# Caring Begins Closer to Home

Patrick Baudoin takes obvious pride in the scheduled meeting in Paris this week of around 500 activists to mark the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights.

“We demand the dignity of the universal man,” declared Baudouin, president of the International Federation of Human Rights. “Vive la liberté et vive l’égalité de l’homme universel.” The rousing words were received with rousing applause.

Both his tone, which was at times patronizing, and his speech, replete with slogans, seemed to be the customary delivery of Gallic politicians.

As the guest of honour at last Saturday’s forum on peace and justice, held at the Universite Saint-Joseph, Baudouin was invited to talk on the defenders of human rights. His crusade is an international one against unfair trials of political prisoners, indiscriminate torture, and random executions. He cited as examples several activists from as far afield as Algeria and Timor who had been persecuted by their respective governments.

Which was all very grand, except for one, niggling problem: how many people cared?

Most of his audience sat through much of his discourse with glassy expressions. Baudouin revelled in highlighting his long list of global injustices. But the sad fact, which may have escaped the Frenchman’s notice, was that with so many injustices occurring at our doorstep, it was all but impossible to empathize with foreigners unjustly treated by others.

Baudouin could well have caught the attention of his audience by a simple link to Amnesty’s concerns about the mistreatment of prisoners in Lebanese jails or - had he wished to draw in his public without touching so raw a local nerve - the habitual torture and detention of Arabs by Israelis. So that instead, one was left thinking: “So it’s bad in Timor. But where the hell is Timor anyway in relation to Lebanon?”

With an over-liberal use of the word, *universalité* - universal man, universal thought, universal freedom, etc - the speaker was clearly under the impression that Lebanese were like Europeans, that we had reached the stage in our national development where our frontiers were nothing more than a quaint historical throwback like a Schengen state’s. But our view is necessarily more parochial than France’s or Germany’s. For a start, we can never forget that our southern border is still occupied. Can we, hand on heart, say we care about an injustice taking place 2,000 kilometers away with as much feeling as one occurring 100 kilometers from our homes?

The second cause for our national shortsightedness on universal matters is, to quote a French saying: “Il faut faire le ménage chez soi, avant de le faire chez les autres.” A maxim which, aptly enough, could equally well apply to the parents of the little maid Fatima Ahmad Jassem, who allegedly suffered severe abuse at the hands of her employers.

MP Nayla Mouawad’s talk on children’s rights in Lebanon carried a more practical message. In light of Fatima’s tragic tale, the age at which children can legally work has been increased from 8 to 13. Mouawad was the first to admit that this older age was a far cry from the desirable 16-18. She explained that, given the widespread poverty, particularly in rural areas of Lebanon, parents were being forced to opt for the lesser of two social ills.

As the president of the parliament's commission on children's rights, she focused her attack on two fronts. First, the commission's attempt to solve the problem of the child peddlers and beggars at every crossroad of Beirut's boulevards - with the corollary problems of hygiene, drugs and, most disturbing of all, the growing child sex trade. Her second desperate call to arms concerned the imprisonment of minors.

Mouawad had barely finished when a gaunt woman in the audience interjected, "What about a child's right to nationality?" Her voice was almost a distressed cry. "A child born in Lebanon, with a Lebanese mother and a foreign father remains a stranger in his own land."

"It is a problem," admitted Mouawad sympathetically. "But there are more pressing problems regarding a child's welfare." The MP seemed to imply that this was almost a domestic issue, whereas she was dealing with national concerns.

Ironically, Baudouin might have leveled the same criticism at Mouawad and at the audience: that, with the declaration of human rights celebrating its golden jubilee, it was time for Lebanese to become universal people, and to think along universal lines. He then read out a Malian proverb: "Do African mothers not cry when their babies are hurt?"

Indeed, as Mouawad might imagine, with as many tears as Lebanese mothers. And her pale-faced interjector might have been thinking: I know, I cry.

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# Capital that Missed its Culture

In the past week, the Lebanese public has been treated to two widely different renditions of the national anthem. The first, celebrating Lebanon's historic victory over China at basketball, was not so much sung by the thousands of fans as it was shouted jubilantly when the Sagesse team waved the Asian Cup.

At the other end of the musical scale was Wednesday's considerably more demure and melodious performance by seven Lebanese choirs. More than 250 choristers gathered at the Unesco Palace, ending a week of singing with what the promoters had billed would be a "musical apotheosis." The event was a success even if the superlative was not quite justified.

The Ministry of Culture sponsored the choirs as part of this year's celebrations of art. Beirut is the cultural capital of the Arab world, but has anyone actually noticed a difference? The streets are not awash with art, nor do there seem to be many extra shows, book fairs and all the other variables that go into creating a cultural capital. It is as if the Ministry of Culture, overseer of Beirut99, had entered the year with few original thoughts to improve culture.

That is not the case. The people who bring us Beirut99 are rich in ideas - what they are exceedingly short of is hard cash.

At face value, Beirut's nomination as a cultural capital is one of the most important events since the outbreak of peace. It is a top-notch endeavor with a two-fold mission. First, there is a need to re-educate Lebanese in matters of art or, as Mohammed Madi, managing director at the Ministry of Culture, put it: "There's a need to introduce culture in the average home."

Secondly, the aim is to reposition Lebanon in the heart of the cultural map of the Middle East, a message that is destined to reach a foreign audience in an effort to boost tourism. Luciano Pavarotti's visit is a case in point. The hype is as much international as it is national in a bid to reassert the fact that guns have indeed been silenced and have turned into pens, paint brushes and tenor voices.

"Liban, l'autre rive," the high-profile exhibition of Lebanese history at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris is another example of cultural diplomacy. But unfortunately, both the tenor at Cite Sportive and the exhibit on the left bank of the Seine would have taken place even if Beirut had not been nominated cultural capital. The Beirut99 logo - the dove in mid-flight with a rainbow of wings - is distinctly absent from the two most publicized if not most prized cultural events of the year because the Ministry of Culture has painfully little money to spare.

And just how little becomes ever more agonizing as one gleans the sheer number of cultural projects that have been shelved or summarily dropped. Visitors to Starco, the seat of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, are handed a Beirut99 monthly brochure, a thin if expertly published pamphlet that is rendered thinner still by the fact that it is divided into three sections, each for the main languages spoken in Lebanon.

The annual program is somewhat harder to come by. Published toward the end of 1998, when Sharjah in the U.A.E. was the cultural capital, it lists all the projects, the ambitious ideas in the coming year from architecture to art, literature to museums. It is a wonderful catalogue, brimming with such plans that one is almost deceived into believing that Beirut99 will become the cultural capital of the wide world. There is only one problem: It is about 90 percent inaccurate.

It is not a list of events that will take place - as is stressed in the catalogue - but rather of events that ought to.

Mohammed Madi, the man responsible for Beirut99, spoke in general terms of the importance of culture.

"Beirut has always been a cultural capital, not just in 1999. And in 2000, as the cultural capital moves on, we will continue to promote culture in any form," Madi said. Hinting at the shortfall of money, he added: "With Beirut99 we decided to look for quality not quantity."

When he was pressed on the specifics, Madi finally conceded, "We simply weren't given enough funds." A dismally inadequate figure of $1 million has been allocated to subsidize all cultural events for the entire year.

"In 1998, Sharjah, last year's cultural capital, had a budget of $21 million," Madi said. "And next year, Riyadh 2000 will have $550 million to play with." The director's tone carried more than a trace of bitterness as he added: "What can you do with $1 million? You can't even buy two rocks with that," he said, quoting a Lebanese proverb.

The ministry has been begging for more funds from various sources. Money pledged in 1998 from foreign donors as well as from the private sector was not forthcoming.

"No one was prepared to help us. We haven't received a piaster from Unesco, or the Arab World," Madi said. "And even the European community has been high on proposing projects and conferences, and low on supplying funds."

The result, therefore, is a catalogue full of bright projects popped as unceremoniously as a balloon. This also vindicates the feeling among the general public that, six months into the year, Beirut99 has scarcely more culture than Beirut in 1998.

With such a tight purse, Madi and his team at the ministry have had to make some difficult decisions. He described the expenditure in terms of priorities, without wishing to disclose the actual dollar amount allocated to the various projects. In essence, the ministry's drive has been on three fronts.

First, Beirut99 has focused on symposiums and historical debates. These are events that require little financial outlay but have, nevertheless a useful role in bringing Lebanon onto the cultural agenda. "These discussions provide a forum for Lebanese to discover their own history and culture and also encourages foreigners to get to know the richness and diversity of our nation," he said.

A second stress is on folkloric events and dance festivals to be held in the summer months at the height of the tourist season.

"Lebanon receives a lot of Arab visitors. We expect that such festivals will attract even more tourists," Madi said, seeming to imply that culture was not so much for culture's sake, but for the sake of generating hefty profits. "Hotels should be fully booked, and we should receive much-needed extra revenue."

The one branch of culture that is receiving Beirut99's unstinted backing and funds is the theater. "The theater in Lebanon is like a sick child, with many theaters closing down," said Madi. "We need to support the theater as much as possible, which is why we have chosen to treat it preferentially.

"This year we've subsidized plays by Raif Karam and Roger Assaf. And we're planning to back a total of 20-30 plays nationwide."

Many artists and promoters have expressed their frustration at what they regard as the ministry's vacillation. George Zoghby, director of the promoting group New Horizon, had proposed a Lebanese week back in October 1998 - a series of events aimed at inviting Lebanese artists living abroad, such as artist Nada Aql and classical musicians Wissam Boustany and Naji Hakim. "Our plans received a lot of encouragement last year," said Zoghby. "We were offering a dynamism of culture, an opportunity both for our young to discover art, and for our Lebanese abroad to be recognized in their home country."

His project, though accepted by the ministry in October, had to be presented again in February of this year. "We've heard nothing since then," said Zoghby. "There seems to be a total freeze on events." Undeterred by the lack of sponsorship from the ministry, he invited Boustany and Hakim for a short concert run with advertising supplied not by Beirut99 but by Abou Khalil supermarkets.

Zoghby believes there is goodwill at the ministry, but that it is a matter of poor organization. He implied that a certain learning period was necessary for the committee of Beirut99, and added wryly: "They should perhaps extend the cultural year for another twelve months."

Alfred and Nabil Basbous, the uncle and nephew team of sculptors, are equally dissatisfied with Beirut 99. "The Ministry of Culture contacted us last year," said Nabil. "There was a project to

erect sculptures in the public gardens of the capital and we were asked for ideas." When it became apparent that each sculpture would cost at least $10,000 in public funds, the ministry canceled the order.

Another sculptor did not seek financial backing from the ministry for his project. In November 1998, Malek Basbous, no relation to the above, proposed to erect stylized letters from the Phoenician alphabet along the airport road. The 23 letters - each a two-meter high sculpture - were to be carved in local limestone, and would serve to remind visitors that Lebanon is the birthplace of the alphabet. "The ministry loved the project," said Basbous, "not least because I had also proposed and found potential private sponsors." The idea was for several Lebanese banks to each sponsor one of the letters: Banque Audi for A, Byblos Bank for B, and so forth.

Basbous admits that he is baffled by the ministry's procrastination. "All I need from Beirut99 is some space, either along the airport road or in the city, and a few flowers and plants to brighten the spots. I would do the sculptures for free and the banks would provide the cash for the materials." Basbous believes his project has been shelved through inefficiency. "There's no follow-up," he said despondently, adding, "more's the pity because it does strike me that overall, be it through public or private sponsorship, there is more culture this year than in 1998."

Mireille Aouad, promoter of the week of choir singing, agrees with that sentiment. "In previous years, there used to be a hole in the cultural agenda between the al-Bustan Festival and the summer festivals," she said. "I think it's fair to say that there's more on offer this year."

Aouad, a soprano whose specialty is Baroque music, was the co-promoter for the week of choir. At the end of 1998, the Ministry of Culture asked her for some musical projects. Out of three proposals, only one, the choral event, was retained. "The other two were considered too ambitious - in other words, too expensive.

"Beirut99 has been slow getting off the ground," she said. "In large part I think this is due to the Cabinet change. A new team took over in February, and there was a certain sluggishness in the handover."

Madi's team of Beirut99 took over in February from Mtanios Halabi, the previous managing director at the Ministry of Culture. Many projects, approved by the first team at the end of 1998, were subsequently either dropped when it became clear that there would be a shortage of funds, or postponed as Madi's team re-evaluated the proposals.

There are many artists who feel as let down by Beirut99 as Madi feels short-changed by the international sponsors. Aouad's week of choir-singers, on the other hand, was an example of unbridled success, of Beirut99 as it was meant to be. The Ministry of Culture sponsored the event so that the entrance could be free to the general public.

For an hour-and-a-half on Wednesday, after a warming-up exercise with the national anthem, the choirs treated their audience to an eclectic mix that ranged from Lebanese and Armenian folk songs, to Latin hymns and French baroque and ending with the divine strains of Darius Milhaud's "Cantate de la Paix." The very walls of the Unesco Palace shivered with content.

In the final analysis, it is not that there is a dearth of events - the choirs have seen to that as will the Baalbek and Beiteddine festivals - it is simply that there are too few extra happenings to count as a cultural capital. And as the choirs sang the national anthem, one couldn't help but

wonder what Rashid Nakhle, the poet and patriot who wrote the lyrics, would have made of Beirut in 1999. Even had he been inspired enough to write an ode about the cultural capital, given that the international poetry festival planned for 1999 has been canceled, he might not have found a forum to read it.

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# A Driver's Tale (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Traffic Police)

Motorists in Lebanon have been warned: make sure your car papers are in order for a grim fate awaits drivers whose mecanique has expired. In a high-profile clampdown, police across the nation have begun a control blitz, seizing as many as 30 cars a day in an attempt to stem the tide of mecanique cheats.

Last Saturday, I was stopped on the Old Sidon road along with 31 other motorists. Alone of my fellow arrestees, I had a valid mecanique. My offence was to have left the car's registration papers at home.

Lieutenant Amin Farah of the Ain al-Rummaneh traffic division, who is in charge of erecting roadblocks in the eastern and southern suburbs of Beirut, was resolute as he warned us, "No-one is above the law." Though I was clearly in the wrong, and the officer totally entitled to stop me, his words struck a deeply dissonant chord.

Having stopped 32 motorists, Farah proceeded to release 14 drivers, despite the fact that they had no valid mecanique. "They have learnt their lesson," he explained to us - the remaining 18 drivers whose cars were impounded. But, given that the difference seemed to lie in the first group's shiny cars and the flurry of phone calls to relatives and friends, the only conclusion to be drawn was that the rich and well-connected have methods of getting off without penalty.

Officials at the Ain al-Rummaneh station later defended the apparent double-standards, saying they do not have any choice because the yards where impounded cars are kept are full. Besides, they added, it did not seem fair to penalize drivers who could clearly pay their mecaniques.

While the clampdown on mecanique cheats is a noble end, the means is anything but civilized, and, if you are roaming the streets with overdue mecanique payments hanging over you, be prepared to suffer the ignominy of the due process.

Retrieving an impounded car can swiftly turn into a bureaucratic nightmare. As you arrive at the Palace of Justice with the traffic summons, the first thing you notice is everyone's nervous disposition. The angst is increased both by an ill-lit interior and by the presence of many heavily armed guards who lounge and chat in distinctly unmilitary fashion.

Looking only glancingly at the guards, you join a queue and fidget with your slip. You shuffle your feet, jostling for position with dozens of other drivers, until it's your turn to hand your slip over the counter to the officer. Then you're off again, rushing to join another long and disorderly queue that hems in the cashier, touting your LL100 fiscal stamp and considerably more cash.

Three sweaty hours later and LL163,000 poorer - LL110,000 for a mecanique if you don't already have one and, in my case, a fine of LL53,000 for not carrying papers - you're now ready to begin your second ordeal, this time at the police station. Here, it is relatively easier with a waiting time of just two hours and an extra fine of LL13,000.

Finally, it's off to the pound where, for the first time in a very long day, you experience joy at catching sight of your car. There is a parking fee of LL6,000 a day and, in my case, though my car had only been locked away for 48 hours, I no longer cared that the attendant was asking for LL18,000. Reaching for my last LL20,000 bill, I breathed, "Keep the change."

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# Blockbusters in their own right

Lebanese have spent the past week rediscovering the magic of small-budget films on big screens. At the end of this year's Beirut Film Festival, an estimated 15,000 moviegoers participated in the event. Set between the blockbuster-heavy summer months and the crowded Christmas season, the third annual Beirut Film Festival from Oct. 8-14 featured screenings in Empire Sodeco's theaters 5 and 6. The festival included new independent feature films, short-film programs, panel discussions with film-makers and an awards ceremony honoring those selected as the festival's best offerings.

Of the 15,000 tickets that were issued, 20 percent were reserved for VIPs and sponsors, and the Empire Sodeco is satisfied that the remaining 12,000 tickets were sold, raking in an estimated $40,000.

Societe Generale Libano-Europeenne de Banque and Kentertainment sponsored the event, though the organizers would not reveal how much cash the two organizations provided. Among other official backers, MEA issued discounted airline tickets to foreign VIPs, Le Meridien offered the rooms, and Budget Rent A Car had 25 cars to ferry them to and from the theaters.

This fall's festival line-up included all-season genre fare, slightly off-center romances and a few off-the-wall oddball items that defy easy labeling such as Solitudes, a collage of 6 vignettes from the vantage of toilets. To be sure, there were the usual autumn cavalcade of losers dumped into Sodeco Square as fire-sale merchandise. But, as the leaves turn golden and the temperature dips, it was refreshing to find adult-skewing dramas displacing the blockbusters on megaplex screens. Among the notable home-grown entries was Autour de la Maison Rose, strategically showcased at the end of the festival to demonstrate its award potential, and earning the film an honorary mention for Lebanese feature film at the closing ceremony.

As with last year's event, there were complaints about the lack of seating, particularly for the afternoon and evening screenings. This resulted in makeshift seating arrangements on theater steps, and in lost revenues as a significant number of dissatisfied moviegoers had to be turned away. Joe Hayek, coordinator of the festival at Empire Sodeco, confirmed reports that the organizers were working on plans to increase seating space and that, for next year's gathering, an extra two theaters might be allocated to the festival, doubling the total seating from the present 280 to 560.

Given the pulling power of the festival and an affinity for a home-grown subject matter, demand could well meet the extra seating, thereby boosting income to about $80,000. But even

that bumper figure is a speck of galactic dust compared to the estimated $420 million in global sales that The Phantom Menace is reported to have netted so far.

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# Prepared for another Chernobyl virus strike

Last month, on April 26, 13 years to the day after a nuclear reactor meltdown in Ukraine, a malicious computer virus struck an estimated 600,000 PCs in the Middle East and Asia, erasing valuable information and permanently shutting down some machines. Even more distressing to companies and PC owners is the rumor - travelling at speeds close to the speed of light - that this killer electronic bug is set to resurface next Wednesday, May 26, and on the 26th of every month thereafter.

“We’ve simply no way of knowing whether Chernobyl will strike this month or not,” concedes George Hajj, manager of the computer firm, Compudata. On April 26, a quarter of all computers in Lebanon were affected by the virus. Businesses accounting for about one-fifth of that total.

What computer bugs do once inside your PC depends on the fiendishness of their creators. Some, like the “Happy99.exe” reported in the Daily Star on Feb. 27, merely display annoying messages or graphics on your screen.

But others, such as the Chernobyl virus, are highly damaging, capable of corrupting the motherboard and thereby hoodwinking the computer into believing it has no hard disk. This permanently cripples the machine, and deletes all stored data, necessitating the purchase of a new motherboard and BIOS chip that costs between $90 to $120.

There is hope on the virtual horizon. The computer industry has come to accept viruses as a fact of on-line life, with programmers striving against ever more virulent strains. Functioning as antibodies, the latest anti-viral software such as “McAfee VirusScan” and “Norton AntiVirus” recognize 13,000 known strains of viruses that can worm their way into systems, including the Chernobyl variety.

Upgrading an anti-virus program is free to bona fide customers and can be downloaded from the Web at the Norton or McAfee sites. But users of pirated copies will have to reinstall the anti-viral programs for $50.

Computer retailers in Lebanon are strongly recommending their clients  upgrade their anti-viral inoculations as a preventative measure against a possible resurgence of Chernobyl.

“Some virus programmers get their thrills out of linking their attacks to a recurring date,” said Hajj, explaining the significance of the number 26. “It happened on April 26. It could happen again on May 26.”

Hajj adds that it is fortunate for Lebanon and other countries with Shiite populations that the attack occurred when it did.

“Monday, April 26, was Ashoura, a national holiday. Ten times more computers would have crashed in Lebanon had it been a regular working day,” he said.

If your PC has already been infected, you won't know about it until the end of the incubation period. That is, according to the electronic grapevine, until the 26th of the month.

"If you can't afford an anti-virus, you can avoid the flare up of Chernobyl on the 25th by switching the date on your computer to the 27th, and switching back to the 27th after the 26th," Hajj said. This process would have to be repeated every month until the installation of a Chernobyl-proof antivirus.

"Better yet," adds Hajj, "refrain from using your computer altogether this Wednesday."

But Hajj shrugs helplessly as he admits that, as frightful and potentially costly as the rumor appears, it's still nothing more than a rumor. It is quite conceivable that nothing untoward will happen to computers on the dreaded date, but unfortunately it's equally possible that Chernobyl will explode in the face of PC users once more.

Even grimmer is the possibility of a truly diabolical algorithm which the creator of Chernobyl may have programmed - a randomly generated appearance date whereby, having surfaced on April 26, it could return on any date this month.

And, while playing Russian roulette may have its aficionados, clearly the best solution remains to shield your computer with the latest in anti-viruses before next Wednesday.

There is some good news in all of this. Chernobyl, like any self-respecting biological virus, is a selective pathogen.

Lodging itself in Windows 95 and 98, it only contaminates IBM compatible PCs. Apple users can therefore rejoice, and switch on their computers safely on May 26 - or on any other day of the month.

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# A Life in the Long Day of a Street Vendor

"Most of them want to come work in Beirut," says Ihtan Mazloum of his friends back home in Syria, "but they don't know life here. I tell them what it's like. It's not what you think. They think when they get to the city there's dollars everywhere - they just put them in a bag. I tell them no."

Before coming to Lebanon, Ihtan Mazloum had heard about a booming economy, but he has never seen it, not from his little piece of real estate, his beat on the Corniche.

Mazloum has been serving coffee on this same spot for five years - laden with his coffeepot in one hand, and stacked coffee cups in the other which he strikes rhythmically like castanets. When he came to Lebanon from Syria in 1992, it was his dream to save enough money as a step to having his own grocery store in Hama, his hometown.

He worked a few other jobs at first, on several construction sites in downtown, and then, encouraged by others in the vending business, he bought his charcoal-filled rakwe.

Business was good at first. He could make $20 a day, a bit more in summer. About three years ago, things began to change. Mazloum can't quite put his finger on what happened, but 1994 is

the year he says people stopped spending so much. Sales fell. Whereas before he would always expect a tip, people started waiting to get their 100-lira coins back. Vendors started going out of business.

But Mazloum slogs on, even though he is making half what he used to, if that. He is 42. He is tired. His idea of starting a store? He waves his hand dismissively. With a gesture, it is clear he has abandoned that goal. Maybe he will go work for someone else, though with only part of a secondary education, he worries he will not find a job. “Life is nothing for me - work hard, no family, nothing. This takes all my time.”

All day long, Mazloum serves his customers, some of whom have become regulars. He is proud he knows them so well. Judging by the smiles, the feeling is mutual: they are glad he is there. But, added to dwindling profits is a schedule that has left him burned out and underpaid. Mazloum rises at about 5am and gets home around 10pm. When he was younger, he could handle the schedule, he says. But now, he’s tired. He wants out.

Winter is coming, and Mazloum hopes it will be his last as a vendor. People stay inside when it is cold, so business is bad. “My only rest is in bed. That’s when I dream. I dream a lot. It’s always the same dream,” he says, adding simply, “I dream to get out.”

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# Gentle Man of Many Words

Bismarck, who was fond of poking fun at contemporary politicians, is reputed to have likened Lord Salisbury to “a strip of wood painted to look like iron.”

Had the German statesman met Jose Sarney, ex-president of Brazil and poet, he might have used contradictory terms such as, “a solid sea” or “running land” to explain Sarney’s twin, and often conflicting natures.

On the one hand, he is a politician, a senator in Brazil whose duties lie in the real, concrete world, tackling such issues as poverty and inflation in his country. But the deeper, more ethereal persona dreams of braver worlds with a mind that ebbs like a tide.

Sarney is in Lebanon for a short visit. Although he has met Prime Minister Salim Hoss and Speaker Nabih Berri to discuss bilateral issues between Lebanon and Brazil, his main purpose is to promote his first novel which was translated into Arabic under the title, Sayed al Bahar, “Master of the Sea.”

Fate placed him in politics, but Sarney’s secret vocation was, and remains literature.

“I have always said that literature was my heart but politics was my destiny - a destiny for which I am grateful nevertheless because it gave me the opportunity to do something for my country,” he said.

“But politics did somewhat fall on my lap,” he confesses, reflecting on how, as a young lawyer from the northeastern provincial town of Maranhao, he first entered the political arena. Fate would also play a major role in Sarney’s ascension to power.

In the 1970s, as the economy and living conditions in Brazil worsened, the military government became less popular.

Finally, after 23 years of military presidents, Congress was allowed to choose a civilian as a presidential candidate. Tancredo Neves was selected and later elected president of Brazil in January 1985.

But very soon after, Neves contracted a fatal disease and passed away before he could take office. His vice-president, Jose Sarney took over and promptly began to tackle Brazil's three major problems: The huge foreign debt, soaring inflation, and the ever-increasing poverty.

He stepped down from the presidency in 1996 but, as a senator, still plays a key role in steering Brazilian policy.

When asked how he could find the time to write given that affairs of state take up so much of his day, he replies by quoting an Irish proverb: "Only those who have time have no time at all," he grins.

"I was lucky, you might say, because ever since childhood I have suffered from acute insomnia. I sleep only 3 or 4 hours a night. I write when I should be asleep," he explained.

Like most authors, his concept of time changes when he's working on his literature. "I lock the door to my study, switch on the computer and time just vanishes," he says.

The sea off Brazil's coast is undoubtedly one of Sarney's inspirations. As a child, he would spend months with the fishermen of Maranhao, admiring their traditional fishing techniques, mesmerized by their myths.

"Their life is totally controlled by the motion of the sea. Whereas we think in terms of day and night, they think in tides and waves," Sarney said. "I decided to write about these fishermen for whom their very boats come to life."

The master of the sea in Sarney's novel is Captain Cristorio who spends his life on the high seas in his ship, the Chita Verde, the "ship with the green sails." The undulating nature of the sea is a metaphor for a constant tug of war between good and evil. The captain's ship grows in the fisherman's eyes from a mere vessel to a full-fledged human companion. With feminine charm, the ship becomes a woman and Captain Cristorio's best friend.

Sarney's work is, perhaps predictably, like its creator - dichotomous, yet with strong parallels between the real and the imaginary. First, he is a narrator, a traditional storyteller of yore, who revels in legends that can reach out from across time and space. His style, that of magical realism with a Latin tempo, is not unique: It is shared by many contemporary Brazilian authors.

The history of South America has influenced the evolution of the genre. "In Spanish America there is the burden of a bloody history - conquest and the utter destruction of ancient civilizations." In Portuguese America, on the other hand, Sarney believes there was more of a symbiosis, a meeting of minds and cultures between the European, African and Indian populations, thereby providing a rich forum for tales from three continents.

However, Sarney is also a realist, and his characters reflect earthly powers and desires. "I believe that, without so much as highlighting political messages, true literature must above all

else be a witness of reality. A writer must be able to examine serious social problems," Sarnery explains.

"My heart is for literature, to have a chance to create just like God created the world: With neither borders nor physical laws. But politics has enormous possibilities as well. While the intellectual has a need to re-create the world, the politician wants to better the world. Politicians must work hand in hand with reality, while intellectuals toy with abstractions," he continued.

To avoid internal conflict between revolutionary and reactionary impulses, Sarney convinces himself that, in theory at least, the two are not that far apart.

Quoting Bismarck, he says brightly: "Politics is the art of the possible." And, if those impulses can be thought of as two isles, all that is needed is a good captain on a seaworthy ship.

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# Silent Battle of Logic and Wits

There is something strangely captivating in watching two players, with furrowed brows, battling to take control of 64 black and white squares. Voltaire called chess a game "which reflects most honor on human wit," and Saladin is reputed to have taught the rules to Richard the Lionheart during the armistice in the Third Crusade. It is the only Olympic sport that uses more brain than brawn and certainly no board game enjoys so illustrious a pedigree nor has sparked so much passion over the centuries as "chatu-ranga" - the original "game of the four-armies" that was played in north-west India in the fifth century AD. Over the course of generations, the knights and pawns have remained as the cavalry and infantry, but the war chariots have become rooks, the battle elephants have turned to bishops, and the king's vizier has been transformed, bizarrely, into a queen finally to settle into the modern version of chess - or shatranj in Arabic.

Chess has been brought to the fore this week with the Asian Cities chess championships held at the Arab University in Beirut. Lebanese have not had many opportunities of seeing chess Grand Masters in action. Compared to the numerous achievements of native chess players such as Eva Eid, one of only four Grand Masters in the Arab world, Walid Dagher, the under-14 Arab champion in 1986, and Knarik Mourabian, the rising star in Lebanese chess, there have been very few world-class events held here.

The March 18-26 tournament has been perceived as rectifying this shortfall with the international ruling body on chess, the Federation Internationale des Echeques, officially classing the event as a half-Olympiad ahead of next year's Chess Olympics in Istanbul. Twenty-two teams of four players and one substitute each have been invited to participate from as far afield as Mongolia, India and Uzbekistan. And while most teams have essentially been drawn along national lines, as a contest between cities, some countries such as Iran, Syria and the Emirates have been able to send more than one team. The host, Lebanon, has fielded four contingents of players from Beirut, Sidon, Zahleh and, refreshingly given the recent history, Jezzine.

One upset in the original line-up was the last-minute withdrawal of the Chinese team. "The Chinese officials informed us two days before the inauguration that they would be unable to attend," says Ammar Houri, president of the Lebanese Chess Federation. He believes the reason might be quite mundane in nature and down to the cost of flights from Beijing to Beirut.

But championship chess was not deemed to have suffered by this absence. “Everyone knows that the Russians are the best chess players in the world,” quipped Houri as he alluded to the solid ex-Soviet Union teams of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The Kazakhs are the clear favorites with a highly impressive team that comprises no fewer than three Grand Masters. And though Lebanese teams may be in no state to put up serious resistance - Houri would be satisfied with a final ranking of seventh place for the Beirut side - the fact that local players are being offered the opportunity to play competitive chess at a professional level is considered reward enough. The three leading teams just before round eight was played on Friday afternoon were, as predicted, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, while the Lebanon-Beirut team maintained fourth place jointly with the Iran-Tehran team.

An estimated $200,000 has been invested in the bout, $25,000 of which was donated by Dubai, the patrons of the Asian cup, and the remainder coming from sponsorship deals with Future TV and Voice of the People radio, as well as a modest subsidy from the Ministry of Sport. The cup itself, which the winning team will hold for two years, is a 14-kilogram gold trophy valued at a respectable $140,000 and which, to some observers, seems at odds with the relatively paltry prize money. Along with their medals, the top team will carry away $3,000 to be shared among its participating members. The runners-up will earn, respectively, $2,000 for silver, $1,000 for bronze, and a further $500 to the fourth team.

But the true spin-off from all this high-powered chess playing may be inestimable. Houri hopes to emulate a recent sporting success story in Lebanon and dreams that this chess tournament, along with the Arab Chess Festival to be held in August, will do to the game what the Asian basketball championships achieved - notably to get schoolchildren hooked. “It’s a battle of kings and queens with rules that can help kids make it through life,” he says, explaining that the game of chess teaches discipline, concentration, reasoning and, above all, the understanding that actions have consequences. “It teaches young and old alike that the first thing is not always the best thing,” he adds. “And that winning isn’t everything and nor is losing all that bad.”

To that end, the Lebanese Chess Federation has encouraged the game as an extracurricular activity where it is now played in more than 40 schools, up from almost none in the 1980s.

Houri and his chessmen organize and arbitrate tournaments without cost to the schools leading up to the major intercollegiate competition in the first Sunday of May in which he expects as many as 500 students will engage in battle on the checkered board.

Another feather in their cap is the growing number of private clubs, 32 so far, that offer youngsters a brainier alternative to table-tennis and video games. With about 1,000 members - of which roughly half are younger than 20 - the federation is well on its way to reaping the benefits of a “chess culture.”

The Lebanese teams may not win any prizes at Sunday’s award ceremony but they are showing class in the endgame, and if they keep improving at this rate, Lebanese chess may turn into a force in years to come. Reinforcing perhaps that checkmate does ultimately come from Shah mat which, as any schoolchild will tell you, means “the King is dead.” Long live the game.

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# When You Wish upon a Star

One of the latest and - some might say - wackiest American ideas to hit the Lebanese market comes in the form of starlight. The Beirut branch of the International Star Registry (ISR), based in Chicago, has been selling pieces of heaven since August, and can already claim to have as many star-buying clients per week as there are new stars forming in galactic nurseries.

Simply put, the business involves naming stars after cherished friends or, more vainly, after yourself. “It’s the original gift par excellence,” says Rania Kassem, who introduced the star registry to Lebanon.

Initially, she faced an uphill struggle trying to convince a skeptical public. “People would ask, ‘How can you sell the stars’?” recalls Kassem. “We had to explain that we were selling names, not stars. And that clients could choose the name for such-and-such a star - a name that would be copyrighted for all time.”

The advertising campaign, launched on Radio 1 in August and to the tune of $4,000, was as much an effort to promote ISR’s ethereal product as it was an attempt to dispel a first impression of charlatanry.

The going rate for a star is $100, for which the client receives an unframed certificate signed by the head registrar in Chicago - the Beirut office throws in the frame for free - and a chart of the chosen constellation with the newly-named star, complete with its astronomical coordinates. Customers can choose their constellations from the well-known and ever-popular Ursa Major to the obscure Microscopium. However, the stars themselves are chosen by the registry, and all the stars on the registry’s list, provided by NASA, are of magnitude 3 or higher - meaning that they are invisible to the naked eye. So any potential customers who would like the bright Dog Star named after them will be disappointed.

The Beirut office is giving itself a year to become profitable. “We need to sell five stars a week to break even,” says Kassem, admitting that, for now, their offices welcome an average of three new clients a week. She adds that she is optimistic of increased sales with the coming Ramadan and Christmas holidays, and has already earmarked a further $5,000 for another radio campaign. “St. Valentine’s Day is also a peak season for us, with couples hoping to immortalize their love.” With a rush, presumably, on the Cygnus constellation - the white swan that symbolizes pure love.

Indeed, in global terms, the English language has proven an unexpected ally in selling stars. Rich in stellar metaphors, ISR has been able to get significant mileage out of such expressions as “Let your success be written in the stars” or “Hitch a ride on your stars.” Registrars are also quick to point out the good company that your astral egos will brush shoulders with. Of the 750,000 odd people who have “bought” stars since ISR’s launch in 1979, a high number have been stars of a more terrestrial nature. Actress Nicole Kidman named a star “Forever Tom” as a Christmas gift for her husband, Tom Cruise. Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor and Whitney Houston all have stars named after them.

But keep in mind that this is just for fun. Although names will be registered and copyrighted in both the US Library of Congress and British Library, by international treaty, the Paris-based International Astronomical Union is the only entity authorized to name a celestial body.

Finally, some food for thought in the form of a mathematical conundrum. One of the key benefits to the business of selling stars is their inexhaustible supply. With around 400 billion stars in our Milky Way, and 200 billion galaxies in our universe - each with as many stars again

- there are enough stars in the known cosmos for 10 trillion Earths with populations of 6 billion inhabitants. The registrars may have their work cut out for them.

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# The Man Who Wants Hollywood in Beirut

The LA-based Lebanese director, Georges Chamchoum, readily accepts Hollywood's rough rule of thumb that films need to be free of messages to become successful or, as the movie mogul Sam Goldwyn put it: "Pictures are for entertainment, messages are for the postman."

Chamchoum's work, spanning four continents and over 15 feature films, has changed in three decades. As a young and - to his retrospective eye - quite vain director in the late 1960s and 1970s, he launched into the movie-making world with two shorts: "Inside out," and "Salam … after death." Both his first films were never screened in Lebanon for what may appear to be trivial reasons: The first, because the film tackled the sensitive issue of drugs in Lebanon; and the second, more banally, because cinema owners in Beirut asked that the script's dialogue in the Lebanese dialect be dubbed into moneymaking Egyptian - a request Chamchoum rejected outright.

He left Lebanon somewhat dispirited, returning only briefly during the war to make a short feature, "Tell me Lebanon," a documentary on shell-shocked Lebanese children seen through the eyes of a 14-year-old French girl. After a 15-year stint in Europe where he came to work alongside Sidney Pollack, and shot a handful of British and French productions, he moved to the States working on such films as "Techno-fear" in 1994, "Universal Cops" in 1996 and, his most recent offering, "Musketeers Forever."

Chamchoum has embraced the American way of life wholeheartedly. He crossed the Atlantic in the late 1980s, moving his home from Paris to Los Angeles because Europe had become too small for him. "I was claustrophobic in Europe. The continent wasn't big enough," he says with a mixture of cowboy bravado and born-again passion. "I have since found paradise on earth in the city of the angels."

In his early films, political and social issues came to play major roles in his haunting, wispy productions. Later, though, Goldwyn's indictment of the "European" genre began to strike a resonant chord with Chamchoum.

The tongue-in-cheek, double-entendre-rich plots from Europe and offbeat American houses now hold little sway in the director's heart. "I am a commercial director," says Chamchoum proudly, proving to what extent he has been smitten by the American dream. "Action, sci-fi - these are films with a proven track record, and they're the films I make and wish to continue making." He explains his rationale with a statistician's logic: "Let's face it. The 12-19 year-olds form the majority of the movie-going public. The cinema industry must therefore fine-tune its productions to suit their tastes."

Hollywood has wrapped its tentacles so strongly around movie-going habits that it's easy to forget how many worthwhile pictures don't fit the usual multiplex patterns. Prime examples are so-called art films and documentaries or, to use the latest label, "non-fiction films," as insiders have come to call them, hoping this name will prove friendlier at the box office.

So when the globe-hopping, camera-shooting Chamchoum dropped in on the old country this month, one had to ask whether he - like the administration of his adopted country - had finally come to mend fences.

He explains that on an earlier visit in January, during his first trip to Lebanon in a decade, Chamchoum met cinema students from Alba. “Their little films were gems talking about real social issues,” declared Chamchoum. “They were contagious and joyful. Some of them were very romantic, some very melancholy. But even if they were sad, they never pulled you down. Strangely uplifting - there was an energy in them that just needed to be tapped.”

His short stay in January was like a trip down memory lane, a chance to meet his younger, alter ego when message and plot were more important variables than the ubiquitous special effects and the requisite multi-car pile up of action blockbusters.

In fact, he was so enthralled by the student projects, and by the stories of the artists making them, that he resolved to suggest Lebanon as the site for future set locations to his mogul friends in Hollywood. “I would like a new generation of American eyes and ears to be introduced to fresh sights and sounds from Lebanon.”

Steven Segal expressed his interest when Chamchoum approached him, as did Americans of Lebanese extraction such as Tom Shadyac, who produced “Patch Adams” and “Liar, Liar,” and Ron Shawary, who produced most of Pollack’s films and who received an Oscar for “Scent of a Woman.” Clint Eastwood, another of Chamchoum’s heavyweight acquaintances is reputed to have commented: “Give me the date for a trip to Lebanon and we’ll sort something out.”

“These guys knew Beirut before the war,” explains Chamchoum, “so they’re very keen to do something in this country.”

Having gathered interest in California, Chamchoum landed in Beirut in June with the key purpose of selling his proposals to the Ministry of Culture. Moving beyond the vague, “Let’s start shooting movies in Lebanon,” Chamchoum is specifically looking for official backing on two projects.

The first is a movie that was written some years ago but was never realized. Set between London and Monte Carlo, the film was to be cast with Sean Connery and Roger Moore, the two ex-007’s coerced somehow into sharing the limelight. “We revived the story,” says Chamchoum, “and suggested changing the Monte Carlo scenes to Beirut.

“It’s a well-written and fun film - and a bit like ‘Entrapment’.” He would like to see John Malkovich or Daniel Day-Lewis in the leading role. The budget for this film has already been estimated at $35 million. “I would not direct it,” insists Chamchoum. “I don’t like movies with big budgets. I’m more a 5 million-dollar man myself. Smaller budgets remain more personal.”

The second project which Chamchoum proposed to the ministry is a considerably cheaper film at $1 million-$2 million, to be filmed strictly in the Lebanese dialect, and with a Lebanese plot. Chamchoum is already working on trying to find a suitable script.

In either case, though, the movies would be American projects shot in Lebanon and thereby providing the students - the Alba undergraduates who set the ball rolling - with a clear opportunity of working on a professional film.

Chamchoum wishes to serve as a middleman. “I’m only a link in the chain,” he says, more with true intent than any modesty. “Another director would make the movie.”

With Chamchoum’s recent movie successes in the big time thanks to “Musketeers Forever” and “Universal Cops,” a quaint metaphoric saga set in Lebanon may no longer be his cup of tea. However, says Chamchoum, he intends to offer his services as a “tour guide,” to iron out any creases if and when east meets west on the film set.

The Ministry of Culture has expressed enthusiasm for Chamchoum’s ‘hand-across-the-ocean’ gesture, particularly in light of Beirut 99, the cultural capital of the Arab World. “But there isn’t a budget for a movie,” said Alexandre Najjar, of the Beirut 99 committee. “However, we would certainly like to meet anyone who’s interested in making a film in Lebanon.” Najjar added that the committee had extended invitations for October’s Beirut Film Festival to Chamchoum as well as to any of his Hollywood pals. It is no secret that the film festival would gain considerable street credibility if a star of the stature of Clint Eastwood were to participate in the event.

Chamchoum may have to wait a couple of years yet for his dream of an American movie in Beirut. To be sure, Lebanon could provide some fascinating footage of a grandly decrepit country, shot in a florid, sun-baked color - but there is a certain degree of adjustment required which even the expatriate Chamchoum should bear in mind. “You land and you’re in a total time warp,” Chamchoum relates, more irked than enchanted by what he perceives as the country’s unnatural state of grace. “You take traffic, for instance. It’s just so unbelievably hazardous that I’m constantly amazed that anyone here makes it into adulthood.” Chamchoum has been away for so long that he seems to have all but forgotten perhaps our most frivolous yet endearing national trait: Our nonchalance.

But time is a great reconciler. One of Chamchoum’s strongest assets is his adaptability. His “Musketeers” was shot in Quebec with two French Canadians sharing the credits with Michael Dudikoff. In order to appeal to the American movie-going public, Chamchoum decided that the French Canadians should be dubbed with American accents. Quite a different Chamchoum from the one who, at the dawn of a successful movie-making career, could not tolerate the notion of dubbing his “Salam … after death” into Egyptian Arabic.

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