

Music III: Al Wasl Opera

ARCHIVE: Opening of Al Wasl Opera

NOON SALIH: Sshhhh. The show's about to begin...

LUCAS SIMON: As per tradition, the conductor arrived when the audience is dark and everyone applauding the conductor. Say, okay, that's the beginning, the traditional beginning of the opera.

And then, through this applause that start to faint, the orchestra and the chorus start to applaud in a specific rhythm. The first instrument come.

Continue...

And the dark is coming to the light...

The second instrument arrive...

The young Zayed emerge from the sand dune, coming front of the stage. And then the opera start.

NOON SALIH: This is the overture, or the opening scene, of Al Wasl Opera: an original opera commissioned by Expo 2020 Dubai.

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After being in development for 4 years, the opera had its world premiere on December 16, 2021 at the Dubai Opera. Lucas Simon, the production director, was there.

LUCAS SIMON: It feels good. It feels good to finally with all the challenges, the COVID, the, the up and down of the project to finally breathe and see the result, to see the images, to feel the music, to hear the public applauding. To talk with them after and having these eyes full of poetry, of question, of feelings.

It's a good moment. It's a good instant to share together, even throughout challenges, it's at the end... [deep breath]

A moment that you can share with, with your family, friends and, and everyone. So that was really an amazing moment to see all those people in the theater.

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NOON SALIH: In the third and final episode of our music series, we'll see a story unfold in three acts. A story full of music, poetry, lights, costumes, and dreams of a better tomorrow. A story about Al Wasl Opera, an Expo 2020 Dubai production.

I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Act One: A Brief History

Al Wasl is the first ever Emirati opera, composed by Mohamed Fairouz, written and co-authored by Maha Gargash, and produced in partnership with the world-renowned Welsh National Opera. This production is a bold move for a country that is known for... well, making bold moves. Its story spans the past, present, and future of the United Arab Emirates and asks the questions: what is Al Wasl - the link - between us as humans? Between us and our planet? Between connecting today's minds and creating the future?

LUCAS SIMON: Yes. It's a little sparkle. It's a little sparkle in the world of art, but from little sparkle, you, you build fire, right? So that's how it's need to be understood. It's how it's need to be seen.

NOON SALIH: The art form of the opera - Italian for "work" - dates back to 1598, when Dafne premiered at the Palazzo Tornabuoni in Florence, Italy. Now, the music of Dafne was lost to history, but its composer Jacopo Peri is considered the father of the opera. Peri's second work, Euridice, is considered the earliest surviving opera.

Early on in its life as a genre, the opera was almost exclusively Italian in origin, but eventually found new voices around Europe. An Austrian by the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, for example, composed some of the most well-known operas in the late eighteenth century. You might be familiar with this one from The Magic Flute...

Mozart's work also showed an interest in Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures, an interest that can also be seen in nineteenth century works like Rossini's The Italian Girl in Algiers, or Verdi's Aida.

So, it was only a matter of time that the Arab world would get its first opera in the Arabic language - widely regarded to be *The Two Kings* by Lebanese composer Wadia Sabra in 1927. While that opera was also lost to history, Arabic operas are still composed to this day, like *Al Wasl*.

Now, operas historically have had a...not-so-inclusive reputation. People often associate operas with lavish halls, expensive suits, fancy dresses - and people who belong to a certain social class.

Lucas Simon, who we heard from earlier, disagrees.

LUCAS SIMON: The big myth of the opera is that opera is elitist, is for the high culture and really knowledgeable people. That's wrong.

An opera is here to trigger question, to trigger interest, to react. Not only in a philosophic way, but as well into an aesthetic way.

So sometimes there is not necessarily the need to understand, but the need to feel.

NOON SALIH: The story goes that in an opera, characters sing because regular speech can no longer describe how they feel on the inside. It's this reliance on music and emotions - both universal languages - that makes an opera accessible to everyone.

LUCAS SIMON: The complexity of the genre opera is that yes, sometime there is a story, sometime there is an aesthetic. Not everyone is touched by the same thing.

Same as art or artifact. An artifact, you will like. An artifact, I won't like it. So that's the easiest way. How this opera have touch you - the story aspect, from the aesthetic, the color from the costumes, from the voices, from the music. So there is many aspect.

NOON SALIH: Act Two: An Expo Opera. An Exp-opera.

In 2017, Her Excellency Reem Al Hashimy, Director-General of Expo 2020 Dubai, commissioned world-renowned Emirati composer Mohamed Fairouz to create an original opera for the Expo. The brief was simple yet daunting - to "tell the story of the UAE through the hopes, dreams, achievements and values of its people." But for Mohamed Fairouz, it made sense in the context of the Expo.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: I think that the Expo is really a vision of collaboration. And I think that that's what opera really comes down to. It comes down to a major collaborative effort between many people who come from various artistic sides. And in order to create one work, they're not creating a synthesis of many different works or many different art forms. They're creating one art form, which is about scene and it's about structure and it's about design and it's about harmony.

I think that is reliant on that human connection. There's nothing more universal than opera and the theater in that way to bring people together. I figured that if people can laugh together, cry together, then anything is possible between them.

NOON SALIH: Mohamed got to work immediately, writing the book - or the story - of the opera. This is different from the libretto - or the script - of the opera, which was written by none other than Emirati novelist Maha Gargash.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: I've read her books, her stories, and she writes beautifully. And I thought to myself, you know, I have this book that I wrote.

And I gave it to her and I said, "This is kind of crazy. It's very ambitious. I don't know how you're going to dramatise this or stage this, but I think you should give it a go because there's great poetry in your words on the printed page or novels."

NOON SALIH: Al Wasl was Maha's first attempt at writing a libretto - but she was such a natural at it from the very first draft, which took her only 3 months to write.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: And I looked through it and I just heard music. As soon as I saw it, I just heard the music and it was remarkable. I mean, the meter, the beautiful way in which she wrote the words. It just seemed as though she was waiting to do it her whole life. And I loved it.

NOON SALIH: If you recall, the brief given to Mohamed and Maha was to tell the story of the UAE through the hopes, dreams, achievements and values of its people. And the opera really tells that story - all the way from the beginning with Saruq Al Hadid, an ancient archeological site that provided the inspiration for Expo 2020 Dubai's logo.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: Well, the opera is going to span a few thousand years of... I want to say history, but history is story. Because we don't really know who these people were thousands of years ago in the Iron Age who created the ring that is the basis for the Expo logo. So when I saw that logo, I immediately said, there's something interesting happening there, because I saw the sun in the logo and I saw the rotations of the sun, and I saw circles within circles within circles within circles.

And I looked into it, and sure enough, it wasn't iron, it was gold. It wasn't created for any utilitarian purpose or trade purpose. It was created just so they - I mean, imagine this, people thousands of years ago in the middle of the desert, making something just so they could look pretty.

I mean, that's something in itself that's quite moving, you know, these - who were these people? You start asking yourself these questions and you do research. And to the extent that you find something, you find fascinating stories.

NOON SALIH: The golden ring found at Saruq Al Hadid becomes the driving force behind the opera's first act.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: You have this guy and his wife who commissioned the ring for their anniversary. And he's sort of regarded as a great thinker, until he starts saying things that people don't want to hear.

NOON SALIH: The character here warns the people of his tribe against disregarding nature, bringing in Expo 2020 Dubai's theme of sustainability.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: But you see things that you really recognize that really were plausible, that could have happened, indeed, may have happened. And then you make that connection that this is not so foreign, that we're not so distant from the people of the past.

NOON SALIH: It is here that we are introduced to a young boy named Zayed, a character inspired by the UAE's Founding Father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. The young Zayed plants trees on the desert stage - a testament to Sheikh

Zayed's vision for the country and a metaphor for humanity's need to care for the environment.

Al-Wasl's second act takes us to the present moment.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: And then you open Act Two when you're in the middle of Dubai International Airport. And there's people speaking in all of these different languages and there's this counterpoint of languages, and distinction, and you have this tower rising like Babel above the skyline.

NOON SALIH: Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: And all these people are coming together with their different concerns, their different backstories, and discovering that there are certain things that we carry one another with.

NOON SALIH: The story then focuses on the relationship between Adnan, a Pakistani migrant laborer working on one of Dubai's skyscrapers, and his daughter back home, Eshaal, who dreams of making a meaningful impact in this world. With her father's support, she grows up to become a doctor.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: Her father eventually becomes quite old and she tries to recover his memory for him by helping him to relive and again, to return and to recognize and to relearn. And this is in a sense the way we relearn ourselves.

NOON SALIH: The third act looks to the future through the eyes of Mary, another young girl who grows up to become an accomplished scientist. The ending is a

celebration of the country's achievements but also acts as a warning for us to strive towards a more sustainable future.

You might've noticed that the opera's three acts are anchored by three children as they navigate the links between the past, present, and future, between different generations, between humans and Planet Earth. These links are ultimately the heart of Al Wasl Opera - and the source of its name.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: Al Wasl is the title of the opera. And that literally means the link in Arabic. "The Link" is the old name for Dubai, but it's also the link between man, or humanity and our environment - that link, that crucial link of which we are a part and then we learn to sort of separate ourselves from it or... I think our sense of time as a continuum and our sense of our stories and how those keep us going through time and keep us recognizable through time.

So that we're not thinking about every day as a rupture, every day is a different event, every day is or every moment as a, as a revolution.

And so this is the age of stories, and it's not just people who are writing operas. It's people, it's young people with cameras and, and a Twitter feed telling stories. And I think that there are some very important stories being told these days.

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NOON SALIH: Act Three: A Legacy.

After being in the works for nearly 4 years, Al Wasl had its world premiere at the Dubai Opera in December 2021, running for four nights right before the holiday

season. The opera looks to have an impact beyond this premiere however, through its various educational initiatives. These include a series of opera and theatre workshops for Emirati youth. Atelier 2020, which is dedicated to supporting rising stage and film costume designers. Opera 360, an immersive experience that takes Expo's visitors behind the scenes of Al Wasl Opera. As well as Nasheed Al Wasl - the "Al Wasl Anthem" - which gives youth in the UAE the opportunity to perform original compositions on the country's largest stages. These initiatives capture the spirit of Expo 2020 Dubai's motto: "Connecting minds, creating the future."

LUCAS SIMON: The legacy of the opera is not only having a beautiful and amazing aesthetic opera. It's what's it's going to generate for the future. It's all about that throughout those resources: how to connect a world, which is a new world, a new genre, the opera, with the mind of the young generation, creating talent, creating the future.

MOHAMED FAIROUZ: As soon as you finish writing the piece, it's done. And it's no longer your piece. And it's other people's piece. It's not only the audiences, but it's also performers and actors and singers and directors, and all these people start to own it.

And they turn it into their own thing and you recognize your piece in their vision. And you see it in other people's perception as well. So it really just - you know, that ring in the Expo really just spreads out harmonically from the source.

NOON SALIH: As we come to the end of our music miniseries, I ask that you carry on the legacy of Expo's various musical initiatives by encouraging the youth in your community to compose, to write, to play an instrument, to sing, to dance, to

design costumes, and...to make art and tell stories about our collective past, challenging present, and bright future.

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.

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