

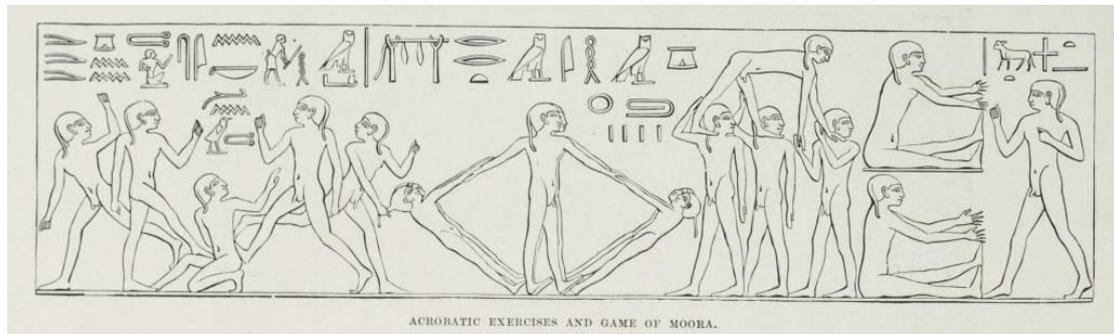
what does contemporary circus look like in Palestine?

By Noor Abo Alrob

What is contemporary circus and what does contemporary circus in Palestine actually look like? When did it start? What do Palestinian circus artists crave for? These questions and much more have been under discussion for the past 10 years in Palestine. To answer these questions, we must first look back and go through circus evolution, reaching the contemporary circus in Palestine today.

According to A.H. Saxon (2019) In an earlier article, about circus history:

Acrobatics, balancing acts and juggling are probably as old as human kind itself. With records of such acts being performed in Egypt as early as 2500 BCE. The Greeks practiced rope dancing, early African civilizations engaged in *siricasi* (a combination of folkloric dance and acrobatics), and the ancient Chinese juggled and performed acrobatics acts for members of the imperial court. Clowns have existed in nearly every period and civilization both as characters in farces and as individual performers.



Weidenbach. "Acrobatic Exercises and Game of Morra."

The origins of the circus that we know today were in England, and it's the modern circus (traditional/classical). The circus has seen many evolutions from the modern circus starting point. here are the 3 generations of circus evolution: modern circus, new circus, and contemporary circus.

Modern circus (traditional/classical circus), is the first generation of the circus we know today, and it came into being in England in 1768. And Philip Astley is

considered the creator of the modern circus. Modern circus is mostly in a ring, under a tent, with several unrelated acts with focus on high-skilled performers, clowns, and animals, which are often presented by a ring master. According to Katharine Kavanagh (2017), “The classical circus as we now know it – in a ring, under canvas, with multiple unconnected acts.” Circus at that time was pure entertainment art, and it has several characteristics, such as: parades, equestrian acts, acts of skills, circus families, wild animal acts, and clowns.

The second generation of circus evolution is the **New Circus**, or **Cirque Nouveau**. The beginning of the new circus movement was in France, arise from the political unrest in 1968, breaking away from the modern circus in different ways: animals were banished from the shows and the attention in new circus was focused on the human body. circus shows started to have a narrative or symbolic meaning with artistic expression. New circus began to connect with other art forms, including contemporary dance, radical theater, and all performance arts where the human body is central. The most famous circus company which represents the new circus is Cirque Du Soleil, for its shows that contain separate acts tied together with a theatrical theme.

Contemporary circus shares with the new circus the centrality of the human body, and animals were banished as well. So, what defines contemporary circus? And when did it start? Many circus researchers concur that the beginning of the contemporary circus started with the graduation show *Le Cri Du Cameleon* of CNAC (center national des arts du cirque) in the 1990's in France. the show combined elements of theater, dance and circus. The Contemporary circus is connected to contemporary dance and postmodern theater and all kind of performance arts. it's not easy to find an inclusive definition of contemporary circus since it's a big umbrella and the styles of shows that goes under it are really different; Some shows are thematic, others are focused on creating moods and feelings without main general theme necessarily, some are based on the characters and communication through gestures, and others are based on the movement. these elements created new categories such as: circus theater and circus dance. the mix of these elements created a wide space for different opinions for categorizing circus shows, and people see and perceive it differently. Some of the contemporary circus companies are Cie XY, CIRCA, and the 7 Fingers.

Tracking circus history in Palestine is quite hard. There are no resources or archive available that addressed circus between the 16th and the 20th century. One of the main reasons for lacking resources in many fields and the circus is one them, is the instability of the political situation in Palestine, and the movement of the Palestinian population internally and externally due to the ottoman empire control over Palestine during the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th century until 1917, then the British colonialism (1920 – 1948) and lastly, the Israeli occupation of Palestine (1948 – today). Most of the performances that were recorded in the 20th century were sport entertainment shows performed by athletes. Gymnastics and acrobatic existed in different Palestinian cities, and sport shows existed in many celebrations and occasions.



Gymnastics show in Berzeit (1950 – 1958)

This photo was taken in Berzeit, Ramallah in the building of the Palestinian circus school today, during a performance that was conducted by the sport college in the town. So, all the records for circus arts in Palestine were taken in the 21th century. many initiatives were born between 2000 and 2020 to establish circus schools, companies, groups, circus clubs, and training centers. many of them took the circus arts as an entertainment art, while the others focused on circus education using social

circus methods to deliver circus arts for children and youth, by using circus skills as a tool to achieve social values.

Contemporary circus in Palestine is new as it is worldwide. Many Palestinian circus artists concur that the starting point of the contemporary circus in Palestine is the circus show *circus behind the wall* by the Palestinian circus school. it is its first circus show that was produced in 2007 directed by Shadi Zmorrod. the show combined elements of drama and dance beside the circus skills. All these elements were applied to support the main aspect of the show which is the **theme** of the show. Here is part of the synopsis of the show written on the website of the Palestinian circus school “Circus behind the Wall is a testimony of what the real life of Palestinians is: being separated from their families and beloved ones, their land and water by the Wall.” The show came as a response to that time when the Israeli apartheid wall was built around the west-bank in the occupied Palestine. The show was depending on its story as a main aspect, and it contained all the needed elements to deliver the message in most effective way.



The Palestinian Circus School. (2008) “circus behind the wall”

Here is another example of a contemporary circus show *SARAB*, also by the Palestinian circus school, produced in 2018 directed by Paul Evans. SARAB is a

theatrical circus show, that shares the plight of refugees worldwide. Here is the synopsis of the show:

We were forced, and had no other options. Pushed on a track with an uncertain end, our destiny is unpredictable. We're competing to arrive at the unknown. We all have our dreams and wishes and we ambush to achieve them. Our journey is directed towards an illusion that can't be described as any more than a mirage. Finally, we arrive. But, have we arrived at our goal? What is our aim? After floating earth and oceans and narrowly passing obstacles and checkpoints we arrive to what we did not expect, we arrive at the mirage which doesn't seem to be like the one we've pictured in our soul's imagination. So after all, it really was nothing but a mirage.



The Palestinian Circus School. (2018) "SARAB"

The show combined theater, dance, and singing beside the circus skills to create a contemporary circus show that can address political and humanitarian issue. the brilliant mix of these elements is what gave the show the possibility to tour around the world.

Contemporary circus in Palestine tend to raise difficult questions and convey serious messages. it is influenced by the history of Palestine as a country under occupation, and by social and political issues in the present time. that's why most of the circus shows in Palestine hold political or social topics. Palestinian circus artists and companies tend to use the circus skills as a tool to communicate and share their ideas with the audience, while others tend to do circus for the sake of art.

We are living in the contemporary circus time right now, and we, Palestinian circus artists /companies /circus schools /researchers... etc. are part of developing the definition of the contemporary circus with its new styles, categories, and methods.

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