

# Syrian art in Beirut: Breaking boundaries and restoring hope

By Myriam Marcuello-Lopez – June 2017

## I / The context of intervention

### 1. Syrian art in exile

From the Syrian revolution emerged a prolific movement of artistic expression using innovative forms, and developed by artists and simple citizens, inside and outside Syria. Born out of war or transformed as a result of it, this art aims at calling the attention of the international community to the plight of Syria, documenting the revolution and the resilience of Syrian people, amplifying voices of resistance, breaking fear and raising hope, and rehumanizing the world. Though given particular attention in the media and Western cultural organizations, this ‘art of war’ does not represent the whole of Syrian artistic production, and its aesthetic value is questioned by some cultural specialists. Furthermore, while some Syrian artists consider their art as a means of protest or healing, others refuse these categorizations and reclaim the existence of Syrian art as pure artistic creation. Only time will allow a better understanding of the impact of these new artistic expressions on Syrian cultural history. What remains without doubt is that Syrian art must now be considered beyond Syrian borders since the world itself became its ‘battlefield’ with the exile of millions of Syrian refugees (Al-Yasiri, 2015).

Lebanon is one of the neighboring countries where Syrian refugees have established a new residence and tried to rebuild their lives despite the loss and suffering. Among them are numerous professional and emerging artists. Their status as artists and their proximity with Lebanese culture do not make their integration easier, as shown by the recent tragic disappearance of Hassan Rabej, a 25-year-old Syrian dancer established in Beirut (McVeigh, 2016). Not only are they faced, as any refugee, with economic, legal, and other numerous difficulties, but their art itself is at risk of disappearance if not given the impetus or adequate support to be maintained or transformed in this new environment. However, these refugees do not perceive themselves as mere victims of war but as artists, resilient citizens, and ambassadors of their culture. Because of their experience of forced displacement and artistic endeavor, they have the potential to build a bridge between Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities, and to disseminate another perspective of Syria through the promotion of its art. Furthermore, they can enrich the Lebanese artistic scene as much as they can enrich themselves from collaborating with local artists.

## 2. Ettijahat and the project ‘Create Syria’

The pilot project ‘Create Syria’ was launched at the end of 2015 by the Syrian cultural organization Ettijahat<sup>1</sup> – Independent Culture, in collaboration with the British Council and International Alert. The main objective of the project is “to create environments and initiatives that will enable Syrian artists, cultural activists, and civil society organizations to play increasingly active roles in improving the lives of Syrians, primarily by supporting creative endeavors which develop long-term cooperation and mutual resilience between Syrians and host communities” (Ettijahat, 2015). In March 2016, 11 projects led by Syrian artists living in Lebanon – except for one of them who lives in Paris – were selected, which would benefit from the support of ‘Create Syria’. The projects encompassed a broad range of artistic fields including choral singing, performing arts, playwriting, documentary making, animation, and fine art.

As part of the capacity-building component of this program, two workshops were organized, in April and May 2016, with the project participants. The first workshop focused on building skills to communicate with the beneficiaries and audience, as well as on project monitoring and evaluation. A main expected outcome of this workshop was to help participants refine their artistic framework and projects’ objectives. The second workshop was oriented towards developing the skills of financial management of cultural short-term projects. Both workshops benefited from the participation of several cultural experts and International Alert staff. The artists revisited their initial project based on the learning from these trainings and were expected to conduct their activities across Lebanon by August 2016. Grants of up to US\$12,000 were awarded for the realization of the projects, three of them were implemented in the Bekaa valley and the rest in Beirut.

The project ‘Create Syria’ is led by Ettijahat, a cultural organization that aims to stimulate the growth of independent culture in Syria and supports the artistic and cultural productions for their ability to create resilience. According to Nada Farah, the project manager of ‘Create Syria’, “the organization is clearly aware that culture will not be the major concern of decision makers. Thus, it is up to organizations, cultural activists, and independent researchers to put ‘culture’ on the agenda of political discussions and create some pressure, within the reconstruction and development of the identity of Syria, for culture to be a major component of the upcoming phase”. Ettijahat does not promote arts-based peacebuilding initiatives but offers spaces of encounter and dialogue between

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<sup>1</sup> It means ‘directions’ in Arabic language.

artists and communities affected by war through the creation of a common artistic production of high aesthetic quality. Within the framework of this project, art is valued as a vital element of society that can improve the lives of people, and as a language that can communicate in a very sensitive and profound manner experiences of human beings whose lives have been torn apart by war. Besides the British Council, the project is supported by an international organization, International Alert, which “supports people to find peaceful solutions to conflict”.

### 3. Research methods and its limits

Abdullah Al Kafri, the director of Ettijahat, and Nada Farah, manager of the project ‘Create Syria’ proposed that I undertake a research about their project ‘Create Syria’. They did not indicate any specific requirement or research focus except that it should consider ‘art for art’ and not as a means to promote dialogue and enhance resilience despite the official objective of the project to “improve the lives of Syrians, primarily by supporting creative endeavors which develop long-term cooperation and mutual resilience between Syrians and host communities” (Ettijahat, 2015).

#### Research questions:

Artistic spaces are spaces of creation, freedom, and expression which build on the unique life experiences of those who engage in them. This research examined the process of collaborative artistic production between artists from different cultures in a context of exile, and non-artists affected by war and displacement. It focused on three key elements:

- *The artists:* their artistic journey; views of art; motivations to participate in the project; perceptions of the project’s outcomes.
- *The artistic framework:* its purpose, participants, setting, content, approach, values and target audience.
- *The artistic collaboration:* between the artists themselves; between the artists and the community participants; between the project participants and target communities.

The research reviewed the modalities, challenges, and outcomes of this artistic collaboration, and the dialogues that were generated through this shared artistic experience. While focusing on the artistic endeavor itself, this paper examines some of the tensions, interrogations, difficulties, and opportunities that emerge from a collaboration between artists and communities affected by war.

### Main research questions:

- What artistic framework can be put in place in a context of exile that allows the production of a high-quality aesthetic creation with non-artists affected by war and displacement?
- What transformations take place at the personal, interpersonal and societal levels as a result of this collaboration?

### Research methodology:

The research is based on an arts-based peacebuilding (ABP) literature review and on the collection of first-hand data from the participants of the ‘Create Syria’ project. The data collection process was scheduled to take place during eight weeks, in Lebanon, in the summer of 2016. Due to delay in the provision of contact details of project participants, the researcher was able to focus on only three artistic projects: Basmeh & Zeitooneh’s Sin Festival, Family Ti-Jean theater project by Masrah Ensemble, and Al Fayha choir by Maestro Barkev Taslakian. Because two of these projects were already completed and time was limited due to the delay, the researcher could only interview project managers and artists and not community participants and recipients as was initially planned. Another major constraint which restricted the outcomes of this research is that, for internal policy reason, Ettijahat was not able to share any document about the project, except for the concept note and guidelines which are public documents. Thus, this research is based on the following elements:

- 5 interviews conducted with: Eyad Houssami, Director of Masrah Ensemble; Milia Ayache, actor and writer who participated in Family Ti-Jean project; Boushra Adi, Art & Culture Center Coordinator of Basmeh & Zeitooneh; two staff from the Child Protection and Peace Education departments of Basmeh & Zeitooneh; and Maestro Barkev Taslakin from Al-Fayha choir.
- Projects’ documents shared by the interviewees, including videos
- Websites from the three target organizations as well as Ettijahat and International Alert
- Articles and reports on Beirut’s art scene and architecture

*Please note that dates in parenthesis after a name indicate that the quotes are extracted from the interviews I conducted.*

## II / Literature review

Most literature about arts-based peacebuilding highlights the limitations of traditional approaches to conflict transformation such as mediation, negotiation, conflict resolution trainings, which focus on the cognitive aspect of human endeavor. As mentioned by Cynthia Cohen (2004), studies have shown that “purposeful rationality is inadequate to the task of reconciliation” (p. 2). The conscious and the unconscious, the mind and the heart, the reason and the spiritual, the present and the past, the said and the unsaid, all need to be touched and awoken to induce a deep and long-term change in human attitude and behavior. The power of arts-based peacebuilding initiatives is that they appeal to all senses through the diversity of artistic forms proposed, and thus provide a holistic approach to human expression, healing, and reconciliation. These artistic spaces allow individuals to express themselves beyond words, within safe boundaries, and at a protective distance from an often painful or disturbing reality. They induce from participants an attitude of ‘engaged detachment’ (Cohen, 2004) which manifests itself through a quality of presence, listening, and an ability to acknowledge the complexity and paradoxes of realities and relationships (p. 6). Such artistic experiences nourish ‘paradoxical curiosity’, a fundamental peacebuilding quality which refuses the pressure of dualistic narratives and instead embraces complexity and is able to hold together apparent contradictions (Lederach, 2004, p. 37)

The art which is produced emerges as much from the energy and creativity put into it by the artists and others involved in the process, as from the sensibilities of the perceivers. These artistic performances are developed bearing in mind the aesthetic sensibilities of the participating individuals and of the target audiences. The relationship between those engaged in the process, whether professional artists or not, is based on mutual care and respect, while reciprocity is at the heart of the interaction with the audience. In a recent visit at Brandeis University, Joshua Sobol, the Israeli playwright and activist, reminded us that “artists need the audience to tell them who they are. Similarly, the audience needs the artists to tell them who they are as a society” (2017). This is a fundamental element to bear in mind because it draws a clear distinction between some harmful utilizations of arts, such as in war and political propaganda, and the art which is generated within the framework of the ‘moral imagination’. While the former imposes an adversarial binary worldview, the latter acknowledges and fosters a shared humanity. It is also an artistic endeavor which promotes a bottom-up approach rather than an elitist view of arts or a critical view of arts by experts. As explained by Cynthia Cohen (2004), “in analysis, the perceiver “controls” the [artistic] object by

investigating it in relation to pre-existing categories, or by breaking it down to be examined. In propaganda, the expressive form has been designed to manipulate, seduce or coerce the perceiver” (p. 8). In contrast, the perceiver in ABP performances is invited to an immediate sensorial experience that can touch him, question him, and shake him.

Most arts-based peacebuilding practitioners are aware of the harmful potential of arts and concerned with maintaining the integrity of the artistic process. They warn against the use of arts as an ideological instrument but also as a prescriptive tool. Increasingly, development projects employ artistic forms of expression to communicate a message and induce a specific change in people’s attitudes and behaviors. While this approach might be effective to raise awareness of communities on issues of concern, its pedagogic focus impedes the realization of a truly transformative process. “When nonarts agendas overpower the artistry of the production, the transformative potential of the arts will be compromised” (Cohen, 2015). Thus, arts-based peacebuilding initiatives need to be transparent about their intentions, honor local knowledge and culture, and be mindful about who they decide to engage with and under which modes of interaction and collaboration. Seidl-Fox & Sridhar (2014) urge us to consider:

Who owns the ‘artistic process’? How do we transform the vocabulary of peace-building to avoid its becoming a ‘top-down’ model? What is the power of culture to reshape the culture of power? How do we avoid neo-colonial models of peacebuilding and create leadership in change-making? Projects have to be clear about whose voice they claim to represent, whose agenda they intend to implement and whose notion of peace they seek to achieve. (p.24)

The purpose of arts-based projects and the level of ownership of all those involved, especially the non-professionals, are important indicators of their integrity. Learning from other experiences and building on the knowledge acquired in this developing field of intervention are also important means to ensure the integrity of these processes and enhance their potential impact.

Increased awareness and targeted efforts have led to remarkable progress in the documentation of socially transformative arts-based projects. The ongoing initiative ‘Acting Together’, a collaboration between Brandeis University and Theatre Without Borders, is a groundbreaking work of documentation of arts-based peacebuilding performances across the world. It is part of a global effort by ABP practitioners to enhance the effectiveness of their projects and to promote a more strategic approach to socially transformative artistic endeavor. There is a widespread acknowledgement that ABP initiatives undertaken whether by artists or peacebuilding practitioners could have greater impact if they were more strategic, included an evaluation component, and built

on current learning. By strategic, it is meant that “arts-based methodologies be conceptually grounded, coordinated with other forms of peacebuilding approaches, infused with a long-term perspective vis-à-vis the nature of social change, and serious about evaluating their effectiveness and impact” (Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 2). Enhancing the socially transformative potential of arts and strengthening art-based peacebuilding as a field or sub-field of intervention require a more strategic approach and critical reflection. Seidl-Fox & Sridhar insist that “agendas need to go beyond nice stories and see how approaches can be translated into something replicable and scalable and eventually incorporated into mainstream policy by being connected to the global agenda” (2014, p.22).

How do arts generate social changes? What do the arts contribute to peacebuilding? Which art forms should be used and at which stage of a conflict? These are some of the questions that ABP practitioners are trying to respond to frame their interventions within a more rigorous and evaluative approach. Another question to ask, though, would be: do artists have such a desire? Some artists and cultural activists do not necessarily share this perspective and claim the importance to make ‘art for art’. They do not want to compromise art, its natural impulse, and its aesthetic quality for some political or social agenda. “Art is for art’s sake, the saying goes, and any attempt to make it political and/or transformative for the community betrays the self-expressive nature of art” (Shank & Schirch, 2008, p. 1). Even artists involved in peacebuilding initiatives are sometimes more concerned by the aesthetic quality of the art than by what is transformed in the participants through this process of creation. Beyond this reluctance to mix practices, one could wonder how can arts-based peacebuilding performances become replicable, scalable, and eventually incorporated into mainstream policies without ‘losing their soul’? While the encounter between arts and peacebuilding is full of promises, as deeply reflected in Lederach’s framework of the moral imagination, it also runs the risk to transform the arts as a mere tool and undermine the quality of serendipity that makes such processes unique. How to deal with the tensions between the local and the global, the spontaneous and the planned, the unexpected and the expected, the risky and the risk averse which distinguish both endeavors? How to ensure that participants are engaged as resources and not mere recipients and that facilitators are catalysts rather than experts?

Despite the stated aim of the project ‘Create Syria’ to “develop long-term cooperation and mutual resilience between Syrians and host communities”, the staff of Ettijahat insisted on the cultural nature of this pilot initiative and their concern for ‘art for art’ (Ettijahat, 2015). The director of the

organization explained that “we don’t use art, we *do* art, responding to the needs of artists and communities. Achieving art is not using it” (Abdullah Al Kafri, 2016). The first three components of the project are indeed focused on developing Syrian actors’ skills on project design and management, supporting 11 artistic projects, and establishing a platform of Syrian artists and cultural activists. Only the last component has a more social aspect, with its emphasis on “interactive dialogue with Syrian audiences in their new environments”. In the participants’ selection criteria, the project highlights the engagement of host communities and the collaboration between Syrian artists and their Lebanese peers. Why is then Ettijahat staff reluctant to acknowledge these social elements of the project? Maybe because it is not an NGO or a relief agency but a cultural organization, and thus wants to maintain clear boundaries between the two fields of intervention. They might also fear that any emphasis on the social aspects of the project could compromise the nature of the artistic production and its aesthetic quality. Another reason might be the accessibility of funding for arts-based social stability projects. Public funding in Lebanon for culture is extremely limited if not inexistent, and more so for non-Lebanese organizations. Thus, the framing of cultural projects through resilience and dialogue between Syrians and Lebanese might give them greater opportunities for funding, serving both the needs of Syrian artists and Syrian communities in Lebanon.

In her research on the transformative power of interactive theatre in post-war Lebanon, Hannah Reich differentiates theatrical initiatives that are conducive to social change and development, from those which constructively address conflict. She proposes to use the distinction of Jonathan Goodhand between working *in* conflict and working *on* conflict to better deal with the complexity and diversity of artistic projects in situations of conflict. According to her, “it helps to differentiate arts-based work which consciously addresses relationships from other arts-based work which might also have a powerful and positive influence on relationships, but does not tackle them directly in the process of artistic production” (Reich, 2012, p. 3). Both endeavors evolve indeed around relationship building and personal change; however, their purposes, discourses, and frameworks of action are distinct. In a research conducted by Simon & Pakizer (2013) on the political potential of artists in Lebanon, those using theatre consider their art as a medium for self-reflection and “not a power of change but a possibility of questioning things” (p. 5). Most artists interviewed do not believe in fact that a piece of art can change the world. However, they all recognize the power for arts to influence society and converge towards the idea that “the potential of an impact is at least one of the reasons they create art” (Simon & Pakizer, 2013, p. 5).



According to this research, artists in Lebanon feel that their society is confronted with three major ills: an illusion of freedom and rights, sectarianism, and the tendency to escape the reality through consumption and entertainment. Lebanese citizens believe that they have a freedom of choice and expression. However, the dysfunctional political system and endemic corruption at all levels of the society are structural limitations of this freedom and of access to opportunities. Furthermore, sectarianism remains a divisive force and people are too divided to generate a united national front which could force their government to fulfill its obligations. Thus, faced with a political deadlock and a disastrous socioeconomic situation, Lebanese strive for their own survival and have ‘given up’ on their country. One of the artists, heavily frustrated by this situation, laments:

This is what bothers me: all Lebanese people, when they travel outside they become really, really, organized and they follow rules and regulations. And they become different people. But when they come to Lebanon they feel that they can do whatever they want. They don't stop at traffic lights. They do whatever they want. It is like a Luna Park here – it is like a zoo. (Simon & Pakizer, 2013, p.8)

Lebanese try to escape from the ‘organized chaos’ in their country through consumption and entertainment. The artists heavily criticize the tendency in Lebanon to consume Western products, including Western culture, to the detriment of Lebanese identity and self-affirmation. Cultural projects, which usually rely on international funding, are very much donor-driven, which explains the current interest in artistic performances dealing with the ‘Arab Spring’ and women’s rights. This dependency on international funding also leads to the subversion of local artistic forms of expression by some kind of orientalist expectations. “The Occident needs a theatre play that reflects their own vision of the Middle East or the Arab world or Africa and they throw money on it. And what we give them is their conception of the Middle East and not culture” (Simon & Pakizer, 2013, p. 14). Most artists interviewed in the research feel disconnected from Lebanese culture and from their society. They view their role as setting up alternative spaces where people can meet, engage in dialogue in a constructive manner, and where differences do not matter. They all express a strong wish for change, healthy confrontation, and collaboration. Through their art, they want to reclaim the dignity and self-worth of Lebanese people.

The growing arts-based peacebuilding literature offers useful insights on the potential of arts in conflict transformation, the forms of arts that can be used and at which stages of a conflict, and the dilemmas and challenges in trying to bring together these two fields of intervention. However, it leaves me with the question of: “How do you do it?”. How do you bring together artists, cultural

activists, community members, peace practitioners, in a safe and creative space in the hope that the collaboration will bring some kind of positive social and personal change? What are the differences in the making of arts-based projects which unintentionally or indirectly produce social transformation, and those which specifically aim at social transformation? While differences might be obvious in the case of monitoring, boundaries are blurred in regard to the design and implementation of such projects. Through the review of three artistic initiatives of the project ‘Create Syria’, this paper will reflect on these questions and the challenges inherent to work at the crossroad of arts and conflict transformation. A useful metaphor and concept for analysis is the ‘permeable membrane’ which imagines the artistic performance as a fluid three-dimensional space whereby:

“elements of everyday life cross through a porous boundary and enter the space/time of ritual and theatre. ... Inside the ‘nucleus’, these elements from the real world are transformed. They are then brought back through the membrane, reentering the quotidian world of everyday life, primarily through the consciousness and the bodies, words, actions, and relationships of those who participate in and witness the performance”. (Cohen, Gutierrez Varea, & Walker, 2011, p. 162).

In a first section, this paper will examine the purpose and artistic frameworks or ‘permeable membranes’ of the three projects. The artistic frameworks are assessed against a brief guideline included in the annex 1 of this document, which focuses on the participants, setting, content, approach, and values of ABP projects. It helps ABP practitioners reflect on the following main questions: WHO participates in the projects? WHERE do rehearsals and performances take place? WHAT are the aesthetic sensibilities, art forms, and content which are included in the ‘permeable membrane’? HOW does the artistic process take place, through which modes of communication and collaboration? The responses to these questions shall be guided by the purposes of the ABP projects and their underlying values. The second section reviews the processes of artistic collaboration, what happens in the ‘nucleus’, the relationships and forms of interaction. Finally, the third and last section assesses what has been transformed in terms of skills and behaviors, attitudes and perspectives, and means of expression, and what these changes and the artistic performance have brought to the society.

### III / Setting the stage of socially engaged art

#### 1. The artistic projects

##### a. Description of the projects

Family Ti-Jean theatre project: Masrah Ensemble is a “nonprofit theatre company and organization that makes, develops, and fosters research and criticism of theatre with a focus on the Arab stage”. Based in Beirut, the Ensemble was established in 2009 by Eyad Houssami, the theatre director, a Syrian artist who grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta and studied theatre at Yale. ‘Ti-Jean and his brothers’ is a Caribbean play by Derek Walcott which tells the story of a poor widowed mother and her three sons who dwell on the edge of a magical forest haunted by the devil's spirits. This folk tale told by the animals of the rainforest through dialogue, dance, and songs, deals with the themes of good versus evil, poor versus wealthy, and the search of what defines humanness. The play was one element of a double-bill performance which included another play, ‘Family Stories’, by Serbian playwright Biljana Srbljanovic.

Sin<sup>2</sup> Festival: The NGO Basmeh & Zeitooneh (‘smile and olive’) was born from the initiative of five volunteers who, in 2012, strived to provide assistance to Syrian refugees living in the Palestinian camp of Shatila. Their hard work rapidly bore its fruit and led to the registration of Basmeh & Zeitooneh as a Lebanese NGO in 2014. Its focus is to fill in the gaps left by other aid agencies and to concentrate its efforts on the most disenfranchised Syrian refugees. It promotes a grassroots approach and operates through community centers which provide a comprehensive set of services and employ refugees themselves. The first community center was established in Shatila refugee camp in the spring of 2013, and since then, five other centers were set up in Lebanon and two in Turkey. While the initial focus of Basmeh & Zeitooneh was Syrian refugees, it now provides services to all residents of selected communities. Within the framework of the project ‘Create Syria’, Basmeh & Zeitooneh requested support for the organization of the second edition of its so-called Sin Festival. This yearly festival presents, during one week, different cultural activities led by Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian artists and community members. The second edition of this festival organized in collaboration with several

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<sup>2</sup> In Arabic, the letter (س), pronounced “sin”, stands for the unknown variable in mathematical equations, the equivalent of “x” in English. The Sin Festival aims to shed light on the unknown and on emerging talents such as the unknown but prolific artists of the marginalized communities in Lebanon.

cultural institutions opened with an art exhibition in Downtown Beirut. Throughout the week, residents of Beirut and other parts of Lebanon were invited to attend a rehearsal of the play ‘Family Ti-Jean’, movies screenings, a photography exhibition, concerts, Palestinian dance, and other rich artistic performances.

Fayha Choir: Fayha Choir is conducted by Maestro Barkev Talakian and was established in 2003 in Tripoli and in 2016 in Beirut. The initial objective of Fayha project was to promote Arabic music with a professional choir which would perform throughout the world. After 30 years of conducting, Maestro Barkev decided to use the power of music to support disenfranchised and underprivileged populations in Lebanon. With the support of organizations such as the UNESCO, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and several foundations, he worked in public schools and refugee camps to establish choirs for children and prevent them from engaging in harmful behaviors. Since 2014, Fayha Choir has worked with the educational NGO Sonbola. Sonbola is based in the Bekaa Valley and focuses its programs on the provision of formal and non-formal education for Syrian refugees as well as training for Syrian teachers. With the support of the project ‘Create Syria’, Fayha Choir and Sonbola designed a programme to train Syrian teachers to become choir leaders. This research focuses not only on the collaboration with Sonbola but also on the general experience of Fayha Choir in using music to support disenfranchised communities.

## b. Projects’ objectives

Beirut, as a highly segregated space and a city marked by a history of violence, plays a fundamental role in the shaping of these different projects. As described by Eyad Houssami (October 3, 2016), “Beirut is a city of barbed wires, rejection, failure, and collapse”. As an artistic scene, it does not put much emphasis on the creative process and infrastructure. It is more a spectacle and product-based society. On the contrary, the aim of a theatre like Masrah Ensemble is to “reconfigure audiences and to encourage transcendent riveting theatre”. As an outsider, Eyad Houssami (August 12, 2016) felt the need to be an “access point for theatre makers” and to develop “public culture routes that champion free and accessible performance to audiences from various demographic groups”. Masrah Ensemble performs its art in non-traditional and semi-public spaces and this was the case as well for “Family Ti-Jean” which was shown in Shatila refugee camp and in five other locations in Beirut. However, the aim of such an endeavor is not to bring the theatre to the people, nor to make the voices of the disenfranchised heard. The objective of Masrah Ensemble is to “forge and cultivate

new publics and to leverage the incredible creative and social potential of the cultural and linguistic as well as socio-economic pluralism that makes Beirut such a special place” (Houssami, August 12, 2016).

Masrah Ensemble worked with residents from Shatila refugee camp, with the support of the NGO Basmeh & Zeitooneh. According to the UNRWA website, the Shatila refugee camp, located in southern Beirut, was established in 1949 for just 3,000 people by the International Committee of the Red Cross to accommodate the refugees who poured into the area from northern Palestine after 1948. About two thirds of the residents of Shatila are under the age of 40. While more than 9,842 refugees are officially registered, it is difficult to know the exact number of people in this area of less than one square kilometre in size<sup>3</sup>. Living conditions are very difficult in Shatila, an environment which is heavily polluted, overcrowded, and whose sewage system is insufficient and running water undrinkable. It also suffers from electricity cuts that can last for days, including during the summer when temperatures are unbearable. Chronic poverty and unemployment prevail among this population which suffers from discrimination and legal restrictions of its fundamental rights. Though primarily a Palestinian camp, Shatila also hosts poor Lebanese, Syrians, and immigrants from elsewhere in the Middle East and South Asia (Mackenzie, 2016). With the Sin Festival, Basmeh & Zeitooneh aims to break prejudices and geographic barriers between the host community and the different refugee and migrant communities. The empowerment of professional or emerging artists from marginalized communities and the display of their cultural potential rehumanize the ‘other’ and build bridges between individuals and groups from different social classes, sects, and other affiliations.

When Fayha Choir was approached to engage in social or peacebuilding types of projects, it realized that it had contributed to what many NGOs, with their fancy and costly programmes, were struggling to achieve: bringing people together and generate dialogue and peaceful coexistence. The men and women of Fayha choir pertain to different religious, social, political, and economic backgrounds. “We are all kinds of people, from different religions, and we don’t think about it”, explained Maestro Barkev (August 16, 2016). Maestro Barkev himself was born in Anjar, a little town in the Bekaa Valley which consists primarily of Armenians. He is a self-taught musician because his parents, who were refugees, were too poor to send him to school. Thus, he is very sensitive to the plight of refugees and disenfranchised communities, and wanted to bring music to them and positive

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<sup>3</sup> The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies estimated that the camp’s population increased to 16,000 with the arrival of Syrian refugees. However, according to residents and NGOs working in the camp, the number is much higher and could be between 22,500 and 40,000 (Mackenzie, 2016).

changes in their lives. He strongly believes that music has the power to prevent children and young people from dropping school and engaging in aggressive or harmful behaviors. The collaboration with Sonbola and Ettijahat allowed to train five Syrian teachers to become choir leaders. It is expected that these trainees will create children's choruses with other associations to spread the art of choral singing among Syrian children living in refugee camps, help them overcome their dire living conditions, and restore a sense of hope in their lives.

## 2. The artistic frameworks

### Family Ti-Jean theatre project:

It is the choice of the first play which led to the choice of 'Family Ti-Jean' and its actors. Back in 2013, the team of Masrah Ensemble decided to work on 'Family Stories', a play anchored in the Milosevic years and the violent break up of Yugoslavia. The playwright mentions that "all the characters in the play are children. But they age or grow younger as required and also occasionally change sex. No one should wonder at this. The actors, on the other hand, are not children. They are adults in the roles of children, who, in turn, play at being adults. No one should wonder at this either. There are plenty of other things for people to wonder about". The team of Masrah Ensemble did wonder about it though and asked themselves how to do this, as actors. Such young people, grown in war-affected societies and who became refugees, were all around them. They were the thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the violence in their country. The team wanted to involve them, but how and why? They decided to collaborate with young refugees on a second play, and agreed that this performance should be twice as significant as 'Family Stories', in terms of length of the performance, number of performances, and time dedicated for rehearsal. The choice of 'Family Ti-Jean' became obvious since both plays share similar themes about growing up and leaving home, about children rising up against adults, and the blurry line between animal and human.

Because the process is very important for Masrah Ensemble, they gave themselves five months to select the young refugee participants. They collaborated with Basmeh & Zeitooneh and focused their work on the Shatila refugee camp community. In September 2015, they organized a one-week workshop with 30 volunteers selected by Basmeh & Zeitooneh. In November, they met with a smaller group and worked with them during four days. They met again in February 2016 and by the end of that month, seven young refugees were selected to participate in 'Family Ti-Jean'. Besides the refugee teenagers, Masrah Ensemble decided to include migrant workers. With the

evolution of the Lebanese law in 2015, Syrian refugees found themselves subjugated to the infamous Kafala system traditionally applied to migrant workers<sup>4</sup>. Eyad Houssami, who is also an agricultural worker, became under this law an indentured servant. As a result of this legislative reform, both Syrian refugees and migrant workers are faced with similar issues of institutionalized discrimination, racism, and exploitation. These are dominant themes in the play whose characters are all black, except for the evil white planter. The decision to include migrant workers in the project thus became obvious, especially that many of them are part of the Shatila refugee camp community. “The migrant worker community has organized itself and fought against the kafala system for years”, explained Eyad Houssami (August 12, 2016). “So, one incentive was to build links between that community and this [refugee] community because they face the same struggle”.

The project ‘Family Ti-Jean’ gathered individuals from different communities, Syrian and Palestinian refugees, Lebanese citizens, migrant workers, and international artists. However, they were not considered as representatives of their community or treated as professional artists versus amateurs, adults versus children, foreigners versus Lebanese. “We are not Lebanese, we are not Syrians, we are not the oppressed and the discriminated against... We are not the downtrodden. We are all the same”, insisted Milia Ayache, one of the professional actors. The participants were not considered as ‘vulnerable’ individuals but empowered as actors in a shared artistic project whose success depended on their ability to demonstrate solidarity, care towards each other, and patience and discipline in the efforts required. They were expected to work as colleagues fighting together for the realization of a common artistic project “which is itself marginalized and disenfranchised as the pressures to create performance work outside of the festival or humanitarian industry becomes more intense and stifling year after year”, emphasized Eyad Houssami (October 3, 2016).

It has become common for Syrian refugees to be involved in artistic projects which use classic literature to reflect on Syrians’ own tragedy. The plays ‘Antigone’ by Sophocles or ‘The Trojan women’ by Euripides, for example, have been performed by Syrian refugees in theatres of Lebanon and Jordan and in refugee camps under the direction of artistic directors or NGOs (Fordham, 2013; Habteslasie, 2014; Ataman, 2015). Even more frequently, theatre has been proposed to Syrian refugees as a means to share their stories and support the healing process. Milia Ayache (2017) is critical of this trend which ‘fetishizes’ Syrian narratives and explained that “while it is important to

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<sup>4</sup> According to this system, all unskilled laborers must have an in-country sponsor, usually their employer, who is responsible for their visa and legal status. The kafala system is usually deemed exploitative and in violation of fundamental human rights.

have Syrians tell their own stories onstage, in their own words, we must challenge the expectations of audiences and funders by being wary of performing ‘Syrian-ness’ ”. What Eyad, Milia, and the other professional artists aimed to bring to children in this project was an engagement with literature ‘with a capital L’, not children’s own life stories put on stage or stories that they would have created, but existing literary text. They wanted children to engage with words, ‘juicy text’. However, they were more interested in folktales than classical texts. Milia (August 24, 2016) emphasized that “it’s not sexy literature. It’s not the sad story of Syrian children. It’s not western French literature, it’s not Greek literature, it is Caribbean and Serbian, a global South literature”.

One of the missions of Masrah Ensemble is to “challenge prevailing ideas of what theatre should be, where it should take place, and to whom it belongs”. It usually performs its art in semi-public and community spaces – feminist collectives, migrant worker centers, refugee camps, or public parks. The rehearsals of ‘Family Ti-Jean’ took place in Shatila camp, in the American University of Beirut (AUB), and in public gardens. Performances were shown in six different locations throughout Beirut, including parks and open community centers. The choice to perform in non-traditional spaces is not only a necessity in a country where rental costs are outrageous and unaffordable for most artists, it is also a political and societal stand. It is part of the endeavour of reclaiming a public space that has been privatized by a minority of privileged and corrupted businessmen and political leaders. It is also an attempt to break segregated spaces, promote diversity, and thus counter efforts which aim to divide, maintain fear, and subjugate the population. Furthermore, it contributes to the preservation of the environment through another conception of nature and infrastructures: “Plays are architectural blueprints and templates for how we inhabit space and time. If we make theater for air-conditioned, 400-seat venues, we are advocating for and supporting fossil fuel urbanism, great energy consumption, and real estate moguls”, asserted Eyad (October 3, 2016). This sensitivity towards the environment is all the more important in a country which is facing alarming pollution rates and whose most recent and major social crisis was ignited by the rivers of uncollected trash which infested Beirut and other parts of the country in August 2015 (Abu-Rish, 2015).

### Sin Festival:

Since Basmeh & Zeitooneh is, in a way, part of the Shatila community, it is easy for the organization to mobilize volunteers and encourage residents, especially children and young people, to participate in its cultural activities. As compared with Masrah Ensemble, there was no formal process of selection of the artists and volunteers for the Sin Festival. The organization used its



network, social media, and the channels of communication created through the school and other activities in the center to inform potential participants about this event. In order to select the artists, Basmeh & Zeitooneh posted an open call on its Facebook page. The judges for the art exhibition were recruited through their network of collaborators. Boushra Adi, the coordinator of the Art & Culture Center activities, was the executive manager of a Damascene art gallery before joining Basmeh & Zeitooneh. Therefore, she is a professional Syrian cultural activist and benefits from numerous contacts in this sector. In regard to the chorus which participated in the Sin Festival, it was the children's choir set up by Basmeh & Zeitooneh in 2015 with the children of Shatila camp. The Sin Festival was made possible thanks to the collaboration of several artists and cultural organizations, including Masrah Ensemble, Music & Beyond (another participant of the project 'Create Syria'), and the French Cultural Centre.

The idea of serving a community is the essence of the work of this grassroots organization. More than working with a community or for a community, the staff of Basmeh & Zeitooneh feels that they are part of this community. "We are in the middle of the community. We live with them. We go through the same conditions. We know exactly what they feel at home", stated passionately Boushra. They managed to gain the trust of the community by responding to their needs and by offering activities which parents feel are safe for their children. Initially focused on the provision of relief assistance, Basmeh & Zeitooneh has expanded its programs, constantly adapting its services to the needs and constraints of the residents. They organize for example workshops during the week-end, since most adults work during the week. They also give a lot of attention to men and young men whose well-being is often neglected by aid agencies. In regard to the organization of the second edition of the Sin Festival, Boushra was very positive about the collaboration between the Lebanese and Syrian artists and the camp community. She explained that "they come from different cultures, even if they are close. But collaboration is not a problem as long as we are open to working with others" (August 17, 2016).

The Sin Festival aims to promote mobility and to break mental and physical barriers between communities. Its first edition invited people to come to Shatila and enjoy the various artistic performances. "It went well. People were very happy. They showed Palestinian and Syrian cultures. We had only one problem. People from outside Shatila were fearful to come to the camp", recalled Boushra (August 17, 2016). Therefore, in 2016, they decided to come to the people and put them in contact with another face of Shatila, that of its thriving artists and resilient inhabitants. The Festival

took place in different locations in Beirut. It was an opportunity for Shatila residents to discover areas of the city that they might have never been to and might not dare going to. In Christian neighborhoods, artists performed a traditional dance, *dabke*, with Palestinian music. In Mansion, an artistic space in the heart of Beirut, they showed films made by young Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese filmmakers about life in Shatila camp. The photography exhibition entitled “My eyes” was the result of three workshops conducted in Beirut, Tripoli, and the Bekaa valley with the participation of 45 Syrian and Lebanese youth, under the supervision of the Chilean artists Filipe Jacom. The performance “Stuck here”, displayed poems from Syrian and Palestinian youth and plays from Arab writers. All these different artistic performances provided the opportunity to hear and learn about the ‘other’, her life, suffering, and aspirations.

### Fayha Choir:

What is noteworthy about Fayha Choir is that, contrary to most cultural initiatives in Lebanon, it was not initiated in Beirut but in Tripoli. It became so popular that another group was established in the capital. Despite its rich history and charming architecture in the old part of the town, Tripoli suffers from a reputation of violence and conservatism. Since the 1970s, the city has been exposed to regular and severe episodes of fighting between predominantly Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh and Alawite-majority Jabal Mohsen neighborhoods. The situation was exacerbated with the uprising in Syria, and Tripoli was increasingly perceived as a microcosm of Syria’s war in Lebanon. Even though incidents of violence drastically decreased in 2015, after a deadly suicide attack, Tripoli is still perceived as a volatile and insecure place. By bringing music and not bullets from Tripoli, Maestro Barkev is spreading another image of the city. In fact, the name of the choir is derived from the name of the city ‘Tripoli the Fahya’, i.e. ‘Tripoli the nice smell’. Fayha means in Arabic “smelling good”. Maestro Barkev remembered that in the past one could smell the *zuhur*, the flowers of the orange trees in Tripoli. With his two choirs, he builds a bridge between the two cities and allows their populations to meet and get to know each other. He is proud that the singers are men and women from different backgrounds and socioeconomic categories, which, according to him, “reflects the choir’s openness and reverence towards common human heritage”.

When Maestro Barkev launched Fayha choir, it was the first choir singing a cappella in Arabic. He wanted to develop Arabic music, and to show its importance and richness. With the help of a composer, he created new ways of arranging polyphonic music in order to keep its ‘Arabic smell’ while respecting the rules of classic harmony. However, they do not sing only in Arabic. The choir’s

repertoire is composed of Latin, Armenian, French, and English music, in addition to Arabic music from different heritages, Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Bedouin, and Andalusian. The eclecticism of this repertoire reflects the diversity of Lebanon and brings another sound of the Middle East. When asked if he thought to perform Jewish songs, Maestro Barkev responded that they already sang with Jews (“not Israelis”), but if they wanted to sing in Hebrew or Yiddish, he would first inform Hezbollah not to create any tension with them. But the current context, with the threats of ISIS, is not conducive for such an idea.

The team of Fayha Choir supported the organization Sonbola in the selection of the trainees for its project with ‘Create Syria’. Sonbola organized an open workshop on choir leading facilitated by Maestro Barkev and members of Fayha Choir. Only 8 persons attended, out of which Maestro Barkev chose 5 to participate in the training in choir leading. The group had regular meetings since May 2016 and received both theoretical and hands-on training on choir leading with the participation of the Sonbola choir. Each trainee was asked to choose a song from the Syrian or Lebanese musical repertoire and teach it to the Sonbola choir with the guidance of Maestro Barkev. It was expected that the 5 conductors would be able to lead the choir alone after they graduate. In September 2016, the trainees participated in Ettijahat’s showcase of ‘Create Syria’ in London, and in Sonbola’s annual concert held under the patronage of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

## IV / Engaging with artists and communities for social change

### Family Ti-Jean theatre project:

**Building a community:** Building a community, a theatre community, was a primary objective of the project ‘Family Ti-Jean’. “It was not a one-time stand theatre”, explained Milia (August 24, 2016). “It was about working with a community. We realized that every step we were taking was trying to bring the community together. What does theatre teach us? It feels it’s community, it’s citizenship”. For this to happen, the team of Masrah Ensemble had to be accepted by the host community, both the refugees of Shatila camp and the team of Basmeh & Zeitooneh. They first did small interventions in the camp, attended events, and informed the community about their project in total honesty. Transparency, openness, and care, were key elements in their ability to build trust and collaboration with the refugees. Once they had selected the project participants, they organized regular meetings with the parents, to reassure them and keep them informed of the process. Eyad Houssami recalls

that, initially, the mothers were respectfully cooperative, but not so much engaged. However, towards the end of the project, they were telling jokes and describing how their homes had become a 24h theatre.

What helped bring this theatre community together was breaking the barrier between the actors and the audience, and allowing the community to play an active role in the making of this project. All the project participants would eat a meal together, prepared by the residents of Shatila camp. The idea of breaking bread together reinforced this feeling of being part of one community. The rehearsals were taking place in the heart of Shatila camp, in the community center of Basmeh & Zeitooneh. It is located in the fifth floor of a building always crowded with children running out of class or mothers and their newborns waiting in the stairwell near the Doctors without Borders clinic. There was constant agitation and rehearsals were often disrupted by the noise and interruptions of children who tried to snick into the theatre room. In a way, these challenging rehearsal conditions were a perfect training for the outdoor performances of 'Family Ti-Jean'. Some of the children were responsible to guard the door and mitigate disruptions. Others, who were initially some of the trouble makers or pranksters, made their way and were hired as stage manager or other support function. Thus, everyone contributed in different ways to the realization of the theatre project.

**Working with children:** It is the choice of the first play 'Family Stories' which led to the decision by Masrah Ensemble to involve young refugees in a second play. 'Family Stories' required adults in the roles of children who, in turn, play at being adults. "How should a professional actor deal with such a proposition? Who were these children? If adults are playing the roles of children on the stage, why shouldn't children perform the roles of adults on the stage too? Can we formulate and design a creative process that digs deep into these plays and fosters equitable collaborations between the adult and children?" (October 3, 2016). These are some of the questions that Masrah Ensemble attempted to respond to by establishing a working environment whereby children and adults would be treated equally and support each other in their artistic exploration. It was made clear that everyone in the team should be referred to as actor and not just the professional actors. The children would learn from the professional actors and musicians while the adults would enrich themselves from the children to perform their role of children who play at being adults. Each actor was 'assigned' a child whom they were expected to observe in order to feed their performance from this learning. They adopted the language patterns of the young actors as well as their physicalities, rhythms, and moods.

Children were treated as adults and, as such, were expected to follow some rules and abide by certain standards of professional behavior. “We are not coming here to discipline and raise them”, explained Eyad Houssami (August 12, 2016). “We are coming here to do a project. You must be a professional, whether you are 12 or 32. If you are late, you wait outside”. Naturally, children took upon responsibilities of adults, blurring even more the line between adults and children, between the reality of the rehearsals and the fiction of the plays. One of the professional actors, Paul Spera, is from France and does not speak any Arabic. Thus, children felt the responsibility to teach him some Arabic so that he could communicate with them. In September 2015, during the first workshop organized in Shatila, a shooting occurred and the actors of Masrah Ensemble had to evacuate the camp in less than 15 minutes. This was an unexpected and tense moment which Milia remembers not just for its violence but because of the remarkable reaction of the children:

I am from Lebanon, I am used to it. But I was in Shatila, that place where the police cannot even go in. This was scary. I think I look startled. A boy turned to me and said: “don’t worry miss, it is just fireworks”. The kids took care of us. (August 24, 2016).

Like in the play ‘Family Ti-Jean’ where the young heroes defy the devil with the help of forest creatures, children of Shatila, with the power of their imagination and their sense of solidarity, took the lead in the face of difficulties and adversity.

**Creating a safe space:** The success of this project stemmed greatly from the ability of the facilitators to create a space where everyone would feel safe, respected, and able to express oneself freely and without judgement. Whatever their background and concerns, all participants in the project were moved by the same commitment for the artistic creation and sense of care towards their peers. “The success of creating a safe space was that we are all actors, with very different trainings, but dedicated to the theater”, explained Milia (August 24, 2016). The adults encouraged the children to speak openly about their feelings, incidents that had happened, or anything else they would feel the need to speak about.

The children who participated in the ‘Family Ti-Jean’ project needed to reconnect with their bodies and enjoy the space around them. Some of them came from an open area and found themselves, in Shatila, trapped in a narrow and densely populated environment. Through the physical exercises, rehearsals and performances in the parks and other outdoors, they were able to let the body express itself, fill in the space, and move freely. When the team organized the workshop in AUB in November 2015, the children were encouraged to walk in the forest, enjoy the nature and the space around them.

“Being outside reminds me of being back in Syria”, expressed 11-year old Marah, one of the young actors, during this workshop. Milia Ayache also noticed that children were able to focus on the work more rapidly than when they were rehearsing in Shatila.

This reconnection with one’s body and physical interaction with others was not always a smooth process. Some of the children were uncomfortable or clumsy in the way they would move around the space and accidentally hurt their peers. This was certainly linked to the adolescence age but also to the conservative culture some of the children belong to. “How do we deal with the difficulties that could arise from physical contact in a culture where it could be a problem or something uncomfortable?”, wondered Milia (August 24, 2016). Cultural sensitivity and respect were the approach used to address this issue. Linked to body awareness and the issue of physical contacts were also the questions of sexuality and unclear emotions that emerge during this transitional stage of development. They sometimes led to tensions between some young actors, which had to be managed by the adults.

Working with children was maybe one of the greatest challenges for Eyad Houssami who did not have much experience, prior to this project, of collaborating with this age group. The support of the Protection team of Basmeh & Zeitooneh was essential to manage some of the difficulties that emerged from engaging with adolescents. They know very well the community and are able to deal with potential difficulties or tensions. Even though enriching, the collaboration between the two organizations was sometimes challenging because of their different ways of functioning and their different conceptions of children. “Basmeh and Zeitooneh is an institution. They have a policy. We are their guests and we have to understand how they work. This is their community and we are a part of it”, asserted Eyad Houssami (August 12, 2016). This mutual respect and awareness of what the other brings to the project allowed the partnership to be a successful one, and to establish a safe and enabling working space.

**Mixing languages:** In its artistic endeavour, Masrah Ensemble is very keen to explore the mixing of different languages through translation, playwriting, and performance, with the actors and the audience. It was the case as well for ‘Family Ti-Jean’ since the eleven actors collectively translated the text. As explained by Eyad Houssami (August 12, 2016), “literacy, translation, language acquisition, and open workshops of language exchange were at the core of Family Ti-Jean”. Only two thirds of the play had been translated in a very bad Arabic in the 1990s. The actors started to work

with this Arabic version and the English twenty pages of the last part of the play. They were then given a truncated version, solely in English, and all actors were tasked to translate their role with the support of their peers. Everyone was assigned a language mentor. Interestingly, some young actors who seemed to be illiterate taught adults their native dialect, thus regaining ownership of language and developing their communication capacities. During some of the rehearsals, half of the team was working on stage while the other half was in the library, busy with the translation. It was an ongoing effort which required everyone's collaboration and support.

This collective process enhanced solidarity between the members of the team, and promoted ownership of the text by all those engaged in the project. "Everyone has an opinion about language and translation. It is a mechanism to facilitate critical discussions and emotionally charged discussions. It is a personal question, it is about understanding, nuances, culture", explained Eyad (August 12, 2016). It was important for Eyad that the actors work on the text, on narratives and their poetry, as compared with the dominant art industry increasingly driven by image. The emphasis put on translation also aimed to promote literacy and the use of Arabic language. Illiteracy remains a major problem in the Arab world and the translation of books in Arabic language remains very low.

**Promoting mobility:** The idea of the play 'Family Ti-Jean' emerged as early as 2013 and aimed to promote the mobility of international artists and community participants. Masrah Ensemble wanted the project to travel, thus breaking the isolation and physical constraints attached to the status of refugee. However, because of the changing Lebanese laws and additional restrictions faced by Syrian refugees, this initial expectation could not be realized. Furthermore, one of the Syrian actors, Soubhi Shami, who was living in Germany, was denied entry twice in Lebanon. As a result, he could not participate in the project. The turmoil faced by the Middle East region and the increasing restrictions towards migrants and refugees have fragmented human networks, decimated communities, and theatre facilities themselves. Eyad Houssami lamented that:

Whereas, in the early twentieth century, it was possible for artists in Gaza to commute to Baghdad, for instance, today artists are more isolated than ever. And intraregional mobility, particularly of citizens – to say nothing of refugees – of the Arab Levant and North Africa, grows increasingly difficult. (October 3, 2016).

The team was faced not only with mobility restrictions but also with unexpected moves, such as the sudden migration of one the Palestinian actors to Sweden, another important loss for the project. Since it was impossible for the project and its participants to travel abroad, all efforts were made to have it

at least travel inside Beirut. The double-bill performance was shown in six locations in the capital and reached over a thousand people. Two performances took place in Shatila, in the hope that Lebanese citizens would cross the invisible barrier that separates the camp from the rest of the city. Masrah Ensemble also encouraged Shatila community, at least the parents of the young actors, to attend the performances outside the camp and venture into unfamiliar neighborhoods of the city. For the theatre team, it was essential to give refugees and migrant workers the opportunity to go outside of the trapped and overcrowded environments where they are usually confined. The November 2015 workshop was facilitated by Milia Ayache in the American University of Beirut. She wanted the children to enjoy the nature in the beautiful park of the university, feel that this was also part of their city, and let their body wander free of limitations and preoccupations in this open space. “How do you take a full breath in Shatila, with all that surrounds you?”, pondered Milia (August 24, 2016). In the camp, rehearsals were taking place in a room of the fifth floor of the crowded and noisy offices of Basmeh & Zeitooneh. The only other spaces for children to play were the caged roof of the school, labyrinthic streets, and rare unpleasant backyards.

**Dealing with loss:** The aim of Masrah Ensemble was not to have the participants tell their stories or create some stories, but instead to work on literary text whose themes might resonate with their life experiences. In order for the children to take ownership of the words and immerse themselves in the narratives, Eyad Houssami asked them: “What is the story about for you?”. Some of the main themes that emerged were the love of a mother for her children and forced displacement. Like the characters of ‘Family Ti-Jean’ and ‘Family Stories’, some of the actors had been confronted with the loss of their homes, of family members, of their country. They had known exile, fear, violence, and sometimes the loss of hope itself. The theater project gave them a safe space and opportunity to deal with these feelings and painful memories through the characters of the play. Milia (August 24, 2016) explained that:

All these kids had left home. What is this fear of leaving home? What is it like, leaving home? We asked the kids what it meant for them, and we told them that it did not necessarily mean a bad thing, it could be getting married. It’s part of growing up.

Maybe the most disturbing experience that the actors of the ‘Family Ti-Jean’ project faced was the death of one of their peers, Alaa, a young refugee who was involved in the project as assistant producer. He had fled the war in Syria and found asylum in Lebanon in 2014. Considered by some of the boys as an older brother, 25-year-old Alaa drowned off the coast of Byblos, in Northern Lebanon.



The day the actors heard about the terrible news, they decided to spend the afternoon together, whether they would rehearse or not. They ate together as usual but did not have any appetite. Everyone was shocked and aggrieved. Suddenly, the teenage actors began reciting lines from 'Ti-Jean' saying that "I think nothing dies. My brothers are dead but they live in the memory of our mother". This irruption of fiction into the reality and their alignment was felt like a magic consoling moment. "Smile broke out, the initial shock of grief lifted. We were alive again", recalled Eyad Houssami (2016). Thus, despite the pain and the sorrow, they decided for the show to go on and to perform the play in Shatila as was planned that day. This is what Alaa would have wanted them to do. A message was posted on Facebook and residents mobilized themselves to pay a last tribute to Alaa. An immense crowd gathered, people filling the quad atop the Basmeh & Zeitooneh building. Speeches in the memory of Alaa opened and closed the performance. "It confirmed that for Alaa, working in the art survives our time on earth", asserted Eyad (August 12, 2016).

### Sin Festival:

Basmeh & Zeitooneh works in a holistic manner, both in the type of services it proposes to the residents and in the approach used to work with them. The teams of the different departments work closely with each other; thus, for example, a community member who participates in an income-generating activity will also be offered psycho-social support or literacy activity. "For everything related to children in the center, I share with the Protection department. Because I cannot take this responsibility", explained Boushra Adi (August 19, 2016). "I don't have the background and the experience that can guide me, to know what is good for children, what is bad". For the staff of Basmeh & Zeitooneh, it is important to create a safe space where individuals feel encouraged to express their feelings in a non-judgemental and non-discriminatory environment. They work at the individual and social levels, and use artistic and other rituals from different countries to connect the children and the participants together and with the center.

The team of Basmeh & Zeitooneh works with a population who has faced multiple and protracted forms of violence, physical and psychological, and who finds themselves in a new place and culture. For this reason, most of the activities of the organization integrate aspects of psychosocial support and promote social exchange. The arts play a major role, not solely in the activities of the cultural center, but as a tool in the protection and peacebuilding programs. They allow young people to express themselves creatively, put words on what they have lost and on their feelings, and learn to positively engage with their peers. Boushra told the story of a sister and brother who joined the choir

in 2015: “It is very sad that they witnessed the death of their brother, hit by a bomb in Syria. Since the accident, they both stopped talking. But they joined the choir and they started talking again, by singing” (International Alert, 2006). The Protection team stressed the changing roles of men and women as a result of the displacement, the loss of their job, their family, their home. However, despite the tragedy of their situation, there are success stories. Some refugees gain new skills and perspectives, which gives them the impulse to continue the fight. A teacher from the literacy program said that, because people were forced to leave their home, they had to learn how to read and write. Thus, despite the war, it was not the end of everything. It was also the beginning of other possibilities and personal growth.

### Fayha Choir:

Maestro Barkev has an astonishing and revigorating way of engaging with children and young people, which he seems to enjoy profoundly. He is both a teacher and a mentor, playing skillfully with rigor and humor to generate a lively and productive working atmosphere. Members of Fayha choirs meet three times a week, which is very demanding. Fayha singers perform in various locations and the two choirs visit each other once a month. Since they have to stay overnight, the parents of some girls from conservative families do not authorize them to travel. For some of these girls, it is already an achievement that they are able to participate in the choir. Fayha singers also get the opportunity to travel in many countries. They performed and participated in festivals all around the world, including Poland, Armenia, Jordan, Canada, France, just to name a few. This exposure to foreign cultures is not only a means to spread Arabic music, it is also a way to build bridges between different peoples whose governments are sometimes antagonistic.

It happens that members of Beirut Fayha Choir complain that their peers from Fayha choir in Tripoli mock them because they are new to choir singing. Maestro Barkev encourages them to work even harder in order to show, one day, that they can be better than their comrades from Tripoli. When young boys are engaged in a quarrel, he does not stop them but tells them: “OK, you kicked him. You are happy? I want you to be happy. Continue, break his teeth, break his foot, take off his eyes. You will be happy if you do it? Please do it...” (August 16, 2016). And usually boys stop immediately their fight. This approach towards young people is what he calls ‘reverse psychology’. Maestro Barkev engaged in the same manner with the children of the Sonbola choir. During the rehearsals with the children or the trainings with the teachers, they do not talk only about singing, but also about

courage, family, and Syria. Maestro Barkev always pushes them to sing better, to be better human beings.

Maestro Barkev is also in charge of the Sonbola choir which comprises around 200 Syrian refugee children from the Bekaa valley. He recalled that when he visited schools to select potential participants for this choir, he kept a serious face while holding his cane and told the children: “We are here on a very serious mission. Who wants to help?” (International Alert, 2016). Rehearsals are demanding, disciplined, but before anyone would think to protest or leave the choir, Maestro Barkev warns them that he can kick them out. Thus, children stay. With the Sonbola project, Maestro Barkev aims to bring music to the most marginalized communities. Since their mobility is restrained because of the numerous restrictions and harsh living conditions they face, music comes to them. For Maestro Barkev, “music is the art of arts” and has the power to transform individuals and to gather them around the beauty and joy of singing. As a choir conductor, he does not only teach songs, he also passes on social and civic values. He strongly believes that music can “create a community of good citizens who would influence their parents, friends, and neighbors. They have the biggest influence when they get married, because they can raise children with the same values they learnt” (August 16, 2016). Music enhances the potential of individuals and the capacities of a community to live in peace and harmony.

By collaborating with Syrian and especially Palestinian refugees, Maestro Barkev also contributes to the rebuilding of a community through the rediscovery of its culture and heritage. Working with Palestinian refugees, he realized that they had forgotten part of their culture and that he is more familiar than them with their musical heritage. “They don’t know how to keep their culture alive. They don’t even know what it means, culture. They don’t have the leaders to teach them how to keep the culture”, lamented Maestro Barkev (August 16, 2016). He is trying to teach them a new culture, which revitalizes the music of the past while embracing elements of modernity. This endeavor is not just a cultural stand but a political one. As he emphasized, undermining the culture of a people is the best way to massacre them. Keeping a culture alive is a wonderful means to survive and resist.

## V / Achievements and transformations

### For the community participants:

*New skills and behaviors:* In the project ‘Family Ti-Jean’, children were treated as adults and actors, and were expected to demonstrate commitment to the project, respect and care towards their peers throughout the collaboration. Their schedule and constraints were taken into consideration, but they had to honor their engagement and respect the rules that everybody had agreed on. As a result, the young actors developed or enhanced skills of self-discipline, respect of schedule, focus, memorization, sense of prioritization, awareness of the world around them. One of the young actors, Abdelkarim, stated that “I have an entirely new and intense sense of focus, of being awake to the details all around me. I am aware like never before” (Masrah Ensemble, 2016). In addition to these personal skills, they developed new technical competencies – translation, writing, acting, stage management, logistics. “The pedagogical and creative process boosted literacy, foreign language acquisition, self-confidence and self-expression, and leadership skills”, evaluated Eyad Houssami (August 12, 2016). Because they were engaged fully, physically, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally, the adolescents were able to (re)connect with their body and soul through the physical exercises and improvisations. By the end of the project, they were expected to conduct warm up exercises on their own, from their own initiative and responsibility, and according to their own needs. The fact that they managed to complete the project and to perform in front of various audiences in challenging environments boosted their self-confidence and sense of achievement.

Boushra and her colleagues from Basmeh & Zeitooneh witnessed similar personal growth for the children and youth who participate in their activities. “When you watch them perform, you can see pride in their faces”, emphasized Boushra (Haines-Young, 2016). The recognition of their artistic and human value and their engagement in group work induce a higher level of confidence, self-esteem, a decrease of violent behaviors as well as improved academic performances. The young singers engaged in the activities proposed by Maestro Barkev experience similar changes. Participation in the choir requires a high level of discipline, work, and commitment. Thus, it develops their social and personal skills, as well as greater memory capacity and academic results. More importantly, it gives them a sense of belonging, of collective. “They become calmer and more united”, explained Maestro Barkev (Sonbola, 2015). “When you sing in a choir, you are supposed to go along with other voices, not like when you are singing alone”. Besides the rehearsals and performances, children have the

opportunity to deepen their bonds during camps which are organized at least four times a year. They live together, learn to deal with each other, cook together. They are not just part of a choir but of a singing community.

*New attitudes and perspectives:* Injustice and the impetus for action seemed to be the greatest concerns for the adolescents involved in the ‘Family Ti-Jean’ project. The group regularly organized discussions on these topics, comparing the circumstances and ideas depicted in the play with their own realities. At the beginning of the play, a mother laments that “here we are with an empty bowl. We do not have any food while the white planter is eating fish on a silver plate”. This is also the reality of the lives of the young actors. In the play ‘Family Ti-Jean’, the devil owns half of the world and commits all types of atrocities, including massacres and the spread of diseases. This story resonates strongly with the current environment in Lebanon and other contexts that the actors experienced in their lives. However, in the play, the children are victorious of the devil because of their ability to respect the nature, to get down to the levels of the animals and to listen to them. While the actors would not claim at all that their artistic endeavor changed a painful reality, the engagement with these texts did bring hope, new perspectives, and the affirmation of a different set of values than the ones imposed upon them. When asked what were, according to them, the greatest achievements of this project, some of the children stated that they had been able to overcome their fears, to go to and become familiar with new places in Beirut. They also mentioned the commitment of the group despite differences in background, and the fact that the performance was contagious: “Everyone in Basmeh & Zeitouneh, everyone in our audiences wanted to be a part of it”, they reported during an evaluation session (Masrah Ensemble, 2016).

The children and youth in Shatila camp face dire living conditions, lack prospects for the future, and have gone through terrible experiences of war and displacement. A few of them suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and most of them have to deal with stress and promiscuity in a daily basis. This situation generates a high level of frustrations, leads to aggressive behaviors, and has the potential to push children towards radicalization. Basmeh & Zeitouneh’s peacebuilding coordinator (August 19, 2016) believes that “art and psychosocial support together can maybe not heal these issues, but at least they give another perspective for groups to look at things, and transform them from being victims to being productive in their communities”. Some of the children from the refugee camps did not talk, sing, or smile, remembered Roula Abou Baker, the Fayha Choir Manager. She noticed that they changed rapidly, in their way of talking, engaging with others, and their level

of participation. “They only needed orientation. They only needed a chance”, emphasized Roula (Sonbola, 2015). The civic values and the values of coexistence promoted by Fayha Choir transform the attitudes and perspectives of the singers. They can even lead to radical life changes. Maestro Barkev gave the example of a conducting trainer who was previously enrolled in an armed group. “He joined our choir and now trains refugee children. He left his violent past behind”, rejoiced Maestro Barkev (International Alert, 2016). Refugees do not only gain new perspectives and opportunities, they also rediscover their own cultural heritage, the Arabic music heritage, and become conscience of its importance.

*New means of expression:* The young actors of the ‘Family Ti-Jean’ project were moved by issues of injustice, oppression, identity. This artistic experience gave them the space and opportunity to question and confront these themes. Some children expressed the wish to further explore them in a future project, either through their own play or through performing a literary text. Having experienced theater in outdoors and non-traditional spaces, some shared their desire to play one day in an actual theater, with real seats and proper lighting. Abdelkarim, one of the young actors, stated during an evaluation session that “I think I am now ready to do a show on stage, with proper lighting” (Masrah Ensemble, 2016). This claim reflects a greater familiarity with the theater world as well as the ability of these young actors to express artistic choices, to consider options available, and to demand a certain level of quality and comfort which they deem themselves entitled to.

The children and youth engaged in the activities of Basmeh & Zeitooneh can choose from a broad range of artistic forms to express themselves. “As many of the artists are Syrian, you can see the Syrian situation reflected in the artworks, but everyone expresses his or her own feelings with their art”, explained Boushra (Haines-Young, 2016). Silkscreen printing, sculpture, drama therapy, choir, and photography are some of the artistic activities proposed to Shatila residents. They are free to choose whatever suits them better. They consider what their capacities are, their potential, and what they like to do. The numerous possibilities offered by the different means of expression enhance children’s communication and socialization skills. Children and young people enjoy singing. They are very curious about it and it makes them happy. For Massa Mufti-Hamwi, the director of Sonbola, music is magic, because “when they sing about life, hope, childhood, they are challenging the whole world” (Sonbola, 2015). The enthusiasm of Basmeh & Zeitooneh and of Maestro Barkev and his team are highly contagious.

### For the project managers and professional artists:

*The artistic collaboration:* For Eyad Houssami and Milia Ayache, the mere fact that they succeeded in bringing the project to its completion was in itself an outstanding outcome. “Really, you can do the impossible here, in Lebanon. The project was so outrageous and we did it, and we did it in an awesome way”, expressed Eyad (August 12, 2016). There were many uncertainties, a high level of risks, and it was a demanding performance, in outdoor spaces, which combined multiple forms of arts. Thus, Eyad does not embrace the idea that they “helped children”, but rather that they all helped each other to accomplish a project that could seem terrifying. If children were empowered, it is not as ‘vulnerable individuals’ but as emerging artists. Another major achievement was that, despite the various challenges, they were able to work side by side with these adolescents, not just regular adolescents, but young people who had been carrying a heavy load of pain and suffering in their lives. Even for Milia Ayache, who had experience working with children in the USA, collaborating with adolescents of Shatila was a totally different challenge. As a leader and an organizer, Eyad learnt to encourage them to become co-leaders and for him to become more of a follower.

For Basmeh & Zeitooneh, the collaboration with the artists and community residents in the framework of their festival was very much enjoyable and gratifying. It reinforced their relationship and trust with the community, and expands their network of contacts in the artistic scene. For this project, they partnered with several organizations and artists, including Karama Beirut, Music & Beyond, Masrah Ensemble, and the artists Filipe Jacom, Nawar Yousef and Daniel Sayegh among others. “This collaboration made our festival richer. We are all professionals in this field. Everybody provided their own expertise, knowledge, and we shared”, explained Boushra (August 17, 2016). Outside the festival, they continue to collaborate with the artists and support them. Coming himself from a poor family of Armenian refugees, Maestro Barkev feels strong connections with the Palestinian people, and with the other refugee and disenfranchised communities he engages with. He was able to build trust with them and make himself accepted even though he ‘only’ brought music in the camps. “I only know music, so we used music. I was so strict that I thought that this would not work. But little by little that worked. And now we have 8 choirs with refugees, Palestinians, Syrians, and poor Lebanese”, explained Maestro Barkev (August 16, 2016). Some of the refugees were initially surprised to hear that he is a Christian, but from the moment he told them that he respects them and they shall respect him, everything went well.

*The artistic production:* It was essential for Eyad Houssami that artists would challenge themselves. If some kind of social transformation were to happen, it would not result from a conscious and sustained effort to bring about enhanced resilience or change in relationships and attitudes, but from the friction generated by the artistic engagement. “I think theatre must harness frictions – with the content, among the performers, between the texts and the contexts, between the performers and audiences. ... It needs to be the place where we can do that, otherwise we kill each other”, stated Eyad. The text exposed children to Creole, French, English, and Arabic languages. It addressed them not as mere individuals but as citizens of the world, engaged in a universal struggle. “Your struggle of living home, your struggle of growing up, it’s not just about you, Ali or Abdelkarim, or Murad. It’s something that everyone shares. There have been wars before, there have been deaths before. How can this bring us closer?”, questioned Milia (August 24, 2016). Words have a meaning that transcends particular contexts and borders. They also have a power which contributes to healing and making sense of difficult situations. It is the content, the words, the poetry, that allowed the group to face and transcend trials such as the death of Alaa.

For Boushra Adi, there is no question that “the Sin festival is art for art. It is a cultural activity. We might have indirect outcomes, like increased dialogue, resilience, but these activities are primarily cultural” (August 17, 2016). While other programs of Basmeh & Zeitooneh, like the Protection and Peacebuilding departments, approach the arts as a means for healing and dealing with conflict, Boushra is more concerned by the recognition of the artistic potential of this marginalized population and their vitality. As former manager of an art gallery, Boushra defends very high standards of artistic quality, both for professional and emerging talents. She laments that, because Basmeh & Zeitooneh is an NGO, their artistic endeavor might be perceived as amateur while they have a wealth of experience in artistic creation and arts promotion. She acknowledged that some of the artists involved in their projects, whether professional or emerging, sometimes lack project management and communication skills, which can impact negatively on the realization and promotion of their work. Through the project ‘Create Syria’ and the workshops that were organized, some artists learnt these new skills.

*The purpose and meaning of this artistic endeavor:* It was clear for the team of Masrah Ensemble that they were not doing art therapy, theatre for development, or theatre for social transformation. Certainly, the project embraced some of these elements, but they would define their work as ‘artistic



performance' first and foremost. In an increasingly chaotic and uncertain world, there is a dire need for theater as a bridge between people, a space for breathing and allowing the free flow of movements, an alternative means of expression. For Eyad Houssami, there is an urgency to make theater and to mobilize young people, because they represent the future and the possibility of a different world. The engagement of young people in a project which confronts ideas of justice, power, oppression, discrimination etc. plants the seeds for a new generation of citizens more respectful of the other and the environment. Thus, the educational aspect of this project through the cultivation of personal and ethical skills and values is paramount for Eyad Houssami. He does not claim for theater to change the world but to pave the way for a better world.

This sense of urgency is shared by Milia Ayache (August 24, 2016) for whom such an experience changes everything:

It teaches me that there is a desperate need for theater, and for Text, for very juicy text, in this world. It teaches me that I will always be needed. ... Maybe I will never make money out of it. But it reinforces the belief that what I am doing is good.

The inner conviction of doing something that is profoundly good and needed is also felt by Maestro Barkev. Through his collaboration with Sonbola, he managed to train 5 conductors. It is a small number and maybe not all of them will succeed in conducting choirs for children. However, “even if he does not become a conductor, he will work in some place in the right way. ... I always say, tackle any problem at its roots. When you are introducing arts to these children who have known nothing but war, you are paving the way for a better future” (International Alert, 2016). For Basmeh & Zeitooneh, the Festival is an opportunity to show the creativity and artistic talent of the communities they engage with. It does not only give a different perspective of Shatila, it also serves as a platform for artists from marginalized communities to be known and their talent acknowledged and supported. For the 2017 edition, they are thinking to have less performances but even more quality. They also want the festival to be decentralized and to propose artistic performances in different areas of Lebanon.

### For the Lebanese society

**Desegregating spaces and minds:** The opening of the 2016 edition of the Sin Festival took place in Downtown Beirut, the most emblematic part of the city's post-war reconstruction plan, with its

fancy apartments and luxury shops. The contrast between life in Shatila and Downtown could not be more striking. Both neighborhoods suffered greatly during the war but have known totally different fates, though marked by a similar attempt to erase or set aside the atrocities and wounds of the past. This is exactly the reason why Basmeh & Zeitooneh decided to launch the festivities in this neighborhood. Art, especially in Beirut, is increasingly becoming the preserve of the rich and is exhibited in spaces that could seem inaccessible for different parts of the population. “Many see art as an elitist thing”, asserted Boushra (Haines-Young, 2016). “We are showing them that it doesn’t have to be”. Art does not have to be solely displayed in galleries, museums, and select art fairs; it can be exhibited in the public space as a means to fill in the void left by socioeconomic and sectarian divides.

Making and showing theatre outside of traditional spaces defies the highly segregated territory of Beirut. It also forges “unchartered pathways in a city whose prohibitively expensive real estate impedes the possibility of creating work in a blackbox studio or the like”, emphasized Eyad Houssami. Artists have to invent new spaces or transform existing ones, thus promoting the circulation of art towards new audiences and through new forms. The mobility of the double-bill theatre project allowed communities, who are usually separated, to mix and get to encounter each other. Having refugees from Shatila come to Downtown Beirut, Palestinians and Syrians perform in the Christian neighborhoods of Beirut, seeing Lebanese, Syrians, and migrant workers together on stage, and inviting Lebanese to attend the performances in Shatila were a remarkable breakthrough in an environment marked by segregation, suspicion, and fear. In a way, with the ‘Family Ti-Jean’ project, Masrah Ensemble did not only create a theater community, it also imagined and proposed new ways of living together, through a citizenship which transcends exclusive affiliations and breaks visible and invisible borders.

Besides the audience, the actors themselves were confronted, throughout the artistic process, with questions of identities and prejudices. The children faced incidents of discrimination and were both victims and agents of racism. One day, during a rehearsal, one of the young actors started to make fun of a girl whose skin was darker than her peers. This led to an immediate and serious discussion between all the actors and the other children who happened to be there during the incident. Eyad Houssami shared his experience of growing up in Atlanta, one of the pillars of the civil rights movement in the USA. Another day, while they were rehearsing outdoors, in Sanayeh park, an incident happened and some of the young Syrian actors were scolded by a guard who complained that

“Syrian kids ruin everything”. Restless and ashamed, the children tried to justify themselves to the adults and, in their narration, mentioned “al-sirilankiyyeh”, a derogative term referring to “the Sri Lankan woman”, a restroom attendant who witnessed the skirmish. Milia Ayache (2017), who was highly concerned that such an incident could ruin one year of efforts trying to build these young people’s agency and sense of self-worth, commented that “just as the youngsters were blamed for being Syrian, the cycle of discrimination continued, as they linked their misfortune to a woman of (different) color”. Speaking it through, listening to the children, and encouraging an open and respectful discussion was the response of the group to such disturbing events.

**Confronting the past to better live the present and prepare the future:** The locations of the rehearsals and performances in the project of Masrah Ensemble and Basmeh & Zeitouneh are a moving journey in the history and struggle of a city marked by violence, destruction, nostalgia, and hope. It invites us to the rediscovery of an urban space whose tragic past has left its scars on the façades of buildings untouched since the civil war, whose architectural beauty has been torn down and continues to be destroyed to erect luxury apartments and boutiques, whose coastal and downtown access is increasingly denied to the majority of Lebanese for the private enjoyment of a wealthy few. Shatila refugee camp is maybe one of the most marginalized areas of Beirut whose untold history still haunts the city and spreads fear and prejudices. Living conditions are very difficult in the camp which does not have any greenery. The few open spaces are cramped and usually unfriendly. Shatila was devastated during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Around 1000 residents were killed over three days in a massacre perpetrated by the Phalange, the Lebanese-Christian militia, as the Israeli army, led by Ariel Sharon, stood by. The situation in the camp has been exacerbated by the arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees, which strained already limited resources and services. Taxi drivers are often reluctant to go to this neighborhood and few Lebanese would dare breaking the invisible barrier and make their way to the camp. But the pride of the Palestinians and their desire to keep their culture and hopes alive are very strong. From the office of Basmeh and Zeitouneh, one can see an enormous iron key hanging on a water tower above a crossroads in the camp. It is the key of return, a symbol of the keys that Palestinians keep preciously in their home until the day they can make it back to their lost houses.

In contrast, Downtown Beirut, where one of the Masrah Ensemble performances took place, is the fanciest area of Beirut with its plush apartments and posh cafes, and countless boutiques of iconic

fashion designers. It was reborn from ashes after the civil war, through a multi-billion project that was part of Prime Minister Hariri's grandiose reconstruction plan for Beirut. His aim was to revive Beirut as a financial and tourist center linking East and West. Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury criticized this vision of "an 'Ancient City for the Future', because 'it evokes and links the past and the future, but shrugs off any notion of the present', that is the city as it is currently experienced by Beirutis" (Randall, 2014, p.11). For the Lebanese, it is hard to remember or imagine the bustling life and vibrant cultural atmosphere of downtown Beirut before the civil war. A well-guarded neighborhood, Downtown enjoys open spaces and wide avenues, but its superficial and wealthy consumer-oriented identity lacks the charm and spirit of old Beirut and its five thousand years of history. Post-war governments were more interested in the rebuilding of stones than in the reweaving of the social fabric. As part of the reconstruction plan, historical buildings were destroyed and an estimated 2,600 families, owners, and tenants in Downtown Beirut were dispossessed and displaced (Larkin, 2009, p. 5). The reconstruction plan was very selective and celebrated ancient Beirut through the restoration of Ottoman and Mandate era buildings, along with mosques and churches. Thus, Downtown is a geographic contested area and has been occupied by civil society organizations and protest movements which denounce the exclusive, sanitized, and segregated use of this space. This controversy is emblematic of sociopolitical relationships in Lebanon, where public projects are made without national plans, without the participation of the people and sometimes of the government itself, and where decisions are the result of a bargaining deal between competing factions or individuals, without any consideration for the well-being of Lebanese citizens and the rebuilding of a collective and plural identity.

**Reclaiming public spaces:** However painful this journey throughout the city can be, it does exhibit pockets of hope and possibilities of shared spaces and collective re-imagining (Larkin, 2009, p. 4). One of the performances of Masrah Ensemble took place in a cultural space called "Mansion". A 1930s villa located in the neighborhood of Zuqaq al-Blat, it is one of the many historic houses abandoned by their owners because of emigration, family inheritance quarrel, or financial inability to maintain the building. Empty since 1987 and in a disgraceful state, the house has been refurbished and transformed as part of a cultural project initiated by the Lebanese artist Ghassan Maasri. Now known as 'Mansion', it is open to the public since December 2012, and currently hosts eight studios, with artists, designers, curators, and researchers working there and contributing to the ongoing upgrading of the place (Whiting, 2012). 'Mansion' operates as a cultural space open to the public

twice a week, and as a library and café. It provides a free working space for artists who cannot afford to rent studios, gives access to diverse forms of art to the general public, and contributes to the revitalization of the social and cultural life of the neighborhood. It functions without external funding, solely through the contributions of the artists, private donations, and support of volunteers. The function of the house and its rehabilitation through recycling and reuse of materials and equipment, are an alternative and a counter project to the dominant neoliberalism. “There is a frightening trend to demolish, destroy, and – at best – commodify so-called “cultural heritage” so that it becomes inaccessible to the public”, lamented Eyad Houssami. “Mansion is an exception to the rule, a lone wolf warding off real estate conquistadors” (October 3, 2016). Several such projects<sup>5</sup> have made their way in Beirut and other parts of the country, a testimony of the capacity of the Lebanese to reinvent themselves, under the most difficult circumstances, and of the power of arts to challenge dominant practices and provide new perspectives.

Another glimmer of hope in this fragmented, polluted, and schizophrenic urban space are the several parks that have been refurbished and reopened recently in Beirut, in an effort to improve the image of the city. Several of the rehearsals and performances of Masrah Ensemble took place in these parks which played a very important role in the reappropriation of space and freedom by the actors. The day of the performance in Horsh Beirut park happened to be the day of the burial of Alaa. It was raining and all the actors were distraught, unable to perform the dress rehearsal. “We decided to do a whole hike through the park, under the rain”, remembered Milia Ayache (August 24, 2016). “We could talk or not talk; what was most important is that we could breath and just *be* collectively”. In July 2015, the park of Horsh Beirut was officially reopened, though only partially, as a result of advocacy efforts by civil society activists. Until then, it was only accessible to foreigners because of fears by the municipality of the “littering and anti-social behavior” of Lebanese (Worley, 2015). This event was perceived by some residents as a victory against the privatization and gentrification of public spaces in Beirut. The park was seen as a space which could break the ‘geography of fear’ and allow Lebanese from various classes, sects, and political affiliations to meet and exchange, or just to breath and enjoy the nature. According to some estimates, “Beirut has one of the lowest public green space ratio in the world (0.8 sqm per inhabitant)”, compared to the minimum of 9 sqm (97 square feet) per capita recommended by the World Health Organization (Bitar & Al-Saadi, 2014). Another

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<sup>5</sup> Other artistic projects such as La Maison Rose, Villa Paradiso, Batroun Projects, Art Residence Aley (ARA) are examples of initiatives aiming to preserve and revitalize cultural heritage (Stoughton, 2015; Badran, 2013).

park, Sanayeh, also used by Masrah Ensemble, was reopened in June 2014. This and other projects of rehabilitation of green spaces were not smooth but challenging processes of negotiation of public areas and redefinition of what is a public space and how it should be used. Even though they create tensions and sometimes frustrations, these initiatives also raise hopes and provoke debates, which is a healthy move towards self-affirmation and a greater sense of responsibility from Lebanese citizens towards their environment.

## CONCLUSION

There is a dire need in Lebanon for socially transformative arts-based interventions. Memories have been shut, justice denied, scars of war hidden, people compartmentalized, and any form of collective nonviolent resistance is systematically undermined. Public spaces have dramatically shrunk and opportunities of encounter with communities from different affiliations are limited. When fears are deeply rooted and spaces segregated, it seems that only arts could cross the visible and invisible barriers. Arts do not impose a narrative but invite to dialogue, propose new means of expression, imagine new relationships, and forge pathways into uncharted spaces. The three artistic initiatives analyzed in this report share this same endeavor to break boundaries, desegregate spaces and minds, and embrace diversity. The artists and cultural activists interviewed consider first and foremost their interventions as cultural and artistic. However, they are socially engaged and, like peacebuilding practitioners, “assume and inspire a citizenry unwilling to be passive or frozen in fear, a community with the power to evolve, to strengthen its skills, and to take action to transform the world” (Cohen, 2011, p. 174). In their artistic endeavor, they do not claim to generate social transformation, but they are willing to take risks, harnessing frictions, revealing the unknown, opening perspectives, upholding ethical values, and fostering a sense of belonging.

The artists and cultural activists of the project ‘Create Syria’ do not consider community participants as vulnerable or marginalized individuals. They view them as artists and empower them as such. Whatever their background, they treat them as professionals and expect from them commitment, discipline, and respect and care towards the others. They engage with them for the realization of artistic performances of great aesthetic value. Iman Aoun, an artist from Palestine, said that “good aesthetics is a form of respect” (Cohen et al., 2011b, p. 195). For this reason, Eyad, Boushra, and Maestro Barkev uphold high standards of artistic creation both with professional artists and community participants. However, they criticize elitist views of arts and instead strive to bring the arts where they are not expected and reconfigure traditional audiences. Some might wonder though what this hodgepodge of people on the stage – adults and children, professionals and amateurs, nationals and internationals, refugees and migrant – have to do with arts, serious arts. Milia Ayache would answer that “exile, war, racism, and discrimination are universal, and it can be empowering to find that one’s suffering is not unique. So why do we have to constantly explain why this kind of theater is valuable? Are other art forms as subject to these recurring question marks?” (2017).

There is no doubt that such artistic forms which engage non-traditional spaces, artists, and audiences stand up to the quality of professional performances. At the same time, like peacebuilding interventions, they are “laboratories for exploring relationships, memories, questions, and meanings, for experimenting with cross-cultural encounters, and for discovering what might be possible” (Cohen, 2011b, p. 192). Therefore, what are the boundaries and differences between artistic projects which unintentionally or indirectly produce social transformation, and those which specifically aim at social transformation? Is it the intention, the categories of people involved, the audience targeted, the topics dealt with, or even the branding which transform an artistic performance into a socially transformative arts-based intervention? Hannah Reich (2012) stated that “the attitude of the artist is often more about the process of the artistic creation and less about effecting change on others – for instance how the audience behaves after the performance. The attitude creates an opportunity to foster attitudinal change precisely by not demanding it” (p. 13). Another important question which would deserve further exploration is how to make arts-based peacebuilding projects more measurable, scalable, and replicable without compromising their integrity, serendipity, and creativity? And finally, how to mobilize the power of arts in conflict transformation not solely as separate full-fledged artistic performances but as artistic tools which could reenchant traditional settings and methods of conflict transformation such as dialogue, negotiation, mediation processes?



## SETTING THE FRAMEWORK OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

This brief guideline for the establishment of an artistic framework in arts-based peacebuilding or socially engaged artistic initiatives aims at answering the following question: What artistic framework can be put in place that will allow artists and non-artists to interact in a safe, collaborative, and creative manner? The design of this framework should be guided by the purpose of the artistic initiative, considering the ethical and aesthetic intentions and sensibilities of the artists, the non-artists, and the target audience. Any such framework should abide by the principles of safety, inclusiveness, integrity, and spontaneity.

### People

- Who do you decide to work with?
- How do you select the participants?
- How do you manage those who have not been selected?
- Do people participate on a volunteer basis or do you provide incentive?
- How do you envision the relationship with the communities of the participants?
- What are the roles of individuals in the artistic process?
- What are the rules of participation and interaction?
- How will you manage people's emotions?
- Do you have measures in place to ensure the well-being of participants (age, gender, disability, specific vulnerabilities)?
- Which audience do you target?
- How do you plan to outreach your target audience?

### Space

- Where do you plan to conduct the rehearsals?
- Where do you plan to conduct the performances?
- What are the possibilities and constraints of outdoor spaces?
- What are the possibilities and constraints of public spaces?
- Are these spaces safe (physically and emotionally) for the participants?
- What rules need to be respected in these spaces?
- How do you manage individuals external to the process who might cross the artistic space?
- Is there anything that should be left outside of the artistic space?

### Arts

- Which form(s) of art do you plan to work with?
- Who chooses which forms of art should be used?

- What are participants' familiarity with these arts and with art in general?
- What indigenous forms of art prevail in the host community? Outside the host community?
- Do you plan to work with participants' stories, to create new stories, or to use existing artistic literature?

## Time

- How often do you plan to rehearse?
- How long do you plan to rehearse?
- How many performances do you plan to conduct?
- How will participants be able to manage their daily routine and the artistic work?
- How do you envision the future of this initiative?

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