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# Fighting Fire With Flame: Visual Storytelling As The Antidote To Negative Media Imagery

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**FIGHTING FIRE WITH FLAME: VISUAL STORYTELLING  
AS THE ANTIDOTE TO NEGATIVE MEDIA IMAGERY**

**Léna Sulpovar**

**PIM 69**

**A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
Master of Social Justice in Intercultural Relations at the SIT Graduate Institute  
in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.**

**July 2011**

**Advisor: John Ungerleider**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an examination of the power of art in building bridges between groups of people in conflict. Through two complementary case studies where theater and film are utilized as catalyst for dialogue, the paper highlights the impact of visual storytelling on the hearts and minds of participants entering the experience with certain prejudices towards and fear of the “other” group. In particular, it shows that complex visual stories and empathetic characters have the ability to increase understanding of other perspectives, transform perceptions, and even instill narratives that are contrary to the ones dominant within the given culture. Interviews with the individuals orchestrating the two initiatives, as well as testimonies from participants and facilitators show that when it comes to the negative imagery of Muslims in the U.S. and Palestinians in Israel, which is promoted through the mainstream media, art is in fact a very powerful antidote.

## INTRODUCTION

Our globalized society is progressively becoming more visually mediated. Whether it is news on TV, in the printed press, or in the ever-expanding electronic channels of communication, with the video broadcasting website YouTube and the social networking site Facebook at their forefront, we are relying more and more on visual material as our primary source of information. In a reality that requires important messages and news stories to be condensed into 140 words or less, as is the case with today's popular micro-blogging service Twitter, an increasingly greater role is being played by visual stimuli, which take the form of videos, photos, and full-length films, and inform us about local as well as global happenings. In the last decade especially, we have witnessed a major transformation in the way media information is transmitted and shared, from predominantly written word to images. Today, it is particularly the issues that impact the public most deeply that receive representation in the form of images, and it is those images that end up shaping our views and framing the discussions. In his article *The Visual Persuasion Gap*, Gurri states that "visual material is felt more viscerally than text, and human beings are far less skilled at guarding their judgment against this style of persuasion", creating a situation where those savvy in visual rhetoric are able to exert an amount of sway over their target audiences that is unparalleled to anything else.

Complicating matters is that if in the past visual propaganda was the domain of governments and large companies, in the modern era it is the consumers themselves who dominate most channels of visual communication. Everyone has access to the visual channels of communication if they know how to use them. This is true both to violent groups, such as Al-Qaeda, who have been able to mobilize themselves and wield psychological warfare through

the use of threatening videos and images, and to other free agents, such as journalists and private individuals with personal agendas.

Because of the persuasive effects of the image, which works in large because we are unaware of it, an important concern that is raised by Gurri is the gap created between our textual literacy and our visual literacy. While we have entire disciplines built around on the critical examination of text and literature, we are not nearly as competent at deciphering the hidden messages embedded in visual content. Visual communications scholar Paul Martin said: “The most powerful, meaningful and culturally important messages are those that combine words and pictures equally and respectfully... and yet, educators never developed a visual grammar for photographs in the same way that a verbal grammar was developed for words after Gutenberg. People are taught to read words but are never taught to read pictures.” (Gurri, 2010)

One area in which such illiteracy is particularly harmful is intractable conflicts, where the media plays a paramount role. Ellis asserts that media has the power to promote conflict and encourage violence, and it does so by constructing a certain ethnic political reality for its target audience. Humans’ perceptions of reality are largely dependent on what they see and hear through the various media channels, so when the governmental authorities or the agents of influence in the given society present ideas, social practices, peoples, and relationships in a particular manner, such representation shapes the audience’s perception of the world it lives in. As it is, media plays an immeasurable role in acculturation and spread of distorted views of reality and various ideologies. A good example in the American context is Fox News, which appeals to a large portion of the conservative American population and helps spread fear, hate, and xenophobia.



In Israel, the mainstream media, which is almost entirely concentrated in the hands of the military, has always worked to serve the Zionist ideology by developing the Israeli military ethos over a civilian ethos, constructing a threatening image of the “other”, and feeding the positive image of the Israeli hero. (Peri, 2007) Powerful images that stick with me from my childhood in Israel include Arabs burning the Israeli flag in protest of the mere existence of the Jewish state, Palestinian children trained to be Jihadist suicide bombers in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the aftermath of terrorist attacks on the streets of Tel-Aviv or Jerusalem—all of which were captured on video and repeatedly played on all the television channels. And it is not only about shaping Israel’s own population’s understanding of the conflict; there is also an effort to reshape the Palestinian civilian society’s consciousness, with the purpose of discouraging insurrection, by means of psychological warfare. It is what Peri refers to as influencing the entire “theater of conflict”. To keep your ethno-political group cohesively tuned to the national mood and invested in the ideology you seek to permeate, you must also promote the notion of competing, irreconcilable worldviews with those of the “other”, or a “Clash of Civilizations”. (Ellis 2006)

The theory of the Clash of Civilizations, originally proposed by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington to argue that in the post-Cold War world, the main source of conflict between people will be their cultural and religious identities, has been utilized not only by Israelis to create the belief that their difference with Arabs are so fundamental and so unbridgeable that they simply “do not have a partner for peace”, a catch phrase often repeated by Israeli political figures; in the United States as well, especially post-9/11, the prevalent narrative promoted first by the Bush administration and then by various pundits and media figures has been that of the East versus the West, or more particularly, the Arab World versus the U.S. “Why do they hate us?” became the buzz question immediately following the attacks, and unfortunately, has since

then grown to encompass all Muslims, including those who are Americans. Films and TV have played a huge role in spreading the image of the barbaric, anti-American Arab/Muslim fundamentalist and perpetuating the fear of the secret terrorists next door.

With so much manipulation at the hands of political figures and communication experts, and given our relative inability to reject the influence that images exert on our subconscious, how do we combat the symbolic perpetuation of conflict and begin to build understanding and trust between clashing populations? My suggestion is to fight fire with flame, with the flame being art. In particular, I am referring to the mediums that tell stories through the use of multi-dimensional human characters— film and theater. Drawing on my experiences working at an American film production nonprofit called Unity Productions Foundation and on the set of an Israeli play called *Return to Haifa*, both of which are aimed at challenging the mainstream narratives in the respective societies by offering humane and complex portrayals of the “other”, I will show that those two artistic mediums can and do play a consequential role in reshaping our biased attitudes towards our perceived enemies. Testimonies from the artistic director of the theater which showcased *Return to Haifa*, the co-founder of Unity Productions Foundation, an opinionated film screening and dialogue participant, and middle school and high school students as well as teachers from nationwide screenings of UPF classroom screenings— will all highlight my argument that visual storytelling is the most powerful tool for undoing the influence of negative visual materials, precisely because it is the only source of information that can tap into those dark corners of the subconscious that are infected with media-imposed distortions of reality and alter them.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Art and Visual Storytelling

*“We are encouraged to view our fellow human beings with contempt and suspicion. The arts, whenever they call us together, invite us to view our fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity.” -Ben Cameron, Program Director for the Arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in NYC*

In their book *INROADS: The Intersection of Art & Civic Dialogue*, Korza and Bacon-Schaffer highlight the various ways in which art can be and has been instrumental in facilitating civic dialogue, not only as a spark, but also as an inviting force, a safe space, and as a form of dialogue in and of itself. The authors make the point that where others have been unsuccessful at moving forward dialogues and mobilizing groups of people or individuals to take up issues, the arts and the humanities have the potential of being a helpful catalyst.

As a spark, the arts can and have invoked a “sense of humanity” necessary for increasing understanding about current social issues and injustices, as well as shed light on our identity and the identity of those around us. In *arts-based* civic dialogue, the art or the artistic process serves as a focal point or catalyst for public dialogue on the issue at hand. Opportunities for dialogue are inherent for the art experience, since it inevitably evokes thoughts and emotions that require processing following the experience, be it internal or external.

When saying that art is itself a form of dialogue, the assertion is that art is dialogic by nature, since an internal dialogue between a work of art and the viewer is always present. Korza and Bacon-Schaffer state that “though difficult to measure, the mere presence of art in society has ripple effects that contribute to broad civic discourse.” (Assaf, Korza & Schaffer-Bacon, 2002)

As an invitation, art can bring together people with divergent perspectives who would normally not choose to engage with one another. It can also encourage the inclusion of those voices that are often left out of public discourse, either because they are forcefully silenced or because they are otherwise overlooked. What is more, by humanizing personal experiences, art can also create empathy among participants, thus creating a less judgmental environment that is more conducive to dialogue.

Maggie Herzig of the Public Conversations Project suggests that art can also be viewed as a central participant in a larger process of civic dialogue. As a participant, art can be a provocateur, mediate ideas, or might even present a fresh new perspective on a given issue.

Herzig explains:

*"[Art] will inspire and interest some people at some times. It will move people. It will be confusing or even a bit uncomfortable at times. It will invite people to reflect in new ways on their own perspectives. It will attempt to honor more than one perspective but it will not be perfect in this regard — it couldn't be. It will be offered in a spirit of authentic expression, and if it is received in a way that makes it hard for someone else to participate, it will ask that person to hang in there, say what's hard, and participate anyway. It will provoke but with love. It will say what it says then leave space — lots of space — for others."* (Assaf, Korza & Schaffer-Bacon, 2002)

Finally, as a space for civic dialogue, art can provide not just a physical environment for people to gather, but also a psychological, experiential and intellectual space advantageous to reflection, processing, and conversation. Since art, like dialogue, is risky, it is important to create a space where participants feel safe enough to voice their honest opinions and to hear out those whose views may conflict with their own.

What makes art so effective, the authors state, is that it often explores those issues that are unsettled or in conflict between people as well as within an individual. The power of art lies

in its ability to humanize social or political issues by shedding light on the human impact and ramifications.

### **On the Power of Film**

*“Movies help individuals articulate their feelings and moods that ultimately shape their behavior.”* (Kincheloe, 2010)

Much research has been done on the psychological impact of film on our understanding of the world around us and on its potential use in mobilizing people to create social change. One such example is Carl Plantinga, associate professor and film director of the Screenwriting and Film Studies Program at Hollins College, who compiled an anthology titled *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, a collection of essays all of which examine the relationship between a film spectator’s emotional reaction to a film and their response to the film characters. The approach employed by Carl Plantinga and the other contributors in this anthology proposes a cognitive-affective theory of film spectatorship whereby cognitions and emotions work together to elicit cognitive reactions from the spectators, translating into positive or negative regards of the characters in the film based on feelings such as anger, hatred, empathy, and identification. While there is no question about the cognitive reactions resulting from portrayal of villainous characters in film and on TV, the most relevant to my research is audiences’ responses to film characters and situations that make them identify with those characters and feel a sense of empathy towards them. Among the various film techniques and factors listed as triggers for such emotive identification are the ability to imagine being in the character’s shoes, if their situation and environment are easily be imagined as one’s own, and the character’s possession of one or more attractive character traits. By taking note of similar influences, it

becomes easier to strategize ways to influence audiences into changing their patterns of thinking in regards to groups of people typically portrayed negatively.

Television actor Peter MacNicol once said:

*“Films have not only delighted me, transported me, enchanted, terrified, and informed me; they have, in the best instances, shaped me. No priest or homily so calibrated my moral compass as did movies. No classroom lecture so humanized me as did Hollywood.”* (Kazlovic, 2007)

According to Anton Kazlovic, author of *Islam, Muslims and Arabs in the Popular Hollywood Cinema*, in our day and age, popular films have become a teaching tool for faith and spirituality, with more authority and influence on the matter than educational institutions and other sources of guidance. The number of religiously themed films in recent years has been overwhelming, and it includes films that depict Islam. “Hollywood films have the power to reinforce, alter or challenge ones’ most deep-sated beliefs, values and hopes, especially via erroneous images and negative stereotypes”, says Kazlovic. The most obvious example for that is the stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs in feature films following 9/11, which have helped incite fear, distrust, and hate among Americans in particular. Three archetypes that Arab-Muslims are most often depicted as are: billionaires, belly dancers, and bombers, who are presented as “heathen, uncivilized, anti-modern, unreasoning, cruel, antagonistic, obsessive, rascally, barbaric, punitive, blood-thirsty, villainous, dissolute, hot-tempered, money-grabbers, lustful, polygamous, patriarchal or bumbling buffoons”. Just as in the past the favorite American villains were the Red Indians, Communists and Nazis, now that spot has been taken by Muslims, who are most often depicted as terrorists, so much so that the Muslims-as-terrorist film has now become a genre or subgenre in and of its own. Examples include: *Federal Agents vs. Underworld, Inc.*, *Black Sunday*, *Delta Force*, *Executive Decision*, *Rules of Engagement*, and

*The Siege*. What is more, not only terrorist films present such negative images of Islam; so do Disney cartoons such as *Aladdin*, and war films like *Three Kings*. Positive portrayals of Muslims and Arabs on the big or small screen are unfortunately very uncommon.

The solution presented by Kazlovic is adopting the *via negativa* (negative witnessing) strategy, which requires engagement with and examination of the negative portrayals in films in place of rejecting them, to counter-balance the dominant voices within the intellectual discourse. An additional step is studying films as an approach to interreligious dialogue, which entails gathering Muslims and Christians to watch films together and deconstruct the distorted images presented to them. He states, “Seeing one’s faith through another’s eyes is intrinsically enlightening, and once the errors, stereotypes and mechanisms of manipulation are revealed, its harmful effect can start to be corrected or neutralized.” By becoming more informed ourselves, we can begin to pressure filmmakers, producers, and screenwriters to amend the inaccuracies and wrongful depictions and avoid repeating them in the future.

A filmmaker who has taken a similar approach to the one advocated by Kazlovic, one that involves catalyzing discussions around films, and put into action is Robert Greenwald, noted for his critical documentaries on Fox News and the Bush administration, *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election* (2002); *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About The Iraq War* (2003), and the founder of Brave New Films, a media company that has produced documentary films such as *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006) and *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*. In an interview on *Documentary as Political Activism*, Greenwald was asked to what extent he believed film could affect social change. Greenwald’s response was that the film in and of itself is not sufficient for mobilizing viewers. What makes a film affective beyond simply raising awareness of an issue, is efforts by civic groups that are done in conjunction with the film

screenings. According to him, it is the action component that leads to specific changes. When asked whether he was mostly preaching to the choir and not reaching out beyond his supportive base of left-wingers, Greenwald responded that while he did find it crucial to stimulate the base for their continuous support, he was also making efforts to reach a broader ranges of viewers, and said that the best strategy to do that was a large-scale distribution of DVDs. In such a way, his films are bound to be viewed by people who would not normally choose to view them, for instance if they are shown in a church gathering or at a school. Not to mention that people are more likely to debate an issue if they are among relatives (because who does not have relatives they do not disagree with?) and familiar community members. Finally, Greenwald was asked, in general terms, what he thought was the role of documentary film in the context of his political strategy in recent years, to which he responded that the success of films as a tool to tell stories that are focal to our lives is extremely important, and that it was only going to become a more central player as the culture becomes more visual.

### **UPF and 20KD**

Unity Productions Foundation (UPF), the non-profit I have interned at for my RPP, defines its mission as “creating peace through the media”. Founded in 1999, UPF is an educational media organization that uses the power of film to bolster greater understanding and dialogue between people from different faith and cultural backgrounds. UPF does so by producing documentary films for both television broadcast and theatrical release, and implementing long-term educational campaigns through its outreach initiative, *20,000 Dialogues*. The rationale behind it is best articulated in the organization’s mission statement: “We are convinced of the power of media to empower citizens with greater understanding and to nourish pluralism in America.”



Since it was founded in 1999, UPF's executive producers and founders, Michael Wolfe and Alex Kronemer, have produced three nationally broadcast films for PBS, three other widely-distributed PBS films, and one full-length film for theatrical release. Most of these films have been internationally distributed. The list of films includes:

1. *Mohammad: Legacy of a Prophet*—a documentary that tells the story of Prophet Mohammed and examines the impact of his legacy through a number of contemporary Muslim Americans who live by his example.

2. *Prince Among Slaves*—a film that recounts the remarkable true story of Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori, a prince from West Africa who was made a slave in the American South and negotiated his own freedom 40 years later.

3. *Talking Through Walls*—a documentary that explores some of the difficulties facing American Muslims since 9/11 by focusing on a Zia Rahman, a man who set out to build a mosque in his community and after encountering much resistance from local residents, formed a coalition that included a Catholic Priest, two Rabbis, and a Buddhist who joined Zia to support his efforts and helped him get the mosque built.

4. *Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain*—a film that presents the accomplishments of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, as they co-existed, collaborated, and thrived together for a period of 700 years in al-Andalusia.

5. *On a Wing and a Prayer*—a documentary that follows a Pakistani-American named Monem Salam and his family, he attempts to achieve a lifelong dream of obtaining a pilot's license and overcomes the challenges facing him in a post-9/11 reality.

6. *Allah Made Me Funny*—a film that features live stand-up performances by Azhar Usman, Preacher Moss and Mohammed Amer, who poke fun at both Muslims and non-Muslims, thereby inviting people to think outside of their cultural prejudices.

7. *Inside Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*—a documentary that presents the findings of the world’s first major Muslim opinion poll, conducted by the Gallup organization.

UPF’s films have been viewed by approximately 150 million people worldwide and have gained dozens of national awards. Current projects in the works include a documentary called *The Paris Mosque*, which recounts the remarkable story of an interfaith network that worked through the Great Mosque of Paris during WWII to save Jews from the Nazis under the Vichy regime, and a short film called *My Fellow American*, which is accompanied by an extensive outreach campaign meant to encourage Americans to stand up for their Muslim neighbors and defend their civic rights.

In accordance with Robert Greenwald’s approach, UPF mobilizes groups and individuals nationwide to view its films and engage in discussion afterwards. Like Greenwald, UPF also works to reach a broad base of viewers, beyond its immediate Muslim American supporters. It does so through its outreach arm, *20,000 Dialogues*. A nationwide peacebuilding initiative based in Washington, DC, *20KD* uses UPF films to promote interfaith dialogue, pluralism, and civic engagement by offering a platform to discuss relevant issues of today. Since 2008, *20,000 Dialogues* has launched over 10,000 group discussions. The ultimate goal of *20,000 dialogues*, as implied in its name, is to stimulate a total of 20,000 group discussions nationwide. Using online marketing, partnerships with various national organizations, and extensive outreach to high schools and libraries, the initiative has been able to identify individuals and institutions interested in conducting small and large-scale public programs. It has partnered with prominent

Muslim, Christian, Jewish and interfaith groups to host dialogue events nationwide — with more than 80,000 participants in classrooms, community centers, living rooms, government offices and religious congregations. *20,000 Dialogues* offers anyone interested in hosting a dialogue a free UPF DVD of their choice and online resources such as discussion guides, marketing materials, etc. It measures its impact both by the ripple effect that it creates, that is to say, by the number of participants that it inspires to start dialogues within their own communities, as well as by participant evaluations that every event organizer is required to collect at the beginning and at the end of each screening and dialogue event. Participant evaluations demonstrate the unequivocal power of film-based dialogues in breaking down stereotypes and increasing understanding of Islam and Muslims. More on that will be elaborated in the findings section.

### **On the Power of Theater**

A leading figure in the theater world who applied theatrical techniques to give voice to oppressed populations through his most influential work, *Theater of the Oppressed* is the Brazilian theatre director, writer and politician, Augusto Boal. In Schaedler's article, *Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and How to Derail Real-Life Tragedies with Imagination*, he recounts the ways in which he was able to apply Boal's Theater of the Oppressed techniques to help Portuguese immigrants in his English class to improve their literacy through expressing their social and political struggles. He explains why he chose to use Boal's techniques by outlining their fundamental principles: "1) To help the spectator become a protagonist of the dramatic action so that s/he can 2) apply those actions s/he has practiced in the theater to real life." The core belief behind the Theater of the Oppressed is that "every human being is theater, and theater is necessarily political". One particularly powerful technique, utilized by both Boal and

Schaedler, is the Forum Theater. In this technique, actors improvise a given story of oppression, and the spectators are invited to intervene by stopping the action, jumping in to replace a character, and improvising a different ending. The purpose of Forum Theater is to allow the active “spect-actors” to look at past and present situations from a new perspective as well as to practice for the future. As Schedler puts it, here lies a “rehearsal for the revolution”. Schaedler concludes his learning from the teaching experience by saying:

*“Theater stimulates dialogue and creates critical consciousness. It is a nonviolent approach to problem solving, shows people that there is not only one frame of reference in the world, challenges traditional power roles in the classroom, stimulates imagination and creativity, and strikes people in a unique way that a lecture will likely not.”* (Schaedler, 2010)

### **Return to Haifa**

To a degree, Boal’s “rehearsal for the revolution” took form in the Israeli play *Return to Haifa*, which performed at the D.C. Jewish Community Center In January 2011. There I had the opportunity to take part by working on the set as the caption operator (the play is in Hebrew and Arabic). *Return to Haifa*, produced and performed by the Israeli Cameri theater, is based on a novella written by the celebrated Palestinian writer and past member of the PFLP, Ghassan Kanafani. What makes the novella and the play unusual is that they humanize both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by simultaneously acknowledging the Israeli narrative of the Holocaust and the Palestinian narrative of the *Nakba*. Not unlike Boal’s Forum Theater, it allowed the viewers, who later became participants discussing the issues raised in the play, to gain a new perspective on the past and imaginatively rehearse for the future. At the end of each of performance, the theater held a panel discussion with Jewish and Palestinian scholars and activists, and many interesting conversations came out of them.

In her article *Return to Haifa Confronts Holocaust Victims with Palestinian Refugees*, Journalist Ety Diamant reviews the Cameri Theater play while weaving in her own voice and experiences as a daughter of holocaust survivors, thus directly addressing the deeper significance of such a production. To explain why her mother was not interested in seeing the play or hearing about the suffering of the Palestinian people, Diamant points to a trend among holocaust survivors and their second and third generations: while the survivors tend to retreat into their own trauma and justify the displacement of Palestinians with their own displacement, many from the second and third feel that it was morally unjustifiable to impose such injustice onto another people, regardless of the scope. Thus, it is the latter that actively seek a solution to the decades-long conflict. The ending of the play, as Diamant denotes, is very different from the ending in Ghassam Kanafani's novella, which the play was adapted from, and is clearly meant to give a message of hope and inspire Israeli audiences. Instead of the original call to arms by Sa'id, who promises to return and take back everything the Israelis had stolen from him and his people, the play ends with the two parties in conflict agreeing to spend the night in the same house in Haifa before the Palestinian couple can safely return to Ramallah. Such an ending hints at a possibility of dialogue and reconciliation. Also pointed out by Diamant is the fact that "the uniqueness of the story lied in Kanafani's courage in grappling—for the first time in Arab and Palestinian literature—with the Holocaust, and his demonstration of empathy towards the Jews in the story."

Despite the relatively equal treatment of both narratives, many Israelis and American Jews were not pleased with the mere acknowledgment of the opposing narrative and with the fact that the play was based on a novella written by a Ghassan Kanafani, a former member of the PFLP (and killed in a Mossad operation in 1972). Both in Israel and in Washington, DC, the Camri Theater production of *Return to Haifa* was met with protests from right-wing Israelis and

Jewish Americans. Palestinians were not always happy either and many times protested the appropriation of Kanafani's novella by the Israelis. The following is what Boaz Gaon, the play's screenwriter, had to say about the reactions in an interview with Diamant:

*“As a theatergoer, you have to directly confront the other side, without intermediaries to protect you. The most frightening thing that can happen is that you will find yourself identifying with the pain of the other side. One cannot close one eye and think that you see the whole picture. I believe that there is not one person in the country who will not be shaken by the play.”* (Diamant, 2010)

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In my inquiry, I conducted three in-depth interviews, one with Michael Kronemer, the co-founder of Unity Productions Foundation and the co-producer of all its films, one with Ari Roth, the Artistic Director of Theater J at the DC JCC, who was responsible for bringing the Israeli play *Return to Haifa* to his theater and facilitated many of the post-play discussions, and finally, one with a participant who shall be referred to as Lara, who attended a UPF film screening and was very involved in the post-film discussion. In addition, I compiled testimonies from the hundreds of students' post-film viewing evaluations collected by UPF through its educational *Islam and Civics* campaign, to examine their learning and growth as a result of the film experience. The identities of those students remained anonymous. What is more, I collected a number of teacher testimonies, commenting on the impact UPF films had had in their classrooms. Permission to post all the above-mentioned reflections online has been granted to the UPF Development office, for promotional purposes, thus eliminating the need to request individual consents. Finally, I assembled several posts from the Theater J Blog, where spectators of *Return to Haifa* commented on the play after having watched it and taken part in the ensuing discussion.

## FINDINGS

### The Power of the Media

Two of the interviewees, Michael Wolfe and Lara, commented on the huge role media plays nowadays in shaping people's perceptions of their reality and of one another. While both agreed on the dangers that lie in the growing influence of media and of the agents who manipulate it for their own purposes, there was no question for either of them that such an influence had enough weight to affect democratic processes, be it a negatively or positively.

In explaining how he came to found a film production organization, Michael spoke extensively about the complicated and debilitating power the various media forms hold in our present society. He said:

*“The role of media is as complicated as the society that it serves, or in some cases, debilitates... I would say that on the one hand, there is an enormous potential for information in television media in particular, and online media, those two places, which are ultimately going to converge technologically. Tremendous opportunity for shared knowledge and there's a, I hope not equal, powerful force for confusion and misinformation and a debilitating influence as well.”*

Michael went on to contrast the employment of media propaganda today and in the past, as was done during periods of elections through the printed press, and commented on the evolution of propaganda methodologies and their nature in our technologically advanced culture:

*“There's a tradition of this (media propaganda) in the United States, but it's much more complicated now because there's a television or two in every house, and there are computers everywhere, and the notion of a gate keeper media is disappearing so anybody's say can have weight, and that allows for a lot more propaganda and a lot more opinion and a lot less analysis based on facts.”*

Despite the drawbacks of the accessibility of media and potential manipulation in the hands of negative forces, Michael emphasized the paramount importance of the presence of media, in all

its perspectives. According to him, such a dynamic public square of voices and viewpoints allows for counter-balancing, and that is what democracy is really all about.

*“Without that media, I think things would be worse than they are. There’s a kind of a counter-balancing that goes on. This is a dynamic world and a dynamic society and there’s change of foot and very rapid, and powerful and somewhat uncontrollable change occurring in this period of history and it’s not going to resolve itself, but through the media, it’s possible to give people a platform to learn and discuss and kind of reinvent the public square a little bit... I think it’s useful. Any democracy is dead if the public square isn’t fairly active and somewhat informed. Otherwise, you can’t have a democracy. You might as well just close up shop. And the media has in many cases become the public square. And I think the arts as well, I mean, entertainment and film and everything, really, is a part of this public square voice.”*

Lara, in turn, expressed her concern about the continuing hindrance of the negative voices in the media to the impact of more positive representations and the cyclical emergence of those harmful forces for different political agendas:

*“I just feel like, with the 2012 election already starting, people’s fear is very potent and manipulating people’s fear works politically. You get people to vote for you because you say there’s ‘danger, danger, danger, and I can keep you safe, and the other guy can’t keep you safe’. So I worry about that...”*

### **Ignorance as the Problem**

The second theme that came up was ignorance as the cause of susceptibility to the propaganda of the mainstream media. Reasons for such ignorance that were mentioned by the interviewees included: lack of exposure to individuals from the group demonized in the media, unfamiliarity with the social issues faced by those individuals, and the inability to filter negative images through a critical eye, or what Gurri refers to as the “visual persuasion gap”. Solutions offered here include exposure through film, personal contact, and conversation.

Lara, a graduate from the John Hopkins School of Advances International Studies (SAIS), is a well-informed young woman who follows the news with an analytical eye and who



showed her familiarity with the issue of discrimination of Muslim Americans during the dialogue that ensued the screening of UPF's film *Talking through Walls*. She came to the event with a close friend of hers, in part to expose her sheltered friend who is "sort of wide-eyed about stuff like that" to the everyday reality of Muslim Americans, as it is depicted in the film. Lara explained:

*"Any time we encounter something like that, it's always an eye-opening experience to her, which, to me... It always strikes me that, 'wow, I can't believe she hasn't already noticed this or thought about it', and it makes her think, and she always wants to talk about it afterwards."*

This insight made Lara reflect on how the media manages to perpetuate prejudices against Muslims. To her, the answer is the viewers' ignorance and inability to see through the manipulation that is taking place:

*"You know, I would like to think that most people, when they really recognize some of the discrimination and the fear mongering and all of the divisiveness that's happening, it would be troubling to them. So I just have been very conscious of it, and maybe it's because I went to the School of International Relations."*

Lara also mentioned friends of hers, with whom she grew up in a "very Jewish neighborhood in New York", who are noticeably biased against Muslims, and explained that their ignorance is also the result of not knowing any Muslims first-hand:

*"And then I have other friends... and I'm thinking of my sister's husband and some extended family, who are just maybe a little less thoughtful and they just lump... You know, I think if they really sat down and had a conversation with them, they'd probably think twice, but they don't usually think that hard, and they just make stereotypes pretty quickly."*

When asked how her friends would react to watching a UPF film, Lara argued that exposure in and of itself is not enough to open the eyes of those who are blinded by the media propaganda; willingness and open-mindedness are essential prerequisites for a film or any other intervention to make an impact:

*“I think the willingness is... the degree to which people recognize the bigger picture. The people I know who I think may not be convinced by the movie will say, ‘ok, that is one case, in which maybe it was a nice man in a nice mosque but most of them aren’t like that’. I think that would be the argument.”*

Michael Wolfe also spoke at length about the shortsightedness of the American population in regards to the burning social issues of the day, and placed the phenomenon that frames current discrimination of Muslim Americans in the context of American history:

*“History in the U.S. in one sense is a succession almost by decades of new arrivals... passing through, being run through a complot of social critique by those who were already here. There’s always been the ‘real Americans’, that’s the people who got off of the boat 20 or 100 years earlier and the new arrivals... The films that we make have to do with looking at Muslims as equally important arrivals, because they’re the latest new kid on the block, you might say. And like certain of those groups, I would say particularly the Japanese and the Germans, they are here right now at a very difficult time because war is mixed up with, wars between the U.S. and parts of the Muslim world are mixed up with the Muslim presence in America, they’re confused in the same way that the Japanese during the Second World War were confused in the mainstream American mind, with people 5,000-8,000 miles away who were Japanese who were docking American shores... so I’m thinking that the Muslim presence in the U.S. is in the same situation right now.”*

In light of such a reality, Michael explained how the work of UPF is an attempt at serving as a catalyst for learning and social change:

*“I do think that on balance, the work that we have been doing with a hot button issue that is latent with racism and anger and stereotyping and misrepresentation and in the long run the kind of work that we’re doing, I think, has a positive role in society, to being people to a place where they can have a conversation instead of a shouting match. There people begin to admit that things are more complicated than they think, or would like them to have been, and that in order to really analyze and begin to solve some of the very complicated problems that we have in the world today, people have to think hard and look deep and get over their initial reactions to differences... it’s a vey hard thing to do.”*

## The Jewish Bias

A theme that came out in all three in-depth interviews is the bias of Jews, Americans and Israelis alike, against Muslims. Whether it is in Israel or in the United States, there are perceived tensions between the two and widespread rejection of the Muslim narratives in the minds of Jewish people. The underlying reason for that, as it came out from the interviews and based on my own experience, is the ethno-political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and the extension of that animosity to Diaspora Jews outside Muslims and Arabs.

Ari Roth, the Artistic Director of Theater J at the DC Jewish Community Center, described the major obstacle to bringing the Israeli Cameri Theater to perform their already controversial play *Return to Haifa* as the resistance within the local Jewish and Israeli community. The first to express the displeasure of such a venture were the Israeli Embassy:

*“The unsupportive response in certain small sections of the Jewish community or the Israeli community here, and the Ambassador, Michael Oren, was not happy with this production, even though he received a couple thousands dollars to throw a breakfast on behalf of the Cameri Theater, he was not happy to do it... He never saw the production. He watched the video, and he accused the DVD and the adaptation of creating a false parallel between the Shoah and the Nakba. He felt that they used putting the tragedies on equal level, and for that reason, he felt, and he told all 34 of us gathered at his home, that morning on January 22<sup>nd</sup> that they didn't want this play to come here. ‘Welcome to my house, we didn't want you here’, because of the false parallels that are in this play, the historical inaccuracies, and ultimately, the fact that Israel is under an existential threat not only from Iran, but through efforts to delegitimize and denigrate it and tell slanderous lies about its history, and that he felt and his cultural attaché felt that this play spoke poorly on behalf of Israeli history... There was an effort, after all was done, to criticize the JCC for allowing its program, the theater, to present it. And there was criticism of the Jewish Federation for giving money to the JCC to make it happen.”*

Having been there for all sixteen performances and post-performance discussions, I personally felt this negative attitude reflected in many of the comments made by Israeli and Jewish American spectators, who were furious about the adaptation showing Israel in such a

negative light and equating the plight of European Jews during the Holocaust to the plight of Palestinians in 1948 and after.

A recent visitor at the UPF office in D.C. made the comment that without the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there would be no need for all the Jewish-Muslim dialogue initiatives that are so popular in the interfaith circles in the U.S. these days. From personal experience, I can say that this statement is probably true. I myself have noticed that there is a prevalent belief among American Jews that regardless of how friendly their Muslim friends behave in this country, if push came to shove, they would abandon all current alliances to stand up with their Muslim brothers in Palestine against the Israelis. Thus, just as they have difficulty acknowledging the Palestinian narrative in the Middle East, so do some American Jews refuse to accept the narrative of injustice and discrimination as it related to Muslims in the U.S.

Lara addressed this sentiment was and spoke of her disappointment with her Jewish childhood friends who hold fear and hatred towards Muslim Americans:

*“Some of them, it has to do with... I have some friends who are really liberal politically, but when it comes to Israel and Judaism, they get extremely, extremely... and so I’m thinking of one friend right now when I say this, and she’s really an extreme case, but, you know, she’s lived in Israel. She just does not trust Muslims, and she really believes that there is very good reason t be suspicious and fearful and to treat... I don’t know about one-on-one basis, but I tell you, if they tried to open a mosque in her neighborhood, she would be there and she would be at the forefront of the protest about it. And again, a lot of it has to do with her experience and feelings as a Jew.”*

Even Michael Wolfe, whose goal in producing films about Islam and Muslims is not to influence Jewish audiences per se, recalled of all the positive feedback he had gotten on his work, a particular letter from a Jewish viewer, which moved him more than any feedbacks he had gotten from Muslim or Christian viewers:

*“I’ve been working with a publisher to edit a book I’m working on, so in the course of all that they got hold of a copy of our film about Muslim Spain, Cities of*

*Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain, and it described the history of seven or so hundred years, where Jews, Muslims and Christians lived all in one corner in Europe and had a pretty exciting civilization. And he wrote me a couple of days ago, said he'd watched it, and wrote, 'You know, when I picked this film up I thought I wasn't going to like it. I thought it was going to be an apology for Islam and Muslims, and you know, it would paint a rosy picture and would be trying to convince everybody that everything in Spain was always glorious and good because Muslims were there', and he wrote 'I read enough about history to know that it was up and down, that there were good and bad times, and there are always good bad times'. And this guy is Jewish. And he's in his 60s I guess. He runs a publishing company that's pretty successful and he's a fairly well-read guy. And he wrote to say that this was a very balanced and intriguing film that taught him a lot and didn't try to fool him. And I thought that was really the highest compliment I could get about that movie."*

### **The Value of the Counter-Narrative**

Another theme that came out in the interviews is that of the value of presenting a counter-narrative to the predominant narrative, for building bridges of understanding and trust. Both Ari Roth and Michael Wolfe described the reactions they had encountered in their respective productions, positive and negative, and the significance they saw in challenging the predominant narrative by presenting reality from multiple perspectives.

Ari Roth spoke of why he chose to take upon Theater J what turned out a huge endeavor of hosting the Israeli play *Return to Haifa*:

*"It was the first time out theater had presented an Israeli theater company grappling with a Palestinian version of Zionist history. It was looking at how Israelis interpreted a Palestinian novella, which was broad-minded enough to consider the history of the Jewish pioneers, the Jewish settlers, who after the holocaust came to settle in Israel, and it looks at the wrenching impact of their coming and raising a family in the house that had been left behind, and of course the baby that had been left behind as well. So, this was a way of putting a different lens and seeing a formative juncture in Israeli history, and to see it through both Israeli and Palestinian eyes simultaneously in this fusion adaption of smashing a Palestinian voice and an Israeli voice together in the joint authorship of the work, so that promised to be not only interesting, but potentially a very wise kind of synthesizing, "*

As previously mentioned, many of the responses of Jewish Americans and Israelis to the play were negative, precisely because of the simultaneous acknowledgment of both narratives. However, unfavorable reactions also came from the Palestinian spectators, who felt that the play was yet another example of the appropriation of a Palestinian artifact by the Israelis. Even the widow of Ghassan Kanafani, the late author of the novella on which the play was based, showed some hesitance about the adaptation of the play for American audiences:

*“The challenge of making the project involved (also) getting permission from the Kanafani estate.. Anni Khanafani, the surviving wife, the widow of Ghassan Kanafani, getting her permission for this play to happen here. Now, of course, it didn’t happen in English. That’s because she didn’t allow it to happen in English. Why wouldn’t she allow it to happen? Because there was concern that an English-speaking public, an American public, might mistake this adaptation for a definitive English language adaptation. No, in fact this was a specifically Israeli adaptation, and so that was the reason she insisted on it being performed in Hebrew, only in Hebrew.”*

Then again, there were plenty of very positive responses to the play, both from Jewish and Muslim spectators, and I was witness to it myself:

*“Many, many, many others thought that the play spoke well for the Israeli culture’s ability to assimilate a critique of its own version of history, and to pose those two together.”*

Whatever the reactions to the play were, they were never neutral, they came in abundance, and we were surprised to see that on most days the majority of the audience stayed for the post-play discussion to voice them. Here lies, according to Ari Roth, the true value of telling this traumatic story from the point of view of both sides; it is not in the approval, but in the dialogue that is sparked as a result:

*“There’s no such thing as the perfect discussion after. They’re organic, they’re authentic, they are unpredictable, they are semi-facilitated, they are semi-controlled, and by time and all this, but ultimately, they were very, very healthy.”*

Similarly to Ari Roth's experiences, Michael Wolfe mentioned the disapproval of some Muslim viewers of the narrative showcased in one of UPF's films, *Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain* because. Apparently, they were unhappy with it because "they wanted a more positive across the board portrayal of Muslims who never made a mistake." However, just like Ari's concern was not pleasing the Jewish community, what matters to Michael is not pleasing Muslim audiences, but telling what really happened, across all narratives:

*"I'm more interested in getting the truth out, getting the real story out, because nobody's perfect, and the idea that somehow, if people just understood that we are, all of us, struggling to be reasonable human beings in always difficult settings."*

### **The Impact of Film and Theater**

Not surprisingly, a common thread thought the interviews was the impact of theater and film as art forms, particularly in transporting participants into the reality of the characters through their stories, sparking dialogue within and between the spectators, and creating a space for them to engage with one another in conversation.

In regards to theater, Ari Roth said:

*"Theater is unique in that it has live participants in there who are exchanges in dialogue amongst each other on stage, but in the moment they are having a kind of dialogue, they are helping to facilitate and transmit and involve an audience in a dialogue as the play is going on. Then those same artists have the ability to step out of character a little bit, or the director has the ability to walk up on stage, having manipulated the action in rehearsals, he now can be a part of the conversation with the audience. It's similar to a film, and then you have the director come out and talk about the process of making it and sort of getting there with them. It's a highly interactive way of both using a story to transport people into the world of this narrative and then to step out and have people sort of intellectualize their experience of this journey."*

The format Ari was referring to is the exact format used by UPF with its audiences: first transport people into the world of the narrative using compelling storytelling, and then invite

them for a discussion, both with one another, and often times, with the makers of the films and associated scholars. Storytelling, in fact, is what makes art forms such as film and theater stand out in comparison to the other mainstream media. I asked Michael Wolfe why he particularly focused on making documentary films as opposed to feature films, which tend to be more popular, he responded:

*“Feature film, if you think about it, gets a big buzz for 5 or 6 weeks tops. Then the film is replaced by other films. And that’s not much of a platform for real learning or for changing hearts and minds... With a documentary, I do know that we’ve made 7 films, and so far, although several of them are on so-called contemporary topics, all 7 of them have been evergreen in the sense that several years later they still command audiences... I don’t have at my command the statistics to compare the two forms, but you don’t really have to because they’re both there. It isn’t one or the other. It’s both. And it’s YouTube. And it’s the radio. And it’s the internet. I mean, all of these ways of telling a story go into making something that is our public entertainment. And it’s very vital, and it’s very lively, and the rest of the world is very interested in it.”*

Michael went on to discuss the paramount importance of storytelling in every society, and how it is the stories, not the numbers or figures, that last throughout history as the legacy of a civilization:

*“ I do believe the most important thing that a civilization creates is not its business or its money; it’s art, its voice, its storytelling, that’s what we remember. When we look back at Greece and Rome, no one remembers who made the big bucks... we forget about, we undervalue, we ignore this incredibly rich and powerful machine here of information and entertainment... it’s really something... you look at the Middle Ages and you think about politics, build why do you even know anything about medieval politics? Because you’ve read Dante. Or why do you know English history so well? Because you’ve watched Shakespeare. That’s why. How come you get it? Right up until now, today... it’s always the same. The storytelling, in all of its different forms, is a very rich and powerful thing.”*

In regards to the advantage of using storytelling as an invitation for dialogue and the characteristics that make it a safer space for discussing difficult topics like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ari Roth said:



*“I think it becomes a much more democratic way and a much more focused way of having people speak to the situation by giving them a narrative to sort of focus the discussion. You know, when you begin to talk about Palestinian-Israeli relations today, the question is, where do you start? You say with claim and counter and claim and this, which piece of history, but to have an author and a series of artists involves in collaborating to present a narrative... that’s your portal, you know, you’re going to frame the discussion of what happened in Haifa in 1948 based in Sayeed and Safiye’s experience, their leaving, and Miriam and Efraim’s settling into the house. These are very, very specific things that you can then project a whole series of other beliefs, feelings, and most importantly, questions, things that are unclear that might become more clear by virtue of having a public discussion around them.”*

What emerges here is the idea that one major advantage of storytelling is that through the characters and situations described, it provides us with a frame of reference for approaching the larger topic or story at hand. Lara made a comment that fits into this perspective:

*“I think the film really made the dialogue. I think it would have been very different... It would have been much more difficult to just have the whole context, because it’s when it’s facts and figures it’s very amorphous, and it’s not really... so I think the movie was definitely, I think it would have been much less effective without the movie.”*

Finally, to take a good story from film or a play to the next level—an effective discussion—there needs to be a group of people who make a positive contribution to the discussion, and it is the positive attitude, willingness to listen and to learn, as well as the diversity of opinions, that make a discussion fruitful. Lara said:

*“I think that those types of things always really are determined by the group of people you get. I think it was really good that we had four Muslim women there, and there were only eight of us, and that was really good, especially for my friend, who I know she doesn’t have Muslim friends and I don’t know how often she hears...because what they hear in films... actually have a conversation in person...And I think the Muslim women there were great because they were... I’ve seen some of my Muslim friends get this way where they’d just get irritated at people who haven’t thought about it or don’t realize what’s happening, so these people were very kind to my friend and patient, so I think that went really well.”*

## Connection and Emotional Responses

The emotional responses elicited by the play *Return to Haifa* and the UPF films as a result of the audiences' empathy with the characters are a theme all three interviewees spoke of extensively. For them, the key to the success of both enterprises in affecting a change of mind is in influencing a change of heart, and the means to that end is telling compelling and relatable stories. Emotion became a sort of measurement tool, as the more emotionality and empathy Ari Roth and Michael Wolfe witnessed in their audiences, the more reassured they were of the effectiveness of their work in shifting the public discourse.

When Ari Roth began planning the arrival of the Israeli play to Theater J, his main concern was that because of linguistic barriers, audiences would not emotionally connect with the characters, and that such a disconnect would lead to the flop of the play in D.C.:

*"I think it was moving and uplifting to be concerned that people wouldn't care, wouldn't come, wouldn't identify, wouldn't connect. You go to all this trouble of taking an intriguing story and then you know the formidable obstacle of doing it in a foreign language. We've never done subtitles, and you worked subtitles on the show, you know how involves a process that was. But we had no idea if the audience would be going like this: reading, watching, reading, watching... I mean, that was the whole experience of the audience. Now, how annoyed would people be with that? Would they laugh at a joke? Would they care? Would they cry? The assumption was, and the budgeting for this was very pessimistic. Don't underestimate people's ability to be annoyed and people's ability to be detached. So we felt this was a very important project, but we did not have full confidence that it would connect."*

However, Ari's fears did not materialize, and the audience proved to very much connect with the characters and the narratives on a personal level, which was also evident to me, as I observed the various emotional reactions throughout the entire run of the show. Ari described his reaction:

*"So the huge relief, the huge joy, and the profound learning experience was to see a sense of, on a virtually unanimous basis every night, the level of engagement, the pin drop silence, the laughter, the intensity with which the performance unfolded was tremendous indication of the art, of the decision to bring it here, and then, the level of attentiveness in the conversations."*

What succeeded in eliciting strong emotional reactions from spectators, according to Ari, was not necessarily the metaphors for which many of the themes in the play stood, like the young Israeli soldier with two mothers representing the Israeli land fought over by two peoples, but the representations of those metaphors, that is to say, the personal, human stories of the characters depicted in the play.

*“The baseline reaction was that most people were extraordinarily moved, and again, the play might have had important arguments in it, but ultimately what makes this a much more unique contribution to the conversation about Israel and Palestine then and now is that it has this very strong emotional component to it: the meeting of two mothers, who ultimately are left alone to talk about their fears, their mutual, respective fears of losing their son.”*

The power of these stories is that everyone could relate to them on an individual level, whether they care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or not:

*“ It touches people who don’t even have to have an investment in the Israeli-Arab conflict; they can identify as parents of an adopted child, they can identify as parents who have children in a custody battle, they can identify as children who were torn by their parents in a parents’ conflict. And so it has this extraordinary way of meaning something very personal to a lot of different people.”*

To summarize the effectiveness of the play in sparking dialogue, Ari said:

*“(The play was) extremely successful. We had a huge rate of retention from who came to see the production and who stayed to hear the play and the follow-up conversations. I think the play, the art, was a very successful trigger for generating, illuminating conversation.”*

Still, for some who did have an investment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the play helped in many ways process thoughts and emotions that had been stirring inside of them and in many times suppressed (speaking from personal experience). As a tech assistant, a spectator, and an Israeli, what stood out for me the most in the discussions were comments by ex-Israelis who came to see the play and admitted to have been moved by the humanizing stories and to have better reconciled within themselves the weight of their heritage and history. Also noticeable were stories shared by Palestinian audience members about their childhood and

memories of the events depicted in the play. Almost every night there were tears, and “oohs” and “awws”, and very emotional testimonies on the part of Israelis/Jews and Palestinians alike. Perhaps the most common theme that came out of the discussions is gratitude for a play that acknowledges both narratives and the need for that sort of acknowledgment in moving forward with the ever-pending reconciliation and peace process.

Similarly to Ari, Michael Wolfe spoke of the humanizing stories that UPF is trying to tell through its films and the emotional response it hopes to elicit through them:

*“Some stories that underscore the fact that we are all human beings and that Muslim people share a lot of the same struggles, concerns, problems and joys, as everybody else, and to try in our humble way through storytelling to get people over the hump, out of this place where they think ‘I am better than you are’, where they think ‘your community’s worst behavior rendered, the worst things that the people in your community do is what all of you do’. This kind of fake judgment that we make of people... So to just try to level the playing field a bit, so that when a Muslim kid goes on to the playground in the fourth grade, he doesn’t have a bunch of people standing around him in a circle, pointing at him or her. That to me is kind of the goal really, to normalize relations, and it’s not simple as we see.”*

As for the film viewer I interviewed, Lara, she too talked about the impact of a relatable character on her response to the film:

*“The whole thing was very moving and you certainly and it was very focused on one man, and he was a very sympathetic character, especially when he got ill. You know, it would have probably been better had there been other Muslims who talked about their experience and feeling discriminated against. But he was a very sympathetic character and he certainly seemed like he was just a good representative because he was sympathetic and he seemed very sincere. So yeah, definitely moving.”*

In fact, the film was so moving for Lara and the friend that she brought along to the screening, that Lara expressed her desire to host a dialogue using one of UPF’s films with her more conservative and somewhat prejudiced family and friends of whom she spoke earlier. In UPF, that is precisely how we measure our success—by the interest we raise to share out films and starting discussions further from our base.

## Learning through Identification

Along with the proportion of the ripple effect created by UPF, we also measure our success by specific feedback provided to us by organizers of screening and dialogue events, in the form of pre-film viewing and post-dialogue evaluations. We consider an event successful if the participants show a deeper level of understanding Islam, of the issue of Islamophobia, and as Michael Wolfe put it, a recognition that despite apparent difference “we are all human beings and that Muslim people share a lot of the same struggles, concerns, problems and joys.”

The following are reflections of middle school and high school students following the screening of several UPF films in their classrooms, as noted in the evaluation forms sent to us by their teachers. Two main themes that emerge from these reflections are: 1) Identification and the realization that Muslim Americans are “just like us” and 2) A better understanding of Islam as well as the Muslim American experience in the U.S., as it relates to the prejudices and injustices inflicted on the community.

### 1) They Are Just Like Us

*“I have the same humor as the Muslim characters in ‘Allah Made Me Funny’ and I live the same type of life. My belief in God is one way I am different from them.” - Ryan, Pitman Middle School, NJ*

*“What I have in common with the Muslim characters in ‘Allah Made Me Funny’, is because I’m Spanish, people stereotype me. But I’m different from the Muslim characters because I don’t get stereotyped on planes.” - Fernando, Pitman Middle School, NJ*

*“The Muslim faith is very similar to Judaism and Christianity which are very accepted. The only reason they (Muslims) aren’t accepted is because of misconceptions.” - Dan, Pitman Middle School, NJ*

*“In ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’ one thing we all have in common is the American dream. We just have different cultures and ways of dressing.” - Shanira, Pitman Middle School, NJ*

*“What surprised me the most about ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’ is they act like normal people. I learned everyone is truly themselves despite stereotypes.”*

- Andrew, Pitman Middle School, NJ

*“What surprised me most about watching ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’ was that Muslims are so normal! I never really knew anything about them because I’ve never met one! They just want to become normal Americans treated with respect. We both want our natural rights to be recognized and want to live out our faith.”*

- Veronica, Plainfield High School, NJ

*“What surprised me about ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’ was that the Muslim wife did so many ‘American’ things. I found that I had a lot in common with the wife. She likes vacations, wants the best for her children, and was very involved in high school. We are only different in religion. I learned not all stereotypes about Muslims are real.”* - Crystal, Pitman Middle School, NJ

## 2) Growing Understanding

*“Every form of the Muslim faith is compatible with America, we just can’t tolerate it, apparently.”* - Joe, Pitman Middle School, NJ

*“In watching ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’ I learned that people were very sketchy and watching Muslims after 9/11. The film also gave me a better idea of Muslims and be more open-minded.”* - Andy, Pitman Middle School, NJ

*“In watching ‘On a Wing and a Prayer’, I feel Muslims are absolutely compatible with America. Islam holds many of the same teachings and upbringing that Christianity and Judaism hold. Their culture and teachings are wholesome and promote good and reject evil.”* - Augustine, Plainfield High School, NJ

Also revealing are testimonies from the teachers themselves, after having observed the transformation in their students. In consonance with the reflections from the students, the teachers report noticing: emotional connection and empathy, identification and a sense of “they are like us”, a deeper exploration of Islam, a better understanding of the Muslim American perspective, and a successful catalyst for discussion of hot topics of the day which became instrumental combating negative images from the media.

*“Regarding Inside Islam: Perhaps the most important thing my students got from watching Inside Islam was a sense that ‘they are Muslims’. That is to say, they realized that which motivates Muslims isn’t different from what motivates them: family, freedom, love of God, and honoring their faith. They discovered that ‘the*

*other' is not so 'other' after all. This allowed me to explore Islam with them more deeply than I might have been able to do otherwise. The less alien Muslims seemed, the more open they were to discovering what Muslims believe."*

- Rabbi Rami Shapiro, Professor Religious Studies, Middle TN St. University

*"I teach at a very diverse school, with many different cultures making up our school. Amongst the student population is a sizable Muslim population. As we watched the film, I could see understanding on all sides. Muslim students nodding their heads, feeling what the characters felt on a daily basis; and non-Muslim students, having true "ah-ha" moments, seeing what their peers go through—which some of them take for granted. On a Wing and a Prayer was a very positive learning experience for my students, it helped promote ideals of cultural respect and understanding, deeply valued ideals in my school district."*

- Mark A. Rummel, Social Studies, Henry Ford Early College, Dearborn Public Schools

Thanks to the students' ability to find commonalities with the Muslim characters and better understand their perspective and experience, teachers also report gaining a valuable space for discussing hot topics that are associated with Islam, such as 9/11, terrorism, and the Arab Spring—in a more informed and productive manner.

*"In discussion following a viewing of your video, On A Wing And A Prayer, my students mostly gravitated to the emotions of the individuals and situations portrayed, and did talk about how they could or do feel the same emotions. Viewing this film was a great avenue for students to explore their feelings regarding 'big rock' issues like terrorism, war, fear, faith and even family."*

- Joseph R. Naughton, Social Studies Teacher, R. Wood Center for Learning: Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program, Arcola, TX

*"The main benefit we had from viewing Inside Islam was to get a more human view of Muslims and their opinions. Following the World Trade Center bombing, Americans' view of Muslims became strongly linked to terrorism, but the candid surveys of Muslim opinion in Inside Islam help to make us realize that Muslims have many other facets as human beings. This makes the "Arab spring" of this year more understandable too."*

- Robert B. Reese, Ph.D, Associate Professor of Cross-Cultural Ministry, Elizabeth City, NC

*“Thank you again for sending this very useful documentary on Islam. I actually had it shown in two classes I teach on Islam and Islamic political thought. This was quite a rare educational opportunity especially for those students whose knowledge of Islam and Muslims often come from mainstream media. They described that as eye-opening and many students said they learned things about Islam and Muslim that they never heard in any other place or read in any book before. Many students said that this work must be a required part on any course on Islam, Middle East Studies, comparative religions, and the like.”*

- Mohammad H. Faghfoory, Professor, Department of Religion, The Middle East Institute, The Elliott Center for International Affairs, George Washington University

Reflections of similar nature came from moved spectators of *Return to Haifa*, and were shared on Theater J’s blog. The following are some of the ones that stood out:

*“What an evening! Tonight, 18 Shevat 5771, marks the beginning of the Jahrzeit of my sisters Eva and Leah, killed in Auschwitz February 8, 1944 when they were eight and six. ‘Return to Haifa’ deserves to be celebrated for the political questions it dares to ask. But is the personal tragedy that captivated me. As I listened especially to Saffiyeh but also to Sa’id and Miriam and Efraim, I couldn’t help but think of the number of times, so many years after they were presumed to have been killed, that I wondered whether my sisters might have survived after all, whether like others they might have been adopted and raised by a Christian family. A fantasy, of course, a fantasy so secret I never even dared speak about it with my own mother, but a fantasy and an unending quest shared by millions around the globe whose sister, brother, son or daughter have been swept away by war. It’s the spare portrayal of personal tragedy reminiscent of Greek tragedy that will remain with me for a long time and that makes “Return to Haifa” not just relevant today and to the Middle East but timeless and universal. Thank you Cameri and thank you Ari and Theater J for an unforgettable and deeply moving theatrical experience.” - Al Munzer*

*“I felt that your production was very successful; not only in that it was as moving and painful as the original novella, but also on its own, as piece of substantive theater. I was completely riveted to the characters and their respective dramas.”*  
- Udi Pladott

In addition, an entry written by a present theater staff mentioned a particularly emotional and telling reaction from the audience, which I remember very vividly as well, of an Israeli mother who openly said: “I don’t my children seeing this play, not until AFTER they’ve finished their military service. They need to be hard.” The comment below this quote says:



*“This play will soften hardened hearts, even as it will challenge the softened heart with its hard and unwatered down rhetoric. No feel good journey is this Return. But honest. And difficult. And necessary. And eye-opening. Heart-opening too.”*

The play was indeed difficult for many to watch, but it also softened and transformed many hearts and minds, including my own. The same can be said about UPF’s films.

The significance of the findings is that they all point to the fact that theater and film, as mediums of visual storytelling, do indeed provide an inspiration, an invitation, a space, a stimulant that is dialogic in and of itself, and a spark both for internal reevaluation of preconceived notions and for group dialogue. More than anything, the interviews and testimonies show that appealing to the emotion of the public, through humanizing characters and telling universally-relatable narratives, makes an enormous difference in the ways in which individuals of all ages, nationalities, and personal loyalties perceive groups of people that they have been conditioned to think of unfavorably.

## **DISCUSSION**

My internship at Unity Productions Foundation and involvement in the production of the Cameri Theater’s *Return to Haifa* at the D.C. Jewish Community Center allowed me to closely examine both the impact of visual materials in the media that make intervention necessary to undo the negative stereotypes of the “other” propagated in popular culture, and the scope of influence as well as the unique characteristics of interventions in the form of art. I have found that visual storytelling and depiction of relatable characters situated within a counter-narrative play a pivotal role in changing perceptions and attitudes, and they do so first and foremost by evoking an emotional response of sympathy and identification. If the clash of narratives is one

of the most violent aspects of ethno-political conflict, then by creating three-dimensional characters and story arcs that people can relate to, it becomes significantly easier to get groups with actual clashing memories, such as Israelis and Palestinians, or perceived clashing identities, such as Muslim Americans and Americans of other faiths, to put aside their preconceptions and listen. This is where transformation truly begins.

Additionally, art provides a space and an invitation to participate in dialogue, and through my experiences with *Return to Haifa* and UPF, I have learned that it does work in bringing together people of different viewpoints and propel them to engage with one another in a respectful and productive manner. It goes without saying that to fully benefit from a challenging film or play, a follow-up discussion is necessary, to process and share individual insights, but my emphasis was on the artistic experience as the first step of transformation and reconciliation.

The implication of this research is that dialogue alone is not enough anymore to build peace. While dialogue is an essential step in negotiating conditions for peace and laying the foundations for relationships between parties in discord, deeply-rooted images of the menacing “other” may hinder the creation of trust that is so central to the stability and longevity of such relationships. Truly successful peacebuilding efforts in our media-mediated world would have to start by tackling the underlying stereotypes created by the negative imagery, and only once those have been confronted and broken, begin a conversation about collaborative reconciliation. Thus, as people become increasingly more reliant on visual representation of their realities, peacebuilders, whether in situations of ethno-political conflict, like the one between Israelis and Palestinians, or in situations of conflict between perceptions, like the case with Muslim Americans, will benefit tremendously from utilizing the only means that is capable of reaching

as deeply into the subconscious of people as visual propaganda materials—art in the form of visual storytelling.

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## APPENDIX

### Michael Wolfe's Interview Questions

1. You weren't originally a filmmaker, what made you want to get into filmmaking?
2. What role do you think the media plays today in shaping people's perception of each other?
3. How about films?
4. Why have you mostly focused on documentary films rather than fictional films. Do you think they are more effective in getting your message across?
5. What are particular lessons that you hope for viewers to take from your films?
6. What's the most memorable feedbacks you've gotten about any of your films?

### Ari Roth's Interview Questions

1. Why was it important to you to bring Return to Haifa to Theater J?
2. What were the challenges in bringing the play?
3. Could you talk more about the general reactions you got from the audience?
4. Are there any particularly memorable reactions you've gotten?
5. How good of a job do you think the play did in presenting both narratives/perspectives? Do you think it succeeded in being unbiased?
6. How effective would you say theater is in bringing about a dialogue that would have not happened otherwise?
7. As a Jewish American, what do you personally take from this experience and did it move/shape you on a personal level?

### Lara's Interview Questions:

1. What brought you to this event?
2. What was your experience, if any, with Muslims before the event?
3. How much did you know about Muslims, and where did your information come from?
4. Describe, to the extent you are comfortable with, some of the feelings that were brought up in you as you were watching the play/film? Did anything surprise you or move you?
5. In your opinion how effective was the dialogue in processing the film and increasing everyone's understanding of Islam?
6. Would you say that your views of Muslims/Palestinians/Israelis changed as a result of the experience? If so, how?
7. How different would the dialogue have been, in your opinion, had we not used the movie?
8. What are you taking from this whole experience? (a few weeks from now)
9. Would you recommend this film or play to anyone else? Why or why not?
10. Did the experience inspire you in any way? If so, how? What are your hopes for the future of the relationship between Muslims Americans and people of other faiths

## Post-Dialogue Evaluation (created and utilized by UPF's 20,000 Dialogues)

1. What are some characteristics of Muslims?
  - Muslims are mostly Arab
  - Muslim men tend to oppress women and require them to cover their heads
  - The basic teachings of Islam say Muslims should be tolerant of other religions
  - Muslims share similar beliefs with Christianity and Judaism
  - Muslims tend not to participate in community events
  
2. To what extent have Muslims contributed to society? Please check any contribution that applies.
  - knowledge about science
  - creation of music and art
  - conquering and converting peoples
  - translation and preservation of ancient philosophy
  - dedicated public service
  
3. Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right:
  - The Islamic religion is more likely than others to encourage violence among its believers
  - The Islamic religion does not encourage violence more than others
  
4. How much do you think Muslims, Christians and Jews had in common in the past or have in common today?  
1- a lot    2-some things    3-not many things    4-nothing
  
5. How much do you feel you have in common with Muslims?  
1- a lot    2-some things    3-not many things    4-nothing
  
6. How helpful was the Film or Film Clips in stimulating dialogue/discussion?  
1-not helpful    2-slightly helpful    3-helpful    4-very helpful
  
7. How would you characterize your experience participating in the dialogue?  
(Mark all that apply). The dialogue:
  - helped me understand the movie better
  - helped me clarify my own views
  - helped me understand Muslims
  - was a waste of time
  - would not have been as good without the movie
  
8. What improvements do you think would make the dialogues better? (Mark all that apply)
  - better facilitator
  - different discussion questions
  - more time to talk
  - more Muslims in our dialogue group
  - Other. Please specify
  - If you'd like to give us more details so we can improve the process, we'd appreciate it.

9. In the coming month, do you think you'll do any of the following? (Mark all that apply)

- Talk to Muslims
- Recommend to friends or family that they participate in a dialogue
- Read or look at the news about Muslims differently
- Think differently about the role of Muslims in world history
- Not do anything different or new
- Other. Please specify

10. What would you tell your friends and family is the most important thing they should know about Muslims and Islam? (open ended)

11. Would you like to join the 20,000 Dialogues network? Joining the network gives you access to dialogue facilitation training, access to service projects and organizational opportunities.

Email:

Phone:

Organization, if relevant:

I'd like to organize a dialogue : Yes/ No

12. Is there anything else you'd like us to know?