

" *The State shall promote science, letters and the arts...*"

(Article 14 of the Kuwait Constitution)

Over the last six years, my theatre company has been undertaking international tours of its work across the globe. The work we engage in revolves around the major issues facing our society and region in the twenty first century. It draws its inspiration equally from world classics (like Shakespeare) and figures from the Arab Islamic tradition, as much as from the reality of our society today, adapting and rewriting stories and texts that have special relevance or poetic power.

Through a string of internationally acclaimed productions that are performed in Arabic and simultaneously translated into the host language, this work has been seen by tens of thousands of spectators worldwide, covered by most major international news and media channels across the globe and admired by audiences and critics alike. The impact of the theatre we make challenges the negative preconceptions surrounding Arab and Muslim culture today and champions the Arab voice internationally, through it we create a forum for contemporary Kuwaiti culture to shine on the world stage.

This theatre work, with its cultural and strategic impact, continues a uniquely Kuwaiti heritage of transcending national boundaries through art, freedom of expression and thought. Flagship institutions like 'Al-Arabi' magazine, alongside an impressive series of literary, philosophical and scientific periodicals produced by the Kuwait National Council for Arts and Letters in the 1970's and 1980's, combined with high-level state commitment to theatre, music and the arts carved out for Kuwait a leading position in the arena of regional cultural leadership.

Today however- a far cry from this 'golden' era of the 1970's- the situation has changed drastically. Almost all forms of cultural ambition and creativity can no longer hope to attract the interest or support of the state institutions whose mandate is to develop and nurture Kuwaiti culture and arts. Indeed this type of cultural ambition can count itself lucky if it is able to circumvent the obstacles and red-tape laid across its path by the state and its institutions.

The current world tour my theatre company is undertaking of its latest piece, "Richard III, an Arab Tragedy", may serve as an example. Created in 2006 through a direct commission from one of the world's most prestigious theatre companies, the Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK, this piece started its life in Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-Upon-Avon, with a series of twelve performances in 2007. This was the first time in theatre history an Arab theatre company had performed on the stage of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the significance of this event was relayed by the BBC, Al Jazeera and other major international news media. Bringing together some of the leading stars of Kuwaiti theatre alongside stars from across the region (Jassim Al Nabhan, Faisal Al Ameer, Fayez Kazak, Amal Omran) this play has been globally acclaimed for its groundbreaking exploration of power and politics. Neither then, nor in the 43 international performances since then

made across 7 European and Arab countries (including the UK, Athens, Damascus Capital of Arab Culture, the UAE, France, Holland, the USA) has this work benefited from state support on any level. Indeed, when the play was invited to perform in Kuwait by the gracious invitation of the Editor of Al Arabi magazine, Dr.Slaiman Al Askari, the production needed to seek funding from private benefactors to cover the budget deficit which the state was unwilling to fund.

One of the most significant global tours in the history of Arab theatre has been ongoing by a Kuwaiti theatre company for the last two years and yet throughout this time even the most basic levels of aid (like facilitating cargo transport, or permitting time-off for government employees) have been impossible to obtain from the state. This, despite the repeated requests of some of the world's leading theatre, cultural and political figures. The disbelief of the French Ambassador to Kuwait that a letter penned by the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, himself in support of the production's invitation to one of the leading theatres in France went unanswered, was one in a long series of ignored correspondences from major international parties.

This situation was altered recently thanks to the efforts of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the USA Shaikh Salem Al Sabah who insisted that the work receive support from the state to perform at the recent "Arabesque" festival held in Washington DC. The Ambassador's request was kindly taken up by the Ministry of Information and, in turn, by the National Council for Arts and Letters. The festival in question had, granted, received funding from a number of Gulf states including Kuwait whose contribution was of the order of 1 million US dollars. As a result of Shaikh Salem's kind efforts, the ten Kuwaiti members of the team received the minimum level of support that could be offered to an event of this scale- economy class return tickets to Washington DC and seven days of per diems.

Despite the persistent stonewalling of the Kuwaiti cultural authorities , the performances of this work have continued throughout the world – due in part to the commitment of the artists undertaking this work - but thanks also to the vital support of the Kuwaiti private sector represented by Kuwait National Projects Holding Company and, more recently, Zain.

The fact that Kuwait no longer occupies a position of regional cultural leadership is not news. For the last fifteen years, other countries in the Gulf have made culture and art a strategic priority in their national planning and budgets whilst Kuwait has allowed culture to become, at best, relegated to the margins of national policy and, in the worst cases, allowed the definition of culture itself to become prey to currents diametrically opposed to the very notions of art and freedom of expression. As a result, the infrastructure of neighbouring states like Qatar, the Emirates and Bahrain now far outshines our own outdated and uninspired institutions. But the real damage is far greater than can be assessed through a comparison of buildings and institutions. The deeper damage lies in the ruin of Kuwait's human potential, in the gradual disengagement of a whole generation from the processes of self expression, dialogue, criticism and self-questioning that comes through the

experience of beauty, of thought, of art. Indeed, one of the more distressing results of the long-standing disengagement from the national cultural project can be gleaned through the current (re-current) crises of national identity brought to the fore by each round of national elections.

For theatre makers and artists of my generation, the shocking indifference demonstrated by the very institutions whose mandate is to nurture, promote and develop arts and culture in Kuwait is tantamount to state censure. It is state censure through apathy and a gross failure of those institutions to respect and implement of Article 14 of Kuwait's constitution, in which the commitment of the state to arts and culture is explicit and unambiguous: ""The State shall promote science, letters and the arts".

My aim in writing this article is not defeatism. On the contrary, I am proud that in spite of the difficulties thrust before us we- and others like us- are able to make our voices heard. But any process of state building that does not incorporate the arts into its very lifeblood is doomed to failure; it is important for us to stake our claims to the future of this nation and not permit the systematic policy of state apathy towards culture to become the defining trait of our own beings.

Sulayman Al Bassam
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Kuwait