

# Celebrating Culture during COVID-19

By Michele Cantoni

## A Warm Welcome to the First Edition of the Bethlehem Cultural Festival

**T**he Bethlehem Cultural Festival was planned initially as a series of performances, screenings, exhibitions, and talks in the United Kingdom in December 2020 to honor Bethlehem as it celebrates its role as Arab Capital of Culture. It was determined to open a window for UK audiences to discover and enjoy Bethlehem's cultural scene in what was to be the first edition of a yearly independent cultural festival dedicated to this not-so-small-anymore Palestinian town.

A walking tour of the wall with young Palestinian artists.



# BETHLEHEM

## CULTURAL FESTIVAL

Then, COVID-19 intervened, and everything had to be reinvented, at least for this year.

While it is still unclear how the "Bethlehem, Arab Capital of Culture 2020" celebrations will be held, the 2020 edition of the Bethlehem Cultural Festival will go ahead online, allowing the participating institutions and organizations to reach audiences well beyond the United Kingdom. So, join us from December 3 to 7 and enjoy a rich program of events.

A brainchild of Melissa Scott – writer and chair of the charity Friends of Alrowwad UK – the Bethlehem Cultural Festival is a result of her innumerable visits to Palestine, and to Bethlehem in particular. For this first edition of the festival, Melissa was able to rely on the tireless efforts of teams of volunteers from Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society and Al-Harah Theater – led by Abdelfattah Abusrou and Marina Barham, respectively, as co-directors of the festival – as well as on the efforts of a mixed production team in the UK and Bethlehem.

The spirit of the festival is one of inclusivity (in terms of access for artists and audiences alike), collaboration, and continuity over time. This independent festival for all reunites within a common space Bethlehem's cultural riches, traditions, and creativity.

The online event programming, which started on a modest scale earlier this year, has recently snowballed almost uncontrollably to include a variety of exciting performances, screenings, virtual tours, practical demonstrations, panel discussions, a virtual Souk, and more – involving cultural figures from all generations and well-established artists alongside emerging ones.

Even now, as this article is being written, young local artists continue to propose interesting additions every day. Due to limited space and resources, however, this wave of cultural proposals must necessarily

**From December 3 to 7, 2020, the first edition of the Bethlehem Cultural Festival shares with the rest of the world a virtual celebration of this famous town's rich and eclectic – but perhaps little-known – arts and cultural scene.**



- █ Dabka show by Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society.
- █ Virtual tour of Bethlehem (video produced by Bethlehem Municipality).
- █ Documentaries by young Palestinian filmmakers. (The still in this photo is from *Ambience*, by Wisam Al Jafari.)

be contained. Although the 2020 calendar of events might not be comprehensive, it should be noted that this first edition of the festival aims to offer a taste of what to expect in the years ahead. Indeed, if adequate resources are secured, the Bethlehem Cultural Festival website may well become a platform available throughout the year for artists to present their Bethlehem-related cultural projects.

Artists, wherever they are, need to have access to dedicated, independent, and noncompetitive spaces that offer them visibility year after year. The Bethlehem Cultural Festival attempts to provide one such space in Palestine, engaging artists and encouraging them to combine creative independence and cooperative spirit, and to look forward to brighter prospects when shaping their future.

This is all the more urgent in the Palestinian context, where the increasing suffocation from Israeli occupation and policies is more

than ever fragmenting societies and depriving the population of its freedom and basic rights. Frustration and a sense of isolation can easily dominate under such circumstances, but creativity, energy, and determination have always distinguished generations of Palestinian artists – the older ones, who have lived through decades of dispossession and abuse, as well as the younger ones, who have known only the reality of separation and segregation imposed on their country by Israel's "separation" wall and relentless colonization.

The Bethlehem Cultural Festival hopes to succeed not only in conveying to its audiences the remarkable traits of Palestine's cultural actors, but also in accompanying them for many years to come, starting with this first edition online, at a time when Bethlehem is on its knees because of the global pandemic that serves to aggravate an already challenging situation.

The 2020 edition of the Bethlehem Cultural Festival, in partnership with Al-Harah Theater and Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, is supported by the British Council and the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport.

The events, which you can find listed on the Bethlehem Cultural Festival website <https://www.bethlehemculturalfestival.com/>, feature (at time of writing) numerous artists, institutions, and cultural figures that include Abdelfattah Abusrour, Al-Harah Theater, Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, Amal Mukheirez, Amwaj Choir, Amer Shomali, Annemarie Jacir, Ayed Arafah, Baha' AbuShanab, Baladi Dance Group, Basma Al Hussein, Bethlehem Municipality, Brandeán de Gallá, Caitlin Mcleod, Catherine Young, CharqGharb, Chœur de Jeunes de l'Orchestre de Paris, Dan Saladino, David Greig, Elias and Yousef Anastas, Fadi Kattan, George Al Ama, Hani Abudayyeh, Ibrahim Handal, Issam Juha, Jacob Norris, James Greenan, Larissa Sansour, Leila Sansour, Mafar Band, Maha Saca, Manal Odeh, Marina Barham, Mark Khano, Miara Kawwas, Michael Awad, Milad Fatouleh, Mitri Raheb, Mohamed Abu Haniyeh, Nadia Wardeh, Nicola Zreineh, Omniya Abdel Barr, Palestinian Heritage Center, Phyllida Lloyd, Raed

Saadeh, Ramzi Shomali, Rana Musallam, Rania Elias, Rima Mesmar, Ríonach Ní Néill, Sameh Shaheen, Sami Khoury, Sami Metwasi, Sir Vincent Fean, Sliman Mansour, Tamara Abu Laban, Victoria Brittain, Vivien Sansour, Wisam Al Jafari, Wisam Salsaa, Xanthe Clay, Zaid Hilal, and more to come...

The festival is free but welcomes donations during the online registration process to access the events (please allow a few minutes to complete the registration process).

Wherever you are, please join us in Bethlehem from December 3 to 7!

*Michele Cantoni is a co-director of the Bethlehem Cultural Festival, co-founder of Amwaj Choir, and director of the Palestine Philharmonie initiative.*



- █ Mafar, the group who will perform at the closing event of the 2020 BCF.
- █ A culinary journey through Bethlehem with Chef Fadi Kattan.