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**#FEMALEFORWARD**

**Lina  
Abyad**

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*Stage Theatre Director*

# The WOMEN of LIBYON



~~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*







Lina Abyad, is a Professor of Theater Arts at the Lebanese American University and Director of the recent production, "The Royal Pardon". She studied Child Development and Communication Arts at Beirut University College, and Psychology at American University of Beirut, before pursuing her MA and Ph.D. degrees in Theater Arts in Paris.

Since 2012, she has been an Associate Professor at the Communication Arts Department (Theatre), The Lebanese American University. She is also the Co-founder of Beirut 8:30 (a theater company), and headed the Jury for the Prize of Dr. Sheikh El-Sultan Bin Mohammad El-Qasimi, Festival du Théâtre Arabe, Rabat, 2015.

Lina Abyad has directed more than 30 plays of which are the following: *Alai' zayak fein ya Ali* [where can I find someone like you Ali] (2015), *Hayda mish film masri* [this is not an Egyptian movie] (2014), *Come back to bed love* [Theater play] (2012), and *Al-dictator* [The Dictator] (2011).

In 2011, she received the Mellon Award by the American University of Beirut (AUB) for producing the play "Tea with Biscuits in Prison", and in 2013, she received the "Prize of his Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qassimi" for the "Dictator", as best theatrical work for the year.

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**Lina  
Abyad**

<https://www.instagram.com/linaabyad>

# INTERVIEWS





# LINA ABYAD

## Stage and Justice Passionaria

The prolific theater director who chose beauty and taboo breaking

by

NICOLE HAMOUCHE

Lina Abyad's theater does not always come from theater, it is often inspired by fiction, by life and by storytelling. Stories from everyday life in a complicated Middle East, stories of domestic violence, of patriarchy, of dictatorship, of exile of war and love.

Together with her actors, they weave the thread of the plays, gathering stories from here and there and sharing their own. And the imaginative and prolific director creates a world with all this, a different world with each play.

"I love to create worlds" says the director who has explored various forms, subjects and texts in her work and who has brought to the public about thirty plays in thirty-five years: *The Deers' Sleep*, *The Dictator*, *Where do I find someone like you Ali?* *Return to Haifa*, *The Cage*, They prescribed me patience, Come back to bed darling, and many more. Her plays deal with the shortcomings of our society and its taboos. She says: "we don't have the luxury of an entertainment theater; we don't live in Sweden". If her theater is often not an entertainment theater, it is always aesthetic, poetic and does not forget humor, providing a liberating experience for both the actors and the spectators, who are open to transformation.

She is driven by this transformation potential: "Theater has the capacity to transform people, it shows the array of possibilities and that these are not that out of reach".

For Lina Abyad, the stage is a place of freedom, a place where one "breaks certain silences, certain rules, as well as suffocating and unfair straightjackets which strangle creativity". She

means it also to be in a way, a utopian world, as she views it, as a sphere for the exercise of democracy. "I like to give the possibility to the people I work with to express themselves, to have a say".

Hence, driven by the vision of a fair world, she starts within, in her own circle, with an intention to produce a larger impact on society as well. It is what drives the passionate LAU professor who has formed generations of artists and actors. In the place we live in, there is no room, in her view, for less than an engaged theater, "unless it is something very beautiful, so beautiful that it becomes political", given the cathartic power of beauty.



Theatrical poster for *The Dictator* (2011)



## What brought you to Theater? What is your story with Theater?

Image by Falak Shawwa



**“I had the possibility to do things and not be overwritten by the weight of tradition, both in terms of theater and of what others do.”**

When we travelled to Paris and London with the family, my father made it a point to go to the theater every evening. He was very fond of theater. Together with the concierge of the hotel, he would prepare the theater program for the full week. In Beirut, he took us to see the famous Chouchou shows. Later, I saw the famous Nidal Achkar acting with Roger Assaf in *La Bobine* written by Therese Basbous and directed by Fouad Naim. I was overcome. At the end of the play, I went to speak to Nidal Achkar, with my school group and told her “I want to be like you”. Nidal Achkar had studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. I also saw Isabelle Adjani in *Ondine* at the Comédie Française in Paris, she had the main role and was about my age. People were wearing their long dresses and jewelry and after the play, strolling in the Palais Royal Gardens with my parents, I had this insight that I wanted to do theater. When I told my parents who were doctors, that I

wanted to study theater, they said no. It was the civil war then, and they thought that theater didn't enable you to make a living: Chouchou had died poor and didn't even have enough money to pay his funeral. They wanted me to be independent, to be able to stand on my feet. So, I did a BA in Psychology at AUB, while taking theater classes. Then I went to Paris during the war, waiting to go to the US to study dance therapy in South Carolina, as I loved dance. And in Paris one evening at the theater, I met a man with whom I fell in love and who encouraged my passion for theater: **“We do what we love”** he said. I did not leave Paris, registered at Sorbonne University in theater and married him. I earned a Masters in Theater from Paris III Sorbonne, then went for post-grad studies and also did a PHD in theater, as my parents had urged me to have a university degree, it was more reassuring.

In Paris, I put together small shows, but I was taken by what others were doing. There, you become a very good spectator, but it also gives you the impression that you can't do anything: as you see outstanding work, it is somehow paralyzing. We came back to Lebanon in 1996, after the end of the war. At that time, there was lots of hope and a lot to do in Lebanon. There was the possibility of reconstruction and it was exciting to be part of the people who would rebuild – we got it wrong. I had the possibility to do things and not be overwritten by the weight of tradition, both in terms of theater and of what others do.



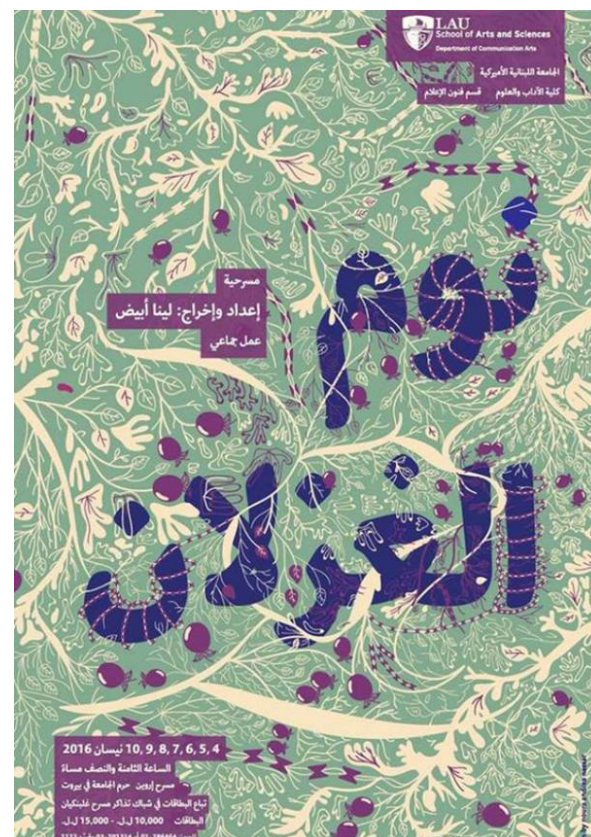
## Tell us about your journey in Theatre.

I worked for a long time at the theater of LAU, where I put together shows in the scope of the university theater. The university had a tradition of thirty years in theater and an elitist, though wide, public. It was a moment of cultural boom and the media contributed a lot to the promotion of the vibrant theater scene, notably newspapers such as An Nahar, Al Hayat, As Safir. Television stations were also open to cultural activities at that time. Al Madina theater was at the core of this movement with its prominent director, Nidal Achkar, an actress and an activist with whom I had collaborated on a show and whom I mentioned earlier as my first

striking encounter with theater. Then I started producing my plays at LAU such as *Electre* from Giraudoux in Arabic, Elias Khoury's *Smell of Soap*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Women's prison*. I translated several foreign fiction into Arabic and shifted to working in Arabic very quickly when I came back to Lebanon, as I wanted my work to have a reach in the environment we live in. I think that with the subjects I addressed, I brought some openness to LAU and contributed to making its theater more popular. It took time for me to get outside LAU.



Theatrical poster for *His Voice* (2016)



Theatrical poster for *The Deers' Sleep* (2016)



Theatrical poster for *The Cage* (2014)



Theatrical poster for *We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay!* (2019)





Theatrical poster for *Come back to bed love* (2012)



Theatrical poster for *Alai' zayak fein ya Ali* [where can I find someone like you Ali] (2018)

## What drives your work which often addresses social issues and taboos?

By marrying a Christian, causing a tsunami in my family – it was war times then - and by studying theater and going for it, I had rebelled and broken certain taboos myself. Therefore, in my work as well, I wanted to take a position against all that was unspoken, against certain barriers, imprisonments, against conformism and the fear of the other. I wanted to break certain silences and certain rules, that are suffocating, especially for creativity.

My desire is to build a fairer world through the theater. Through the production of a play, already within this small circle, the rapports that you have with another enable you to practice democracy: the technician, the actors, everyone has his word.

Theater is a school of citizenship. People learn to listen to each other, each one has a role, his role, but I also like to maintain a certain permeability of the roles and responsibilities. Also, I attach the utmost importance to beauty: theater has to be aesthetic for beauty saves us. I want my theater to have an impact on people's lives. For instance, even when working on a Greek tragedy such as *Electre* or on *Miniatures Algériennes* which addressed the war in Algiers and *The Tough Guys* that tells the story of a village that has hired hunters to get rid of the pigs, I was indirectly addressing the Lebanese civil war and several underlying questions: what do we do with assassins? What do we do with foreign forces and mercenaries that we have called upon?



## How can one continue making Theater in times of COVID-19?

The current situation is the exact opposite of theater: theater is not about the text, it is about presence, incarnation, the essence of theater is the body, the presence. Theater is about a breath, a laugh together, shoulder against shoulder, like in Friday's prayer as we say, for the devil not to sneeze through the holes. There is a certain unity that is conveyed when the public is present: usually, we fight to have a full theater, the energy circulates through proximity, there is a communion. Same is true for acting, proximity and touching, are a must. Part of the theatrical experience is also when people walk out of the theater together and exchange. In a theater, what is amazing, it is to be sitting next to someone else. Currently, with COVID-19 and with social distancing,

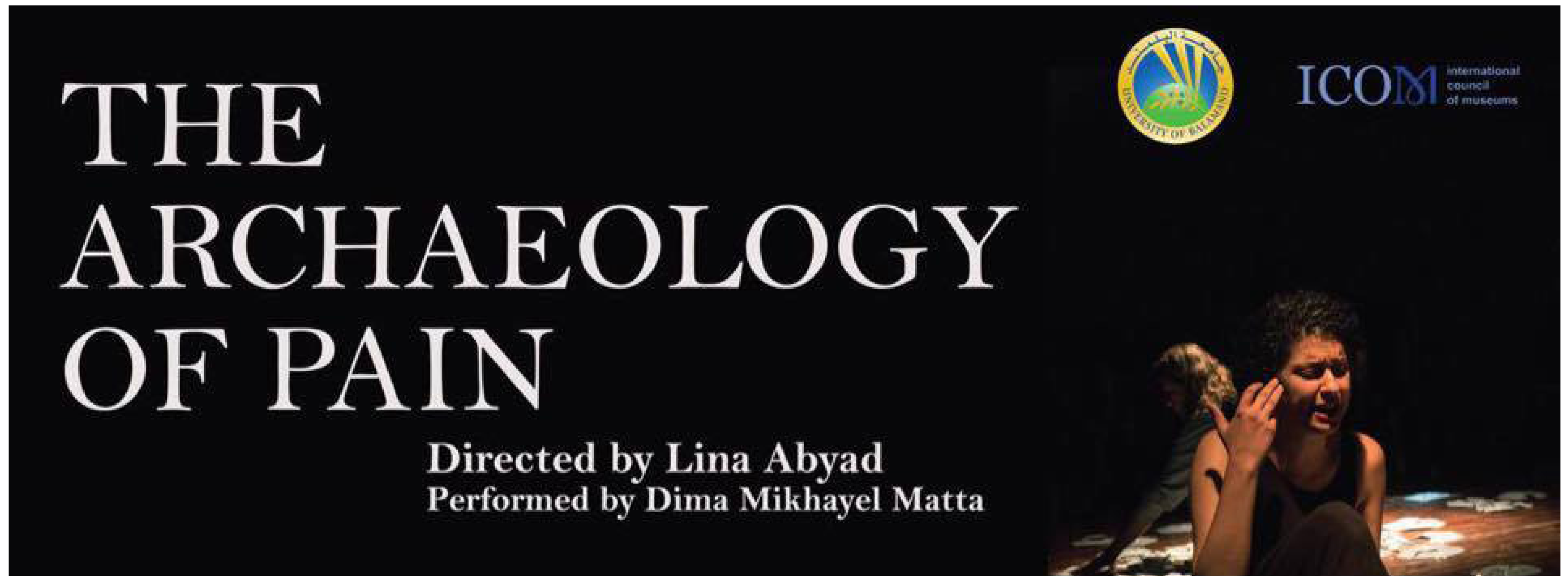
there are holes. In proposing online streaming, we bluff with the movements of the camera so that the public gets the impression that he is in a theater. Also, we have to think of productions outdoors in private gardens, public gardens, at the beach, use all possible outdoor spaces. We can't perform in small spaces anymore.

After the Beirut blast, we have put together *Whispers*, which was broadcasted online, we received many messages from people saying, "we miss theater", so, it seems there is still a thirst for it.



Theatrical poster for *Tuyoora Ayloul* [The Birds of September] (2018)





## How to teach theater in such moments?

**T**We work more on voice, on poetry, on the body, on dialogue and on tales. We can't work on space, gesture and gaze. Neither can we work on scenes that involve two people or more, the entries, the way out, it sounds banal, but it is very important. Screens limit us to a chest, we don't know what body are is anymore, neither the image we have of ourselves.

However, despite the circumstances, tens of student are enrolled in theater at LAU, more than in the preceding years, I believe thanks to the preceding years' productions.





## You are also an actress. Do you have a preference between being an actress or a director?

**T**he director is in the shadows, the actors are my creation and at the same time they have their freedom, there is something about respect to stay in this rapport. There is a certain insolence in an actor's work to show his body, to in a way, "undress" in front of the public and then to go back home and pay the electricity bills. This is magic, really: to be in the skin of another. As for a director, you are creating worlds. And I love to create worlds. I have a vision, a vision of the world and of that specific world I am developing when I am working on a text.







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