

DISPATCHES FROM PALESTINE
DECEMBER 2011
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It is 5.00 in the morning and I am awake, listening to the Mullahs outside my hotel in Ramallah. I am also planning my day's work in a school in the deserts of Jericho, famous to Palestinians and abhorred by the Israelis. It is made out of car tyres covered in mud and serves the Bedouin community. I feel sure that if the Grand Design Team were here they would hail the building as a tour de force, a veritable masterpiece to conservation as well as marvellous example of community in action.

The big question, however, is very much more significant and disturbing. The question 'is the school a building?' is by no means easy here in the Occupied Territories. For Palestinians, any new building erected without permission in the whole region will bring dreadful consequences. We have heard, since my arrival 2 weeks ago, of 5 houses summarily destroyed because the owners cannot prove their ownership as many of the documents are part of the Ottoman secretarial system and long since gone. Without such proof of ownership houses (especially in Jerusalem) are claimed by Jewish entrepreneurs for their own use at a later stage. The even more awful news for anyone in such a position who is Palestinian is that their family is served the bill for its destruction by the Occupying Authority and left to stay in tents on the destroyed land until a relief agency takes over.

The plight of the school near Jericho is attracting some attention at the highest governmental levels. We will wait and see the outcomes in the next few days. I have accepted the brief to work with Qattan in the school today, Wednesday 14th December 2011, after an impassioned plea by a member of the community to Qattan in the summer. They feel they might have been forgotten. My good friend and colleague Nader Wahbeh, who works with Qattan, immediately thought that the project with which we are involved should stretch from Jerusalem to Jericho with a bit of tweaking of time. The class will be the 7 to 9 year old children and the Qattan team will all be there - Khalid on his camera, assisted by Jousef our sound man, Nader as researcher and brilliant liaison person and of course my dear friend Kefah who has long stood as my simultaneous interpreter and who also knows the work intimately through years of working with David Davies during the initiating years of the Drama School. The Jericho school, I am told, is very compact and has around 30 local children who attend.

So, what can an affluent British teacher teach in such circumstances and, at the same time, avoid the label of colonialism by any other name?

Since Qattan have commissioned me to support teachers in the region using MoE and drama for learning I am thinking through the possibilities:

- How about a Victorian context regarding children in chimneys? Maybe not.
- How about a secret organisation who distribute water from a secret well in the desert to anyone who needs it in the region? (Some possibilities I think and it has the ring of truth.....but still.....)
- How about a big risk? I get the class to draw what they would like to know more about and go from there? This will be the most exposing as the film will capture the whole event-so I had better be on my toes. This route I think has better possibilities as the work will be based on the class ideas and concerns. My challenge will be - can I do anything of use with the class after they have completed the task?
- Best to have one up my sleeve as well just in case. I will prepare a context in my head that involves an image I woke up with this morning; that of a stranger seen in the far desert distance, waving his hands in a deliberate crossing motion then disappearing. The dramatic device to be used, if necessary, could involve a teacher in and out of role as *he who has seen the figure now 3 times*. As the observer (as in the Frame Distance concept) this gives me lots to work from if the class are in the mood for a bit of mystery and an intrigue - with a bit of luck Nader might represent the figure for me so that the flow of language won't be interrupted as much when Kefah translates for me in role. He will of course have to translate my task-setting language. So a full role could be a good option. I am aware of the gender issues here as well so I must remember to ensure the class is fully tuned into male/female attitudinal stances as we progress. The Qattan team is mostly male for some reason. Maybe a woman might avail herself. I will see.

The more I think about it the more I like my fourth idea! I will decide when I meet the class. If I get the feel that they are in my hands I will opt for the more open one but if they are in the mood for some discussions I will offer them *The Stranger*. It is for me always difficult to project into a new situation in teaching. I have learnt by fire the error of not being prepared in any way and letting it all happen! I can think through the sequences of dramatic action if I plan for *The Stranger*, and it may also give the class more to go on in an instant. I can now imagine myself with them.

The first steps and the negotiations: I will draw an outline of a high plateau similar to those around Jericho on our now eponymous 'large sheet of paper'! This will enable me to create the dramatic imagination and the distances we need to maintain the inbuilt dramatic tensions. (Friend or foe? What is the signal? Where does the figure retreat to? Is there any need to go and see or will the figure get closer etc? In a way, come to think of it, this is a bit like the images in *The Signalmán*, the ghost story by R.L Stevenson). I will ask Nader to demonstrate to the class the arm signal(s) using the first 8 of the conventions in signs and portents so that we can see the figure closer up by the distancing techniques the conventions allow. (A great new book is out by Stig Ericson called just that I believe *Distancing to get Closer*). We can then investigate the matter as we build the fiction together so I must ask Nader not to invent too much so that the children can create their own context in front of our eyes. Yes, the more I think about it the more I like it. And this came as a dream to me last night! Just as well.

So how did it go? 06.22 getting ready for the day ahead now, quick shower and breakfast (coffee essential!), picked up by Nader at 07.30 to get to Jericho after transferring to a taxi at 8.30. Some of the journey at the end, I hear, will be off road to get to the school. Must remember to take my camera.

We have taken the rickety road to Jericho through Qalandia junction. This is the notorious Israeli 'check point' and well worth a read on the net just to see what everyday life is like for those who want to breed hatred and oppression. We arrived at 8.45 at the Bedouin community of Al Khan al Ahmar where their school is situated. After a quick look round, so the children could get a look at this very white haired old individual we began the work at 9.05.

15th December 2011

If you would like to read the remainder of this fascinating article, it is available in full in the current Issue (28.1) of *The Journal for Drama in Education*.

(Luke Abbott is currently National Director of Mantle of the Expert which has 25 experienced tutors and coaches. He is also the director and lead for the Redbridge Networked Learning Community (RNLC) which has 8 vibrant and innovative individual networks for the London Borough of Redbridge. The RNLC is the sole surviving network left from the original NCSL initiative. He is linked with the Qattan Foundation in Palestine for the future development of the Early Years Curriculum. He has also been working in China for the past 4 years on a long term set of projects using Mantle of the Expert as an innovatory curriculum tool in Jiangsu Province. Luke is also director of the final year of the Palestinian Drama School in Jordan [previously held by Professor David Davis, who is now emeritus]).