

Once Upon a Time on the Steps of Vendome



Kamil Hanna's marionette is waiting on another rooftop.

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The Vendome stairway was named after the cinema it led to below. Along with al-Hekmeh, it used to be the oldest movie theater in Achrafieh, but its magic lantern was put out early. Developers razed the Cinema Vendome building, leaving a big hole ready to be filled with a new highrise.

“On the stairway, nothing has changed,” says Umm Mitri who has lived in one of the houses along the steps for the last 50 years. She believes the stairs to be a village inside the city, where neighbors come together, whether in joy or grief.

The stories of the Vendome Stairway are being told by Collectif Kahraba, who transformed the space into an open theater to

perform the second edition of their festival *Nehna Wel Amar Wel Jiran* (The Moon and the Neighbors and us). The program closes today, following two days full of puppetry, theater, music, and film.

Starting at 7pm, a group of 20 people are taken on a magic ride through the stories of the residents of the stairs.

Nawal started baking for her family and her neighbors on the stairs from her little shop, where she remains to this day.

Atop one of the buildings, a group of three artists are waiting, with their puppets. The short performance echoes recordings done with one of the residents by artists Nadine Touma and Nivine Ariss.

Ara the tailor tells us about his father's arrival to Lebanon, fleeing the Turkish massacres against the Armenians. He speaks about his own birth in Homs, then about his work in Beirut making clothes, boasting about the time president Michel Suleiman was one of his customers.

His story told, we climb the steps towards a small house and take a glimpse through a window into a living room and another into a small kitchen. From the roof, Beirut's seaport is visible, setting the scene for Nawal's pre-recorded story.

She began making *manaqish* on the *saj* when the bread stopped coming during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).

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You are beckoned by the sound of a dulcimer strummed by Bilal in the small courtyard in the middle of the stairs. Neighbors sitting outside their homes greet you as Sara begins to tell "the tale of the garlic clove."

But the trip does not end here. Kamil Hanna's marionette is waiting on another rooftop. "I filled my basket with lemons/I gave him one; he said thanks," it sings a song written for the festival and reminisces about the Burj cinemas in old downtown

Beirut]: Roxy, Empire, Hollywood...

Behind you, on another rooftop, the story of “the giant neon sign” is recounted. It changed the life of the family living in the building across. You listen to how they became accustomed to the rhythm of its lights, going on and off in 20 seconds intervals. The show goes on. Every time you think that there could be nothing more, you hear a voice coming from a different direction, inviting you on another trip in the world of the stairs. If you decide to take a break in the main court, eat a *manqoushe* at Nawal’s or have coffee at Samira’s, you will suddenly be pulled back into the festivities by the sound of an *oud*.

This is but a small selection of the continuous performances down the stairs, inside the houses, and on the rooftops. The festival’s program is filled with theater, music, poetry, cinema, and animation.

Tonight at 9pm, the Mancopy Dance Company from Denmark will be performing its modern dance show *Every Last Breath*. This will be followed by the closing ceremony, a song and dance party in the courtyard.

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The festival was launched last year by Collectif Kahraba, which calls one of stairs’ houses its home.

The art collective believes that artists should not be limited to the stage. They have a role to play in whatever surroundings they happen to be in.

Last year, the neighbors were worried about what these artists might do to their tranquil stairs. But this year, they were the first to ask about the date of the festival. They collaborated with Collectif Kahraba and took part in the show.

Nehna Wel Amar Wel Jiran also plays a role in revitalizing public space in Beirut. Public parks are almost extinct. Green spaces, like Horsh Beirut, are closed under the pretext of protecting them.

Stairs and alleys connecting the traditional quarters of the city may be the only public spaces that do not fall under the jurisdiction of the municipality or the state.

Collectif Kahraba does not want the steps to be turned into another hole for another skyscraper.

***Nehna Wel Amar Wel Jiran* is at 7pm tonight on the Vendome Stairs in Mar Mikhael, Beirut. For information: 01/442770.**