

Dealing with taboos: a story from the field on youth led theatre and dialogue in Lebanon

Ali Dokmak

The author, a 19 year old student from Lebanon, reflects on his experience working with War Child's methodology Performing for Peace. Through theatre, he and his colleagues build on previous initiatives and dialogues conducted since 2009 about the history of conflict and war in the country, and the sharing of individual memories. Lebanon has been through periods of intense conflict among the many different political and religious factions that divide the country. The idea is that this will lead to a better understanding of the past, a better understanding of 'the other'.

Keywords: conflict, history, Lebanon, theatre

My name is Ali Dokmak. I am a 19-year-old biology student from Lebanon, and a member of one of the Citizenship and Peace youth clubs that the Sustainable Democracy Centers established in 2009. These youth clubs consist of children and youth, from 13 years of age and up, from different religious groups, political affiliations and socioeconomic backgrounds from across Lebanon. We came together with the common belief that we could overcome the fear of 'the other' and participate in bringing about a culture of peace.

This programme was developed in light of Lebanon's infamous, conflict ridden history. A conflict that was induced by the societal division and fragmentation that have instilled a culture of violence and hatred, passed down through the mentalities of successive generations.

This cycle of violence is demonstrated by Lebanon's long history of conflict. Since the

19th century, the country has seen periods of intense conflict among different political and religious factions, as well as significant involvement by both regional and international actors. Lebanon's most recent civil war lasted from 1975 to 1990, and saw the country divided by violent conflict. Lebanon has also faced numerous international conflicts, most notably with neighbouring Israel. This has led to a further fragmentation in the country, and to instilling psychological barriers between people.

On a personal level, my life was not really affected by the civil war, at least not in a physical sense. However, the Israeli/Lebanese conflict did take its toll in a way as I can still remember the sight of the Israeli bombers firing their missiles. Images of dead and injured children are still in my mind. The effect of the internal conflict was that I became somewhat isolated within my region. I didn't know what was happening in other parts of Lebanon, and was not concerned about events in other parts of Lebanon, or the barriers with other youth in Lebanon. On the other hand, part of me wanted to know what had happened. For that reason, and because I have suffered from the violence, I am motivated to help Lebanon to try to get to a place of unity and peace. What keeps me going is the thought that one day I will have children, and I do not want them to suffer as I have. This is why I joined the youth club.

One of the methods we use is called Performing for Peace (P4P). This supports young people like me to raise awareness and policy change through theatre and performance.

This method is more than just a play; an important element of P4P is engaging the audience in an active discussion afterwards, where they are stimulated to commit to change. It feels really good to be part of P4P and the performance is our own creation; myself and other youth club members came up with the ideas for the content of the play. Using that as a basis, Zoukak, a professional Lebanese theatre company, created the performance. The play portrays a man who decides not to remember the history of conflict in Lebanon; traumatised by his memories, he insists that remembering is useless and might even be counter-productive.

I think it is extremely important that people in Lebanon know about the history of our country. We need to shed light on what really happened, and on things that are not usually spoken about. There are many different versions of events that occurred during the civil war and during the violent phases afterwards. For this reason, we have not managed to create a commonly accepted history book in Lebanon. It is also why I started doing my own historical research. I learned from documents and my parents; sources I think of as neutral parties. People here are afraid to know more about what happened. Shame also plays an important role. However, my conclusion is that the differences between people should not be a cause for problems, and it should not be a taboo subject.

I attended 16 of the 24 performances that were staged over the past months. It was nice to reach people in places where I don't usually go. When I brought my friends and family, they were surprised. There are many things they didn't know about the history of our country. They were surprised that we want to deal with such taboos.

The history taught at school ends with the Independence Day in the 1940, so nothing is taught about the civil war at all. I feel the Lebanese youth have the right to know what

really happened and shouldn't just hear it from their parents. It has opened their eyes. This is why the interaction with the audience after the play is so important. I found it very interesting to see that in some areas people refused to talk, and in other places they loved the discussion. I understand now why it is so difficult to talk about our history. Everything that hurts is hard to talk about. Although it often stirs wounds that have not yet healed, theatre is a good way to approach these sensitive issues, people like it. I noticed that it really makes them think about their own strategies of dealing with the past, it helps them to analyse, understand and learn to express themselves. I hope that it will lead to better ways of dealing with the past.

It is important to bring people from different generations together to talk about what happened, and most importantly, to listen to the perceptions and memories of other people from different regions. During P4P, I noticed that there was often a huge gap between people from different generational groups, which made it even more interesting. In some places, it was frustrating to hear what people said; some are still convinced that violence is the only solution. In other places, I was very encouraged by people who believed the opposite.

I think that P4P should not be a stand alone initiative. It should be combined with multiple actions (such as discussion periods after the performance, especially when there are decision makers in the audience, and should include the topic of youth participation and youth's right to know about what happened). The subject that we selected for the play was the continuation of a bigger process that began in 2009. It is based on several intergenerational dialogues conducted in our youth clubs' respective communities. During these dialogues, people spoke about the history of the conflict and individual memories of community members are shared.

Together with the Sustainable Democracy Center, we are now using the outcomes of the P4P discussions and the intergenerational dialogues to create a shared collective platform for memories, which will be touring the country and expanding the dialogues. This will be used for a better understanding of the past and a better understanding of the *‘other’*. I think that initiatives like P4P should continue to take place in Lebanon; it will help our country to change the current

culture of violence into peace, trust and mutual understanding.

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