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Zoukak unveils performing arts festival



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BEIRUT: "Zoukak Sidewalks" will be familiar to anyone following Zoukak Theater Company – being the name of a yearlong series of performances, workshops and talks by international and local artists. Launched in 2013, the series has been retooled into a new performance festival, opening next month.

Since it was founded, Zoukak's mission has been to restore and reinforce Beirut's theater culture. The premise of the "Sidewalks" program was to introduce the tools of the trade and to bring the audience closer to performing arts practice.

The international talent participating in the "Sidewalks" program includes German theater director Thomas Ostermeier, Alexander Kelly and Chris Thorpe from the U.K. troupe Third Angel and, from France, DuZieu. All will present master classes and workshops that dwell upon specific aspects of their practices.

American performer Mark Mitchell will stage his "Burial," an investigation of the relationship between the living with the dead. The show's burial ensembles are hand-sewn textiles whose materials are biodegradable, allowing both the textiles and the body to be reabsorbed into the earth naturally.

Suite42 will present "Land Without Words." Directed by Lydia Ziemke, it tells the story of art stemming from war and its value relative to the contemporary world.

Third Angel will present "600 People," which depicts a comic conversation between Alex and an astrophysicist Dr. Simon Goodwin about whether extraterrestrial life exists.

Developed by Third Angel's Chris Thorpe, Rachel Chavkin from The TEAM (USA) and the U.K.'s Triggered@Warwick, "Confirmation" explores how people only see what they choose to see. The work works to create an honest dialogue about the origin of this condition and what it means.

DuZieu will present "Soudain La Nuit." The third play in its "Spectres de l'Europe" series, it follows a stranger who dies, alone, on a flight from Istanbul, and eight other passengers quarantined and interrogated when the flight lands in Europe.

"L'avantage du Printemps" – the first play in the "Spectres de l'Europe" series – was created in collaboration with Zoukak and performed in 2013 during Baghdad's "Cultural Capital of the World" festivities.

Based on an encounter of an Arab director and a French actress during rehearsals for Shakespeare's "Othello," the play (like "Othello") uses autobiography and fiction to develop the relationship between foreigner and European.

Zoukak itself will stage its work "Battle Scene," a performance draws on personal experiences to tackle issues of violence and how it damages values and imposes silence.

The process of reformatting a yearlong program as a festival has given birth to "Focus Liban," a performing arts residency program created in conjunction with several institutions – the French Institute, Middle East Airlines, the British Council, and the Goethe Institute.

Selected artists are given the opportunity to present their work to international curators, festival directors and venue directors.

Six artists who submitted work to Focus Liban but didn't make it to residency – Chrystele Khodr and Wael Ali, Monika Basbous, Dima Matta, Yara Bou Nassar, Mona Mehri and Camille Brunelle – will pitch their developing ideas to professionals attending "Sidewalks."

For the public, 10 artists – working in theater music and contemporary dance – will stage their projects in the context of "Focus Liban."

Five theater projects will be staged. Among these is a "theater in progress" called "Jogging," by veteran dramaturge Hanane Hajj Ali. The play explores the performer's life – her daily routine and the contradictions within it.

Koon Theater Group will present, "The Story of a Mother." Based on a book of the same name by Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875), the story follows a mother who must brave a grave journey to return the soul of her son that's been taken by the angel of death.

Collectif Kahraba will stage "Origin of a Tale," a narrative that emulates the literal form of the first tale. Playing off the idea that history's first tale was recorded on clay, the performance deploys layers of sheets, piles and blocks of clay modeled on stage to build a map of the history of fables.

Petra Serhal's experimental performance "No Blood Included" illustrates the connection between mourning and remembrance, forgery and sincerity.

Minwal Theater Company will stage "Barzakh" (loosely "isthmus"), a performance investigating the barrier between the physical and spiritual world, in which one waits for judgment day.

"Sidewalks" will stage three music projects.

Oumni Ensemble (Mohannad Nasser, Nobuko Miyazaki and Rami Al Jundi) will perform "Hello" (marhaba) consisting of seven original oriental pieces.

Two or the Dragon (Ali Kobeissy and Ali Hout) will present "Two or the Dragon," an array of contemporary urban sounds incorporated with traditional Arabic music.

The Overseas Ensemble is a collaboration between Italian artist Ilaria Lupo, Swiss composer and musician Paed Conca and the Sri Lankan band Sarigama, whose players are Lebanon-based migrant workers. The ensemble will perform from their album.

Ali Chahrour's work "Men of the Land of re-Working Title" explores modern masculinity and its connection to social, political authoritarianism and power.

Khouloud Yassine's "Heroes – Surface of Revolution" invokes the challenges of society's images of strength and heroism, asserting that it has lost its meaning.

"Zoukak Sidewalks" runs Nov. 8-15. Focus Liban happens Nov. 11-13.