

## **Lebanon**

*Bearing in mind the present social context in Lebanon, it is not surprising that the cultural and artistic communities should also be suffering to this day from the inexistence of proper laws to protect them or give them the possibility to run their lives with dignity and justice.*

*In 1926, while Lebanon was still under French mandate, a law was adopted regarding “artistic” activities, and unfortunately it prevails to the present day. “Unfortunately” because it has become totally outdated, and to a great extent, it is seriously irrational, since it covers under one all-encompassing heading all forms the definitions of what is an “artist” and artistic events, including nightclub strippers and the like.*

### **The Artist’s Place in Society**

There are now very few theatres in function at this point, and television, after having produced a very small number of soap operas, now counts mainly on games and on the current fad, "reality" shows. On the other hand, as there are a plethora of Mexican serials, a number of local artists find some employment in dubbing.

The situation, made even worse by the general current economic crisis, has recently forced one theatre after the other to close down. The “Al Madina” Theatre, founded immediately after the war ended, was a very dynamic and very active house, most of the time having between 25 to 50 events taking place every month. It was the same for the “Théâtre de Beyrouth”, inaugurated in 1966, and which had been flourishing since then. Both are now closed.

Unfortunately, most artists need to resort to a second form of gainful employment in order to make a living. Some are fortunate enough to find this second job in a related occupation, such as teaching in their field. Others conduct talk shows on various TV stations, some are in commerce, banking, etc. But of course many are totally jobless at any given time.

### **Role of State**

There is a Ministry of Culture. The role of this Ministry is quite difficult to ascertain. A faint sprinkle of financial support trickles down to some rare institutions or theatres, whose directors, it would seem, may be in favour with those in high places. Otherwise many organizations suffer from circumstances that are often dramatic (as it is currently the case with the National Centre of the ITI).

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Employment**

Although it is not possible to give precise figures about artists’ employment and unemployment, because no studies have been carried out on the subject, unemployment is becoming more and more dramatic as the economic crisis of the country drags on and in fact deepens.

## **Contracts**

In short, with regard to the profession for performing artists in Lebanon (and surely this applies to painters, writers, etc., as well) it has become a question of a "free-for-all". For each production, or each engagement with an artist, special contracts are worked out, some of which make gruelling demands on the producers and/or artists involved. In the case of disagreements, going to court naturally becomes a necessity, but most of the time the artist is not in a position to afford such a procedure. The parties therefore have recourse to settlement by "arbitration", which most often ends up in rather unjust solutions for the artist.

## **SOCIAL WELFARE**

### **Insurance schemes**

There are no social welfare, medical/hospital or retirement pensions schemes operated by the State for artists.

### **Complementary insurance schemes**

Artists who choose, and who are in a position to do so, may pay medical insurance privately, but this is extremely expensive and not available to all. Many artists are therefore not protected by any kind of medical or other form of social insurance.

## **TAX STATUS AND TAX ADVANTAGES**

### **Tax status**

Taxes are collected on each performance ticket sold (10 %), and tickets have to be printed bearing numbers, so that inspectors from the Ministry of Finance can check at any time.

Producers of shows are entitled to set aside 20 % of their tickets for invitations. The question of individual income tax is a very elastic affair, and taxes are mostly collected on the contracts artists sign.

### **Export of cultural products**

Not only are their performances in their own country subjected to tax impositions, but if they work abroad, Lebanese artists are subject to taxes prevailing in the host countries (in some Arab states they are as high as 40%.) Half of this amount is then passed on to the appropriate trade union of the host country.

### **Exemptions for temporary import duties on cultural products**

Foreign artists who are invited to Lebanon are free to come, perform, cash their fees and leave without paying a cent.

## **INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY OF ARTISTS**

### **Working permission for foreign artists**

Anyone wishing to engage an artist to perform or exhibit in Lebanon has to obtain a special permit from the "Sûreté générale" (General Security) in which the specific occasion (festival, "tournée", etc.) is mentioned, as well as the exact duration of the engagement.

### **Measures to promote the mobility of artists**

Foreign artists working in Lebanon have the advantage of not paying tax to Lebanon for lack of regime, but Lebanese artists abroad, on the contrary, are in adverse condition being imposed a tax for host country. Since its foundation in 1993, the Trade union of Performing Artists has been struggling to overcome this injustice, but has not succeed yet.

### **Proportion of foreign artists working in Lebanon**

No statistics are available, but there are very few foreign artists (mostly from Syria, Egypt, and Iraq) permanently living and working in Lebanon. Yet, as it can be seen from the above, the general conditions including lack of job opportunities are not conducive to this.

## **COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION**

### **Trade Unions**

In 1947, a trade union was created for actors, which has been including all kinds of people claiming to belong to the artistic and/or cultural world. As a matter of fact, one of its presidents remained in his position for more that 30 years, and this gave rise to innumerable accusations of abuse in the recruitment of members, payment of subscription fees, etc.

Therefore, in 1993, a group of professional theatre people (directors, actors and one choreographer) decided to break off from the old syndicat and to form a new one. They called it the “Trade Union for Professional Performers” (*Syndicat des Artistes Professionnels*) and sought to establish very strict rules to govern it especially with regard to the recruitment of new members.

One of the first objectives of this new body was to persuade the Government to formulate a new law in replacement of the 1926 one that was widely vilified, and all efforts were made to collaborate in the elaboration of the new text. Numerous meetings were held with the various ministers of culture who succeeded each other, as well as with several other members of Government and of Parliament.

### **Current situation**

After more than ten years, the text is still in its draft form, with handwritten notes and corrections in the margins. The reason given by the authorities for not passing it through Parliament is that they refuse to change the law as long as there are two trade unions claiming to cover the same professions. Again, countless meetings were organized, this time between the boards of the two trade unions. It became imperative to try and find a way of dissolving them both, and merging them into one trade union. Naturally, here began the clash of opinions and more especially of personalities; the result is that, rather than uniting as one front, there is talk of frittering the two bodies into several more bodies that would cover the various disciplines of the performing arts.

### **Other Trade unions**

Apart from the above-mentioned bodies, there exists a trade union for artists of the world music. It was founded in 1951, and is still active, although several musicians

belong to the two other bodies, and sometimes have a simultaneous membership with more than one trade union.

In Tripoli, the capital of North Lebanon, a group of actors got together around the period of the Independence, and apart from presenting plays, also founded modest “schools” for acting. At one point, this group founded a trade union for their region that was officially recognized and registered in 1954.

An important body representing the music world in Lebanon is the SACEM (Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique au Liban), structured along the lines of the French SACEM, and directly connected to it. It was founded in 1961, and is supposed to protect the rights of musicians in the country. Unfortunately, many complaints have been registered in the past years with regard to the efficiency of this body, especially as far as payments of rights to musicians are concerned. Music and plays are supposed to be protected by the SACEM but many artists are clearly not convinced that they receive all that is due to them. Composers also complain, as in many other places in the world, of a high degree of piracy.

In the field of dance there is absolutely no copyright protection for choreography.

## **CONTINUING TRAINING and FINANCIAL AID**

The following are some institutions providing continuous training in Lebanon. Most of the other main universities below have dramatic art courses. However, due to the diminishing opportunities for employment, the number of students who register in the private universities is decreasing. The following main institutions also provide training in the performing arts.

- Institut des Beaux Arts – Université Libanaise (Beyrouth)
- The Lebanese University has a Dramatic Art Section in its Institute of Fine Arts (this university is of course government financed). It takes 4 years to obtain a diploma.
- Conservatoire National de Musique, Courses: Oriental and Occidental music (Tel: 961 1 500996)
- École Libanaise de Ballet, Fondatrice/Directrice: Georgette Gebara (Tel: 961 9 218577, FAX: 961 9 218 477 )
- Département de théâtre et des études audio-visuelles IESAV, Université Saint Joseph (Beyrouth)
- Département de théâtre – Université Libano-américaine LAU (Beyrouth et Byblos)
- American University of Beirut
- Université du Saint Esprit (Kaslik)

### **Grant**

There are no grants or scholarships for initial or further artistic training.

**Source : International Theatre Institute, Lebanese Centre, December 2004**

More information:

Ministry of Culture of Lebanon: <http://www.culture.gov.lb/Indexfr.htm>