

## Culture

## African focus at Casablanca book fair

Saad Guerraoui

Casablanca

Morocco's improved diplomatic ties in Africa had an effect on the *SIEL* (International Book Fair), which turned into an ideal place for a close look at African literature and culture.

The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) was the guest of honour at *SIEL* during its 11-day run in Casablanca, with its 11 members showing titles to highlight the countries' contributions to literature. Conferences, book signings, children's activities and round tables took place during the book fair.

ECCAS consists of Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Central African Republic, Rwanda, Chad, Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A programme titled *Cultural Productions in Central Africa and Their Natural Environments: Sahara, Sahel, Tropics* brought together intellectuals from ECCAS countries to discuss the cultural perception of the phenomenon of space and its meanings by writers.

More than 700 publishers from 54 countries took part in the 23rd *SIEL*, which concluded February 19th. Organisers said they expected more than 350,000 people to visit the fair.

The number of visitors has been steadily increasing in recent years, rising from 300,000 in 2015 to 340,000 in 2016 despite the low rate of reading among Moroccans.

Second-hand books received a new life at a stand co-managed by Mohammed Kabbaj.

"Buying power in Morocco is not the main cause of the low rate of



People browse through books on a stand at the *SIEL* (International Book Fair) in Casablanca.

reading because there are plenty of people who spend a lot of money on other items such as cigarettes and drinks in coffee shops," said Kabbaj.

"The main reason is the lack of motivation to read that keeps Moroccans away from books," he said, adding that high tax rates on imported books also hinder book purchases.

*SIEL* Director Hassan el-Ouazzani said the absence of reading from the educational curriculum was a major obstacle to promoting this culture among Moroccan students.

A recent study by Moroccan association for the promotion of culture Racines, with the support of the UN cultural agency UNESCO in 2015

and 2016 showed that almost two-thirds of Moroccans did not buy any books in the 12 months prior to the survey and that 84.5% did not enroll in any library over the same period.

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Only 5.1% of respondents said they frequented libraries several times a week and 9.8% had attempted to write poems or novels, added the study.

"The second-hand books come to fill this void because they are affordable," said Kabbaj, who owns a bookstore in Essaouira where he deals mainly with foreign tourists.

"There are rare and out-of-print books that cannot be found anywhere else throughout the world. Our role is to fill this hole in the book market and circulate these books throughout generations," he said.

Dar America, an American cultural centre in Casablanca, organised *Technology, Innovation and Science*.

"We have set up our booth as a laboratory for children of different ages using electronic games where they can build a windmill, learn about recycling," said Eva Coffey,

assistant cultural affairs officer at the US Department of State.

"We want to encourage the young generation about what they can do themselves and empower them to learn about science, invent technologies and solutions for different problems they're going to be facing."

Dar America sells books in Arabic, French and English.

"In Arabic, we're selling books that are translations of American authors in various topics such as business, entrepreneurship and politics," said Coffey.

Saad Guerraoui is a frequent contributor to The Arab Weekly on Maghreb issues.

## Tunisian rising star preserves history through dance

Roua Khlifi

Tunis

As the sound of drums grew louder, Rochdi Belgasmi, one of Tunisia's most renowned dancers, took the stage in an outfit that combined male and female garments, sparking surprise in the audience.

On his head, Belgasmi carried coloured jars. He began dancing, telling the story of *Ouled Jalaba*.

The show, which played in Tunis recently, told the story of Ouled Jalaba, a 1920s-era dancer who performed traditional dance routines while wearing women's clothes. Belgasmi's *Ouled Jalaba* asserts the dancer's uniqueness and his show has gained critical acclaim.

"When I look at my work, it is a return to childhood. It is a conjuring of childhood," Belgasmi said.

From *Zoufri* (*The Thug*) to *Wa Idha Assaytom* (*If You Disobey*), Belgasmi fascinates and entangles audiences with choreography that celebrates a fusion of traditional dance and contemporary style.

Belgasmi said dance was a journey on which he embarked at an early age, as traditional dance style was a part of family gatherings.

"I was a child when the whole family used to gather and start dancing," Belgasmi said.

"After graduating, I joined a theatre school because of a lack of institutions offering a professional training in dance. I met many famous choreographers and dancers in Tunis as part of my theatre training."

He said it was not until January 2011 that he performed his first solo show, *Trance*. He said the revolu-

tion at that time gave more freedom to arts.

Originally a contemporary dancer, Belgasmi said he found inspiration in traditional dancing, which he said was overlooked and neglected by the government and society.

Belgasmi said the government used traditional dance to promote tourism and many Tunisians said they felt alienated from that style as it became associated with postcards sold to tourists.

"The traditional form of dance was subject of injustice, especially in that it was commercialised by the state. Tunisians felt that traditional dance was for tourists. At the same time, they could not relate to contemporary dance as the latter was considered alien to them," Belgasmi said.

■ Despite his success, Belgasmi acknowledges the hardships Tunisian dancers encounter.

"I tried to combine both styles to pay tribute to Tunisian patrimony and to develop and preserve this style of dancing. The question was which patrimony should we promote? The one defined and recognised by the state or the one celebrated by people?"

In his quest to revive the Tunisian patrimony through dance, Belgasmi tackles taboos and controversial topics.

"After the revolution, everyone was speaking and even shouting," he said. "It was hard to understand what people were talking about. Dance, however, offers an opportunity to express ideas subtly. You don't need to shout. The body is

eloquent enough to transmit the message."

Belgasmi explained: "Dance helps me express my ideas about society and life. Everything that is provocative, controversial interests me as it is an expression of life. For instance, in *Wa Idha Assaytom*, my inspiration was my childhood and my mother. I tried to give shape to my mother's narrative about looking to the world through holes. It is, in a way, a revolt against the patriarchy that prevented my mother from experiencing life in the public sphere."

Recounting his mother's life in a patriarchy, the show explores the relationship of women to the body and to society. Belgasmi takes on the role of his mother and him as a child in his choreography. Alternating between the roles, Belgasmi draws attention to the boundaries that society sets on women.

"I used to be my mother's companion in her journeys outside the house," he said. "At the age of 4, I was the man of the house. My mother used to fear being on her own. The show is about her story and I danced like she would dance."

"Through that show, I express my revolt against a society that stigmatised women. Now, the same society considers a man who dances as a man who is not man enough."

*Wa Idha Assaytom* gained international acclaim and the show toured Europe and Africa. Belgasmi's *Ouled Jalaba* recounts the history of Tunisia during the early 1920s through the character of Ouled Jalaba, breaking gender boundaries.

"In *Ouled Jalaba*, I play the part of a woman to document a phenomenon that was popular during the '20s," Belgasmi said. "It is about a dancer who used to dress like women and perform dance shows



A photo taken during one of the performances of *Zoufri*.

(Hassene Hamaoui)

in public places. He was a juggler, an acrobat and a dancer. It is an opportunity to remind people of how Tunisians used to tolerate differences."

He added: "I was criticised but I always defend my art. This show is based on a research about the origins of certain traditional dance styles and our patrimony. In my show, I try to break the boundaries between genders."

Belgasmi was awarded the Olfa Rambour Prize for Best Dance Creation in 2016. He is working on his next show, which promises to be as provocative as the previous ones.

Despite his success, Belgasmi acknowledges the hardships Tunisian dancers encounter.

"Building a career in dance remains difficult in Tunisia," he said. "It is hard but it is worth trying. It is important that young dancers work hard and keep their passion alive. Get inspired by your identity and be who you are. Be unique. The body has a language of its own and you need to share it with others through dance."

Roua Khlifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor to The Arab Weekly. She is based in Tunis.