

***Fireworks*, by Dalia Taha**

Translated by Clem Naylor

THEMES:

WAR & OCCUPATION

STATE VIOLENCE

CHILD DEATH

GENRE: Drama, a fictional account based on actual events

AGE RESTRICTION: 12+ (death)

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 6 (3W, 3M)

CHARACTER LIST:

KHALID, a man in his early forties. He tries to protect the innocence of his daughter Lubna by turning the horrors of war and death into happy stories.

NAHLA, Khalid's wife, late thirties. She grieves over her dead son, Ali, who was killed by Israeli soldiers 6 months earlier.

LUBNA, Khalid and Nahla's daughter, eleven to twelve years old. A bright girl who hits puberty in the play. She is endlessly inquisitive as she tries to make sense of the loss of her brother and the violence she witnesses around her.

AHMAD, a man in his late thirties. He collects radios and electronics, claiming that he was once an electrician, but has a clear plan for their use.

SAMAR, Ahmad's wife, mid to late thirties. She protects her son fiercely, reinforcing the imaginary worlds he creates by joining in his games.

KHALIL, Ahmad and Samar's son, twelve to thirteen years old. At the cusp of puberty, he finds comfort in make-believe worlds to escape the realities of violence around him, which he mirrors with violent outbursts.

SYNOPSIS:

'There's no-one in the streets but us. You run that way and I'll run this way. Whoever gets back to the front door first without getting shot, wins.'

Set in an unnamed Palestinian town under Israeli siege in the early part of the twenty-first century, the play offers a new way of seeing how war fractures childhood. Eleven-year-old Lubna and twelve-year-old Khalil are playing on the empty stairwell in their apartment block. As the siege intensifies outside, fear for their safety becomes as crippling as the conflict itself.

As the children try to make sense of war, violence and death through storytelling, play and wild imagination, their parents must make an impossible decision over whether to leave their homes and live an uprooted life of refuge. In vacillating between whether they should stay put or flee, the parents' helplessness in protecting their children against the military might of the state leads to desperate acts and decisions.

Fireworks was written by Dalia Taha and translated by Clem Naylor. It was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre.

KEY MOMENTS:

Scene 7 (1F, 1M)

Lubna is unable to sleep because of the noise of the 'fireworks' (bomb flashes) outside. When she stirs to leave the room, she wakes Khalid up, who patiently coaxes her to go back to sleep. She reveals her worry over her mother's mental wellbeing, while Khalid reinforces the stories he tells her to cover up the ugly face of the siege.

Scene 14, a monologue (1M)

Samar confronts Ahmad, having discovered that the reason he has been collecting radios and electronics from the neighbours is to build an explosive device. Ahmad assures her that the device would not be active and that the plot is an act of nonviolent resistance. In a heartrending monologue, he reveals his desperation to be understood by Israeli citizens who may be able curb the violence of their government against the Palestinian people.

Scene 16 (1F, 1M)

Having heard that the graveyard where her son Ali is buried was bombed, Nahla goes to collect his remains and bring them back. Lubna returns home to find Khalid anxiously awaiting her mother's return. Meanwhile Lubna, who has now hit puberty, experiences an awakening into adulthood. The veil of stories made up by Khalid to protect his daughter's innocence slowly unravels as she reveals how much she now knows.

STEP ONE: EXPLORE

Ask a student of either gender to read the monologue by Ahmad in Scene 14.

What philosophical questions does this monologue raise in the students' minds? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the scene, and which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised and perhaps try to combine more than one concept in a single question to broaden out the potential for the discussion. For example:

- Where state violence has been committed on a mass scale, to the extent of killing children, how far are citizens justified in acts of resistance? Does violent resistance become a moral imperative?

Vote to select one of the questions and discuss it, keeping the fruits of your conversations (themes, further questions, provocations, points of discomfort...etc) alive as you go through the exercises below.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1: Stories

A recurring theme in the play is the fabrication of an alternative reality, by children and by adults, to survive the constant life-threatening danger in their day-to-day lives. While living with the threat of COVID 19 is no comparison to the everyday violence of occupation (although the daily dangers ‘frontline workers’ have been enduring come close), it is a mildly comparable experience.

Sitting in a circle, tell the students that they are all storytellers alleviating a child’s fear of COVID. Give them a moment to prepare, either in writing or by giving them some thinking space, how they would explain school closures, not being able to see their friends and cousins and grandparents, and losing loved ones. In the play, the sounds of explosions are ‘fireworks’, planes carrying bombs are ‘ambulances’, and the dead are living a parallel life in heaven. Once ready, the students can begin to share their alternative realities explaining the fall out of COVID to a frightened child. They can go in turn around the circle, or call out popcorn style.

Some examples might be:

- *The hospitals are overflowing because I have to go to hospital to receive the treatment that will make them better.*
- *Your school is closed because they are making it an even happier place than it was before, and that takes time. You will be even happier in school when you go back.*

It is important to give a trigger warning in advance of this activity, as some students may have had a traumatic experience through COVID. Forewarn the students that you will be talking about COVID together, and give space for students to self-exclude if the conversation might be too raw.

Exercise 2: Space

When states put people under siege, they are often living under curfew and, in extreme cases, may not be allowed to leave their homes except for essential reasons. Again, while we cannot compare living with COVID to living under siege, there are some loose overlaps, with the restriction of movement being one of them.

Ask students to walk around the space, remaining equidistant from one another, and speaking the lines from their fabricated story in Exercise 1. Gradually decrease the space they are able to walk in until they barely have space to get past one another. Notice what happens to the pace of their gait and speech, and to the volume of their voice. You may wish to select some observers to take note of those changes, and reflect those back to the actors in the space. Make space also for the actors themselves to reflect on how that exercise impacted on their pace of gait and volume of speech. Consider together why this might have happened. How does the expansion and restriction of space impact on us as human beings and performers?

We know that lockdown in the UK and elsewhere in the world has led to high levels of mental ill health, albeit a necessary measure to curb the rate of infection. Much research has linked plummeting mental wellbeing to physical distancing and restriction of movement. Although the play is set at the beginning of the 21st century, parts of Palestine are today among the most densely populated human habitations in the world, with astonishingly high levels of state surveillance. With all characters in the play suffering from some form of psychological scarification, a question begs to be answered – to what extent is mental ill health a personal affliction as opposed to societal?

Exercise 3:

Scenes 7 and 16 are mirror scenes, inviting an inversion of roles to the same conversation. Khalid is trying to maintain the protective veil of altered reality to assuage his daughter's anxiety, a charade she accepts in scene 7, then subsequently challenges in scene 16. At the centre of the conversation is their shared concern over Nahla's mental wellbeing.

Read through scene 7, then read through scene 16. Compare and contrast the two scenes, then tell the students that, in groups, they will stand them up as echoes of one another. Just as there is an alternative reality to the bomb-dropping planes being ‘ambulances, and a parallel life in heaven where the martyred Ali now lives, we witness an alternative relationship between father and daughter. Give the groups time to prepare both scenes, considering how they will perform them. Does the set change? Who is in a position of ‘power’ and how will they show this? Will they perform the two scenes one after the other or are there other ways of staging them?

Share.

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. What are they still wondering about? What was the most interesting thing they learned? What was their least favourite part and why?

APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL SYNOPSIS:

A few days before the Muslim festival of Eid, twelve-year-old Lubna has been composing a song about her brother Ali who was killed in an Israeli bomb attack six months earlier. Troubled that she hasn’t seen Ali in her dreams, Lubna worries that he’s angry with her for breaking the frame of his photo. Khalid, her father, comforts her. As the play progresses, it’s clear that Khalid has been lying to her about the war in order to protect her innocence. For example, he tells her that the Israeli missiles lighting up the night sky are fireworks; a lie she uncovers on her own. Meanwhile, Lubna’s mother Nahla is going mad with grief at losing Ali, which puts strain on her marriage and parenting. In the apartment downstairs, their neighbours are experiencing

troubles of their own. Ahmad wants Samar to treat their son, thirteen-year-old Khalil, like an adult. When Samar discovers that he's been making bogus calls threatening to bomb an Israeli restaurant, she decides to pack up and move with Khalil to the UN shelter. Lubna and Khalil strike up a friendship playing in the stairwell of the apartment block. On Eid, their friendship is shattered when an Israeli bomb kills Khalil as they're playing outside.

STRUCTURE:

Scene 1. Lubna and Khalid are talking about her brother Ali, who was killed (or 'martyred') during an air strike. Lubna is sad because she no longer dreams of him. Khalid reassures her by saying that he's heard her talking to Ali in her sleep.

Scene 2. Ahmad and Samar are arguing. Ahmad says he no longer believes that God will protect them from the bombs, and Samar accuses him of blaspheming. He also accuses Samar of nannying Khalil.

Scene 3. Khalil and Lubna are playing in the stairwell of their building. Their conversation soon turns to the scenes of violence they've witnessed on television. Lubna mentions that their school has been bombed.

Scene 4. Nahla and Samar are looking at photos of Ali. Samar says she saw Ali in a dream, which upsets Nahla who urges Samar to pass on a message to Ali: that she will visit his grave on Eid.

Scene 5. Khalid and Nahla are arguing about Ali. Nahla says she should have committed suicide when they received news of his death. Khalid is taunting and gaslighting her. She scolds him for turning Ali's bedroom into a workshop. She wants to move his stuff back in, but Khalid threatens to kill her if she does.

Scene 6. Samar and Khalil are playing ninja turtles. They pretend to be lost on an unknown planet. Samar tries to radio for help, but Khalil breaks the radio. He says the enemies will overhear and start bombing them. To calm him down, Samar promises that on Eid he can go to the internet café with his friends.

Scene 7. It is the middle of the night. While Nahla sleeps, Khalid and Lubna are talking about her. Lubna is worried that her mother is going mad, unable to come to terms with Ali's death. We discover that Ali was killed six months ago. Unwittingly, she reveals to Khalid that Nahla has been packing things into a bag so the two of them can run away.

Scene 8. Khalil and Ahmad are feeding their pigeons on the roof of the building. Ahmad points out the bombed buildings in the neighbourhood. Khalil says he wants to be a fighter pilot when he grows up. Ahmad tells him he's becoming a man now, and should start shaving. Suddenly, they hear a warplane overhead. Ahmad grabs Khalil, and they run inside.

Scene 9. Khalid is trying to leave the apartment, but Nahla is blocking the door. She doesn't want him to get killed; otherwise, he'll be reunited with Ali before her. Khalid threatens to strangle her. Suddenly, Nahla orders him to get undressed so they can have sex for the first time in months.

Scene 10. Khalil and Lubna are playing in the stairwell. Khalil is pretending to be an Israeli soldier, using a stick as a gun. He orders Lubna to show her identity card, to dance for him, to sneeze, to stand on one leg, to smoke a cigarette. Lubna gets angry and grabs the stick. Just as Khalil pretends to shoot her, Lubna has her first period.

Scene 11. Nahla and Lubna are in their apartment. Nahla is trying to explain menstruation and hygiene. Lubna is convinced that she's ill, and blames Nahla for not preparing her for this experience.

Scene 12. Lubna and Khalil are discussing the first things they'll do when the war ends. Lubna says she'd like to buy herself an ice cream. Khalil doesn't know what he'd like to do. Giving up, Lubna suggests they play outside. Khalil is hesitant because their parents have forbidden them from playing in the street. Lubna challenges him to a race: whoever can run around the neighbourhood and get back to the front door without getting shot, wins.

Scene 13. Nahla tells Khalid that she went outside and bought cigarettes. When he asks why she was gone for three hours, she says she knows about the pistol he's been hiding in their bedroom. Khalid explains that he's trying to protect the family. Nahla tells him that the neighbours have started leaving the building, moving to a shelter for safety. We discover that the Israelis have bombed the graveyard in which Ali was buried. When Nahla says she wants to go to Ali's grave, Khalid begs her not to go.

Scene 14. Samar is sitting in the bathtub. Ahmad is washing her with bottled water. Suddenly, Samar says she overheard him on the phone saying that he wants to call an Israeli restaurant and threaten to blow it up. Ahmad explains that he only wanted to scare the Israelis so they'd know what it's like to live in constant fear and chaos. Lubna gets scared. She starts worrying that the Israelis will track their number and bomb their building. She threatens to leave him, take Khalil with her, and inform the neighbours about what he's done.

Scene 15. Lubna and Khalil are playing in his apartment. Khalil reveals that he and Samar are moving to the shelter that same day. Before she leaves, Khalil reminds Lubna that it's Eid the next day. He makes her promise that she'll meet him in the playground.

Scene 16. When Lubna returns to her apartment, she discovers that Nahla has gone out. Worried that her mother will get lost, she scolds Khalid for not keeping an eye on her. She accuses him of hiding things from her, especially Nahla's mental state.

Scene 17. Nahla and Samar are arguing. Nahla is complaining that Samar is the one having dreams about Ali when he isn't even her son. She feels it's an injustice. Samar is trying to pass on Ali's message that they should all leave the building. Nahla is too stubborn and angry to listen. She tears up Ali's photo.

Scene 18. Ahmad watches as Samar and Khalil get ready to move out. When they leave, he stays.

Scene 19. Khalid is telling Ahmad about the difficulties he faces in coping with Ali's death. He tries to shoot himself with the pistol but can't. Instead, he breaks down in tears. Ahmad hugs him, and the two men cry.

Scene 20. It is the day before Eid, and Nahla gives Lubna her presents: new clothes and a bag. Lubna confesses that she used to be jealous of Ali because she thought Nahla loved him more. Her mother tells her how much she loves her.

Scene 21. It's Eid, and Lubna and Khalil are in the playground. Suddenly, there's an explosion. Khalil is killed. Lubna delivers a monologue, as someone older looking back on these events, reflecting on the trauma of losing her friend.