

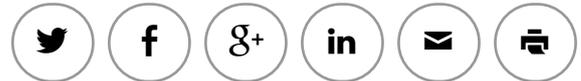


The theatre director Peter Sellars, who is part of the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. Courtesy Rolex / Marc Vanappelghem

Artists benefit from programme that supports their collaboration

[Richard Holledge](#)

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In the wood-panelled formality of the Trustees Room of the New York Public Library an intense, rather nervous, woman is holding an audience in rapt silence.

In gentle cadences, the Lebanese playwright Maya Zbib is performing her one-woman show, *The Music Box*. There is a lightness to her voice that contrasts with the shelves of portentous books and elaborate tapestries that stuff the room, but it is a lightness that is deceptive because her story tells of life in Beirut - a world of violence to women, disappointed marriages, mislaid dreams and untimely death.

She is so affecting that when the short performance ends there is a silence, then heartfelt applause and even tears. And few shed more than the charismatic American theatre, opera and festival director Peter Sellars, who is sitting in the front row.

"I was crying my eyes out," he says. "I knew the text but this is the first time I have seen Maya perform. So much in the Middle East comes from a sense of desperation, so it is beautiful to see something of intelligence, of balance, of quiet and understanding that comes from an inner clarity."

Why does this matter to Sellars, who has gained renown worldwide for his transformative interpretations of artistic masterpieces, who is more at home in the opera houses of Chicago,

Glyndebourne or Paris than he is in Lebanon? What is this unknown performer to him?

He and Zbib were thrown together by the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, a biennial scheme that was launched in 2002 and for the past year has paired a young artist from South Africa with the sculptor Anish Kapoor, an Australian musician with the ambient music composer and producer Brian Eno and a Palestinian filmmaker with the great Chinese director Zhang Yimou.

The idea is that they work, talk and investigate their art forms together but do not necessarily come to any particular conclusion or complete a piece of work.

Indeed, as Sellars says: "Maya made this before she ever met me, so I take no credit of any kind. We really concentrated on life questions and things we cared about but never discussed her art. There were no conversations about stagecraft - none at all. She saw me rehearse, but I never saw her make anything."

Born in 1981 during the Lebanese civil war, Zbib studied at Goldsmiths in London and was one of the founders of Beirut's Zoukak Theatre Company, a collective of six former Beirut University students, which works with victims of domestic abuse and children damaged physically and mentally by the struggle to survive in the war-ravaged refugee camps of south Lebanon.

She normally performs *The Music Box* in other people's houses with an audience of 30 or so and uses boxes as props to represent memories and secrets with contents that include the random ephemera of everyday life - a length of string, a letter, photographs. She uses the refrain: "A house begins with ... a key; a bed; slippers; the dining room ..." to draw the audience into a series of intimate accounts that examine the emotional ties that women have with their homes and family.

"Meeting Peter pushed me to look for what the performance is really about," says Zbib, whose nervousness was caused by acting in English for the first time. "Things that I was saying became more meaningful because I was thinking about them in a different way. There were certain nuances I didn't understand until the actual performance because, in a very quiet way, he helped me to see things differently."

If Sellars has galvanised her work, he seems to have gained as much as her by his visits to Lebanon.

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