



# Rhys Dubin

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## 'Plain Secret' unites outsider, locals in Baalbek

17 October 2016, originally at [Daily Star](#)

BAALBECK, Lebanon: The Heliopolis temple complex served as an impressive backdrop for the play "Plain Secret" Saturday.

The piece grew from a seven-session workshop Beirut's Zoukak Theatre Company conducted with a group of Baalbeck residents, men and women over 50 years old.

"We tried to work through the workshop on contemporary issues related to Baalbeck society that the participants were interested in," Zoukak's Hashem Adnan said. "We wanted to work on memory related to this city with all of its complexities, as well as its relation to the ruins."

The production saw individual community members come forward to speak directly to the audience about their personal history and relationship to the city and its history. Each was introduced by a local guide at the temple complex.

"The performance addressed many issues in the community – including mafias, and the violence that exists in their society," Adnan explained. "They were speaking a lot about the absence of theater, artistic and cultural life, in addition to problems of security."

The participants were also interested in depicting a side of Baalbeck not normally seen by the outside world. "They were very interested in talking about what was very beautiful about this city," Adnan continued. "They were celebrating their city during the workshops all the time."

"Plain Secret" was sponsored by APEAL, a nonprofit devoted to the local and international promotion of Lebanese artists. The performance concluded "Silent Echo," an exhibition featuring work by local and international contemporary artists that's been up at the Baalbeck Museum and the adjacent ruins.

"People are very happy about the exhibition," APEAL president Rita Nammour said. "It's completely contemporary and something that not everybody understands, but the people of Baalbeck are very interested."

"Young people are interested in understanding the meaning of each installation. They are asking, 'What does this mean? How does it relate to Baalbeck?'" she added.

She believes "Plain Secret" too is important to Baalbeckis.

"Telling their story was quite important," Nammour said. "They want to be heard and they want people to come to the city. The people of Baalbeck want to interact with the rest of the country. They've been cut off for a long time."

APEAL, she said, "want to decentralize art and make it accessible to all parts of Lebanon. Art is a way of bringing people together."

Adnan said a desire to increase art's accessibility also guided Zoukak's workshop and production process. "It's really an issue of bringing people together in this place," he explained. "Usually, the ruins are a bit closed [to locals]. It's generally a place where people come from outside. This was one of the first times where people from Baalbeck, amateurs, created a play, and people came to see their own, local ideas."

Adnan and Nammour were enthusiastic about art's ability to transcend ideological boundaries in bringing disparate groups together.

"I think art is a very easy way to communicate with people, and to be close to people, and for people to interact with one another," Nammour said. "The ultimate goal is to reach consensus and to reach a common ground between everybody."

Adnan said that for Zoukak, this kind of consensus-building necessarily focused on Lebanon's marginal groups. "I think in this context of artistic interventions in local communities, there is a kind of marginalization of elderly people."

"We thought it would be good for the project itself to work with this group of people because they have a certain memory of the city and what happened here and what is happening now," he added.

Beyond the complex social and political issues addressed in the play, Adnan said he simply enjoyed working with the Baalbeck residents.

"It was nice to work with people who were so sure about what they wanted to say," he explained. "They were saying, 'We have something to say. We have something to do. We have something to share and something to contribute.'"

Oct 30th, 2016

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