

# Roundtable on Women in the Performing Arts

“Women in the Performing Arts” was the subject of a round table discussion held at the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World in January 2007. The participants were Nidal Ashqar, a pioneer actress and director, and the first Lebanese woman to manage her own theater *Masrah al-Madina*; Julia Kassar, renowned Lebanese actress and acting instructor; Joelle Khoury, pianist, composer, and founder of the Jazz quintet *In-Version*; Yasmina Fayed, singer in the troupe *Shahadeen ya Baladna* and assistant producer at *Future Television*; Pamela Koueik, singer and university student at LAU; Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, director of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, and Mona Knio, guest editor of *al-Raida*. Due to space constraints, the following are excerpts from the two-hour discussion.

Guest editor Mona Knio welcomed the participants and the discussion began.

**Mona Knio:** Are female performers more independent than ordinary women?

**Joelle Khoury:** The first thing that comes to mind when trying to answer this question is yes female performers are more independent than ordinary women. Female performers are free to say and do whatever they please and express themselves the way they want to. On the other hand, I have to admit that they are not fully independent, simply because they are criticized more than ordinary women. Ordinary women fail to pose a threat; they do not shock people in society. The stronger the personality of a female performer and the more outspoken she is, the more she is fought and feared.

Being a female composer I sense a sort of animosity that other colleagues do not suffer from. I believe that artists who sing, dance, or play an instrument are less criticized than me. When a woman composes music and does not do so in a traditional way she is strongly criticized.

**Yasmina Fayed:** I believe that ordinary women are a bit more powerful than female performers simply because their everyday life is not under scrutiny. The accomplishments of women in general become apparent through their children and the way they raise them. However, when it comes to female performers the situation is different given that as public figures, their life is scrutinized. We are living in a patriarchal society where women are often controlled and monitored by their male counterparts in whatever they do.

**Pamela Koueik:** I believe that female performers have more freedom than regular women simply because they work and are financially independent. A female performer has a strong personality simply because of her way of life and work experience.

**Nidal Ashqar:** I think the time factor is very important to take into consideration when talking about female performers, given that they have been historically judged according to the era they were living in. For instance Sarah Bernhardt was viewed as a whore even though her friends were among the greatest writers and poets of that time. They used to nourish her intellectually and she learned a lot from them.

Female performers during the eighteenth and

nineteenth century were considered loose. They could come and go as they pleased and could say whatever they wanted. Moreover, their body, mind, and intellect were free. They could display their bodies publicly and sleep around with whomever they wished. People enjoyed watching these women perform but deep down people did not respect female performers.

I believe that when the opera and ballet were introduced, people valued such art forms. Even though ballet dancers wear short skirts (tutu) and show their legs, ballet is still respected because there is a barrier between the audience and the performer's body. The moves in ballet are calculated and studied. What the ballerina is performing are moves that are mechanical and have no relation to everyday life. Ballet has no message to deliver and doesn't change anything in one's life the way the opera does. It is very abstract and the bourgeoisie accepted such an art form. Members of the bourgeoisie in our part of the world approve that their children learn ballet but not belly dancing or acting.

In the past, acting had a lot of stigma surrounding it. Actors were considered to be doing something against the law. Actors were considered to be rebels against society, social outcasts, in their actions, in their profession, in their demeanor, and in their portrayal of characters on the stage using their body and loud voice.

There is no doubt that female performers in Lebanon are still paying a high price. We the female performers of the 1960s became the prototype because the younger generation started looking up to us. Against our will, we became a role model. It was a novelty to see women from respectable families sing, dance, and act.

Theater work in Lebanon did not start with the Baalbeck Festival. It started on the streets with Theater Farouk and Badi'a Masabni's theater. In those days singing was more acceptable than acting. Female performers suffered a great deal. Some became outcasts and rebels and others were stigmatized then later got accepted. Mothers worked

hard on fathers to have them accept their daughters who worked in the performing arts field given that it is a profession that is looked down upon. It was a taboo. Men refused to marry female performers. They believed that actresses were whores.

**Julia Kassar:** People are scared of female performers. Given that they are very comfortable in their skin and are very outspoken in their everyday life, they become blunt with their husbands and hence scare them. Sometimes men fail to accept their daring attitude and their bluntness. Female performers are used to theater work where everything is out in the open.

**Dima Dabbous:** Women performers are under a lot of pressure. They are rejected by society. Moreover, performing is not like any other acceptable profession such as being a lawyer or a teacher. The nature of theater work, the odd working hours and late hours you have to put in are all not very normal.

At university I majored in communication arts and I recall all the hardships I endured in trying to convince my parents that I had to stay up very late rehearsing. Working on a play required putting in long hours. We used to work very hard as students, when everyone else had finished their course work and could leave the university, we started rehearsing. I recall my mother's reaction when I was directing or acting in a play, she used to get very upset when I got home very late. She often lamented "I don't want you to continue in this major ... what is this university and what is this major?"

**Nidal:** Not just that, as performers we are fully exposed to people. We use our bodies and voices and everything we have for the sake of the audience. I believe that actors are bare in front of the audience. Sometimes you need to show some flesh in certain scenes and it is deemed unnecessary by the audience and you are criticized.

**Julia:** I believe that female performers are not independent. I chose the theater because it offered me the freedom I needed. The only place I feel

totally free is when I am on stage. When I leave the stage I feel more restricted. We lead a schizophrenic life as a result of our society. As actresses we have to succeed because if we don't, people will criticize us. If we remain the way we are and preserve our independence and freedom and we always offer something new, people will eventually accept us the way we are. People like what is nice, innovative, and new.

In our daily life we are not free since we are chained and bound by a lot of constraints. If we are to talk about the financial aspect, well, we might work for six months and then stop working for two years. How can one be independent when one doesn't have the means and is financially insecure? I believe that being independent as a performer requires financial stability and success. I can be independent once I have the financial power to change the norms.

One very important point I have to add is that performers and actors are as critical of our work as ordinary people. I believe that ordinary people are the ones who support us. We are still working because they love us.

I will give you an example. In the first movie I participated in I was asked to act in a daring love scene that lasted around 5 minutes. I was hesitant to take the part but then accepted because I really wanted that part. I did the love scene and even though I was certain that I wanted to do it, I later had a deep personal crisis. I knew that I was not the first one to perform such a daring love scene. (Twenty-five years ago, Gladys Abou Jaoude appeared fully nude in the Lebanese film *al-Qadar*). The film was censored, not because of the daring love scene but for political and religious reasons. A huge outcry took place on the part of the intellectual body that met in Beirut Theater to sign a petition against censorship. In the meeting, many intellectuals criticized the love scene in which I appeared. I didn't hear any comment from ordinary people who watched the film (it was screened for 6 months in Lebanese theaters). I heard hurtful and mean things from the so-called intellectuals. I also believe that some intellectuals work hard

on censoring us, the performers. Unlike them we can be outspoken, we say things that they long to say but are unable to. I believe that the previous generation was much more daring than we are.

**Joelle:** I agree. My latest CD has a picture of me wearing a sexy top. I was gravely criticized by a lot of my friends who consider themselves to be cultured and intellectuals simply because according to them it is shameful to appear in this sexy manner when one is creating alternative and intellectual music. I believe that I am free to do whatever I want. I don't want anyone to dictate to me what to do or how to behave.

**Mona:** How does the image of the female performer affect ordinary woman in society? How is the image of female performers affected by how the media portrays them? We sometimes play games in order for society to accept us.

**Joelle:** People are allowed to play games provided that this gets them to where they want and fulfills their goals.

**Mona:** Joelle, in your profession as a composer do you think about the image you are portraying and how society will view you?

**Joelle:** I think about that constantly especially that within my family I faced a lot of rejection because of my profession. There are no artists in my family so my parents often made me feel like I was good for nothing. They fought with me because of my career path and refused to talk to me for five whole years. After I got married and when they realized that my husband accepted and respected me and my profession they decided to give me a chance. The first time my mother saw me on television giving an interview, she said: "My daughter is not that bad". Bottom line is I was very hurt by my parent's attitude. My daughter too didn't accept me at first. She often used to complain and say: "Why aren't you like other mothers? Why don't you dress like other mothers?" She also used to tell me "people will leave the minute they hear your music". But now things have changed. She accepts me and respects my music. She often helps out during my

concerts and invites her friends and parents to attend and listen to my music.

**Yasmina:** When I first sang one of our alternative songs that ends with the phrase *el-'ama bi albak* (i.e. damn you) in front of my parents and grandmother they laughed. In their presence and while performing the song, I fought back the urge to laugh. People found the song very appealing. To be honest, I used to feel hindered by the fact that my parents were present when I had to say daring lyrics. It is important for people to be able to express themselves. Also sometimes when you want to pass a message across you have to shock people. An example is the play *Haqi Neswan* (i.e. women's talk). I liked the daring element in the play. It spoke freely about a lot of subjects that are taboo and hush hush. It addressed the issue of menstruation openly and exposed other women's issues bluntly. They named the vagina "coco". I was saddened that it is no longer performed in theater.

**Dima:** It all boils down to one's upbringing. As girls we are raised not to express a lot of things. We shouldn't reveal our strong personality, its *aib* (i.e. shameful). We shouldn't talk about certain issues. Unlike us, men are free to do whatever they want. If a boy/young man swears then it is ok. As for us it's an absolute no. A female performer is a role model. When she is daring and outspoken she encourages other women to speak out. Who gets scared in the process? Men.

**Yasmina:** I want to add a comment. We started off with *mouwachahat* (ie. terza rima or third rhyme). The young generation saw in us something unusual. We influenced the youth who were not raised to experience or appreciate this type of music. After seeing young people of their age group singing this genre they started thinking maybe this music is interesting. They got introduced to many songs through us.

**Nidal:** This is so true. When in 1995 we at Theater al-Madina organized events to commemorate the month of Ramadan and invited classical authentic Arab groups to perform, we managed to attract a lot of people. The aim was to introduce the younger

generation to classical and authentic Arabic music. The youngsters, who were raised huddled under staircases hiding from the shelling during the war years, grew up listening only to the *taqatik* (i.e. low brow pop songs). We hosted the best groups and the most beautiful voices that sing classical Arabic music. We succeeded in attracting the younger generation, many of whom fell in love with this genre of music. Yasmina you are a live example, you sing classical Arabic music and then you move on to sing a song that has the phrase "damn you" in it and you are liked and accepted.

**Dima:** Yasmina, I wonder what would have happened had you started off with singing alternative songs like the one with "damn you" in it.

**Yasmina:** We knew we couldn't do that since we had to establish ourself as a serious band first.

**Knio:** How does the voice of the performer shape the Arab woman?

**Nidal:** What is trendy and fashionable affects people's perception and style of dress. People take the performer as a prototype to copy and emulate. Even if the performer is not a good influence people still copy her. A lot of girls nowadays are very much affected by famous female singers and want to be like them. Some want to be Haifa Wehbe, others try to imitate Nancy Ajram. Video clips promote European fashions. Black *kohl* is very much in thanks to the video clips.

People tend to construct an image of the performer in their mind and they sometimes mix between the real performer and the character she is portraying. People attend a play and their aim is to listen to what Nidal Ashqar has to say. In fact it is not what Nidal has to say but what the character is saying. When the portrayed character overshadows the performer, it is very difficult to differentiate between them.

**Mona:** Actually change is not well tolerated; changing genres and exposing oneself to the scrutiny of the audience isn't easy. I can give the example of Fairouz who was criticized by her fans

when she changed the genre she used to sing and ventured into something more daring.

**Nidal:** Like everyone else female performers want to progress. If the performer is loved by people and has a renowned status in society she will succeed. Fairouz is a person who has a huge effect on the collective memory of people. She has influenced very many people positively. Had she stuck to the old genre of music she used to sing she would have remained in the past, a remnant of the collective memory. She managed to make a transition from the past to the present. Fairouz managed to move on. She sang songs like *kifak inta mala inta* and created the antithesis of the Rahbanis when she spoke of the real Lebanon. She gave people a shock but they later accepted her.

**Pamela:** The way the female performer presents herself makes the media respect her or not. I belong to the new generation and I sing light songs and the media likes me. They do not criticize me because the way I present myself differs from others. People accept me the way I am. I do not overdo it. I don't exceed the limits. On the contrary I perform in a very respectable manner.

**Nidal:** So what you are trying to say is that when you are true to yourself, people respect you and accept you.

**Pamela:** Yes.

**Nidal:** I agree that when a performer resembles herself when performing she is accepted. The way one presents oneself to the audience is very important. Maintaining this image makes people like us for who we are. Then if we are to shift in genres we can simply do so because people accept us and we grow stronger.

**Julia:** The media has promoted a catastrophic prototype of the female performer: all plastic from top to bottom. This is really outrageous. Performers are reduced to dolls. I am not against plastic surgery and beautifying oneself. However, it is sad because for a performer to succeed nowadays she has to be fake and appear flawless.

Fortunately, there are still performers who refuse this stereotypical portrayal, women who are true to themselves and who try to promote an alternative image to the one prevalent and the one that is in vogue. People are being indoctrinated to like what is offered. It is important to highlight the fact that there is an alternative image that is also beautiful, acceptable, and real.

**Yasmina:** People think differently of the female stereotyped image promoted by the media. People are more down to earth and deep down they identify with people who are more like them and resemble them.

**Julia:** We should fight this trend and work hard on promoting an authentic image of the female. It is difficult to sustain but as long as we exist we can easily expose the difference between us and them.

**Nidal:** The media outlets are media merchants. Each and every one reminds you of a store that is trying to promote its own goods.

**Julia:** Introducing change is possible on a small scale (personal level) but on a larger scale it becomes very difficult. I remember during the war years, television stations were fighting to have the exclusive rights to airing plays. Theater back then had more weight. Nowadays nobody cares.

**Nidal:** Unfortunately the ten television stations in Lebanon are like kiosks that promote their merchandise. There used to be a state owned television station (Tele Liban) that we performers and artists helped build and sustain but was killed [currently under-funded Tele Liban mostly broadcasts re-runs of old Lebanese series and shows]. Those who are responsible for the breakdown of Tele Liban did so to found their own television stations which are more like retail stores that have contributed to destroying our taste in music, singing, and theater. There are ten merchants who own television stations that promote what sells in the Gulf. They don't bother spending a penny on what doesn't sell in the Gulf. To add to that there are many journalists who are ignorant. They are not cultured in the sense that they have no idea about the history of music, poetry,

etc. Some journalists are hired personnel who cash a check every time they promote a specific artist. Can you believe that they get paid by the artists they promote? This is very unfortunate.

**Dima:** This is so true. With the hegemony of Arab media in satellite channels there are hours and hours of airing time to be filled. The audience with the money is located in Saudi Arabia.

**Nidal:** We the performers and artists are exhausted. Unfortunately when the performers who belong to my generation start dying, what we will be left with are the petty cheap artists along with a handful of other serious performers. It is very difficult to remain authentic and preserve what is there simply because satellite television has invaded our houses.

**Julia:** Television stations would actually lose in France if the government doesn't sponsor and provide a budget for artistic work that is not commercial.

**Nidal:** A huge budget is allocated to support the theaters in France. Unfortunately I don't expect anything from the Lebanese government. I believe that since the Independence in 1943 and up until today Lebanon is the country of the uneducated. We are reputed as being intellectuals but we are not, we are also not united, there is no cultural unity. We have groups of people that follow their religion and confession.

**Yasmina:** I love Lebanon and I refuse to leave this country. What bothers me though is that some television presenters are in positions unfit for them. For example you will find a young woman who has a program about the latest films and knows nothing about the films, who the directors are, who the actors are. She is good at reading what is written on the piece of paper in front of her. One feels that she is presenting, she is shallow. If you ask her a question other than what is written on the paper she is reading she gets lost since she is not knowledgeable in this field.

**Nidal:** There is a difference between the performers in theater and presenters on television. What scares

me the most is the fact that Lebanese journalists are neither cultured nor educated. In earlier years, whenever there was a play, it used to get extensive coverage in the press. Every journalist would run the news item on the first page and would write about the play. Nowadays you hardly get any coverage whatsoever. When working on a play, we have to worry about who is going to defend it if it is censored. We have no real journalists left to defend a good piece of work in music, art, and theater, etc. You have to keep in mind that in Lebanon we are currently living in an era of decadence.

I agree with Julia that the audience is the entity/body that will defend us and support us. However, nowadays this is not enough, we need more than that to fight the current trend. Cultured and cultivated individuals who are willing to defend works of art and fight the censors are rare commodities nowadays. Art is when a person can freely express himself/herself. It is a world of make belief and imagination; a virtual world that we create out of reality.

Who are we supposed to depend on if we don't have the support of journalists, intellectuals, or the government? We are left to fend for ourselves. Therefore, on a personal level, I use my authority and my words against everyone in the Lebanese government. This is the only way to defy them. I stood by dozens of directors in their struggle with the Internal Security Forces and the censors. I am willing to defend any play even if it is the most awful play on earth because I believe that it is my duty. The theater is supposed to be a free platform where no censorship exists and where one is free to say whatever he/she wants.

**Dima:** Is there solidarity among women working in this field?

**Nidal:** I know for a fact that if I call Julia Kassar, Carol Samaha, Jahida Wehbe, Sumaya Baalbaki, or Joelle Khoury in the middle of the night and ask them to meet me at al-Madina Theater because there is a play or a song the state censors want to stop and I need their help, they will comply. They

will definitely be there. Those are the real artists, the genuine ones. They are theater people who have sacrificed their whole life for the sake of art. I often wonder whether we are able to change things. I believe what we have been doing is not enough anymore.

When the play of Lina Khoury, *Haqi Neswan*, was stopped I went down to the police station and met with the director of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and asked her why they are stopping a play directed by a graduate of the Lebanese American University and who is a free human being. By the way I don't necessarily like the play. But I believe I have to fight for Lina to remain free to express herself. I explained to the director of the ISF that the play is about women's issues and given that discussing political issues is not approved of, we might at least discuss sexually taboo subjects. The Internal Security Forces director complained that the actors are using unspoken words. I told her that only 5,000 to 10,000 people will watch the play. Let them see it, it is better than having them say that the government banned a play. I explained to her that the obscene words they use are actually heard on the streets everyday. So let them say whatever they want. I worked hard for all the plays to be performed. Then came the play *Testefil Meryl Streep*. Well when the ISF came to watch a rehearsal I instructed the actors to use auto-censorship on stage. It was a beautiful performance. The ISF officer interfered to tell me that there are vulgar words and I told them Nidal Ashqar cannot be censored. I scared them because I am outspoken.

**Nidal:** Saying the English word "condom" is acceptable. While *kabbout* [condom in slang Lebanese] is not.

**Julia:** There is a wave of fundamentalism that is spreading throughout the world. It is scary. The generation of actors and directors who came before us were fortunate because there was more freedom. People were more religious previously. Now they are

fanatics. I envy the generation that came before us. They enjoyed more freedom.

**Mona:** Joelle, do you face a similar problem in terms of censorship in the music industry?

**Joelle:** I must admit that I am very envious of theater people, given that I work on my own as a composer. There is no one I can fall back on and discuss my compositions with. You on the other hand can do things jointly. As for censorship, there cannot be much censorship on compositions.

**Pamela:** Censorship is directed towards those who steal old melodies.

**Joelle:** I wish they were that careful. My music is aired on all radios with no copyright protection. I was once asked to speak in a conference on censorship and I prepared a paper answering a lot of the questions the organizers wanted to discuss. When they read my paper they told me it was very interesting but I shouldn't be outspoken. In a conference on censorship I was censored.

A lot of people come from the West with budgets to help out Lebanese artists since they see it as a political game. They have a political agenda they want to propagate. Mainly they want to appear politically correct in the sense that they are encouraging Arab artists. They always choose amateurs who are not the best artists. They want to promote the idea that Arabs can make music, also that they are like Westerners, they can make electronic music.

**Dima:** Performers and musicians in the Arab world are suffering from this situation. Anyway it is important to note that there is no policy to assist and encourage Arab artists and so artists tend to look for foreign funders in Europe to help them out.

[The discussion ended].