

Perspiration, Painting and Bo Derek's Hair

They are big, and they are everywhere. The large, hand-painted promotional posters for movies that can be seen outside cinemas and lining major roads may not be to everyone's taste, but they do raise the question of why cinema owners in Lebanon choose to commission artists to paint the giant posters instead of printing them, as is the usual practice in Europe and the U.S.

"It's still cheaper to commission an artist," explains Tony Eid, in charge of advertising for La Cite cinema. "Printing is more expensive, particularly for a small print run of two, maximum three posters."

Typically, a hand-painted poster will cost \$500 compared with \$800 for a printed copy. "In Europe, movie owners enjoy a larger number of cinema-goers and therefore have the advertising budget to print one or two giant posters."

Hagop Demerdjian and Joseph Lahoud are veterans, two of only five full-time commercial artists. "First there was the color TV and then came the video recorder," says Mr. Demerdjian, who has been painting billboards since 1962. "Today our main rival has become the computer." He predicts that with further technological advances the \$800 for a typical print will drop and force him out of business. His finger throws an invisible switch in the air. "At a touch of a button you can blow up any poster to the size you want. It might be easier, but where's the art in that?"

All the major film studios send promotional leaflets for their movies around the world. Some artists opt for a film still; they project it onto a wall and pencil the magnified image of the outline. This is a labor-saving technique which Hagop Demerdjian cannot use. His workshop in Bourj Hammoud measures no more than eight meters by three, forcing him to sketch unaided.

"You have to be fit. We're not like artists who work leisurely at their easels. All our work is on a gigantic scale," he says. The cinema billboards can vary anywhere from four meters by seven to five by 15. "There's a lot of lifting and climbing ladders to reach awkward spots. In our business it's 75 percent perspiration and 25 percent painting."

On average, an artist earns \$100 to \$200 per project for a poster that can take anywhere from two days to a week to complete depending on the size, the materials used, and the content. "Hair," he says, nodding to himself. "Painting an actor's hair always takes the longest time. I remember I once spent two days on Bo Derek's hair. I'm a perfectionist, even though the public, in cars, doesn't really spot the detail."

"You have to care about your work," says Mr. Lahoud, whose workshop is in the Chouf. His specialty is action images such as an exploding comet or a blazing volcano. "Action shots on posters are always more appealing than the plain features of an actor - more interesting both for the passer-by and for the artist."

“Sometimes,” he adds morosely, “we’ve barely finished a poster when it has to come down to be replaced by another.”

Souk Looking for a Roof Over Its Head

“Five hundred lira!” shouts a vendor. “Everything you see for only 500 lira!” His neighbor shouts: “Socks! Get your socks here!” And next to him is a makeshift stand where the thirsty can buy freshly-squeezed orange juice.

The Sunday souk is not for the faint-hearted or the fastidious. Besides the deafening din of hawkers selling their wares and the pervasive odors of kebabs and falafel are the crowds of thousands of shoppers and bargain hunters.

People jostle for position, bottlenecks form at the more popular stalls creating logjams that are the pedestrian equivalent of the Chevrolet crossroads at rush hour on a Monday morning.

The Sunday souk by the Beirut River in Sin al-Fil is a misnomer - it’s open on Saturdays as well. On a dry weekend, as many as 40,000 shoppers visit the market, an estimated 10,000 on Saturday and 30,000 on Sunday.

The figures are halved come rain, a fact that rattles Tony Shedid, coordinator of the market. “People don’t want to go to an open air souk when it pours,” he says. “That’s why we’ve been begging the mohafez for the past eight years for a grant to install proper amenities.” He waves at the patchwork canopies over the stalls that act as shelter from the elements. “We’ve been asking for a tent, a large pavilion. Think how much more practical, not to say attractive, a pavilion would be.”

The one feature that stall-holders have in common is that they are all Lebanese. “We’re part and parcel of the Cooperative,” explains Mr. Shedid. “Only Lebanese families are allowed to book a stand with us.”

The 1,070 stallholders rent their plots at a rate of LL3,000 per square meter per weekend and, on a good day at least, the most successful vendors hope to report sales of LL2 million.

“For many of our families, the souk represents their only source of income,” Mr. Shedid says almost paternally. “They spend the week preparing their merchandise for the weekend.”

The market had a humble beginning in 1987, with a dozen stands arranged haphazardly - a circle of wagons when the pioneer stallholders had to contend with both the weather and the occasional sniper fire. But now, in spite of the crowds and overall mayhem, there is a degree of order in the midst of the chaos.

The stalls are arranged along neat parallel and perpendicular axes, and seven policemen as well as 10 guards in plainclothes patrol the souk.

“We’ve never received a report of crime on our premises,” insists Mr. Shedid. “In 11 years, not a single case of pickpockets or of other thefts.” The problems that he is called upon to resolve are of a more mundane nature: parents losing their children, or stallholders looking for more space.

He is optimistic about the future. “We’re the only souk in Beirut that is run by the common people for the common people,” he says somewhat rhetorically. Referring to the new government, he adds: “Our president is in touch with the common people. He will understand our need for a permanent souk, with a proper pavilion.”

He casts another glance at the messy canopy. “We need more color in our lives. A sky blue tent would be nice.”

Opening Up New Musical Frontiers

George Zoghbi’s mission is to boldly go where no other promoter has gone before. Businessman-cum-patron of the arts, Zoghbi is a man with a refined ear for music. He established the New Horizon agency over two years ago, organizing concerts from classical to jazz in order to “open new frontiers to the Lebanese.”

New Horizon’s motto is more than mere words. All of Zoghbi’s events are reasonably priced with the stated aim of attracting the younger generation. The commercial downside to this is that, even at sell-out concerts, revenue from tickets are currently covering a maximum of 60 percent of total costs. “So we count rather heavily on private sponsors to cover the rest,” said Zoghbi.

It was New Horizon that was responsible for the concert on May 29 of Naji Hakim, perhaps the most acclaimed classical musician to come out of Lebanon since Walid Aql. Even though sponsorship was not obtained, ticket prices were kept at an affordable LL15,000 to LL25,000.

For the first jazz festival, another feather in Zoghbi’s cap, sponsorship was easier. Winston cigarettes stumped up \$25,000, roughly a third of the budget. And some restaurants, such as The Avenue, ran full-page ads in Horizon’s brochures, a quid pro quo which entitled Zoghbi and the four bands to free meals. “Every little bit helps,” grinned Zoghbi. “Profits are always welcome. But for this festival, our main aim was to offer something really new and original by bringing Oriental jazz to Lebanon.”

Indeed, Zoghbi’s business is, for the time being at least, far from tinkling with the sound of money. New Horizon experienced losses of \$20,000 with the jazz festival alone. Zoghbi remains optimistic though, and believes he can beat future losses by a more aggressive

approach both in seducing higher participation from private sponsors, and by cutting band costs.

“The average band of a good standard asks for \$8,000 to \$13,000 for two concerts,” he said. “We need to negotiate more with the groups, and make them understand that they shouldn’t expect the same fee in Beirut as in London or Paris.” He believes many musicians will respond favorably. “It can work. Some foreign bands enjoy coming to Lebanon more for the thrill of it, the adventure, than any thoughts of earning vast amounts of money.”

One part of Zoghbi’s equation which won’t change is ticket prices. For the jazz festival, prices ranged from LL15,000 to LL40,000 with 60 seats reserved for students at the special price of LL10,000. “We initiated the student program for all our events to encourage schoolchildren and undergraduates to attend. All they need to be entitled to the discount is their student card.”

Zoghbi’s focus is always on the young. Culture speaks for itself, ignores parochial social conventions including, most importantly to Zoghbi, any prevailing prejudices. “Music and art have this tremendous adhesive power which we, in Lebanon, are only beginning to realize,” he said, adding brightly: “Music is without doubt the food of love. It’s that much more difficult to hate your neighbor when he’s swinging to your favorite tunes.”

Copyright Law Creates a Software Buying Frenzy

Consumers are rushing to buy software at special and soon-to-become-illegal prices.

Lebanon’s copyright law, passed in March, comes into force on June 15 after which it will be illegal to sell LL5,000 pirated copies. Customers will be forced to buy original Microsoft, Adobe and other programs at prices that vary from \$100 to \$600 per package.

Lebanese retailers such as Walid Kadi’s Microsystems are taking the government’s shift to copyright very seriously.

“We’re preparing ourselves for the 15th,” Kadi said. “We’ll be selling pirated software until the 12th, after that our shelves will be emptied of everything but the genuine programs.”

Kadi believes that most copies left after the 15th will be shipped out to Syria or Jordan where electronic buccaneering is rife.

In theory, the government’s stated policy to quash the “copywrongers” is generally seen as a step in the right direction.

Any retailer caught selling pirated software after June 15 faces a penalty of LL50 million (\$33,000), seizure and destruction of the pirated copies and possible closure of the shop for an undisclosed period of time.

In practice, however, the illegal trading of software - which is difficult enough to control in the West - may prove impractical in Lebanon as retailers may continue to sell the counterfeits under the counter.

“Everything has to become legal,” said Kadi, optimistic about the change, adding, “either we have a government which respects itself, and where laws have to be respected, or we forget the whole thing and return to the anarchic days.”

Kadi has an estimated \$10,000 in lost sales riding on the new copyright law. In a fiery act of good will, his company, Microsystems, will be burning over 3,000 pirated CD-ROMs on 12 June to show the international anti-piracy group Business Software Alliance (BSA), that he will be turning over a new leaf.

“We need to put an end to the Malaysian invasion,” he said, referring to the country that is responsible for a large chunk of counterfeit exports to the Middle East.

At present, about 70 percent of the software used in Lebanon is pirated, a reduction from last years figure of 73 percent. BSA as well as major software corporations are hopeful that the government’s drive will further slash that figure.

But for the time being at least, copyright anarchy still rules the electronic waves. For instance, the latest Adobe Premiere, a video editing program that will set you back \$250 in two weeks’ time, still costs LL5,000.

Crusade Turns into Best-seller

Success is all in the name, and the name is Najah Wakim, maverick Beirut MP and currently a best-selling author. His book, “Black Hands”, about alleged corruption in high places, has taken the Lebanese publishing world by storm.

Already in its ninth edition with a tenth to follow shortly, the book has sold 19,000 copies so far. This is an average of over 700 copies a day in the 27 days it has been in print. Last Wednesday alone the publishers, the Printing & Editing Company owned by Tahsin al-Khayat, reported an end-of-day sale of 1,200 copies - worthy figures to turn even the most successful of best-selling novelists green with envy. The frenzy shows no signs of abating and Mr. Wakim’s book is still selling like warm manakish on a Sunday morning.

Talal al-Omary, responsible for sales at the publishing house, explains this success in the marketing terms of customer needs being fulfilled, as if he were describing the sales in a supermarket rather than a bookshop. “We, the Lebanese people, need to know what’s

happening,” he said as his phone began to ring, adding in an assertive tone, “We all need this book.”

Then he turned to the phone to receive an order for a further 100 copies.

This signals a departure of sorts for the company, which is more known in the market for its publications of atlases and children’s books. It is a small operation which has had to stretch its resources and manpower to deal with “Black Hands.”

At LL15,000, the book has no value-added frills, such as photographs or high-quality paper, and the cover pictures of the troika and other local politicians are hardly a triumph of design. But then, at such a low price, one doesn’t expect a leather-bound hardback. The marketing aim is clearly to draw in a mass readership.

In fact, if “Black Hands” been more aesthetically appealing and thus more expensive, Najah Wakim might well have lost some valuable street credibility.

“Black Hands”, loosely translated from the Arabic, should read “Dirty Hands,” for it is an open attack on the allegedly rife corruption taking place behind closed doors. Depending on which side of the fence one stands, the legislator/author is either a staunch supporter of freedom and fair play, shouting “J’accuse” to the powers that be, or, as his critics claim, he is a sad Don Quixote figure blinded by delusions.

History or the planned sequel may tell the complete account. But beyond the controversy and the political debate is the undisputed fact that “Black Hands” is a stunning success story. It is available nationwide, and Mr. Omary stressed that his salesmen had called on all bookstores from Tripoli to Tyre. “We’re concentrating on this one book,” he explained, and admitted that all the other works on their list were on hold in the warehouse, at least until the passing of the present whirlwind.

He also confirmed that Mr. Wakim was writing a sequel in which evidence would be made public to substantiate the charges raised in “Black Hands.” Volume two is due to appear on the shelves some time in the first quarter of 1999. The title has yet to be released; but no one expects it will be called “Cold Feet”.

Pedal to the Tune of Nature with an Eye Toward the Sky

The natural beauty of Qornet al-Sawda, Lebanon’s highest peak, is enough to attract anyone, and now with the arrival of a new breed of adventure seekers, there are two more reasons to visit the Cedars. Constant winds that rush through the scenic valley, and a rugged terrain have turned an area once dominated by tourism into a mecca for paragliders and mountain cyclists.

No longer the preserve of children, grownups are getting into the pedaling act, signing up for excursions on the slopes of Qornet al-Sawda. For LL20,000, Thermique will lease you a 21-speed, high-performance bike for the day and a tour operator for groups of at least four. The guide, following the cyclists at a respectful distance, is on hand for any mishap. This partly explains why the guide shadows his group in a less strenuous Land Rover.

“The 4x4 can also pick up any stragglers who are too tired to continue,” says Jihad Kashami, an instructor in the Paragliding Club who set up Thermique Mountain Biking in May, along with fellow members Raja Saade and Alain Gabriel.

If biking is your thing, Thermique offers two trails and acres of wildlands. For those who prefer a smoother ride than mountain biking on the rugged peak of Mount Lebanon, there’s a trail over the mountain range with a more leisurely ride around the lake of Ouyoun Orghosh, with a stopover for lunch at a lakeside restaurant - for a total cost of LL30,000.

Whichever the trail, and whether the objective is a solid workout or a mezze, the clear bonus is that cycling in the woods promises an immediate respite from the hustle and bustle of city life. “You don’t have to be a professional mountain biker to enjoy pedaling in nature,” says Kashami. “It’s the non-racing aspect of mountain biking that’s appealing. A mountain bike allows you to get away and get into some of Lebanon’s beautiful scenery.”

Their customers for both mountain biking and paragliding range from undergraduate jocks to city slickers. The Paragliding Club, now in its fifth year, is more established with 70 full-time members and an equal number training to become airborne. Along with the \$300 fee per course, of which \$125 goes toward insurance, the club offers single trips in a tandem sail for \$35, where the instructor does the flying and the passenger goes along for the thrill.

There are ambitious expansion plans. “We’re trying to double our stock of bikes,” says Kashami, who would like to bring the sport closer to the capital with outings to the hills above Beirut.

But for the time being, at least, and with an eye on unimpressive profits, Thermique and the Paragliding Club are not flying as high as they would like. They have an inventory of a dozen sails and 14 bikes. Each sail has an airworthy life of only 3-4 years and costs \$1,000 and \$2,500 for, respectively, the standard trainee sails and full-fledged paraglider.

But they remain optimistic that, as the Lebanese become more sporting, their organization will prosper. It is a hope that many local businesses in the Cedars echo. Last month, an estimated 300 people participated in the paragliding and biking programs, which is strong ammunition for those who claim that, added to the winter sports of skiing and snow boarding, Qornet al-Sawda is fast becoming the outdoor adventure capital of Lebanon.

“We strongly believe that if your heart’s in something and you keep plugging away, you’ll get there in the end,” says Kashami - words that can equally be applied to pedaling up a very steep mountain.
