

Atelier Düsseldorf / Theater der Welt

organised by the International Theatre Institute and The Festival Academy – an Initiative of the European Festivals Association

### **Interview with the ITI fellows of the Atelier:**

**Nada Abdel Wahab, Moutaz Abdulrahman, Milena Gehrt, Valia Katsi**

*From 16th until 22nd June 2021, 22 emerging festival makers are participating in the Atelier Düsseldorf/Theater der Welt, co-organized by ITI Germany and The Festival Academy – an Initiative of the European Festivals Association. Before the start of the Atelier, we met the four ITI fellows Milena Gehrt, Moutaz Abdulrahman, Valia Katsi and Nada Abdel Wahab, online for an interview about their projects, how their lives and work have been affected by the covid-19 pandemic and their expectations for the Atelier. The interview was conducted on June 14th by Maria Rößler and Stella Jacobs (ITI Germany).*

**Nada, Moutaz, Milena and Valia, thank you for joining us for this interview, which gives us the very valuable opportunity to hear perspectives of a young generation of transnationally oriented artists, art organisers, and cultural managers in this particular time of uncertainty and transformation. What seems to connect the four of you is a shared interest in the social dimensions of the performing arts. To start with, please tell us about your work and your research on the intersection of theatre and society.**

**Valia:** For me, anything I do in the arts is linked to my politics, my world view. I studied international relations and Arabic, which brought me to Egypt where I met Nada. I wrote my dissertation on how theatre can be used as a tool for decolonisation in Palestine and South Africa. Also, I do drama facilitation and I worked with refugees in Greece. Here in London, I am part of a group that organises workshops for refugees and non-refugees as well. The idea is to bring people together and play games. I think theatre and playing form an amazing basis for community to thrive, socially and politically.

**Moutaz:** I studied theatre and worked as an actor in Algeria. I also studied media and worked on TV. When I moved to Kurdistan, I first worked in TV there as well. Then, I got the chance to do theatre at the Goethe Institut. It was a project with children and adults focusing on how to bring theatre to the refugee camps. We organized workshops for trainers who live in the camp so they can teach theatre to the children. We organized small festivals in the camp. Last year,

unfortunately, everything stopped because of Covid19 and until now we are waiting for a better situation.

**Nada:** I studied drama as part of my English studies and, while I was at university, I became an actress and a trainer in a 'Theatre of the Oppressed' project. We did performances and workshops in Egypt and Morocco with children and with adults. I became a program coordinator and later the executive director of [Theater Is a Must](#) festival in Alexandria. *Theater Is a Must* is a platform for political contemporary theatre created in the wake of the Arab Spring with productions from Europe and the Arab region. The Artistic Director is Adel Abdel Wahab. For me, it was a great opportunity to be in a transnational environment with artists who make theatre that is really different from what we usually get in Egypt. We did nine days of performances, talks, and workshops with international and local trainers. And all this with a very small team. Working like this, you have to be in many places and do many things at once. When you are making a festival that has little resources and funding, it feels quite unstable all the time. In comparison, when we took our performance to Germany, it was a very different experience.

**Milena:** I come from a somewhat different background. Both of my parents work in theatre so I had no chance to escape it. First, I wanted to study something far away from the so familiar theatre context so I studied Middle Eastern studies in Berlin. I went to study abroad in Beirut and there I ended up at *Zoukak Theatre*. Back to Berlin, I worked at Haus der Kulturen der Welt for two years, where I gathered experience working internationally and interdisciplinarily. I decided to go back to Lebanon in 2019 which was fateful timing, starting with the uprising and the revolution, then Corona, and then the explosion. So I struggled a bit. But now the circle is closing and I am working again with [Zoukak](#). For me they are a very interesting organisation: a socio-cultural theatre with flat hierarchies, which, coming from Germany and from a German theatre context, has been very refreshing. It's almost the opposite of what Nada was saying. Coming from a German institutional structure, which sometimes feels a bit stuck, into this completely new world, I found possibilities and new spaces opened up. I continue working here and I also chose to study Art History and Curating at the American University Beirut, looking at theatre in interaction with other disciplines as well.

**Some of you have already touched upon the impact of Covid-19. How have you experienced the last one and a half years? How did the outbreak of the pandemic affect your working and living environments?**

**Nada:** It's been crazy. Just before it was even understood that there was a pandemic, I had applied for a job with the Goethe Institut in Cairo. Starting in March 2020, I went to work there physically for two weeks and then: 'home office.' Everything shut down and no one was going anywhere. All my travel plans were cancelled. At the Goethe Institut, I had to start from scratch because we couldn't do what they usually do. At first, it was stagnant because it was not clear that this pandemic would persist for so long. We did not know how or whether to spend money or make plans. So we did a [Digital Residency](#) Program for artists who incorporate digital technology in their works. The other project was about offering a physical space for artists in Cairo at the Goethe [Institut](#). We decided to offer the auditorium to solo artists for rehearsals. This became a long term thing because one of the things that artists always need is space. These two projects focus on process (versus product): How to support artistic processes while other entities usually look for specific artistic products and also cultural funding often follows quite distinct agendas. I have been trying to support the artistic process and development as best as I can with the resources that I have.

Meanwhile, the 2020 edition of *Theater Is a Must* was postponed and the 2021 edition became hybrid. The aim was to keep the international identity of the festival and although we could not bring people to Egypt physically, we wanted them to be there nonetheless. So we had online workshops where, for example, somebody in Switzerland or in the UK would give a workshop remotely. We had a local trainer who coordinated with the artists from abroad prior to the festival so they became a duo. The public event regulations in Egypt are different and not as strict as in Europe. It has been possible to host events and physical workshops as long as you are taking care. Complete lockdowns were rare and short. Otherwise, it has mostly been business as usual, while we do follow the protocol, wear masks, socially distance and so on.

**Milena:** For me, things started to change the moment when I decided to move to Lebanon. I went in September 2019 and I started working with the interdisciplinary festival *homeworks* at Ashkal Alwan. The opening of the festival happened to be on the night of the revolutionary uprising. In October 2019, things already got completely mixed up. As a freelancer, being in a new country, although knowing it for a few years, I started 'swimming.' It was an interesting time, because from this moment on, all art institutions stopped working as usual and started bringing people into the streets, creating different kinds of performances and moments of interaction in public space. Art was emerging everywhere, reclaiming the streets. After a few weeks, the Corona virus arrived and shut everything down. At the same time, the economic crisis hit Lebanon and with hyperinflation the art institutions, which are not supported by the

government, got crushed. For a while, everyone was in shock. I literally just sat there and waited not knowing what to do.

Then again, similar to Egypt, life in Lebanon during Covid is not heavily restricted. I began to do research on reclaiming public space through artistic interventions. I got inspired by the protests because it was something I had never experienced before. Then summer came and people had just started to plan again. It was possible to rehearse with restrictions. But then in August, the explosion in Beirut just destroyed everything. Corona had already taken so much from the art scene and now this incident raised the question how we can plan ahead at all if something like this can happen at any moment. That was ten months ago but it feels like almost yesterday. Most art institutions including the theatre I work with got damaged. A donation campaign of the ITI helped Zoukak financially. But it takes a long time to get things fixed because everything has to be imported and things are too expensive due to the hyperinflation. Although it feels impossible at times, art is still popping up everywhere. Many people in the theatre scene are currently not planning so much on doing their own productions but they rather focus on connecting with each other and on sharing resources. I currently work on a mentorship program for young emerging artists helping them to produce, teaching them skills, and in the end also giving them hope for staying in theatre. So I feel like this year is a phase of trying to get around, trying to connect, to help each other survive. We are waiting for the vaccination as things are slowly opening again.

**Moutaz:** Reversely, I got stuck in Germany last year. I thought I would come here only for a couple of weeks, but then everything closed down. No flights. Then, my Syrian passport expired and I could not get a new one so I could not move.

For our work, we looked for alternatives, moved online, but it was not easy. Of course, we can get used to online meetings and training. But how to convince artists and other people to attend online workshops or events? Everyone started screening movies, music, and also theatre in the first month. There were so many offers online. We also organized online events at the beginning, but at some point, we had to also organise physical workshops again with health and safety regulations. Not all the people cared and wore masks, even if we asked them to. I was like: what to do? Especially regarding the situation of the kids in the camps. It is a big responsibility and no one else works with them.

Another project I currently work on with Goethe Institut is about building environmental awareness. In Iraq, we have suffered ongoing wars for decades and we also have a lot of pollution. A lot of rivers will dry out. In a few years, there might not be any rivers in Iraq. How can we get the people with power and influence to recognise and discuss this issue? It is not enough to lecture people about the environment. We realized that explaining it in an academic way does not work. Through [Guan Eden](#), we bring together artists and activists to

work together on a campaign, for example to raise awareness for climate change in schools and in public spaces. Last year we supported five campaigns and we are still continuing to do so. This way people can learn about important topics through theatre, music, or contemporary art.

**Valia:** When the pandemic hit, I was doing a one-month dance residency in India. I went alone and was in India for the first time. I didn't know anyone there. We had 24 hours to decide whether we would stay or leave, while staying might mean staying for the next four months or so. So I decided to leave. My flight to London got cancelled, but I managed to get a flight back to Athens where my family lives, just in time before they closed all the borders down. I will say that I found myself quite lucky as I ended up spending a lot of time with my family after having been away from home for six years.

During the first lockdown, I had a lot of ups and downs mentally. But I also came back to working on [kandaka.blog](https://www.kandaka.blog), a blog about art and politics, which I co-run. There, we developed an online residency called 'Kinotita' which means 'community' in Greek. We offered online sessions for free, including yoga, breathing and creative writing lessons, history, dance, and drama therapy sessions. I led sessions based on improvisation, which were all about relieving your mind and your body from all the craziness happening around. I went back to London because I had to move flats in London and then went back to Greece. It was all very hectic. After that, I got involved with a theatre company called *Mistaken Identity* as an actor and writer on a piece about domestic abuse. We showed it online at a student festival. Ideally, we would have liked it to be a very physical kind of theatre piece with a lot of music, but obviously that was not going to happen. So it ended up becoming a small film. Now that we have come out of lockdown, we are developing the piece for the stage. I also did an immersive site-specific show with a company called Persona Collective, for which we occupied a building in London, which is going to be turned into a luxury hotel very soon. I have been quite lucky in that I was able to work on projects during this time. But for many, especially the emerging artists, it has been very hard. You are just getting on your feet and then this happens and it feels like you have nothing.

**You all have experience with the conceptualization and the realization of cultural events and gatherings. What has motivated you to join the Atelier for Young Festival Managers as participants in this particular time? Some of you participate remotely, some will be on site in Dusseldorf. What concerns and expectations do you bring with you into this hybrid gathering of peers?**

**Valia:** I was involved with the [NEAP](#) of the ITI, the network of emerging art professionals. And I actually visited Dusseldorf last October to help find a venue for the Atelier Düsseldorf /Theater der Welt. Ironically, now I am not going to Düsseldorf. I think that a shared experience among this generation might be to perform several different roles within the arts and within theatre. I may consider myself primarily a performer in a theatre, but I am also very interested in coordination and in everything that happens backstage. Nowadays, it seems necessary to be able to do a bit of everything rather than being super specialized. I think it is in the air of this generation. That's how I sense it anyway.

**Nada:** Honestly, I am quite tired of the online formats at the moment. Obviously, they have saved a lot in light of the current situation. But there is a very fine line between ruining things by adapting them for an online format and actually doing something that makes sense online. This line still appears blurry and we don't have a great handle on it yet. I wish we could just take what we've learned from this time and incorporate it in our lives, but that we are not just going to keep doing all this just because it is possible or as if we can't do it differently ever again. What we have learned is that online formats are important sometimes and they will come with us when this danger stops looming over us as. People have become more comfortable with the technologies. For example, they make things easier for international collaboration. Still, my hope is that we're going to see each other and work together in real life, that we will have physical meetings and see performances together rather than cameras showing empty seats. It's just all very sad, at least for me.

**Milena:** I totally agree with this point. Somehow working with each other internationally without always depending on borders and visas and moving things into the virtual world was already relevant before the pandemic. We just had to learn it the hard way now. I agree with Nada that I am sick of Zoom meetings. And I am still looking forward to the Atelier. Half of the participants are going to be there and half of the participants are going to be online. I am super excited to meet like-minded people from all over the world and share experiences. Personally, I have experience working in strong institutional structures, especially in Germany, where it was always clearly defined what I had to do. Now I feel like I am just at the beginning of figuring out what I want to do and what I think is important. I look forward to sharing my ideas in an international context and to get feedback on it. I am now starting my Masters in curating so it is the perfect timing for me to take part in the Atelier.

**Moutaz:** In general, I also see the positive side of online activities. Normally, people who cannot fly or who cannot get a visa, would be excluded. But now everyone can be part of the experience. It is a great opportunity to meet people, to talk to them and to learn from their

experiences, to network with artists and different organizations, companies, theatres, and to understand their different ways of working.

**Thank you all for taking the time to share your viewpoints with us. We wish you all an inspiring time at the [Atelier Düsseldorf / Theater der Welt](#).**

*The interview was conducted by Maria Rößler and Stella Jacobs (ITI), Monday, 14 June, 5 PM*

**Milena Gehrt** studied History and Culture of the Middle East at Freie Universität Berlin due to her passion for contemporary art and art history of the Islamic cultures. Her interest in art and politics led her to focus her academic and professional pursuits on the cultural, aesthetic, social, and political contexts of the Middle East and the Arab world. Milena worked as a project assistant for several festivals and exhibitions at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Right now she is working with Zoukak Theatre as a project coordinator in Beirut and will start her Masters in Art History and Curating at the American University Beirut in the upcoming fall.

**Moutaz Abdulrahman** is a cultural manager working with Goethe Institute Iraq. He has studied media in Damascus, Syria, and Theatre in Oran, Algeria. He has extensive experience both in media and art production in Syria and Iraq. For the past years, his work has focused on cultural projects with a social dimension: for example, he planned and implemented the Goethe project “Yalla Shano” to introduce theatre and performing arts to children and youth in refugee camps in Kurdistan. Similarly, he planned and implemented the projects “Ideas Box, “Guan Eden” and other projects, all concentrating on using arts as a tool for social transition and dialogue.

**Nada Abdel Wahab** is a Cultural Manager and Theater Practitioner, graduated from the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Alexandria. She was working as an actor and a trainer in the Egyptian National Project of “Theater of the Oppressed”, before she started working as the programme coordinator of Theater Is A Must forum. 2018 she became the executive director of Hewan Company for Independent Theater and Performing Arts and Theater Is A Must forum in Alexandria. The forum is mainly concerned with presenting contemporary political and socio-political theater productions from the MENA region and Europe created in the wake of the Arab Spring. As a member of the Bosch Alumni Network, she was part of “The Round Table Funding Structures” project in 2019. Nada Abdelwahab is now a member of the Goethe-Institut Cairo’s cultural programme department team.

**Valia Katsi** is a performer, theatre-maker and writer. Her work is mainly informed by physical theatre and dance canon. Her BA was in International Relations and Arabic at SOAS, University of London, and so she is wanting to create theatre that is socially and politically-conscious and addresses the inequalities in the theatre industry and the world more generally. She also co-runs a multilingual blog ([www.kandaka.blog](http://www.kandaka.blog)) that uses different visual artistic mediums like photography, illustration, film, music and writing to shed light on global issues relating to intersectional feminism and alternative forms of activism.