

ZAYED AND THE DREAM



All photographs courtesy of Caracalla Dance Theatre.

Gerald Dowler previews a new production by Caracalla Dance Theatre, which makes a rare visit to London next month

Out of the sands of the desert comes Caracalla Dance Theatre with its new show, a stage spectacular based on the life of Sheikh Zayed, founder of the modern state of the United Arab Emirates, which they are presenting at the London Coliseum for just two performances on August 1 and 3.

Founded in 1968 by Abdel Halim Caracalla (known to all simply as Caracalla), the company itself remains the Arab world's only established, professional dance company. After training in Martha Graham technique Caracalla returned to his native Lebanon determined to fuse his western training with the dance traditions of both his own country and of the Arab-speaking world in general. Since then, he has

realised that dream, creating a permanent company that performs in its own theatre in Beirut and also has a busy touring schedule. The company dances two to six-month seasons in the Lebanese capital but is still "fighting for dance in the Arab world," where the art form is still regarded by many with suspicion.

"We are constantly fighting to survive," explains Ivan Caracalla, the show's director and son of the founder, before a recent performance in Paris' enormous Palais des Congrès. "We are entirely privately funded," he says with everything that that implies in the precarious world of the arts. Another of the founder's children, daughter Alissar, is the show's choreographer. She is very conscious of her father's legacy in the dance world, which

"brings a modern dance technique to Lebanese and Middle Eastern traditional movements". Caracalla himself explains, "Everything we do comes from Martha Graham. No dancer begins to move without first knowing why he or she is moving. There has to be reason and thought behind everything – it is not just dancing!" Alissar, however is moving things on a little, "because I am a female choreographer and I feel very comfortable creating movement for women too – we are important!" She adds, "One thing to note is that in Caracalla Dance, there are no lead dancers – the choreography is the leader and the company are all principals." Caracalla himself impresses with his forward-looking take on where his company is going: "Everything must change and develop – things are quicker today than they were in the past and dance must reflect that – the brains of the dancers and the audience are used to moving faster now".



Zayed and the Dream is not, however, a typical Caracalla show, for those who remember its last UK appearance in 2003 with *Two Thousand and One Nights* and in visits past. This is much more a combination show, which fuses words, singing and dance and is like that because of the unusual way in which it came about. The show is a commission by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, which chose the company to realise a concept that highlighted the remarkable legacy of Sheikh Zayed, the founder of modern Abu Dhabi and the man responsible for bringing the seven emirates together into what we know today as the UAE. In the Arab world Zayed is a revered man, someone who is universally admired not only as political leader but also as a man of vision and personal integrity. Caracalla was at first, “nervous to approach the life story of such a great man”, but once he researched the life of the Sheikh he, “realised that here was a man who promoted a message of

peace, unity and tolerance, who set up education for both boys and girls, gave women the chance to be educated at university, and who focused on making the desert productive, literally to make it bloom”. Hence the company’s acceptance of the commission and the present show.

What can audiences expect to see? Firstly, spectacle. Even though what will be seen in London is a somewhat reduced touring version of the huge show conceived for Beirut and Abu Dhabi (which included live horses), the stage is constantly filled with dancers, actors and singers who tell the story of a simple desert boy who rises to become a national leader. Costumes are sumptuous, with fabrics and designs sourced from all over the Arab world by Caracalla’s own research unit in Beirut. Every costume is hand-made and unique, and shimmers with vibrant colours. Dance sections by the company are infectious – the dancers clearly love performing, and accompany

their movements with whoops and cries as they fill the stage with energy and dynamic movement. Look out for the traditional Lebanese “depke” when the dancers line up, shoulder to shoulder, and sway and lunge in unison, nowhere more impressive than in the final section of the work in which Caracalla’s immensely popular brother, Omar, leads the dancers – he is an artist of remarkable intensity and charm.

Ivan, the director, has made superb use of projection and computer graphics – a desert moon waxes and shooting stars appear, camels walk across the sand dunes, palm trees rise up, and in the final section, modern Abu Dhabi rises out of the desert. The story of the man, Sheikh Zayed, and his country are inseparable and the modern city is his legacy. Today it is a focus for art and culture, with a recent successful exhibition on Picasso and outposts of the Guggenheim and Louvre museums planned to open.

Caracalla has taken the idea of the world’s culture coming to Abu Dhabi and



translated it to the stage by bringing the world's cultures alongside the resident company dancers. It makes for a truly exhilarating finale and features several national dance troupes and performers, including the Ukrainian Veryovka

Ensemble, whose feats of spinning and acrobatic dancing at jaw-dropping speed are superb, the sultry Flamenco Español group from Spain and the mesmeric Hangzhou Song and Dance Theatre. All are of the highest standard and bring

the show to a real crescendo. Song is not forgotten, with guest singers from the Middle East, not least Lebanese star Assi Al Hellani, who literally has the audience dancing in the aisles.

This show does a great deal to combat stereotypes – the image of the burqa is banished in favour of colours, music, smiles and happiness, which are the unsung features of this part of the world. Caracalla Dance Theatre perhaps embodies this “other” view: it survived the civil war in Lebanon because it was recognised as “above” the politics of conflict – it performed in both territories during the schism, dancers were from all communities (and still are) and even Caracalla himself, a Muslim, is married to a Christian. *Zayed and the Dream* is not in any way a “conventional” show, but it is most certainly from another, perhaps unfamiliar, tradition. For a taste of the sights and sounds of lands far from our own, and for an evening packed with irresistible colours, sounds and dancing, it recommends itself. ■