research, Flade examines the relevance, impact and challenges of cultural practice in one of the most politically turbulent spaces in contemporary times. The oxymoron captured in the title of the book, of course, hints at the ambiguity and paradox of observing, pursuing and participating in three genres of performance art organised in the middle of relentless resistance for autonomy, and more so under Israeli military occupation and enforced borders. The reader is left with the image of a Panopticon with regards to the Palestinian West Bank which is constantly under Israeli military surveillance. Flade is unwavering in exposing the pain, trauma, loss and resilience of the Palestinian people in the midst of such crisis. More precisely, her supposedly normal interactions with the Palestinian community as she pursues her research, she unravels, is constantly interrupted by "No F-16s fighter plane" (120) that brutally illustrate and consequently remind her readers of the purpose of her research on the Palestinian West Bank. She thus presents how the body is employed as an aesthetic and semiotic symbol to educate people to cope "with the physical, mental and emotional effects" (114) of Israeli military occupation.

The author's work journal which punctuates Parts I and II of the book

serves as a critical representation and subtle assessment of a constantly menaced social and political life of a community. This assessment is attained simultaneously with an exploration of cultural productions that are created by different performance groups to respond to the crises. Her three case studies which are examined in Part II, includes Playback Theatre during a Freedom ride in Jenin in 2015, Forum Theatre in the Jordan Valley run by Ashtar Theatre, and Social Circus in the Palestinian Circus School. These all inform her readers on how performers' bodies serve as satirical and metaphorical frames for confronting violent political realities on the Palestinian West Bank. The political, economic, social and cultural background against which these three projects were conducted has been provided by the author in the first part of the book. The author's analysis of the three genres allows her to evaluate the efficacy of what she terms *positive social change*. This evaluation, in my view, interrogates how such change could be attained considering the intervention of donor agencies and theatre catalysts which she, equally, covers in the first part of her book. Flade further questions how the practical implementation of the three case studies could effectively result in change in the domain of human rights, democracy and development. She therefore asks whether it is "even possible to measure, trace and locate change in ways it might materialise in narrative, performative and structural dynamics in particular projects?" (114). On the level of implementation, the author interrogates the impact of international participants in such projects, which allows her to reconceptualise change in this artistic context. Therefore Flade's role as an international participant in the forum theatre workshop permits her to comprehend "the particular dynamics of *group formation and the theatrical devising process*, as well as the soft educational support towards the *development of new social, political and artistic capacities of the participants* that Ashtar Theatre seeks to enable" (116). These concerns, in this context, relate to the meaning of mobility and border crossings in, supposedly, one's homeland and more specifically the question of patronage with regards to how she perceives herself as a funded researcher on the Palestinian West Bank; a theme which she discusses within the political context in Part I. Flade therefore explores the relevance of play-back, forum theatre and social circus in their continued vision and mission to effectuate economic, social, political and cultural changes in undermined and less-privileged Palestinian life in the West Bank that is constantly menaced by Israeli eviction, resettlement policies, occupation and violence. This explains why she considers her three case studies "as a tool for mobilising national and international solidarities" (22). In doing so, the author highlights the engagement not only of the major players in the artistic space, but also donor agencies' endorsement; the latter being a contested subject

in contemporary debates on applied theatre.

Flade's non-conventional and experimental approach in the book explores the contradictions of peace and war, together with multi-layered meanings derived from the implementation of devised art in a conflict zone. Further, she captures and reflects on the different emotions, feelings, and perception of individuals involved in the productions that she examines in the book. The different encounters presented in her book also permit her interviewees to comment on the method, process, aesthetics, and adaptability of, specifically playback theatre, to suit the social and political context of performance. Kristin Flade combines the notion of vision and practice to investigate topical issues that applied theatre has been grappling with for decades in marginalised communities. In my view, her approach hinges on a postcolonial approach as her research explores not only the notion of binary opposition, but also how it plays out realistically in the context of redesigned and forced borders, border crossings, resistance, forced relocation, oppression, home, and belonging. These nominations are authentic to her study as she unmasks despicable and cramped living conditions in the different settlements and refugee camps on the West Bank and the Jordan valley. Her book, indeed, informs readers, teachers and students of theatre and performance of the tangible purpose of applied theatre which has been moved beyond limiting academic confines.