

Kids Revive Ballet

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Youngsters overcome myriad problems to stage fable with marked contemporary resonances.

After a 15-year absence, a group of child dancers resurrect ballet in Iraq, despite the constant bombings, power cuts and meagre budgets.

The ballet - a fable about an evil magician, Nebal, subdued by a prince and princess - is the first to be performed in Iraq since the early 1990s, when budgets for cultural events were slashed because of economic sanctions imposed against Iraq.

The ballet, the story of a people's triumph over evil, is being staged by a children's ballet company, Dreamful Butterflies, in a former cinema renovated by the education ministry's Iraqi Child Centre.

The first performance was on September 15 and tickets cost 1,000 dinars (68 US cents). The show is being staged once every three weeks.

While the new ballet is for children, it carries political undertones and adult themes.

"Nebal, the magician, is a symbol of the former dictator's regime and the groups embracing terrorism who are trying to divide Iraqis, represented by the prince and the princess," said Mahasin al-Khatib, the ballet's director.

Classical dance was introduced to Iraq in 1969 when experts from the former Soviet Union established a ballet and music school.

"The former regime used media and the arts to serve its dictatorial line," said al-Khatib. "Now the regime doesn't exist. This is one of the major themes of the play."

For the Dreamful Butterfly dancers, who range in age from 6 to 18, there are parallels between the story of Nebal and their daily lives in Iraq. They face severe problems just making it to rehearsals.

"I have witnessed explosions several times on my way to the theatre but I escaped, thank God," said Niba Amir, 18, an art student at the Fine Arts Institute who plays the role of Nebal.

Maryam Salam, the heroine of the story, said such dangers have not deterred the dancers, "We're determined to keep going."

Once the dancers arrive at rehearsal, they face more problems. Though the theatre has been renovated, working conditions are difficult. The power continuously goes out and temperatures sometimes soar to 50 degrees Celsius. A small budget means there's no money for electricity to power fans or light the stage.

"The performers resorted to using battery lamps or candles to find their way out onto the stage during

rehearsals, and we bring ice from the market to cool the water,” said al-Khatib.

Dr Fatin al-Jarah, head of the Iraqi Child Centre, said he spent a year trying to secure funds for a new generator. The education ministry agreed to supply one, but the centre is still waiting, said al- Jarah.

The tight budget also means little money for proper costumes. The children bought second-hand dresses at the market, sometimes pitching in their own pocket money, said al-Khatib.

The dancers hope to perform the new ballet abroad if they receive funding. “We want the entire world to hear our voice,” said Salam, “to tell them Iraq is a country of peace, and to erase the image of violence the world sees.”

Location: Iraqi Kurdistan
Iraq

Focus: Iraq

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