

INTERVIEW

THE IMPACT OF THEATER ARTS

A Conversation with Dr. Lina Abyad

By Juhaina Razzouk

Lina Abyad, Professor of Theater Arts at the Lebanese American University and Director of the recent production, "The Royal Pardon", studied Child Development and Communication Arts at Beirut University College, Psychology at American University of Beirut, before pursuing her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Theater Arts in Paris. Abyad had wanted to study theater since childhood, but her family could not really grasp the idea of a career in theater; it was too puzzling for them. But since she insisted, they agreed, but only after telling her that she should go as far as possible, i.e., to achieve her Ph.D.

Dr. Abyad felt that working in the field of theater is preferable to achieving a high degree in it, but now she does not regret obtaining her Ph.D. at all, since this degree will allow her to become financially independent by teaching at the university, because working in the theater is rarely lucrative. Her parents also emphasized this point foreseeing the obstacles she was likely to face, whether she married or not.

When asked about the specific influences that led her to study theater, Abyad's reply was, "Nidal Ashkar was my starting point. I saw her when I was fifteen years old in a play called "Al-Bakara", and I remember being astonished by the freedom of this woman on the stage, her ability to speak Arabic so well, and to live a character so intensely. I wanted to be like her one day — I wanted to be someone who could be so free to say whatever she wants. Also, I have to say that I was a very lousy student at school, and when I started acting, I became somebody very special for my teachers and for the students around me, and so for the first time I was recognized as something very special. At first, everyone found me so bizarre, but after I started acting, they understood why I was this bizarre!"

Everything changed for Lina Abyad the moment she went into theater. She suddenly started liking books, texts, and paintings, because she felt she needed to understand things with a deeper sense in order to express them fully on the stage.

Through the medium of the theater, Abyad feels capable of saying so much more than mere words can convey. "Through theater, I was able to talk about the war, about how difficult the life of people in theater is, the pressures they face due to politics and the opinions of influential people. I like choosing beautiful texts for such topics, or for any topic in general. "The Royal Pardon", for example, talks about anarchy, and how rules in such a system become beyond reach of the law.

Dr. Abyad thinks that her gender makes a difference in her work. "In "The Royal Pardon", for example, I was telling my actors that it is very obvious that the director is a woman, because the women in it are much stronger, they are characters who tell their husbands what to do, and their sexual desires are stated very clearly." Abyad thought it was very important to emphasize the role of women in her play, "because we in Lebanon should never forget at any moment that we have a role to play because we are



A scene from "The Royal Pardon".

facing a great danger." When asked to identify this danger, she immediately replied that it was the various fundamentalists and political extremists who limit the role of a woman and try to narrow it down to being only a mother and a wife.

Dr. Abyad feels that her greatest reward and satisfaction as a director is not reaching the audience, but more importantly, the actors. They discover something about themselves when she is able to move something in their minds, hearts and souls.

As an artist, Abyad is glad to be back in Lebanon contributing to the local arts scene. As a person, however, some aspects of post-war Beirut are disturbing to her. "I would like to talk about my own memories about Beirut. I went away for fifteen years and things have changed drastically. I feel that the changes in our behavior are especially due to architecture. In the past, we used to have nice, small houses with neighbors all around. The people were closer to nature and closer to the sky which is something that is very important for me. We are losing all of this now, for we don't even have balconies anymore in Beirut. All of this has altered our social behaviors so much."

"For me, coming back to Beirut is like going on a trip. I wanted to go back to the culture, to Arabic literature, to Gilgamesh, to discover things about the language that I have completely forgotten."

Abyad's greatest challenge is to strive for a Lebanese national theater, and to encourage government support of the arts, because private sponsorship is not enough.

"Theater is very important for our society, it 'rings a bell' and it becomes a reference, and through the communicative and educating force of theater, we can have hope for changing so much in our society." Abyad's advice to talented young women who are just beginning their art careers is simply "to strive".