

The art of finding peace

Local woman's project looks to bring Israelis, Palestinians together

By RICHIE DAVIS
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The play, with Israeli and Palestinian actors brought together to act out a dramatized resolution of their real-world conflicts, broke into an all-too-real struggle over their lines.

It was one of the art-imitates-life lessons Greenfield choreographer and dance teacher Jodi Falk discovered during a two-month Israeli visit to find "co-existence arts" — ways of bringing together two side-by-side societies that have been at each other's throats.

Falk, who will talk about her project at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Greenfield's Temple Israel, directs the dance program at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter

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Jodi Falk
On her project in Israel

School in South Hadley.

A Greenfield resident for about six years, she's also an adjunct faculty member at the University of Hartford's Hart School and Lesley University.

It's a "comfortable place," she admits. But she wondered, "Is art as important to life as I'm always telling everybody it is?" Are peo-

ple using the arts to make a difference in Israel, she wondered, and is it working?

After about six months of research, Falk toured Israel in January and February with a grant from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, exploring programs throughout the country and even in a West Bank Palestinian refugee camp.

Starting with a somewhat biased view about a hard-line Israeli stance and oppressed Palestinians, Falk learned from Orthodox Jewish women recently displaced from Gaza, to whom she was teaching dance at Orot College about 20 miles from Tel Aviv.

"I got to hear more of the religious Jewish side that Israel is their country, though Arabs are welcome..."

"It's a highly, highly complex situation, and I've come back with a more nuanced vision of how complex and interrelated it is," she said. "Some of most religious people are some of the peacemakers, and some of the most right-wing people want to co-exist more. There are so many variations..."

The 42-year-old American, who had last visited Israel briefly when she was 10, sought out projects that were hidden but showed a

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desire by publicly and privately funded groups to bridge the divide.

She found a photography project in which Arab and Jewish teens visited each other's homes to take photos and witness each other's worlds.

There was a Jerusalem effort, with teens working together to produce a film over a year.

And there was a program at the Experimental School in Jerusalem that brought Arab and Jewish boys and girls together to learn hip-hop, modern dance, belly dance and the Brazilian martial art form, copoeira. Hip-hop and copoeira were especially popular, Falk said, because they were neutral territory. And she watched Arab children, who had been taught copoeira by Brazilian instructors then teach it to Ethiopian Jews.

Theater of life

One of two intercultural adult projects Falk found was a play, "By the Well of Sarah and Hagar," written by a Palestinian and Jewish woman and performed by women from the two religious communities who are reaching out to one another. The women are also planning a "sulha" (forgiveness) event modeled on an bi-cultural men's summer festival that features singing, dancing and Frisbee. The women's version, she said, will focus more on women telling their stories and healing.

The other adult effort was a play performed by the organization "Peace Child Israel," which also brings mixed groups of teens together to produce plays around the country. But this was an adult play: "Six Actors in Search of a Plot."

The commissioned work was done in Hebrew and Arabic as stories about the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, such as one about characters showing one another the key to their grandfather's home in Palestine, in Europe, as a way of each group saying, "I've been displaced, victimized, persecuted ... and if we're going to continuing clobbering each other with history, we're not going to get anywhere. We need to forget history and move on."

The actors, though, didn't agree. Arguing that the other's story was given more weight, the production reached an impasse.

Billy Yalowitz, a Temple University director and choreographer, was called in to help rework the production.

He expanded one of playwright Muhamed Thaher's elements, a birth, by introducing two midwives to narrate about "twin transfusion syndrome," in which twins in utero who share one placenta with two amniotic sacs. One fetus gets more blood and thrives, as the other withers. Yet both die — the blood-rich fetus from a heart attack.

"It's an interesting metaphor about the country, about the birth of this nation," said Falk, who interviewed and videotaped Yalowitz about the production. Treatment involves either opening a flow between the sacs so there's more blood flow, or else building a wall between the two, she said.

"It's so compelling an image," she said, pointing to the wall being now built between Israel and Palestine, and Jews leaving occupied parts of the country.

Yalowitz also had actors learn fundamental birth movements and incorporated those into the play.

Concentrating actors on body-centered movements rather than cerebral arguments about history, she said, "made them change

a little bit, to get outside of real time. After that, there was kinder speech in the rehearsal process."

Many of the "dialogue groups" that have worked to bring Jews and Arabs have ended since the second Intifada in 2000, Falk said.

"Words sometimes get in the way," she said. "You can speak the same truth over and over and get nowhere. What can arts groups do differently?"

What the artists told her repeatedly is that simply bringing people from the different cultures to create and explore each other's worlds helps humanize them in each other's eyes.

"If there are arguments, they're about what camera angles to use, instead of about another bombing in Tel Aviv," said Falk, who plans to return later this year to explore ways of creating a curriculum to weave arts and conflict resolution. She'll study creation of a center to study and foster "co-existence art" programs.

Falk also traveled to South Africa in 2004 to choreograph a dance work that brought together disabled and able-bodied dancers, both black and Afrikaner.

"Wherever I've gone, I seek out other artists, and they're in the trenches, either trying to confront society, heal it, or both," she said. "It's not necessarily the first thing politicians think of when there's an area of conflict: 'Bring in an artist.'"

Falk added, "I'm not saying that's going to be the answer, but it's a natural part," especially in non-western societies where dance, theater, storytelling and music are more integrated in the culture.

"It's a whole, complex effect that also includes the arts."

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