

Clowns Without Borders

Beit El Fan, Tripoli



Clowns Without Borders

Beit El Fan, Tripoli

We had an addition to the team today as we were joined by French documentary film-maker Martin Roux. We had run into Martin on the second day of our tour, in Chatila camp, and he had expressed an interest in what we were doing and asked if he could come with us to film the work.

So we were returning to Tripoli but today visiting a cultural centre run by International Humanitarian Relief. The centre was in a very beautiful building with an open courtyard in the middle, shaded with canvas awnings, where we were to perform two shows.

We were greeted by manager Omar Sarrou, a warm and friendly man whose conversation was peppered with "God bless you's". He told us that the children to whom we would be performing today, all Syrian refugees, were undertaking psychosocial therapy there to help them deal with their experiences during the conflict in Syria. The first group were already in place as we arrived so we quickly set up and started.

There were about 130 children in the first audience. They were among the quietest children we had performed to but they were attentive and began to laugh more and more as the show went on. Omar explained to us that these children were very traumatised, having witnessed some terrible things in Syria. The second group, around 100 children who were more boisterous right from the start, were all Syrian orphans who have been living in a Tripoli orphanage for as much as five years in some instances.

Omar told us that it is so important for these children to have positive experiences like watching a clown show, as they need any little thing at all that can make them happy and make them forget about their problems and the bad situation in which they're living. He said that the impact of the experience would extend beyond the end of the show, that the children will be singing our songs and repeating our gags for a week or more.

We spent quite some time after the second show, playing with the children, who were very affectionate and fun. I connected with one little boy in particular, Sleiman, a cheeky bright-eyed giggler of about 8. We had a lot of fun, doing animal impressions, arm-wrestling, and debating my age (not, in truth, 6). However, when I asked him if I could take a picture of him on my phone, his demeanour changed entirely, he said no and walked away and would not return. Ghassan followed Sleiman and asked him what had upset him. He said that he did not want his photograph to be on the internet in case the Syrian government would see it and he would be in danger. It seemed inconceivable to me that a child should have such fears. And I felt terrible at having burst the bubble of fun we had been having together.

Of course, Martin had been filming all day and the children were aware of that and even playing up to the camera. But seemingly they do not make the same connection between a video camera and social media as they do with a phone. However, when Martin was interviewing some of the adults that came with the first group, they told him that they were happy to speak but would not appear on camera, for pretty much the same reasons given by Sleiman.

We were a bit shaken to know the fear these people are subject to, and could only hope to have brought them some light relief for a brief period of time.