

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Specters of war thwart efforts to forget

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: As we troop awkwardly through the narrow streets of Khandaq al-Ghamiq, our guide gestures to the decaying facade of a once-stunning building.

The balconies are crumbling, their wrought-iron rails rusted. The masonry is pocked with bullet holes, window frames empty or fringed with jagged, lethal-looking shards of glass.

As if unaware of the devastation that has been wrought on the building, the guide orders us to take note of the beautiful architecture. The derelict-looking structure is occupied, he notes in passing, but the inhabitants in the area are forbidden to hang washing outside to dry.

Pointing out one building where residents have blithely ignored this stipulation, he complains that he has called the police several times but no one ever shows up.

The washing, he claims, ruins the area's historic appearance.

"Watch Your Step: Beirut Heritage Walking Tour," is an interactive, site-specific performance directed by actress and AUB theater studies lecturer Sahar Assad and written by Robert Myers, cultural historian and AUB professor of English and Creative Writing.

Six tours took place over the weekend, led by actors Raffi Feghali and Sany Baki. Numerous interventions and interruptions along the way are devised by students from Assaf's "Workshop in Theater Production" and enacted by theater students from five Beirut universities.

A sizable group follows Feghali through Khandaq al-Ghamiq Friday. As we mill like sheep in his wake, he rattles off architectural facts at great speed. The consummate tour guide, he seems keen to rush through the sites and collect his tips in time for Happy Hour.

Inside a building he claims was designed by "the Lebanese Gaudi" – a corner apartment block with an elaborate, decorative façade – we stop in a spacious first floor apartment. Its beautifully proportioned rooms are long-since abandoned. Feghali calmly brushes a thick layer of grime from a small section of the floor, imploring us to observe the beautiful tiles.

Two floors above, we wait in awkward silence as he negotiates with a young man in a soldier's drab olive attire. Before accepting LL20,000 to let us inside the apartment, he eyes us with scorn and twice spits at our guide's feet.

An ancient suite of furniture, coated with decades of dust, attests to a want of inhabitants. Our guide informs us that the building's tenants are actually four young men in combat-colored clothing – lounging on newspapers, smoking and playing cards amid the rubbish, abandoned dolls and filthy mattresses.

Seemingly utterly disinterested, he draws our attention to an exquisitely painted ceiling, now

damaged and peeling, urging us to step over and around the young men as casually as the dusty furnishings.

As the tour progresses, our guide's chatter becomes increasingly bizarre. Strange incidents begin to intrude. As we turn the corner of what our guide says is Syria Street, a young woman dressed in a blue bathrobe begins to scream at him in Armenian.

Apparently embarrassed by her outburst, the guide smiles awkwardly and looks at his feet. When she stops shouting, he ushers us urgently away.

"What was she saying?" enquires an audience member.

"Oh, just something about how the Armenians used to live here but were driven out and exterminated like they were in Turkey," he says. "Nothing important."

We visit a small, cramped flat where a wild-haired, catatonic-looking woman sits at a small table with two plates of congealing pasta. We shuffle past to the balcony.

As we aim our gazes wherever our guide commands, the woman appears, staring into our faces one by one. Seizing a bearded young man, she shakes him violently then runs inside.

The guide mutters something like: "She does this every time."

We edge back inside, studiously avoiding her gaze. As the last member of our group reaches the hallway, a blood-curdling scream issues from within, and several people jump. The guide slams the door as though protecting himself from an attacking dog and impatiently herds us outside.

An exercise in resurrecting past trauma, "Watch Your Step" is likely one of the most fascinating and least comfortable performances to take place in Beirut in recent years.

"The inspiration of the text was a play by [Argentine playwright] Griselda Gambaro," Assaf explains. "She wrote a play in the '70s entitled 'Information for Foreigners,' which is also a sort of promenade performance ... basically pointing the finger at audiences as accomplices to the state terrorism in Argentina at that time."

"When I read the play, I thought of our Civil War: 'This would make a great project for the students.' So we read it together. We started brainstorming and I started to look for a location ...

"I passed through Khandaq al-Ghamiq and the first thing that struck me was that the moment you're in the area you automatically think of the Civil War ... You go down to Downtown it's as if you're in a different country – there's no trace of the war. Here it's like the whole area is a monument."

Assaf came up with the idea of contrasting a manifestation of the post-war amnesia – the tour guide's shallow, fabricated rhetoric – with dramatic moments based on stories residents shared with her or gleaned from research conducted by the International Center for Transitional Justice.

The wailing woman, she explains, is based on a lady whose son disappeared during the conflict. Three decades on, she still prepares two plates of food every night, refusing to leave the house for fear he might return.

"I wanted to make a play about our memory of the Civil War," says Assaf, who timed the performances to coincide with the 39th anniversary of the conflict's beginning, "to just say

simply that we must remember. We have to look back, we have to step back in history in order for there to be a peaceful present and a peaceful future.

"We had 15 years of Civil War that ended overnight when all the fighting parties came together and decided to end it, like it was a football match or something ... They rehabilitated all of the buildings, but they've done no rehabilitation for the human beings – all the people who disappeared, all the people who lost their houses, lost their future, lost everything."

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the performance was the audience's reluctance to intervene in scenes of violence, and willingness to passively witness strangers' suffering.

"The guide is an accomplice, [a manifestation] of Lebanese amnesia," Assaf says. "Like in Gambaro's play, the audience becomes an accomplice to what's happening. You see that he's lying, but what do you do? Nothing. You just nod and move on."

A thought-provoking performance, "Watch Your Step" is amusing, enlightening and deeply sad. Allowing audiences a rare opportunity to explore the interiors of some war-ravaged Beirut buildings, it simultaneously provides an insight into the human cost of the conflict and the passive mentality that allows atrocities to happen.

Far more than a simple trip down memory lane, "Watch Your Step" was a chilling wake-up call.

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