

A guided tour of your body in Beirut

Petra Serhal's
'Toyota89' explores
language, imagination,
physicality, the city

By Francesca Mills
The Daily Star

HARET HREIK, Lebanon: Whatever light seeped through the blindfold before your eyes has gone now, devoured by the darkness of a room of unknown size.

"I'm going to take your hand now," a man's voice announces. The cool smell of mint abruptly rises into your nose, then fades just as quickly. Your steps are tentative. Faith is now a stranger's hand guiding you through an unfathomable space.

It is by this route that audience members visiting The Hangar, the exhibition space of UMAM Documentation and Research, eventually arrive at their allocated places.

Each couchlike seat is a unique construction, designed to encourage people to get comfortable among materials you might expect to find around Beirut – foam cuttings, mesh, pebbles, whatever else your hands are able to make out in the dark.

The smells are also those of Beirut – zaatar, jasmine and coffee – although afterward you may find each viewer has a unique report of what their nostrils detected.

The audience members now lie scattered around the room, all incubated within their surrounding props. The darkness persists as the show begins and throughout the performance. Behind the blindfold,



Rehearsals for "Toyota89" at Zico House, Spears. The show is on at The Hangar, Haret Hreik.

your imagination is the stage upon which the show will play out.

An array of speakers around the room guide the audience for the next hour or so, as Petra Serhal's surreal storytelling escorts you on a journey that at once meanders through Beirut neighborhoods and leads you into different precincts of your body.

The narrative starts with her car.

With her sensory performance "Toyota89," Serhal encourages

audience members to go deep within themselves and re-emerge as the performer. "I wanted people to be aware of their bodies, but every person relates to theirs in a different way," she tells The Daily Star in a post-performance interview.

"Once you're aware, you're like a performer."

Serhal independently created "Toyota89" to explore "how language affects our imagination and our awareness of our bodies,"

specifically within the context of Beirut. It's important that her audience members come to the performance fresh, which is why this review contains so few plot details about where you go after stepping into the artist's Toyota.

"It's about the experience of my body in this city," Serhal says of her show, "and how I can relate to past and present and to the different generations of people who lived here during the Lebanese [Civil] War.

"I felt the necessity to talk about the body in this region because I felt it was lost."

The feminine body in particular is a key component of Serhal's performance. It's conjured up in the audience's imagination via both the performer's narrative and the accompanying sound design, in which feminine voices replace those that would usually be male.

"The vegetable caller is a sound which is usually non-feminine in the city, so I tried to use a woman's voice," Serhal says.

"Masculinity is more present [in Beirut] and I'm trying to make my body, as a feminine body, present in the city in different ways."

Although Serhal's previous performances have encouraged audiences to find awareness in their bodies, the use of absolute darkness in "Toyota89" is a first, as is the level of imagination required of the audience. After the show is done, attendees are asked to take off their blindfolds, and something has shifted. Parts of the body reclaim your attention, as if reminding you of their significance.

Likewise, you are surprised by where you find yourself. UMAM's Hangar is neither where Serhal's narrative takes you, nor anywhere near the images that had been conjured up by your imagined sensation of movement.

Afterward, Serhal distributes a map of Beirut with the locations of her passage highlighted. It's a useful reminder of where she's been and you've imagined being.

Arabic-language performances of "Toyota89" are staged daily at The Hangar, UMAM D&R's exhibition space, through May 26. The final performance will be in English.

Photo by Petra Serhal