

Nooriyah 0:03

Love, lust, music, tarab, activism. These are some of the topics that artists are tackling at Shubbak Festival. Marhaba. I'm your host Nooriyah, and this podcast is a window on contemporary arts.

Nooriyah 0:36

Hello and welcome to the podcast of Shubbak Festival, the UK's largest biennial festival of contemporary Arab culture, showcasing new and unexpected voices alongside established artists. I'm your host Nooriyah and I'll be speaking to some of the brilliant artists that featured in this year's festival taking place in London and online. This is a four-part series published weekly so remember to follow Shubbak Festival on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to keep up with the latest updates.

Nooriyah 1:09

Explorations of love and lust took centre stage at Shubbak Festival this year. In this episode, I'll be speaking to Selma Dabbagh, editor of *We Wrote in Symbols*, a collection of writing on love and lust by Arab women writers. Then I'll be speaking with Lisa Luxx a queer writer, performer, essayist and activist of British Syrian heritage. At Shubbak Lisa performed *Eating the Copper Apple*, a 50 minute one-woman verse play that explores themes of love, identity, family and heritage. Both works resulted in daring challenges of preconceived narratives around heritage and identity, and explored how history affects the way individuals see themselves and the world around them.

Selma Dabbagh 2:08

They had just made love when he said, 'Love maker'. She waited a moment enough to regain a little confidence then said, 'Love maker, not lover?' and in a strong, clear voice, he replied, I heard him figure on the sofa, 'If you like'. He was still holding the tissue he had used to wipe himself a minute before. Then he repeated 'Love maker', and she repeated after him, 'Love maker', and he smiled and she smiled after him. It was approaching 2.30pm in the afternoon. Their first lunch breaker he realised, 'Our first lunch breaker.' She laughed. Not that she had any desire to laugh, but his presence made her feel so weak that she was close to tears at any moment, she considered leaving though she had only arrived at 2pm. He went on cheerfully, 'Icebreaker, pacemaker, salt shaker.' But she could only think of the sofa, which didn't end with a 'ker'. There he sat silently inviting her to say a word with the same rhyme, but all that floated back to him was a faint hum, which had begun again to issue from the walls and the furniture of the house. He had heard the sound before while sitting on the sofa, smoking an old cigarette and waiting for her. After a pause, he turned to her and he said, 'Law maker, note taker codebreaker' as she stayed quiet, silently searching for a word to offer him.

Nooriyah 3:36

This was a passage from Palestinian author Adania Shibli's *Without Rhyme*, one of the works featured in *We Wrote in Symbols*, a collection of writing on love and lust by Arab women writers from the past 3,000 years, edited by Selma Dabbagh and published by Saqi Books. The collection features a wide range of stories: a wedding night taking an unexpected turn, a woman on the run meeting her match at Dubai airport, and a carnal awakening occurring in a Palestinian refugee camp.

Selma Dabbagh 4:10

In terms of how the work speaks out, I'd say that it's something which deals with very universal human emotions those connected to love and lust.

Nooriyah 4:20

This is editor Selma Dabbagh speaking on the importance of collating these works by 75 different women.

Selma Dabbagh 4:27

It shows these writings over many millennia, possibly up to five millennia of writing on the subject by Arab women because Arab women were writing poetry way before novels or books were published by English language writers, for example, and I don't think that female literacy is very much connected with the region. I also wanted to show the huge diversity of voices, religions, languages, styles, humour etc, coming out of the area. So it's a very eclectic collection but it's a very, it's fun. It's funny it. Yeah. And it's quite daring. I mean, it's fairly explicit on points, which is something that readers may or may not feel comfortable with. But I think there's such a range of characters within it that there will probably be moments in time that any reader should be able to associate with.

Nooriyah 5:23

When she read the passages and short erotic poems from the anthology at Shubbak Festival in London, attendees could not help themselves but whistle, cackle or clap. I myself felt well romanced while sitting in the venue and the reading certainly garnered strong responses from the audience.

Audience member 5:43

It's beautiful to watch these women who historically have been silenced. And talking about specifically sexual things and just getting out there admitting the passion that is within them.

Audience member 5:56

As an Arab woman, it's been very enlightening and empowering to hear other Arab women talk about, you know, the subject of love and lust.

Audience member 6:08

What stuck out to me is that the old poetry is so sexually empowered in a way that I didn't expect. And I didn't think that was happening in that time. And um I'm curious about the lesbian poetry throughout time, and I was surprised to hear about a history of lesbianism throughout the Middle East even though I'm a lesbian, but I didn't know it was being written about.

Audience member 6:31

Sex is always something that I felt a lot of shame around and sexuality as well. And I feel like my family and and people around me often use it as a way to say that I've been too Westernised so I'm I'm disconnected from our culture. So reading these kind of ancient texts from our part of the world about sex is just so liberating and really amazing.

Nooriyah 7:00

Erotic poetry emerged from the Arab world as early as the 5th Century CE. For this reason, the book features classical poems written by women in the pre-Islamic period, as well as prior to 1492, the end of Muslim rule in Spain.

Selma Dabbagh 7:20

Lay off you can't turn me on with cuddle, a kiss or scent. Only a thrust rocks out my strings until the ring on my toe falls in my sleeve, and my blues fly away.

Nooriyah 7:33

This is a poem by Dana bint Mas-hal , who wrote her poetry during the Umayyad period, between 661 and 750 CE, one of the four major caliphates established after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, located in what was modern day Syria.

Selma Dabbagh 7:51

What's interesting about her account is that she was the wife of a poet. Apparently, Ajaj her husband, he failed to consummate their marriage. So she complained to the courts. And at the time, there was an ability for women to seek divorce on the basis of non-consummation. And according to some people I've spoken to, but I couldn't find a source for this, it was also a non sexual satisfaction, which is quite a radical idea. So she went to the court. And then she also wrote this poem, which is, you know, not particularly sexy, but it's quite, quite angry.

Nooriyah 8:24

The Umayyad Empire became one of the largest in history in terms of area, incorporating vast territories, such as the Maghreb, and even the Iberian Peninsula, that ruled over a vast multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population, whereby Christians and Jews were allowed to practice their own religion. After the collapse of this caliphate, remaining members established themselves in Cordoba, which became a world centre of science, medicine, philosophy and invention, contributing to the start of the Golden Age of Islam. Most importantly, this era is also considered a formative period for Islamic art.

Selma Dabbagh 9:07

There were writers like Abdelwahab Bouhdiba who, in his book, Islam and Sexuality, is saying that there were points like, for example, in the Abbasid and Andalusian periods, where the idea about women's sexuality was that it was a force that was not just viewed as something that had to be contained, which is more of a later construction, but something which had to be satisfied, particularly within the context of a coupling or a marriage, because it was it created a harmony within the couple and that harmony within that relationship would would reflect on harmony and society as a whole.

Nooriyah 9:42

Selma says that after this historical period, there is a long silence from female writers for over 500 years before more contemporary works start being published. Therefore, We Wrote in Symbols features modern writers like Leila Slimani, Isabella Hamed, Hanan Al Shaykh, Hoda Barakat and even some who have never published work before to create a truly eclectic mix of voices.

Selma Dabbagh 10:08

Nada El Amin is a Sudanese Romanian poet. Her mother on the Romanian side is of Levantine descent. In her own bio, she says her mother taught her that pleasure is her birthright and her body is her own territory. El Amin continues to explore poetry in Italian, Romanian, Dutch and rudimentary Arabic and Greek. So this is her poem, which is called Djinn. 'Last night, someone was in my room. The yellow one. I heard him move towards my bed. With sweaty hands, I tried to turn on the light. He moved so fast, I could not see the features in his face. He flipped me over, face in my pillow. He stretched on top of me, his cheek on my cheek, collarbone cutting into my shoulder blades, belly in my lumbar curve, penis

pointing left on my sacrum, knees painful and bony, in my lower thigh, his toenails scratching my ankles. He smelled of burnt incense, and his breath was shallow, and rasping. My right eye could see the tip of his nose and the curve of his wing, seed and knowledge filling every corner of my heart.'

Nooriyah 11:34

For Selma, starting this project meant connecting with her own heritage and re-shaping the reductionist narratives that impact the way the Middle East and North Africa may be perceived.

Selma Dabbagh 11:45

I am half English, half Palestinian. I come from these two worlds and I'm always very interested at trying to find ways to see how they connect. And to try and do that through the language of love. There seems to have been this kind of crossing over of ideas between the Arab world and Europe, like looking at each other over the centuries. And now it's like people from the West, they sort of look at the Arab world, that history and society has always been static and homogenous and restrictive and that's always been the way. And I was just trying to break up that idea, as well as to see in a way how things can be learned from the region, because I think that that's also not in people's outlook when they look at the Arab world. It's been more of a question over the centuries of the two sides, infusing each other like through the Mediterranean with a sea of ideas, stories, philosophies. So the language of love is just one way of looking at that.

Nooriyah 12:48

Love and lust can be perceived as a contentious topic in certain areas of the world. But Selma's research for *We Wrote in Symbols* brought her to understand that conservative attitudes in the Middle East have roots in Europe.

Selma Dabbagh 13:03

I think it's really important that people realise that a lot of the restrictiveness is a legacy of not just constructions of Islam, but also on colonial laws, and a way of policing sexuality, which was influenced by Victorian or Protestant or puritanical outlooks, which came from England and France, and were reintroduced. And then also later, one writer who I quote in the introduction Saha Ahmed, she's talking about how there weren't words, for example, in mediaeval Arabic for bisexuality, because that was sort of seen as being the most common way of being. So it didn't need a label, other sexualities were defined. So you have a more fluid approach to sexuality existing at points in time, which then got regimented, and policed both through the colonial legislation and then it seems also later on in the 20th century, through the first translations of Freud into the region, which brought about this, this new terminology. And sometimes the terminology would then become framed as a problematic as something that the society had to combat. We talk about a post colonial era, but we're still living with a lot of the legacy of colonialism in many different ways and some of that has to be confronted.

Nooriyah 14:25

We Wrote in Symbols travels through time and space to explore what love and lust means to different women. And what Selma learned through this work is that there's a certain level of universality across these recorded experiences.

Selma Dabbagh 14:39

I learned that it's that you're never really alone in terms of what you're feeling, that some of the feelings have been felt throughout all kinds of different circumstances. I also think that there is an element of things being prohibited that makes them more desirable. And there's something in the sexual that makes people feel freed up if there's a sense of voyage and being placed in a new situation. I think that comes into a lot of fantasy as well. It's a part of your mind that naturally wants to explore and to go into different terrains. And I think in an era of boundaries and borders and toxic nationalisms, it's something that we should all be celebrating more, on a human level, not on a virtual level, not on a pornographic level, but just through the words of artists, so that we can discover that part of ourselves, which I think has become very blunted by over commercialisation of it. And I think there's something still about the book as a medium, which is very private, as is this act, as are these feelings, that should continue to be celebrated.

Nooriyah 16:01

One of the contributors to *We Wrote in Symbols* is Lisa Luxx, a queer writer, performer, essayist, and activist of British Syrian heritage.

Lisa Luxx 16:11

So I wrote two poems in it actually. So one is kind of exploring how lust and phobia can exist on the same binary and sometimes that binary collapses, and they exist in one moment. So it's called 'Arachnophobia' and it's this kind of notion of sitting by the fireside with a woman I was longing for, and realising that our bodies have become like this giant spider. And so it's kind of all about this, our fear of our longing somehow. And then, the other poem is inspired by studying more and more about the history of the word *sahaqia*. And the notion that our word lesbian historically comes from the root 'to grind', and how we you know, sexuality so often, and the erotic is so often kind of tethered only to like this physical movement, or something very physical, when actually like in a lesbian experience, the erotic is so much more than that. It's these deep bonds of camaraderie and, and friendship and laughter and we kind of exist in a language that hasn't been written yet.

Nooriyah 17:18

Lisa presented her own work of art at Shubbak, *Eating the Copper Apple* a 50 minutes, one-woman verse play that explores themes of love, identity, family and heritage, taking audiences on a voyage from West Yorkshire to the borders of Syria it asks, 'How do we become who we are?' Here is the opening monologue from the play.

Lisa Luxx 17:43

'My body may be here. But my soul is in Syria, he said, and a dormant world lifted its head deep within my cells and remembered. Sat on a foam stuffed stiff chair in a hall that could be anywhere, Rami, who had been refugeeed, smiled shy, and my body may be here, but my soul is in Syria, he said, pointing left. And I realised my soul must be something I had to go collect. This was the same summer that Brexit made the Spanish florist weep on the street. While Mahmoud the shopkeeper straightened newspapers, front pages full of rubber dinghies crossing the Mediterranean sea and politicians announced borders needed to be closed to protect us from refugees, and then quickly shouted, "Trade its about British trade". And all our parents agreed. And I shook, learning we identify most with whichever allegiance comes under threat. For the first time since I was born, I was Syrian again.' It explores identity from the perspective of those displaced by diaspora, by foster care, by adoption and it follows me going out into

the world to seek my reflection after experiencing all those displacements. There was a particular time when for us in England, the politicians here and the media were using the refugee crisis as Brexit propaganda. And so all of a sudden we were flooded with all of these images of Syria. It was essentially the first time that I had been flooded with images of Syria and with that came feelings that I was having towards Syria that I'd never experienced before. It was something on a DNA level was waking up. So Amin Malouf has this quote from his book on identity, which is: 'You will identify most with whichever allegiance comes under threat.' And all of a sudden, I was identifying as being Syrian, which, you know, was the first time since I was born, that I was considered Syrian. I say, I went out into the world, I tried to get to Syria, I couldn't get over the border, I ended up living in Lebanon. And there I ended up finding a man by a lighthouse who looked just like me. I believe that the soul is something that doesn't exist in the body, but it exists out in the world, and you have to go out into the world to collect it. And it's about that journey.

Nooriyah 20:52

The performance is not only about her national identity, but also about her personal history, which is hidden behind the play's title.

lisa luxx 21:01

The oldest mirrors made by humans were made from copper, and they were made in the Arab region. And therefore if you're seeking your ancestral identity, you are seeking your reflection in copper, and the apple is about the Garden of Eden. Why I became very, very, very interested in the Garden of Eden is that a psychoanalyst called Erich Fromm. And he speaks of how, in the Garden of Eden, when they ate of the tree of knowledge, they did not see themselves naked and become ashamed of their nudity, because that's very unlikely. That's a very kind of modern take on such a tale. They ate of knowledge and became self aware. They became aware that they were not unified. It was akin to when a baby looks in the mirror, as Jacques Lacan would say, when a baby looks in the mirror, that's the moment when they become self aware and realise that they're not inherently connected to their mother. I'm very interested in that, in our exquisite separation from each other. And how that is our core anxiety, as humans is, is our lack of unity to one another. I consider that particularly in relationship to having been a child of foster care, who was separated from my mother, at day dot, very, very, very young.

Nooriyah 22:18

The theme of love runs throughout the show, and serves as a way for the main character to truly find herself.

lisa luxx 22:25

You know, I think the big question that the play is asking, or one of the big questions that the play is asking is: Can love fill the gap where identity never grew? Because I love my family, I love my family who you know, you can call my adopted family, they are my family, I love them so much. But it doesn't mean that love is all there is to it. Like there's so much more to interrogate about how we build our sense of self. And there's also a love story in it. There's a romance in it with a character called the woman like a sea. And why was she the woman like a sea, because I'm very interested in how, you know, when we experience romance it brings up all of our, all of our childhood experiences of care, they kind of come to the surface and we enact them out somehow. And so if the land is a father, then in order to get to him, I have to cross the sea. In order to understand who I am at the core and to understand the effect that these parents had on me, I have to love now. I have to love in the present to know my love in the past. 'A

woman like a sea. A woman whose longing spilled out of her salt water, flooded me. She drove us to Jbeil, where we dropped bhebik into one another's mouths. Mother birds feeding their young, hidden in a cave off the coastline while the seasons lapped us up. She drove me to parties, to dinners to her family home, she was where my longing came to be. My belonging, swimming in the deep blue of her sea. We laughed. We laughed swapping clothes and hiding all our kisses from authorities. She drove us on roads called Dimashq calling through her window for the shop boys to fill our car with Damascus papes, wara2leff taught me the difference between Aleppo Zaatar and all the rest. But the whole time, my stomach was feeling unease. Once I clocked that the wing mirror on my side of her car was gone. At some point it had broken clean off. She saw no reflection when she looked across. So we navigated ourselves lopsided, cranking up Oum Kalthoum, and translating the words as the mountains passed by our open windows, and I called across the borders of Earth. Oh soul. Where have you gone?

Nooriyah 25:42

With so much of her personal history on display, while producing this work of art, lisa had to tackle many internal demons.

lisa luxx 25:50

I've been developing the show for two and a half years. And that's been a period of excavating and excavating and excavating the effects of the developmental phase of my life on who I've become. And I feel like I might actually be about to release a lot of things that I have. I believe that we have like a pain identity. And that is we have a pain or a wound or a trauma or multiple ones and we, we form our identity around those. I can feel it, leaving my body. And it's been a long time that I've been holding on to it. Tamara, who is both my friend and the visual artist on the show, she said to me, you know, you have to acknowledge these things, so that they can leave your body. Because maybe this show is a moment of punctuation in your life, where all of these things that have dogged you for so long, you are going to let them be released finally, you know,

Nooriyah 26:45

Focused around the idea of redistributing wealth and opportunity in a conscious manner, lisa produced Eating the Copper Apple with an entirely female team, which makes part of what she calls the economy of sisterhood.

lisa luxx 26:59

A few years ago, I was due to publish my debut book, and then I found out that the editor of the publishing house had a number of rape crimes stacked underneath his belt. And it was in that moment that I felt that yes, he is an extreme example, but how many times am I writing about the pain of living within this patriarchy while men who have been benefiting time and time again, have been getting away with this, that and the other or have even just been gaining financial benefit from the patriarchy? And I started to think about, you know, how can we create localised currencies that aren't geographically based, but based on who we want to see who we want to share wealth with. So I've been working under this feminist mode of production for a few years now. And it was in the past year or so that it developed really into, including notions of politics of ease, feminist politics of ease, and kind of radical care, and how we actually dismantle our learned modes of production in order to to prioritise each other's wellbeing.

Nooriyah 28:07

The raw, gripping and relatable play left the audience members in a very reflective space, many shedding tears during and after the performance.

Audience member 28:16

I'm a big fan of Lisa Luxx's work. So I was really excited to come and see her perform, I was really blown away by it. It was really beautiful.

Audience member 28:24

So for me, it was really at the same time human and warm, but also quite disturbing because it got me thinking quite a lot about identity, what makes identity, what's my identity. Where are we from? And what are all the different pieces that make us.

Audience member 28:39

It brought up a lot of themes for me around the longing. And also, I think there's really great explorations of where social services have failed in the past and the importance of rooting young people and children not only in terms of attachment to their caregivers, but also in terms of attachment to their own identities.

Audience member 28:59

It was a very intense experience overall. It was so well performed and I was as someone with a mixed heritage going through a very intense journey myself. I was tearing up, I felt uplifted and I think I'm going home with a lot to think about.

Nooriyah 29:25

Selma and Lisa both looked to history, politics and their personal heritage to inform their art. Their contributions thus provided new insights around the meaning of identity to those who have attended Shubbak Festival this year. Love and lust can be experiences that shift not only one's own perception of the world they live in but, most importantly, the perception one has of themselves.

Nooriyah 29:56

Thank you for listening to the Shubbak Festival 2021 podcast series. Produced by Nooriyah and Gaia Caramazza. The music featured on this episode was produced by Bashir Honeini, you can find out more about Shubbak at shubbak.co.uk. And don't forget to like, subscribe and leave a review if you like this episode.