

LONDON

NOUR FESTIVAL

From toothsome desserts to the Arab Spring - London's Nour Festival attempts a distillation of Arab culture for the UK capital this autumn. Sophie Kazan was there.

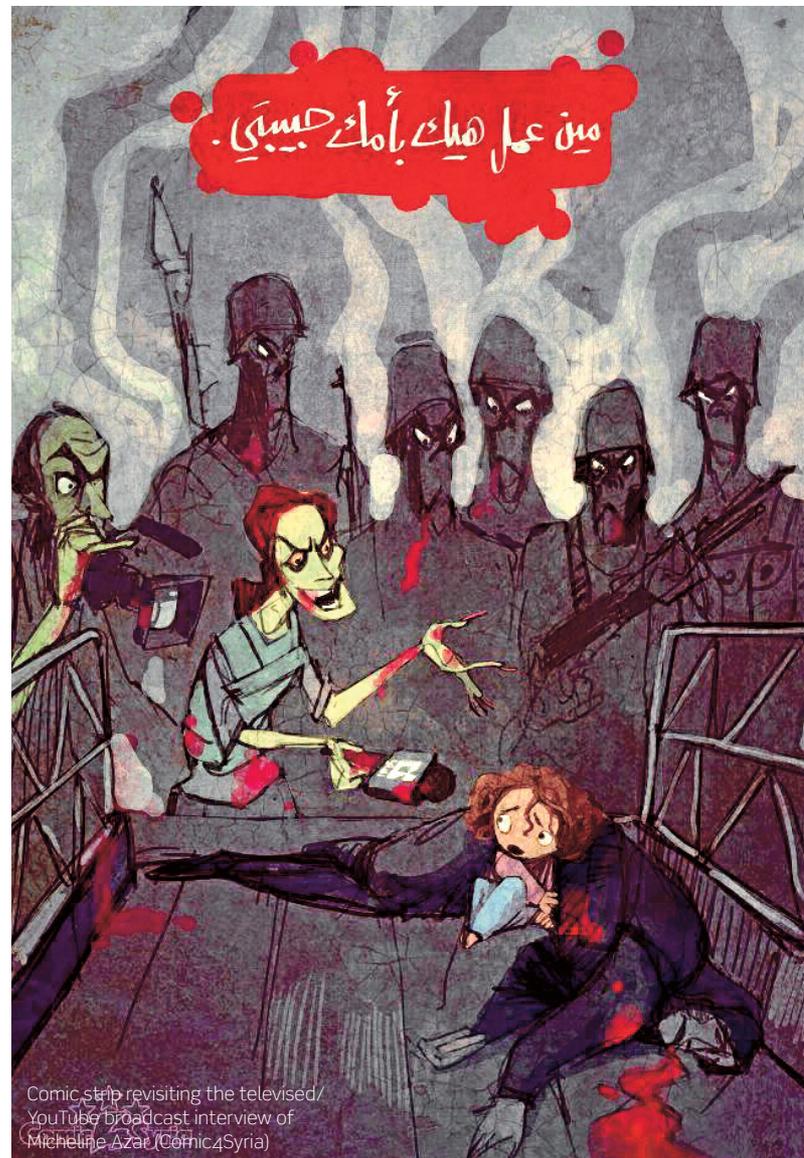
The Nour Festival ('light' in Arabic) is an annual autumn festival held in across Kensington and Chelsea, London. The festival aims to highlight the art and culture of the Arab world and to encourage cross-cultural dialogue amongst the various communities in the borough, many of whom are of Middle Eastern, African, North

African and Asian descent and to promote awareness in the capital as a whole.

The first Nour Festival took place in 2010. It was held at Leighton House Museum in Kensington, West London deemed the ideal location for such a festival. Home of the Orientalist artist Frederic, Lord Leighton (1830-96) the house is decorated like a corner of some forgotten 19th century Syrian palace, with its luxurious tile work, its wooden mashrabiyya windows, indoor fountain and Persian carpets. An apt setting for a celebration of Middle Eastern art and culture. Music, art, comedy and cooking all took turns in the packed daytime and evening at Leighton House, the size and location of which, limited the number and variety of events that could be included in the festival.

Looking back, the success of the first Nour Festival in 2010 highlighted the obvious need to celebrate contemporary Arab

culture in London. So much so in fact, that the following year, in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring', the incumbent Mayor of London Boris Johnson, close to the end of his term of office and keen for re-election, launched the London-wide Shubbak Festival. This summer festival, subtitled 'A London Summer for an Arab Spring' sought to stir nostalgia and



Comic strip revisiting the televised/YouTube broadcast interview of Michel Azar (Comic4Syria)

garner support from Londoners by providing a 'window' ('shubbak') to the contemporary, cutting edge art and culture of the Arab region. Anti-Mubarak anthems, experimental cinema and discussions addressing contentious issues of culture, politics, art and identity added substance to the Arab themes that were presented. At the time, some thought that the Nour festival could not possibly live up to the hype created by Shubbak.

So, for this year's Nour programme, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea cleverly joined forces with many of the same organizations that partnered with Shubbak - from the Mosaic Rooms and Saqi books, to larger partners such as the Victoria and Albert and Science Museums. For the first time, the festival is being held at venues throughout the borough, including the V&A and Science Museum, the Ismaili Centre, Al Manaar Museum Cultural Heritage Centre and other key cultural organizations with strong links to the Arab world. This has not only made room for a longer programme of events, but it has also brought the festival to a much wider audience.

This year, the festival has also unveiled a distinctly-recognisable brand-identity, developed by the Arab artist Muiz. Muiz's strong, graphic images fuse elements of traditional Islamic art, especially calligraphy, with bold, contemporary lines and colours. In fact, an exhibition of Muiz's work, 'Nuclear Nuqta', was a cornerstone of the programme at Leighton House galleries, the original focus of →