



A scene from Caracalla Dance Theatre's *Zayed and the Dream* which comes to the London Coliseum in August

Dream a little dream of dance

Lavish, energetic and spectacular, Lebanon's Caracalla Dance Theatre has been performing in the Middle East throughout its 40-year history. **Natasha Tripney** talks to choreographer Alissar Caracalla about introducing the company's latest production to Western audiences

Lebanon's Caracalla Dance Theatre is regarded by many as the leading dance company in the Middle East. Its founder, Abdel-Halim Caracalla, studied with Martha Graham in sixties New York and went on to create the company in 1970.

During the Lebanese war, it continued to stage work, performing across the country and bringing audiences together during a time of conflict. Its shows tend towards the lavish and spectacular, and are full of energy and colour. Caracalla, who remains artistic director, describes his company's original vision as a fusion of classical, traditional and modern dance with a theatrical sensibility.

Its latest production is unlike anything the company has attempted before. *Zayed and the Dream* was commissioned by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, an organisation established in 2005 for the conservation and promotion of the culture and heritage of Abu Dhabi. The company was tasked with telling the story of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the architect of the United Arab Emirates and its president for more than 30 years.

To the people of Abu Dhabi, Zayed is an exalted figure and, as the show's choreographer Alissar Caracalla explains: "We had to be completely aware of who Zayed

was and who he is to them. He is like a god to them."

Alissar is Abdel-Halim Caracalla's daughter and is herself a dancer and choreographer of some repute – she is the founder of Beirut dance school Studio Caracalla and was a judge on the Arabic incarnation of *Star Academy*, an international television format similar to the UK's *Pop Idol*. Caracalla Dance Theatre is very much a family company – Alissar's brother Ivan is the production's director.

This was a specific brief – the show was initially commissioned to mark Abu Dhabi's National Day, December 2, 2008. "It usually takes up to a year and a half to prepare a production. However, because they wanted it for their National Day we only had six months," says Alissar. "This is the shortest amount of time we've taken to develop a performance."

The resulting production is very much a work of two halves. The first half tells of Zayed's early life and celebrates his virtues. The second depicts his achievements in bringing peace and prosperity to the region, uniting the UAE and encouraging education – including the education of women, as one scene very pointedly shows – and development (one section features dancers in construction hats).

This culminates in a joyous international finale where dancers from China,

Spain and the Ukraine take to the stage, first performing their own traditional steps before joining together to perform Caracalla's choreography. The guest companies, Flamenco Espanol, Hangzhou Song and Dance Theatre, Veryovka Ensemble and Firqat Sahel Al-Anwar Al Shaabiah Al Imarat, were chosen for their openness towards performing Caracalla's steps as well as their own.

Zayed and the Dream is incredibly reverential in tone, a hagiography in every sense. Caracalla was clear from the beginning that the piece would not include any reference to Zayed's private life – that was not the company's intention. The production is also more dependent on narrative than the company's previous work. There are a number of static scenes in which Zayed's virtues are described. Alissar explains the need for this: "[Outside the Middle East] not many people know of Zayed so you need to relate the story."

The booming, bearded figure of the narrator who appears episodically is "a man from the past, here to tell us the story", explains Alissar. "There was a need to include this. Audiences in Abu Dhabi like to hear the words. The prose and poetry are very elaborate, very eloquent, so people enjoy that. We felt also that a foreign audience would need the narration so they can understand what is going on." Alissar admits that the need to relate Zayed's deeds did have an impact on the shape the production took. "In our previous shows there was space for a lot more dance," she says.

As a commissioned piece, the creative process was by necessity a collaborative one, "a give and take situation", says Alissar. After being performed in Abu

Dhabi the show was taken to Beirut. The version that played at Paris' Palais de Congrès earlier this month and that will be staged in London in August is slightly reduced in scale. The seven horsemen, who rode real horses on stage, no longer do so and the touring set is a smaller version of the original. It remains an elaborate piece full of projected images, the stage crammed with dancers in colourful costume. The choreography, when not tied by the demands of narrative, is energetic, vocal – it's not wholly polished, it has rough edges.

Abu Dhabi is the largest and richest of the emirates and this production can be seen as part of its continued efforts to transform itself into a global cultural centre. The pinnacle of this is the current development of Saadiyat Island, where some of the world's most renowned architects are in the process of creating a collage of the world's most famous museums, the Louvre, the Guggenheim and Norman Foster's Zayed National Museum, a partner of the British Museum, all due for completion in 2013.

This is a river that flows both ways, a process of cultural import and export. *Zayed and the Dream* is a fascinating, albeit uncritical, insight into a particular aspect of Arabic culture. Alissar believes the production will appeal to audiences regardless of background. "Arabic audiences love it because it's a part of them," she says. "Lebanese audiences enjoy it because they enjoy Caracalla's work, the French – and international – audiences will find it very exotic even if they do not relate to the story in question."

Zayed and the Dream runs at London Coliseum from August 1-3. For details visit www.eno.org