

AGENDA

Fairs and Exhibitions

Mzaar Xmas Fair
Mzaar Inter-Continental Hotel
Faraya
09/340100
Dec. 25 to Jan. 3
Art workshops, shows and games for children, artistic hand-made decorations, Christmas delicacies and fun activities for the holidays – not to be missed

Accessorize
ABC Dbayyeh
04/416000
Running through Dec. 25
10am-10pm
Accessorize of London has opened its doors just in time for the holidays with a special Christmas stand exhibiting funky, original and creative decorations

Surprise Christmas on Ice
Zouk Mosbeh
Ice Skating Arena
09/224581
Dec. 28
7pm
A fascinating special Christmas play, performed by the children of the ice skating arena school – there will be a special Santa Claus appearance

Fastrackids
Tahwita Highway
Beirut
01/290408
Dec. 28
9am-11am
Santa, gifts, candy and much more for all to come and enjoy during the holidays

Holiday Celebrations
Carpet Plus
Chevrolet Roundabout
01/566667
Running through Dec. 31
9am-8pm
Take advantage of the special prices on the lovely collection that includes Chinese, Persian and Tunisian carpets

Farra Design Center
Mkallès
01/682777
10am-7pm
Running through Dec. 31
Special holiday discount on toys, bedrooms and living rooms not to be missed – open on weekends until 4pm

Toystore
Achrafieh
Abdel Wahab Street
01/203903
Running through Dec. 31
10am-8pm
Discounted prices for the holiday season on all toys and games for children, including a special discount on all Christmas decorations

Christmas Bazaar
Marriott Hotel
Jnah
01/840540
Running through Dec. 31
Featuring the work of 40 Lebanese charities, including crafts and special music entertainment for the holidays, organized by the American Women Club – not to be missed

Dec. 21 to Dec. 25
4pm-7pm
Santa Claus visits with candy and souvenir pictures for all children including a surprise visit on Christmas day at the Palms Brasserie

Christmas Special
Monroe Hotel
Ain al-Mreisseh
Peppermint
01/371122
Dec. 25
Lovely Christmas tunes, gifts distributed to all tables and a special Santa visit with surprises for kids – all on the Christmas lunch menu at Peppermint

Music

Christmas Concert
Choir M2C
UNESCO Palace
03/547947
Dec. 23
7pm
Choir M2C, pianist Firas Chatila with the participation of the musicians of the Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra present a lovely Christmas concert for all to come and enjoy

Between Two Magics
St. George's Convent
Chauye-Beit Chabab
03/857295
Dec. 26
8.30pm
A fascinating Oriental mix of oud, percussion and violin played by Toni Khalife, Charbel and Albert Rouhana

Communist heroine tells her story

Soha Bechara's life changed forever when she tried to kill the head of a pro-Israeli militia in 1988



Bechara smiles during her visit to Khiam after the liberation in June 2000: "I would take up arms again if necessary"

Olivia Snajje
Special to The Daily Star

Her face, engraved in our minds, is synonymous with resistance, detention and strength. Soha Bechara is Lebanese yet her story has become an international cause celebre. She is a symbol of global resistance.

The evening of November 1988 when Bechara shot General Antoine Lahd, head of the pro-Israeli South Lebanon Army, was the day she left the world she knew and entered one of deprivation and isolation, spending the next 10 years in the infamous Khiam Prison.

The 21-year-old Bechara – then a member of the Communist Lebanese National Resistance Party – had been politically active from the age of 14. Bechara's family is from the Christian village of Deir Mimas in South Lebanon, a stone's throw from Khiam.

Throughout her childhood she shuttled back and forth from Beirut to Deir Mimas where she spent her holidays. The time Bechara spent in the South was key to her early political awakening. The numerous Israeli raids and the occupation became the focus of her personal struggle.

"I was lucky to be a Christian

girl living in West Beirut because this enabled me to have a dialogue with everyone and people in different parties," she says. "I began to ask myself, who is the real enemy? I found the answer in the Israeli occupation."

Long dark hair and a figure so slight that a checkered flannel shirt easily masks her pregnancy, Bechara is now studying human rights at a university in Lyon, France. The dark eyes seem familiar because of her intense media exposure. She appears younger than her 35 years, as if she were continuing the life that was interrupted when she entered Khiam.

"Between the ages of 14 and 19, I was a pacifist. My family never had weapons. They were protective. They wanted me to finish my studies. I didn't suffer through massacres or arrests but I didn't want to wait to become someone who had."

"Besides, when you're standing in front of tanks and F16s, you have to take up arms. I wanted to liberate my country and I found strength in the occupation. It's what enabled me to act."

The plan to assassinate Lahd slowly matured in Bechara's mind while she was on a mission to the occupied South. Her role was to provide information about the area for her contacts

in Beirut. Bechara managed to penetrate Lahd's household by becoming an aerobics instructor to his bored young wife.

She only found out that Lahd had survived her attack once she had been taken to Israel for interrogation and then to Khiam.

"I never regretted what I did. I would take up arms again if necessary," she says. "I was proud of it, but relieved when the operation was over because I didn't have to live a lie anymore. I had to listen to militiamen who were bragging about details of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. I had to sit there and laugh and drink with them. Certain things are just unacceptable."

A terrible rhythm fell into place in Khiam. She was interrogated, tortured and held in solitary confinement in a 1.8 meter by 80 centimeter cell for six of her ten years inside. Her remarkable strength of character, perseverance in communicating with fellow prisoners and a strict self-imposed exercise regime kept her going.

In her autobiography, *Resistant*, published in France in 2000, Bechara wrote: "In the Khiam Prison camp, I wanted to continue resisting. It was the same war, waged with different means."

In 1995, the International Red Cross was finally allowed to visit Khiam and Bechara's mother was able to see her. She was the last woman to be released, in September 1998, under intense pressure from international human rights organizations and tenacious lawyers in Israel and France.

Crafts were an essential activity for inmates. With peels of laughter, Bechara recalls when she received a box of paints. "Here I was, the most educated of the bunch, and I had no idea how to paint. As a child, with the war going on I never had time to learn these things. We went to great lengths and risked severe punishment, communicating with another inmate who we knew could paint. We wanted to find out what colors to mix together."

"But after very complicated coded messages, the answer we got was simply 'green and blue makes greenish-blue!'"

While in Khiam, Bechara made two women friends for life, dedicating to each a chapter in her book. Kifah, a Palestinian activist who had survived the Sabra and Shatila massacres, became a fast friend and the two communicated via letters they left for each other in the bathroom garbage can or in a washcloth. Kifah was released

in 1994 and Bechara had to wait two years until another woman was brought to Khiam.

It is only when talking about her friend Hanane that Bechara – who has been over the details of her detention countless times for the media, films, and human rights organizations – shows a chink in her armor.

Hanane was released from Khiam well before Bechara because of medical problems, and her eyes well up with tears as she speaks about her friend, who is still gravely ill.

Nowadays Bechara has started over, continuing her studies first in Paris and then in Lyon. Before her release, Bechara's mother had secured a guarantee that the French government would finance her studies.

"There was a lot of tension at home after my liberation. My parents were afraid I'd go out on another mission, even a suicide one. Whenever I left the house they would ask me where I was going. We were also invaded by the media."

Bechara began by studying French and Hebrew. Her French was very basic making it frustrating for her to express herself. "When I got to Europe I realized how important it was that our cause be known throughout international channels."

She chose to study Hebrew in order to read the original texts of the Old Testament, which she had read in translation in prison. In 1985 she had wanted to study the language in order to know her enemy better, but "I realized when I joined the resistance that there's nothing to understand about occupation. I've always been able to separate the two – the occupation and the Israeli people."

Bechara now lives in Geneva with her Swiss husband, who she says is not involved in politics at all. He and friends have helped her relax and accept everyday life.

"Little by little I'm finding my way. At first it was very difficult. For a while I couldn't accept reality – that people went out, partied and thought about things that were very banal."

She worries about Lebanon and she doesn't see a political party she can fit into. "Now it's an even harder time than during the civil war," she says. "Our identity itself is questioned and all Lebanese seem to be stuck in their trenches. "I'd rather act as an individual or with an international organization. I am convinced that I have a role to fill."

The English-language edition of Soha Bechara's autobiography will be published by Soft Skull Press in April 2003

STAR SCENE



Lilian and Edmond Moutran



Walid Azzi



Ghazi Aridi



Ramzi Naja



Florence Basseux and Georges Slim



Carla Saghir

Byzantine song rejuvenated

Harissa, St. Joseph concerts bring ancient art back to life

Alexis Baghdadi
Special to The Daily Star

In this festive season, there will be no shortage of concerts and other events in Lebanon. It is reassuring, though, to see that in the present crop of secular pageants, concerts, parties and the like, tradition has not been forgotten.

The School of Ecclesiastic Music (SEM) has been at the forefront when it comes to reviving tradition. On Friday Dec. 20, 2002, the SEM choir gave a memorable concert of Byzantine religious music at the Harissa cathedral. The success was repeated on Saturday, Dec. 21, 2002, at the Saint Joseph cathedral on Monnot Street.

The SEM choir's style is unaffected. Far from indulging in special effects, gaudy costumes and sophisticated sound technology, the SEM sing in pure, unadorned *a cappella* style – literally "in the chapel," ie without musical accompaniment. The resulting performance is nothing short of professional.

The Saint Joseph cathedral lends itself very well to the powerful voices of the choristers and the austere nature of their repertoire.

Byzantine songs are of Oriental descent, having originated 2000 years ago in Antioch and Jerusalem with the first followers of the Christian faith. Tradition has it that the Apostles Peter and John would go together to the Temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour, and preach Jesus' teachings in discourse and song.

Byzantine song, then, was actually a form of prayer.

"Putting words of faith into music was and still is a way of sublimating the feeling behind these words and making them beautiful and worthy of being heard by God," explains SEM choir coordinator Nina al-Hajj. "Singing is one way of car-

rying a message to God and to the people," she continues with a touch of pride. "By celebrating this religious legacy, we are also sharing it with the world. Byzantine music has roots we not only learn, but also teach to the world."

The program's songs are mostly adaptations into classical Arabic and therefore accessible to most Lebanese audiences. These are songs appropriate to the Orthodox religious tradition as used in Mass. Some songs are sung in Greek or Syriac, however, and though only a restricted elite may comprehend them, Hajj maintains that the atmosphere of prayer prevails, if only through the music and the quality of the singing.

"The musicality of prayer is what people capture and keep alive in its movement," she says. "The music and its message are on equal footing and both have a role to carry out. The essential thing to consider here is that we were given the gift of speech or singing in order to carry a certain message to the world."

"What better way to address the people," Hajj adds, "than during the period of Christmas

when – statistically, and for reasons of comfort, habit, or tradition – there is a greater presence in church?"

In fact, and despite the somewhat awkward and bothersome presence of television crews filming the concert, those who attended were not disappointed in the least.

Also featured in the program was Lebanese chorister Elias al-Murr, a pioneer and major actor in reworking Byzantine songs into Arabic and son of Antioch's prime chorister, Mitri al-Murr. The singer's voice has not aged at all and it is still a religious and aesthetic treat to listen to him celebrating his faith.

In general, concerts given by the SEM receive quite a good public response, especially among young adults. The SEM hope to secure a privileged position and active role in the life of the community by addressing the younger generations that seem to be losing touch with their religious background or belonging.

"Music is a way of attracting more people to religion," says Hajj, "and filling the gaps in church benches."



The choir in action: "putting words of faith into music"

Children plead for peace

Little voices tackle a big problem

Elizabeth Hunter
Special to The Daily Star

The weather in Beirut last Thursday evening was enough to put off the most staunch of activists: pouring rain, wind sweeping through the streets blowing umbrellas inside out, the damp chill. But more than 200 children, parents and teachers gathered downtown to march for peace.

For these people, overcoming difficulties is an everyday thing. Most of the children study at schools for the learning disabled and mentally retarded and others are orphans from Palestinian refugee camps.

The atmosphere was festive as people gathered before the march. Christmas music blared from a decorated truck which circled Place de l'Etoile, dragging a wagon of children, elves and Santas and billowing fake snow. Delighted kids ran about, taking turns riding a donkey and chasing each other. A team of television animators performed cheery animation and lip-synced cheesy Christmas tunes.

The group of Palestinian children, dressed in traditional costumes, danced their hearts out to the droning of a bagpipe. The smallest of them performed a solo, high-kicking for all he was worth. The kids were spontaneously joined by waiters from nearby restaurants for a final *dabke*.

Little Alaa is lightly dressed but seems not to feel the cold. "I came to dance for Christmas and the New Year, to this festival with disabled children. I liked the dance and Papa Noel." Another boy named Rami adds, "We danced and we were very happy tonight!" "They know that it is a peace

march," explains Elham Shahrou, a social worker at the Beit Athal Assamoud school for Palestinian orphans, "but what they like is that it is something new. In the camps, there is nothing like this festival."

"Mostly we brought them because of the title of this festival. It's about peace and we need to live in peace and to stop war."

"We wanted to teach children to meet and to think

about children in other Arab countries," says Vali Merhej, "especially the Palestinian and Iraqi children living under the threat of war, which we in Lebanon have passed through – thinking of them and hoping for the best."

Merhej was the event organizer and is the director of FISTA (First Steps Together Association). This is the second year FISTA has organized a street festival and peace march between Ramadan and Christmas.

"Last year," says Merhej, "we were asking for peace also... but still there is no peace, there is only a greater threat of war. This is very difficult to live – children can feel it at home. They are not directly involved, but the atmosphere is not relaxing."

When the actual march gets under way, people bring out olive branches and signs reading, "peace for all children, equality for all children." The group winds its way to Martyrs Square and the giant Christmas tree. They hold traditional lanterns and white candles, a symbol of their hope for peace.

Ad awards celebrate the best

Jihane Akoury
Special to The Daily Star

ArabAd magazine and the International Advertising Association organized the Lebanon Print Awards 2002 to recognize excellence in print advertising and marketing communications. The winners were announced Thursday at a gala dinner at the Metropolitan Palace Hotel where key players congregated to toast the successes of the Lebanese ad industry. TMI/JWT was granted the Gold award for the Smirnoff ad "Clear Conscience," while H&C Leo Burnett was awarded the Silver trophy for the Ksarak ad, "Just Add Water." The Bronze award went to Saatchi and Saatchi for their Aishti "Haute Couture" ad.

Photos by Mahmoud Kheir

JUST A THOUGHT

Christmas is the season when you buy this year's gifts with next year's money

Anonymous