

The Opening Ceremony: A Story of Hope

MUSIC Opening Ceremony

AMNA ABULHOUL: What we wanted to do really with Opening Ceremony is, how can we open the book? It's the cover page of the 182 pages that people will read through. The Opening Ceremony is what could set the stage for the next few months for World Expo.

NOON SALIH: This is Amna Abulhoul, the Executive Creative Director of Expo 2020 Dubai's Opening Ceremony.

AMNA ABULHOUL: What we did is really create a story of hope, and hope was represented as a metaphor of a young girl. And we added a character to this person; she was curious, she used to tap into everything, she goes around, she doesn't stop. She really wants to achieve more.

AMNA ABULHOUL: This young girl, performed by Dubai-born 11-year-old Mira Singh, who captured the hearts of viewers globally, becomes the protagonist in this inaugural moment of Expo 2020 Dubai. Through this narrative that unfolds inside the beating heart of the site, Al Wasl Plaza, she guides us to a picture perfect metaphor of what our world could be.

NOON SALIH: An elderly Emirati man enters, walking through the pathways that spiral into the platform in the center of Al Wasl. And then, for the first time, we see the young girl, who's supposed to be his granddaughter. He narrates poetically to her the vision of a bright future.

As they meet, he hands her the Dubai golden ring of Saruq Al Hadid and sends her on a quest of discovery.

AMNA ABULHOUL: She really presents the curiosity of Dubai. She represents the uplifting of Dubai. She represents the never-stopping of Dubai. And her questions about, "Is it us or the world?" It's the same. It's what Dubai did with the Expo.

NOON SALIH: The thing with opening ceremonies is that they go beyond theatrics. They evoke a certain sentiment in audiences, this wonderific sense of nostalgia for something that hasn't yet happened. Think of every ceremonial event you've watched. Think of the anticipation and think of where you were sitting at the time the proverbial curtain was drawn.

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NOON SALIH: After three years of planning, a global pandemic, a 12-month delay, and a whole lot of perseverance, on the night of September 30th, 2021, people everywhere watched as the first World Expo in the region commemorated this historic milestone. And with that, Expo 2020 Dubai was officially declared open.

As this Expo takes place in real time, we look back at the creative process that made this opening ceremony so magical. I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

AMNA ABULHOUL: It was challenging to really understand how can we minimize as much as possible the language and keep it more emotional. And yes, music is a universal language, but we noticed that emotions are the universal language. Like, even if you really don't understand English or Arabic, the spoken words that are happening, you really enter a journey in emotions.

We really wanted to relate to everyone. And everyone loves to be listening to a story.

KATE RANDALL: A lot of the stories that we all know, that we maybe learn and/or listen to from our grandmas or grandfathers growing up, are born from the Arab world. The stories, no matter what sort of cultural part of the world we're from, are the same; they are maybe told in a slightly different way. So those stories born of the Arab world can resonate globally.

NOON SALIH: This is Kate Randall.

KATE RANDALL: I'm the Vice-President of Ceremonies and Programming in the Events and Entertainment Department at Expo.

NOON SALIH: She and Amna have embarked on the Opening Ceremony journey together, practically from the very start.

KATE RANDALL: We're like kindred spirits. We talk about, all the time, the sort of connections between the UAE and Australia, which is where I was born, and how

there are so many similarities in our two cultures alone and how that sort of manifested at Expo across the 192 countries that we have here.

NOON SALIH: And the Opening Ceremony would be the first impression of sorts. To communicate to the world how this city, this nation, that just celebrated its 50th year, endeavored to fuse all these cultures in one place.

KATE RANDALL: At the start of our opening ceremony for Expo in Dubai, it was really important for us to place Dubai and the UAE as the host. That really guided, I guess, a lot of our sort of music thoughts, a lot of the lighting treatments, and a lot of the cast and the types of performances that we did in the first part of the show.

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NOON SALIH: It begins with the official welcome of dignitaries to the Expo, the raising of the flag and a solo of the national anthem. And then, Emirati icon Hussain Al Jasmi performs before His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, distinguished guests and delegates.

A crowd floats in. And then, a sea of flags, including those representing the 192 countries participating at Expo.

AMNA ABULHOUL: How we brought the flag bearers, because Expo has so many nationalities, we asked the Expo tribe to be the one raising their homeland flag.

KATE RANDALL: Despite it very clearly being set in Dubai and the UAE, I think the show really spoke to the rest of the world.

AMNA ABULHOUL: It's an international show, but whoever saw it from start to end will feel that it's related to them. When we put a show together as a nationality or a person who is from a specific country, it's not necessary to put all the cultural elements that is a cliché to everyone. I purposely infused Emirati life within it without people noticing.

NOON SALIH: Take the hero's back story, for instance, which as part of the audience, you wouldn't really have any way of knowing. She was imagined to be the daughter of a main Dubai trader, and this bit of her biography was embedded in the most subtle of elements.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Dubai was always a trade place. This young girl, wearing a specific thobe that Dubai people wear, and the dresses of the girls from a long time ago, the material, the cuts, etc, is all brought from the different trades. And this is something where people might not notice, but it means a lot.

Even the way the grandfather, who gave the Expo ring... The way he's wearing the 'agal... Even the belt he was wearing, we got it from a museum.

NOON SALIH: A lot of small but meaningful details were embedded into the costumes, like the Al Wasl pattern sewn into the white cape of headlining vocalist Mayssa Karaa, who sang the Expo theme song This is Our Time, alongside Hussain Al Jasmi and Almas.

There were also all these Easter eggs hidden throughout the show. For example, the girl's draping gold necklace was inscribed with the word 'Dubai' on its back. But perhaps most fascinating of all were the Ghaf tree leaves.

AMNA ABULHOUL: So the perfect garden had a tree, and initially it was more of these big, grand trees. I said, "Let's have a Ghaf tree." We have the biggest amount of Ghaf trees around the site. How about let's pick a few leaves from every tree and let's scan it, and let's laser cut it and have all of it. It should have an element of the UAE. And not only the UAE, elements from the site, because it came from the roots of the garden of Al Wasl.

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NOON SALIH: The smaller, more intimate gestures are powerful in their own way. But to be sure, the truly unrivaled hero of this production is the projection dome at Al Wasl.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Al Wasl Plaza is a unique place. It's a 360 space, 130 meters. When the Expo ring was lifted, how we awakened the dome? We added AR of Aurora. People thought it's real.

NOON SALIH: By AR, she means augmented reality. And It really does play tricks on your mind when you're watching on a screen. Those Aurora northern lights were only the start of what would be a stunning audio visual performance that complemented sketches, orchestral music, and choreographed dances.

AMNA ABULHOUL: And this is where we played a lot with the music. We took specific music and songs but we reorchestrated it again. We said, okay, let's raise the nai a lot, because it's a very sad, emotional thing. Let's add more of the cello. That takes you to another world. But then, let's make people smile.

And what really helped is the choreography. It really brings people together in ribbons, and this is where they carry the girl. No one knows how she got carried. She had the big seed and this is where she planted it. And the next scene, we saw the perfect Ghaf tree coming from the basement.

We really wanted to demonstrate that hope is a seed that needs to be nurtured, taken care, of by the world. And this is where we stood under the perfect garden at the end.

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KATE RANDALL: Bringing together an opening ceremony is a huge collaborative exercise, for sure.

NOON SALIH: That's Kate Randall, whom we heard from earlier.

KATE RANDALL: There's a creative team that work on developing the show from a music perspective, all the choreography and all the performance elements, the design of all of the set and scenic parts of the show, looking at costumes, looking at props.

NOON SALIH: And a wild lineup of superstars from the region and beyond, including Ahlam, Mohamed Abdo, four-time Grammy winner Angelique Kidjo, and pop icon Ellie Goulding. There was also renowned pianist Lang Lang, the mesmerizing Andra Day, and the one and only Andrea Bocelli. And throughout the event, there were about a thousand performers in the extended cast.

KATE RANDALL: During the rehearsal process there were two key moments that I think really got everybody going, and the same for me. Watching all of the flags of the 192 nations that were going to be participating in Expo just suddenly made it all so real.

And then we had Andra Day...

NOON SALIH: Andra Day, the dazzling American singer, belting out, "I'll rise up, rise like the day. I'll rise up in spite of the ache. I will rise a thousand times again, and we'll rise up."

KATE RANDALL: Trust me at three o'clock in the morning when we were rehearsing on site, and there was nobody else around and you were walking up one of the avenues and could just hear that song booming out of Al Wasl, the lyrics just had so much meaning in terms of the hard work that everyone had put into getting this Expo to happen and then, it about to become a reality that next day.

By the time it gets to the day of the ceremony, there's this really crazy sense of calm and quiet. It was sort of just waiting for it to happen actually until about four hours out from the show. And then it started to get pretty scary. I think that's when it sort of hit: "Oh, my goodness, we're about to do this and it's now or never!" We get one chance to do this live, to broadcast around the world, and then it's done.

NOON SALIH: Not to mention putting on a live show and broadcasting it at the same time meant creating two separate experiences. Especially in a space like Al Wasl, where a 360-degree visual display was integral to the story.

KATE RANDALL: Then it's really, the part where we really get to show off what Al Wasl Plaza is capable of, what Dubai is capable of, and what Expo is going to deliver. And when we got to really use every trick that we had available to us in Al Wasl.

AMNA ABULHOUL: It's not as big as a stadium, so you really cannot hide stuff. If you have a big scenic prop, you cannot hide it. Everyone sees everything. If you want to hide an item, you need to dance around it. But you, as a visitor, as an audience, you choose what you want to see from this palette of emotions and dances.

NOON SALIH: And so, cleverly, it was decided that the girl, the central character played by Mira Singh, would be the only character to wear a brightly colored fuschia dress. This way, whenever she walked on set, the audience's attention would follow her, and away from a prop change, for example.

The constantly changing scenes had to appear seamless for the audience at Al Wasl.

KATE RANDALL: One of the really critical things that does make a show such as an opening ceremony so successful is how it flows and all links together, and how we move from one scene or segment to the other.

AMNA ABULHOUL: The person who is sitting in the space feels the floor rumbling, feels everything around. It's just an immersive experience.

NOON SALIH: Really immersive. In every sense of the word.

AMNA ABULHOUL: When you enter any of the arches of Al Wasl, you feel you entered into a grandmother's house. When you walk from the gates to the grandmother's door, what do you smell? We actually created a specific scent that had gardenia, it had mashmoom, it had jasmine. We created a perfume about that smell and we infused it within the seats in the opening ceremony.

NOON SALIH: For viewers at home, the camera angles dictated where to look, mostly by tracking the cast or act that was central in a given scene.

AMNA ABULHOUL: We directed it differently. We followed the journey of the girl through her eye, through her lens. If you notice, even from a camera perspective, we went low. We wanted the audience to be the girl.

NOON SALIH: What really elevated the experience for home viewers were the augmented reality features Amna mentioned earlier. In one scene, it looked as though the cosmos were raining down stars. Like for real.

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KATE RANDALL: You have this sort of magical picture in your mind of how amazing it was going to be. I think to then actually watch it, is a little bit scary.

I think it's a real mix of emotions at the end of a show like this. For this one, there was huge relief that it had happened and it had been successful.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Post the pandemic, the story is more relevant than ever: bringing the world together. When we come together and connect, the world for

everyone, it becomes like a heaven, and this was the perfect garden. And we really wanted to create this symbolic meaning with every single act.

KATE RANDALL: In the crowd itself, there were a lot of mixed emotions. There was laughter, there was awe, there were most definitely tears. And there was a lot of excitement.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Everyone had the same passion to achieve the best opening ceremony the world needed. Not as how grand it is; from a story perspective, what the world needed.

KATE RANDALL: I think that word “ceremony” for people sort of holds this value, or hopefulness of the world actually becoming one.

AMNA ABULHOUL: When we sit as a bunch of creative team — the staging director, the costume designer — we see a bit of the future. We see from a sketch, how it will look like. And when we see it, in reality, it's like a *deja vu*. But it's hard to explain it. I felt that moment that the world is fine. As they say, “Al dunya b’kheir.”

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting [VirtualExpoDubai.com](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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