Clowns put smiles on children’s faces as carnival comes to the streets of Shatila

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS COME TO SPREAD HAPPINESS

By Christina Foerch
Special to The Daily Star

To have a cheering crowd of people dancing and playing music in the dark, narrow streets of Shatila is quite an unusual sight. But last week, a group of people turned the streets of Beirut’s biggest Palestinian refugee camp, which looks like a large slum rather than a Copacabana-like beach walk, into a place where carnival is celebrated.

And carnival time it was, at least for one day. Many Palestinian children joined the group of clowns, musicians and street actors from abroad and from Lebanon in their street procession to have fun.

The carnival rotates to different camps all over Lebanon during the course of one week. It is organized by the network of children libraries located in the camps, and the Palestinian cultural organization Jana.

Every year in April, this network organizes one week of activities related to artistic learning and creative expression, which is geared toward the hundreds of Palestinian kids. The carnival usually focuses on street theater and clown presentations, on music and on the happy procession in the streets of the camps. Every year, artists from abroad volunteer to participate.

A group of Italian clowns came to Lebanon for the first time this year. In their baggage they brought red plastic noses and colorful clothes, as well as material for some schools and hospitals located in the camp, which they had collected in Italy. “We couldn’t bring as much as we would have liked due to luggage restrictions,” the musician Piero Purini said. Anyway, the material goods weren’t the most important thing they brought to the children. The happiness they spread around was a much greater donation.

The clown Gianni Risola likes what he calls “humanitarian situations.” In the South of Italy, he usually performs in streets, circuses or in schools – and these jobs are usually paid. He volunteered to come to Lebanon because he wanted to give something back to children who can’t afford to pay to see a clown. “It’s my way of thanking the Italian children who paid me for my performances,” he said.

Dressed in a funny combination of a red, old-fashioned uniform, striped socks and overalls, sporting a big earring and a black top hat, he certainly drew the attention of small and big kids. With his funny tricks and jokes, he managed to fascinate both year-olds and teenagers. “I don’t think that the children will forget their hardships while we clowns are here, but I just want to help make these children a little bit happier,” he said.

The musician Purini, who accompanies Risola’s performances on a saxophone, agreed by saying that they were just here to spread a little bit of happiness.

Although it was the first time they visited a refugee camp, the Italians weren’t shocked. “I had performed in Bosnia during the war, so a situation of destruction and hardship wasn’t new to me,” Purini said. “What was shocking was that here, the situation endures without time limit.”

“The Bosnian kids knew normal life before the war broke out, but here, normality means camp life.”

To make childhood more normal and child-like is also the aim of the organizers. Most importantly, the presentations focused on the interaction with the children. The clowns made them come to the “stage” (which consisted of a carpet) and participate in the jokes.

The Lebanese musician Sami Hawat sang songs that the children knew by heart, and Palestinian and Lebanese actors performed a play that concentrated on a child’s world – the kindergarten, school and family.

The actors presented situations of conflict – the bad behavior of a teacher, for example, or a typical scene of family life where the mother demands from the kids to go to the grocer, to help her in the house and to do homework instead of going out and playing. The children were then asked by the actors to find solutions to these situations.

The program ends with the street procession and includes all participants – clowns, actors, kids and organizers – who go through the respective camps playing music, dancing and singing, bringing some happiness to the other inhabitants of the camps, too.