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Theatre: A cure for Lebanon's sectarian tensions?

Two neighbourhoods in Tripoli have set aside their enmity to participate in a darkly funny production.

by India Stoughton

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The play, a comedy, was inspired by the day-to-day lives of the actors [Samer Ghorayeb/Al Jazeera]

Beirut, Lebanon - Less than a year ago, 24-year-old Tareq Hebbewe was a militiaman wielding an AK-47 and participating in bloody clashes in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli.

The fighting pitted Bab al-Tabbaneh, Hebbewe's predominantly Sunni neighbourhood that supports the Syrian opposition, against the largely Alawite population of Jabal Mohsen,

which backs Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"I used to think that if I saw someone from Jabal Mohsen I'd kill him," said Hebbewe. "Now, I love them a lot."

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Today, the only gun Hebbewe carries is the fake one he takes on stage when he acts out the role of the sniper in "Love and War on the Rooftop - a Tripolitan Tale".

Behind the play is writer and director Lucien Bourjeily, who was shortlisted last year for the Index on Censorship's Freedom of Expression Award thanks to his work promoting free speech in Lebanon.

The initiative is being spearheaded by MARCH, a Lebanese non-governmental organisation focused on peace-building.

The play, a comedy, was inspired by the day-to-day lives of the actors - 13 men and three women, aged 16-29, from the two warring neighbourhoods.



The enmity between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen dates back to the Lebanese civil war, which stretched between 1975 and 1990 [Samer Ghorayeb/Al Jazeera]

Many of them were initially reluctant to take part in the project, having lost friends and family members in the conflict.

The enmity between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen dates back to the Lebanese civil war, which stretched between 1975 and 1990. Tripoli witnessed numerous deadly clashes over the past four years following the outbreak of violence in Syria. Alawite-dominated Jabal Mohsen and Sunni-dominated Bab al-Tabbaneh, two of the poorest neighbourhoods living side by side in the city, have clashed with each other over conflicting political allegiances regarding Syria.

After government security forces imposed an uneasy calm on Tripoli in late 2014, following years of violent clashes, MARCH decided to act. "Since it's a situation that's always bubbling, there is an urgent need to do this kind of initiative," explained Bourjeily. "We hope that this will create a buffer if new clashes happen."

Although there were some tense moments, he said, the process of working together has helped to uproot deep-seated prejudices. "At the beginning they had exercises. We asked them, 'If fighting renewed, would you join in?' and many of them said yes," he recalled. "But now, the same people answer no."

After several weeks of workshops, Bourjeily took a two-week break and wrote the play's script, based on what he had learned of the actors' day-to-day lives.

"At first I was thinking it would most probably be some kind of tragedy," he said. "But then I noticed one thing they can all agree upon, is that they like to have fun and to make jokes... Being in a rehearsal room with them is like being with all the troublemakers in the class."

Bourjeily said the actors once interrupted a run-through by driving a motorbike into the rehearsal room.

Another time, he arrived to find that the young men had scaled the building and were playing on the roof, seven metres above ground.

Most of the actors dropped out of school at a young age, and some never learned to read and write. They worked in pairs to memorise the script, lines of which were adapted from conversations during the workshops.

"I said, 'Let's make it funny, but let's base it on tragedy,'" Bourjeily recalled, "because the tragedy is the reality".

The result is a play within a play, loosely revolving around William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

It follows the rehearsals for a play about Ali, a young man from Jabal Mohsen, who falls in love with Aisha, a girl from Bab al-Tabbaneh.

Rehearsals for the tragedy quickly turn comic, thanks to the inexperience of the actors and frequent interruptions from the harassed young director, who attempts to impose order on their chaotic interactions.

The factual basis for the script is clear. The man playing Ali is Ali Ammoun, a 21-year-old from Jabal Mohsen who fell in love with a Sunni girl in real life. The pair faced strong opposition from their families.

"The play tells our story," said Ammoun, who spent some time in prison after shooting someone in a personal dispute, but is now married with a baby daughter.



Although there were some tense moments, the process of working together has helped to uproot deep-seated prejudices [Samer Ghorayeb/Al Jazeera]

Sectarian tensions may be at the root of the violence between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, but the reasons young men become involved are often more prosaic.

Endemic unemployment means that there are few alternatives available. In the end, however, these shared problems became the bridge between the two groups.

"At first I refused to take part because there were people from Bab al-Tabbaneh involved," said Ammoun, who now wants to be a professional actor. "But when I got there, I realised that they were not at all what I was expecting. They are just like me."

Khodor Mukhaiber, 19, who hails from Bab al-Tabbaneh, plays the role of the director in the production.

"I never thought we would have anything in common, but in fact we share a lot," he told Al Jazeera. "First of all, they are humans too. Secondly, our problems are their problems."

Not everyone is happy about the initiative, however. The most challenging moment, said Hebbewe, came when some of the actors were threatened with violence.

"There are always people who benefit from conflict," said Bourjeily. "This is where their power comes from... I think the first sign of success is when people start to receive threats."

On June 15, the first Beirut performance of the play opened to a full house and finished with a standing ovation. The production is set to continue after Ramadan, when it will tour Lebanon, and potentially the region.

"The best moment for me was when we performed in Tripoli," said Hebbewe, "and I saw people from Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh sitting side-by-side."

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA