

Theater in the United Arab Emirates: Cultural Evolution and Contemporary Practices

Sorin-Dan BOLDEA*

Abstract: Theater in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a complex cultural phenomenon shaped by historical, religious, and migratory influences. Unlike Western theatrical traditions, which are deeply rooted in historical continuity and professionalization, theater in the UAE is a relatively recent development, largely driven by expatriate communities rather than local demand. This paper explores the evolution of theater in the UAE, its historical background, religious influences, and its current state, drawing from both scholarly sources and firsthand experiences. The study aims to analyze how theater is perceived, practiced, and integrated into the cultural fabric of an Islamic country with a rapidly growing global identity.

Keywords: theatre, performance, future, acting, Islam, history.

Introduction

The UAE's cultural landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation, propelled by the country's economic prosperity and its strategic efforts to create a diverse, globalized cultural environment. Before the discovery of oil, the UAE was largely a nomadic society, with oral traditions, poetry, and music being central to its cultural expression. These cultural forms were primarily transmitted through tribal gatherings and local festivities, such as *Al Ayalah*¹, a traditional dance and chant that

* PhD student, actor and researcher: *Lucian Blaga* University of Sibiu, Romania - Department of Theatrical Art - Faculty of Letters. Contact: sorindan.boldea@ulbsibiu.ro.

¹ *Al Ayalah* is a traditional Emirati performance that combines dance, chanting, and drumming, symbolizing unity, strength, and cultural heritage. It is often performed at national celebrations, weddings, and official events. The dance features two rows of men or boys facing each other, holding thin bamboo sticks, moving rhythmically to the beat of drums and poetry-like chants. The performance reenacts a battle scene, emphasizing discipline and solidarity. *Al Ayalah* is recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, reflecting the deep-rooted Bedouin traditions of the UAE.

represents the strength of the community. However, the rapid pace of modernization after 1966 ushered in significant changes, and a new wave of cultural activities emerged.

The establishment of the UAE in 1971 marked a turning point. The country, through state investment, began to create a cultural infrastructure that blended its traditional heritage with contemporary forms.² In particular, the UAE's leadership recognized the importance of arts and culture in promoting national identity while also fostering international connections. As a result, major institutions such as the Dubai Opera House (opened in 2016) and the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation have become beacons of artistic expression, drawing international talent and encouraging local creativity. The role of expatriates in shaping the performing arts in the UAE cannot be overstated. As the nation attracted workers from across the world, the influx of diverse cultural influences contributed to the evolution of theater and performance in the region. Indian, Egyptian, and Western theater traditions, among others, began to intermingle with traditional Emirati storytelling forms like *Al Hakawati*, an oral narrative style and *Al Mardah*, a form of folk theater.³

Despite the rapid modernization, traditional performing arts such as *Khaleeji* music⁴, folk dancing, and poetry have been preserved and continue to be a vital aspect of UAE culture. The country has embraced a multicultural approach, fostering a creative atmosphere where Western and Eastern artistic practices coexist. This dynamic blend of heritage and innovation has enabled the UAE to create a thriving performing arts scene, characterized by both global collaborations and a renewed interest in preserving indigenous art forms. The UAE's commitment to nurturing the performing arts was further evidenced by the establishment of the *Sharjah Desert Theatre Festival* in 2016, which brought attention to local talents. In recent years, the growth of film and music festivals, such as the Dubai International Film Festival

² John A. Shoup et al. *The History of the United Arab Emirates*. (2021). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400665622>.

³ O. Picton et al. *Usage of the concept of culture and heritage in the United Arab Emirates – an analysis of Sharjah heritage area*. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 5 (2010): 69 - 84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17438730903469813>.

⁴ *Khaleeji* music is a Gulf-region genre known for its rhythmic percussion, oud melodies, and poetic lyrics about love and heritage. Blending Bedouin, African, and Indian influences, it evolves with modern pop while preserving its cultural roots.

(DIFF) and the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, has also contributed to the nation's standing as a key cultural hub in the Middle East.

Today, the UAE continues to evolve as a cultural powerhouse in the region, with a performing arts scene that reflects its complex history, rich traditions, and cosmopolitan present. This unique synthesis of old and new, local and global, makes the UAE an exciting and dynamic cultural environment, where artistic expression flourishes in all its forms.

The Historical Context of Theater in the Middle East

Theater in the Middle East has long been shaped by religious, cultural, and social factors, with performance forms often intertwined with ritual and moral teachings. One of the most prominent examples of this is *ta'ziya*,⁵ a ritualistic Shia dramatic reenactment of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali. This form of expression, which developed in the 17th century, exemplifies how theatrical expression in the Middle East has often served religious and educational purposes, highlighting the moral and spiritual lessons of martyrdom, sacrifice, and righteousness⁶. From a theatrical perspective, *ta'ziya* blends elements of both performance art and religious ritual, making it unique. The actors often wear costumes that represent the historical figures they portray, and their movements are carefully choreographed to mirror the events and emotions of the story. The performers are typically men, as the portrayal of figures like Husayn is seen as a sacred responsibility, though women often take on non-central roles, such as those of the women in Husayn's family.⁷

⁵ *Ta'ziya* is a traditional Shia Islamic theatrical performance that reenacts the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala. Hussein was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and was martyred at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, fighting against the Umayyad ruler Yazid. Originating in Persia, this form of art blends drama, poetry, and music to evoke deep emotion and religious devotion. Performed especially during Muharram, it remains a powerful form of ritual storytelling in Iran and beyond.

⁶ Peter Chelkowski. *Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre. Die Welt Des Islams*, vol. 23/24, 1984, pp. 45–69. JSTOR. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1570662>.

⁷ John Bell. *Islamic Performance and the Problem of Drama*. TDR (1988-), vol. 49, no. 4, 2005, pp. 5–10. JSTOR. DOI: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4488673>.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

While European theater evolved from ancient Greek and Roman traditions, which focused on narrative structure, dramatic conflict, and character development, Middle Eastern theater has traditionally been more ritualistic and didactic in nature.⁸

In addition to religiously motivated theater, other forms of popular performance emerged across the region. *Hakawati*,⁹ a form of storytelling that uses oral narrative techniques to entertain and teach, has been central to Middle Eastern culture for centuries. The *hakawati* would often perform epic tales, folklore, and history in public spaces, bridging entertainment with moral instruction. Another significant form of performance was *Karagöz* and *Hacivat*, a Turkish shadow puppet theater that emerged in the Ottoman Empire. This form of theater, which portrayed comical situations between two characters, navigated the complex socio-political landscape by avoiding overt religious themes, thus appealing to a broad audience without religious conflict.¹⁰

These forms reflect a broader Middle Eastern tendency toward using theater and performance as a tool for education, moral instruction, and spiritual reflection, rather than focusing on purely artistic or narrative-driven entertainment. The deep integration of religion, morality, and cultural values in Middle Eastern theater has shaped a distinct tradition that emphasizes communal involvement and the transmission of cultural identity.

Of course, these forms are not necessarily considered theater in the traditional sense but are rather hybrid artistic expressions that encourage creativity and bring subjects like these to the forefront of the public's attention. What is important to understand is that there are artistic forms in this region of the world that are very close to theatrical expression, even if they are far from what we typically define as theater. These forms, while distinct from European theater traditions, play a significant role in the cultural landscape and provide an outlet for social expression.

⁸ Shmuel Moreh. *Live theatre and dramatic literature in the medieval Arab world*, New York University Press, New York, 1992. DOI: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn704111>.

⁹ The *Hakawati* is a traditional Arab storytelling art who brings history, folklore, and legends to life through poetic, dramatic narration. Once central to cafés and marketplaces, this oral art engaged audiences with humor and interaction. Though it has declined, efforts to revive it persist in cultural festivals and modern adaptations.

¹⁰ Hassan El-Sham, *Folk Traditions and Theatre in the Middle East*. Indiana University Press, 1995. Print.

On the other hand, it is crucial to recognize that these artistic forms emerged in the Islamic regions of the Middle East, whether in the area that is now the UAE, Iran, or other countries in the region. Over recent decades, they have influenced each other, creating a unique blend of practices. In the collective consciousness of the people in these countries, these artistic forms are often regarded as the closest to theater, not necessarily in the European sense, but as the traditional forms of performance that reflect their cultural and historical roots. These expressions are integral to the region's identity and illustrate a deeply rooted tradition of performance and storytelling, even if they do not align with the Western understanding of theater.

The Role of Expatriates in the UAE Theater Scene

Dubai, in particular, has seen the rise of a vibrant theater scene, not necessarily born from local demand, but primarily as a result of expatriate influence. With a population predominantly composed of immigrants, especially from India, the UK, and Eastern Europe, the need for cultural continuity and expression has led to the establishment of various theater groups, workshops, and amateur performances. These expatriate communities, in their quest to maintain cultural identity in a foreign land, have become crucial contributors to the development of the performing arts scene in Dubai. The city's diverse population, including large numbers of South Asians, Arabs, Westerners, and others, has led to a rich cultural exchange, where theatrical traditions from around the world are brought together and adapted to fit the unique local context.¹¹

The influence of Indian performance traditions, such as Kathakali, a highly stylized classical dance-drama, and Bollywood-style productions, has been significant in shaping Dubai's theater landscape. These forms have provided expatriates with familiar cultural expressions, allowing them to reconnect with their heritage while introducing local audiences to the vivid storytelling and elaborate performances characteristic of South Asian theater. Meanwhile, British theatrical practices, particularly those shaped by London's West End, have contributed to the professionalization of theater in Dubai, with many performances drawing on well-established Western genres, such as musicals, drama, and comedy. The fusion of these

¹¹ S. Z. Al Orami et al. *Diversity and social cohesion in the United Arab Emirates*. RUDN Journal of Sociology, 20 (2020): 837-846. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2272-2020-20-4-837-846>.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

various traditions has created a distinctive theatrical environment, which offers a blend of both Eastern and Western theatrical forms.

The growth of international business hubs in the Gulf has accelerated the demand for cultural activities among expatriate communities, reinforcing the presence of Western and South Asian theatrical traditions. As a result, Dubai has not only become a center for international commerce but also for the cultural exchange that reflects the city's globalized nature. The demand for art and entertainment, driven by the city's cosmopolitan population, has allowed expatriate groups to flourish, facilitating the creation of theater companies, arts festivals, and performance spaces dedicated to these diverse traditions.

In recent years, the UAE has also positioned itself as one of the most open-minded countries in the Middle East, welcoming artistic and cultural innovation while balancing its traditional values. This openness is reflected in the local theater scene, where contemporary and experimental performances have begun to emerge alongside the more traditional forms. While the theater scene in Dubai is still in its early stages compared to long-established cultural capitals like London or New York, it is evolving rapidly. Locals, particularly younger generations, are gaining increasing access to new forms of artistic expression, including avant-garde and contemporary works that challenge traditional boundaries.

The influence of global art forms and the continuous influx of diverse cultures has shaped Dubai into a city where the performing arts can flourish in ways that might not have been possible in more traditionally conservative societies in the region. While local theater still largely reflects the diverse expatriate population, it is gradually incorporating more Emirati voices and perspectives. This blend of global and local influences is pushing the boundaries of what theater in the UAE can be, contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic cultural scene. Although still in its nascent stages, the theater scene in Dubai and the UAE at large is beginning to carve its own niche within the broader regional cultural framework, offering both expatriates and locals opportunities for greater artistic expression and cultural dialogue.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Institutional Development and Religion

Unlike Western countries with permanent theater companies and state-funded institutions, the UAE lacks a professional theater industry with full-time actors. While institutions such as Dubai Opera, which opened in 2016, provide platforms for international productions, the local scene is largely composed of independent projects that rely on models, amateur actors, and expatriates pursuing acting as a secondary profession. Professional theater companies with long-term contracts are virtually nonexistent, and while private acting schools and workshops offer training, they do not confer recognized professional qualifications, making it difficult for actors to establish sustainable careers. The lack of government-supported performing arts institutions highlights a significant gap in infrastructure, which contrasts sharply with the cultural investments made in other creative sectors such as film and visual arts.

Islamic perspectives on theater have historically varied. Sunni-majority states, including the UAE, generally discourage figurative representation in religious contexts, which has influenced the themes and styles of local theatrical productions. While theater is not outright forbidden, restrictions exist regarding the portrayal of religious figures, particularly the Prophet Muhammad.¹² Consequently, the theatrical landscape in the UAE remains largely conservative, with performances avoiding politically and socially controversial themes. Gulf audiences tend to prefer traditional narratives that align with cultural and religious values, limiting the scope for avant-garde or experimental performances.

While theater in other parts of the world, especially in Europe, has evolved into a medium that frequently tackles pressing social issues, through documentary theater, verbatim performances, or politically charged productions, the UAE's theater scene remains primarily entertainment-focused. Productions often revolve around themes that are easily digestible and aligned with local customs and values, reinforcing societal norms rather than challenging them. Although official censorship may not always be overt, restrictions are nonetheless present. Shows addressing controversial subjects—whether related to politics, gender dynamics, or societal critique—are often discouraged, delayed, or outright prohibited from being staged. As a result, the UAE lacks a tradition of social or political theater, which in other contexts serves as a platform for dialogue, activism, and reflection. Instead, the emphasis

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, Ed. Harper One, San Francisco, 2004. Print.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

remains on performances that are culturally safe, offering audiences a familiar and uncontroversial experience. These factors contribute to a theater industry that, while growing in visibility, remains confined within specific parameters. Without institutional support, professional recognition, and the freedom to explore complex themes, the UAE's theatrical landscape continues to function within a model that prioritizes entertainment over critical engagement.

Differences Between European and Middle Eastern Theater

A comparison between European and UAE theater reveals fundamental differences:

- **Professionalization:** European theater features permanent companies and extensive actor training, while the UAE relies on international collaborations and temporary productions.
- **Themes:** European theater explores existentialism, social critique, and experimental narratives, whereas theater in the UAE is conservative, emphasizing moral and culturally appropriate stories.
- **Infrastructure:** While European countries have national theaters and long-standing institutions, the UAE's theater infrastructure remains in a formative phase, driven largely by private initiatives.

Despite these differences, theater remains a cultural necessity in a cosmopolitan city like Dubai. It provides a medium for cross-cultural dialogue and helps expatriates reconnect with their heritage. Moreover, theater offers the potential to introduce local communities to diverse perspectives, enriching the cultural ecosystem of the UAE. The country's ambition to position itself as a global cultural hub suggests that theater may play an increasingly significant role in the future. Gulf cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi are investing in cultural institutions, and while theater is not yet a priority, international festivals and performances are increasing in popularity.

Conclusion

Historically, theater in the UAE was virtually nonexistent before the 20th century, with storytelling and religious performances being the primary forms of theatrical expression. The arrival of expatriates, particularly from India and Europe, introduced modern theatrical traditions, shaping the UAE's current theater landscape. While there is growing interest in the performing arts, the lack of professional training institutions and state-supported theater companies remains a significant barrier to the development of a sustainable industry.

Today, the UAE is at a crossroads: while it hosts international performances and offers acting workshops, it still lacks a structured theater industry with full-time employment for actors and playwrights. However, cultural policies are gradually shifting, and with the UAE's increasing focus on positioning itself as a global cultural hub, theater may receive greater institutional support in the future. The question remains whether this development will be driven primarily by expatriate demand or whether it will also engage and inspire a new generation of Emirati artists to take a more active role in the country's theatrical evolution.

Bibliography

- Bell, John, *Islamic Performance and the Problem of Drama*. TDR (1988), vol. 49, n. 4., 2005
- Chelkowski, Peter, *Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre*. vol. 23/24, 1984
- El-Sham, Hassan, *Folk Traditions and Theatre in the Middle East*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1995
- Gause, F. G., III, *The Gulf conundrum: Economic change, population growth, and political stability in the GCC states*. Washington Quarterly, 20(1), 142–165, 1997
- Moreh, Shmuel, *Live theatre and dramatic literature in the medieval Arab world*, New York University Press, New York, 1992
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, Harper One, San Francisco, 2004
- Oraimi, S Z Al et al, *Diversity and social cohesion in the United Arab Emirates*. RUDN, 2020
- Picton, O. et al., *Usage of the concept of culture and heritage in the United Arab Emirates – an analysis of Sharjah heritage area*. Journal of Heritage Tourism, 2010
- Shoup, John A. et al., *The History of the United Arab Emirates*. Greenwood, 2021

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Flaskerud, I., & Okkenhaug, I. M. (Eds.), *Gender, religion and change in the Middle East: Two hundred years of history*. Berg publishers, 2005