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# CONTEMPORARY PERFORMING ARTS IN LEBANON: AN OVERVIEW



**Emmanuel Haddad**

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**Contemporary performing arts in Lebanon: an overview**

**Mapping IETM**

**by Emmanuel Haddad**

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Since IETM's visit to Beirut in 2012, Lebanon has received 1,6 million (more) refugees, and Beirut became one of the 'twelve artistic cities of the future'. IETM returned to Beirut in October 2016 to re-discover this contradictory, ever-changing capital and strengthen links with its vibrant cultural scene. The Satellite meeting in Beirut focused on freedom of expression and tackled crucial topics such as artistic mobility, cultural policies, funding, gender equality in the cultural sector, the decentralisation of culture and much more (you can [read the final report here](#)).

This new IETM mapping, by French-Lebanese journalist [Emmanuel Haddad](#), offers a more complete overview of the Lebanese artistic scene and a general picture of the stakes and key-players. We invite you to discover a vibrant, engaged, united and outward-looking artistic scene.

# 01.

## THE REPUBLIC OF LEBANON

### 1.1. General information

Population: 5,85 million, of which 1,9 million refugees (World Bank estimation for the year 2015; the last official census dates back to 1935)

Refugees: 1,01 million from Syria (source: UNHCR), 455,000 from Palestine (UNRWA), 40,000 from Iraq (UNHCR)

Surface: 10,452 km<sup>2</sup>

Currency: Lebanese Lira (USD is also commonly used)

Languages: the official national language is Arabic; French and English are spoken and used in teaching

### 1.2. Recent evolutions in Lebanese society

Following 15 years of civil war (1975-1990), that left Lebanon in a depleted economic, socio-political and human situation, the country experienced 15 years of restless as well as unbalanced reconstruction. Under the impetus of the Prime Minister and real estate magnate Rafic Hariri, the centre of Beirut rose from its ruins, generating hope within public opinion, criticism from civil society regarding heritage destruction and conflicts of interests, and warnings from economists about the abysmal debt created by megalomaniac real estate projects. Beyond all this, the end of war was not followed by the beginning of peace. The general amnesty voted on 26 August 1991 for crimes committed during the conflict killed all hope for traditional justice. The former warlords, now political leaders, chose the reign of amnesia nurtured with the regular censorship of artistic and intellectual production. Concrete covered the past.

Also the Palestinian question, considered one of the matrixes of the war, found no response after the end of hostilities. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Lebanon today counts 455,000 refugees from Palestine, mostly settled in twelve

camps at the periphery of the big cities<sup>1</sup>. Careful to avoid a permanent settling of Palestinians in Lebanon and the demographic disruption that would follow, Lebanese authorities refuse the Palestinian community the right to property, the right to vote and the right to practise a large variety of jobs. A law voted in August 2010 increased the number of jobs open to Palestinians; however without efforts towards educational and social integration, they are doomed to unemployment and to low-income work. Living in Lebanon for three generations they are excluded *de facto* from its society, while the right of return<sup>2</sup> to occupied territories is a vain wish of the different Lebanese leaders, all of them supportive of the Palestinian cause, but less of the refugees' one.

On 14 February 2015 the murder of Rafic Hariri shook the precarious balance of post-conflict Lebanon. One month later, a massive demonstration called the Cedar Revolution provoked the departure of the Syrian army that had occupied the cedar country for 25 years. Lebanon split into two opposing political camps. On one side: the 14 March Alliance, dominated by the Future Movement of Saad Hariri, Rafic Hariri's son, a Sunnite party opposed to the Syrian regime and close to Saudi Arabia. On the other side: the 8 March Alliance, dominated by Hezbollah, a Shiite party close to Bashar el-Assad's and Iran's regimes, who saw several of its members soon prosecuted by international penal justice

<sup>1</sup> South of Beirut, the camps of Sabra and Chatila are nowadays inseparable from (the memory of) the slaughter that took place there in 1982. Today the border between these camps and the poor neighbours around them has dissolved, with migrant workers and poor residents increasingly settling down in the area. On the other hand the camps of Aïn el-Heloué, on the periphery of Saïda, and of Nahr el-Bared, North of Tripoli, are surrounded by military roadblocks, and have seen recurrent clashes in the last ten years.  
<sup>2</sup> Defined on 11 December 1948 by Resolution 194 of the UN General Assembly, the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their households is regularly mentioned by Lebanese authorities to justify their refusal to grant Palestinians the same rights as Lebanese citizens.

for the murder of Rafic Hariri. Following the war of July 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah, the latter, strengthened, took a leading role in the political arena and occupied Beirut's downtown in early 2008. Clashes erupted. In May 2008 the Doha Agreement allowed the arrival to power of President Michel Sleiman and the return to an apparent order. His mandate though was shaken by the outburst of the Syrian Revolution on 15 March 2011. Following its internal fractures, Lebanon split between supporters and opponents of its neighbour's popular uprising, which soon changed into an armed conflict whose violence crossed the border. In the North, Tripoli sank into a long series of clashes that caused over 200 deaths. In June 2013 Hezbollah entered the war on the side of the Syrian regime and suicide attacks multiplied in the neighbourhoods under its control.

Lebanon opened its doors to thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing repression by the Syrian regime and the violence of the fighting. Among the newcomers are tens of artists whose works soon started to fill art galleries, concert halls and theatres. Beirut became the echo chamber of Syrian creativity in the face of the nearby slaughters and destruction. A number of Syrian artists' collectives were born or rebuilt in Beirut: Tanjaret Daghet and Khebez Dawle in music, the contemporary dance company Sima, the Koon theatre collective, a pioneer of street theatre in Syria. Very soon collaborations between Syrian and Lebanese artists multiplied: the Syrian MC Sayyed Darwish performs with the Lebanese rapper El Rass; the Syrian playwright Abdullah al-Kafri directs work by the Lebanese theatre company Zoukak or by author Hanan Hajj-Ali; while Lebanese dancers Stéphanie Kayal and Marie-Thérèse Ghosn, actress Sarah al-Zain and French actor Antoine Bouguier joined the Syrian members of Koon.

Meanwhile, the situation of Syrians in Lebanon has worsened. Curfews with no legal basis are imposed in various Lebanese

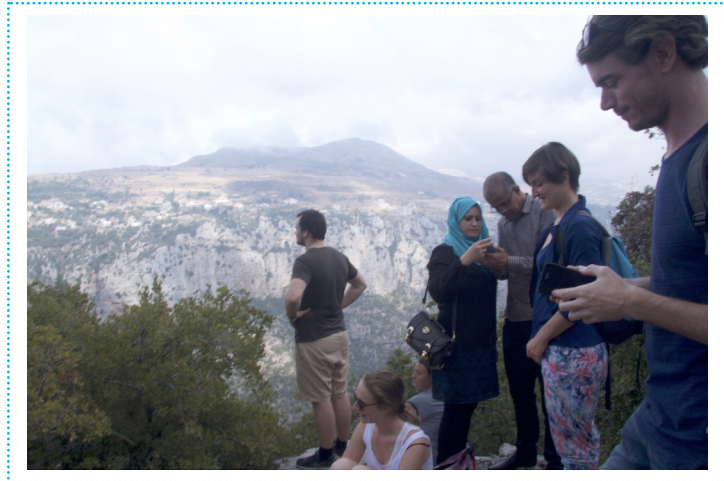
municipalities. After several Lebanese soldiers were taken hostage in the border town of Eرسال in August 2014, Syrian refugees became the arbitrary target of unmotivated acts of violence. In early 2015 the Lebanese authorities closed the border and imposed drastic residency conditions on Syrians, most of whom ended up living clandestinely and in poverty.

The end of Michel Sleiman's mandate on 25 May 2014 marked the end of two and a half years of political paralysis. The Parliament, elected for the last time in 2009 and whose deputies have prolonged their own mandates twice in 2013 and 2014, is an empty shell. Social discontent grows. On top of the crises of electricity, water and refugees, the crisis of waste exploded in summer 2015, when the landfill collecting Beirut's household waste closed and garbage accumulated in the city. A social and environmental movement called *Vous Puez* (You stink) organised several demonstrations against political corruption at the origin of the pollution and the blockages of the country. This citizens' surge saw the participation of several artists (playwright Lucien Bourjeily was arrested and wounded during the demonstrations), and

triggered other clashes. The Campaign to Save Dalieh led among others by the artists of the Dictaphone Group, combined academic research, artistic performance and activism to protect the last part of public seafront in Beirut from a real estate project. 'Crisis boosts creativity', summed up an exhibition organised then by the [Heinrich Böll Foundation](#).

Some progressive legal decisions confirmed the efforts of civil society. In April 2014 the State Council, the highest judiciary authority of the country, acknowledged to the families of the 17,000 people who 'disappeared' during the civil war the 'right to know' the truth. On 30 January 2017 the verdict of judge Rabih Maalouf, in Metn, refused to penalise homosexuality, contrary to a long series of previous judgments criminalising sexual orientation.

In May 2016 the municipal elections brought the fruit of this protest against the established order. In Beirut, the list [Beirut Madinati](#) ('Beirut My City'), made up of activists from *Vous Puez*, civil society members, well-known artists and common citizens gathered 40% of the votes, surpassing the list of the Beyrouthins, the coalition of



Picture from the IETM [Satellite in Beirut](#), October 2016 (© Jens Bjerregaard)

traditional parties created to confront the citizens' list. On 31 October 2016, following unprecedented alliances between opposing political groups, Michel Aoun became the President of the Republic and, at the same time, Saad Hariri was named Prime Minister. Since then, Lebanon is enjoying a stable security situation but the political blockage persists: in the absence of a compromise about the reform of the electoral law, the Lebanese people still wait for a date for future legislative elections to exert their right to vote, after eight years without voting.

## 02.

### THE CONTEMPORARY PERFORMING ARTS SCENE IN LEBANON

#### 2.1. The implicit cultural policy of Lebanon

At the end of the civil war, the creation of the Ministry of Culture in 1993 aimed to establish a unique authority managing cultural affairs, previously scattered among different ministries. Its role is very limited: with a 2 million dollar budget<sup>3</sup>, its resources mostly serve to pay its employees. Several cultural activities cannot be supported. So the Ministry of Tourism supports arts festivals, the most famous of which - Baalbek, Beiteddine and Byblos - serve as foreign tourism attractions. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the municipalities are responsible for establishing cultural centres.

Since 2008 the law 35/2008 establishes that the Ministry of Culture distributes funds to support the cultural industries and cultural activities<sup>4</sup>. The funding is split into sectors: cinema, literature, theatre and performance. Every year 270,000\$ (252,900€) is distributed in the form of grants for theatre and dance projects. The Ministry of Culture first determines the amount of funding that should come from other parties - Ministry of Tourism, embassies, NGOs, private foundations - before deciding its own contribution. A committee, made up of professionals from the sector, evaluates the applications and shortlists some projects that it then divides

<sup>3</sup> The latest budget voted by the Lebanese government dates back to 2005.

<sup>4</sup> According to the study 'Cultural Policies in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia, An Introduction', Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy), European Cultural Foundation, Boekmanstudies, Amsterdam, 2010.

into categories. The selected applicants receive between 5,000 and 15,000\$ (4,600 - 14,000€), but the money is paid long after the actual artistic project takes place. The distribution of grants is done by the Ministry of Finances, and often the selected artists have trouble to get the grants, sometimes waiting more than three years before finally receiving the money. In order to fund their work at the beginning, Lebanese artists cannot rely on public support for creation.

Nor there is any public support for their social security. The majority of performing artists in Lebanon have other jobs, ranging from university professor to primary school teacher, from journalist to casting director, in order to fund their artistic job and their health insurance. It is a vicious circle: artistic practice is labelled as a secondary activity in the view of Lebanese public opinion; precarious production conditions make it indeed a secondary activity for most artists who are unable to make a living out of their artistic work only. In 2012, law n. 7535 was voted to establish a Mutual Aid Fund, leveraging a 2% tax on the box office income of all artistic and cultural activities<sup>5</sup>. To date, this law is not applied; most Lebanese artists are therefore freelancers. As for foreign artists, they have the same status as the prostitutes working in so-called 'super night clubs'. Often from Eastern Europe, these women enter Lebanon with an artist's visa<sup>6</sup>, a fact that contributes to associate the touring of foreign artists with prostitution.

There is no national theatre, no public dance venue offering artists a fee space to rehearse and perform. According to his counsellor, the former Minister of Culture commissioned a preliminary study for the creation of a national theatre, but due to the lack of a budget, its creation

<sup>5</sup> According to the study 'Culture in Lebanon by 2020' published by Agenda culturel in April 2017

<sup>6</sup> Le visa d'artiste selon la Sûreté générale : <http://www.general-security.gov.lb/en/posts/46>

remains a vain wish. In parallel, there are less and less private theatres, with the historic closing of Théâtre Beyrouth in 1998, recently followed by Théâtre Babel in 2016. After a long political vacuum, the Ministry of Culture's team that was appointed in early 2017 wanted to show its determination to act. On 4 March 2017 the Minister Ghattas Khoury chaired a consultative conference to launch a five-year cultural development plan for Lebanon with the declared ambition of fostering artistic creativity and of bringing Lebanon back to its unique role in the Arab world. The Minister asked representatives of each cultural sector, chosen on the spot, to share their demands. Invited to the round table about theatre and dance, playwright Lina Khoury summed up the sector's demands: the end of censorship, cutting the taxes on box office income, public support for the promotion of performances, and the creation of national venues specifically for dance and theatre.

Faced with the gaps in public cultural policy, performing arts professionals create their own spaces for freedom and for expression, and build a bottom-up cultural policy. Lebanese cultural policy is implicit rather than explicit<sup>7</sup>. Due to gaps in the public authorities' support to the artistic scene, civil society and non-State-funded cultural actors allow for the emergence of an increasingly independent artistic scene. So, among artists, some - like the Zoukak company - choose deliberately not to apply to the Ministry of Culture's funds, in order to keep their autonomy, faced with authorities they criticise both in their artistic work and in their citizens' lives.

<sup>7</sup> 'What Cultural Policies? Explicit and Implicit Cultural Policies in Lebanon', by Nadia von Maltzahn



Lucien Bourjeily, 'Vanishing State' (courtesy of the artist)

## 2.2. The prestigious scene and the precarious scene

In Lebanon, the cultural sector - like the education, health and transport sectors - is a resource in the hands of the leaders of the country, divided into well-defined areas of political and religious power. The division of the main artistic festivals and cultural centres shows the disjointed reality of official culture in Lebanon and its submission to political imperatives. The Beiteddine festival is sponsored by Nora Joublatt, the wife of the Druse leader and head of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Joublatt, while the Tyre festival is supported by Randa Berri, the wife of Nabih Berri, head of the Parliament for 27 years and leader of the Shiite party Amal. In Tripoli, the cultural centre Safadi was created in 2007 by the entrepreneur and politician Mohammad Safadi, while Najib Mikati, a former prime minister and businessman, opened the cultural centre Azm, Beit el Fann (Maison de l'art / Art House). For the Lebanese establishment, culture, as the poet Nazem al-Sayed wrote in 2008, is just a more or less direct aspect of politics.

The renowned summer festivals receive the majority of public and private funding

devoted to performing arts. The Ministry of Tourism has a yearly envelope of 2.6 million dollars (2.4 million €) to fund them. The three main festivals receive the biggest share of this budget, up to 500,000 € (460,000 €) for the Baalbek Festival. Apart from exceptions like the dance company *Caracalla*, these festivals do not programme artists from the Lebanese independent scene. They rather function as repositories for international celebrities on Lebanese land. These events are funded by Lebanese authorities, but also receive the support of private funds, banks and enterprises willing to match their brands with such prestigious events. So the bank Byblos sponsors the Byblos Festival, the Société Générale Bank and the Mediterranean Bank support the Beiteddine Festival, and the Al Waleed bin Talal Foundation and the Arab Company for Insurance fund the Baalbek Festival<sup>8</sup>.

The independent cultural scene shapes itself at the margins of, and in opposition to, this culture of prestige, in an environment where stability, infrastructures and human resources are often scarce.

<sup>8</sup> 'Cultural Policies in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia, An Introduction', cit.

Multitasking, theatre, dance and performance artists have to take care directly for the production, distribution and promotion of their work. As free spaces for rehearsal and performance are lacking, they have to rent private spaces, often expensive, as well as hiring technicians. The three main performance venues in Beirut are the theatres Al-Madina, Monnot, and Théâtre du Tournesol. Not having their own programmes, these spaces function as receiving structures that artists rent to perform; thus performing there means assuming a financial risk, since the artists lose their money if there is little audience. Because of the unstable security environment in Beirut, artists often suffer financial losses from last-minute cancellations due to an attack or to sudden riots.

Founded in 1997, the Monnot Theatre initially tried to programme some artists, but then had to stop due to lack of money. The venue is attached to Saint-Joseph University and is directed by theatre artist Paul Mattar; it has 285 seats and works mostly as a receiving structure for artists who can rent it at the price of 700\$ (656€) per performance night. In exchange they earn the whole of the box office income. Exceptionally, the venue can establish a partnership with the artist, in which case there is no rental fee, but 30% of the box office revenue goes to the theatre.

Open in 1994, Al-Madina theatre has a capacity of 450 seats and has been receiving 50,000\$ (46,000€) per year from the Ministry of Culture for the last 5 years. With an annual budget of 500,000\$ (460,000€), it depends on private donations collected every year by the director Nidal Achkar to cover the maintenance costs and technicians' work. Performing there costs 850\$ (796€) per performance, rehearsing costs 175\$ (164€) per day. Nearby, the new underground space Metro Al-Madina, opened in 2012, offers artists its cabaret stage and its technicians for a rental fee of 880\$ (820€) during the week or 1,000\$ (937€) during the weekend.

Théâtre du Tournesol, with a capacity of 300 people, was opened by the Association Coopérative Culturelle des Jeunes du Théâtre et du Cinéma (Shams)<sup>9</sup> after the closure of Théâtre Beyrouth. The association helps young Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian artists to access space for rehearsal and performance at low or no cost. The maximum rental fee for the performance space is 400\$ (374€).

In order to fund the research, writing, performance and distribution of their work, artists based in Lebanon have to look at regional or international funds. These external funding sources are precious opportunities for artists, but they also constitute a challenge in terms of independence and of the training needed to get them.

### 2.3. Funding sources for independent artists

Three regional funds support cultural production in the Arab world: Culture Resource (Al Mawred al Thaqafy), the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) and Mophradat. Al Mawred, the first pan-Arab cultural association, founded in 2004, was initiated to support independent artistic creation outside mainstream commercial circuits through grant distribution and training. This association based in Belgium has provided, since 2016, the Tajwaal mobility grant, offering up to 8,000\$ (7,490€) to allow artists to present their work internationally. Thus in 2016 the theatre group Koon managed to tour 'Above Zero' in Dubai and Europe. The performance of the piece at the festival Dancing on the Edge in the Netherlands, led to a new co-production project. As well, the Minwal group, based in Saïda, could present its work 'Barzakh' at the international theatre festival in Kampala, Uganda. Mawred's Mawa3eed programme also delivers

<sup>9</sup> Association started in 1999 by Mahassen el-Ajam, Issam Abou Khaled, Roger Assaf, Ramlé Krounfol, Hanane el-Hajj Ali, Mirna Hareth, Bernadette Hadib, Éliane Raheb, Fadi Abi Samra, Boutros Rouhana and Zaki Mahfouz.

mobility grants up to 5,000\$ (4,600€). Al Mawred also delivers training courses in cultural management, and annually distributes grants up to 10,000\$ (9,370€) to support creation. In 2015 the Syrian theatre artist Mayan Alexan received a grant to produce 'A Ticket to Atlantis'. The performance, mixing theatre and visual arts, deals with the relationship between the body and the sea in the context of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean; it was co-produced with the Lebanese artist Lina Issa and performed on Beirut's coastline between August and September 2016.

AFAC - the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture - was founded in 2006 as an initiative of cultural activist members of Culture Resource, with support from the Open Society Institute. Today it is the main source of funding for independent artists in the Arab world, providing grants that can be up to 50,000\$ (46,000€), with an average of 25,000\$ (23,000€). Sometimes AFAC and Culture Resource's grants combine to allow the selected artists to cover all the costs associated with a production of their work. So for instance 'A Ticket to Atlantis', supported by Al Mawred, also received an AFAC grant in 2016. The same year, the Lebanese dancer Ali Chahrour received an AFAC grant for his new creation 'Men of the Land of Fire', three years after 'Fatmeh', co-funded by AFAC and Culture Resource. The first part of a trilogy about the relationship of movement, bodies and funerary rituals in the Arab world, 'Fatmeh' was followed by 'Leila's Death' and 'May He Rise', performed at the Avignon Festival in France and at Al-Madina theatre in Beirut. 'Above Zero', a piece directed by Ossama Hallal and supported by Al Mawred, also received a grant from AFAC.

Several contemporary dance projects were recently supported by AFAC. 'To Rest On A Slope', by dancer Danya Hammoud, about the bodily representation of 'becoming mad', received a grant in 2015. 'Heroes, Surface of a Revolution', a creation by the dancer Khoulood Yassine that translates the images of authority and its fall, into



movement, received a grant the same year and was performed in early 2017 at Al-Madina theatre. In 2016, the dancer Nancy Naous, founder of the company 4120.corps, received a grant for her developing creation 'Title Under Consideration', that questions the concept of masculinity in contemporary societies. 'Almaryam', a performance by Maryam Hammoud about the role of the body in the Arab world, sub-merged by images of war and atrocities, received a grant in 2016 and was staged at Théâtre du Tournesol in March 2017.

Mophradat, an association based in Belgium since 2004, previously named Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF), supports contemporary artists in the Arab world and their international partners with grants going up to 5,000\$ (4,600€). Several artists in Lebanon could add this amount to the grants received by the other funds in order to produce their creations. So in 2016 the Lebanese choreographer Khoulood Yassine was supported for research and production of her performance 'Heroes, Surface of a Revolution'. 'Titre provisoire', a piece by Wael Ali and Christèle Khodr, combined a grant by AFAC with one by Mophradat. Starting with the discovery of a tape sent by Christèle Khodr's uncle from Sweden during the civil war in Lebanon, the Lebanese playwright together with France-based Syrian artist Wael Ali, takes a contemporary look at exile, through three generations of her own family.

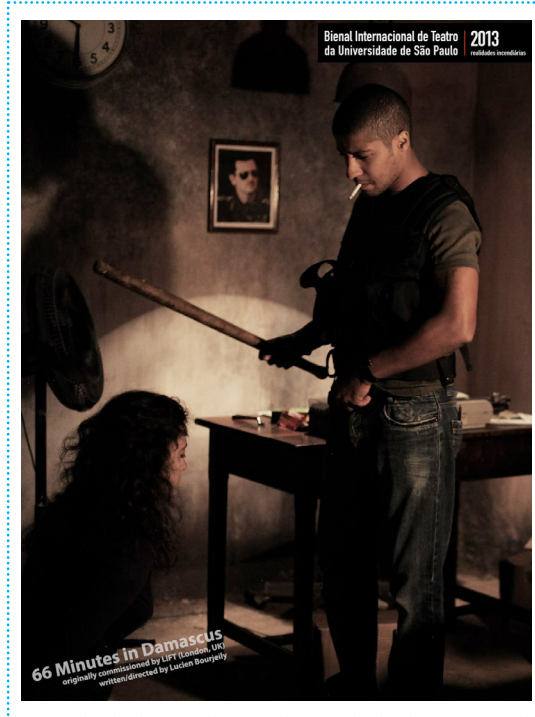
In parallel, other organisations specifically support marginalised artists in Lebanon: on one hand, Syrian artists having fled the war, on the other, Palestinian artists living in one of the twelve Palestinian camps in Lebanon. The training and grants proposed by these organisations are not limited to Syrian and Palestinian artists, but they also encourage cooperation with Lebanese and international artists.

Ettijahat Independent Culture, was created in 2011 to support the independent Syrian scene in Lebanon, Syria and beyond. This organisation has a triple objective:

strengthening the Syrian independent cultural sector so that it plays a role in the current and future situation in Syria; strengthening the status and presence of independent artists in cultural policies namely via the support of external funders; and improving the situation of marginalised groups in Lebanon via artistic production. Artists can benefit from three funding lines. The programme 'Create Syria' offers grants ranging from 7,000 to 14,000\$ (from 6,500 to 11,000€) in order to support the sustainability of cultural entities, like the Koon group who recently benefited from a grant. The programme 'Laboratory of Arts', supported by the Goethe Institute, gives 5,000\$ (4,600€) grants to support artistic creation. In its last edition, Lama Khalil was awarded for her work 'Insomnia', that deals with the disruption in the life of a young Syrian due to war and migration. Wael Ali received a grant to fund 'Titre provisoire'.

Ettijahat also supports research projects about Syrian arts and culture; thus in 2016 Lara Eilo carried out research about Syrian theatre in Lebanon from the 2011 revolution to date.

Citizens Artists, is an organisation inspired by Marie Elias, professor at the High Institute of Drama Arts in Damascus, now a refugee in Beirut. It distributes micro-funding for the creation of theatre pieces and organises writing workshops in Lebanon and Syria. Omar el-Jbaili, Syrian playwright and actor based in Beirut since 2013, received support from Citizens, Artists for the creation of his three most recent pieces: 'Okno', by Polish Ireneusz Iredynski, staged at the Babel Theatre in 2014, 'Helem', that he wrote in 2015, and 'Bronze' written by Mudar al-Haggi, that he staged in 2016 in the new venue called Station.



Lucien Bourjeily, '66 minutes' (courtesy of the artist)

The Qattan foundation supports Palestinian artists living in the twelve Palestinian camps in Lebanon, with the aim of facilitating encounters and collaborations with Lebanese artists inside and outside the camps. In July 2012 Qattan launched the programme 'Selat, Links Through the Arts', in collaboration with the Prince Claus Fund (the Netherlands). The programme aims to support a high-quality Palestinian artistic scene, emancipated from the programmes supported by NGOs and political parties. Selat distributed creation grants for three years. For example playwright Raeda Taha was supported for the creation of her piece 'Comment trouver quelqu'un comme toi, Ali?', that retraces her relationship with her father, Fedayeen and martyr of the Palestinian cause. Staged by Liba Abyad, the work was performed at the Babel Theatre in 2014.

Then the Foundation realised that the lack of education and structures for Palestinian artists living in Lebanon prevented them from continuing after the production of their work, so for the last two years Selat has been focusing its support on capacity-building programmes for Palestinian artists living in Lebanon. The fund is therefore open to all artists or collectives who aim to train and support emerging Palestinian artists. Recent recipients of the grant include the Kahraba Collective, Zoukak, les Amis des marionnettes and the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation; each of them has organised training workshops for Palestinian artists, followed by performances. So at the 2015 edition of the festival *Nehna wel Amar wel Jiran*, organised by the Kahraba Collective, the dance group of the Agial association coming from the Ain el-Helwe camp and set up by Kahraba, performed on the Escaliers Vendôme, the public space where the festival takes place every year.

The Lebanese artistic scene also relies heavily on grants from European institutions present in Lebanon, which have annual budgets devoted to the support of performing arts in Lebanon. Due to

the historical ties between Lebanon and France, a former colonial power, the Institut Français plays a key role among these donors, with an annual budget of 300,000 € for culture. The Institut works as a Lebanese operator fundraising among Lebanese private sponsors, with an annual programme organised around key events: the *Nuit des idées* (Night of Ideas), the *Mois de la francophonie* (Francophone Month), *Folle journée* street art, *Belle saison*, *la Fête de la musique*. The IF in particular supports all events related to the French language, and all creations that involve French visiting artists, but it also supports the local emerging scene. During the 2016 edition of the Sidewalk Festival by the Zoukak company, the IF supported, together with the British Council and the Goethe Institute, Focus Liban, a meeting of European curators and programmers with selected Lebanese artists. The programme offered visibility and micro-grants to, among others, dancer Petra Serhal for her creation 'No Blood Included', to playwright and actress Hanan Hajj Ali for her work 'Jogging', to Khouloud Yassine for 'Heroes, Surface of a Revolution', and to Ali Chahrour for 'Men of the Land of Fire'. Six applicants who were not selected for a grant could also present their projects to the programmers: among them actress Yara Bou Nasser and playwrights Camille Brunel and Christèle Khodr.

The Institut Français offers local artists the Montaigne Room, a space for rehearsals and performances inside the French Embassy. Besides being available for free, the room has the advantage of not having to comply with censorship rules, since it is subject to French law. Recently, during the 2016 Sidewalk Festival, the Kahraba collective played its 'Géographie d'une fable' there, and dancer Petra Serhal presented her performance 'No Blood Included' about collective mourning for the victims of violent death. The Lebanese company Zoukak and the French company DuZieu played the performance 'L'avantage du printemps', which ironically revisits the relationship between East and West after the Arab

Spring, with inspiration from Shakespeare's 'Othello'.

Similarly to the Institut Français, the British Council every year supports the Spring Festival, organised by Culture Resource, the contemporary dance festival Bipod organised by the Maqamat dance company, and the Sidewalk Festival. The British Council's support mainly consists in covering the expenses for British artists included in the programme. In parallel, in 2016 the British Council has supported several theatre projects revisiting William Shakespeare's work, in line with its role to create bridges between Lebanon and Great Britain.

The German Heinrich Böll Foundation, close to the Green Party, supports cultural productions with a progressive and engaged viewpoint. Recently it supported part of the production of 'Jogging', the latest work by Hanane Hajj Ali, and it currently supports its touring in Lebanon. It also supports the Future Stages programme put in place by Ettijahat, training young Syrian playwrights. The foundation annually supports the performing arts festival Al Horsh that takes place in the Bois des pins park. It produced the piece 'Your Love is Fire', realised by the Syrian playwright Rafat Alzakout. In the 2016 edition of the Spring Festival, the foundation also supported the meeting 'Artists Against All Odds, regional and international responses to a cultural sector at risk', that took place over two days at the Théâtre du Tournesol.

## 2.4. An outward-looking scene

For many artists based in Lebanon, a grant is a springboard for their artistic career. Given the absence of public domestic funding, foreign funding is the only way to produce their creations. But the fact that such funding is conditioned to the production of an artist's project endangers the artists' financial stability. Funding to support research, writing, rehearsal or distribution costs of a performance are scarce.

The relationship of dependence between artists and foreign funders creates a huge challenge: that of stereotyped expectations from certain funders, or the existence of a political or humanitarian agenda behind artistic support. Since the popular uprising in Syria became an international conflict and provoked the displacement of millions of Syrians, namely to Europe, support for Syrian artists can come with conditions that hinder artists' freedom, especially reducing artistic creation to a humanitarian or political intent. Some artists respond with artistic language to the impact of such stereotyped expectations. So in 'I Hate Theatre, I Love Pornography', staged at Metro al-Madina in 2015 and inspired by the work of Henrik Ibsen, the Zoukak company and the Syrian artist Abdullah al-Kafri present with irony the story of a Lebanese theatre company that hires a Syrian playwright to be sure to get a grant.

Before the Syrian conflict, Lebanese artists had already experienced the ambiguous relationship between some cultural funds and regional military tensions. Following the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the members of the Kahraba Collective received the support of Italian NGOs at a moment when Italy was leading Unifil<sup>10</sup>. In order to avoid opportunistic behaviour, its members took care to use such funds to support a network of local artistic organisations and to deepen their creation work beyond the specific interests of the funders.

<sup>10</sup> *United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon*



*IETM Satellite meeting in Beirut, October 2016 (© Jens Bjerregaard)*

One way to avoid such traps is the presence of intermediaries between the artists and the external funders. Cultural manager for Mousssem Nomadic Arts Centre in Belgium, and organiser of cultural events in Lebanon, Geoliane Arab has slowly come to play the role of a guide for European festival programmers, curators and funders. As an intermediary between the latter and Lebanese artists, she facilitates the presence of Lebanese artists in European festival programmes, while at the same time helping European programmers to understand the reality of the Lebanese scene. On his side, Abdullah al-Kafri, director of Ettijahat, plays the same role regarding Syrian artists in Lebanon and Syria. Still, there is a real and sincere interest in Europe for the Levantine arts scene, and funding opportunities are more numerous here than in Lebanon. So the creative process of several artists is often split between the two continents. For their piece 'Titre provisoire', Wael Ali and Christèle Khodr spent a residency period in Lyon where the Sens Interdit festival offered to co-produce their piece. The première will take place in France in November 2017, since Wael Ali is struggling to get a visa to Lebanon. On her side, Lebanese artist Tania el-Khoury presents her performances produced in the UK

in Lebanon. Her recent creation, 'Gardens Speak', evoking the biographies of Syrian citizens killed during the war and buried by their relatives in their own gardens to avoid the bombing of funeral processions, has been produced by Birmingham's Fierce festival. Her latest work, 'As Far As My Fingertips Take Me', that places the audience and the Syrian artist Basel Zaraa in an epidermal relation, is produced by the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Lift Festival. Two of the latest creations of the director Lucien Bourjeily were also produced by LIFT Festival: '66 minutes', that plunges the audience in a Syrian prison, and 'Vanishing State', that focuses on the impacts of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 on the current chaos in the Levant. Working outside Lebanon allows artists to have their works produced, as well as to experience enriching cultural exchanges with other scenes. Split between these two worlds, some artists end up moving away from the Lebanese scene where production constraints can finally overcome the will to go on stage. It is the case of Lebanese dancer Nancy Naous, founder of the 4120 corps company - the number is the distance in km between Paris and Beirut, the two cities she's attached to. For her latest creation, 'These Shoes are Made for Walking',

she benefited from two residencies in Paris, while she struggles to find funds to perform in Beirut. She finally staged the piece at Al-Madina theatre in 2016, but she's still doubtful about the possibility to present her current project, 'Title Under Consideration', in residency in Brittany, in a Lebanese venue. Performing in Beirut always requires grant applications with no guaranteed results, eroding the time available for creation.

However, in spite of the obstacles, creating for a local audience, and creating a local audience, is the main issue for the Lebanese independent scene. Whether they have a foot in Europe or not, these artists share an engaged vision of the performing arts as a tool to transform their society.

### 2.5. An engaged scene

The members of the Lebanese artistic scene consider their work as a form of political engagement and resistance. An engagement to allow the emergence of a culture and a local audience for theatre and dance on one hand; on the other hand a resistance against censorship by authorities, but also as an answer to the permanent noise of military and political conflicts in the region.

The theatre scene adopts different attitudes towards censorship. If all artists refuse strongly its principle and existence, some of them have made it into a hobby horse in their creative work, while others get used to it and bypass it via case-by-case strategies. Finally, some members of the artistic community participate in political and legal lobbying for its abolishment, to date still without success.

The preliminary censorship of theatre works by General Security is based on decree n. 2 issued on January 1st, 1977, during the civil war. The decree gives the security institution the authority to deny the staging of a theatre piece, or parts of it, without giving details about the criteria used for the censorship process, thus giving

authorities ample room for manoeuvre in applying the law. According to this decree, a theatre director willing to stage a work in Lebanon must bring three copies of the text of the work to the publications department of General Security. If amendments to the text are requested to go on stage, s/he has to approve them with a signature near each part of text that is amended or deleted.

Theatre director Lucien Bourjeily decided to denounce the practice of censorship through his own work. In 2013 he staged the piece 'Will it Pass or Not?', directly addressing the censorship authorities in Lebanon. The work was staged in some universities before being forbidden by General Security. Then the text, presented to the publications department, was censored. His next piece, 'Beirut Syndrome', recounting the kidnapping and trial of a corrupt politician by a popular tribunal, was forbidden in 2015, following the director's refusal to sign for approval of the censorship of some parts of the text by General Security. Finally the text was read at the Zoukak studio.

Some authors choose to modify parts of their texts in order to be able to show their work. In 'Rituals of Signs and Transformation', staged at the Babel Theatre in December 2013 with the students of the American University in Beirut (AUB), playwright Sahar Assaf accepted to replace the word 'mufti' with 'sheikh' in order to avoid censorship. In her opinion, staging the piece written by the Syrian author Saadallah Wannous was more important than combating censorship. Director of the 'Theatre Initiative' at AUB, Sahar Assaf denounces the principle of censorship, but also sees its advantages. Counter-productive, censorship offers media attention and an increased audience for censored works, and according to Assaf, it pushes the Lebanese artistic scene to double its inventiveness.

However certain artists refuse to accept the censorship rules. This is the case of Zoukak, who in order to avoid censorship obligations, often play in public spaces,

without printing entry tickets which would oblige them to ask for an authorisation from General Security. For other creations the company chose to play a limited number of performances so that authorities did not have time to censor the work. Finally, they have also managed to avoid censorship by presenting a partial text to the authorities. So in 'Lucène / Formation à l'obéissance', a play inspired by Henrik Ibsen's 'Emperor and Galilean', the text contains the sentence 'the director improvises' several times.

The artistic community also uses legal actions to stop censorship. In the frame of the [IETM Satellite meeting in Beirut](#), 6-9 October 2016, with support from the international campaign for freedom of expression, a collective of artists and activists presented a legal proposal aiming to abolish censorship.

Concerned about marking their distance from current politics, the artists of the Lebanese scene still define their work in relation to the human and political stakes in the region. So in 'Above Zero', Ossama Hallal and the Koon group dance to the rhythm of bullets and bombings, in a confined space that resembles a refugees' tent. Thus they evoke the Syrian conflict in revisiting Bertolt Brecht's work and make it a universal human experience. In 'Titre provisoire', Wael Ali and Christèle Khodr distance themselves from the contemporary migration crisis and put it back in the framework of history. 'Jogging', directed and performed by Hanane Hajj Ali, revisits the myth of Medea to talk about gender violence in Lebanon. In his trilogy about funerary rituals, dancer Ali Chahrour celebrates the strength of mourning women rather than the death of men, through images belonging to the collective memory of the region, from the daughter of Mohammed the prophet to Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war.

## 2.6. A united scene

The local artistic community does not only include victims and persecutors of regional conflicts in its artistic production. Its members also act to improve the living and working conditions of the artists exiled due the conflicts, and through art they try to improve the daily life of refugees and displaced persons spread across the Lebanese soil.

With the arrival of the first Syrian artists in exile fleeing the repression of Bashar el-Assad's regime against the peaceful demonstrations spreading across the country, Lebanese artists opened their doors and their address books. By showing their solidarity with the Syrian artists relocated in Beirut, the Lebanese scene became richer and collaborations multiplied. At the Théâtre du Tournesol, the Shams association offered its mezzanine for one month to allow Syrian director Rafat al-Zaqout to prepare a puppets' play denouncing the Syrian regime. Then the Ettijahat organisation used Shams' studio for two years. Today the Koon company of Ossama Halal is rehearsing in the same mezzanine of the Théâtre du Tournesol.

Besides humanitarian help, the artistic community in Lebanon developed a system to offer cultural support to the refugees displaced on its territory. So Basma el-Husseiny, founder of Culture Resource, created *Action for Hope* in August 2015. After scouting for young talents among the refugees scattered through informal camps in the Bekaa valley near the Syrian border, the NGO created an amateur theatre company. The group members received long-term training in all the domains of the performing arts. Christèle Khodr trained them in directing, Antoine Bouguier, member of Koon, in movement techniques; Eric Deniaud, puppet player of the Kahraba Collective, provided initial training in puppetry, while Karam Abu Ayash, head technician of Koon, trained them in light and sound techniques. The group has already staged three plays, the latest of which,



'Johar... up in the air' (© Patrick Baz/Catharsis LCDT, courtesy Zeina Daccache)

'Elephant, Ô Roi du Temps', based on the text by Syrian Saadallah Wannous, toured different theatres in Beirut as well as the public spaces of the refugee camps in the Bekaa.

In summer 2016 the *La Caravane* project also gathered amateurs coming from the Bekaa with professional artists to create a street theatre project. The performance has been staged in 40 different venues in Lebanon. By putting on stage the intimate life stories of Syrian refugees, La Caravane contributed to challenging the prejudices of the Lebanese population about the refugees relocated in Lebanon. La Caravane is a joint initiative of Beirut DC, *Clown me In* and *Sawa for Development and Aid*, with support from the European Union, the Prince Claus Fund, Unicef and the Goethe Institute. La Caravane also published a report warning about the spatial and cultural segregation between the Syrian and the Lebanese communities; among other recommendations the report asks the Lebanese authorities to let Syrian artists stage their creations in spite of lacking a

work permit<sup>11</sup>.

The NGO *Seenaryo* organises theatre workshops with children and women from the Syrian and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. It also uses theatre to facilitate learning in the informal schools created by the NGOs *Jusoor* and *Sawa for Development and Aid* in the Bekaa valley; here *Seenaryo* trains teachers to use theatre as an educational tool.

Making art accessible for the most vulnerable and using theatre as a tool for education and self-expression is in the DNA of some artists' collectives in Lebanon. Since 2006 the *Zoukak* company organises drama therapy sessions for the marginalised groups of the Palestinian and Syrian camps, male and female inmates in prisons, and victims of domestic violence. In parallel the Lebanese theatre director Zeina Daccache has specialised in the creation of theatre works based on drama therapy workshops

<sup>11</sup> In Lebanon, Syrians are entitled to work in three domains only: agriculture, cleaning and building.

for marginalised groups. Thus Daccache, who founded the NGO Catharsis, staged 'Sheherazade' with the inmates of the main female prison in Roumieh. She uses theatre to change public perception of these marginalised groups and to improve their legal conditions. Her latest work, 'Johar... Up in the Air', performed in 2016 with 38 prisoners of Roumieh, most of them with mental health issues, aimed to denounce and reform article 232 of the Penal Code dating back to 1943, that permitted detention until the prisoner 'recovers from madness'. The work is still touring in 2017 in different theatres and universities.

The development of the independent scene in Lebanon owes much to the solidarity and collaboration of its members. In a continuous back-and-forth system, artists participate in each other's projects, exchange advice and support each other. So Abdullah al-Kafri directed Zoukak in his last creation, 'The Battle Scene', while Eric Deniaud authored the dramaturgy of 'Jogging' and Christèle Khodr participated to that of 'Story of a Mother', the latest work currently in development by Koon, inspired by the eponymous work by Danish author Hans Andersen.

Some individual initiatives try to compensate for financial and organisational gaps. Thus the theatre and cinema actor Nasri Sayegh worked without pay on press relations of several artists, before funding Be:Kult, a communication agency for Lebanese independent artists, together with graphic designer Abraham Zeitoun. They offer their services either for free or for a very low fee, to promote the latest Lebanese productions.

Collaboration, however, happens mainly at the artistic level and so far struggles to develop on the professional level. Due to the lack of long-lasting structures, exchanges focus on artistic projects, and cannot extend to organisational, financial or legal skills. Acknowledging the situation, Geoliane Arab organised a round table for performing arts professionals during the

2015 edition of the festival Nehna wel Amar wel Jiran, with the goal to debate production, cultural management, promotion, contracts and salaries.

## 2.7. New spaces, new entities

The sum of individual initiatives is not enough for long-term development of the artistic scene; for this reason more and more independent artistic structures are being created. The Zoukak theatre company celebrated ten years of activity with the Sidewalks Festival 2016 - ten years during which they had to rent a flat to rehearse and perform their plays; they are opening a new venue, Zoukak Studio, in late 2017. Funded by the Swiss foundation Drosos and located in the Quarantaine neighbourhood of Beirut, the venue hosts the drama therapy workshops that Zoukak organises for young people from marginalised groups, be they Lebanese, Palestinian or Syrian. It also hosts young artists from any background who can receive training, produce and perform their artistic creations. Zoukak Studio thus offers an alternative to young talents who cannot afford to rent one of the few private spaces in Beirut to produce their work.

Opened in 2012, Mansion rents some working studios for artists in the heart of Beirut, in the Zouqqa el-Blatt neighbourhood. Architect and activist Ghassan Maasri got permission from the owner of this 800 m2 villa, dating back to the Ottoman era and empty since 1980, to use it as a space for multidisciplinary artistic creation. The venue often hosts theatre performances for free or low-fee entrance. In October 2016, 'Terrestrial Journeys', a work staged by the Anglo-Iraqi actress Dina Mousawi about and with Syrian refugee women from the Chatila camp, was staged in its large, adjustably-designed living room. In November, several performances programmed in the frame of the Sidewalks Festival took place in Mansion. The space is also used as a meeting space for artists and activists, including the mobilisation to save the Dalieh coastline.

New spaces for contemporary arts are emerging in Beirut and produce dance and theatre performances. Dar el-Nimer, a space dedicated to Palestinian and international arts and culture opened by philanthropist banker and art collector Rami el-Nimer, hosts some performances during exhibition periods. In October 2016 the cycle 'Sea of Stories' presented the latest creation by the Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation, 'A Performance Desperately in Need of an Audience', tackling the issue of migration. 'Steps, Rhythms and a Camp', a performance created by the members of the Agial association from the Ain el-Heloué camp, evokes the experience of Palestinians in Lebanon. 'This Sea is Mine', a walking performance by the Dictaphone Group, took the audience from Dar el-Nimer on a fishermen's boat for an audio tour of the privatised coastline of Beirut. In October 2017 the Lebanese theatre director Aliya Khalid will show her latest creation. The Palestinian artist Raeda Taha will also perform her new work, co-produced with Junaid Sarieddine, member of Zoukak.

Opened in 2009 by Sandra Dagher and Lamia Joreige, the Beirut Art Center (BAC) is a space for production and research in local and international contemporary arts. In parallel to, or in the framework of exhibitions, it also hosts performances. During the exhibition 'Rétrospective' by French dancer and choreographer Xavier le Roy in September 2015, the work of nine local dancers was at the centre of the exhibition.

The cultural centre also organises frequent round tables for reflection and exchange about contemporary artistic production. In April 2017 the BAC hosted 'Meeting Points', a multidisciplinary meeting in search of new models of artistic production and dissemination, organised every two years by Mophradat.

In 2011 the Lebanese fine arts association, Ashkal Alwan, opened a 2,000 m2 space dedicated to artistic education and production. It regularly hosts performances, especially during the biannual event Home

Works. This contemporary arts platform welcomes local, regional and international artists who share their works over ten days in the form of performances, round tables, workshops and exhibitions, all produced by Ashkal Alwan. Among other performances staged during the last edition in November 2015, artist Marwa Arsanios presented her first performance 'Learning to Dance', realised in collaboration with Lebanese dancers Danya Hammoud, Pierre Geagea and Ghida Hachicho. 'Corbeaux', a performance created by the company O, founded by Moroccan dancer Bouchra Ouizguen, was performed on the Beirut Corniche as well as on the square of the Sursock Museum.

Inaugurated in September 2013, the Station cultural centre offers an interdisciplinary programme mixing performance, digital and visual arts, as well as workshops, round tables, residencies and groundbreaking contemporary arts exhibitions. In 2016 Station hosted among others the performance 'Gardens Speak' by Tania el-Khoury, in the framework of the Spring Festival; the hip-hop performance 'Turn Off the Light'; the performance 'Dushka' by Omar el-Jbaili inspired by the poetic work of Amal Dunqul; the professional meetings 'Regards croisés sur la collaboration', organised in the framework of the Beirut & Beyond festival; and Hanane Hajj Ali's 'Jogging' in the frame of the Yalla Dada cycle.

Opened in October 2015, the contemporary arts museum Sursock includes performing arts in its programme, with the aim to overcome the traditional visual experience of the exhibited works. Dancer Petra Serhal, member of the Dictaphone Group, proposes sensorial museum visits using theatrical and dance techniques. The museum also hosts performances as part of festivals: during the Bipod festival in April 2017 it hosted the performance 'Durational Rope', by the Sweden-based dance duo Quarto, as well as the seminar 'Innovating in Cooperation' organised by Relais Culture Europe to develop new methods for artistic cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean.



Tania el-Khoury, 'Gardens Speak' (courtesy of the artist)

Since 2004 the dance company Maqamat Dance Theatre organises Bipod - Beirut International Platform of Dance. The company, founded in 2002 by Omar Rajeh together with Khoulood Yassine, Hicham Jaber and other Lebanese dancers, has produced a long series of critically acclaimed performances, from 'Beyrouth Jaune' (2002) to 'Beytna' (2017), an encounter of four musicians and four choreographers around cooking. In parallel, Maqamat has put in place several structures in order to develop contemporary dance in Lebanon and in the Arab region. Taqween, a contemporary dance school in Beirut, offers intensive dance education training since 2012 for young dancers from the Levantine region, under the direction of local and international choreographers.

The company has opened two dance studios: Beit el-Raqs, in Baakline, and Deir el Qamar, in the Chouf mountains region.

Both offer artists residencies and contemporary dance, hip-hop, ballet and *dabke* classes.

Beit el-Raqs also annually hosts the programme Moultaqa Leymoun, taking place alongside Bipod, aiming to introduce young dance artists from Lebanon and the Arab world to a local and international audience through performances, round tables and workshops. During the 6th edition in April 2017 Lebanese dancers Bassam Abou Diab, Ghida Hachicho and Charlie Prince participated in collaboration with 20 artists from the region, including Algerian dancer Nacera Belaza, Syrian Hoor Malas and Palestinian Leila Awadallah<sup>12</sup>. For the 2017 edition of Bipod, the Citerne a new mobile space of 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>, was created in Beirut to host 22 dance performances,

<sup>12</sup> See the full list of participants: <https://www.maqamat.org/#/leymouns>

seven workshops and two exhibitions. Among performances by renowned international dancers, Bassam Abou Diab presented his work 'Under the Flesh', in cooperation with Maqamat Dance Theatre.

A former member of Maqamat, Hisham Jaber founded the performing venue in 2012, with the aim to make it financially self-sustainable through box office income. Metro al-Madina is a cabaret venue, half-way between theatre venue, night club and bar, that produces and co-produces works. After having produced three cabaret shows, the piece 'Hishik Bishik' developed a faithful audience which then renewed its interest for the cabaret Bar Farouk or the theatre comedy 'Beirut... Tarik el Jdide' by Yehia Jaber. The venue hosts contemporary artists, often audacious, like the dancer Alexandre Paulikevtich, who in April 2015 presented 'Baladi ya Wad' here, in which he deconstructs the Egyptian dance *baladi* to transform it into a contemporary practice, charged with emotions as well as messages about sexual orientation, gender-based violence and social taboos.

## 2.8. Outside Beirut

While the majority of performing arts productions take place in Beirut where the cultural offer is as dynamic as the novelty-hungry audience, some artists decide to break the habit and foster the emergence of an artistic scene outside the capital city. In Saïda, a town located 40 km south of Beirut, since 2012 the Minwal theatre company has been offering six-month theatre training courses for young people, aiming to foster the creation of a local theatre group. Their youth training programme called Siba received a grant from AFAC in 2016. Proposing a cultural offer free from any political, religious or commercial affiliation outside Beirut requires facing many challenges, including the one of space. Saïda only has three theatre stages, two of which are funded (and named after) politicians. Minwal therefore plays in the third venue, inside a university, in order to protect its independence.

The Kahraba Collective has a long tradition of working outside Beirut to perform in Palestinian refugee camps, prisons, schools, and public spaces in Lebanon. In summer 2017 the theatre and puppet company opened a new residency and creation space in the Hammana village, at the crossroads of Beirut, the Bekaa valley and the Chouf mountains. Besides hosting the Kahraba Collective who now lives there, Hammana Artist House (HAH) aims to be a workplace for local companies as well as international artists passing through Lebanon, with the goal to create connections and collaborations. Funded by a private donor born in the village, in 2016 the venue hosted the festival *Nehna wel Amar wel Jiran*, inviting the Beirut audience to go out of the capital. A 200+ seat theatre should open near the HAH.

Kahraba and Minwal received funding by Culture Resource's Abbara programme to support their institutional development. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, Abbara offers one grant per year to support the creation of independent cultural organisations and the development of their infrastructures in the Arab world. Using the grant spread over two years, it also proposes a series of training workshops in cultural management, legal advice, fundraising, technical support, marketing, websites creation.

Hosting Lebanese and foreign artists in residence outside Beirut is one of the main activities of the Temporary Art Platform (TAP), created and directed by curator Amanda Abi Khalil. In 2014 the first of such residences in Lebanon took place in the mountain village of Meziara, in the north of the country, gathering six artists from India, UK, Spain, Mexico, France and Lebanon. The artists produced site-specific work in an industrial complex located in the middle of a forest. In 2016 the temporary residency took place in the Ras Masqa village. Organised in partnership with the Association for the Promotion and the Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL), the one-month residency gathered six

artists around the topic of artistic education. In 2017 the residency took place in the city of Jezzine in southern Lebanon, on the topic of water.

In the south of the country, Kassem Istanbouli and the theatre company bearing his name have been working since 2008 to create a local theatre movement. After opening the Star Cinema in Nabatieh and the Hamra cinema in Tyre, in summer 2017 they renovated the Rivoli cinema, closed for 29 years. The Istanbouli company performs in public spaces and gathers a network of Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian volunteers in southern Lebanon. Since 2014 it has been organising the International Theatre Festival in Tyre and the Lebanon International Theatre Festival across Tyre, Tripoli and Nabatieh, with the goal of decentralising theatre production in Lebanon and creating a platform for emerging artists in the Lebanese regions.

## 2.9. Performing arts and public space

The public space in Lebanon is a space of conflict, constantly under threat of extinction under a forest of concrete. In the last year the contested high stakes around the right to the city, to the environment and to the sea have fostered multidisciplinary creations, at the crossroads of artistic performance, academic research and citizens' activism. The Dictaphone Group, a collective made of artists Tania al-Khoury and Petra Serhal, and urbanist Abir Saksouk, participated in the civil campaign for the protection of Dalieh, the last public area of Beirut coastline with the Ramlet el-Baïda beach. The collective also created the performance 'Bus Cemetery' on the issue of abandoned public transports in Lebanon; 'Camp Pause' about the history of the Palestinian camp of Rashidieh at the periphery of Tyre and the daily life of its inhabitants; and 'Nothing to Declare' about the borders in Lebanon and the region. Through such performances the public space becomes a full element of the creation that aims to create an accidental audience and to become one with the urban fabric.



The city of Beirut is also the venue for walking performances. The Surssock Museum has commissioned several walks/performances since its opening, inviting artists to propose an alternative experience of the city. Rani al Rajji, architect and urban storyteller, has taken the audience up to the Martyrs Square, while the Dictaphone Group made them walk in the footsteps of a foreign domestic worker from Surssock to the Quarantine neighbourhood. In July 2016 a 'Toxic Tour' organised by the Société des Faux Témoins of the artist Jessika Khazrik brought the audience back to the time of the civil war when the current Beirut waterfront was a giant landfill. Sahar Assaf also questions Beirut's violent past in the walking performance 'Watch Your Steps: Beirut Heritage Walking Tour', organised in the Khandaq Al Ghamiq neighbourhood on the 39th anniversary of the civil war.

The *rendez-vous* for the performing arts in public space in Beirut takes place at the Escaliers Vendôme, in the Mar Mikhaël neighbourhood. From the desire to perform for their neighbours and friends in 2010 the Kahraba Collective duo Aurélien Zouki and Eric Deniaud came to create the festival *Nehna wel Amar wel Jiran*, mixing an audience of *habitués* with a popular and new public. The 2017 edition marked ten years of the Collective and their move to Hammana, where some of the performances took place.

The Temporary Art Platform carried out research about the relation between art and public space in Lebanon, titled 'Art in public space in Lebanon: A research project and tool guide on the legal and administrative challenges and opportunities'. This legal and practical guide for artists willing to work in the public space is [available online](#)<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> The publication was the origin of a round table at Ashkal Alwan in November 2015, gathering artist and art critic Roy Dib, cultural manager Geoliane Arab, Mustapha Yammout founder of Zico House, and Nasri Brax, lawyer and adviser to the former Minister of Culture; the round table was moderated by Amanda Abi Khalil, founder of TAP, and Nayla Geagea, lawyer



Tania el-Khoury, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (courtesy of the artist)

After highlighting that freedom of expression and access to the public space are guaranteed by the fundamental law in Lebanon, the report specifies the rules to respect in order to get permission for creative work in the public space. First of all, one has to respect the decree of 1974 about cleanliness in public space; then article 209 of the Penal Code about the means of diffusion in public space, avoiding defamation, vituperation and degradation, condemned by the Penal Code.

In order to realise a temporary artistic work in the public space it is necessary to go to the municipality and to fill in an official request in Arabic including date, place, duration, expected audience and nature of the support requested from the municipality to realise the performance or work. Some artists, like the Dictaphone Group prefer to avoid the authorisation

and to produce spontaneous performances. This however is not a zero risk practice: several times the artists of the group have been denied access to public spaces by the police.

## 2.10. Education and critique: a work in progress

Within the public Lebanese University, the Fine Arts Institute proposes theatre education as well as education in stage design. Most Lebanese artists studied at the Fine Arts Institute, but many continue their education in Europe or in the USA, due to the lack of specialised education in contemporary dance and theatre practices.

In private universities, dance and theatre are taught as optional subjects and are usually attended by few students, given the lack of professional opportunities in the performing arts in Lebanon. As for the educators, some artists privilege an active, practice-oriented pedagogy. In the Lebanese American University (LAU), theatre directors Lina Abyad, Lina Khoury and Aliya Khalidi plunge their students into the Lebanese, Arab and international history of theatre. Every year Lina Khoury directs a play performed by her students in collaboration with professional actors.

At the American University of Beirut (AUB), theatre director Sahar Assaf has institutionalised the encounter between amateurs and professionals with the creation of the Initiative théâtrale. In collaboration with Robert Myers, professor of English literature and creative writing, she created this theatre production workshop to allow theatre students to produce and perform theatre pieces in real conditions, surrounded by professional actors and technicians. In 2013 the theatre workshop students produced 'Rituals of Signs and Transformations' by Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous, performed at the Babel Theatre. In 2015 they performed 'The Dictator', by playwright Issam Mahfouz, in the same theatre. In December 2016 they produced Shakespeare's 'King Lear' together with the long-respected Lebanese actor Roger Assaf and the London-based group Faction Ensemble at Al-Madina theatre.

The place of performing arts critique in the Lebanese media is shy, not to say fearful. Worse yet, this space tends to shrink with the economic crisis of traditional media which recently provoked the closure of the newspaper *As Safir*. Yet critique is one of the main issues for the developing cultural scene in Lebanon, together with other key sectors such as programming and distribution of artistic creations. The main problem affecting critique is the lack of specific education, but another issue is the lack of funding since Lebanese newspapers offer low salaries and limited space to their collaborators responsible for cultural coverage. Finally, in the background, the problem of Lebanese cultural journalism is its tendency to encourage the precarious and emerging scene rather than critiquing its production.

Given the lack of a rigorous cultural critique, some artists have decided to address it personally alongside their creative work. Roy Dieb, co-founder of Zoukak and a theatre and cinema director, occupied the cultural pages of the daily newspaper *Al Akhbar* for three years, under the direction of Pierre Abi Saab. For a long time *Al Akhbar* devoted four pages per day to culture, thus creating a dialogue with the artists through its articles, as well as a specialised audience among its readers. Due to current financial difficulties, *Al Akhbar* has cut half of its cultural pages, and is nowadays rather focused on daily news.

To counter this relative lack of interest, new media have recently appeared. The new information website Al Modon hosts acerbic and erudite theatre critiques by Roger Outa. The new online magazine Raseef 22 is focused on cultural and urban issues. The new quarterly magazine Bidayat, founded by Lebanese historian Fawae Traboulsi and distributed in eight Arab countries, gives major space to long articles about artistic and cultural issues. .

## 2.11. Lebanon, 'a message'

In the end, considering the lack of public support for the performing arts, artists in Lebanon are condemned to be creative. Given the scarcity of public funding, they have to turn to grants offered by private funders; this implies the development of organisational and managerial competences before their creative work. The obligations deriving from such an economic model based on scarcity and competition limit the creative freedom of independent artists, who often need to have a well-paid job to fund their own artistic work.

Acknowledging this situation, the Zoukak and Kahraba collectives have managed, in their respective ten years of existence, to become cultural entities with unique identities, able to attract long-term funding and to overcome project-based funding. In 2017, with the opening of the Zoukak Studio and the Hammana Artist House, these two theatre companies have given a new impetus to the independent performing arts scene in Lebanon. By creating spaces for rehearsals, performing and residencies that are accessible and free for amateur and professional artists, the two collectives are accompanying the evolution of the Lebanese scene towards a greater creative autonomy. The theatre groups Koon and Minwal are already marching in their footsteps, themselves creating spaces that mix artistic creation, training and meeting opportunities for artists.

In parallel, the professional encounters organised beside artistic events are increasing, in order to give artists the necessary tools to defend their rights, raise funds, and finally, to build an artistic community that is able to speak with one voice.

Scattered and precarious, the artistic community remains united and collaborative. The continuous back-and-forth between artists working in each other's productions, the sharing of contacts, the frequent collaborations allow artists and collectives to last in the long term in spite of the structural

gaps of the Lebanese artistic scene. The Lebanese artistic community is as diverse and ever changing as geopolitics in the region. In a country where a quarter of the population is displaced, the actors of the artistic scene are Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and more. The artists have chosen openness; they multiply quality educational opportunities for refugees, integrate contemporary stakes related to regional conflicts in their own creative work, and collaborate with artists of all horizons. The many artistic productions organised in Palestinian and Syrian camps, in collaboration with amateur and professional artists from those camps, have consecrated the public nature of such places, often politically and economically marginalised.

The effervescence and quality of the artistic projects born from such collaborations challenge the borders imposed by the confessional political system in Lebanon that keeps dividing its inhabitants according to their religious faith, their ethnic and national identities. Relatively safe from the chaos of a region destroyed by seemingly unresolvable conflicts, Lebanon has the historical opportunity to create a long-lasting basis for a society where multiple components coexist peacefully. Artists are at the forefront of this demanding endeavour, in order to make the project of Lebanon, as a 'message, more than just a country'<sup>14</sup>, a message of pluralism for the world, more than an empty formula.

<sup>14</sup> *The idea of Lebanon, as 'a message' in addition to being a country was ratified by Pope John-Paul II in October, 1989, when he wrote in a letter to the Bishops of the whole world: 'The Church wants to show the world that Lebanon is more than a country, it is a message of freedom and an example of pluralism for the East and the West'. Since then, the Lebanon-message is an image regularly used by Lebanese politicians of all sides, according to the events that the country has to face.*

## 03.

### RESSOURCES

#### 3.1. Online resources

**L'Agenda Culturel** - <http://www.agendaculturel.com/fr-Accueil>

Since its launch in 1994, L'Agenda Culturel is the only publication specialising in the promotion of cultural activities in Lebanon, and the first of its kind in the Arab world. A reference in the media, l'Agenda Culturel plays a key role in the development of Lebanese cultural life and communicates the image of an evolving society by summarizing the activities that enliven the country's cultural life.

**MedCulture** - <http://www.medculture.eu>

Med Culture is a 4-year (2014-2018) regional programme funded by the European Union to accompany partner countries in south of the Mediterranean in the development and improvement of cultural policies and practices related to the culture sector. The approach is consultative/participative and takes place in partnership with civil society actors, ministries, private and public institutions involved in culture as well as other related sectors.

**Al Mawred Al Thaqafy** - <http://mawred.org/>

Founded in 2004, Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy) is a regional, non-profit organization that seeks to support artistic creativity in the Arab region and to encourage cultural exchange between intellectuals and artists within this region and abroad.

**Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC)** - <http://www.arabculturefund.org/>

The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) was established in 2007 by local cultural lobbyists as an independent initiative that funds individuals and organizations in the fields of cinema, performing arts, literature, music and visual arts while facilitating cultural exchange, research and cooperation across the Arab world and globally.

**On the Move** - <http://on-the-move.org>

The international network on information for the mobility of artists and cultural operators, On the Move shares free information about mobility opportunities and publishes guides to funding opportunities for mobility from and to several countries, including in the Arab world.

#### 3.2. Recent interesting publications

'Cultural Policies in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia, An Introduction', Ressource Culturelle (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy), European Cultural Foundation, Boekmanstudies, Amsterdam, 2010.

Stephen Hill (2008), 'Creative Lebanon: Framework for Future Prosperity', British Council, London. [creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/uploads/files/lebanon-creative-lebanon-full-report.pdf](http://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/uploads/files/lebanon-creative-lebanon-full-report.pdf)

Nadia von Maltzahn, 'What Cultural Policies? Explicit and Implicit Cultural Policies in Lebanon', META Journal, 2017. <http://meta-journal.net/index>

#### 3.3. Principal funds and support organisations

- Liban mécénat, Lebanese association to develop private funding for culture, created by Ghassan Tuéni in 1998.

- [L'association pour la promotion et l'exposition de l'art au Liban \(APEAL\)](#)