

ZAFFÉ زفة

/ˈzafɛ/ noun

a wedding march,
a group celebration with dancing,
singing, and ululation

created by
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Visuals for the work realised by Ayman Kaake

i think i can take care of myself because i...
only let myself think
once of the crossed ocean

how we thought it was enough to keep us safe

Safia ElHillo

THE CREATOR

STÉPHANIE GHAJAR

director & dramaturge

Stéphanie Ghajar is a Lebanese-born Australian theatre and filmmaker, mainly working as a director and dramaturge. Her work delves into the human condition to explore the individual in deeply personal situations where the familiar motions of the everyday darken and veer towards the tragic. Having a mixed background and working in both film and theatre together has shown evident streaks of each medium seeping into the other, in a wide scope of cultural narratives.

Since 2011, I have worked between Melbourne, New York, and Beirut. My directorial credits include: *The Cave of Spleen* at TheatreWorks (2023); *Ardna* for tour with Regional Arts Victoria (Bukjeh, 2022); *Make Me A Hour* (La Mama, 2019); and assisting Briony Dunn on *When the Rain Stops Falling* (TheatreWorks, 2020-2023). I am a Writer on *Babylonia*, a new TV show in development with Tony Ayres Productions for SBS Television, and a Producer at the State Library Victoria. I also work as a dramaturge, where most recently, I joined Cybec Electric to work on Jordan Shea's *Malacañang/Montgomery* (MTC, 2023).



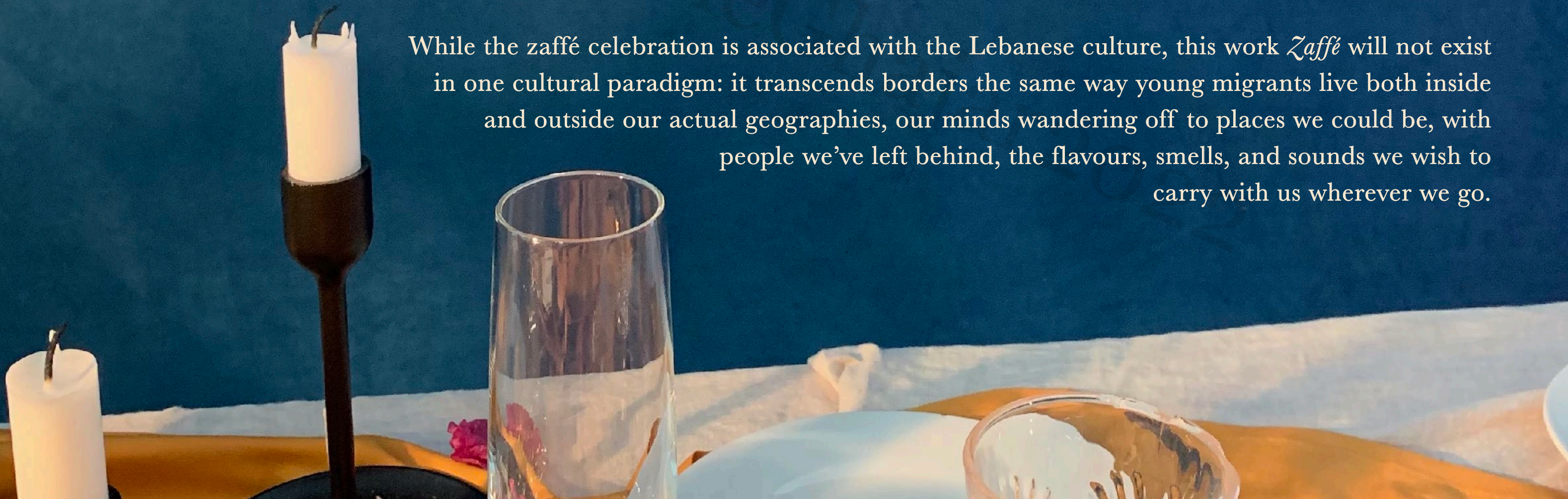
THE PROJECT

Zaffé is a new immersive performance work-in-development that explores how young people in the Arabic diaspora deal with, heal from, and move on from displacement and loss.

Zaffé is a celebration. It invites audiences to take part in a Lebanese wedding party in Australia. There is dancing to the big drums, singing, ululation, wedding games, gossip, and long distance calls. Yet something is awry—the bridal party is absent, and toasts break down into poems of longing for all that is missing here: loved ones across the sea, places forever changed, moments lost to the past.

I see these celebrations as a way that people create in the face of loss, root themselves in history, express their resilience, provide for one another, and help each other heal. *Zaffé* brings together young artists from the Arabic diaspora to ask: how does our generation attempt to commemorate and revive what is lost to us through migration and the passing of time?

While the zaffé celebration is associated with the Lebanese culture, this work *Zaffé* will not exist in one cultural paradigm: it transcends borders the same way young migrants live both inside and outside our actual geographies, our minds wandering off to places we could be, with people we've left behind, the flavours, smells, and sounds we wish to carry with us wherever we go.



THE IDEA

The idea first crossed my mind upon reading Khaled Hussein's book *Sea Prayer*. *Sea Prayer* is a father's reflection as he watches over his sleeping son, on the dangerous journey across the sea that lies before them. In it, he paints a sensorial picture to his son of their home in Homs, Syria, before and after the war. That sensorial picture was my start-off point into how people try to embrace things that were lost to them.

While thinking of where this work needed to exist, I started coming across many incidents in Lebanon where the perfect way for people to express their cultural identity, their image, their beliefs, was through celebrating, whether at moments worth celebrating or those that did not make sense to celebrate. At times, the worse their circumstances, the more they had the urge to find a reason to throw parties. The greater the tragedy, the bigger the party.

The ultimate tragedy deserved a wedding. These weddings seemed to be a distillation of who these people are. For everyone who attended, it was a firm beacon planted in their memories fighting against the vestiges of their daily realities.



Since the year 2020, it seems the whole world could use some form of celebratory proximity with other cultures, especially those they have not been exposed to before. In sharing the joyous side of a culture, I also want to highlight the other side that seems quite distant to us living in Australia. While issues from Southwest Asia and North Africa (aka the Middle East) have travelled to the very heart of many homes in Australia, they still feel out of reach for many living here who, due to distance, could, at most, only sympathise, without fully comprehending what their neighbours are experiencing.

With *Zaffé*, I want to bring these matters to every person attending, on a level they not only understand and sympathise with, but could feel in the room as they enter and would carry and remember while they live their daily lives among the other cultural groups. I want to curate an experience that will help on the wider socio-political scale when making decisions that could alter human lives outside their immediate circle.



WHAT WE HAVE BEEN UP TO

DECEMBER 2020

Content development. Contacted writers from around the world to contribute stories in different formats for the wedding party. Written pieces came back from Lebanese migrants living in Melbourne, New York City, and Lisbon as poems and short scenes.

JANUARY 2021

First creative development with Melbourne-based collaborators at Siteworks. Shared more stories of young migrants from the Arabic diaspora and developed a form for this wedding party that parallels funeral proceedings, as this party is not really a union of two people, but a façade to the loss these young migrants are experiencing.

MARCH 2021

Our second creative development took place as part of a one-month residency at Testing Grounds. During this month, I worked with visual artist, Ayman Kaake, and creative producer, Lara Week, on creating visual vignettes for the work. I also got the team together to workshop our first draft of content within the form and start creating music for the work. The musicians got their keyboard, bongos, qanun, ney, guitar, oud, and voices to a jamming session that led to our first musical discovery: the Skype ringtone as one of the main motifs for a musical piece.



FEBRUARY 2022

Our third creative development took part in the Be Bold residency at the Bowery Theatre. We presented our first two drafts of the experience and music for the show in front of two test audiences of invited peers, friends and family. We have since received the feedback necessary to rework the experience towards what it needs to be for its public presentation in 2023/24.



THE MUSIC

This theatrical experience, this wedding, is a young, contemporary piece. The music and soundscape are to be instrumental, merged between Arabic and Western styles through musical instruments from both cultures. It is that which the younger generation from various backgrounds can connect to, expatriates and migrants can sense its nostalgia, and others can feel welcomed into its aura.

Composition References:

[La Grande Marche](#), *Khaled Mouzanar*

[Promiseland](#), *MIKA & Mashrou Leila*


[Interlude Dalida](#), *Ibrahim Maalouf*

[Skype Ringtone](#), *Camille Feghali*

At Testing Grounds, Camille Feghali (to the left) was invited to jam with Yo CiTY and Tide on Testing Nights and [the music](#) played fell right into the musical genre the work will exist in. That influenced our [preshow music](#) in our next development at the Bowery. The Bowery development also included Arabic covers of world famous songs from around the globe as part of our dance mix [playlist](#).



THE PEOPLE



I have approached collaborators for this project for their skill as art makers in whichever form they practice, for their individuality, their expertise in working with diverse cultures, and the stories they can bring to the table in creating this show.

For the creative developments, these and/or other collaborators would focus on the role they are usually brought on a project for. The project will require a producer, a composer, a sound designer, writer(s), devising performers and musicians, a lighting designer, a set designer, a costume designer, a projection designer, and a stage manager.

LARA WEEK

creative producer

Lara Week is a designer for performance and creative producer. Her design credits include ANNA (La Mama Courthouse), Caliban (Western Edge Youth Arts, Malthouse Theatre), 3 Sisters (Metanoia Theatre), South Sudan Voice (Free Theatre), Night Sings Its Songs (La Mama Theatre), and two seasons of Samah Sabawi's award-winning play Tales Of A City By The Sea (La Mama Courthouse) which she co-produced in 2016 with Daniel Clark and toured to Adelaide, Sydney, and Kuala Lumpur. In 2019 she produced and designed the premiere season of Samah Sabawi's play THEM at La Mama Courthouse, directed by Bagryana Popov. THEM was shortlisted for the Victorian and NSW Premiere's Literary Awards, nominated for four Green Room Awards, and will be remounted at Arts Centre Melbourne in 2021 as part of the VCE Drama Playlist. Since 2011, Lara has been associate producer for Tribal Soul Arts, working with Patrice Naiambana to produce decolonial arts programs and performances in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, the Netherlands, UK, and Australia. She sits on the Green Room Awards' Independent Theatre panel.



AYMAN KAAKE

visual artist

Born in Tripoli, Lebanon, Ayman Kaake travelled to Australia in 2011 in pursuit of studying visual arts. A telecommunications engineer and cinematography graduate, he left behind his parents and eleven siblings as he set off on his artistic journey. Applying his creative vision then led to diplomas in photo-imaging and visual arts from Melbourne Polytechnic, winning best conceptual folio with each. In 2014, his passion for cinema and photography eventually developed into a body of digital art works, creating images that delve into the dreamlike world of personal experiences, emotional turmoil, and the complexities of isolation that came from starting a new life in a new country. Although dealing with moving and serious emotions, Kaake's works are almost hopeful, and he believes that "sometimes imagination is better than reality". Some of his awards include: Finalist at the National Photographic Portrait Prize 2022 and 2023, Finalist at the Nillumbik Prize Contemporary Art 2023, Finalist at Vantage Point Sharjah 10 in Dubai 2022 to name a few.



MEENA SHAMALY

deviser, musical director, performer

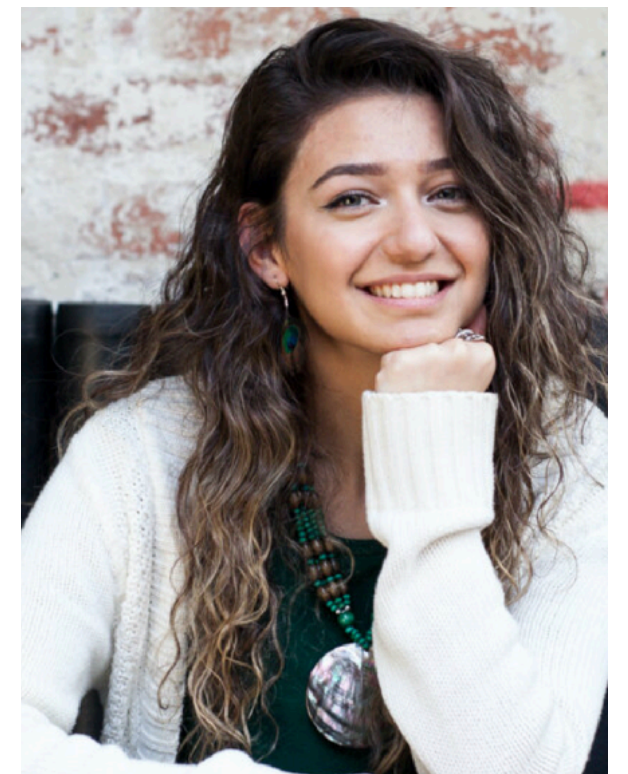
Meena Shamaly is a composer, musician, poet, and radio presenter. As a composer, his work centres around creating music for stories, through the mediums of film, video games, and theatre. As a songwriter and poet, he tells stories of hope, justice, faith, and reasons to love and laugh. He also collaborates with other poets and songwriters in creating stories together and helps produce and arrange their work to highlight all the best aspects of their art. Meena is one of the creative producers of Slamalamadingdong, Melbourne's premier poetry slam. He runs workshops in poetry and music, since he is as passionate about igniting and providing space for the creativity of others as he is about creating his own art. Additionally, Meena is the host of the Game Show on ABC Classic FM, where he presents and speaks on the diverse and beautiful music of video games each week to a national Australian (and online global) audience.



TAJ ALDEEB

deviser, performer

Taj Aldeeb was born in 1998 in Homs, Syria. She was accomplished in performing arts since early childhood, participating in international piano competitions such as “Solhi-al-wadi Academy Piano Competition” and training in the National Ballet Academy in her hometown. In 2014, Taj fled the Syrian war with her family and settled in Melbourne Australia since then. She graduated high school and completed a degree in Digital Media in 2019. During the last four years, Taj conveyed a more serious interest in the performing arts and dedicated her free time to developing her talents in all of acting, music, and dance. She participated in multiple acting workshops, some in the Victorian College of the Arts, landing a few roles in short movies like *Nour* (2018) and *The Fall* (2019). Taj now employs her performing art talents in advocacy work for human rights and the community. She was also cast in the leading role of Layla in Samah Sabawi's *Them* (2021). She hosts her own radio program on ABC Classic Sunday Afternoons.



CAMILLE FEGHALI

deviser, musician

Camille is a Lebanese musician and film-maker who draws heavily from the traditions of classical Middle Eastern music. The instruments he plays include the Qanun, the Nay, the Buzuq and the synthesizer. He cofounded *Tarabeat* in 2016, which is a music collective combining Arabic traditional music with electronic instruments. *Tarabeat* managed to perform at various festivals in the middle east, Europe and Australia. Having studied sound engineering and film-making in Beirut, Lebanon, Camille directed a few social documentaries including *Transit* in 2017.



JEAN BACHOURA

deviser, performer

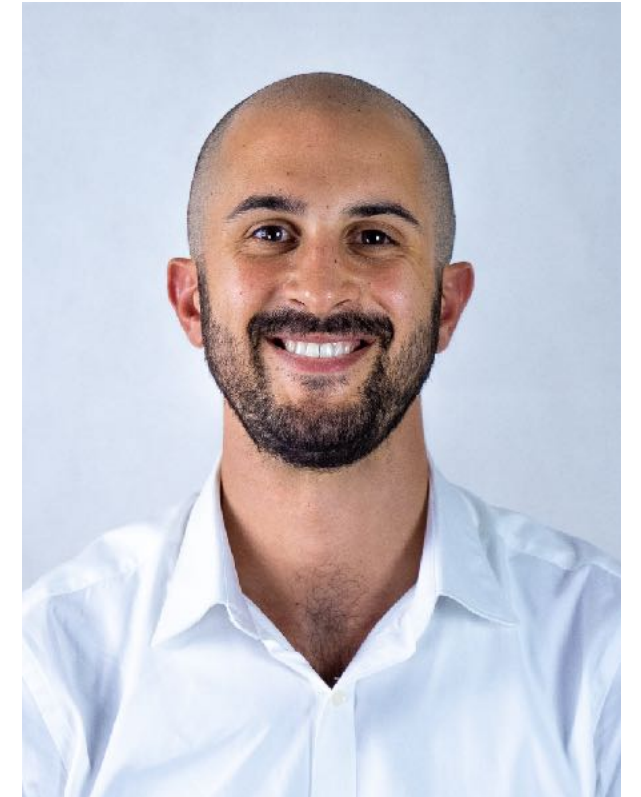
Jean Bachoura is an inaugural recipient of the Wheeler Centre's scheme for writers, The Next Chapter. His work is reflective of a life lived between cultures: born in Damascus, raised in Syria, Lebanon and Australia. In 2016 he was awarded the Deborah Cass Prize for his piece 'Night Falls'. In 2017 he wrote 'No Man's Land', an account of his journey crossing the border into Syria. In 2019, his multi-platform project TRETINOIN was awarded The Lifted Brow & RMIT non/fictionLab Prize for Experimental Non-fiction. As an actor, Jean is known for *Shiloh* (2018) and *You Deserve Everything* (2016).



ABDULRAHMAN HAMMOUD

deviser, performer

Abdulrahman Hammoud is a spoken word artist based in Melbourne by way of Lebanon. He teaches writing classes and workshops for schools and organizations that are looking to explore new avenues of expression. His art has taken him as close as New Zealand and as far as the United States, as well as to his beloved home country. In 2013, he became founder of The Dirty Thirty online writing platform as well as editor/compiler of The Dirty Thirty Anthology. In 2019 he also made his acting debut as a lead in Samah Sabawi's critically acclaimed play, *THEM*. Most of his work revolves around current issues including the constant state of war in the Middle East, racial divides, as well as the portrayal of masculinity. He is also an avid purveyor of starting books but never finishing them.



RAIN OKPAMEN IYAHEN

stage manager, performer

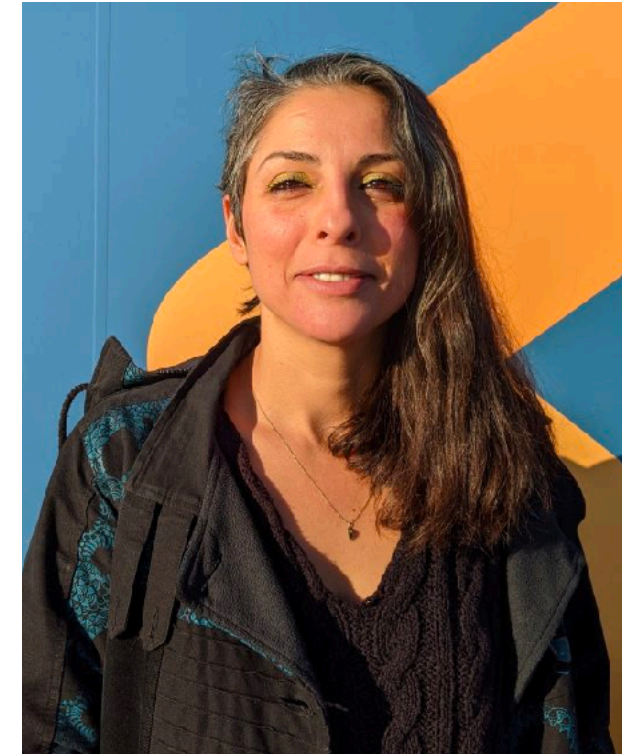
Rain started her career as a Stage Manager in London in 2019 by shadowing Stage Managers from West End musicals including Everybody's Talking About Jamie (The Apollo Theatre), Come From Away (Phoenix Theatre) and The Lion King (The Lyceum Theatre). Since she relocated to Melbourne, she's been working in Melbourne's independent theatre scene, her credits include; Goodfellow Theatre Company's production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' directed by Jesse Novella, 'Scarborough' directed by Bronwen Coleman, Encore Theatre Company's production of 'The Witches' directed by David Collins, TBC Theatre's production of 'Rust' directed by Renee Palmer, Alice Darling and Trudi Boatwright and played as part of the Midsumma Festival, Red Stitch Theatre Production of 'Single Ladies' & 'The Cane', Anthropocene Play Company play reading of 'Ignis' directed by Bronwen Coleman, Thomas Carr College's production of 'Matilda the Musical'. She's currently the Production Manager of two exciting shows coming up later this year 'Security' written by Michele Lee and directed by Ra Chapman and 'Gene Tree' directed by Nadja Kostich.



RAWYA EL CHAB

writer, performer (overseas)

Rawya El Chab is a Brooklyn-based Lebanese theater maker. As a multidisciplinary storyteller, Rawya has extensive experience in physical, interactive, and street theatre. Her career trajectory has combined classical training in theatre with contemporary art and community engagement. During her career, she participated in major productions, working with leading theatre and cinema directors in Lebanon, such as Roger Assaf, Nidal Al-Achkar, and Danielle Arbid. Coming of age in the aftermath of the Civil War in Lebanon, she has come to understand and experience theatermaking as a critical place and practice where we suspend the state of emergency and reflect on what matters to us. She co-founded a number of theatre groups in Lebanon and worked with numerous local artists on experimental projects and art performances. Her vision and trajectory explore three interlaced projects: the democratization of the tools of theater as a means to respond and dismantle oppression, reclaiming public space as an extension of art-making practices, and asserting freedom of expression as a basic right for all.



ELISSA ISSA

writer, performer (overseas)

Elissa is a Lebanese-born American artist, social psychologist, and writer. She is an aspiring actress and published poet who is extremely passionate about theatre, film, literature, and the arts. In parallel to studying psychology, she performed in Anton Chekov's *The Bear*, Tennessee Williams' *Talk to Me Like the Rain*, Issam Mahfouz's *Al-Zenzalakht*, Hoda Barakat's *Viva La Diva* amongst others she has devised and written herself. Her most recent notable work includes an article and poem on culture in *SLIMI Magazine* and an essay titled *Beirut | doomsday on Lebanon's August 4th explosion*.





NEXT STEPS

SUMMER 2022 - 23

4-week rehearsals to culminate in the premiere public presentation of *Zaffé* with an affiliated festival. *Zaffé* is most suited in a festival context as it is an immersive celebratory party that audiences get to experience for a brief time before it moves elsewhere. We are looking to present it at a non-traditional venue that we can transform into the setting for our celebration like the backstage of one of the large theatres, a carpark, a rooftop, an empty site where a building used to be, under a bridge.

BEYOND PREMIERE SEASON

Prepare for touring starting in regional Victoria then Sydney, and then in festivals abroad.

While it is a shared celebration, through as much of the five senses as we can include,
Zaffé has the sixth sense that constantly yearns for something missing, a void.

It has a cloud of gloom hovering over our head,
a bitter taste on our tongue,
a nostalgia that reality cannot meet,
and the privilege that weighs you down
because you're living,
not merely surviving.

