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Meet the Syrian Refugee Artists Who Are Transforming Modern Berlin

Since the beginning of the torturous Syrian civil war, many of the country's most creative young people have decamped for Berlin, where they have joined the city's thriving international arts scene, transforming their adopted community and themselves.

by Sarah Topol

On a Friday night at the Werkstatt Der Kulturen, a basement venue in Berlin's hip Neukölln neighborhood, a band called Berlin-Baghdad Bahn had everyone in the audience clapping in unison. Its Syrian singer, Wasim Ghrioui, stood bathed in blue spotlights, his soulful voice quivering in time with the accordion, oud, and contrabass. The group, which also included a German-born Kurd, an Italian, a Georgian, and another Syrian, was performing the Lebanese classic "Ah Ya Zein." The song took the crowd on a musical journey from Europe to the Middle East, just as the Berlin-Baghdad Railway—the quixotic, early-20th-century undertaking for which the band is named—had once tried to do.

It was only Berlin-Baghdad Bahn's second performance, but the room was packed. Ghrioui, who is bald with deep-set brown eyes and an aquiline nose, sang in nine languages, performing klezmer ballads; folk songs from the Balkans, Kurdistan, Armenia, and Chechnya; and Syrian and Persian classics. Between numbers, a young woman read short riffs on refugee themes through history—of people leaving their homes, boarding boats and trains, missing lands and family far away. Then the music, by turns haunting and lively, would start up again. The audience was rapt. "We're trying to raise some kind of sense of tolerance," Ghrioui told me later. "It's trying to give a

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During the encore, a few young Arab men in the corner let out ululations, alternating their outstretched arms and jutting their hips in time to the beat, as if home in Damascus. On the other side of the room, a blonde in a Day-Glo-pink muumuu danced in the corner, jerking from side to side with the kinds of moves you'd expect at the techno clubs Berlin is famous for. In the middle, a few German girls stood up and tried their own impromptu Arab-style dancing, awkwardly shaking their hips, raising their arms, and laughing at each other.

A performance by the Berlin-based Syrian rock band Khebez Dawle.

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Today, in Berlin, the European and Middle Eastern cultural scenes are colliding, and I had come for a front-row seat. For well over a decade, artists from around the world have sought out the German capital as a cheaper alternative to New York, London, and Paris, recasting the city as Europe's new cultural hub. While the Syrian artists and intellectuals who have arrived more recently came not by choice but to escape the six-year civil war that has ravaged their country, they have joined a booming creative community. Now these refugees are changing the city's culture as much as they are being changed by it.

"Before, it was me observing Berlin," Ghrioui said. "Now, it's me observing the changes that Syrians are making in Berlin." The 35-year-old was part of the first wave of refugees flown in from Lebanon in 2013 on a government relocation scheme, as part of an "intellectual quota." When he arrived three years ago, he told me he found that there were only 13 Syrian refugees registered in the city. During the first half of 2016, 22,471 Syrians applied for asylum, according to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

In Damascus, Ghrioui crafted mosaics and painted. Since leaving Syria, he has branched out, in part because he hasn't had the

and plans next to adapt it into a graphic novel. He is also working on a second play, a video project, a documentary, and an art exhibition.

I met Ghrioui and his friend Emily Dische-Becker at Südblock, a cafe in Kreuzberg, Berlin's traditionally Turkish neighborhood, which is gentrifying rapidly. Dische-Becker is a German-American filmmaker and journalist working on a documentary about the Berlin-based Syrian rock band Khebez Dawle, whose members made headlines when they arrived on the Greek island of Lesbos and immediately started handing out their CDs on the beach. "I didn't choose to come here," Ghrioui said as he rolled a cigarette at an outdoor picnic table. "I was living in Lebanon in such a horrible situation and I got the chance by coincidence to come here, so I came and I tried to make the best out of it. But later on I realized actually that I came to the best place for me."

Centuries ago, Berlin's Gendarmenmarkt, a square ringed by German and French churches, served as a refuge for French Calvinists. *joe daniel price/Getty Images*

Dische-Becker, a Berlin native who has also lived in the U.S. and Beirut, has noticed changes to her city since last summer's massive influx of refugees: new Syrian restaurants, more Arabic spoken on the streets. "Berlin obviously recognizes the cultural capital that Syrians bring," she said. Still, she admitted to being frustrated when she hears Khebez Dawle's members pigeonholed as "refugees," instead of "Syrian musicians." "It's like, 'You're just a refugee, you're a person in exile,'" she said.

Ghrioui nodded in agreement. "It's a fashionable thing, somehow."

Modern Berlin is famous for its nightlife, hedonism, and anarchy. The streets are covered in graffiti, cigarette butts, and empty beer bottles. Many of the Syrians I met there told me that this disorder makes the city feel more like home. "It's dirty, open-minded, mixed," said the playwright Mudar Alhaggi. "It's a very normal city. That's difficult to find in other European cities, which are very clean."

in old hangars. Porta-Potties from Europe's inaugural Lollapalooza have been left in place for them. I met Hazem Alhamwi, a cartoonist and filmmaker from Damascus, at a beer garden nearby. He told me that although his art explores the same themes it did in Syria—pain that is shared beyond borders—being in Berlin has changed his approach. "I'm more political now," he explained. "Before, in Syria, I worked the way many Iranian artists do, avoiding directly facing political or sexual issues."

Lolapalooza at Berlin's Tempelhof, an airport turned city park. *Courtesy of Lollapalooza Berlin; Photo by Stephan Flad*

Alhamwi's film, *From My Syrian Room*, which aired on Arte, a Franco-German television channel, addresses freedom and dictatorship from an autobiographical angle. After shooting the film at his home in Damascus, he went to France in 2014 to edit it, only to realize —because of the project's political nature and the escalation of the conflict in Syria—that he couldn't go home again. Instead, he came to Berlin, where his wife joined him. "Berlin is a place for artists, filmmakers," he told me. "For me, I'm breathing here. I'm working all the time. It's so much better."

For his next film, Alhamwi plans to collaborate with German artists. "It is important to find our commonalities," he told me. "Deep down, people are good. A lot of misunderstandings happen because we don't understand deeply each other's pain."

Some Syrians are striving to find commonalities by showing Germans the richness of their country—explaining where they're coming from, and what they have left behind. Once a month, Bassam Dawood, a Syrian actor, and Rachel Clarke, a Scottish performer, host a handful of Syrian volunteers with stories to tell at different theaters around Berlin. The novice thespians perform a spoken-word show called Storytelling Arena in which they tell tales of everyday life in Syria before the war, of love and loss, of arriving in Germany, and sometimes of the conflict itself. They deliver their stories, sentence by sentence, in Arabic with translation so that audience members

"Germans are just getting the images of refugees from the media—that Syria is just death, destruction, and war, people fleeing. But we have very humane stories. We have a humane history and now such stories are happening too," Dawood told me. "I wanted German people to really know what happened to the Syrian people." The shows have been sold out ever since they launched in early 2016.

Sometimes the audience is shocked, Dawood said, by how much singing, dancing, and revelry accompanies these often-sad stories. At a recent show, one viewer stated that either the comedy or the tragedy had to be a lie—there couldn't be both. "I laughed and said, 'No, we are Syrians, this is our life,'" Dawood recalled. "On the same day, you experience both. You experience sadness and tears and you experience joy and laughter."

Prenzlauer Berg, one of Berlin's more upscale neighborhoods, is home to Al Hamra café, frequented by many of the city's Syrian refugees.
Busà Photography/Getty Images

I met Dawood at the Al Hamra café, in the upscale neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg. The café's dark, red interior is more punk Berlin than traditional Damascus, but there are faint echoes of the smoky cafés across the Middle East that serve bitter, strong coffee and *shisha*. Despite the relatively poor quality of the hummus, Al Hamra has turned into a meeting point for Syrian artists. Most people I spoke to wanted to meet there.

Even with the success of Storytelling Arena, the transition has been hard on Dawood. With his massive frame and large jowls, the buoyant actor looks like he was made for the stage. But to work in German film and television you have to speak German, a language that's challenging to learn and even harder to make your own as an actor. "Starting here isn't even starting at zero, it's starting below zero. It's very difficult," Dawood explained. Last month, nearly three years after his arrival in Berlin, he began rehearsals for his first play, which will be performed in German, English, Arabic, and Hebrew. "It's a crazy idea, but I love it," he told me gleefully.

Hamdan lived in Dawood's apartment for two months when he came to Berlin in August 2015. In fact, Dawood told me, since the beginning of 2015 the spare room in his two-bedroom flat has been continuously occupied by one Syrian artist friend or another. Berlin feels better to him now, he added, than when he arrived. There is a bigger Syrian artistic community, and with that comes more opportunity for collaboration and more old faces of comfort in a new place.

Back in Damascus, Hamdan had sought to get his compatriots interested in classical music. The National Orchestra sometimes performed European composers on traditional instruments—like Vivaldi on *kanun*, a kind of harp found in the Middle East, Central Asia, and southern Europe. Here in the homeland of Beethoven and Brahms, German audiences are interested in hearing Middle Eastern music, but Hamdan has discovered they have little sense of the difference between good and bad. "They don't understand Eastern music very well," he told me. "They don't know if it's nice or not, so there is a lot of junk oriental music here."

The two old friends have spoken at length about the problem of charlatan art. "We've noticed that NGOs don't really look at quality, they have a checklist of doing a project—one, two, three. They just want any Syrian to have an exhibition, to have a play, a concert," Dawood explained. "This puts pressure on us, because after two or three years of working in this low quality, Germans have the impression that our Syrian art is low quality." They are trying to change that.

Two years ago, one of Hamdan's former students gathered about 30 Syrian musicians from across Europe. Calling themselves the Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra, they perform both classical works and their region's traditional compositions. Because they are scattered across Europe, rehearsing together is difficult. "We are dreaming about how to make it a solid thing," Hamdan said.

I asked the Syrian artists I met about the challenge of remaining true to their own art while also being seen as representatives of Syria—without having signed up for the job. "To come from a complicated war zone like Syria, with all the specificity, with all the issues that Syria shares with wars all over the universe, you cannot escape it to

New York. "You represent. That's the thing that I totally don't fight against. If I have this opportunity, I have this duty."

In 2014, Yazji released a film called *Maskoon, Haunted,* about the things refugees take with them when leaving their homes. "So many people would like you to do this or that," she said. "It's easy to find yourself slipping into the stereotype, because that's how other people would like to see you." On the other hand, she wondered if a Syrian poet today could even write a love poem without it somehow being about war. "These are questions for everybody," she added. "I don't have answers, I just have questions."

Berlin's open atmosphere has prompted some Syrians with no arts background, only a desire to explain their homeland, to become performers. On a Saturday morning, I joined a weekly English-language walking tour called "Why Are We Here?" hosted by a Syrian guide who uses German historical landmarks to tell stories about similar moments in his or her own country's past. Mohamad, the leader, asked that I not use his last name because he still has family in Syria. A math student before the war, Mohamad reached Germany in 2014 after crossing the Mediterranean by ship from Libya to Italy. In an effort to make friends in Berlin, he attended a weekly open cooking night called Give Something Back to Berlin. There he met Lorna Cannon, a British tour guide active in migration issues who was working as a project manager at Refugee Voices, an NGO that was running a weekly walking tour led by African asylum-seekers.

Checkpoint Charlie, the most famous crossing point between East and West Berlin during the Cold War. *ullstein bild/Getty Images*

Cannon had been pondering the new wave of refugees coming into the city. "I thought, 'Okay, there's a massive migration, and we need to find a way to tell this other story and why people are here, because too often it's the media telling a story,'" she said. Mohamad, now 26, had no prior experience in theater or public speaking, but was interested. After discussing the tour concept, they decided on the name "Why Are We Here?" It felt right: few of the locals they met

We met at 11:30 a.m. at the Mohrenstrasse U-Bahn station. The group was a motley crew of American study-abroad students, older Germans, and solo tourists. We looked at Mohamad expectantly as we stood at the first point, a memorial to the uprising of June 17, 1953, when roughly a million East Germans gathered to protest the political and economic oppression of the German Democratic Republic before being brutally put down by the military. As we stood before the placard, Mohamad described the Syrian equivalent, which took place in the city of Hama in February 1982, when political protests against the government of Hafez Al Assad—the father of Bashar al-Assad, Syria's embattled current president—were suppressed.

"From that moment on, Syria was a police state," Mohamad explained. "Did anybody know about this before?"

The other members of my group all shook their heads.

We walked to the Topography of Terror, a documentation center at the site of the Nazi Secret State Police headquarters, which were bombed during World War II. There, Mohamad described Syria's own vast network of security services and secret prisons, which led to a discussion of the succession of Bashar al-Assad, the electric energy of the Arab Spring, the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, and the rise and appeal of ISIS.

Next, we headed to Checkpoint Charlie, where Mohamad compared the flight of Germans from East Berlin for West Berlin with the migration of Syrians to other parts of the Arab world and to Europe. "Germans are welcoming us because they lived this or heard about it from their parents. People will say, 'We are with you. I know what you're going through,'" he explained. "Now Germany is a safe place, but it's been through a lot. This is what I'm trying to say about Syria: It was good, there was chaos, maybe it won't last. We should see it in perspective, not as a random war in the Middle East where everyone is always fighting."

The Topography of Terror, a documentation center at the former site of the

Our last stop was Gendarmenmarkt, a square ringed by beautiful German and French churches that Mohammed explained were a refuge for French Calvinists in the 16th and 17th centuries. “In the grand scale of history, this is nothing new. Refugees have always existed. People managed to live with different faiths, background, and mentalities. We must live together in harmony.”

At times during our walk, I felt like the others in the group had shown up in order to meet a Syrian for the first time. The next day, I met Mohamad to find out if he felt the same way. He said that he knew that many people came just to meet a Syrian in real life, and he had no problem with that. He wanted them to. He had discussed the contents of the tour with Cannon and his Syrian friends and had made peace with his delivery, though he was still trying to perfect it. The one thing that irked him was when people exclaimed that he spoke English well. “Am I not supposed to?” he said with a laugh.

Ultimately, Mohamad’s tour feels like a microcosm of Berlin in the current moment—a barometer of the possibilities for cultural fusion or coexistence. “I think some people come to Berlin to see how Berlin is handling this refugee situation,” he added. “They have this interest to see how it’s going. Is it scary? Is it dangerous? Is it peaceful? Is it friendly? How is it going?”

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