

AGENDA
LEBANON

MUSIC

Nils Petter Molaver
Music Hall
September 29, 9 pm
+961 3 413 960
A key figure in the international jazz scene and two-time Grammy award-winner, this Norwegian trumpet virtuoso will perform songs from his latest album “Hamada.” The concert will also include video projections.

FILM

‘Palestine in the New Cinema’
Metropolis Cinema Sofil, Achrafieh
September 26, 5-10 pm
+961 3 793 065
The final day of Ayyam Beirut al-Cinemaïyya features a selection of acclaimed film from Palestine, including Najwa Najjar’s “Pomegranates and Myrrh,” Rasid Masharawi’s “Leila’s Birthday” and Abdelsalam Shehade’s “To my Dad.” All festival films promise to be subtitled in English and/or French.

PERFORMANCE

‘Clïc Clac Les ‘Amoureux’
Ain al-Mreisseh, facing Mickey Dee’s
October 1, 6 pm
+961 3 810 688; www.zicohouse.org
The Eighth edition of The Beirut Street Festival commences on a romantic note as France’s Mat-apeste clowning troupe try to spread love around the Corniche – encouraging couples to kiss and sing accordion-accompanied, while the clowns immortalize them on Polaroids. The show is repeated the following day at the Beirut Souqs.

THEATER

‘2007 or how I squeezed my bubble envelopes’
Monnot Theater, next to St Joseph Church, Achrafieh
Until September 26, 7:30 pm
+961 1 202 422
Farah Nehmé directs writer Chrystèle Khodr in this short performance in which a woman writes letters to men she knew, loved and hated in Beirut between 2005 and 2008.

PHOTOGRAPHY

‘Des ruines toufiquiennes’
French Cultural Center, Damascus Road
Until September 30
+961 1 420 232
The latest exhibition of work by Lebanon’s Gilbert Hage features his critically acclaimed series shot in the aftermath of Israel’s 34-day war on Lebanon in 2006.

ART

‘Divine Comedy’
Agial art gallery, Hamra, Abdel-Aziz Street,
Until October 13
+961 1 345 213
This exhibition of work by Chaza Charafeddine takes its inspiration from Islamic art of the Mughal period and Persian miniatures as well as early 20th-century images produced in the Middle and Indian subcontinent.

Just a thought

I stayed in a really old hotel last night. They sent me a wake-up letter.

Steven Wright
(1955 -)
American Comedian

REVIEW

The nightmare of trying to write in a hotel room

Ghassan Salhab’s ‘The Mountain’ is a further refinement of the Lebanese auteur’s challenging aesthetic

Jim Quilty
Daily Star staff
BEIRUT: A man sits alone, in a near-empty hotel, trying to write. That’s the apparent premise of “The Mountain,” the new feature film from Lebanese writer-director Ghassan Salhab.

Though framed as a “work in progress” in the program of Ayyam Beirut al-Cinemaïyya, the city’s bi-annual Arab film festival, the film’s Wednesday evening screening was in fact a low-key world premier. As this taciturn work opens, an unnamed character (Fadi Abi Samra) prepares to leave Beirut for a month. The audience is left to puzzle over his destination, indeed, what he may have done to elicit departure. Abi Samra’s character is dropped at the airport. The camera contemplates his face as he stands, thoughtful, then watches him rent a car for a month. He drives through the night until he reaches an unnamed mountain hotel. The hotel clerk confirms he’s got the top-floor room, that he won’t have to leave his room during his month-long stay and that he would be undisturbed by human contact. “Your face seems familiar,” the clerk pries affably as his guest walks to the lift. “Maybe I know you from television?” “Yes,” he replies unconvincingly. “I’m a singer.”

A chambermaid seems put off by the sight of him on the stairway, but from that point on the protagonist is on his own for the balance of the film. Settling in, he pulls down the shutters to ward off his window’s mist-mantled mountain view, pulls out the stack of type-writer paper he’d stowed in his suitcase at the start of the film, and, taking out a fountain pen, commences to write. You wouldn’t imagine there’d be many movies about a lone man, holed up in a hotel, trying to write. For those who have ventured to the rarefied edges of popular English-language cinema, though, there is a precedent. Best known is Stanley Kubrick’s “The Shining” (1980), the offspring of the director’s unlikely collabora-

tion with novelist Steven King, whose schlock thriller the auteur adapted for the screen. Suffering from writer’s block, a novelist (Jack Nicholson) takes a job minding a resort hotel, empty in the off-season, with his wife and young son. Unbeknownst to the family, this place has a murderous history, and an evil presence lingers there. The writer becomes unhinged and feels

somehow projected from the neurotic mind of the writer himself (John Turturro). More recently still, in Charlie Kaufman’s adaptation of the memoir “Confessions of a Dangerous Mind” (2002), Chuck Berris (Sam Rockwell) is found standing, unwashed and naked, in an anonymous hotel room while he narrates the course of his sordid life, from television game-show host to CIA con-

which the character can project his inner turmoil, or whatever it is writers experience when they’re trying to write. Since such characters are themselves being written by writers, such writer-sitting-alone-in-a-near-empty-hotel films are also imbued with a meta-narrative something-other that gets thoughtful audiences off. The preferred genre of Abi

as to explain exactly what’s going on. True to Salhab’s fondness for making movies in Lebanon that are not about Lebanon, little information is leaked concerning the context of the story. Since the opening frames locate the protagonist in an older building with antique signage outside, the picture suggests the mid-20th century – an impression magnified by the film

visual and auditory distraction. As soon as he starts his rental car, he turns the radio off. When the front desk calls to inquire why he didn’t eat all his breakfast, he unplugs the phone. He notices that his television might be emitting broadcast signals (in any case the screen reflects the tableau of his room) so he turns it round to face the wall. He’s also removed all the suite’s mirrors and stuffed them into a closet.

As time passes, he increasingly pares himself down. Though he washes obsessively, he stops eating and dressing – much of the film’s latter sequences require Abi Samra to stride about naked.

Deliberately paced without becoming becalmed, and beautifully shot by cinematographer Sarmand Louis, “The Mountain” marks the latest stage in Salhab’s paradoxical development as a filmmaker.

His 2006 feature “The Last Man,” a vampire movie, marked his first experiment with genre forms. Here he employs a soundtrack intrusions for the first time. Yet, for all this, his work seems ever-more aesthetically refined.

“The Mountain” will not be to everyone’s taste. Some movie fans like seeing stuff happen on screen, and far more is suggested here than actually comes to pass.

Others have little tolerance for written poetry in film: Arguably it competes with the form’s visual poetry, and one or the other invariably comes out the loser.

Finally, the unflappable assurance of Fadi Abi Samra’s screen presence is somewhat undermined by his character being made to recite portentous-sounding English-language song lyrics from time-to-time.

The gesture will have a payoff for an informed audience, some of whom will find a glorious incongruity in hearing anyone recite Johnny Cash’s “When the Man Comes Around.”

One of the features of the lone-writer-sitting-in-a-near-empty-hotel film is that, after a spell of very little happening, the viewer is rewarded with an outrageous gout of physical violence. Here too “The Mountain” delivers.



Abi Samra has a smoke in “The Mountain.”

compelled to murder his wife (Shelly Duvall), their youngster and anybody else who happens to wander into the place. A more-recent work is Joel and Ethan Coen’s “Barton Fink” (1991). Here a depression-era writer, having won acclaim with a hit Broadway play, is offered a job as a Hollywood studio scriptwriter. He chooses to live out of an ornate, virtually empty, art-deco hotel on the outskirts of town, where, he feels, he will be better able to live “the life of the mind.” Naturally mayhem ensues, albeit one with a dark sense of humor. There is some ambiguity, too, as to whether the murderous malevolence resides in the place itself, in the large man in the next room with a bad ear infection (John Goodman) or is

tract killer. Each of these very different films is more or less true to its story’s unity of place and they share common narrative and thematic tropes with Salhab’s new film. The cultural meaning of “the hotel,” a place that’s not home, where people volunteer to live as if it were, is obvious enough; emptying out the hotel unhinges it from its mundane commercial-social functions and underlines the isolation and unrootedness of the central character. That character is a writer, whose job is literally to manipulate the interior (whatever is inside his head) and project it outside as writing. This provides all sorts of possibilities for the filmmaker to use the space as a screen upon

Samra’s character is not the novel (nor does he write “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” over and over) or screenplay. Salhab’s protagonist fills up his un-ruled pages with poetry.

He’s not hammering it out on an antique typewriter or laptop

Deliberately paced without becoming becalmed, it is also beautifully shot

computer but writing it long-hand with a fountain pen that keeps staining his hands, like blood. Poetry, even this stream-of-consciousness poetry does have an autobiographical aspect but nothing so mundane

being projected, but for a second or two, as if shot in flat black-and-white. Yet the shards of information that drift into the shot from car radios – Hizbullah celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Israeli Army’s withdrawal from south Lebanon – will remind an informed audience that the action is set about now.

More important is the sense of unease and immanent violence that permeates the film. The character’s arrival at the hotel corresponds to his state of increasing alienation from his environment. While driving on the night-time mountain highway, he comes upon a horrific car crash. He climbs out of his car to take a look, but his reaction is hardly heroic. He is averse to unwanted

National Geographic magazine set to release Arabic edition

Adam Schreck
Associated Press
DUBAI: After decades of turning out yellow-framed covers featuring Egyptian artifacts and other Middle East treasures, *National Geographic* magazine will for the first time soon start printing in Arabic. The picture-packed science magazine plans to issue its first Arabic edition next month, making its more-than-century-old publisher the latest Western media company to tap the growing Middle East

media market. “The stories in this magazine talk about all countries and all cultures,” said Mohamed al-Hammadi, editor-in-chief of the new edition, who expressed hope it would give Arab readers a deeper understanding of the planet and how others live. “The readers here, they need this,” he said in an interview. With backing from the oil-rich emirate of Abu Dhabi, *National Geographic Al Arabiyya* aims to reach readers across 15 countries from Morocco to the Persian Gulf. It

will contain translated articles from the 122-year-old US edition and original pieces tailored to the region. On Wednesday, the magazine named seven Arab experts who will serve as advisers and contributors. They include Egyptian archaeologist Zahi Hawass, a female Saudi medical researcher Khawla al-Kuraya and Essam Heggy, a Libyan-born planetary specialist at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory. The goal, Hammadi said, is to produce at least a fifth of the articles locally.

National Geographic, the journal of the Washington-based National Geographic Society, already publishes in 29 languages besides English. It joins a small number of Western magazines publishing in Arabic, including fashion titles *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. A few other magazines, including *Esquire* and *Time Out*, also publish Middle Eastern regional editions, but they are in English and mainly target foreign residents. Other international media companies are also expanding

in the Arab world. Viacom Inc. launched an Arabic version of MTV three years ago. Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. conglomerate, which includes the Fox television channels and publisher HarperCollins, earlier this year agreed to take a \$70 million stake in Arabic media giant Rotana Group. Its Sky News division has floated the idea of creating an Arabic-language competitor to news network Al-Jazeera. *National Geographic’s* Arabic edition is being published in conjunction with the state-

owned Abu Dhabi Media Co. The companies wouldn’t disclose financial terms of the deal, but Terry Adamson, *National Geographic* executive vice president, said he expects the Arabic magazine to be commercially viable. In 2008, ADMC said its film arm and *National Geographic* planned to spend \$100 million to produce 10-15 films over five years. It launched an Arabic-language version of the National Geographic Channel on cable last year. The new magazine hits newsstands on October 1.

Brazilian artist’s depictions of imagined assassinations attracts criticism

Marc Burleigh
Agence France Presse
SAO PAULO: An artist’s fantasies of assassinating Queen Elizabeth II, former US president George W. Bush and Pope Benedict XVI have triggered controversy in Brazil ahead of a major art show opening. Nine charcoal sketch self-portraits of the Brazilian artist, Gil Vicente, in imaginary scenes murdering world leaders have become the focus of fierce debate, with the national lawyers’ association demanding they be taken down from the walls of the Sao Paulo Art Biennial, which starts Saturday. “They claim it justifies crime” an indignant Vicente said in an interview. “Stealing public money is not a crime? The

reports on television aren’t trying to justify crimes? Only my work is justification of crime?” Both the artist and organizers insist the works would be shown as planned in one of the main exhibits in the Biennial despite the outcry. For Vicente, it was a question of artistic freedom. “They want to remove them,” he said. “No, no way. Why remove them? People need to see this.” For the lawyer’s association, though, a public showing of the works was crossing a line. “Even though a work of art freely expresses the creativity of its maker, without limits, there have to be limits to exhibiting it publicly,” the association said in a statement, demanding that the Biennial’s organizers remove the series.

The organizers rejected that plea, arguing that a “fundamental quality of our institution is curatorial independence and freedom of expression. The works exhibited to do not reflect the opinion of the curators nor of the Biennial Foundation.” The series, called “Enemies,” was started in 2005 with a sketch of Bush, portrayed kneeling with his hands fastened behind his back and the figure of Vicente looming over him, thrusting a pistol toward his head. Over a year, the artist completed the collection with images showing him preparing to shoot other leaders, including the Roman Catholic pope, Britain’s queen, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Iranian Presi-

dent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is also depicted being executed as he sits tied to a chair – but by the artist running a big knife across his throat. The grisly method of assassinating Lula was nothing personal, Vicente said. Originally, he was going to sketch different weapons being used in the mur-

ders, but after Bush and Lula he settled on pistols for the rest of the series. The artist said he came up with the provocative idea because of his “disappointment” with leaders whom he saw as inflicting wrongs on the world with impunity. “Because they kill so many other people, it would be a favor

to kill them, understand?” he asked. “Why don’t people in power and in the elite die?” The works, hanging in a prominent position in the Biennial exhibition in Sao Paulo, are valued collectively at \$260,000. Vicente said if someone wanted to buy them, they would have to buy all nine in the series together.



Vicente in front of his works of former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and Ariel Sharon.

AFP/Mauricio Lima

HOROSCOPE

Aries (Mar. 21 – April 19) This could be one of your more stressful days, but with breaks and deep breaths, you are able to succeed in whatever you set your mind to do.	Taurus (April 20 – May 20) Today may bring major new insights about a business-related matter. Your determination to get ahead in the workplace is important. In a meeting, you will express many new insights.	Gemini (May 21 – June 21) Money matters may be on your mind this morning. You may receive financial backing for a project, however, and this also has you busy calculating and balancing your budget.
Cancer (June 22 – July 22) Today you may find yourself trading, buying, selling or any other number of things in order to find the right price and the right product for a particular person.	Leo (July 23 – Aug. 22) You are coming into a period of greater-than usual emphasis on emotional security, which is likely to manifest as putting down roots somehow. Family matters can play a big part.	Virgo (Aug. 23 – Sept. 22) A friend, who may also be a co-worker, comes up with ideas today that will help you to get ahead in the work field. You may be busy doing extra preparations for a project today.
Libra (Sept. 23 – Oct. 22) A favorite person from your past is expected this evening and your mind may be filled with big plans for the occasion. Somehow you find a little time to get quite a lot done at work.	Scorpio (Oct. 23 – Nov. 21) Those around you, or the situation you find yourself in, may be the set up for the perfect time to make requests or changes in the workplace. Your ideas will help to save money.	Sagittarius (Nov. 22 – Dec. 21) This is a real time to buckle down and concentrate on work-related problems. Your organizational abilities and sense of responsibility will guide you successfully in the days to come.
Capricorn (Dec. 22 – Jan. 19) Making your mark on the world has special significance for you. Achievement, ambition and authority take on greater importance. Administering to people will be a source of pride.	Aquarius (Jan. 20 – Feb. 18) Today may bring major new insights about a business-related matter. Your determination to get ahead in the workplace is noticed. You are very much your own boss this month.	Pisces (Feb. 19 – Mar. 20) You are in a great mood and can sell or find the best buy, particularly, if that is your job. You communicate well and it is stimulating just being with you and this will be reflected in personal matters.