

## Rehearsing Revolution : How Live Action Role Playing Contributes to the Palestinian Resistance Movement

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*Since its introduction to Palestine in 2011, LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) has been subverted and adapted by local groups in order to create authentic Palestinian forms of LARP. This article explores how LARP can be used as a tool of resistance, in ways similar to that of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre or 'Izz al-Din al-Madani's recreation of Istirad through the art of drama. It also explores how fantastical elements and imagination can contribute to the processing of real world issues, such as occupation, through pre-existing and adapted forms of storytelling. It argues that LARP, in its ambition to move across and beyond borders in a fictive reality, can be larger than a game, affecting both micro- and macro-levels of building and maintaining Palestinian society. Unlike previous work, this article argues that LARP's true potential is not as a didactic tool, or as a tool for conflict resolution, but as a manifestation of resistance in its most subversive form.*

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‘... this role has made me feel the pain and desperation a human being faces under occupation. It was not easy for me to accept that life with occupation would be routine in my life forever, but the game also woke a feeling of optimism and hope. Perhaps nothing is forever after all.’<sup>1</sup>

In 2011, the Peace and Freedom Youth Forum (PFF), a Palestinian organisation aimed at community-building based in Ramallah, introduced the concept of LARP (Live Action Role Playing) to Palestine. LARP is a physical form of roleplaying, where the participants take on characters and act out their actions in mixture of playing and acting. Four years ago, the PFF were invited to a LARP workshop in Norway, and now they

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinian Live Action Role Player, Irshaid, 2015

are an experienced group- using LARP in various ways to address social issues in the community and to create a communal historical identity. This essay aims to introduce the concept of LARP and its development and narrative in Palestine. It will focus on LARP as an art form and explore its potential to function as a tool for resistance. LARP is similar to theatre practices which have been used to empower people, and resist their oppressors. Although much theatre aspires to deal with political issues today, it is often performed in venues too inaccessible and expensive for anyone outside of the establishment to enjoy. LARP offers a completely different approach to theatre, because the distinction between actors and spectators dissolves.

There is an empowering mechanism which is set into motion when a participant physically acts out a scenario – especially if this scenario is relatable to their reality, and addresses structures of oppression. By examining the history of LARP, we can see how it has evolved from physical re-enactments of the classical American roleplaying game (RPG), ‘Dungeons and Dragons’, to a tool which is used to address social issues or imagine utopias. LARP aspires to move across and beyond borders of fictive reality. It can open a space for communities to find a shared history, through their own ideas of history through fantasy themes.

Previous studies of LARP in Palestine have focused on how LARP can function as a tool for western models of conflict resolution, or as a didactic tool. However, I argue that it is more interesting to explore LARP’s similarities to other performance arts which have been crucial in resistance movements or social liberation, such as Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre and ‘Izz al-Din al-Madani’s recreation of the *Istirad* and performances of memories from the Tahrir Square demonstrations in Egypt. These practices, born and developed in the Global South in reaction to various oppressors, have more in common with Palestinian larpers than with foreign NGO-lead initiatives. Although the LARPing of the PFF in Palestine came out of co-operation with a Norwegian LARP group, LARP is in its truest form similar to already existing theatre and storytelling methods in Palestine. This has enabled a truly Palestinian form of LARP to emerge. This essay will study two LARPs in detail, both set in Palestine. Through this comparison, we will see the importance of keeping foreign NGOs out of this creative process in order to create a Palestinian form of LARP.

The study of LARP is quite new to the academic sphere. Indeed, LARP first appeared in academic journals in the early 2000s. Within the LARPing community, there are publications such as the *Knutepunkt*, a Scandinavian publication with ties to an annual LARP convention with the same name. Existing literature is almost exclusively produced by Western larpers and academics who are also larpers, whether it is about LARPing in the West or in the Global South. This is also the case for the previous studies of LARP in Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries, and it is imperative to keep this in mind when reading their material. A non-native to Palestine will never fully grasp the experiences and reality of life under occupation. In order to leave room for the narratives of the Palestinian larpers to frame the story, it is important to be aware that much of the existing material is written by members of the community that exported LARP to Palestine. Hence, their observations and analysis will be coloured by their experience. This leaves us with a somewhat biased literature. The practice of LARP

overlaps definitions and categories, and it can be approached from different angles. Some have approached it from the field of ludology, the study of games, or as a didactic tool, which can be used in educational settings as well as a tool for conflict resolution. This article approaches LARP as an art form, with strong similarities to traditional theatre and drama. It therefore refers to other examples of how drama has been used in community-building and resistance on a micro-level. In this article, sessions of LARP are referred to as they are within the LARP community: 'larping'. The participants ofLARPs are referred to as 'larpers'.

### **LARP and art in the world: a rehearsal of revolution**

*'LARPs are ephemeral. They cease to exist the moment they become complete. They can only be perceived as wholes once they have already vanished.'*<sup>2</sup>

Some elements of LARP can be found in theatre practices across different historical and geographical contexts. At the core of LARP is the idea of play, like children do. In fact, the Palestinian larpers describe LARPing to newcomers as '*beit byut*', which has the same meaning as 'playing house' in English. When Nordic LARP is used today to address social issues or lived experiences in an imaginative setting, it reminds us how drama has become a tool of resistance and transformation. Using drama to address social struggles and experiences has a transformative effect on the group and the individual who seek to make changes in the community. Participation, 'joining the scene' and physically taking on a character are all crucial features of Forum Theatre. This experience does not only allow the player to embody and experience the character, but it is also an opportunity for the player to physically and mentally experience this action. Forum Theatre has often been used to address issues of social injustices, when experiences of oppression are re-enacted. LARP can also provide a safe space for a player to try and act out similar situations, and from this, a form of resistance can rise.

Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal was highly political<sup>3</sup> in his deliberate choice to move beyond didactic political theatre to create a transitive theatre, where both sides of the stage learned from each other.<sup>4</sup> As most great inventors in the aesthetics have in some way aspired to change society, the aim for many theatre practitioners has been to change the nature of drama through affecting and challenging the audience.

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<sup>2</sup> Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola 'Nordic LARP', accessed April 23, 2015, <https://nordicLARP.wordpress.com/> (2010).

<sup>3</sup> There is a wide debate on whether Boal's methods were too focused on the individual to be as Marxist as he claimed they were; however most of this critique lies in the focus on the individual in his theories. Although the same could be argued about LARP, it is in my opinion more interesting to focus on the group which go through a LARP together and how their shared experience transforms.

<sup>4</sup> Sheelagh, Strawbridge, 'Some thoughts on connections between the Political and Therapeutic in the work of Fox and Boal', *Dramatherapy*, 22(2) (2000) 8–12.

Bertolt Brecht revolutionised western drama in the 1930s, by tearing down ‘the wall’ between the audience and the actors, often referred to as ‘the fourth wall’, through a process of distancing, called the *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>5</sup> It could be argued that LARP would have been Brecht’s nightmare, with the fourth wall being torn down, but not by distancing actors, audience and director but by merging them and developing the game/play/piece together. Participants view their own characters through an emotional tie they have constructed, and perceive their fellow characters through the eyes of their characters. However, they are never thrown into a LARP with no preparation. They have been given their characters prior to the LARP and have therefore had time to form a balanced, rational opinion about their character. Stenros argues that LARP has a built-in *verfremdungs-effect*, because the player will flicker between modes when trying to stay in character.<sup>6</sup> The player can then act from how they perceive their character, without necessarily sympathising with it. Indeed, we could rather argue that LARP’s complete removal of the binary idea of audience versus actors implies the complete removal of the fourth wall, which is what Brecht was ultimately seeking.

For artists in countries who have suffered under colonialism and imperialism, participating in theatre and the arts also means developing arts which are rooted in the cultural heritage of the community, all the while incorporating new and radical ideas. This requires space, freedom and experimentation. For example, Tunisian director ‘Izz al-Din al-Madani, born in 1938, tried to create a truly Arab theatre by recreating *Istirad*, a traditional technique of digression, through playing on several stages at the same time, thus chopping up the story.<sup>7</sup> This offered a space in which to create, and identify with, the communal Arab heritage and history. Nordic LARP has come out of practicing LARPs based on a communal Western idea of a shared history with fantastical themes. As we will see in the following case studies, Palestinian larpers have used LARP to build their own historical fantasy narrative based on their idea of shared history. This becomes a subversive act of resistance in the same way as al-Madani’s avant-garde theatre was, because it is the aim of every colonizer, imperialist or oppressor to delete the culture and heritage of the existing population. Therefore, LARPs with fantastical and mythical characteristics in a post-colonial setting harbour a different dynamic than those in, for example, Scandinavia.

In her collection of essays *Doomed to Hope* about the surge of creative

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<sup>5</sup> The German 20<sup>th</sup> century play writer and director sought to revolutionize drama by profoundly changing the expectations of the audience and developed what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt*. This method is meant to distance the audience from the actors and the play, in order to assess the play rationally and not get draped in emotions (Brecht; 1927 in ed. Willett; 1964).

<sup>6</sup> Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola ‘Nordic LARP’ - <https://nordicLARP.wordpress.com/> (2010) accessed April 23, 2015, 330.

<sup>7</sup> Ewa Machut-Mendecka. ‘The Living Stones of Tunisia (‘Izz Al-Din Al-Madani and the Revival Theatre)’, *Oriente Moderno*, Vol 16 (77) (1997) 125–132.

practices in the Middle East during and after 2011, Dalia Basiouny describes how the play *Tahrir Stories* told the real stories and experiences of both the actors and audience just days or weeks after they had happened.<sup>8</sup> The play was continuously disrupted by the ongoing reality - by new demonstrations erupting and accessibility to the city being compromised. Performing individual experiences together, can lead to a shared experience and, in turn, a shared yet diverse narrative of events. The late director of the Freedom Theatre in Jenin on the West Bank, Juliano Mer Khamisof, said that one of the reasons for the establishment of the theatre was that the Palestinian Youth had 'lost their language'.<sup>9</sup> Rania Jawad has argued that practicing theatre is about encouraging hope and 'rearranging reality'<sup>10</sup> – a term we could apply to the practice of LARP. The re-enactment of current and ongoing events provides an opportunity for the audience and actors to interact with and address the issues around them. This is especially important in the context of oppressive regimes where few spaces for creative interaction like this are accessible.

From what we know, LARP first took place in Palestine, through the introduction from Norwegian larpers in 2011. At the same time, a movement of resistance were spreading across the Middle East. Palestinian larpers have since spread LARP to neighbouring countries, with new groups forming in Turkey, Lebanon and Syria.<sup>11</sup>

### **LARP in Palestine, between checkpoints and weddings**

As mentioned before, the LARP community in Palestine is run by a youth organisation based in Ramallah named The Peace and Freedom Youth Forum (the PFF). They understand their work to be 'based on the concept that voluntary work has to be not only constructive, but also creative and fun; a joint contribution to the society as well as one-self'.<sup>12</sup> They have been organising LARPs as a way of building and strengthening the community since 2011. The organisers, who are between twenty and twenty five years

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<sup>8</sup> Dalia Basiouny in ed. Eyad Houssami (ed.) *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*. (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Rania Jawad in Eyad Houssami, E. (ed.) *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Clara Biermann and K. Leipoldt, 'Make LARP Not War' in *Birth of LARP in the Arab World* ed. A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah, ( Rollespilsakademiet, København 2015). I will not elaborate on the practice of LARP in Israel for this essay, but it can be mentioned that it has existed there for a few years. It seems to be mainly focused on fantasy LARPs and medieval LARPs inspired by European historical accounts.

<sup>12</sup> The Peace and Freedom Youth Movement Beit Byout, 'Who are we?', accessed March 29, 2015, <http://beit-byout.blogspot.no/p/who-arewe.html> (2013).



old, believe that LARP can bring on a change for both the individual and the group, then bring to the community to which they belong.<sup>13</sup> While one does not need an official membership to participate in LARPs, the PFF estimates that they have about 30-50 active larpers, and by the beginning of 2014, 150 Palestinians had participated in a LARP.<sup>14</sup> Though based in Ramallah, the PFF have organised workshops all over the West Bank.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the group has arranged LARPs on a wide range of topics, from LARPs about issues such as social justice, capitalism, honour killings and life under occupation as well as completely fictional 'for fun' LARPs about topics such as 'the perfect holiday' or a wedding. However, in many ways, the 'for fun' LARPs are also engrained in the context of life under occupation which. According to some of the larpers whom Tindra Englund interviewed for her Master's Thesis 'Live Action Role Play (LARP) in a Context of Conflict' (2014), young people in Palestine tend to blame all of their problems on the Israeli occupation. The interviewed larpers said that LARP can offer an opportunity to tackle this kind of reasoning and to become an engaged and active member of society. Indeed, many of the larpers that Englund interviewed identified one of the main benefits from LARPing as a possibility to escape from an oppressive and limiting reality where many of them feel trapped and stuck in Ramallah. In LARP, young Palestinians have the possibility to travel and explore without physically leaving the West Bank. In its own way, this is a subversive act – refusing the physical restraints imposed by the occupying forces in moving across and beyond borders in a fictive reality.

LARPing was introduced to the PFF in February 2011 by the Norwegian organisation *Fantasiforbundet*, a rather young organisation aimed at serious and experienced larpers in Norway.<sup>16</sup> They have previously been involved in international LARP projects with countries such as Belarus. In 2011, they invited a few members from the PFF to participate in a Norwegian LARP. The Palestinian participants enjoyed the game and eagerly brought LARP back to Ramallah, where they went on to arrange smaller LARPs for Palestinians. Eventually, this led to a bigger LARP called '*Til Death Do Us Apart*' about a wedding between a Palestinian and a Norwegian, to which they invited Scandinavian larpers. The topic of the LARP - a wedding - made the dual reality of their existence more obvious than ever, wrote Palestinian LARPer Fatima Abdul Karim in *Knutepunkt* 2013, because living under occupation means 'a threat of existence, even

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<sup>13</sup> A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab World* (Rollespilsakademiet, København 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Englund, T. Master Thesis: Live action role play (LARP) in a context of conflict: An ethnographic study of LARP in Ramallah, Malmo University, Sweden (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Palestine LARP, Facebook Page, (2015) accessed April 14, 2015, from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/401258506553994>.

<sup>16</sup> A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab World* (Rollespilsakademiet, København 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Knutepunkt 'Do LARP – Documentary Writings from KP2011', (Knutepunkt, Denmark, 2011).

though we constantly fall in love and hold weddings.’<sup>17</sup> This bigger event was followed by a Palestinian LARP festival in 2013 called *Beit Byout*. Outside of these large international events, the PFF has continued to arrange smaller LARPs and workshops around the West Bank. They follow the vocabulary of Nordic LARP and assign Game Masters’ for each game, who lead the games, and Game Designers, who plan and write them. Since no opinions ‘out of character’ should be expressed during the LARP, the LARPs arranged by the PFF are usually followed by a debriefing sessions in order for the participants to have a chance to share and discuss their experiences – which is done by the Game Master(s).

The participants’ experiences gained while arranging LARPs with the PFF, and participating in their LARPs in or outside of the West Bank, have been documented and reflected on in the Scandinavian LARP magazine ‘*Knutepunkt*’.<sup>18</sup> Many of the Scandinavian larpers have been profoundly affected by the LARP put on by the Palestinian group. For example, Juhana Pettersson, a Finnish larper, describes his experience of LARPing in the West Bank as emotionally challenging:

‘The whole trip was very emotionally affecting, and untangling the emotions that arise from fictional contexts from those springing out of real events was not easy.’<sup>19</sup>

Odrun Misje, one of the other Scandinavian participants at the same LARP, writes that the strong emotional experience deepened her understanding for and solidarity with the Palestinians:

‘I could experience how the conflict is dividing the Palestinian population, through LARP. I could live the life of one that believed in peace, the peace process and the Oslo treaty in 1993, but then lost faith. And I could experience life in captivity - how it hurts to be blindfolded and handcuffed.’<sup>20</sup>

## Case studies

This article looks at two Palestinian LARPs in detail. They differ from each other in style and they both characterise two different styles of LARPs practiced by the PFF. The first is called ‘The Village LARP’ and is what I will refer to as a *single issue LARP*. It is practiced during a shorter period of time and focuses on addressing one main issue. The second one is called ‘The Jericho LARP’ and is what I describe as a *Fantasy LARP*. Although

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<sup>18</sup> E.g. Juhana Pettersson, ‘The Horse as a Revelation’ in ed. K. Jacobsen Meland & K. Øverlie Svela *Exploring Borders (Knutepunkt, Fantasiforbundet, Oslo, 2013)*, 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Odrun Misje ‘Beit Byout – a year after’, in A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab* (Rollespilsakademiet, København, 2015).

all LARPs are Fantasy LARPs, as all actions spur from the participants' imaginations, a *Fantasy LARP* is based on a story and situation which exist in an imagined universe. Similar to the Fantasy LARPs described in the first chapter, these might be based on our idea of our historical past or present, but often have magical features and are not realistic LARPs.

### ***The Village LARP***

Many of the LARPs arranged by the PFF are short, focusing on a single issue or dilemma. They are often limited in time because the games have a purpose, either to introduce LARP for beginners or to bring a social issue to attention at a workshop or meeting. The participants in these games vary from beginners to experienced larpers, and they may take from two hours to an afternoon to complete. The LARP al-Qarya Lu'ba (henceforth: the Village Larp) was designed by members of the PFF. The storyline revolves around three families in a village and the differences and dilemmas between them. The LARP is set 90 years ago, but no further details of the physical location or features are given; the abstract nature of the place allows the LARP to focus on the social dynamics described. Situating the LARP in a bygone era, in a time before the Nakba and the occupation, also distances it from the reality of today. There are many reasons for such a decision. One could be that the reality of the occupation is so dominant that in order to discuss issues regarding the Palestinian community without focusing on the occupation, the LARP has to be set in a time before the occupation. The game plan for the Village LARP gives a background story to the LARP, describing how the game will be formed, what preparations are needed and three scenes which will take place during this LARP. The game plan describes three families living in the village. There are disputes between the families rooting in on one of the families buying land from one of the other families to later make money from this land. Before the LARP begins, the participants are divided into groups, told the story of the LARP and pick their roles within the families. The game is then prepared by exercises and games so that the participants can warm up and relax before taking on their character.

The Village LARP has three scenes, each ten minutes long. During each of these time segments, the participants are presented with a scenario or a problem to act out, discuss and finally vote on, three in total. They are then presented with three solutions for each dilemma and, subsequently, require that they send a representative from each family to vote on one of them. This sort of LARP is heavily dependent on several Game Masters, who can both present the storyline and the dilemmas to the participants, but also guide them through what actions need to be taken in order for the game to play out. The dilemmas presented stem from the richer family trying to use the land and resources to maximise their profit on the expense of the other families. In the third and final scene the rich family goes bankrupt and have to move in with another family. The final dilemma presented to the players in the final scene is which family should be expelled from the village. Whether or not an option could be expelling no family, or if any participants have suggested this, is not clear from the game plan. The political message of this LARP seems quite clear - capitalism has had negative consequences for the general population of Palestine. In the final dilemma, it also seems that the game



designers are looking for someone to blame - one of the families need to be expelled.

It seems that this kind of LARP is more in the borderland between regular role play used in educational settings and a LARP of its original meaning. With such a strict game plan, in many ways resembling an actual script, not much is left to the personal imagination. Rather than allowing the participant's mind to adopt a character fully and discover its possibilities, the larper is presented with options, which give them not only a limited outcome, but also a limited analysis of their character and the scenario. There is a great distinction to be made between theatre/roleplay/LARP used as an organic and empowering process, and cases when it is used as a didactic tool. The distinction often lies in who the organiser is. For example, if the LARP financed by the participants or by a third party. Irene Fernandez-Ramos, who have studied the use of Playback Theatre on the West Bank, <sup>21</sup> refers to an 'NGO-isation' of cultural production in Palestine. She has questioned whether this dependence on Western donors in an after-Oslo Palestine has affected the efficiency of theatre as a medium for resistance. <sup>22</sup> Indeed, as soon as a third party is involved, financially or not, the motive of the game becomes orchestrated. The theme of the LARP might no longer be organic or aimed at truly addressing the issue, but rather to please donors or gain international approval.

The game plan of the Village LARP could be used both in an NGO lead workshop, and in social groups. It is definitely a guided role play, which to some extent may risk missing out on some of the empowering mechanisms of LARP. Nevertheless, there is an interesting political and ideological impulse in Palestinian LARP. Acting out the inequalities that capitalism have brought to the West Bank, genuine and emotional opinions can be shaped into a social movement. The last dilemma of the Village LARP is focused on accountability, processes which are extremely important in social and resistance movements. Forming an accountability process which fits the community is most ideally done on a grass roots level. This type of LARP could therefore be interpreted as another cornerstone of building a movement and community – independent of their oppressor.

### ***The Jericho LARP***

The LARP '*La tasaluh wa law qil inna fil-sulh hila – innahu al-tha'r*' (henceforth: The Jericho LARP) <sup>23</sup> was a longer LARP, set and played in Jericho in 2013 and again in March 2015. Extensive work was done to prepare this LARP, ranging from building a

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<sup>21</sup> Playback theatre is a form of theatre where the actors improvise plays based on stories from the audience.

<sup>22</sup> Irene Fernández Ramos *Economic Dependence and Resistant Narratives: Alternative Representations of Reality within Contemporary Palestinian Theatre* (SOAS, University of London, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> The original title in Arabic plays on a colloquial proverb (in more formal phrasing), which can be roughly translated as: 'No reconciliation if it comes with a trick, because that is revenge.' I have chosen to refer to the LARP as 'The Jericho LARP' in this essay since that is how the PFF prefers for it to be referenced in English.

background story and characters to collecting physical materials such as clothing and food. The LARP is a historical LARP set in Jericho three thousand years ago, and played out on the same ground. The organisers attempted to create a truly genuine historical setting by also encouraging the players to speak formal Arabic during the whole play.<sup>24</sup> Tell al-Sultan in Jericho, served as a unique setting for a historical LARP. It has been called one of the world's oldest cities since remains of ancient civilisations can still be found within the city. Archaeologists have discovered findings from 23 layers of civilisations on the site. Today, you can walk in the remains of a Neolithic town, with houses and architectural structures of the earliest found fortification system in the world.<sup>25</sup> The ability to organise and create a fantasy world based on actual local history in this kind of setting is a unique opportunity.

The Jericho LARP revolves around a fictional tribe of this time, living in Tell al-Sultan, and a rival tribe. The game plan includes a background story for the LARP, with a description of the (imagined) physical space for the LARP, life of the tribe, religious beliefs, clothes and a scenario, referred to as '*al-lu'ba*' (the game). There are also two character lists, one for each tribe, describing the relationships within the tribe. Almost all characters also have their own character description giving their name, age and role in the tribe (for example 'the mother'). In addition, they describe the character's role in the LARP and their relation to some of the other characters. The background and setting of the tribe is described in the scenario. The leader of the tribe, Sultan, becomes old and sick. The eldest son then starts preparing to take over leadership of the tribe. After the death of Sultan, a meeting is held with a neighbouring tribe to declare the new leader of the tribe. At this meeting, the tutelage of Sultan is presented. He requests his youngest son to take leadership of the tribe since he does not see his oldest son as fit for the position. The oldest son then leaves the tribe, taking some of the tribe members with him, to start a new tribe. The story then jumps twenty years ahead in time and announces that the oldest son returns to his old tribe to reclaim his right to succession. After this the LARP begins; '*wa tabda' al-lu'ba...*'

Unlike in a *single issue LARP*, such as the previously described Village LARP, the *Fantasy LARP* only describes the context of the game. Thus, it is up to the participants to decide the development of the game. The Game Master can now no longer intervene in the actions of the players but merely co-ordinate logistics. Therefore, we do not know exactly what happened in The Jericho LARP, except for what can be retold by the participants themselves. The background story and plot created for the LARP is

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<sup>24</sup> M. Hamouri 'The beauty of spontaneity', in A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab World* ( Rollespilsakademiet, København 2015).

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO, Ancient Jericho: Tell al-Sultan, accessed April 23, 2014, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5704/>.

presumably based on the planners' ideas and assumptions of pre-historical times. Elements of this imagery and themes stems from classical Su'luk<sup>26</sup>, or vagabond, poetry from the Jahiliyya<sup>27</sup> period. In Su'luk poetry the poet has been excluded from his tribe and, as a result, goes on to find another tribe, or to live as a brigand or mercenary in the desert.<sup>28</sup> Although the authenticity of these works has been debated<sup>29</sup> it is rather the impact of this poetry which is significant in this context. The Su'luk poetry represents a part of a shared idea of what 'history' looked like. The planners of the Jericho LARP, and the author of the game plan, are not historians or literary scholars. Rather, we can assume that the inspiration for this game plan is based on shared ideas and perception of history, most likely shaped through teachings at school or stories told within the community.

Examining the Jericho LARP, we can see how the construction of a shared history can contribute to an understanding of our current reality. It is imperative to examine our perception of history when trying to understand what shapes the environment described in fantasy stories situated in a 'historical' setting. In the Western world, the fantasy genre is well-known through the works of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien or popular television programmes like *Game of Thrones*; in Scandinavia, the fantasy genre has also been explored through LARPs. Hence, not only fantastical but also historical elements of this genre are important. The latter contribute to the perception and idea of our history, and can help us make sense of reality today. This subtle revolutionary tendency of LARP in Palestine is an interesting element to analyse; the building of a community, the shaping of a shared memory and a common identity. Fernandez Ramos describes a Playback Theatre performance in Palestine as if an 'invisible needle was knitting a unique collective narrative'.<sup>30</sup> In LARP, the participants are given a similar opportunity. This narrative becomes crucial in the reality of Palestinian lives, where mere existence implies resistance. Some of the larpers which Englund interviewed claimed that in fact every act in occupied Palestine is an act of resistance. Therefore, every expression of art, every LARP, becomes an act of resistance.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Su'luk poetry was present from the Jahiliyya period to the end of the Umayyad regime, and has famous poets such as al-Shanfara and 'Urwah ibn al-Ward associated with it.

<sup>27</sup> The Jahiliyya period refers to the pre-Islamic time in the Arabian Peninsula, which was the time before the revelation of the Qu'ran.

<sup>28</sup> Arazi, A. 'Su 'lūk.' *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Bearman P., Bianquis Th, Bosworth C.E., van Donzel E., Heinrichs W.P. United Kingdom: Brill Online, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Irene Fernández Ramos 'Storytelling, Agency and Community-building through Playback Theatre in Palestine' *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, Vol 7 (Fall 2014), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Tindra Englund, 'Live action role play (LARP) in a context of conflict: An ethnographic study of LARP in Ramallah' (Master Thesis) (Malmo University, Sweden, 2013).

## Micro-Resistance Through Palestinian LARP

*'It ended when my character committed suicide in the middle of the battle field to stop the bloodshed between the brothers, she raised and loved which I think was awesome.'*<sup>32</sup>

*'None of the Palestinian larpers that I interviewed view LARPs as simply entertainment, they all point out different and useful areas of use.'*<sup>33</sup>

In her seminal research on LARP in Palestine, Englund argues that LARP can be used as a 'tool to empower the powerless'.<sup>34</sup> On a base level, the participant-centered nature of LARP makes it democratic. The ability to step into another character enables one to understand things one could never have experienced in one's own life. This approach attempts to move beyond the personal experience of enjoying a LARP, while focusing on didactic terms and purposes. Much of the Scandinavian study of LARP is based on ideas of education and conflict resolution. For example, Englund focuses on what a study of LARP can contribute to the field of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution.<sup>35</sup> She emphasises the individual development through LARP as an important part of the peace-building process, and uses the example of a Palestinian LARP about a dream holiday to illustrate how vital it is to be able to dream about peace even if one cannot imagine it. Englund concludes her thesis with proposing a LARP between Palestinians and Israelis as the next step. Such a suggestion can only come from a lack of proper understanding of the social, historical and political context of Palestine. The research that has been done on LARP in Palestine so far is based on the Nordic LARPing tradition, which lacks a well-grounded knowledge of the Occupation as told by only one or two people the authors came into brief contact with. Without downplaying the importance of personal stories and experiences, it would still have been preferable if the author was not only familiar with LARP when drawing these conclusions, but also the social, economic and political reality of life in the West Bank.

Although many LARPs bring up political issues, or themes of social justice, as Kaisa Kangas has argued in Knudepunkt, 'every LARP is designed from some kind of a political perspective'.<sup>36</sup> – the themes of the Palestinian LARPs are fundamentally different from that of larpers in Scandinavia, a geographical area which has not experienced

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<sup>32</sup> T. Nassar 'The End Makes All The Difference', in A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab* (Rollespilsakademiet, København, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Tindra Englund, 'Live action role play (LARP) in a context of conflict: An ethnographic study of LARP in Ramallah' (Master Thesis) (Malmö University, Sweden, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> K. Kangas 'Nationalism of the oppressed', in A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab* (Rollespilsakademiet, København, 2015).

occupation or conflict since the Second World War. This disparity becomes apparent in situations where Palestinian and Scandinavian larpers have co-operated in LARPs aimed at raising awareness about the conflict abroad, like the Finnish-Palestinian LARP *Halat Hisar* (state of siege). *Halat Hisar* posed the following questions: in what way does it affect Palestinian participants to see their daily reality played out by Scandinavians in a safe space, far away from check points, raids, prisons and settlements? What happens to the assumed empowering mechanism of acting out and dealing with situations of oppression when outsiders are invited and allowed to dominate the game? To combat these issues and to ensure that the Scandinavian participants actually took on their characters and refrained from stereotyping and orientalising Palestinians, the Game Planners for *Halat Hisar* used two methods: extensive preparation studies and a method called Distancing (not to be confused with Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*). Kaisa Kangas, who organized the game with Palestinian larpers in Finland for a Finnish audience, describes both methods in *The Cutting Edge of Nordic LARP*. All of the participants of this LARP were required to take part in rigorous preparations, including extensive reading before the LARP in an attempt to avoid stereotyping and assumptions. The Distancing effect in LARP vocabulary means taking a situation and detaching it from its geographical and cultural characteristics. In the case of *Halat Hisar*, the narrative of Israeli Occupation was detached from Palestine and moved to Finland, where a new history was built to match the Finnish narrative.

Distancing was in a way used in the Jericho LARP, and is used in many fantasy LARPs. The Game Planners of the Jericho LARP used the political potential of the fantasy genre in their game. Both fantasy and science fiction are genres that have been dismissed to the realm of so called 'nerd-culture' and are rarely allowed into neither the cultural or political sphere. This is in spite of the fact that many big fantasy pieces address societal changes and history, and a crucial feature of science fiction genre to address philosophical and political issues. The game can be interpreted as a purely fictional game about a tribe 3,000 years ago. However, Game Planner Sari Abdo explains that they used the story of two tribes fighting over power, despite originating from the same tribe, as an analogy of the Fatah-Hamas conflict.<sup>37</sup> This was a way of addressing Palestinian politics through Distancing. This instance of Distancing is interesting because unlike the one described in *Halat Hisar* by Kangas (2014), the Jericho LARP did not remove the true geographical location of the conflict, but rather the time in which it took place. The situation is therefore still owned by the participants because it draws on their communal idea of their shared history, but is distanced from current reality to the extent that

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<sup>37</sup> S. Abdo 'Lost in Jericho', in A. Anderson, R. Kharroub, H. Levin, M. Rabah (eds.) *Birth of LARP in the Arab* (Rollespilsakademiet, København, 2015).



prejudices and opinions can be left behind.

Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous said that theatre offers a forum in which ‘we can contemplate our “historical and existential” condition together in a communal context.’<sup>38</sup> I would argue that the practice of LARP holds its main potential in building and strengthening the community - through exploring common identities based on a communal history, and providing a space where both past and future events and developments can be processed on an individual and communal level. This is what we can call resistance on a micro-level, and that’s where our main point of reference should begin when studying Palestinian LARP. Merely the fact that Palestinians participate in LARP is a form of resistance, but there is greater potential for this practice to move beyond mere participation. The main goals of LARPing for the PFF are focused on working with gender equality, resisting the physical fragmentation of the Palestinian people and strengthen the local community.

## Conclusion

Palestinian LARP could, at the stage described in this article, offer two opportunities to Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation. The first opportunity is in the empowering process that is enabled through physically acting out stories and events, whether real – such as performances of stories from Tahrir Square in Egypt and Boal’s Forum Theatre in Brazil, or imagined like al-Madani’s Tunisian avant-garde theatre or the Palestinian Jericho LARP. Art is an undeniable part of resistance; it is a way of making sense of the conditions of our lives. LARP could potentially serve as a development of pre-existing methods in the art of resistance. Its base in the collective narrative and complete participation, gives it the potential to touch every single participant of the game. Perhaps this Norwegian import to Palestine, can be absorbed, subverted and developed into a truly Palestinian practice of LARP. Where daily life is a constant struggle against the occupation, LARP can fill a function as a tool of resistance against the oppression.

The other main opportunity is the potential of fantasy and imagination. LARPs – historical, fantastical or ‘for fun’ – offer a playground where fantasy can roam freely and different realities and outcomes can emerge. Didactic LARPs, on the other hand, are more aimed at making the larpers leave with a certain experience and conclusion. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, if the LARP is organised with external funding the political process is not organic, but will rather adapt itself to the political agenda of its donors. Secondly, the didactic LARPs offer a much more limited possibility for the participants to discover and play. The true potential lies in how Fantasy LARP has a

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<sup>38</sup> Rania Jawad in Eyad Houssami, E. (ed.) *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 36.

tendency to create utopias and in this, empowering mechanisms are released through the physical enactment of resistance. If Palestinian LARP does not dare to enable mechanisms of micro-resistance, in fear of the opinions of donors or Scandinavian colleagues, the practice will probably die out or continue existing on a small scale, like it did for many years within the so-called 'nerd' community in Scandinavia. However, if Palestinian LARP dares to be radical, and fantastical, if it dares to allow its imagination to roam freely, challenging existing structures and ideas – the potential is great.

LARP enables us to move across and beyond borders in a fictive reality. It releases empowering mechanism and it allows the community to build an identity and develop the civil society. Palestinian LARP can be bigger than a game because it affects micro- and macro-levels of building and maintaining a Palestinian society - which mere existence is the biggest threat to the occupying force. Like in Mahmoud Darwish's famous poem: loving life is resistance in its most subversive form. Loving the life your oppressor does not want you to have, and building a community which defends and betters this life – LARP is a way of doing both.