

Theatre for Children in Refugee Camps

By Minhyong Kim for Hankyoreh on 05.02.25

What use is a poet in destitute times? This is a question famously posed by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin in his 1801 poem 'Bread and Wine'.

One year and four months into the Gaza war, with a fragile ceasefire barely in place, Donald Trump has suddenly declared the intention for the US to take possession of Gaza and develop it into a resort. Amid the subsequent wave of unrest, the tragic image of hundreds of thousands of Gazans returning to the rubbles of their home as well as the pitiful faces of Israeli hostages being released painfully illustrate the relentless complexities of the current impasse.

The Gaza war has spread to neighbouring countries. Lebanon, for example, suffered thousands of casualties from missile and drone attacks between September and late November last year. Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Victoria Lupton, the director of Seenaryo, a charity based in Lebanon that reaches out to Jordan, Palestine and other parts of the Middle East. The organisation specialises in education and a form of art therapy, especially for vulnerable communities, focusing on women and children in crisis. Their philosophy is encapsulated in a slogan on their website: 'Lifelong learning through play and theatre.' Since its establishment in 2015, they have engaged with over 150,000 local residents through performance, teacher training, and the free distribution of play-based learning tools. It should be noted that Lebanon has the world's highest concentration of refugees, with one in four residents classified as war refugees. The founding of Seenaryo itself was initially motivated by the need to support the 1.5 million Syrian refugees displaced by the Syrian civil war that began in 2011.

Theatre in Seenaryo is not merely about performance; it is about participants writing, directing, and acting in their own plays, fostering creativity and self-growth. This reflects the belief that drama and play can be integrated into all aspects of education. According to Lupton, theatre is an art form with a uniquely effective capacity to enable participants' agency and dignity. The demand for Seenaryo's services in refugee camps is high. Even during the war last autumn, Lupton continued her work in Beirut with her husband and young daughter. Despite extreme conditions, Seenaryo received requests from 21 different shelters to organise performances and play-based education. It's obvious that even in the midst of daily life fraught with danger, children desperately need time to learn, play, and transcend the ever-present fear of war.

Lupton admits that she often questions the value of their work. There are times when she wonders about the place of theatre in an environment where people must fight to survive. Yet, she explains that the bright faces of children who find their own voices and overcome anxiety through drama are more than enough to ease her doubts.

A passage from Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano's essay 'The Limits of Art' describes the village of Cinquera, a centre of relentless fighting during El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s. It is evening, after an especially brutal and prolonged battle. A photographer walks into an alleyway next to a church, heavy with the scent of death. Bodies lie scattered, while the dirt and grass are mixed with blood. Rays from the setting sun illuminate the strangely silent street in a deep red glow. A guerrilla fighter, one of a pair of twins the photographer knows well, sits dazed against a wall riddled with bullet holes, holding his brother's bloody corpse. At his feet, two rifles are thrown down forming a cross. Even in this nightmarish moment, the photographer can't help but admire the tragic symmetry of the scene—the artistic perfection of the moment. He raises his camera to capture the image. But something holds him back, his finger unable to press the button.

The transformation of tragedy into art—whether in masterpieces like Picasso’s Guernica or in photography—often raises uncomfortable ethical questions. When I ask Lupton about this dilemma, she answers from the perspective of agency. She explains that the objective at Seenaryo is to centre people in crisis themselves. Unlike Picasso’s painting, where human suffering is material for art, in their work, it is the human beings who use art to reclaim agency and dignity.

In the dedicated work of this group, it seems possible to find a tangible answer to Hölderlin’s old question.

Translation by ChatGPT 4 and Minhyong Kim.