

Tunisian activists take to the streets with art



Fanni Raghman Anni performing Talaith Nikat condemning death penalty on Jan. 15, 2015.
(Courtesy: Fanni Raghman Anni)

By Asma Ajroudi | Al Arabiya News
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Post revolution Tunisia is all too familiar with protest – usually through demonstrations - but one group of activists are using the power of street art to get their message across.

Calling themselves “[Fanni Raghman Anni](#)” (Arabic for “My Art in Spite of Myself”), the group simply scouts the streets of Tunisia bringing theater and drama to random passers-by. “It was an idea that started among five people who were secretly taking part in politics and civil society under Ben Ali,” Seifeddine Jlassi, the leader of the group, told Al Arabiya News.

Fanni Raghman Anni performing Thalaith Nikat to criticize death penalty and child suicide.

(Courtesy: Fanni Raghman Anni)

“Some of us were drama graduates, some were fine arts graduates, and some were simply unemployed,” said Jlassi, who is a fine arts graduate. “We wanted to come up with new forms of protests, new forms of expressions and entertainment even, and performs them in alternative places such as the central market or simply the streets.”

Street art was rare of before the revolution, making Fanni Raghman Anni among the first groups to break the classic tradition of on-stage-performing, exposing with that a new type of audience – a type that is usually detached from the arts scene.



“The type of people that attend our shows are not those who frequent the theater and cinema,” said Jlassi.

And impressing those spectators is not the group’s objective, emphasized the group leader, who is also the leader of the Union of Communist Youth of Tunisia (UJCT), the youth wing of the opposition Workers’ Party.

“Our concern is not how many people applauded us and said ‘bravo’ while watching. Our goal is to actually provoke the audience. How do we shock the spectator? How do we make him question and think about what he saw?”

The group performing "Getlough" (Arabic for "They Killed Him"), a tribute to slain opposition leader Chokri Belaid. (Courtesy: Fanni Raghman Anni)

“He doesn’t need to be pleased with the show. He needs to be shocked to question his existence, the country, the current situation. We are not concerned with entertaining people as much as we are concerned with igniting their minds about unveiled issues,” Jlassi added.

Three Principles

Earlier this month, the group performed a 15-minute theatrical show called “Thalaith Nikat” (Arabic for “Three Principles”) on the capital’s busy Habib Bourguiba Avenue - a busy street that was symbolic to the 2011 protests.

With simple outfits and make up, the young activists put up an abstract act criticizing capital punishment. “We are against the death penalty regardless of its form, time, and location. It is against humanity,” Jlassi explained.

The show also criticized - what they say - is an alarming rise in adolescent suicide rates in Tunisia - an issue that has made national news headlines.

“We documented 14 cases in the last two months alone,” Jlassi said.

There were 26 suicides in December last year, according to a recent report by the Tunisian Social Observatory.

NGO role

As well as aiming to expose ordinary people to arts, the group added on an NGO role in 2013 after receiving legal papers allowing them to operate officially as a cultural association and receive funding.

The young actors began to travel across poverty-stricken areas and marginalized neighborhoods in the country not only to perform, but to find young hidden talents.

“Our mission is to help young talents who come from marginalized areas and who could not find a chance to sing, or dance, or act,” Jlassi said.



The group would then train them, engage them in coming projects, and try to hook them up with opportunities to work on their performance.

“They boosted our self-confidence. They instilled in us the idea that we are not inferior and we do not lack anything,” said Ayoub Ben Slama, a 23-year-old tourism graduate who joined the group in 2014, and is set to become a mime actor.

“They let us express ourselves,” added Ben Slama, who also participated in Thalaith Nikat. “We are friends with our instructors. There is no hierarchy.”

“They are providing me with books and videos. They have truly enriched my life,” he added.

Work Abroad

Fanni Raghman Anni is also active abroad. Jlassi and a few of his group members traveled to a number of refugee camps and marginalized areas rehabilitating young people through teaching them arts and drama.

Taking part in various charity and volunteering missions, such as Action for Hope, Jlassi found himself in direct contact with Syrian war victims - even experiencing the terror inflicted by the frequent violence sometimes.

Describing his “most unforgettable experience,” Jlassi told Al Arabiya News that he will never forget the first time he witnessed a bomb explosion.

“I was with children in a sports hall in Tripoli, Lebanon. We were blasting music and dancing. All the sudden, a bomb went off in a mosque near us,” said Jlassi.



Seifeddine Jlassi entertaining children at a Syrian refugee camp in Tripoli, Lebanon.

(Courtesy: Seifeddine Jlassi)

“So strong was the blast, that the windows were shattered. I was terrified for the kids and for myself too because this is was my first experience [with war].”

“But the children continued to dance and told me ‘don’t be scared. It is just an explosive device or a car bomb somewhere. Just carry on,’” he added. “A nine-year-old now considers bombings and dead people normal occurrences.”

Jlassi has recently been awarded and honored for being one of the Arab world’s best young volunteers by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program for his work in the Arab Youth Volunteering For a Better Future initiative.

[Read Also: MBC Hope and UNV program honor Arab Youth.](#)

Activism

Human rights activism is usually associated with round-table discussions, and workshops, and that is why the Tunisian youth refrain from joining this field, explained rights activist Anis Ben Sultane.

But Fanni Raghman Anni is dressing activism with arts, and with that reinventing the culture of activism in Tunisia, added Ben Sultane who worked with Jlassi in the [Arab Institute for Human Rights](#).

“Seif [Jlassi] is an activist before being an artist. It is true that his professional training was in arts, but he handled activism training at the institute like a natural,” said Ben Sultane. “He did not find a problem fitting in.”

The activist worked with Jlassi on one of the group’s earlier performances, Fanni Min Ajl Haqqi (Arabic for “My Art for my Right”), which highlighted issues of freedom of speech and was faced with “immense success” that prompted a second part continuation.



Fanni Raghman Anni performing "Harrerni" (Arabic for "Free Me") in Beirut.

(Courtesy: Fanni Raghman Anni)

When asked whether the old generation of activists are keen on such an innovative approach, Ben Sultane said, “Activism is a principle that a person adopts for life. You won’t find an activist that would come against a group that is entering the hearts of marginalized areas to deliver its message.”

“An artist’s role is to plant happiness in the society and to bring about innovative ways to instill this culture to help in the democratic transition,” he added. “So we share the same vision, and the same issue.”

“If I stopped a random person on the street and started speaking about human rights, he is going to ask me to leave him alone,” said Ben Slama. “But if he is going to see a performance he is going to stick around and watch and understand.”

Obstacles

But not everyone shares Ben Sultane’s enthusiasm about the group’s arts activism. A day before “Thalaith Nikat” was due to take place, the group’s headquarters - a room inside Jlassi’s apartment, was torched.

“The office and its belongings, including the computer, archives, documents, and camera are gone,” recounted Jlassi.

“We have different enemies. We cannot accuse anyone. We can only question. Why January 14 specifically? Why a day before the show? Why right after we spoke to the media about the show and our stance from death penalty?”

Tunisia marked the fourth anniversary of the 2011 revolution on January 14.

Fanni Raghman Anni HQ was torched a day before of the Talaith Nikat show. (Courtesy: Fanni Raghman Anni)



But that was not the first time the group was targeted. In 2013, the group was verbally and physically attacked by religious extremists during their performance of “Getlouh” (Arabic for “They Killed Him”), a tribute to the slain opposition leader Chokri Belaid.

A number of the audience was upset about the group’s lack of clothing and denounced the show as “indecent.” The actors were saved by police forces only to be later arrested on “public indecency” charges. They were only freed after a number of artists organized a campaign advocating for their release.

But such attacks do not discourage the young group from doing what they do, said Jlassi.

“We are an idea. So what if the papers and archives were burnt. It is a war of ideas.”

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