

AGENDA

LEBANON

FESTIVAL

Festival of Flowers
Jbeil public gardens
March 17-20, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
As part of the Byblos Festival 2017, the Festival of Flowers will include spring blooms, art and live music, coinciding with Mother's Day.

International Day of the Francophone
Station Beirut, Jisr al-Wati
March 20, 6-10 p.m.
71-684-218
The Institut Français, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie and various embassies present performances, conferences, exhibitions, workshops and stands featuring Lebanese entrepreneurs as part of International Day of the Francophonie.

FILM

'Stitching Palestine'
Metropolis Cinema-Sofil
March 29, doors open 6:30 p.m.
01-850-218 or 71-823-337
Taawon Lebanon, Forward Film Production and INAASH Association present the premiere screening of a documentary directed by Carol Mansour where 12 Palestinian women tell their stories of their life before the diaspora, of their memories, their lives and their identity. Their narratives are connected by the enduring thread of the ancient art of embroidery. All ticket proceeds will go to support the children's music training program in the Rashidieh camp.

LECTURE

'Hassan Alaa Eddin and Beirut Theater'
Alaust Hall Building, AUB
March 20, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
01-350-000
In a tribute to Hassan Alaa Eddin, Fares Joachim will lecture on the history of Lebanese theater and the life of the late actor, exploring his career during the 1970s and '80s.

MUSIC

'Le Temps Suspendu'
St. Joseph Church, Monnot
March 23, 8:30 p.m.
Tatiana Primak Khoury will perform a piano concert, featuring pieces by Mozart, Schubert, Chopin, Gelalian as well as local composers. Part of the profits will be donated to the Gestures from the Heart charity.

'Shadia and Halim'
Metro al-Madina, Hamra
March 14-28, 9:30 p.m.
76-309-363
From Shadia and Abdel Halim's films comes "Shadia and Halim," a rendition of many of their famous songs.

THEATER

'Dinner with Friends'
Theatre Monnot
March 23 to April 9, 8 p.m.
01-421-870
This is a funny and touching play that tackles our fundamental values. What is love? What is commitment? What is marriage? Do we have to stay with the person we married, for the family's sake? Carlos Chahine brings this award-winning play to the Arab world for the first time, in a Lebanese adaptation of the original.

JUST A THOUGHT

"At a dinner party one should eat wisely but not too well, and talk well but not too wisely."

W. Somerset Maugham
(1874-1965)
British playwright, novelist and short story writer

REVIEW

Juvenile delinquents in Dali's kitchen

Atfal Ahdath unveils its first culinary performance work for Art Dubai Projects

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star

DUBAI: "I only like to eat what has a clear and intelligible form," Dali once wrote. "If I hate that despicable degrading vegetable called spinach, it is because it is shapeless, like liberty."

The face of the surrealist movement in the middle and latter years of the 20th century, Salvador Dali (1904-1989) is best-known for his paintings – reproductions of which have hung on college dorm rooms the world over – and his extravagant pronouncements on the modern condition.

With his wife and muse Gala (1894-1982), the artist was also renowned for hosting opulent dinners. In fact, the couple published a cookbook in 1973, called "Les Diners de Gala."

This work of culinary surrealism has inspired a new performance work, "Cooking Liberty," nowadays being held at Art Dubai. Its venue is The Room – a space in the Mina a'Salam, one of the posh hotels in the Jumeirah hotel complex that hosts the fair – which for the past few editions has staged a parallel program of performance works that Art Dubai Projects commissions from artists from around the MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia) region. This year it's the turn of the Beirut-based collective Atfal Ahdath ("Children of the Events" or "Juvenile Delinquents"). Founded by Vartan Avakian, Hatem Imam and Raed Yassin, the group is known for its witty visual art interventions – aestheticized photo-based works that camouflage sly commentaries on the culture of artistic production and consumption.

"The [11th] Sharjah Biennial gave us our first commission as Atfal Ahdath," Avakian told The Daily Star the afternoon before Tuesday evening's show. "For a work about studio photography and how with digital technology we can create images, make memories, [of experiences] that never existed. It's about people's aspirations to do things they can't – mostly aspirations of the working class."

While Yassin is well-known in experimental music circles, "Cooking Liberty" marks the trio's first venture into performance. "Since [that first commission] we've been flirting with the idea of making a happening, an event," Avakian continued. "Especially since Hatem has worked on this type of thing for



From Atfal Ahdath's "Cooking Liberty," The Room installation, 2017.

Atfal Ahdath, it came, as the food-related Lebanese proverb says, "Like Butter on Pie."

Based on Tuesday evening's show, "Cooking Liberty" is an utterly theatrical experience.

The Room's antechamber serves as the predinner lounge. Here guests – serenaded by Ditar the ghost pianist and his (pre-programmed) baby grand piano – find a series of vitrines displaying Atfal Ahdath sculptures and a display case loaded with what appear to be ornate perfume bottles, actually the evening aperitif.

Ordinarily an anodyne hotel lounge, the dining room has been transformed into a Dali tableau. Ringed in bordello-red draperies, the high ceiling has been lowered by a mobile installation of several hundred peacock feathers.

The room seats 50-odd dinner guests at a pair of long dining tables adorned with Dali-inspired sculptures and candelabras. They're electric, a discreet symptom of the "cheese factor" with which this work is infused.

Yassin, Avakian and Imam are absent from the performance itself. Projected on screens at either end of the dining room, apparitions of "the host" (activist Larry Bou Safi) emerge from gaps in the curtains to commence the proceedings and

introduce each course of the meal with a few lines of poetry, while issuing operating instructions for the unfamiliar dishes.

Supper consists of a 12-course meal subdivided into three acts, a prologue – "Milk of the Humming Bird" (an aperitif of arak, water and almond syrup) – and an epilogue entitled "Crocodile Tears," a surprisingly packaged melange of cognac, Grand Marnier, absinthe and peychaud bitters.

'Cooking Liberty' is an utterly theatrical experience

"Cooking Liberty" has food too, a good deal of it, much of it as delicious as it is perplexing. Each of the three acts – "Glass," "Shell," "Egg" – takes its thematic departure from the preoccupations of Dali's practice. In their juxtaposition of ingredients and titles, these dishes are replete with a winking sense of humor.

The final course of "Glass" (Act I) arrives as a rococo water glass inverted upon a plate to enclose a single piece of giant conchiglie pasta, uncooked. After the guests have had a couple of minutes to puzzle over the thing, The Host informs

them to raise the conch shell to their noses and inhale the eau de parfum with which it's infused. It's called "Dali's Scent."

The first course of Act III ("Egg") consists of a wee pot of shimeji mushroom-based Thai soup, accompanied by a (chicken) eggshell filled with a cream cheese confection topped with sturion caviar. The dish is called "Amniotic Dreams."

"We wrote the menu and worked with architect Antoine Maalouf on the space," Imam said Tuesday afternoon. "We worked on [the table] sculptures and the display cabinets outside."

Imam confirmed that, though its dishes are alien to the Lebanese kitchen, the project was inspired by the culinary consciousness Atfal Ahdath acquired growing up in Lebanon. "One of our dishes is called "Sun-Dried Mermaid," he smiled, pulling up a photo of the dish on his mobile. "It's an inverted mermaid – [a sea bass fillet atop avocado purée, [flanked by] the head of a fish and the legs of a quail.

"The Deep Sleep," he says, thumbing his screen, "is a steak hidden in Langoustine foam, with the claws coming out."

The entire project took about three months to devise and mount, he said. Though based on Dali's

recipes, the menu went through several stages of tasting – assisted by Mina a'Salam chef "Richi" – before being finalized.

"Some visuals we have during the day but not at night," Avakian said. "Our Host recites two recipes that teach you how to make a jelly tabbouleh and risotto in Poseidon ink. It's inspired by sonic poems that were done at the turn of last century."

During daylight hours the labors of Ditar, the ghost performer, are augmented by programmed performances by Yassin and pianist Tarek Yemeni.

While a departure from the collective's recognized photo-based work and its road movie (a film project awaiting a producer), Avakian said "Cooking Liberty" is consistent with Atfal Ahdath's practice.

"As Atfal Ahdath, we're interested in pop, pulp and the mundane, the fucked up, and we have an affinity with the kind of experimentation and friction with the bourgeoisie [found in] Dada and surrealism."

He said Art Dubai is as good a place as any to give voice to these affinities. "It's appropriate as any art fair is," he replied. "An art fair is a playground for these kinds of situations. They're as good as any place, and Art Dubai is as good as any art fair."

REVIEW

Slava's poignant, flamboyant show ... and fight

By Maghie Ghali
The Daily Star

DBAYEH, Lebanon: Theatrical spectacular "Slava's Snowshow" held its awe-inspiring opening performance Tuesday, transporting the audience from the mundane auditorium of the Palais des Congres to an otherworldly dream dimension.

Created and staged by the president of the Academy of Fools, Slava Polunin, the internationally acclaimed show has won the Drama Desk Award for Unique Theatrical Experience and has been nominated for a Tony Award for Best Special Theatrical Event.

Best described as Cirque du Soleil meets Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," "Snowshow" has appeared in over 80 countries since its creation in 1994. The dramatic tragi-comedy is a treat for the senses, with gorgeous visual effects, clever lighting and a musical score guaranteed to delight.

The performance centers around two clowns – Yellow, an optimistic character in a canary-colored jumpsuit, and Green, a morose fellow wearing a hat with horizontal flapping ears.

Through a series of mimed sketches that blend into each other seamlessly, the pair of clowns inspire tears, laughter and questions.

Polunin's thought-provoking show often blurs the line between sorrow and humor, taking serious or sad topics and mixing them with comical theatrics, taking the audience on an emotional roller coaster.

The performance begins with smoke rolling out onto the stage and Yellow taking tentative steps out from the wings with a noose around his neck, later dragging Green out



The ship in "Slava's Snowshow."

with the other end of the rope.

The pair creates comical storylines and expressions, their actions choreographed expertly to the blues style music.

Then with a plume of smoke and a shift in lighting, we're suddenly out at sea with a galleon emerging, the sound of waves crashing against the ship's hull reverberating around us.

It takes a second look to realize the magnificent vessel is actually a small red bed with a broomstick attached to act as a bowsprit, and a large silk sheet fashioned as a sail.

Polunin makes the onlookers forget the limits of reality, as if they are

truly at sea, tapping into their ability to dream and manifesting it on stage with effortless simplicity.

The next sketch takes a sinister yet hilarious turn as Yellow stumbles out on stage with several arrows protruding from his chest.

Despite the morbidity of the scene, the audience giggled away at Yellow's melodrama, as he alternated between anguished expressions and climbing over chairs to shake hands and flirt shamelessly with girls.

Once more treading the thin line between unnerving and amusing, Polunin makes the audience fall in love with Yellow and Green, spread-

ing infectious humor through their simple quirkiness and ability to illicit a spectrum of feeling.

There is no announcement of an interval, or a curtain drawn. The clowns just leave the stage, keeping alive the suspension of disbelief they had encapsulated the auditorium in.

When Green returns after the interval with a few helpers, madness ensues. A full-scale water fight is started with the audience, bottles of water being sprayed from both sides, with clowns climbing on seats, stealing handbags. A woman in the front row is abducted and taken backstage as guests are chased along

the aisles as clowns try to rub ice-cream in their faces.

In a few short moments, the adults who entered Snowshow with composure are transported back to their childhoods, many throwing confetti and embracing the silliness like children.

The second half of the spectacle takes a more thoughtful approach, albeit no less funny and lighthearted. One sketch sees Yellow at a train station but with no one to see him off.

Using a coat, hatstand and his own arm concealed in the coat's sleeve, he creates another character to engage with.

However the audience's laughter dies as it comes time for Yellow to depart and he becomes sad, realizing his own loneliness, pretending a coat and his own arm were a loved one to comfort him.

The grand finale of Slava's Snowshow is the eponymous snowstorm, which at the flick of a switch becomes a blizzard of white confetti powered by an industrial-scale snow machine.

After a standing ovation, humongous, air-filled balls are thrown into the audience, turning the auditorium into the ball pit of childhood fantasies. Many stay long after the show concludes to toss the balloons and have fake snow fights.

Slava's Snowshow is guaranteed to astound and amaze both young and old. Polunin has created a unique performance that reflects his own love for a genre of comedy sometimes considered outdated and relegated to the shallow slapstick, reviving it and giving a performance audiences will never forget.

"Slava's Snowshow" will be at Palais des Congres in Dbayeh until March 26. For more information see: slavasnowshow.com.