

By **Laila Sumpton**

It is 1948, Palestine, and forbidden lovers Ali and Nada are prevented from marrying because her father disapproves of Ali's brother, "mad" Yusuf. Personal and political worlds collide as the British mandate ends, and the futures of Yusuf, Ali and Nada become "what ifs" that their older selves try to unravel. We are thrown into a tragic-comic world where poetry, pranks, politics and proverbs all interweave with the secrets and forced decisions that the *Nakbah* inflicted on the small community of Baissamoon in northern Palestine.

Direct from a tour of towns and villages in Israel and the West Bank, "I am Yusuf and this is my Brother" is co-produced by the Young Vic and the Shiber Hur Theatre Company from Palestine. Though the play will draw many Palestinian sympathisers, director Amir Zizar Zuabi hopes that audiences will detach themselves from the historical background and relate to the stories of broken relationships.

The young protagonists sometimes fight against the wisdom of their older selves, but at other times speak in harmony with them. The two Yusufs sit on an upturned bathtub summarising their history: "We lost, they won, the Arab armies came and went, the war was over before it begun." But it is the simple joys of everyday life that they miss, asking "where are the good mornings?"

The younger Yusuf, played by Amer Helehel, carries the heart of the play, and in a meticulous performance he displays both a childlike confusion and an adult's understanding, saying he likes proverbs because there is "truth in proverbs and only lies in politics". This is echoed when Rufus, the British soldier played by Paul Fox, tells the villagers about how the Queen will protect their interests – which the local teacher translates as "some lies from the British".

As the play progresses there is a mounting sense of panic and desperation that morphs into an exhaustion and sadness that is agonising to watch, but lifted by the beauty of the script and the light-heartedness of Yusuf's character. When she hears that her family is fleeing, the passionate Nada drenches herself in water, screaming that she wants to drown in Ali's love. She is watched by the older Nada who repeatedly pours water onto the stage. A man fleeing his village splashes across the sodden stage carrying a tree on his shoulders, because he doesn't want the settlers to make jam from its fruit.

The absence of Israeli settlers and forces – with their presence confined to the sound of passing aeroplanes or tales from Palestinians fleeing Haifa – gives them a ghostly but powerful quality. We see the villagers' confusion and struggle to survive. They reflect, "Before January who knew

they existed? After January we were not sure we existed.” Some might criticise Zuabi for not showing the Israeli side, but to do this with the same amount of detail within the same play would be impossible.

There is a danger that such a topic will lead to melodrama or political rants, but Zuabi avoids many potential pitfalls by filling a bleak set with a poetic script that somehow fits the raw performances of a strong cast. No-one wants to feel they are on the receiving end of a political rant, regardless of whether they agree with it. Audiences of this undeniably political play need to put the pieces together themselves and come up with their own picture of events.

The feeling of simultaneously being carried through a nightmarish past and getting lost in it is extenuated by the bilingual dialogue, but non-Arabic-speaking audience members were needlessly isolated from the script by technical failings. Subtitles were either projected on a piece of folded tarpaulin, where the material’s crease cut out the first line of dialogue, or on a suspended bath that was too high above the action on the stage, forcing viewers to divert their gaze between the two. With such strong performances and a stunning set design it was a real shame that technical hitches frustrated the viewing.

If you are the kind of viewer who has to understand every facet of a script and the relevance of each piece of stage imagery, this could be a testing play; but if you are happy to guess, let the essences unravel and be left with areas of mystery, then you will find this play enriching, and it will haunt you long after the final bows.

I Am Yusuf And This Is My Brother is playing at the Young Vic theatre in London until February 6th