

share many characteristics with the Palestinian Arab community in Israel, Bedouin have a distinct history of a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle throughout large areas of the modern Middle East, and some historians date Bedouin presence in the Negev back 7,000 years, when the Bedouin roamed back and forth between the Sinai and Negev. In this report we have adopted the short term “Bedouin” when referring to the Palestinian Arab Bedouin population of the Negev (p. 9).

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Bedouins: A theatrical project at Tel Aviv University (Nola Chelton, director, 2008)

During January–April 2008, the theater department of Tel Aviv University staged a documentary show, *Bedouins*, that presented the lives of the Bedouins who resided in unrecognized villages in the Negev, the southern part of Israel. It was the final project of the class of the community theater program, and the show was, therefore, more than an ordinary theatrical event. The preliminary research, the rehearsal process, the public conference that preceded the premiere and the photographs that were exhibited at the university hall during the run of the show turned the project into a social and political event as well.

The person responsible for launching this complex event was Nola Chelton, an American-born theater director and drama teacher with a radical agenda, who initiated the tradition of documentary theater in Israel with shows such as *Coexistence* (1970), on the Israeli-Palestinians of the north of Israel; *The Coming Days* (1971), on people who lived in a home for the aged; and *Bicycles for a Year* (1979), on the North-African born, Jewish inhabitants of the under-developed town Kiriath Shmona. Chelton’s method usually consists of forming an ensemble of actors who conduct interviews among the members of the community that is the subject of the show; then, with the help of a professional playwright, they create together a theatrical event during a long period of rehearsals. The process of working on *Bedouins* was similar.

The gathering of material for the show began in fall 2006, when the students of Chelton’s class went to the Negev to collect information and conduct interviews with Bedouins who lived in unrecognized villages. The research and interviews were guided by members of three NGOs whose aim was to change the status and living conditions of the Bedouin population: Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, the Regional Council of the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev and Physicians for Human Rights. For several months, the students made themselves familiar with the harsh conditions of the residents of the unrecognized villages, who lived without any

infrastructure, such as paved roads, electricity, running water and sewage, being “transparent citizens” in the eyes of the state. They also gathered personal and familial life histories that illustrated the general themes of hardship and discrimination. Turning the raw material into a dramatic text was first the task of playwright Roi Reshkes, and then of Chelton and the students during summer 2007, continuing also during the rehearsal period of fall 2007 and winter 2008.

On the day of the premiere, January 10, 2008, the Department of Theater organized a conference on the subject of the unrecognized villages, in which academics and activists took part. Speakers included Dr. Thabet Abu-Ras, a member of the Department of Geography and Environmental Development of Ben Gurion University, who described the history of the expropriation of Bedouin lands by the State of Israel; Dr. Tobi Fenster, a member of the Department of Geography and Human Environment of Tel Aviv University and of the Bimkom association (Planners for Planning Rights), who presented new approaches to the planning of Bedouin villages; advocate Rawia Abu-Rabia, who analyzed the complex social status of Bedouin women; and Nuri El-Uquebi, a member of the Association for the Defense of Bedouin Rights in the Negev, who told about his recurrent attempts to re-settle in the region of El-Arquib, north of Beer Sheva, from which his tribe was expelled in the early 1950s. After the conference, a photo exhibition of the villagers and their environment, taken by the students during their interviews, was inaugurated in the entrance hall of the theater department.

Nuri El-Uquebi was also one of the “stars” of the show that opened that evening on the campus of Tel Aviv University. The show was staged in the tradition of the “epic theater” of Berthold Brecht, without an attempt to create “authentic” Bedouin characters (all the actors were Jewish) and through an episodic structure that included songs, monologues, dialogues and excerpts from documentary films on the lives of the Bedouins, such as *Unrecognized* by Uri Kleiner and *Sawawin* by Yael Kipper-Zaretsky. The scenes demonstrated the plight of the residents of the unrecognized villages, seen through the eyes of various personages: a father who wants to bury his son, who died as a soldier in the Israeli army, in the old cemetery of his tribe, which presently belongs to a kibbutz, and is prevented from doing so by an officer; an adolescent girl who studies hard at high school in order to be able to attend medical school, after watching the death of her sick father due to the lack of a clinic in their village; a soldier who vainly tries to enlist the help of his Jewish army friends in order to prevent the demolition of his house. The film excerpts presented monologues of several Bedouins, among them El-Uquebi, who was shown in the tent that he built on the land of his tribe, which had been demolished numerous times by the police. Contrary to the current image of Bedouins in the mainstream Israeli media, according to which residents of these villages are criminals who “grabbed” the land upon which they settle, the picture that emerges from the show is that of peaceful, law-abiding people who would like to live in harmony with the Jewish majority, yet are harassed and discriminated against by the state.

The show was received with enthusiasm by the audience, which appreciated the simple and direct approach of the actors, and was moved by the special blend of realistic detail and lyricism, manifested by the film excerpts and the songs. Subsequent performances took place on the campus of Tel Aviv University and in Tzavta, a fringe theater in Tel Aviv, but one of them took the group outside the urban milieu. To celebrate the second anniversary of El-Uquebi's attempts to return to his tribe's territory, a special performance, organized by the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, took place on April 14, 2008, in the very emplacement of his tent. It was a poignant event, with the double presence of Nuri and his tent—both in “real life” and on screen—and with a large Bedouin audience, which encountered its reflection in the show of a Jewish student group.

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