



Silver lining

This July and August, Jerash will celebrate the 25th annual Festival of Culture and Arts. Director Jeryes Samawi looks back on its development

Story by Eddie Taylor

Jerash Festival began as an answer to a question framed by the Arts Faculty at Yarmouk University: 'How do we preserve and promote national culture and folklore, while simultaneously offering a variety of Arabic and international performing arts?' A quarter of a century later, it is firmly established as one of the most important contributions to the region's cultural landscape.

The Jerash Festival of Culture and Arts, championed by Her Majesty Queen Noor, was first unveiled in 1981 as a three-day trial event under the direction of Dr Mazen Armouti. But well in excess of 50,000 people were attracted to the blend of local musicians, dancers, poets and craftsmen performing and exhibiting amongst the town's magnificent Roman ruins.

At the end of the second Festival, held in 1983 (the 1982 event was cancelled amid the political crisis in Lebanon), all the expectations of the organising committee were surpassed. On its eve, Deputy Chair Leila Sharaf had declared a need for 'something to breathe some life into the culture and arts of the land of Jordan'. And with the appearance of

legendary singer Fairouz in the South Theatre, and more than 70 different individual shows and exhibits, from Jordanian folklore troupes to Chinese acrobats and American bluegrass music, 175,000 visitors were on hand to do just that. A year later, the Festival had helped make Jerash Jordan's top tourist attraction with half a million annual visitors – and back in 1984, most of the Roman site was still being excavated.

In the Festival's 25th year, Director Jeryes Samawi is well placed to gauge the summer celebration's impact – not just in Jordan but in the whole of the Middle East. 'We are now in the top tier of cultural festivals in the region, if not actually the best,' he says. 'You should see the emails, texts and letters I get from the biggest stars in the Arab World wanting to perform at Jerash. They are all desperate to come.'

Placing Jerash alongside Baalbek in Lebanon and Carthage in Tunisia, Dr Samawi points to the unique characteristics that elevate it, in his eyes, above its peers. 'We cover more artistic fields,' he says, 'our setting is unrivalled and, most importantly, we set out to be completely inclusive:



over 80 per cent of the Festival's attractions and concerts are free. We are investing in the future of this country; exposing young people to music and art can turn people toward co-operation and understanding and away from conflict.'

Jerash's cultural status is underlined by the stature of the stars lining up to perform every summer. Since 2002, the South Theatre has reverberated to performances from Marcel Khalifeh, Najwa Karam, Nancy Ajram and Nawal al-Zoughbi from Lebanon as well as Iraq's Kathem Al Saher, all of which were broadcast live to all corners of the Arab world. Most significantly, though, Jerash has provided a platform for Jordanian talent. 'Many Jordanian stars start here,' says Dr Samawi. 'Diana Karazon, 2003 Arab Superstar winner, gained real legitimacy after singing on the main stage, and Omar Abdullat is now a star right around the region. It has really helped put Jordan on the cultural map.'

The success of Jerash, though, cannot simply be measured by the fame of the headline performer or the number of tickets sold. One consistent factor has been the quality of all the acts, and when Dr Samawi, a poet who performed at the Festival in 1987 and 1988, assumed the role of Director in 2001, he insisted the programme place a strong emphasis on the classical arts. During his tenure, the Russian Moscow Grand Ballet group has presented Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, while five soloists from the Bolshoi performed Mascagni's *Cavalliera Rustikana*. And one of last year's biggest successes was the Inana Ballet group.



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Dr Samawi has also championed a DJ competition and widened the participation of children and people with disabilities, but he is most proud of two initiatives in particular. 'From 2001, the poetry component of the Festival became international,' he says, 'and every year there are poets from places such as Spain, France, Japan and Kazakhstan as well as the Arab world.'

'Also, in 2002, I introduced a symposium on a specific musical instrument; in the first year, it was the oud. We had performances, talks, papers and this led directly to the Arab League announcing an International Day of the Oud, which is now held every year on 3 August. This year it is the turn of the flute.'

Not that the Festival has been without problems. In addition to the cancellation of the 1982 event, in 2001 financial constraints combined with the deepening *intifada* to limit Jerash's programme to performances expressing Arab solidarity in just the North and South Theatres, including a deeply moving musical interpretation of the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish. 'There have been some miracles performed to put on the Festival in certain years,' admits Dr Samawi. 'But I put a lot of faith in the young people who work with us, and their commitment has always won through. We have managed to keep developing, adding elements and widening its scope.'

The continued success of the Festival is unquestionably important to the cultural life of the country, and in turn the wider role of music and the arts in all elements of Jordanian society. 'The effects of the Jerash Festival can only be fully assessed after many years,' said Leila Sharaf back in 1983, and after 25 festivals, Jeryes Samawi believes establishing Jordan's cultural status has been the biggest. 'Entertainment is important,' he concludes, 'but enjoyment and education must come hand in hand. I think we have consistently achieved that.' ■

The 25th Jerash Festival of Culture and Arts runs from 26 July to 11 August 2006

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS HUGE STARS SUCH AS DIANA KARAZON, NAJWA KARAM AND NANCY AJRAM HAVE SET THE STANDARD AND, THIS YEAR, SINCE OVER 80 PER CENT OF THE ATTRACTIONS ARE FREE, THE JERASH FESTIVAL IS WELL WORTH A VISIT!

