



Peace, War and Cabaret: The Palestine Express – an Interview with Anis Hamadeh

Translation of a German interview for www.diefreiheitsliebe.de, conducted online until September 8, 2011

The Middle East can really be a sad issue. Most of the news from the region is bad news. People are often disappointed with politics and only wish to live in peace and quiet. With the Palestine Express, Anis Hamadeh shows that there are alternative approaches to the Middle East. He is a writer, musician, painter and scholar of Islamic Studies and he lives in Mainz.

Hello Anis, you invented the Palestine Express. How did you come to the idea of making cabaret about the Middle East?

Invented is a good expression. Well, I have been writing satires forever. Since the attack on Jenin in 2002 I have been concerned with Palestine, in articles, essays, commentaries, interviews, lectures, the Free Gaza Art Festival on the internet, literature, music, paintings and some other things. Meanwhile it is a big colorful book of material, here is the index page: www.anis-online.de/1/palaestinabuch.htm.

At one point I noticed that even the best in German political cabaret TV avoid the subject. I mean: even those who I really like, e.g. Volker Pispers, Mathias Riechling, Urban Priol, Georg Schramm, Dieter Hildebrand. Hagen Rether once called Israel a "pretty normal apartheid state", that was the most critical remark I discovered in my research.

And this although the situation in Palestine/Israel is so absurd that satire becomes an obvious way of expression. There is a responsibility in cabaret, too, not to skip important matters, especially situations of oppression. Of course one would have to show one's position and this might be the problem. I stick to international law and the human rights and have a single measure, this is workable. As in the meantime I have also composed six songs on the Middle East, I came up with the idea of the Express last year and wrote some new short things for it which I continuously update.

Why do people in German cabaret avoid the Middle East conflict?

There will be reasons for people not to notice the elephant in the room. The ignored elephant does not really match with our principle of no censorship and it does effect the general level of cabaret, taking away its credibility.

It is difficult in Germany to talk about the Middle East conflict and to advance a view different from the media. Have you had problems in this department?

The situation is not as it was in the nineties. Then many people still had hope, whether this was justified or not. These days are gone. One of the results is that even some media outlets reconsider their position. The journalist Walter van Rossum, for example, recently wrote a potentially taboo breaking commentary on this notorious and persistent reproach of anti-Semitism, and that was in a mainstream medium. These things happen. With my own work I rarely have problems, hardly any hate mails etc. I am not looking for trouble.

Of course it is known that most media and parties in Germany "take care" that nothing happens to our fantasy Israel, this dream image that does not withstand any reality. Routinely, Israel is described as a victim and a reacting party, this has a long tradition. Or the media fantasizes about "two sides", as if the Palestinians had an army or even an elected president. In reality, more than 99 % of the weapons in the country are Israeli ones, while the land theft continues undeterred. It also is a shame that so many news items from the country fail to make it into the rotation in Germany, as they could "damage Israel". Fortunately we have alternative media as the Palästina Portal in Germany or www.theheadlines.org or you, the Freiheitsliebe. At the latest with your Dierkes interview in May you have managed to establish yourself.

To add a little story to the subject: In June, the Israeli group Givat Haviva invited me to present half of the Palestine Express on the Federal Garden Show in Koblenz. They had a stage the whole day through and

there were other artists and interview partners, too. The organizer of the event, Alex Elsohn, said that he finds this voice important even if he does not necessarily subscribe to every part of the content. He would hear similar arguments from native Palestinians and it was not his intention to pretend peace and harmony with the event. I was quite impressed by this attitude. I had no idea how the audience would receive the piece, but had the chance to introduce myself earlier with some songs and poetry. Some of the Givat Haviva folks were really thrilled by the show. Stunning. Some in the audience, on the other hand, left in disapproval, as Alex recounted. For me this episode proved that there are islands of freedom around, and one can find them.

Do German or Palestinian groups invite you, too, with your show, or are they more critical of your work?

As a lecturer and panel speaker people have invited me sometimes. The first time I presented the Palestine Express was on a Gaza benefit organized by FrauenWege Nahost (Middle East WomenWays) in February in Bonn. The half hour was very well received. When in April the YouTube trailer was launched (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NMGXxrWKnQ) I thought that some solidarity groups in Germany would respond to it or at least want some more information, for this show is something else for a change and people know me in the scene. To my surprise there has been almost nothing so far.

This will not be because of the contents of the show. Down our way, Palestine events usually have serious lectures or speakers from Palestine/Israel, sometimes a movie and then falafil and maybe dabka dancing, plus donation appeals, info posters and flyers and a table with books. This is how we know it, the ritual, and correspondingly we expect these things. I think it is important to enlarge the scope here. This can also be a way to get some new faces to attend such events. We all search for ways of social change, don't we? We do not search for closed self-help groups. There has been feedback from the US and England, for I present it in English, too. My humor is rather British, maybe that is why.

Why is it that the Palestinian groups do not change their program? Could this be a reason for the fact that, despite an existing solidarity with Palestine, relatively few people get involved?

You will only get involved if you have a personal reason for it, otherwise it will not work. In my case it is domestic violence, ironically. Ever since, I understand what an asymmetrical conflict is and that society tolerates

injustice, even supports it when in doubt. Therefore I cannot really be called pro-Palestinian. Domestic violence, next to the discrimination against women and corruption, is one of the main problems in Palestinian society and there is a big omerta about it. Therefore I am rather anti-Palestinian. Despite that, I support the Palestinians, because they are an oppressed people! I do not speak with my family, but they have human rights I will defend. – Not a very easy situation for me.

There has been a lot of innovation lately, the strongest are the Gaza ships. They show the problem of custody, they show how Palestinians are treated. No German should be able to tolerate that! I was scheduled to be delegation leader of a cultural boat which did not happen because of the massacre in 2008/09. Then, when the peaceful Mavi Marmara was captured by Israeli soldiers, killing nine human rights activists, there was no real outcry in the world. This is symptomatic for our decadent times. It is like in ancient Rome, it really sucks! The law of the jungle. As if democracy was a joke. I admit that today you will have to swim against the stream if you want justice. This is difficult for many people. In the beginning of the Palestine Express it reads on the question why Palestine is such a rare topic in political cabaret: "Just because you lose your job, get stigmatized as an anti-Semite and never become part of society again? Oh come on! This will hardly prevent anyone from taking a stand, will it?"

Do you really think it is so difficult to criticize Israel? Or is it rather because people tend to either only criticize Israel or Palestine, respectively?

If the TV society received unfiltered news from Israel it would strongly feel against this state, because of the land theft, the murders and the racism. Instead, the German mainstream ties the reporting with the own history and uses the situation to express its feelings about the genocide of the Jews. For example through the genre of anti-Semitism articles or by excusing Israel for its alleged self-defense. Yet Israel does not defend itself, it defends an injustice, and this is not mentioned. Our holy history is much more important to us than the human rights.

Israel has not integrated into the region right from the start, but has made often aggressive and always unilateral decisions. This is by no means self-defense. Therefore, Israel is unpopular in large parts of the world and certainly in the age of Lieberman. Germany's active support of this behavior is not out of love for Israel. It is about the German ego. So the media obediently writes "radical-Islamic" every time they mention Hamas. They say "right of existence" and "anti-Semitism". All of these are clear indicators of an ideology, as is the double standard. This way

we seek – as unconsciously as it is successful – to deal with our own history, at the expense of our values. The human rights of the Palestinians are blocked by the reproach of anti-Semitism.

So do media and politicians draw the wrong conclusions from the German history?

There are still many who draw the conclusion: "Never again against Jews", instead of: "Never again against the human rights". But when you prefer and privilege Jews just because they are Jews, then this is racist, too. Moreover, it leads to the empowerment of radical groups and it relativizes the human rights. And this, although the emphasized pro-Jewishness in our society is not even pro-Jewish in reality. This behavior only brings damage to all involved parties, it remains stuck in an old trauma and is far from reality, e.g. the reality of Zionism.

Are you trying to point to this misinterpretation of history with the Palestine Express?

Sure. The program has many different topics. I talk about Gaza, the biggest open air prison with a sea view, about 1948, about terrorism and about a friend who considered areas of his neighbor's garden while building a fence, and who now is wondering why his neighbor is so unfriendly to him. In some parts I play roles, like the one of a chief editor on the phone or the one of a translator of White House American. For example, when Obama says "stability", it must correctly be translated "instability", otherwise it makes no sense. In between I take the guitar and play a song or I recite a Palestimerick like this one: "Will there be two states or one state? This isn't a matter of fate. / Most people say: two. This surely is true, / but I think it's rather too late." I integrate current topics so that the program remains flexible. When I feel up to it I also like to improvise bits. I will be glad if you find the opportunity to watch the Palestine Express on stage one day.

Thank you for your answers. May we now give you some concepts and ask you to tell us your associations? Political cabaret

An important means of expression, because with satire you can say more than without satire. And it is a new field for me.

Two-State Solution

Justice is the main issue. The form is not of central importance, it has to follow the content. Yet I do not believe that a two-state solution is realistic.

UNO

Shows that we humans want peace eventually. Also shows that we are unable to get it done. We reward highly armed states by granting them a special power position in the UN, this is illogical and immature.

September 20

The day when the UN concerns itself with the recognition of Palestine as a state. A problematic demand, because it leaves out many issues, especially the one of the displaced people. The proposal in question was not developed in a democratic consensus, either, but it is a solo number of Mister Abbas.

Anis, thank you and good luck with your show. Maybe we can make it to organize a show with you one day.