

Welcome to Folkwang... Faris!

Faris Saleh is 26. Born and raised in Palestine, he recently moved to Germany to study „Physical Theatre“ at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen. Henriette Lips, StudiScout at Folkwang, talked to Faris about his journey and the experiences he has gained so far.

I am meeting Faris in his flat in Bochum. When I reach his entrance door, he greets me with a huge smile and a warm-hearted hug. Afterwards, he leads me into his kitchen. While he is pouring tea, I light myself a cigarette. Then he tells me his story.

H.: Faris, what made you come to the Folkwang University of the Arts?

F.: I studied acting for three years back in Palestine and when I graduated, I was shocked: there were basically no jobs for actors there. Due to the political situation, art is almost non-existent in Palestine. However, I needed to earn money to live on. I did a lot of small jobs back then, partly social work, partly projects, but that was very difficult...

I found out about the Folkwang University of the Arts as it closely worked together with the school I used to study at in Palestine, the Drama Academy Ramallah. In fact, I met my girlfriend being part of a project that both schools organized together. When I performed in her final bachelor's presentation "Shoeman being" at Folkwang, for which we also won the Folkwang prize, I began to think that I really needed to work on my acting tools. I wanted to be an artist who presents more than just his lines. That is why I started looking for something that includes movement and dancing and I found Physical Theatre.

H.: Was it a difficult decision for you to leave your home country in order to study abroad?

F.: Yes, it was difficult. My audition was in January 2016 and I was very well-prepared. In fact, I had already worked on the scenes for months which is why I got accepted, although I had decided to sign up for the audition quite spontaneously. Of course, I often asked myself back then: Do I want this? After all, moving to another country was a life-changing decision. In the end, I came to the conclusion that acting was my dream and that I just had to go for it.

It was the visa and the money though that constituted a much bigger problem. I was supposed to begin my studies in April 2016 and I only had a visitor's visa then. To be able to study in Germany, however, I needed a student visa and 8000 € on my bank account. It was impossible for me to come up with such a huge amount of money within two months only, so, I was not able to accept my study place. That was a big disappointment!

Through crowdfunding I managed to collect the 8000 € that would enable me to study in Germany. I made a video of myself, explaining who I was and what I wanted. And it worked. Some people gave me 5 €, others 100 € but the bottom line was: people believed in me.

Unfortunately, by the time I had collected the full amount, I had to audition at the Folkwang University of the Arts again. But luckily, I also passed the second audition. That is why I was finally able to come here and commence my studies in April 2017.

H.: You have been living in Germany for about a year now. What are the most significant differences for you between your home country and Germany?

F.: In my opinion, the biggest difference lies in society itself. While in Palestine, it is completely normal to just go and talk to strangers on the street, here in Germany, that would be considered a very weird thing to do. People generally seem to be less open here. In addition to this, the Germans seem to each mind their own business. That does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. On the contrary: It is what makes Germany so successful and stable as a country. Everybody focuses on his or her own abilities and therefore, automatically contributes to society. In Palestine, that is totally different. It seems as if there, everybody is sitting in the same bowl but here, everybody has their own bowl.

H.: Is there anything about your home country that you miss and that you cannot seem to find here in Germany?

F.: The weather! The sky is always so grey here. No wonder, Germans are in such a bad mood sometimes... Just joking!

H.: Do you feel that some things about you have changed ever since you moved to Germany? Do you "act more German"?

F.: Yes. I mean, Germany has rules, which I respect. Of course, those rules have changed my behaviour. So, you could say that I am "acting more German" because of those rules.

Naturally, my working attitude has changed, too. I have become a much more responsible and better person in many ways. Especially, because I have learned a lot about myself and my emotions since I came here. My girlfriend and I used to do this project together: We would record our Skype calls for two years and make a movie out of them, illustrating the story of a Palestinian boy and a German girl in love, whose only possibility of being in touch with each other was via Skype. And there was this one Skype call, we were talking and bombs were dropped outside Ramallah. She heard the bombs and started crying while I was still laughing. Those bombings had become *normal* for me. When I saw the movie later, that bizarre scene stuck to my mind. She was crying, the audience was crying but I – was not feeling anything at all. So, somehow, Germany made me realise that I had lost all ability to *feel* back in Palestine. I needed to see those bombings from a distance to accept them as something not normal and sad. Being so close to the events, they did not seem as dangerous as they do now. And suddenly I became very aware of my own sensitivity. That was a huge development! You cannot be an actor without being able to feel.

H.: I had not heard of "Physical Theatre" until I met my fellow student Amelie van Godin in October last year. What is it like to "study" Physical Theatre?

F.: Physical Theatre is a lot about movement. You learn about masks, acrobatics, dance, voice, mime, all sorts of things. I think, the basic idea is that you are able to express yourself on stage using movement rather than language.

H.: Have you always been acting and dancing, even when you were still a child at school?

F.: Yes, but I did not take the art classes in school too seriously. I never thought about a career as an actor back then. That happened by accident...

H.: By accident?

F.: That's true. My family wanted me to go and study at a university after finishing school but I thought: "No!" That is why I failed my secondary school exams on purpose, so I would not qualify for university. Then I told my dad that I wanted to be a hairdresser. He said: "If you take your exams again and you pass, I will allow you to be a hairdresser." So, I took the exams again, passed and became a hairdresser. I opened my own salon, it was a lot of fun, I loved it. After a while, my parents started pressuring me again: "You have to study, you have to gain some knowledge!" That is when, out of protest, I came up with a subject I knew we could not study yet in Palestine: acting. However, one day, my brother came home and told me about this new academy. Now you have to know that if you want to study acting in Palestine, it is somehow against society, it is *haram*, "not allowed". Many people there frown upon it, but not my parents. My dad said: "Ok, go and try!" I darned my brother for telling me about that academy. But I went to the audition. After my first year of studies, I was ready to pack my suitcase and go back home. It was only in my second year that I warmed up to the idea of actually being an actor. And after graduating, I thanked my parents for forcing me to do this.