

Palestine oratorio

A contemporary musical drama of historic breadth and depth of feeling is heading to Brussels for a one-night stand. Don't miss *Al Kamandjati*



Up against the wall: resisting with music, Palestinian Ramzi Abduredwan is teaching children in the occupied territories to do likewise

He not only gives the production its narrative thread, but also performs in it as a musician, with Dal'Ouna, his traditional Middle Eastern music ensemble, and, briefly, as a speaker. But *Al Kamandjati* is about more than the altruistic channelling of this charismatic and talented man's energy. It's about the Shoah, the Naqba, and role of history in shaping individual destinies.

"I tried in my writing to express the pain I feel with this history, the everyday pain of every Palestinian," continues Hass, whose parents fled Europe during the Holocaust. "Ramzi resists with his music, and he's challenging a common reality – that music is for the privileged. He's fighting for change within Palestinian society."

From violence to viola

Ramzi was lucky. Still an angry young stone-thrower, he was offered music lessons at 17, took up the viola, and eventually won a scholarship to the conservatory in Angers, France, where he studied for eight years. Music changed his life. "Bring music, and you bring life," he has said.

"*Al Kamandjati* started from nothing. I invited friends from my studies in Angers to help out for free." With funds from the Swedish government, they renovated a building in Ramallah. Three years later, the programme has 400 students, most between the ages of five and 14, who attend classes in three small conservatories and seven workshops – six of them in refugee camps. All the children are given their own instruments to play and, if portable, take home to practise. There are voice students as well, two of whom are spellbinding soloists in *Al Kamandjati*.

"This is not a Cinderella story," said Israeli journalist Amira Hass after the performance of *Al Kamandjati* (The Violinist) last month in Oslo. "It was a way for me to speak about the Naqba – the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands in 1948 – and about resistance." Hass, who has lived in the occupied territories for the past 15 years and is the author of the bold and widely admired book *Drinking the Sea at Gaza* (Henry Holt & Co, 1999), is a major participant in *Al Kamandjati*, an Italian-Norwegian co-production of live music, narration and video which premièred in Rome one year ago and has since been performed in Ramallah,

Trondheim and Oslo. She appears on video, narrates live on stage and wrote the text on which the work is based.

Hass's poetic text springs from the life story of Ramzi Abduredwan, a stone-throwing child of the first intifada and now a classically trained musician, member of Daniel Barenboim's East-West Divan Orchestra, and creator, in 2002, of a foundation which gives music lessons to Palestinian children living in refugee camps. At 29, Ramzi, as he is known, is a cultural hero. It is little wonder that the advance press for *Al Kamandjati*, which is named after the foundation he started, focuses on him.

Bozar, 23 Rue Ravenstein/straat, Brussels, December 2, 20.00, tel 02.507.82.00, www.bozar.be

The project is supported entirely by donations. “We don’t have oboes or bassoons yet, and we need pianos and cellos – everything, really,” said Ramzi on a visit to Brussels last month, when he performed with his ensemble in the Masarat Palestine festival. “We teach traditional and Occidental music and jazz for brass instruments. A drummer from Antwerp has joined us, so that section will be expanding soon.” There are 24 paid teachers, whose prerequisites include Arabic lessons with their students.

Child with a cello

But, as Hass has said, *Al Kamandjati* is about more than Al Kamandjati and Ramzi. On one side of the stage, the Trondheim Soloists, a Norwegian string quartet, play works created for the occasion by Azerbaijani composer Franghiz Ali-Zadeh; on the other, Ramzi’s quartet, accompanied by two young singers, play traditional Palestinian music. The two ensembles flank four narrators, who take turns reciting portions of Hass’s text, each in his or her own language: Hebrew, Arabic, Norwegian and, in Brussels, French or English.

Projected on a large screen behind the performers, videos made in the Israeli-occupied territories by contemporary documentary filmmakers alternate occasionally with archival footage of the Naqba. Linking past and present, Ramzi’s grandfather, a weatherbeaten old man with a sharp memory and keen wit, remembers on camera his jail term and his land, from which he has long been banned. Cut to soldiers destroying an olive grove with power saws; cut again to a child playing a pint-size cello; and to preschoolers caught in the crush at a checkpoint.

How to donate

Musical instruments in good condition are being collected for Al Kamandjati in the vestibule of Bozar on December 2, between 14.00 and 20.00. To donate instruments at other times, kindly contact Defrise/Maillart, 12 Rue Bal, 7340 Warquignies, tel 0494.50.59.48, info@alkamandjati.com, www.alkamandjati.com