



Syria girls escape war with Snow White fable

Doum

To escape the nightmare of life in their besieged hometown near Syria's capital, 13 young girls sought refuge in a fairytale performance of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs".

The all-girl cast spent months memorising lines from the classic Brothers Grimm fable before performing in front of a packed audience this week in the elementary school in Douma.

"It was really hard, but I memorised all my lines in English," said proud 10-year-old Afnan, who played the story's lead antagonist, the Queen.

"When I act, I forget the war that we're living through in Douma and I feel happy and hopeful," she said.

Afnan's hometown is the de facto capital of the Eastern Ghouta region, the last remaining rebel enclave near Damascus and besieged by government troops since 2012.

Until this month, Eastern Ghouta had been regularly targeted by air strikes and artillery as part of a government offensive chipping away at rebel territory.

The bombardment would often wound or kill children as they headed to street markets, played outside, or walked to school.

But the skies have been quiet since a landmark deal earlier this month to create four "de-escalation zones" in Syria, where more than 320,000 people have been killed since conflict broke out in 2011.

'Bombing is their normal'

On-stage, her character is consumed by a search for youthful beauty, but Afnan said her own ambitions in life lie elsewhere.

"The lesson from the play is that beauty is in your heart and your soul, not in your looks! I want to be a doctor -- I want to be brave and treat sick people," Afnan said.

With the glittering stage decorations and nervous murmurs of young students, the evening could have almost taken place in any school around the world.

But halfway through the performance, two distant booms shook the room -- rockets that hit the edge of the town, residents later said.

"These children don't know what it's like not to have shelling. For them, bombing is their normal," a female stagehand said.

Earlier this year, international aid group Save the Children warned that a whole generation of war-scarred Syrian children may be "lost to trauma and extreme stress".

For the school's director of extracurricular activities, Yasser al-Assaad, theatre is one of the most effective ways to offset years of traumatic experiences -- for the young students and their mentors alike.

"I get my rehab from a student's smile, and that student draws her psychotherapy from the teacher that came to her school to motivate her," Assaad said.

It is his third fairytale performance: in 2015, he helped put on "Little Red Riding Hood", and last year his students performed "Beauty and the Beast".

"We want to send a message to all of humanity that Syrian children can create, that we are open to all civilisations," he said.

'Flowers can grow'

Despite efforts to leave Douma's devastation behind, death seemed to touch the cast of Snow White.

Just days before the final performance, the director's husband was killed by a stray bullet from intra-rebel clashes in the town.

And the play's rosy-cheeked narrator, Dania, recalled how her own school had been bombed just a year and a half ago.

"It was all blood and (the bodies of) girls in front of me," the 11-year-old said.

Even lead actress Rayhana Noaman, who played Snow White, said her favourite part of the story was escaping a tragic fate.

"The witch wanted to kill me, but the charming prince saved me from death!" she said with a shy smile.

Slender Amal al-Kurdi burst onto the stage with an explosive introduction: "A-a-achoo! I'm Sneezzy!"

The eight-year-old actress donned a white felt beard and brown shirt like her fellow dwarfs.

"I really liked acting because we learned how to be brave and how not to be afraid to speak in front of an audience," she said.

As his students prepared to raise the curtain, Assaad said the performance was a sign that "flowers can grow amid rocks of pain."

"Every household in Douma has lost someone and tasted the anguish of pain, war, and siege. Despite this, we can build Syria anew," he said. (AFP)