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#FEMALEFORWARD

**Zeina
Daccache**

—

*Actress and
Director*

The WOMAN LEFT

~~HOW?~~

~~WHY?~~

~~WHO?~~

~~WHAT?~~

~~WHEN?~~

WOMEN

Empowering women and closing gender gaps in the world are key for economies and communities to thrive. Therefore, the aim of our series "Women of Lebanon" is to give women from very different backgrounds in the country a voice, as we believe that it is important to portray strong women and use their impact to inspire future generations. Thus, this series will cover a whole range of different topics and sectors, from human rights, the arts to business and politics and all the women in the series have one thing in common: they are outstanding personalities who believe in change and the importance of individual responsibility to work for a better society. I am particularly grateful to Nicole Hamouche, the author of this series, who has identified and interviewed the ten women in our series and has worked so hard to make this project happen.

Enjoy reading and we hope that you will get inspired too!

Best regards,



Kristof Kleemann

*Project Director
ENF Lebanon and Syria*



Zeina Daccache founded *Catharsis* - Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy in 2007, establishing Lebanon's first organization dedicated to theatre as a social and psychological therapy tool.

Both her theatrical and film productions of *Twelve Angry Lebanese*, interpreted by male inmates residing in the Roumieh Prison, received international recognition and brought much-needed attention to the issue of penitentiary reform in Lebanon. These productions were essential to the enactment of the early release law in Lebanon, which had been published in 2002 but was finally enacted in 2009. Following *Twelve Angry Lebanese*, Zeina created the play *Scheherazade in Baabda* and the documentary *Scheherazade's Diary*, in which female inmates of the Baabda prison share their personal stories in an attempt to heal their wounds and hold up a mirror to Lebanese society about the oppression of women.

Her theatre productions have a dual purpose: to help participants deal with their own psychological trauma, and to give voice to marginalized and disadvantaged communities within Lebanon.

**Zeina
Daccache**

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<https://www.facebook.com/CatharsisLCDT/>

WOMEN SCHOOLBOARDS



ZEINA DACCACHE

Her plays, movies and clinical practice invite each
and every one to a cathartic journey

by

NICOLE HAMOUCHE

The Blue Inmates, Zeina Daccache's latest documentary which sheds light on the situation of the mentally ill in Lebanese prisons was distinguished at Venice Final Cut Festival last August. It is not the first time that Zeina Daccache makes the news: her documentaries, inspired by her work, have been acclaimed at renowned international festivals. *Scherazade Dairies* and *12 Lebanese Angry Men* were also award winners. The director, actress and drama therapist amplifies the voice of the vulnerable, notably those of inmates, and has become the spokesperson of the causes of people forgotten behind bars of an indolent and corrupt system. Years ago, passionate and with strong convictions, she was the first to venture proposing drama therapy in Lebanese jails and finally succeeding in obtaining the authorities approval after several rejections and endless meetings. She founded her NGO *Catharsis* and started her work in Roumieh jail in 2007, the biggest and most crowded jail in Lebanon where 7000 inmates rot in dirty, unhealthy, promiscuous cells cohabiting with rats, the smell of urine and abandonment – and now with Covid-19. Many of them have been there for years - awaiting judgment. The same applies in Baabda's prison for women, worsened by iniquitous laws reflective of a patriarchal system.

Thirteen years down the road, with the consistent support of a few courageous judges and members of parliament, *Catharsis* was able to change laws and free several inmates, who went back to a dignified life. By addressing and demystifying taboo questions, Zeina Daccache also contributes to freeing many spectators from the chains of prejudice. Her plays with the inmates in the ill reputed prison drew people from all walks of life: judges, lawyers, journalists and activists.



Through *Catharsis*, the plays, movies and the talks and encounters articulated around them, Zeina Daccache plants the seeds of a dialogue between separate worlds: inmates and free people, authorities and citizens, men and women, the outside and the inside. Hence, her work breaks boundaries. The territories of politics, violence and conflict can't defy common humanity revealed by the power of theater and collective work.



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Poster for *12 Angry Lebanese* directed by Zeina Daccache (2009)



Tell us about your journey: How did you get to drama therapy and particularly to drama therapy in prisons?

When I finished my studies I wondered: Why do we do theater? There was something missing, I didn't want to do theater to be restricted to a circle of cultured and highly educated people. I felt we as theater artists, had isolated ourselves and had lost sight of society. I also felt that theater should address people who were not from this background and wondered if theater could live in the most forgotten places and grow in the most difficult situations.

This pursuit took me to study at *Philippe Gaulier* theater school in London: Gaulier is one of my greatest inspirations. During those two years in London, I realized that theater was indeed not reserved to a sophisticated elite and when I came back to Lebanon, I wanted to employ my know-how in theater elsewhere than in theater per se. As I had studied both theater and clinical psychology, I volunteered at the *Oum el Nour* rehabilitation center, where I felt I could be of some help.

Around 2000 and 2001, a lot of people in Lebanon were taking drugs, including many of my university friends.





How was *Catharsis* founded? What triggered it?

I worked for seven years at Oum el Nour, then I felt the urge to combine therapy and theater and thus embarked to *Kansas State University* in the US. I had the vision of *Catharsis* during the July War of 2006 after I had returned from KSU. This is when, an internship I had done in Italy, at Volterra's prison with a great Italian director, whom I had met when studying at USJ, popped into my mind. Very likely, it had been with me for a long time. I wrote the entire project down, then noticed a call for proposals on the European Union's website. Having worked on it hand in hand with member of parliament Ghassan Moukhaiber, I got the EU funding.

Then, I knocked at the doors of all public authorities many times. I had to get the approval of many people, such as the General Prosecutor, the Director of the Prison, the Director of the Gendarmerie, the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Justice. Some of them called me Woody Wood Pecker because of my insistence and stubbornness. It took a year and a half to make it happen, but I was young then, very determined and had a long breath.

Artist or Activist?

Both come together for me. But now, if you tell me art for art only, it is a no. My heart beats more now if it is a heart to heart project. For me, I cannot separate them, I cannot have a nice play in prison and then simply get out. I can't separate theater from reality. Actually, at first you'd think you'll just convey the voices of the inmates through theater, but then, once you are inside the prison, you understand that it takes more than theater, that there is much to do, that you need lawyers to change the laws. You believe first that someone else will handle this matter, then you come to realize that you have to do all

of this yourself. This is where I decided to solicit lawyers and judges: to amend the laws and draft new ones. I have worked with many of them, both Lebanese and foreigners sometimes.

After the *Johar Up in the Air* play for instance, I worked with a judge to suggest a new law to replace that of 1943. People suffering from mental illness should be taken to psychiatric hospitals and be treated instead of being thrown into jail until they are cured as stipulated by the law, because what defines "being cured"? We presented this draft law in 2016 to the Lebanese Parliament, it




still hasn't been passed. Articles were written in 1943 and never reviewed since. Note the terminology used in the Penal Code: "If a crazy, possessed or alienated person commits a crime, they have to go into an asylum in jail until they are cured". However, out of 25 jails in Lebanon, only Roumieh accommodates such a center. Moreover, even in this center, there are no medical doctors – they only visit every two months -, no nurses and no specific equipment. In the other jails around the country, people suffering from mental illnesses share cells with the broad prison population. Then, this set off a snowball effect: my interest extended the question of prisons only, I became involved in other social causes such as the migrant workers' and mentally ill.

With all the difficulties and hurdles that you mention, what made you stick to this work?

The most difficult were the first two years, but now when I look at the results, I continue. With maturity, I am increasingly interested in transmission, in broadening the horizons, in working with those who left jail, following up with them - like Abou Abdo, who now raises awareness on the revolution in Britel. The beauty is that they now are helping the inmates from the outside, they didn't abandon those who are still inside. Group therapy created empathy amongst the

inmates. The latest play *Johar Up in the Air*, was created by "mentally healthy" inmates who looked and listened at their mentally ill co-detainees. A community was therefore created amongst the "mentally healthy" and the mentally ill in the prison. The first took good care of the second, providing them with cigarettes, cutting their nails, giving them a shower and making sure they won't be stigmatized and bullied in prison.



“If a crazy, possessed or alienated person commits a crime, they have to go into an asylum in jail until they are cured.”

- Lebanese Penal Code



Tell us about your relationship as a young woman with the inmates, notably in a macho society as ours.

Sure they project a lot on me, they did not censor themselves and this is what is great, but when we are working, everything finds its place. I created a space where they can speak, express themselves and be respected. They spoke of their crimes, and became witnesses of them. The fact that I could amplify raise their voices and change the laws - we were able to get a reduction of sentences - also earned me respect. Most of all, they respect someone who gives them their word and keeps their promises. They were promised things in the past and were disappointed, very disappointed, since their

childhoods. They had lost trust. At the beginning, I used to go to Roumieh jail two or three times a week, this created a bond. I had several hats: the woman, the policewoman, the mother, the therapist, the lawyer and the theater director. Actually, the inmates often became protective of me, and sometimes our interactions also changed their views on women, they thought a woman should free herself. They ended up giving me the nickname of Abou Ali, a sign of recognition as me being one of them and a leader who carries their voice.

How do you cope with violence? Moreover, with the pandemics in prison?

To recharge, I stay away from people who nag all the time, I go to the beach to look at the sea, I spend time in nature. I speak to close people and if there is nobody, there is God. I read spiritual books, it is a journey. I spend time on my own, with myself. Time becomes precious, I can't stay with just anyone. I do sports.

At the moment, we can't go to prisons because of Covid-19, I am carrying out the work that can be done from outside. And *Catharsis* is pushing for a conditioned amnesty law for the vulnerable and non-violent part of the prison population, given prisons' conditions which are terrible, a nest for Covid-19.

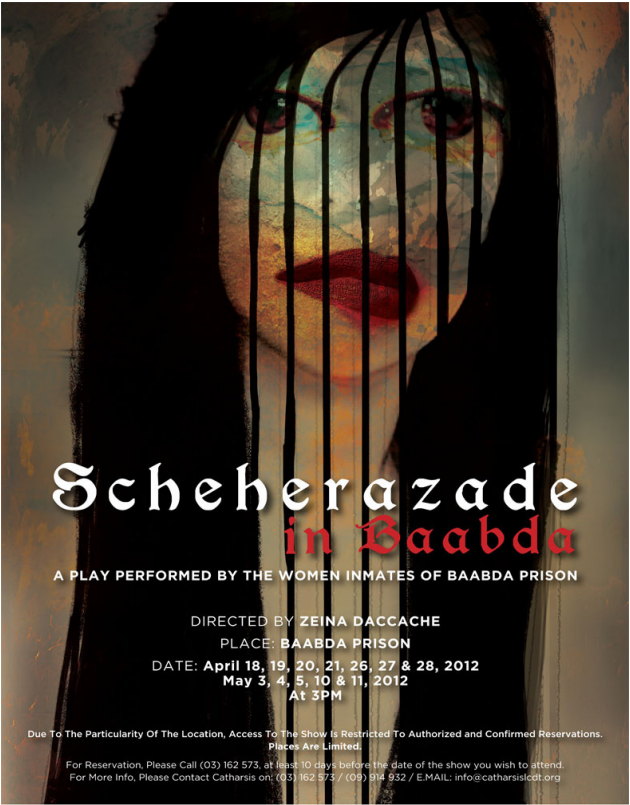
Do you think there are still some officials that one can work with? Could we draw on your experience for other public-private partnerships?

Sure, there are people with whom we can work, such as judge Hamza Charafeddine who has accompanied *Catharsis* in our struggle or MP Ghassan Mkheiber. Yet the number is very small. And as we say "one hand alone cannot clap", they can't alone outweigh the whole system. For instance, at the private screening of *The Blue Inmates*, I had invited many Members of Parliament on the Justice Committee, only one out of eight came. Concerning public-private partnerships, sometimes I feel maybe if we, as in the civil society and NGOs didn't exist, it would have all exploded and it would have been much better, maybe the government would have then be compelled to move.

You still had the courage, with all this misery that you see on a daily basis to bring a child into the world?

Who said that life is rosy? At some point, I had spent time in an impeccable city, all restaurants had 7 stars, people's only conversations were where will I go on vacation, it was so boring. For me the beauty of the world is in the whole, in the fact that there is both good and evil or injustice - and in the question of how to overcome injustice, how to balance injustice and violence. There will always be injustice, but do we have to submit ourselves to it all the time? And maybe there is meaning to all this. However, it is true that now we, in Lebanon in particular, are living in fear, it is becoming cumbersome.

Bilingual posters for Scheherazade in Baabda directed by Zeina Daccache (2009)





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