The Siege | A story breakdown

**Introduction**

*The Siege* is drawn from the accounts of a group of men who during the height of the second Intifada (Palestinian uprising) took refuge in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Now exiled and living across Europe and in Gaza, the production is built from interviews with these fighters and others who were trapped in the church as the Israeli army closed in. The siege came to last for 39 days, paralyzing the centre of Bethlehem and keeping tens of thousands under curfew.

While some might call the siege a desecration of a holy place, others view it as a continuation of the church's ancient tradition of offering sanctuary to those who ask for protection. The production raises important questions about strategies of resistance against military might and gives a unique insight into the Palestinian armed resistance and the struggle for freedom.

The piece is a juxtaposition of scenes, film footage, verbatim monologues and music. It has been developed and devised by The Freedom Theatre’s actors and creative team along with actors from Israel/Palestine ‘48 and from Jerusalem. Together they make a unique ensemble whose members come from different backgrounds, separated by the very deliberate policies of the occupation, but sharing the experience of having grown up during the second Intifada and living under oppression their whole lives.

**CREATED & DIRECTED BY**
Nabil Al-Raee & Zoe Lafferty

**WRITTEN BY**
Nabil Al-Raee

**CAST**
Ahmed Rokh
Ahmed Tobasi
Faisal Abu Alheja
Hassan Taha
Milad Qunebe
Rabee Hanani

**CREATIVE TEAM**
Andy Purves, Lighting Designer
Anna Gisle, Set & Costume Designer
Dror Feiler, Composer
Mohamed Yousef, Costume Research
Nikola Kodjabashia, Composer
Noor Al-Raee, Composer

**PRODUCTION**
Adnan Naghnaghiye, Head Technician
Ahmed Desouki, Video Collection
Alaa Shehada, Assistant Director

**SPECIAL THANKS**
Abona Firas, Armando da Rita, Chris Foxon, Dan Glass, Eve Pereira, Gary English, Jacob Gough, Mustafa Staiti, Sybil Cock, The National Theatre of Wales, Zakaria Zubeidi, Zina Papageorgiou and all of the people who so generously shared their stories and contributed to the making of *The Siege.*
Scene – Tourist guide

The play opens in the Church of the Nativity. It is 2015.

A tourist guide, Issa, welcomes the audience. He is a bit surprised at the large amount of people; normally he takes groups of just a few, this time there is over a hundred.

Issa introduces himself, then goes on to talk about the Church of the Nativity. He talks about his family’s history dating back to the time of Jesus and how his ancestors have always worked in the church. It is the most important place in the world to them.

“Okay, now, before we begin, did we discuss money? No?... Okay this time it’s for free but please, if you would like to make a donation... Let’s go on the tour of the church.”

Scene - Interview

Five men sit. They are the exiled fighters from the siege of the Church of the Nativity. It is 2015 and they are being interviewed.

Interviewer: “I need you to introduce yourselves, what was your role was and what can you remember from the siege?”

Taking a moment, the fighters gather their thoughts. They begin to speak: words, thoughts, feelings...

Video

The Israeli invasion of the West Bank comes on screen. We see tanks, helicopters and shooting. We see the fighters running across Manger Square, into the Church of the Nativity.

Scene – Refuge in The Church of the Nativity

The men enter the church. It is mass and the prayer is taking place. They wait for the Father to finish. The men ask him if they can take refuge in the church. He is upset; why are they in the church? This is a Holy place and not for fighting. The fighters explain that the Israeli army is outside, there is nowhere else to go. The Father is concerned that they will bring the fighting inside the church but in the end decides that as long as the men show respect, they have the right to take refuge in the house of God.

Scene – Fighter calls home

The fighters organize themselves in the church. They bandage one man’s wound. He is bleeding heavily and is in much pain. He makes a phone call to his pregnant wife and tells her to look after herself.

The Israeli army begins to surround the church. The fighters position themselves ready for an attack.

Video
We see tanks, helicopters and snipers surround the church. The siege of the Church of the Nativity has begun.

**Scene – The bell ringer is shot**
Silence everywhere. The sound of speakers demanding the fighters to surrender. A quarrel begins between the men about what to do. Some want to take the injured out, others want to stay. One man wants to shoot back. During their discussion, the church bells begin to ring. Tension builds. One of the fighters goes out. Then a gun shot. Panic.

The fighter enters. He tells the others that the bell ringer has been shot. Silence.

**Scene – Phone call from the general**
A cell phone rings. It is a call from the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah telling the fighters to have patience and not to shoot back. The fighters are angry; should they just sit here and die, one by one?

**Video**
The Israeli army prepares for an attack on the church. We see tracer fire and an explosion.

**Scene – The attack**
There is an explosion. The church is under attack. Israeli soldiers start to climb over the walls of the church. The fighters are in position, waiting. They open fire, killing four Israeli soldiers.

**Scene – Celebration**
The fighters celebrate their victory. They begin to get out of control. Eventually one of the men tells the others to control themselves and to behave with respect, not like animals. There is a fire in the church but everyone is so busy arguing they don’t notice it. Eventually the monk enters and asks them to calm down and remember to respect the church.

**Scene – Tourist guide**
It is 2015. Issa the tourist guide enters. He tells the history of the Church of the Nativity, including the story of the Massacre of the innocents. The Massacre of the innocents is the biblical narrative of infanticide by Herod the Great. Herod ordered the execution of all young male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem, so as to avoid the loss of his throne to a newborn King. Issa shows the group where the bones of the children are buried and points out that this church has always been a place of refuge for the sons of Jesus.

**Scene - Interview**
It is 2015. The exiled fighters are being interviewed.

Interviewer: *Tell me about the first few days of the siege. What did you do? What did you see?*
The men explain that the first few days were the hardest. They had very little food and water and didn’t know if and when the Israelis would attack. “Despite all the difficulties, we were still able to sing, tell jokes and laugh. We had hope that the problem would be solved.”

**Scene – Torture**
Intense noise. The Israeli army are playing strange sounds as a means of psychological torture. It has been going on for hours. The fighters are going crazy. They begin to dance in resistance. Eventually silence. Relief.

A voice. It is the mother of one of the fighters. She has been brought to the church and is forced to speak at gunpoint. She tells her son that the whole family has been arrested. The Israelis want her to ask her son to leave the church. Instead she tells him that she will rip off the breast that fed him if he surrenders. The man is in shock. He grabs his gun and tries to exit the church. The others stop him.

**Scene – Leadership**
The man whose mother was brought to the church sits and talks with another man, who tells him about leadership and the importance of wisdom, endurance, mercy and understanding. He tells him to stay strong because the Israelis are trying to emotionally and psychologically break them. They must act with their minds, not their emotions.

**Video**

**Scene – Escape**
One of the fighters enters. He had fallen asleep on guard and now there are people from the church missing. He goes to tell the others. They don’t understand how these people could have left the church unless they were collaborators. They accuse the man on guard of also being a collaborator. They go to take his gun but at that moment another man enters and tells the others not to punish him, it was not difficult to escape the church.

**Scene – Injured fighter**
The man whose leg is wounded is in immense pain. The designated medic among the fighters goes to check the wound and finds that it has become infected. The men decide that he must get out of the church even if it means he will spend the rest of his life in prison. Otherwise he will die. They begin to lift him up but the man grabs his gun and threatens to kill himself if they take him out. He begs the others to amputate the leg. The medic manages to speak to a doctor on the phone who recommends that they cut the gangrene off. They proceed to do so.

**Scene – Food**
As the wounded man sleeps someone suggests they must get him food to strengthen him. They start to imagine eating the perfect maklube and chocolate cake. One fighter tells a story of a time when he was
lost in the mountains with his friends and they began eating leaves for survival. The men realize they can do the same; they can pick leaves from the courtyard to eat.

**Scene – Picking leaves**
Two men go outside. Drone footage on screen: the fighters going out to pick leaves.

The men cook and eat the leaves.

**Scene – A fighter's death**
The man on guard receives a call from the father of another man. The father says he saw two white doves and his son coming home dressed in white.

The man whose father called wakes up and is angry with the guard for not waking him to watch the sunrise, a tradition they have created. The man takes over the guarding post.

Moments later there is a gunshot. The fighter has been hit by a sniper. The others try to save him but he is bleeding heavily. They shout at the Israeli soldiers to get him out but there is no answer. He bleeds to death.

**Scene – Tourist guide**
It is 2015. Issa tells his personal story and his connection to the church. He believes that the siege was a test from god. He shares an experience of seeing an icon in the church cry tears of blood.

**Scene – Prayer**
The fighters pray – we see both Christian and Muslim prayer.

**Scene – A negotiation**
The monk brings news of a deal by the international delegation, the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority. According to the deal, 26 people will be exiled to Gaza and 13 to Europe. There is no further information. The fighters are told to sign the paper if they agree. The men have a long discussion and eventually decide to reject the deal.

**Video**
We see images of Bethlehem under siege. Heavy military occupation, empty streets, curfew.

**Scene – A young woman calls**
There is a phone call from a young woman. Her baby is sick and because of the siege she cannot take him to hospital. She asks the fighters to leave the church so that the siege will be over and her baby can live.

The fighters are in a very difficult situation. One of them makes a speech:

“We have a siege. We have martyrs, we have injured people, we have thirst, we have hunger - we have all these things. But we have to take into account all the givens of the situation, inside the church and
outside. There is a collective suffering and we have to take responsibility for this. Yes, we are fighting for the freedom of our people against the Israeli occupation but the facts of the situation have changed. If they are accusing me of being responsible then I must make a sacrifice. We are faced with the Israeli information machine, which is in many languages, and this machine reverses the facts, makes black white and white black, makes the oppressed the oppressor and the oppressor the oppressed. All truths are reversed. We are standing in front of our people, and our names are being repeated for forty days as the reason for the siege. And our people are protecting us, because without our people we are nothing. The alphabet of the Revolution tells you that the Revolution is a fish and the people are the sea. And if you come out of the sea, you are dead. You are nothing. So you have to take into account a number of factors, not only military but also human ones. You have moral obligations toward your people. If we know that a pregnant woman is going to deliver and she can’t get to the hospital because of the siege, we must ask, why? If they are saying that we are the reason, and the opportunity arises for an honorable solution, we must cooperate.”

The men decide to take the deal.

Video footage: The fighters exit the church; kiss the ground of their homeland and wave goodbye to their families. They drive off on a bus.

**Scene – Interview**

It is 2015. The men tell of their life in exile and how they long to return to Palestine.

**Scene – Tourist guide**

It is 2015. Issa enters. “The Church is the place of our eternal light. The light that gives us the beginning and the end. Without this light we cannot walk on this earth. This church is the heart of our land. Our holy land. We are born in this land and we have to live here even if we face difficulties. We are the sons of this land. This is why we take the strength and the power from our Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and we continue on our path. I hope that God will bless us and show us the way to the real peace that we are looking for.”

THE END