

British Theatre Guide

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Gardens Speak

Tania El Khoury

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Back in the spring of 2011 thousands of people in Syria marched against the repressive regime of President Bashar al-Assad. They had been inspired by the waves of popular protests across the Arab World. The sheer brutality with which Assad tried to crush the protest turned a movement for civil rights into a terrible civil war. Yet we know very little about the victims of these events.

Tania El Khoury responded to this absence by creating *Gardens Speak*, an interactive sound installation. It was inspired by a picture from 2011. The picture shows a woman in Syria digging a grave in her garden for her son's body.

Any public gathering even in a graveyard was and is dangerous in Syria. People are at risk of being killed by snipers, planes or bombs. It became necessary to use private gardens for the quick and sometimes secret burials.

The garden which speaks in this installation consists of ten graves marked by different-shaped wooden boards. Beneath the soil of each grave are recordings played through speakers of first-person stories. These have been constructed from interviews with the victim's family and friends.

A maximum of ten audience members are led into a preparation room where, after storing their bags, jackets, shoes and socks, they put on heavy duty plastic coveralls reminiscent of those worn by forensic teams visiting a crime scene.

Last night, we were given a torch and a card bearing the name of a buried victim before being shown into a second much darker room to locate in a central garden area, the grave of that person.

The soil felt cold, damp and uncomfortable. Scraping away some of the soil from in front of the wooden markers, we found a cushion-shaped item of cloth bearing the person's name and where they were killed. Beneath it was a speaker that played the individual story which we could only hear by leaning very closely to the speaker. Most knelt in a manner that resembled a religious person at prayer.

The ten stories came from a range of people killed between the years of 2011 and 2013. Each of us only heard one story. Mine was of a young woman who defiantly marched wearing a revolutionary flag before being killed in Karm al-Zeitoun.

After hearing the story, the audience was asked to lie on the grave for a time before writing a letter to the victim. These were left in the soil by the grave and later perhaps shared with the victim's relatives. Most of the audience spent a good ten minutes writing their letters.

The installation felt like a quiet, reflective religious ceremony. The darkness and the privacy of the personal story we heard gave it a particular intensity. But the circumstances, especially the religious elements and the cold damp soil beneath our feet, made the dead person seem very remote.

Gardens Speak is an imaginative and memorable experience. It gives voice to a small number of those caught up in one of the most awful conflicts of our time. However it's the physical strangeness of that experience we are likely to remember much longer than the story we heard.

Reviewer: [Keith Mckenna](#)