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## 'Smiling and creating'

Without politics - and by means of the media of art, music and dance - Jews and Palestinians gathered at last week's annual Speaking Art conference in Jerusalem

By Ofer Aderet  
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The Jerusalem Inter-Cultural Center, which promotes activities that bring together communities in conflict, is located in the David's Tomb compound, near the Dormition Church on Mount Zion, in the midst of an ultra-Orthodox yeshiva, an old mosque and the room where tradition says the Last Supper was held. With the muezzin's call mingling in the background with the singing of "David, King of Israel," the center's small, dedicated staff is involved in a program aimed at bringing Jews and Palestinians together - without engaging in politics .

Last week, under the auspices of the JICC and the Jerusalem Foundation, which helps fund the center's activities, the seventh annual Speaking Art conference took place. A two-day event, the conference brought together some 80 Jewish and Palestinian artists to discuss joint projects, participate in workshops, and view music, theater and dance performances. The conference ended with an appearance by singers Shlomi Shaban and Mira Awad, performing in Arabic and Hebrew, at the Jerusalem YMCA .

"We have not succeeded in influencing politicians or settling the diplomatic conflict, so we decided to try to deal with it from below, at eye level, on a human basis," said Nadim Shiban, director of the projects department at the Jerusalem Foundation and the conference's organizer. "The artists are showcased. They meet, they cooperate and along the way they also deal with the conflict from a personal place," he adds .

For example, in the past, in the framework of Speaking Art, two actors from different parts of Jerusalem - Bonna Devora Haberman, 50, and Khader Hirini, 36 - met each other and began working together. At the conference last week, they cooperated on staging a new show that will be called "Garbage " .

"It will be about people who are treated not as human beings but as garbage. People who aren't useful for any particular goal," Haberman explains .

Hirini describes how, at the army checkpoints he has to pass through to visit his family in Ramallah, "They treat me like garbage. Who is standing there? New immigrants, who came to this country a few months or a few years beforehand. Who are they to dare ask me where I am going and where I am coming from?" he asks. "They tell me I don't look like someone who lives in Jerusalem. What right do they have "?

The "garbage feeling," Hirini calls it, also derives from the fact that he is not a citizen of Israel, but only has resident status. "We are refugees, not citizens. We don't have the right to vote. We are just guests here," he says .

Haberman, a Jewish-feminist scholar and immigrant from North America, has been collaborating for three years with Hirini. She has children serving in the army. "And one of them is even in the Border Police," she says. "I wish them the best of health," Hirini says to her, and starts laughing .

"I don't think we are going to resolve the issues," Haberman adds, "but this gathering constitutes an incubator for Palestinians and Jews, which enables us to deal with the situation via theatrical work " .

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Last summer, the two performed the play "Freeze," about a group of people who find themselves on an island with no water and eventually discover that the well they were looking for is right under their feet. "They are in an incubator that underlines the problematics, the disputes and the relationships in the group," says Haberman .

### **Another peace**

Nadim Shiban, a social worker by training, was born in the village of Rama in the Galilee - "three years after the War of Independence, what we call the Nakba," as he puts it. At the age of 21 he moved to Jerusalem and was smitten by the city's charms .

"I've been through eight wars and 33 military operations," he relates. "Each operation had a bombastic name, a cause and effect. When you look at all that, you think: 'Who has had time to talk about peace?' I've despaired of bringing peace," he adds, looking at Haberman and Hirini .

"We are, in fact, bringing it," Haberman interjects .

"You're right. If you are smiling and creating together - for me that's peace," Shiban agrees. "My aim is to cause as many people as possible to look at the 'other,' of whom we are afraid, and to open doors and communications channels. We are sharing the same land. We are living here. Life has dictated a very intense relationship together, and we have to build it on a firm basis " .

The JICC also offers language programs aimed at professionals who work with Arabs and Jews. The JICC staff discovered what every high-school student in Israel knows: The Hebrew spoken by Arabs is immeasurably better than the Arabic that is usually spoken by Jews .

"At our first meetings between the groups, the Jews sat there like dopes and didn't understand the language. We frustrated them on purpose, until they realized they had to learn Arabic," says Shiban .

Shiban calls Mount Zion, just outside the Old City walls, where the center is located, "Mount Crazy." His colleague, center director Dr. Hagai Agmon-Snir, says: "David's Tomb, located here, is the only place in the world that is sacred to the three religions. Even the Temple Mount can't compare to it. True, in the past 1,500 years the religions have been busy throwing each other off the Temple Mount. It's hard to talk about it as a place of tolerance " .

Until 1948 the building where JICC is located was home to the Dajani family, one of the most veteran and well-connected clans in Jerusalem .

"When we moved in here, we held a discussion and we realized that even if we wanted to, we don't have the ability to return the building to its previous owners. We realized that of all the uses this building could have - the center was the most appropriate," Agmon-Snir explains .

In their vision, Haberman and Hirini imagine a thousand performers, Jews and Palestinians, cooperating under the auspices of the JICC .

"We are training more and more artists in working together and in dialogue, so as to establish the next generations of Speaking Art," says Haberman. "We have found the way to converse without fear. To communicate without hurting. To respect one another " .

"And there is respect," adds Hirini with a smile.