

Egypt hit by 'cultural drain' as artists can't make both ends meet

Amr Hussein

Cairo

Having tried for years to move ahead with low pay, Egyptian ballet dancer Hazem Zakareya decided to leave Egypt. "I was paid far less than I deserved. This has been extremely frustrating," Zakareya said.

With rampant inflation in Egypt, it had become increasingly difficult for the 29-year-old performer to make a decent living. When the Royal Norwegian Ballet Company offered him a spot in its training, he packed up and left.

Hundreds of Egyptian artists, like Zakareya, are leaving the country due to worsening economic conditions. Singers, musicians, film-makers, art directors and painters are moving away in the hope of finding better opportunities abroad. They have become another casualty of the country's deteriorating economy.

■ Half of the artists at Cairo's Opera House have quit due to low salaries.

The cultural drain is certainly evident at the Cairo Opera House, Egypt's most prestigious art hub. Hundreds of artists are on the payroll of the house, which organises artistic events and festivals every year. As of late, however, the Cairo Opera House has been unable to pay

its artists, said Inas Abdel Dayem, who is chairwoman of the facility.

Abdel Dayem said half the artists who used to work for the Opera House have quit due to the tough financial conditions.

"Low salaries are causing all these people to leave for other countries," Abdel Dayem told local media. "They emigrate in their pursuit of greener pastures abroad."

Many, she said, are resettling in Dubai, Oman, Kuwait or Bahrain, where there are better opportunities for more money. For Egypt, long viewed as the cultural powerhouse of the Arab world, the flight of its artists amounts to a national scandal. Musicians, singers, actors, poets, novelists, playwrights and ballet dancers like Zakareya are leaving in large numbers, draining the national cultural scene of artistic value.

Former Culture Minister Gaber Asfour expressed fear that the migration of artists was a sign of cultural decadence.

"It is such a shame that we are giving up on the people we have raised," Asfour said. "This country had spent hundreds of millions of pounds on these artists but now it is losing them because of the lack of money."

The government is allocating minimal funds to arts and culture as more essential needs remain unfulfilled. The budget allocation for cultural activities in 2016 was \$9 million, Culture Minister Helmy al-Namnam said. However, only a fraction of that money reached the Opera House, dimming the future of some artists and placing limitations on others.



Clinging to hope. Hazem Zakareya (L) in his own production of the musical "Grease."

(Photo provided by Amr Hussein)

Abdel Dayem called on authorities to increase funding for the Opera House and the arts in general, describing the migration of artists as a "national disaster."

"The Opera House will continue to function and its doors will remain open to the public so long as there are artists working in it," Abdel Dayem said. "Therefore, their salaries should be raised to stop them from quitting."

Describing artists as Egypt's "real treasure," Asfour urged the business community to help save artists and national art.

"If the business community can offer help, artists will stay," he said. "It is a real shame that good artists are leaving, while the bad and the mediocre are staying."

Zakareya said he did not want to leave but he had to. In Egypt, he was not only paid poorly but also far less than his foreign counterparts.

"This forced me to go somewhere else where I would be appreciated for what I am worth," he said.

After receiving training in Norway, Zakareya moved to Hungary, Croatia and other European countries. He successfully performed

across Europe.

Zakareya later moved to Spain, where he and his wife established a dance academy. Things are good for him now but he said he thinks of the hard times he spent in Egypt before taking his chances abroad.

"It was so bad back there because of corruption. If you want to do any work you have to flatter top decision-makers," Zakareya said. "Without praising these people, you will never get a chance."

Amr Hussein is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.

Sufi ritual of Hadhra remains popular in Tunisia

Roua Khlifi

The scent of Tunisian incense wafted in the air and enveloped the stage in a mist. Singers and musicians, adorned in traditional attire, took their places on the platform.

Their voices slowly grew louder in conjunction with the music, until the sound of religious chants filled the air. The audience watched as performers, seemingly intoxicated by the music, whirled and danced in a trance-like state, in what is one of Tunisia's oldest Sufi traditions: Hadhra.

Sufi music dates back hundreds of years and Hadhra remains popular in Tunisia. The ritual, which has deep religious significance, is common during religious occasions and in a variety of popular settings. In Tunisia, Hadhra performances headline major music festivals, such as the International Festival of Carthage.

The ancient Sufi tradition, which is practised as praise and supplication to God and the Prophet, regained popularity in the 1990s when Tunisian actor and director Fadhel Jaziri combined Sufi chants and choreography in modern shows. In Tunisia, the unique style grew popular with the working class.

Hichem Ben Amor, who specialises in Sufi music, said Sufi orders are behind the music's rise in Tunisia.

"People often categorise Hadhra music as Sufi music but one needs to trace back the history of Sufi music to understand how it grew popular in Tunisia," said Ben Amor, who added that "Hadhra

can be traced to the ritual of Sama."

"In this ritual, one of the Sufis stands up in the Dhikr circles to chant a selection of poems praising religious values. Sufis believe they grow closer to God's divine presence when fully feeling the music and the chants, when they reach trance. That is why these chanting circles were called Hadhra, which is Arabic for 'presence'."

Taoufik Doghman, the founder of Hadhrat Rjel Tounes (Hadhra of the Men of Tunisia), has performed Hadhra since he was young. His group's latest performance, which took place in June at Tunis's Avenue Habib Bourguiba, attracted hundreds of viewers.

■ The Sufi tradition regained popularity in the 1990s when Fadhel Jaziri combined Sufi chants and choreography in modern shows.

"It started when we were young, at the age of 14," Doghman said. "Our grandfathers come from these well-known religious families and we were raised listening to Sufi chants."

"We were a group of children who would play together. That is how we came together as a Sufi chants group. Today, some of them are doctors, engineers, teachers but they all came from this group."

After Doghman's group gained a following, they were invited to participate in Jaziri's Hadhra show in the 1990s.

"My journey with Hadhra started 50 years ago when I became a part of a group of young men chanting religious poems," Doghman said. "I participated in Jaziri's Hadhra with my knowledge of Sufi chants and I also learnt from him about this art. Then I started the Hadhrat Rjel Tounes."

He noted that his group, which has grown to 30-40 performers, has

"had shows in and out of Tunisia. This year, we had shows in Canada, Belgium and Algeria."

Hadhra performances are especially popular during Ramadan and in the summer.

"These chants began growing bigger and they are essentially (a form of) musical appreciation that is created by the followers of these Sufi orders," Ben Amor said, adding that the tradition is part of Tunisia's identity and culture.

"It often expresses how the working class, especially in the popular neighbourhoods, believes in the power of this music."

As much as Hadhra is part of Tunisia's cultural heritage, it has also adapted to the world's changing musical landscape. By adding contemporary instruments and techniques, Doghman and Ben Amor put a modern spin on the old tradition.

"Hadhra that is popular in Tunis uses a great number of singers and musicians," Ben Amor said. "These musical numbers are performed in a theatrical setting with other musical instruments that are modern such as drums, pianos and violins, which is different from the old model."

Doghman said the change was necessary to keep the heritage alive.

"These are difficult times," Doghman said. "In this century, there is the internet and so many visual things. You cannot just rely on listening to music when the eyes of spectators watch the show too and taste the music. A Hadhra show is not just music but it is a whole show to be watched and enjoyed visually."

"The dance choreography, the outfits, the lights and other elements are all to make the show something visual and (aesthetically pleasing) to watch," he said. "By the end of the day, what matters to us is that the spectators feel the peace and feel how this music is from the heart."

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



Ancient tradition. The founder of Hadhrat Rjel Tounes Taoufik Doghman performing.

(Facebook page of Taoufik Doghman)