

# Voices from Jordan and Mexico

A hybrid conversation with Hadi Abunahleh and Ileri Mugica  
on cultural practice, resilience, and solidarity in times of crisis

Tue 29 April  
3:30 PM CET on Zoom

As part of the Arts Festivals Summit 2025

## Report: Voices From Jordan and Mexico

Tuesday 29 April 15.30 PM (Edinburg) and Online on Zoom

Facilitators: Inge Ceustermans, General Director of The Festival Academy, Thobile Maphanga, Dancer, curator, and programmer at JOMBA! Durban Contemporary Dance Experience

### Introduction

The 3rd session of The Festival Academy's Voices From series, took place for the first time in a hybrid format, as part of the European Festivals Association (EFA)'s Arts Festivals Summit 2025 in Edinburgh and online, on Tuesday 29 April 15.30 PM CET.

The Festival Academy (TFA) invited their global Alumni community to take part online in this conversation alongside participants at the EFA Summit in Edinburgh to **listen to cultural workers from Jordan and Mexico and reflect together on how festivals can respond to the realities of crises and conflicts unfolding around the world**. TFA welcomed TFA Alumni Ileri Mugica and Abd Al Hadi Abunahleh as online speakers. They engaged in a conversation exploring the conditions that shape cultural work in Mexico and Jordan. From the deserts of Wadi Rum to the dance festivals of Morelos, the discussion centered around how artists and curators are creating space, building bridges, and navigating systemic challenges in their countries – and brought their global voices into the gathering of European festival leaders in Edinburgh. The conversation reflected on shared challenges in their respective regions, including limited mobility opportunities, fragile support structures, and the urgent need for fairer working conditions in the performing arts sector and brought together in-person and online participants to brainstorm actionable ideas for supporting festivals facing crises worldwide.

The 90-minute session was facilitated by Inge Ceustermans and Thobile Maphanga and presented by The Festival Academy in collaboration with the European Festivals Association. 15 people attended the session.

### Part 1 – Presentations

**Ileri Mugica** – On Morelos Danza and artistic needs in Mexico

Ileri kicked off the conversation giving some context about the political context in Mexico. She described the current situation as an “exciting time for the country” being led by the first female president who is working towards fairness, equity, not leaving anyone behind. Her government declared 2025 as the ‘Year of the Indigenous Woman’. This initiative aims to honor and center

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indigenous voices, and to start a reflection about the way policies are made. She described this initiative as successful, with a lot of the initiatives work going into indigenous communities through the integration of community-based strategies, such as citizen consultations and roundtables to collect feelings, necessities, urgencies from voices across different regions. On the other hand, Ileri described a **remaining difficult situation regarding violence, drug cartels and the worrying developments in the US impacting on the Mexican society.**

Ileri described the **artistic environment as fragmented, with many people working isolated within their bubbles or comfort zones.** She mentioned that *Morelos Danza* was initially conceived as the presentation of a dance show in celebration of the 'International Day of Dance'. During the process of inviting local communities and universities to the event, somebody proposed to use the term 'festival' – which was the birth moment of the festival that now takes place in different municipalities. In her work, Ileri shared that she is **interested in expanding the understanding of dance and opening doors for unusual, experimental work.** Currently they are revising their priorities, **identifying a shift in artists' needs.** As the government invests more into the cultural development (including the promotion of indigenous culture), artists are right now in a better position to present their work, scholarships, etc. *“Is it relevant for us to keep thinking of this festival, about having spaces for artists to show their work to be together, or **should we move our objectives into other needs that maybe now are more present?**”*

**Hadi Abunahleh** – On Studio 8 and the challenges of being a dancer in Jordan

*“I was just dancing and having fun.”* Growing up in Amman, Jordan, Hadi's first step into the artistic world were in the streets, dancing. He saw himself, together with others with the deep wish to express themselves artistically, in the middle of a **decreasing dance scene, the absence of spaces to work, the difficulties of entering the national theatres, and a ban on using public spaces.** As a small community of young dancers, they were forced to look for alternative spaces – and started to produce small work in museums and galleries labelled as multidisciplinary work, just to find themselves confronted with the next challenge: the lack of audiences. With all the development from a small group of friends dancing on the streets of Amman to building an ecosystem for contemporary dance with the founding of platform Studio 8 and the biannual international dance festival, Hadi mentioned that he still sees **Jordan being disconnected from the global dance scene.**

Hadi described the dynamic of work as **unpredictable and quickly changing,** putting you in a situation where you **constantly have to start all over again to build relationships and trust.** Asked about the main challenges in this work, Hadi named 1. The cuts of funding (following Trumps re-election), 2. The slow recovery after Covid, and 3. the Israeli invasion in Gaza. While currently dealing with an exceptionally challenging situation, Hadi also highlighted that he takes

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strength from **reminding himself of their difficult beginnings and previous hardships which created resilience for today.**

**Dani Abulhawa** - About the situation of Al Harah Theatre in Palestine

Dani Abulhawa, British-Palestinian performer, director, producer, was invited by TFA to join the session in-person and represent Al Harah Theatre from Beit Jala in Palestine. She contributed **with calling attention to Gaza and the ongoing daily aggressions towards Palestinians in the Westbank which also immensely affect the work of artists, cultural workers manifested in severe restriction of movement, violence and displacement.** In this context Al Harah Theatre works mainly with **children, and young people, women, disabled people** focusing on **psychosocial support with ongoing traumatic experiences.** Additionally, Al Harah finds herself in a situation of a **turning funding situation**, in which **Palestinian theatre makers reduce EU funding in their projects and ongoing travel restrictions due to visa inequalities.** Dani furthermore called for cultural workers who operate in European contexts to reach out to Palestine, go to Palestine, to build solidarity through collaborations, partnerships, cooperations.

## Part 2 – Dialogue

### On Smallness

Ileri commented on Hadi's experience, mentioning the similarities of their artistic development and comparing the work of artists to the work of scientist, characterized by experimentation and connecting with people. She highlighted the power of smallness that bears many opportunities: **"You can do so many things when you're so small, when nobody cares, when nobody knows you. You have a great room to try to screw it, to do it again, to reflect on that."** She also mentioned the **authenticity of working small-scale, the connectedness with real experiences of people, and called for embracing being small,** being lost and being unsure without losing commitments and values.

Inge mentioned the work of TFA operating with a small team of three, making the organisation **flexible to respond to emergencies in the world** and asked about the positionality of cultural organisations towards governmental systems focusing on the question of **"Are we going to keep on trying to work within the system? Or are we going to try and break open different doors?"**

Tobile said that **"rather than thinking about the doors that are closing, it's better to think about what doors can we open and what windows are available to us."** She talked about the **necessity of creating a community that allows opportunity for resilience,** while Ileri called for keeping our minds elastic to maneuver when things suddenly change and to keep ownership over things. She stretched again the "blessings" of being small with less resources used leading to

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more sustainability and especially currently being for example less affected by tariffs (big festivals are in paranoia mood being confronted with rising cargo costs) and **strengthening more the collaborative than transactional nature of cultural work**. She described her methodology of survival coming from an optimistic point of view, with small scale open calls that focus on involving the community in curatorial processes and like this experimenting with new ways to connect with their communities.

## On conflicts in neighboring countries and the importance of community work

The most recent challenge related to the new US government is media messages from the neighboring country addressing the Mexican population as illegal immigrants and other **threats of propaganda**. She also added that the huge dance community in Mexico sees itself confronted with **shrinking audiences**.

Being asked about how neighboring countries political situation affects the work in Jordan, Hadi pointed out the topic of mobility by referencing to stories that his father told him – travel stories in the region where people could easily go from one country to the other, could even go to Europe by car, or a train line connecting Egypt with Europe. With the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, **“working in art and culture when it comes to visiting each other, co-creation going, having platforms, having spaces, having exchanges is so difficult, and that’s why usually we do it in other countries.”**

In relation to the aspect of smallness, he shared that Studio 8's activities are based on the work of the 3 co-founders and 2 employees and a “support circle”. Key element of their strategy is **place making and working on never fully depending on a venue** and rather **reinventing new spaces**, activating rooftops, hangars, etc. He also quoted a sentence of a funding consultant that stuck with him who said that **“sustainability is the people”** and how this made him realise that they had built up a community that he could now build his festival on – which led to this year's festival edition being co-produced by 10 directors from the Arab world.

Emily Ansenk, Director of Holland Festival, took the chance to react to the discussion topics, starting with **acknowledging her privileged situation**. She talked about the beginnings of Holland Festival after the 2nd World war with the aim to bridge gaps and raise awareness between countries and their journey from a Eurocentric curation to a diverse programme covering stories that are not known for a Dutch audience.

She shared information about cultural funding in the Netherlands which are 4-year cycles that allow for longer-term planning. While this creates financial sustainability for established cultural actors, the **system is not easily accessible for smaller organisations, companies, or**

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**independent artists** which means that when the chain of funding breaks and responsibilities shift towards companies and artists, they are the ones who don't receive the money.

In her position she asks herself a double-layered question how she can support “*not only for the international world, but also for the Dutch artists that you want to help.*” She highlighted the **importance of resilience of leaders of cultural organisations** in difficult moments but also mentioned the **feeling of paralisation due to current emergencies**. She identified a collective **need for systemic change** and suggested rethinking the way we work.

## On sustainability, recentering self, strengthening optimism

Inge mirrored Emilys contribution, asking: “*Can festivals also be grounds for experimentation with different models of collaboration and different models of sustainability?*”

Ileri mentioned the feeling of how our current times, the “rhythm of life take us away from our very selves” and pointed out the importance of being aware of our emotions (when we feel fear, anxiety, ...) and the **energy that come from being connected to our heritage, our ancestors and most importantly our bodies**. “*What is it that I need? Because I know that I have friends, I have colleagues, I have people that love the project that love me, and will do things for me or for the people I vouch for. And I think this energy and this optimism comes from there, from coming back to these very intimate places that for me, it's very easy to get when I connect with my body. When I get conscious again of how I feel and how my body is reacting to everything around and to from there seek the connections I need.*”

In response to this call for grounding ourselves in the present moment, Thobile asked the participants to “describe in one word what you feel right now” and the following feelings were gathered: **Seen - Dance - Stress - Energised - Inspired - Awareness - Unsure - Hope - Energetic - Adaptability - Connectivity - Collectivity - Collaboration - Connection - Motivation - Free Palestine.**

## A voice from Argentina

**Roni Isola**, programmer and producer from FIBA Argentina, the biggest performing arts festival in the region, joined online. To describe the **devastating situation of the arts in Argentina**, Roni took a striking example from the cinema industry which went from producing around 600 new movies per year to 0 new films last year, being the first year of the ultra-right government. For the organisation of the bigger-scale FIBA Festival that has happened since 1997, it is **still unclear if the next edition in October can take place as the governmental funding is not yet confirmed**. Smaller festivals were already cancelled, leading to a **reduction of 50% of festivals in the country**. This **insecurity falls into the context of weekly mass demonstrations against the government**. Roni overserved a **state of anesthesia in the arts community** due to a very **violent**

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**atmosphere that makes people fearful of speaking up or putting out their demands** leading to a shutdown of communication or exchange with the cultural ministry. *“People are being shot by the police, so maybe festivals unfortunately are in a second level of urgency right now.”*

Hadi, in reaction to this, highlighted the **importance of flexibility** and described the current situation as a **mental health pandemic** in which **festivals might need to become spaces to breathe, to connect, to talk**. With Studio 8, they had the idea for a small authentic project with a small budget that developed into an artistic residency happening in the desert of Wadi Rum in which a small group of artists created together far away from distraction.

Ileri concluded by highlighting the **importance of an international community of festival makers** and platforms of exchange to think about how to be there for each other.

## Part 3 - In-person closing thoughts

The session continued in-person focusing on the reflection of the global stories by participants who mainly work in European contexts. They mentioned the **importance of bringing international voices into European gatherings**.

Mahir Namur, Coach and cultural manager based in Vienna and Istanbul, spoke about his work around well-being and meaning-oriented planning while questioning how to talk about the well-being of Europeans, when there is something bigger happening outside of the continent? He reminded the group of **the arts being the highest form of human communication** and called for not losing ourselves with operational things but focusing on the humanitarian aspect of the work. Thobile added to remind ourselves of the **purpose of festivals as a human act**.

Emily pointed out the **importance of setting up a platform for people to talk freely**, and how this sometimes feels intimidating, also due to avoiding conflict. The group then discussed the idea of developing a list of recommendations, a manifesto, or a call to action.

They concluded that it is often easier for smaller organisations to speak out, but that bigger organisations who can have large impact have to not shy away of positioning themselves in the face of human rights violations - even if they take place outside of Europe - highlighting the connectedness of global issues.