

Clowns Without Borders

Joub Jennine



Clowns Without Borders

Joub Jennine

Day 8 of performances and the clowns were only delighted to be taking a different route out of the city after all those trips to Sour. Today we were going north-east, over the mountains and into the Bekaa Valley. This necessitated leaving at 6am. Clowns only delighted.

We'd been warned to dress warm as it is much colder in Bekaa, so we were bundled up as we piled into the van and headed for the hills. The road rises very quickly in altitude and we were soon looking back on stunning views of Beirut and the sea and feeling our ears needing to pop! Only half an hour out of Beirut there was snow on the ground and we were soon driving through army checkpoints on a high mountain pass and descending into the Bekaa valley.

The landscape here is quite different from the south, the valley a wide plain that seems a bit desolate at this time of year but is covered with vineyards, and on all sides the snow-capped mountains.

It was still only 8.30 in the morning but suddenly, we were at our destination: a small camp of temporary dwellings, constructed from wooden boards and covered with plastic sheeting, some stamped with UNHCR, some with random advertisements. We were met there by a man called Abed Adaweya, a resident of the camp, who showed us to the space in which we were to perform. This was another building of wooden boards, with a freshly laid concrete floor and was by far the smallest space we had been given to perform in, about 3m x 6m, and windowless as are all the dwellings.

Abed invited us into his home to sit and drink tea and talk. There we met his wife, Shah Ibrahim and their two young daughters, aged about 1 and 7 years old. The same construction and size as our performance space, their home was divided into two spaces, one presumably a bedroom and the larger one a living space into which we were welcomed. The walls and floors were covered with coloured hangings and mats, soft mattresses ran around two sides of the room and in the centre was a stove, its chimney running up and across the ceiling to an exit point in the wall, its heat creating a toasty warm and comfortable atmosphere.

Abed brought sweet tea and we talked for a while, with the help of Ghassan and played a little with Aya, his older daughter, a fun, sparky, clever and curious little girl, throwing and catching the juggling balls and counting in English. She knew 1 to 10 and Daniel taught her 11-20. Abed, Shah and their daughters are, like all the residents of the camp, Syrian refugees and have been living in their temporary dwelling in Joub Jannine since the start of the Syrian war, between four and five years. Their home is tiny, with no windows. They clearly have barely any possessions. The toilet facilities for the camp are a series of tin shacks, each the size of a small round shower stall, over a hole in the ground, with a ragged blanket for a door. There are 42 families on the encampment, with 120 children under 12 years of age.

We set up for our show and then Debbie and Helen went back into the house to change. The electricity had gone off so Shah held up the torch on her mobile phone to make light for them, and Aya watched with delighted curiosity as they donned their bright spots and stripes.

We had an audience of about 50 little ones, a handful of older boys and a group of women who stood at the back, some cradling

babies, and one or two men. The show was so intimate and fun. The little ones seemed genuinely amazed at Daniel's magic and there was much whooping and hollering from them, which we loved, cramped as we were on the tiny stage area. They told us afterwards that they loved the magic and Abed told us that the adults had enjoyed the show as much as if not more than the children in some cases. The children were extremely affectionate and offered us lots of hugs and kisses which we were only too happy to accept. They said they wished we would come back next year and do the show for them again and we certainly also hoped that we might. We said our goodbyes and thanked Abed and Shah particularly for welcoming us into their home. And then we were off, trundling down the dirt road, somewhat amused to see one man sitting on his own in the middle of the tufty humpy grass, enjoying a shisha pipe.

We headed to the next camp over, a bigger grouping of similar houses. Unfortunately once there, we discovered there had been some sort of mix-up or miscommunication and it would not be possible for us to perform there today. The space where we might have worked was in use as a school and we had hoped to perform during the midday break. But today it was being used during the break to give a seminar on health and hygiene to the women of the camp. We met two young aid workers from a group called World Vision, who were deeply apologetic about the mix-up. We reassured them that it was no problem and agreed that if there was another time in our schedule when we might be able to perform, we would gladly come back.

So we were unexpectedly done for the day and headed back over the mountains, descending again into Beirut, admiring the views and popping our ears. We all felt we had had quite a special experience today. Up until now we have visited long-established camps, largely Palestinian with a recent influx of Syrian refugees. It was

fascinating to now find ourselves in a totally different environment, different countryside, a different type of camp. And it had been a real privilege to meet Abed and Shah and be welcomed into their home and to perform for their community.

Clowns only delighted.

(P.S. You can see Aya in the first photo with this report, dancing a bit of a jig as she queues to get into the show. What a little star.)