Cultural offensive: on an English road trip with Syria's artists, activists and exiles

For a week in June, Syrian writers and artists toured England, giving readings and workshops to promote Syria Speaks: Art and Culture From the Frontline, a book reflecting the country's new revolutionary culture.

Robin Yassin-Kassab July 10, 2014

From left, Dan Gorman, Malu Halasa, Yasmin Sedda, the driver Rasha, Khaled Khalifa, Khalil Younes and Robin Yassin-Kassab en route to Bristol. Courtesy Ruth Killick Publicity

In Bradford we met a woman who had tried as hard as she could to forget she was Syrian. We didn't discover her original trauma, but we heard its symptoms over a British-Pakistani curry. She hadn't spoken Arabic for

years, and never told anyone where she was from. Once a policeman detained her for an hour because she refused to tell him her origin.

In Bristol, on the other hand, we met a little old woman who, with her red hair and flowery dress, we might have mistaken for English. But she was a Damascene, and she wept when I read a description of her city. Afterwards she came to introduce herself. "I've lived in England for 30 years, and I didn't realise until the revolution that I had a fear barrier inside. Then I noticed I'd never talked about Syria. I'd tried not to even think about it. But those brave youths gave me courage; they gave me back my identity and my freedom."

So the Syrian revolution is alive and well in Bristol if not in Bradford, for this is where the revolution happens first, before the guns and the political calculations, before even the demonstrations – in individual hearts, in the form of new thoughts and newly unfettered words. Syria was once known as a "kingdom of silence" in which public discourse was irretrievably devalued by enforced lip-service to the regime and its propaganda pieties. As a result, many Syrians describe their first protest as an ecstatic event, a kind of rebirth.

Ossama Mohammed's story *The Thieves' Market* concerns a woman who attends the state's official demonstrations, until her friend is murdered for participating in an oppositional one. "I grew up," she says, "came of age, abandoned someone and was abandoned, on a march that finished yesterday." When that coerced march ended and a thousand new ones began, Syrians found unprecedented liberation simply by expressing honest opinions in the presence of their neighbours, by breaking the barriers of fear.

The documentary director and producer Itab Azzam describes the old cultural dispensation: "In Damascus, if you want to be a recognised artist, you have to be part of the system. The system is based on you being, or you being able to pretend to be, sophisticated enough." In 2011, many of the

established sophisticates took the side of the regime, from the pop singer George Wassouf to the state intellectual par excellence Bouthaina Shaaban (a translator and writer as well as regime propagandist); but many others – from the poet Rasha Omran to the actress Mai Skaf – stood publicly with the savagely repressed protesters. More importantly, artists were now judged not by their position or prestige but by what they could contribute to a rapidly transforming society. "Ordinary" Syrians no longer sought permission to speak; they no longer craved entry to the Arab Writers' Union or other institutions of the state's official culture. Instead, culture exploded from the bottom up, through slogans, cartoons, dances and songs, through endless debate and contestation in the liberated areas, through free radio stations and independent newspapers produced and distributed even in besieged and constantly bombarded neighbourhoods.

Our tour of England was to promote *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture From the Frontline*, a book [Amazon.com] based on the assumption that the cultural revolution is indistinguishable from the political. It contains a broad range of genres to reflect the growth of engaged art, both highbrow and low, in revolutionary Syria.

There is work by Ali Farzat, the internationally celebrated cartoonist (whose fingers were broken by regime thugs), as well as by the cartoonists and poster makers of Kafranbel, the media-savvy village in southern Idlib province which almost nobody had heard of before 2011. There are agitprop posters from the Shaab as-Soori Aref Tareeq group and photographs from the Lens Young collective (anonymous and cooperative productions have flourished in the constrained security environment), alongside haunting canvases from Youssef Abdelke and Amjad Wardeh. Text by Sulafa Hijazi accompanies her nightmarish images – a woman giving birth to a gun; a weapon which is itself pregnant; a rosary of human heads – commentary on the cyclical aggression provoked by the state's repression.

Music is represented by the text of *Come On, Bashar, Get Out!*, the song sung in Hama by Ibrahim Qashoush before the regime ripped out his vocal cords and dumped his corpse in the river Orontes; and in an illuminating essay by the rapper Hani Al-Sawah on facing the new criticism. "The street is not an ignorant listener," he writes. "It can distinguish the good from the bad."

There's poetry by Aboud Saeed, the provocative, defiantly working-class Facebook poet from Manbij, as well as by more established figures Golan Haji and Faraj Bayrakdar. Bayrakdar spent 14 years in regime prisons, and prison literature (most notably *The Shell* by Mustafa Khalifa) was a well-established Syrian genre even before the revolution.

Syria Speaks contains an extract from Dara'a Abdullah's memoir Loneliness Pampers Its Victims as well as Fadia Lazkani's account of a search for her detained brother which is really a journey towards accepting his death. Yara Badr, who as a child was robbed of her power of speech when her parents were taken from their home, contributes a text. And the political thinker Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, imprisoned for 16 years, is interviewed on the role of the revolutionary intellectual. "I believe that the new culture will take shape around the experience of resistance to the Assads' tyranny," he says, "but also … resistance to the emerging forms of domination."

What else? Much more, including scripts from Masasit Maté's *Top Goon* puppet shows – a runaway internet phenomenon. And an interview with Assaad Al-Achi, a procurer of equipment for the citizen journalists of the Local Coordination Committees. Plus the activist Mazen Darwish's *Letter for the Future*, smuggled out of Damascus Central Prison as an acceptance speech for the 2013 Bruno Kreisky Prize for Human Rights. And the cultural activist Dan Gorman's fascinating discussion with the critic Miriam Cooke on dissident arts, from popular debke to Emergency Cinema.

It was Dan, as director of Reel Festivals, who organised our book tour around the English regions, starting with a full house at Rich Mix in East London. Khaled Khalifa, Syria's most accomplished novelist and one of the most important in the world, began the evening by reading from his new novel *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*. He read in Arabic, and then I read the same passage in English translation. Malu Halasa, co-editor of the book and author of several others, read an irreverent flash fiction piece by Rasha Abbas. The artist and writer Khalil Younes read from *Chicken Liver*, a compassionate account of his relationship with a childhood friend, an Alawi he calls Hassan, who now fights for the regime.

The next day we headed west to lunch in uncharacteristic English sunshine on the river Avon, and then to Bristol, where we met the aforementioned little old lady.

Throughout the tour, we delivered workshops on behalf of English PEN (the writers' defence organisation) to a variety of audiences. I gave one at an East London sixth-form college (the students, several of them Muslim, were well-versed in Syria's Islamic dynasties but knew little of its modern history – and none knew that Syria produced the world's first alphabet).

Khaled Khalifa delivered his workshop to an audience of migrants at Bristol's Malcolm X Centre. Like Khaled, some came from rural Aleppo – there was a man from Afreen and another from Manbij. "They asked me about the olive trees and the seasons," Khaled grinned afterwards. "I love these people."

Khaled usually lives in Barzeh, a devastated Damascus suburb. In the tour's quieter moments he directed a puzzled gaze at the well-ordered streets and well-fed pedestrians and gasped at the surrealism of it all. I remember coming out of Palestine after a three-week visit, at a time of cold tension. As I arrived in Jordan, I noticed parts of my brain untensing, and understood just how much attention I'd been paying to the towers, checkpoints and armed men. How much stranger, then, for Khaled, who's

spent three years in the hottest of wars.

Our event in Oxford was at the Ashmolean Museum, amid the ancient Levantine statuary. That night we slept in Keble College, where I was once a student. The hot weather broke in a violent storm which lit the sky blue and cast furious thunderbolts. Again I thought of Khaled, and of the planes which hover above his house to fire missiles south at Qaboon. A bewilderment or exasperation breaks across him when he speaks of it. "Every time I leave the house, I look at my things for the last time … But what can I do? It's my country, my revolution. My situation is no different to any other Syrian's. As a writer, it's important to stay and to reflect the reality of what is happening." The cost, however, is high. "I go home at night now." He widens his eyes in wonder. "I never used to. This has changed me. I'm discovering a new Khaled."

I set off to deliver a workshop in Wigan in the north-west. The participants were teenagers, bright and eager, but also reflecting the general lack of knowledge of Syria. One boy was surprised to learn the country contains cities; another believed "it had always been war there".

From Wigan on to Liverpool, a proudly northern city revived and bustling after the death of its industry, and Khaled's favourite stop of the tour. "It's a different culture here, stronger," he winked to a backdrop of hen parties and street musicians. The *Syria Speaks* event was part of a larger Liverpool Arab Arts Festival. Afterwards, there was a performance of *Sarmada*, a play based on the 2011 novel by the Syrian writer Fadi Azzam.

Zaher Omareen, the *Syria Speaks* editor and essayist, was on our panel in Liverpool. He spoke about growing up in Hama, scene of the terrible 1982 massacre, and how he'd never dared to look up at the statues of Hafez Al-Assad. People believed there were cameras hidden in the stone eyes. In 2011 the statues came down and donkeys were paraded on the empty plinths.

Our first sight of Bradford was a white woman in shocking pink hijab and shalwar kameez. The Bradford trend more reported in the media is towards ethnic ghettoisation, though in the cosmopolitan city centre we didn't notice it. The faded architectural magnificence, the crumbling mills and warehouses, made it feel like Lahore circa 1800 – a place immensely wealthy until recently, with a definite edge in the air. The audience here was fully engaged but also the smallest of the tour. We were competing with the annual Bradford Festival. Bhangra and reggae music drifted through the doors of the Fuse Art Space.

Khaled spoke about his "fathers" – Dostoyevsky, Marquez, Faulkner. Do Syrian writers have Syrian fathers? Khaled mentioned a writer of an older generation, in negative terms – "A father must respect his children". The conversation turned to relations between fus-ha, standardised literary Arabic, the preserve of the educated, and a'miya, the dialect of the street.

Then Khalil Younes discussed his short film *Syria*, in which a needle is pushed repeatedly through skin, provoking an appalled response to mirror an expatriate Syrian's nauseous experience watching war videos from back home. He also showed his pen and ink drawings, some of which have become revolutionary icons. The picture of Hamza Bakour, the child whose lower face was blown off by a regime shell, seeks to remember, mourn and celebrate this boy, otherwise a single flash in an endless stream of martyrs. *Comb* – a bloodier version of an amputation instrument from the American Civil War – and *Our Saigon Execution* are attempts to universalise the Syrian predicament by linking it to struggles in other times and places.

Next morning we travelled farther north to Durham, a green, river-fed, cathedral town, where we were joined at our university reading by the British-Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir. She read from her new novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, and expressed powerful solidarity with the Syrian people.

Finally the long drive back to London and our final event, at Waterstone's bookshop in Piccadilly. Tonight we were in the company of the fearless Samar Yazbek. She read from *Gateways to a Parched Land*, an account of a regime assault on Saraqeb, and of a meeting with resistance fighters, which depicts the strange coexistence of terrible violence with "tolerance, altruism and dialogue". Characteristically, Samar gives over half the piece to her interviewees. Such is her method in the much-translated *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, a personal narrative that nevertheless includes the perspectives of defected soldiers, grassroots activists, the tortured and detained, the refugees.

Her approach is an antidote to ubiquitously lazy coverage of Syria's revolutionary trauma. Far too many journalists, academics and politicians stick to the pre-existing narratives they feel comfortable with. They twist and bend reality to fit their discourses; in doing so they sometimes find it necessary to make stuff up. As a matter of course they ignore, or fail to see, lived experience on the ground. In this way they missed the miracle of Syria's nonsectarian freedom movement, the dominant trend throughout 2011 among poorer and "religious" classes as much as among elites. They ignored this sure sign of Syrian political maturity, long before the rise of Salafist militias, in favour of the Orientalist story of eternally and causelessly warring sects. Others cleaved to the Islamophobic story, with its overgeneralising urge, or to the various conspiracy stories, or to the simplistic chess-game-of-states story, in which America is bad, so Russia and Iran must be good. In every case, the Syrian people are written out of the story.

Seldom are they permitted to represent themselves on the world stage, as agents of history, as architects of their own destiny, as contradictory, imperfect, struggling human beings. *Syria Speaks*, in a small way, aims to remedy this imbalance.

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