

Clowns Without Borders

Camp Burj el-Shemali



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Day Six of the tour and we were up early and off down south again. We're feel like we're becoming pretty familiar with Southern Lebanon now! We headed to Sour once more and to a small town just outside it called Burj el-Shemali, home to another Palestinian camp which has been in existence since 1948.

Once in the town we stopped to collect Ahmad, a community worker whom we had first met on Thursday along with Hamada when we went to Aytit and Hanweah School which are nearby. They are both residents of the Burj el-Shemali camp and Ahmad would escort us in.

We were stopped at the army checkpoint entrance and handed over our passports for inspection. The soldiers there looked over our cases of costumes and props before instructing Samir to park up across the road and wait. After ten or fifteen minutes Ahmad brought our passports back to us and we were free to enter.

This camp seemed relatively pleasant to me, in comparison to some we've seen. It's built up the side of a hill, the buildings are painted in bright colours and there is a buzz of community about the place. We unloaded at a large hall, which was already full with plastic seating, with room for at least 500. The show had been advertised as open-invitation so a potentially large crowd was expected. We decided to take Ahmad up on his offer to bring speakers and a sound desk!

We quickly changed into costume, got a hug hello from Hamada who was there with his scout troupe, and we were ready to begin. The hall was full, with little ones at the front and some older teenagers and adults at the back, and more piling in at the doors. It was a challenging show due to the size of the hall and our tired throats, with two of us suffering a dose of the lurgey. But we had lots of craic and were all mobbed afterwards by children requesting photos and even mothers thrusting babies into our arms!

After the show, we walked up the hill, in through a little doorway and up a flight of stairs, to find ourselves in a series of freshly built rooms, where we met a group of young women with whom we would run a workshop. They were running a centre there where they attempted to educate young camp residents about their health and well-being. Many of them wrote content for their website and were learning photography. They were mostly Palestinian refugees although a couple of them were actually Lebanese. Seemingly, with the camp being around for so long and in a very small town, the communities have become somewhat integrated. We also met a young woman called Susanna who spoke very good English and had lived in London for three years.

Some of the young woman work with the children of the camp and we asked them about our show and how it had been received. They told us our audience had been mostly Palestinian but there were also Palestinian Syrian children there and local Lebanese children. They told us the children and adults had all engaged with the show and enjoyed it and one child had said they were sad it was the only time we would be there and wished we could come again. They had wished the show could have been longer (although we explained that in our experience 45 minutes is about right for little ones), and also expressed a desire to see more circus skills.

After tea and chats we ran a workshop with the group (about 20). It was tricky due to us being in a relatively small and poorly lit room. Many of the women were a little bit shy too and perhaps unaccustomed to the boisterous activities of a drama workshop. But we explained to them that we used games to tune in to each other and help with cohesion of the group in performance, and simply to have fun together as well, and we hoped they might be able to find something of use, perhaps in their work with the children of the camp.