

Damascus Cultural Festival "Too Foreign"

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As Damascus's year as Capital of Arab Culture draws to a close, critics say there was a disproportionate western influence on the festivities.

"The year's end is approaching and the [organising] general secretariat in Damascus has not done any activity that would make Damascus deserve to be called Capital of Arab Culture," said Mohammed, a 22-year-old economics student at Damascus University.

In January, UNESCO bestowed the title of Capital of Arab Culture on Damascus, ushering in a year of film, theatrical, musical, artistic and literary events. Since 1996, the title has gone to a different Arab capital every year. In January, the torch will be passed to Jerusalem.

As planning got under way for the year's events, disagreements emerged over whether funding should go toward local artists or high-profile international acts.

Basil Salih, a lecturer at the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus, complained, "At the opening ceremony, the music was strange, and it wasn't Arabic. Even the groups that performed weren't Syrian."

Hanan Qassab Hassan, the secretary-general of the Damascus: Cultural Capital of the Arab World 2008 programme, defended the decision to focus on international performances.

"From the start, we were under attack because some people said the first activities we had scheduled were foreign," she said. "I tried to explain my own view that although this celebration is about Arab culture, that doesn't necessarily conflict with playing host to [other] cultures. We want international events that will promote Syria's image abroad, which is simultaneously a political and cultural goal. I'm sorry to say Syrians were unaware of this goal."

Hassan noted that local artists were also highlighted, and grants were awarded to 26 Syrians from the worlds of cinema, theatre, art and music.

Nonetheless, many Syrian artists said they felt under-represented.

"When it came to art, there were only two exhibits, which were in storage and taken out and put on show. But other things should have happened," said Safwan Dahoul, a Damascus-based artist. "The culture ministry should have created new galleries to give young artists a chance to show off their paintings. Yet this wasn't done."

Faiza Shawish, an actress in the Syrian capital, accused organisers of deliberately "excluding many big names from the celebrations".

As well as actors who missed out on a chance to perform, she said, “A great injustice was done to deceased Syrian writers like Saadallah Wannous, Mamdouh Odwan, Mohammed al-Maghout, and others besides. They were great writers who should have been accorded greater recognition and celebration.”

Those involved in organising the year’s events defend their record.

Najm al-Deen al-Samman, chief of staff for the culture minister, said the ministry printed more than 200 books by renowned Syrian writers, including novels by Zakariya Tamir and Colette Khouri. In addition, there were at least 20 shows produced by up-and-coming artists and two theatre festivals targeting young people.

Hassan, too, said much had been done to showcase Syria’s literary tradition.

“We held a conference about the culture and the city, and we are currently working on a conference on the contemporary Arab novel,” she said. “We also held a successful conference on electronic documentation. In the last quarter of the year, we are holding a large number of forums and conferences, and many literary forums.”

She accused Syrian media outlets of failing to cover the year’s cultural events.

“We had close to 1,500 people coming to events every day. But no articles were written about most of these event. I can’t understand why this celebration wasn’t covered by the media,” she said.

Abdul Karim al-Afnan, a Damascus-based journalist who works for Al-Jazeera TV, disputes this, arguing that media outlets frequently did not get enough advance notice of upcoming events.

Not everyone was disappointed with the internationally-themed events.

“I think all these negative comments about the... celebrations are wrong,” said Lamyia, 27, an engineer in the capital. “It’s time to break out of this cultural isolation and open up to other cultures, and that is what was achieved by the general secretariat for the Damascus celebrations.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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