

*“Nothing, and no one, goes through all this
and remains the same”*

Meet Stephanie Kayal and Abed Kobeissy,
co-authors of *Galactic Crush 2: Into the Cold*



To start, could you briefly introduce yourselves?

Stephanie: We are Stephanie Kayal and Abed Kobeissy, we've been creating work together for a few years. I come from a theatre and dance background, Abed is a music composer and performer. We are both Lebanese, Abed is based in Beirut, I live between Beirut and Brussels for almost 3 years now.

*Can you summarise *Galactic Crush*'s story in a few sentences?*

Stephanie: *Galactic Crush* is a science fiction dark humorish saga, composed of 2 parts. Both parts are connected but they can be definitely seen independently, or in any order. You don't need to know part 1 to understand part 2. Both are dance performances, with live music and texts, the second part contains in addition video work, and it is the first time we use video in our work on stage. Part one revolves around two delirious crime fighting couples, two self-proclaimed antiheroes that decided to collaborate in order to save their city from corruption and an evil rule. Of course all this is happening in a parallel universe.



© Margot Briand

What inspired you to create this particular DIY science-fiction universe?

Abed: The idea came from what us and many Lebanese went through after a popular uprising - that we were both part of in 2019 - an uprising that was on many levels driven by idealism and naivety. We were going against a horrible and corrupt elite that was and still ruling the country for decades, and is very much entrenched in every level of government. This idealism led us to Don Quixote, and other figures of antiheroes in pop culture. This is how the world of *Galactic Crush Part 1* (GC1) was created.

By the summer of 2021 we were living in a reality that is so absurd and unjust, a reality with no whatsoever order, to the point that absurd events were hijacking from fiction its ability to exaggerate, so we wanted to make a work that in a way apologizes to fiction, and consoles it.

After a violent economic collapse and the crime of the Beirut port explosion - the biggest non-nuclear bomb that destroyed the city and killed hundreds - of which until today we don't know the truth and the culprate, Beirut felt like an empty dark abandoned place. This feeling of losing everything familiar to us, this feeling of helplessness, hopelessness, and the need of revenge from everyone that took away familiarity from us was and still deep in our hearts and body. A classic need for an antihero with superpowers (and her sidekick).

This was translated into a dark humour sci-fi dance performance, we never mention Beirut or the explosion or anything real, because it's a choice we took, to let this hyper-reality feed the realm we've built.

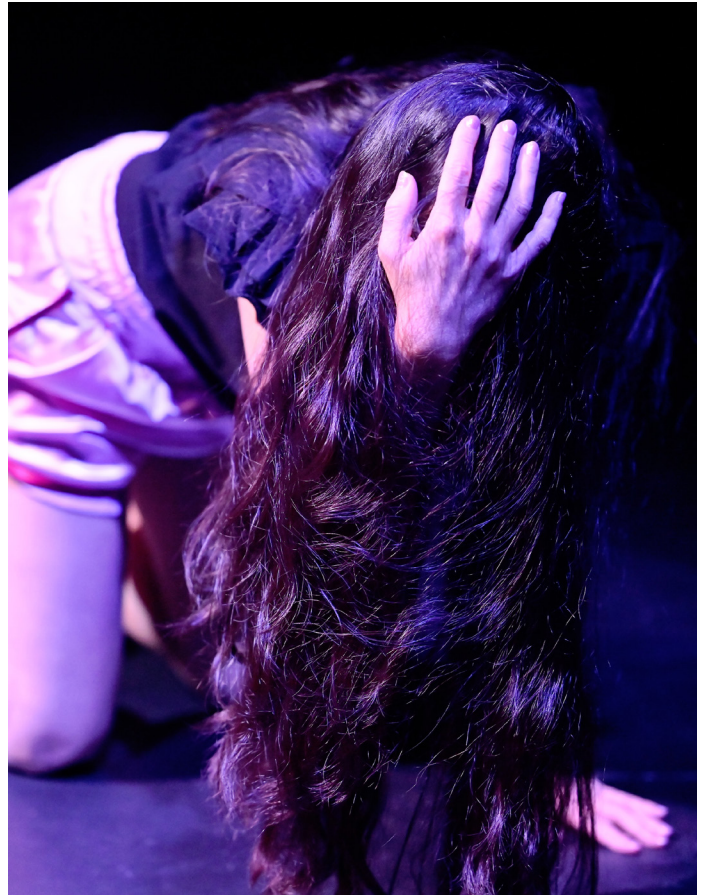
By the summer of 2021 we were living in a reality that is so absurd and unjust, a reality with no whatsoever order, to the point that absurd events were hijacking from fiction its ability to exaggerate, so we wanted to make a work that in a way apologizes to fiction, and consoles it.

Stephanie: *Galactic Crush 2: Into the Cold* (GC2) came also from this need, specifically as a reaction to the failure of the uprising. We felt the urge to continue telling the story of our two protagonists; the failed antihero and her scideckik. and for us this sci-fi realm is a refuge in a way. So part 2 follows them in their final mission to leave for good. The difference in part 2, is that they hesitantly admit their failure and delirium.

But midway through the creation process of part 2, the genocide in Gaza happened and then Israel expanded its fullfledge war onto Lebanon, and until today the south of Lebanon is still under occupation and is receiving daily bombings and killings of civilians. During the writing of Part 2, that is during the most recent war on Lebanon, one of our team members who live in Lebanon had to evacuate their home with their mother in Beirut, after they received an airstrike notice from the Israeli army - to be clear, receiving an airstrike notice to evacuate means that you're very lucky, most people were killed in their homes, without knowing that a number of missiles are about to be dropped on them. To this day, our colleague's family is still displaced. Their homes are still not rebuilt due to an economic blockade by Western governments. However, none of our personal stories during the war are mentioned in the performance. We chose not to be the center of the performance, and to tackle bigger political issues, and because our experience is nothing compared to the Gazans and the people of South Lebanon.

Nothing, and no one, goes through all this and remains the same, unchanged, especially not after witnessing the most documented genocide in hystory. We allowed these changes to intrude on our work process. It was impossible and unnatural for us to go on with the creation process without acknowledging them, and it is something ongoing, still happening.

"You're supposed to be polite in your suffering. And I completely refuse this. I can experience travesty and tragedy, and profound loss, and I can still make a joke about it." Mohammed El-Kurd, poet and journalist



© Margot Briand

Abed: But because of all this, we wanted to reclaim our agency of how to tell our own story, without playing the role of the broken or the angry victim. We wanted to grab our story by its reins, and use our main tool to allow it to infuse our work; dark humor. Something we refuse to let go.

Palestinian writer, poet and journalist Mohammed El-Kurd expressed his view on agency and wielding humour in an article titled "The Right to Speak for Ourselves" but also in other interviews and texts; he says; *"You're supposed to be polite in your suffering. And I completely refuse this. I can experience travesty and tragedy, and profound loss, and I can still make a joke about it."*

Galactic Crush deals with abandonment, disappearance, and departure. Why did you choose to explore these feelings, and how did you personally evolve during the creation process?

Abed: Well GC2 in its initial version already dealt with the notions of abandonment and disappearance. The two crimefighters basically overreact to their failure by deciding to abandon their city and

leave not only to another country, but leave the whole damn galaxy once and for all. You know, two drama queens! As we said, this also mirrors the heavy feeling of despair that haunted many Lebanese after the failure of the 2019-2020 uprising. And writing about abandonment led us to explore the notion of disappearance, into the dark void of space. As if they chose to be lonely together, instead of staying home and living with the shame of defeat, and the collapse of their fame and stardom. That's in the fictional aspect of the piece, but also, here in the real world, and due to our personal disillusionment towards the failure of the Lebanese uprising, we were writing a piece that portrays the decision of abandoning a homeland as a bold political act.

Then, the genocide began, and here it's very important to mention that this genocide is not a separate event in the region's history, it is in fact nothing more than a continuation of the modern history of Palestine, the history of a people that decided to stay in their land and fight despite impossible odds. There are numerous photos and videos of Palestinian farmers literally hugging their olive trees as the Israeli army is destroying their fields and



© Margot Briand

pulling out their trees. Same situations happened so many times with the people of south Lebanon. So naturally we were faced with the obvious question, how on earth can we keep writing a piece that glorifies the act of abandoning one's homeland, while Palestinians and Lebanese are literally being executed for deciding to remain in their land. This is how the notion of abandonment became a double reference, a reference to the decision of the fictional two crimefighters of GC2, and the decision of us co-creators of the piece, to abandon our initial script for GC2. Thus allowing the writing of the piece to react honestly to current political and historical events.

You've lived through the war while staying connected online. How did that shape your relationship with social media?

Stephanie: That's true. Of course this was happening to most families in Lebanon and Palestine, two peoples with a very vast diaspora. Abed lives in Lebanon, and my parents do as well. We were in constant communication every day. Although it is not to be compared to surviving a war physically, but I can tell you that living a war remotely, fearing the loss of loved ones, or even just witnessing the extermination of your people while you are helpless, and while the pro-democracy Western governments are either actively or passively complicit, not only destroys you psychologically, but also shatters any false hopes you ever had about human empathy and universalism. It's all a mirage, it really is. We were totally helpless as we counted their missiles and our dead.

Some of us decided not to take part in this "campaign", and felt unwillingly complicit by not "doing their part", some of us decided to take part in this campaign and also felt unwillingly complicit by falling in the Israeli plan of normalizing our victimhood. We will never know who made the right choice, probably both were right, both were wrong.

A simple example of social media warfare is one that I mentioned already; during the war on Lebanon, the Israeli army's spokesperson was constantly posting evacuation orders on X (Twitter) accompanied with a zoomed-in satellite map showing the specific houses they wanted to bomb, and the houses were circled in red. These x posts were released a few minutes before the bombing. He would also post a selfie video of himself, speaking to us in broken Arabic, telling us to leave our house, naming our street, our grocery shop, our nearby mosque and church. To us, his face and voice will forever be the personification of terror, of pure evil. But again, those civilians who received these notices were the lucky ones. In Palestine and Lebanon, tens of thousands were murdered in their homes without any notice.

Another despicable relation to social media came from the dilemma of helping the cause vs. normalizing massacres. On Instagram for example, the more hearts an image of a massacred civilian would receive, the more Instagram would give it exposure - despite the shadow banning algos. Why is exposure important? We knew that western powers had different levels of influence over Israel,

we also knew that big enough protests in western cities might pressure some governments to change their policies. We also knew that there was a slim chance of all this actually working. But still, we had to try everything, so we launched a 24/24 task of "hearting" and sharing videos that document the crimes of the Israeli army. To be clear, this was a tactic to try and cause as much reaction as possible in cities and capitals of influence, in the slim hope of forcing change in policy. But this means we will be taking part in normalizing the image of the Palestinian and Lebanese victim, the slaughtered family in Gaza or Nabatiyeh to become a standard piece of daily news. Some of us decided not to take part in this "campaign", and felt unwillingly complicit by not "doing their part", some of us decided to take part in this campaign and also felt unwillingly complicit by falling in the Israeli plan of normalizing our victimhood. We will never know who made the right choice, probably both were right, both were wrong.

Did you ever feel that the digital space helped you stay human, or on the contrary, made it harder ?

Abed: This is THE question, when discussing social media. I think it's too soon to know the answer. I mean the act of assigning hearts to the smiling faces of Israeli snipers as they shoot children looking for food, it's not something one can assess in terms of psychological damage. But honestly, in light of what people are going through, psychological health is really a luxury.

