

Re-Opening of The Beirut Theater in Ain-el-Mreysseh

Dr. Mona Takieddine Amyuni

For the support of creativity and culture; for giving back to Beirut her role as a Lebanese and Arab cultural center; for the creation of a polyvalent scene in which plays, films, children's programs, musical concerts, poetic recitals, art exhibitions and conferences, will be offered.

This is what the first brochure of The Beirut Theater encapsulated when it was distributed to fans last October 1992. We felt, indeed, that we and our city were coming back to life, the kind of cultural life we knew in the key-days of pre-war Beirut and the Beirut of the sixties. Owned by Said Sinno, Cinema Hilton was then converted into a theater in 1965 and was animated by our best playwrights and producers. It created a dramatic tradition which added a special dimension to the rich Ain-el-Mreysseh area, rich in its beautiful mixture of a mosque, old Lebanese houses with brick roofs, plush restaurants, modern buildings, a fishery and small shops along the beautiful seafront. The pillars of theater life in Lebanon wrote plays and performed in The Beirut Theater in that epoch. The names of Roger Assaf, Jalal Khoury, Shakib Khoury, Raymond Gebara, Nidal al-Ashkar and many others come to mind.

The Theater closed its doors when war tore our country apart and it remained closed until the Summer of 1992, when six people put their efforts together, moved by deep love for Beirut and for culture. They rented the theater for three years and



Scene from Siham Nassir's play Al Jayb al-Sirri - The Secret Pocket



Man Qatafa Zahrat al-Karif - Who Cut the Autumn Flower by Raymond Jebara

renovated it. Thus, Ghassan Tueni, Vasso Salam, Hoda Sinno, Ilyas Khoury, Marie-Claude Akl, and Nawaf Salam started on an exhilarating adventure, and were clever enough to quickly involve the public. One hundred fifteen couples paid annual membership fees which allow them to attend all openings, and FransaBank sponsored the venture for one year.

The Theater opened its doors early in October. The first night was very special and quite surrealistic! The elegant Beirutis parked their cars on garbage heaps in the neighboring area, which was just coming out of the war, and flocked into the theater hall that had been turned into an old-fashioned type of Saloon. Champagne was generously offered, people fell into each other's arms, kissing and hugging friends they had not seen for long. A real happening before the curtain was raised! Slowly, during the first trimester of the year, the area became much cleaner and its population took part in the life of the

theater, welcoming us whenever we arrived, obviously happy and proud to own, in a way, this cultural center.

We have been offered so far, four plays; one Tunisian ballet, two painting exhibitions by Amin el-Basha and Mahmoud Zibawi, a sculpture exhibition by Nada Raad, one poetic recital of Mahmoud Darwishe's latest collection of poems and another one by Adonis. This rich variety of programs has been very well received and I shall select to discuss briefly three plays hoping to trigger the interest of the reader in The Beirut Theater.

Raymond Gebara's play *Man Qatafa Zahrat al-Kharif - Who Cut the Autumn Flower* opened the season. The play mirrored the shabbiness and despair of life for two Lebanese men stranded in Paris during the war. Laughters and tears mixed on stage and Camille Salameh's superb acting was particularly remarked.

The Algerian play *Fatmah* was very good. It was a one-woman show

brilliantly performed by the well-known actress Sonia, who used Arabic and French on alternate nights. For two hours, Sonia held our breath as she reproduced a satire of the socio-political plight of the Algerian man and woman since independence, bent down and crushed by all the isms of our epoch.

Similarly, Siham Nassir's play *Al-Jayb al-Sirri - The Secret Pocket* struck us as a very painful but very clever image of man, woman and society in times of war, a fragmented, disfigured and ugly image, indeed. Strikingly well done, in the absurdist rein, it won its author the first prize for Experimental Plays in the Cairo Festival of 1992. Siham Nassir is Professor of dramatic art at the Lebanese University and her students performed the play in excellent style proving they had a solid dramatic tradition guiding them.

Finally, I tried to get a feel of what goes on behind the stage and spoke with Hoda Sinno, the Directing



Recent Play "Shi Mithl Alaska - Something Like Alska, by Julia Kassar

Beirut Theater venture a successful one. The odds are numerous, of course. The financial aspect is the main problem for such cultural enterprises, which are normally supported by the State. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the The Beirut Theater. The public is

not large enough, and the cultural scene needs to be enriched by the commitment of a handful of people in Lebanon who genuinely love the arts.

Through such a commitment, a support group will grow and will really help in consolidating the Beirut Theater. It will then reach its aim and

become a dynamic cultural center for Lebanon and the Arab world •

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