

A few years in journalism

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I met Etel Adnan the summer of 1972 , in Beirut. She had just arrived from the United States, where she had been teaching studying philosophy, then teaching Philosophy and Humanities for fourteen years at Dominican College, in San Rafael California.

Upon her return, she did not take a teaching job, but was offered to be the cultural editor of a newly founded French speaking newspaper, Al Safa. Beirut was a city in which 13 Arabic newspapers were published each morning, plus one in English, three in Armenian, and one in French named L'Orient-Le Jour! To introduce yet another daily, especially in French, was an extraordinary challenge . The editor –in-chief of Al Safa knew that to make an impact from the start he had to offer something that the other French daily did not have and he chose to have a very strong cultural policy. He asked Etel to build a whole section, producing 5 cultural pages per week. She immediately hired a team of young people, and asked them to cover the scene on Jazz, books, pop music, cinema, theater, shows... The city was vibrant with events of every kind. All the Arab countries and many Western countries had cultural centers offering various programs. The scene was hectic . Galleries, theater and cinema had everyone busy, running from one end of the city to the other. The newspapers played a very important role in the city. The Arabic newspapers belonged to different political affiliations. (In the U.S., you have one or two syndicated columnists publishing all over, in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., New York, Philadelphia, etc...!)

On the cultural side, the Beirut newspapers played also the role of literary magazines: poets and writers wrote everyday in them, while the city was the publishing center of the whole Arab World, as it was a center for the arts.

So Etel got to work with the energy of the newcomer, happy to be part of all this, creating this cultural section, encouraging young writers, correcting, adding drawings to illustrate their articles. Some of these drawings even found their way on the front page. But what made her tenure such an immense success, giving her instant fame, were the editorials she wrote for the front page. Indeed, she had the freedom to write anything she wanted on the front page! She did not let a significant political event go without a long or short comment! Her writing was incisive, fearless, fierce!

These editorials signed with a name that was in itself a challenge to the ears of a society where everyone can be traced and categorized immediately upon listening to his/her name, created a big stir. She had a name that showed a mixed origin: an unknown first name(Etel we learned much later could be an ancient Greek name completely in disuse) and Adnan is usually a first name , and strictly Muslim. Thus, the name in itself provoked the interest of the readers.

She was daring. For example, one day she covered a much awaited conference gathering

3 politicians among the most famous and influential .The next day we learned in big letters that the day before “It took 3 politicians to speak nonsense for 3 hours!”

The morning after the day an Israeli commando landed on the beach in Beirut, making their way to the homes of three Palestinian leaders and killing them we read on the front page of her paper: “I am in Saigon”. She was accusing directly the government of collusion with the enemy.

When there were no particular events to mention, Etel would write with the same freedom, sense of humor and tenderness, something that crossed her mind. I remember the story of a Belgian man caught by the Vietcong during the war who owned his safety by writing on the sandy floor some Chinese characters... they were stunned by his skill and let him go. That also was on the front page.

She was liked by her colleagues as well as by the foreign correspondents posted in Beirut. Very often the cultural attachés were inviting her to cover some major cultural event in their own countries, such as, once, the 400th anniversary of the death of Jalal Eddine al Rumi’s in Konya. I still remember what she wrote about the concert that Theodorakis and Maria Farandouri gave, when the Greek composer was just out of the jails of the Greek junta, or on the magnificent concert that Miles Davis gave in Baalbeck, the last year of the Festival, that had to stop because of the Civil War!

When two years later, Al Safa had to close because its owner had disappeared (very likely assassinated for political reasons), L’Orient- Le Jour, the other French-speaking newspaper asked her to join their staff but warned her that “here she was not to write on politics but only on painting!”

But there again she was able to make an impact. The painters would often come to her house at 9 a.m. to ask her to write on their shows. “please say anything, even if you don’t like it, but write something.” She was extra careful in her articles, being a painter herself, never saying a bad thing but letting the reader draw his/her own conclusion. Still, she could be sharply ironic, as for that show when a gallery had many contemporary masters, such as Christo and Nicolas de Staël, and wanted to flatter its wealthy buyers by posting their business cards next to the purchased paintings. (Some people are still laughing about this!) Etel ended her paper by “asking” this question: “And why the clients didn’t also post their photographs?!”

When the Civil War started Etel went to Paris, where she wrote Sitt Marie-Rose, her novel, which was immediately published by Les Editions des Femmes . She then came back to her newspaper but the director told her that she couldn’t resume her job as he was warned that the paper would be banned from entering the quarter of the city in which it was most read if her name appeared in it. She said she understood that, but was infuriated when he added: “And who asked you to write your political opinions in that novel?”. She answered: “but you were paying me every month to hear my opinions! “ Of course, she knew the answer. Anyway, as she received death threats, she left the country.

Some decade, and more, later, and when on a visit to Beirut, she would write sometimes a piece and send it to her favorite Arabic newspaper. There was one that touched the readers particularly: it was during the Football Mundial. People were fiercely partisan. Some high buildings were covered totally with a flag of one of the competing countries (among which, of course, there was neither Lebanon nor a single other Arab country participating). Still, people were ready to fight among themselves for Germany, Brazil, Spain or Italy. They were circulating in cars, with banners, hooting, screaming, celebrating all night when the team of their choice had won, and illuminating the city with fireworks. Etel wrote from some deep sadness a virulent though meditative piece on the irony of the situation, asking if, unable to win any war, the Arabs were not fooling themselves, and drowning in victories earned by others.

Last year, in 2010, the Theater Al Madina organized an homage to Etel Adnan. It was an impressive event. Besides the poets of the city, the editors-in-chief of the most prominent newspapers participated, and then ran commentaries or long interviews with her in their columns.