

We can now talk about an “alternative” Arab culture that is in the process of taking shape

By Youssef Bazzi (June 2007)

Abstract:

Interview with Lina Saneh

This young woman, who with her partner Rabih Mroué, was forced into debt to put on one amateurish and modestly produced play in the early 1990s, now takes her work to Tokyo, Moscow, Vienna and other international capitals, aided, like others, by the influx of foreign funding for Lebanese artists in recent years. It was this foreign connection that formed the focus of the interview.

When did you produce your first non-self-funded work?

In the first round of the September Festival in 1996 I received funding from the festival administration to stage *Ofreira* with money that came originally from the EC and other donors.

Did you feel any embarrassment or difficulty in accepting it?

At the time we felt that the festival was giving us this money and we never really considered foreign funding, which at that time was quite controversial, especially funding from the Ford Foundation. We heard that the Ford Foundation was giving money to a number of institutions. Elias Khouri and Roger Assaf were passionately opposed to Ford at the time. Nothing was that clear. We weren't so cautious about the Europeans, but we later came to realize the drawbacks of European bureaucracy. We also suffered quite badly from the low levels of aid provided by the European cultural centers in Beirut (i.e. those centers with links to diplomatic missions). For the most part, their directors had quite a conservative mindset and were only really interested in what we called the “prestige” culture and the folkloric performing arts.

To return to the September Festival: how much funding and support did it provide?

All I know is that the festival director, Pascal Faghali, distributed funds to stage four plays, about \$10,000 for each, not to mention money for producing short films and installation pieces as well as the costs of the festival itself. In my opinion it was a lot of money.

But wide scale cultural production had started before that, as far as I recall...

Sure. Foreign funding was coming in during the Beirut Theatre period, which reached its peak when local funding was obtained from local donors and the Franco-Lebanese Bank. Artistically speaking this was the high point then it hit a brick wall. The Beirut Theatre started up directly after the war and generated a lot of enthusiasm

and an interested and involved public, as well as giving a chance to a new generation to get their work seen, but the funding just wasn't enough. The previous generation (i.e. during the 1960s and 1970s) received financial and moral support that was mainly motivated by an idea that was extremely popular at the time: a desire to revive our past glories... the golden days. The Beirut Theatre helped open us up to the wider world and reestablish contact with the Arab and Middle Eastern worlds in particular. It worked with the Iranian film festival, theatre in Tunisia and Syria and the work of the Iraqi playwright Jawad Al-Assadi. It established the Time of War Festival for film and video and the Border Tape Project as well as supporting early video and installation works. It brought a new generation into the light: a group of artists who spoke in a new and oppositional language and had a cultural and political perspective entirely distinct from the generation that had preceded them. These artists had suffered through being marginalized and ignored.

Is this the reason for the split with the Beirut Theatre and the setting up of the September Festival that necessitated the search for alternative sources of funding?

Yes. Pascal Faghali, who was at the time working for the Beirut Theatre, put forward the idea of September Festival that would be free of control by senior figures in the cultural establishment. With this new festival came quantities of funding we never dreamed existed. It was also the first time we embarked on a project purely to experiment with no regard to the outcome. It was a chance to break the mold: an opportunity to work completely free and unconstrained. The festival gave us a whole year to concentrate on experimentation, thinking and preparation.

How do you assess what has been achieved?

The festival has been going for five years now. Because it shows so many foreign works it gives us a chance to really get to grips with the contemporary arts scene. The type of experiences it offers are far more valuable, unusual and modern, whether they be dance, performance art, installation or video.

Was this the inspiration for *Forms/Colors*?

Perhaps. At that time Christine Tome had started regulating the funding and production of artistic and cultural works. I should also point out that in the late 1990s, Roger Assaf founded the Shams group to get hold of foreign funding to produce his theatrical works and help young playwrights who belonged to his school of writing. Beirut D.C was another group (Dimitri Khidr, Hania Marwe and Ilian Rahib), which existed as an archive center for all Lebanese and Arab cinema. It staged a cinema festival every two years and occasionally helped support film production. All these institutions received funding from the Ford Foundation, the EC, Euro-Med and other bodies. Then Emad Yemut decided to found Ziko House that specialized in street art as well

as funding and displaying youth projects. I should also mention the Arab Image Foundation, an enormous project in its own right.

Which works by you and your partner Rabih Mroué received American and European funding?

I remember *Ofreira*, *Extract of a Family Civil Registry* and *The Appendix* by myself and by Rabie Al-Muqassim 19, *Come in Sir, We're Waiting For You Outside*, *3 Posters*, *The Search for the Missing Clerk*, *Who's Scared of Acting*, *How Nancy Hoped It Was All Just An April Fool's Joke* (yet to be shown) and *Make Me Stop Smoking* (from his post-theatre work). These pieces were shown in Berlin, France, Vienna and Tokyo among others.

Let's talk about your experience with the funding for *Forms/Colors*...

Funding can take two forms: financial support for the production or purchase of the work in advance.

Where does the money come from?

The Ford Foundation, Heinrich Böll, Prince Claus, the European Cultural Foundation and the American Center.

What are the conditions?

There are absolutely no political or cultural conditions attached to the funding. The only caveats are to do with accounting for expenditure and budgeting. Some donor foundations send an expert to examine the details of your expenditure and budget each year, whereas others are content to receive copies of documents detailing how we have spent our money and our budgeting. Most of these foundations have some expertise in the field: they get a good idea of our financial behavior from the finished product and don't need to hang over our shoulders.

In your opinion, what effect have these foreign donor foundations had on cultural life in Beirut?

If it wasn't for foreign funding cultural production in Beirut would be considerably more difficult. Major cultural events have the ability to generate public interest and attendance and produce constant and consistent output in terms of both quantity and quality. If it weren't for this funding such events would never happen.

In Beirut, perhaps, but what about other Arab cities? Any ideas?

In all Arab cities there is enough freedom to form private cultural groups and foundations and get hold of funds. Importantly, foundations in places like Beirut, Amman and Cairo have begun to form cooperative networks and exchange works and shows. We can now talk about an "alternative" Arab culture that is in the process of taking shape.

Translated from Arabic by Robin Moger