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WALKING THROUGH THE OLD CITY - JERUSALEM

Helena Walsh

I went to Israel to perform a work based on the lives of my grandparents in Ireland, children of tremendous global and national turmoil. My performance recounted the conflict between my grandparents, an incompatible couple, trapped in systematic roles, their indifference mirrored in the performance by a gender conflict within the same body. Following the recollection of bittersweet childhood memories across a divided landscape and through troubled dreamscapes, a charting of the uneasy political history of Ireland alongside the complex personal layers that form identity in this work, I took a walk through the Old City in Jerusalem.

I had been there two days without braving that other world, preferring instead to walk through the streets, markets and neighbourhoods on the outside, trying to acclimatise myself to the differing elements of this strange place. A hot, tense place, a place that has a sense of tightness, stress, a feeling like being inside a volcano that is constantly bubbling, a pot on the boil in danger of spilling over.

I left my hotel and its kitsch Arabic décor behind, a throwback to former affluence, signalled by the latticed wooden panels concealing areas in need of refurbishment like the now empty swimming pool.

I began my journey past the hustle and bustle of the noisy Arab street market, where cars and buses pile up and horns beep like a constant conversation. Keeping myself to myself, trying not to attract unwelcome attention as I had found being a lone female with an uncovered head always invited some male heckling on this street, some in good jest, some not.

On reaching the portal of Damascus Gate, I am greeted by an outpouring of uniformed school girls, holding hands, giggling and gossiping as all young girls do. Following their exit, I enter this other world - a chaotic world, a labyrinth of passages and arches, a rabbit warren of doorways and stairs, hustle and bustle condensed. Anxious, impatient almost pleading voices constantly chant, "Look here miss, look here!" "Buy this, buy this!" "You want this miss?" Laneways lined with tacky items, people on the ground, legs crossed as they guard their wares looking up at me with gesturing eyes and hands.

Lost, confused, bewildered, I walk around in a daze, overcome by the colours, the people, the smells, the heat. Will I ever find my way out of here, I wonder? I walk on trying to make markers so I can find my way out, but after a while everything seems the same. Images begin to repeat, as

the stalls begin to merge.

There are doorways to dark staircases and streets off the main passage ways, each doorway providing an escape to a less chaotic place or on second consideration, uneasy escape routes destined to lead deeper into the depths of this maze.

Anytime I look lost or grasp my map some child offers, for the kindly sum of ten shekels, to take me somewhere else, somewhere I do not know but I guess must be a popular spot.

Amid the whirlwind of arches I see a passage it leads to a beautiful garden, I see the light shine down through the tress and instinctively I walk towards it, a calm Eden in the madness. Beside this entrance sits two armed guards. "Muslims only," one says to me. "Maybe she is a Muslim," the other says. They smile at me and each other and say, "Come back tomorrow morning, it's open to tourists then."

I turn my back on this paradise and walk down the tunnel past some men having coffee, "You want to sit with us have coffee?"

"No thanks," I reply and walk off after a while in search of some calm in the sweltering heat. I take a turn up a stair-cased street. Everything is quiet at last, there are houses with laundry hanging outside, some kids kicking a ball, neighbours gossiping. I wonder what it is like to live in this strange, enclosed place as I glance over the fierce, yet no longer fully intact, barrier atop the walls.

On the re-continuation of my trail through the street market, the hustle and bustle finally wanes, my surroundings suggest that my route is leading away from this side towards the other. I pass a doorway marked "Border Police" and a higher percentage of army uniforms and guns become apparent in the midst of the shoppers.

Upon arrival at the next portal, a heavily guarded airport scanning machine; I part with my bag and hope for no beeps, amused that it has been decided from on high that such an action does not break the laws of Sabbath.

I walk into a vast open space, see a step on a wide staircase and sit on it, relieved with this new found sense of room. I smoke a cigarette, check the evidently shiner pavement for a place to stub it out and try to get some form of bearing.

It is then the Western Wall unveils itself in front of me, the wall and the row of men in black hats and suits, reverently nodding side to side, wailing, books in hand. Right beside them is a much, much smaller space, the space allocated to women. I look up and see the great golden dome protruding up above the walls shining in the sun. I walk around the Jewish Quarter and everything is less chaotic; there is evidence of growing composure, organised topiary, ongoing reconstruction work and all the atmospheric appeal of visiting any site organised for frequent tourism.

I walk out of this enclosed divided world, contained within a square mile through a portal on the other side, this world infiltrated with so many uniforms and dress codes highlighting alliance, beliefs, systems nurturing double barrelled boundaries on all sides. A world apart from Ireland, yet a place where the cultural splits, fears and strict gendered roles imposed on my grandparents are

hauntingly present in the lives of others.

I sit looking at the hills, on the other side when the rows of parked tour buses appear in the distance and I laugh out loud as a drinks kiosk making its business by quenching the thirst of tourists, blasts out a song that goes, "Hey Mr. American, how are you?"

Helena Walsh is an Irish Performance Artist living in London. Samples of her work can be found on his website:
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