



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Theatre in Ras Al Khaimah has a unique and intriguing history. Yet studies of theatre in the region tend to focus on Sharjah, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, making little to no mention of performances in this northern emirate. This policy paper surveys landmark performances from the past, highlights the challenges and potential of present-day theatre activities, and makes recommendations for raising the profile of theatre in Ras Al Khaimah in the future.

Raising the Profile of Theatre in Ras Al Khaimah: History and Impact

Katherine Hennessey, American University of Kuwait

Introduction

The emirate of Ras Al Khaimah lays claim to some of the earliest productions of theatrical performances in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Culture in Ras Al Khaimah, 2019). Khalifa Al-'Irayfi, a pioneer of theatre in the Emirates, directed several landmark productions in Ras Al Khaimah in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to plays he had written himself, Al-'Irayfi premiered works by Emirati playwrights such as Ibrahim Bu Khalif, and Bahraini author Rashed Al-Mu'awada (Al-Attar, 2009, p. 83). In subsequent decades, the Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre has continued to support the work of local and regional playwrights and theatre-makers, giving rise to a vibrant range of work, from colorful musicals for children to thought-provoking dramas about class conflict, arranged marriage, and the clash between modernity and tradition in the UAE.

Yet these facts are little known outside of Ras Al Khaimah. The emirate makes few appearances in histories of theatre in the region; accounts of contemporary theatre in the UAE focus almost exclusively on performances and theatre activities in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Sharjah (see Al-Attar, 2009; Michalak-Pikulska, 2012; Tijani, 2014; Cvitanovich, 2015). This policy paper thus has three complementary aims:

1. to provide a brief historical survey of theatre in Ras Al Khaimah, and an overview of the contemporary state of theatrical activity in the emirate;
2. to identify the factors that contribute to the marginalization of theatre in Ras Al Khaimah; and
3. to provide concrete, feasible recommendations for raising the profile of theatre in Ras Al Khaimah locally, nationally, and regionally, highlighting the accomplishments of its practitioners.

Field research for this policy paper began in Ras Al Khaimah in March 2020. Sadly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed plans to conduct in-person interviews with local theatre practitioners, audience members, and educators. However, the shift to mainly online interviews and archival materials actually held some unexpected benefits: it provided a clear and detailed picture of the current state of the Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre troupe's online presence, and of the difficulties researchers from outside of Ras Al Khaimah might encounter when investigating elements of the emirate's theatrical history.

Theatre in Ras Al Khaimah: History and Present Status

The Early Decades

The first theatre activities in Ras Al Khaimah date back to 1958, and drew impetus from the spread of schools, the Scouts movement [*al-haraka al-kashafiya*], and the establishment of social and sporting clubs within the emirate (Al-Sabab, 2014). Though amateur in nature at first, these activities became increasingly visible and proficient over the subsequent decade.

By 1969, Ras Al Khaimah had produced a dedicated group of theatre makers, including actor, writer, and director Sa'id Abu Mayan, actor and writer Hamad Sultan, and actors such as Jaber Naghmush, Rashid Abu al-Hamam, and Ahmad Ghaniwat (Al-masira al-fanniya, 2008). Abu Mayan wrote and directed the short play *Titi, Titi, Mithil Maa Ruhti Jiti*, which the troupe performed in Dubai, in either 1972 or 1973, for an audience that included Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan.

The play's title—"Titi, Titi, you haven't changed an itty-bitty"—comes from an Arab fable in which a little worm named Titi leaves home to make her way in the world. She finds a nutshell with a hole in its side, climbs inside, and eats the contents, only to find that she has become too chubby to exit through the hole in the shell. She has no choice but to wait in the nutshell, fasting until she returns to her previous size. When Titi returns home and recounts her story, her mother tells her "You've come back exactly as you were when you left," a phrase now proverbial for a person who expends significant time and energy without ultimately achieving anything worthwhile.

Intriguingly, Sheikh Zayed seemed to find the play relevant to the moment, commenting to the troupe after the performance that their message had been received ("*Risalatukum wasalat*," he told them, as recounted in Al-Mahi, 2016). In 1976, Abu Mayan and his colleagues' activities gained additional recognition with the official establishment of the National Theatre in Ras Al Khaimah [*Al-Masrah al-Ahli bi-Ras al-Khaimah*], under the leadership of HH Abdulaziz Bin Humaid Al Qasimi (Al-masira al-fanniya, 2008).

The troupe's first few years bore witness to both tragedy and progress within the world of Gulf theatre. Tragedy struck in the death of celebrated Kuwaiti actor and director Saqr Al-Rushoud. Al-Rushoud, who had taken a position as a theatre consultant with the UAE Ministry of Information and Culture, perished in a car accident in the Emirates in December 1978. To honor his memory, the Ras Al Khaimah troupe was renamed the "Saqr Al-Rushoud Theatre" in 1979, a name it bore for the next decade. But there was progress as well, most notably in the arrival of the aforementioned director, Khalifa al-'Irayfi, who came to Ras Al Khaimah from Bahrain.

Khalifa Al-'Irayfi and Socio-Political Drama

Al-'Irayfi directed the troupe's productions from 1979 to 1984, highlighting the power of theatre as a vehicle for socio-political critique. In 1981, for example, 'Al-'Irayfi and the troupe staged Saadallah Wannous's sardonic play, *The King's Elephant* [*Al-feel, yaa malik al-zaman!*], in which a group of villagers are terrorized by their ruler's rampaging pet elephant, but even more terrified at the prospect of voicing their concerns to the monarch. Later that year, 'Al-'Irayfi directed their performance of the play *Seven Nights*, by Bahraini author Rashed Al-Mu'awada. Set in a Gulf village in the 1940s, Al-Mu'awada's play portrays the conflict between destitute villagers, a cabal of wealthy noukhadhas (pearling boat captains), and a well-meaning teacher named Muhammad, who tries to convince the avaricious captains to distribute their hoards of dates to feed the hungry before the villagers' grief and anger boil over into revolutionary violence.

It required courage on the part of Al-'Irayfi and the Ras Al Khaimah troupe to tackle such potentially controversial subject matter. *Seven Nights* is a polemical play, and it had sparked a backlash when it premiered in Bahrain in July 1971, just before the island gained its independence. Neither the violent class conflict, nor the representation of religious authority in the person of a cowardly and venal Imam, sat well with the authorities; the play was banned, and the author and the director jailed (Husayn, 2007).

Fortunately, however, the production in Ras Al Khaimah concluded with no adverse repercussions for the participants. In fact, to judge from the audience's applause as caught on a video recording of the performance, *Seven Nights* was engaging and well received in Ras Al Khaimah.

Al-'Irayfi left Ras Al Khaimah in 1984, and the loss of his leadership was a blow for the troupe. Over the subsequent decade, their activities decreased to only one or two new plays a year. Even their 1989 shift to their current name, the Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre [*Masrah Ras Al Khaimah al-watan!*], failed to spark much new activity on the stage. The association did, however, establish a literary magazine, *Al-Multaqa al-adabi*, eight issues of which were published between February 1991 and January 1994, when the magazine folded (Al-Sabab, 2015).

Decades of Renewal: 1995 to the Present

From 1995, the troupe began to stage two or three new plays each year. In several of these plays, the playwrights doubled as lead actors, such as in Ibrahim Bu Khalif's *People and People* [*Nas was Nas*] (1995), Jassem al-Ma'amari's *Timon and Pumbaa* (1998), and Farhan Hadi's *Alif Baa* (2000) ("Al-masira al-fanniya," 2008). Moreover, in 1999, the National Theatre embarked on the publication of a new literary magazine, *Shu'un Thaqafiya*—though unfortunately, like its predecessor, it ceased publication after around eight issues (Al-Sabab, 2015).

In recent years, the Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre Troupe has continued to perform regularly at venues and festivals throughout the UAE, including the Cultural Foundation Abu Dhabi and the Sharjah Theatre Days Festival. The troupe has excelled in the production of theatre for children, with plays like *The Penguins are Singing* (2014) and *The Cave of Wonders* (2015), both of which won multiple awards at the Emirati Children's Theatre Festival.

Moreover, under the guidance of directors like Mari' al-Halyan and Mubarak Khamis, the troupe has continued to perform plays that contain a certain degree of social critique, for audiences of all ages. They have repeatedly staged dramas in which domineering fathers and rigid social hierarchies crush young people's dreams of love (*Al-Bushiya*, 2017, and *Lamas al-Mawaja'*, 2020), or in which characters abandon their moral compass to chase after money or fame (*Mawal Haddadi*, 2018, and *Talaya al-Layl*, 2019).

The Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre has received recognition at the local and national level for their talent and achievement. In 2018, for example, they won the Distinguished Theatrical Troupe Award from the UAE Theatrical Association, upon which HH Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi praised the troupe for its "youthful creative energy" (WAM, 2019). They also acquit themselves well regionally; their production of *Al-Bushiya* at the 2018 Awaal Theatre Festival in Bahrain took home the awards for both Best Script and Best Leading Actress (WAM, 2018). Such successes deserve to be better known, particularly at the international level, and should be built upon locally. To do so, however, certain obstacles need to be overcome, and current strengths need to be expanded. The next sections explore these concerns.

Theatre in Ras Al Khaimah: Challenges and Possibilities

The following section provides a brief overview of the challenges theatre-makers and audiences in Ras Al Khaimah face, and the current strengths upon which they can draw.

At the time of writing, the most formidable obstacle to theatre-making in Ras Al Khaimah, as elsewhere, is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has forced performances and festivals to be indefinitely postponed, and will cause disruption for the foreseeable future to theatre activities that require in-person rehearsal or the gathering of a live audience. Theatre practitioners around the world have found creative ways of circumventing these restrictions, including digital performances, socially-distanced rehearsals, and appropriately-spaced audience seating; presumably theatre-makers in Ras Al Khaimah will adopt some combination of these measures as the world adjusts to post-pandemic realities.

This policy paper, however, takes a longer-term view of the context in which Ras Al Khaimah theatre occurs. The

following discussion, therefore, contains the underlying assumption that at some point in the future, live theatre and in-person audiences will return.

Venues and Performance Opportunities

The local context is, in certain respects, favorable to theatre. Though the original decades-old National Theatre building is "simple... poorly equipped... and small" (Adwan, 2016). The Ras Al Khaimah Cultural Development Center, constructed in 2004, provides local theatre-makers with a newer, better equipped, more spacious stage. The 2020 edition of the annual Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival in Al Jazirah Al Hamra hosted the National Theatre troupe for a site-specific performance, helping to integrate the performing arts into the local art scene.

Regionally, too, theatre competitions and performance opportunities abound. Sharjah Theatre Days is foremost on the yearly calendar, but other, more specialized festivals run throughout the year in the UAE and the Gulf, providing troupes with impetus to produce children's theatre, youth theatre, mono- and duo-dramas (one- and two-actor shows, respectively), theatre in the desert, and so on. Furthermore, the 21st-century construction boom that has given rise to architect-designed mega-theatres in the southern Emirates (Hennessey, 2016) has benefited troupes throughout the UAE, offering them new stages, like that of the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation, on which to perform. Further, though theatre is arguably the literary genre of lowest stature in the Gulf, HH Sultan Bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, the Emir of Sharjah, has not only written plays and acted on the stage, but also sponsors and attends numerous theatre festivals and colloquia, a fact which indubitably has helped raise the profile of theatrical activities in the UAE as a whole.

Gaps in Education and Training

Yet difficulties remain. Although the early development of theatre throughout the Gulf stemmed at least in part from schools using drama as a pedagogical tool and a cooperative, creative student activity, this is not a consistent part of the curriculum. Occasional performances take place in Ras Al Khaimah's schools and can be quite successful (see Saad al-Din, 2002). However, the presence of theatre in schools remains highly dependent upon individual teachers' initiative. Thus some students may receive little to no exposure to live dramatic performances as a part of their education, either as audience members or as participants.

There are also few local outlets for formal training in the performative arts, whether in terms of scriptwriting, acting, or directing, set and costume design, lighting, or audio effects. Emirati theatre practitioners who wish for more rigorous formal study often look abroad, to institutions like the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Kuwait, but such study requires a significant commitment of time and other resources. Consequently, local theatre talent remains primarily amateur in nature, exhibiting raw potential

rather than disciplined artistry, and thus is less able to draw an audience accustomed to the technical proficiency of contemporary film and television.

Language Barriers and the Problem of Censorship

Language barriers, real or perceived, further heighten theatre-makers' difficulties in attracting and communicating effectively with audience members. In the Emirates, theatre productions in English attract audiences of highly diverse backgrounds and nationalities, not merely spectators whose mother-tongue is English. Conversely, Arabic-language productions, like those of the National Theatre, are often perceived to be of interest only to native speakers of Arabic—or even to be intended only for an Emirati citizen audience.

A further problem is that of censorship, which the late Egyptian theatre critic Nehad Selaiha described as weighing so heavily in the Gulf as to leave theatre-makers with "a feeling of being incarcerated, besieged and having to speak through metaphors and symbols" (Selaiha, 2009). My interviews with theatre practitioners throughout the UAE bear this out: writers and directors repeatedly voice concerns that producing plays with content that challenges or questions any sort of socio-political norm will result in backlash, either at the official or the social level. Thus they repeatedly engage in varying degrees of self-censorship, inadvertently draining their own theatre of its power to inspire audiences to consider innovative ideas.

All of the above local, national, and regional complexities feed into a lack of recognition of the history and accomplishments of Ras Al Khaimah theatre on a wider scale. If theatrical activities have a reputation, however undeserved, as amateurish, socio-politically irrelevant, or incomprehensible to non-native audiences, then they will struggle to attract the attention of potential audience members, not to mention historians and scholars. If, on the other hand, those activities are perceived as consistently well-executed, inclusive, and impactful, then they will constitute an essential element of local cultural life.

Recommendations

1) Expose students in Ras Al Khaimah to theatre as an integral part of their education.

Research on the impact of arts integrated education demonstrates that when schools expose students to the arts more generally, and to theatre in particular, students score better not just on evaluations of literacy and language use, but also in other disciplines like mathematics (Inoa et al., 2014). Empirical research also demonstrates that increasing students' experiences with the arts helps to reduce disciplinary problems, to sensitize young people to others' problems and perspectives, to increase student engagement and to encourage students'

aspirations to attend tertiary education (Bowen & Kisida, 2019). Studying and making theatre encourages creativity and cooperation, helps students overcome shyness and fear of public speaking, enhances imaginative empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives and personalities—all key benefits for young minds.

Moreover, multiple studies, including a recent one conducted in the UAE (Buigut & Amaize, 2020), indicate that exposure to art forms like theatre in schools strongly correlates with frequency of attendance at live performances in adulthood. Providing moral and material encouragement for the use of theatre in primary and secondary schools is thus an essential step in creating a flourishing local theatre culture.

One way to create greater educational exposure is to sponsor theatre-related workshops in Arabic and English, aimed particularly at teachers of literature and history. Educators versed in this practice could present sample lesson plans in which dramatic sketches and readings bring texts to life, and then encourage participants to brainstorm ideas relevant to their own classrooms.

To further encourage the integration of theatre into the curriculum, an annual email could be sent to the heads of Ras Al Khaimah schools, containing easily-circulable suggestions and resources for performing plays in class, making theatre an extracurricular activity, organizing a student trip to see an age-appropriate performance, or bringing a troupe to a school to perform.

The benefits of theatre-making remain important for students when they reach the tertiary level, and as they prepare to embark upon professional careers. Yet Ras Al Khaimah currently offers university-level students very few opportunities in this regard. The American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK), which already teaches some classics of world drama as part of its commitment to a liberal arts education, could be a natural niche for a local drama program.

2) Encourage the recognition of theatre as an important form of artistic and socio-political expression.

The aim of theatre is not merely to entertain audiences for a few hours, but more importantly to engage them, both emotionally and intellectually. Historically, the most significant achievements in the domain of theatre have been plays that cast light on pressing social and political problems, challenging audiences to think critically about them.

Concerns about censorship and social reputation, however, have caused some Emirati theatre-makers to camouflage their opinions under layers of allegory, while others engage in overtly didactic drama based on simplistic, unobjectionable premises, such as "children should respect their parents."

To encourage more complex and thought-provoking drama, the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah could organize a Festival of Social Drama, in which troupes would perform plays centered on a significant social issue. Participants would be guaranteed freedom of expression, and discussions open to audience members could follow each performance.

Theatre could also be better utilized as a means of celebrating Ras Al Khaimah's unique history and culture. Playwrights could be encouraged, or even commissioned, to write historical dramas set in the emirate. Troupes could perform site-specific theatre at Al Jazirah Al Hamra Heritage Village and other significant architectural landmarks (for which see Maclean, 2018). To further illuminate Ras Al Khaimah's rich cultural background, playwrights could adapt important literary works by authors from Ras Al Khaimah, such as Ahmad Ibn Majid's accounts of fifteenth-century sailing and navigation, Al Majidi Bin Dhaher's seventeenth-century Nabati poetry, and Thani al-Suwaidi's pioneering novel *The Diesel* (1994).

Maximizing the impact of such efforts will require making them accessible to a large and diverse audience. This will require helping audiences surmount barriers to communication, whether these stem from physical disabilities like blindness or deafness, or from lack of fluency in a language. This task is not as difficult as it might seem, since theatre already communicates on multiple levels, incorporating audio and visual effects, costuming and sets, the actors' movements, expressions, and gestures; all of these assist audience members in comprehending action and meaning. And while technologically-advanced theatres can provide supertitles that simultaneously translate every word of spoken dialogue, there are also simpler expedients, like providing non-native-speaker audience members with a translated summary of the plot and the main character relationships. Providing an English summary of the plot of a play in Arabic, and vice versa, would harmonize with the official language policy of the UAE, which aims for bilingualism and bi-literacy in both Arabic and English in Emirati schools, while encouraging the use of "Arabic as a language of culture and communication" (UAE government's *Arabic Language Charter*, cited in Cook, 2019, p. 2).

Aids to understanding the action of Arabic-language plays could also attract a wider and more diverse audience to performances. William Cook notes that some expats who try to learn Arabic unfortunately find themselves "disincentivized," both economically and socially, from using Arabic in the UAE (Cook, 2019, p. 5-6). Making Arabic plays more accessible would provide expats an opportunity to practice their listening comprehension skills while learning more about the local culture.

Last but not least, development of the arts sector contributes to economic prosperity. A recent study in the US noted that, while government allocations for artistic and cultural organizations totaled around 5 billion USD

in 2015, the activities of those organizations actually generated 27.5 billion USD in government revenue, more than a five-fold return (Americans for the Arts, 2015).

3) Better publicize the achievements of theatre-makers from Ras Al Khaimah.

At the moment, only pieces of the history of theatre in Ras Al Khaimah are readily available, and those pieces are scattered and incomplete. The World of Theatre Archive, for instance, provides a list of plays produced by members of the Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre troupe from 1969 to 2003, along with the names of the author, director, and principal actors for each play (see "Al-masira al-fanniya"). The archive is a crucial resource, but it needs to be updated to include productions from 2004 onwards. It is also of limited utility if interested readers are unable to access copies or summaries of the scripts, or recordings of the performances.

Fortunately, numerous recordings of the Ras Al Khaimah National Theatre troupe's performances from 2013 onwards are available on YouTube. However, these are curated and posted by host organizations like the Sharjah Theatre Days Festival and the Emirati Children's Theatre Festival, not by the troupe itself. One can also find a handful of videos of the troupe's performances from the early 1980s, but these are posted independently.

Though the National Theatre troupe has a reasonably active presence on social media, the troupe does not have a website that fleshes out its historical record, nor a comprehensive listing of performance videos. This documentation problem is even more acute for theatre activities that take place outside the auspices of the National Theatre—for plays in Ras Al Khaimah schools, or for productions by local community organizations like the Shamel Association for Arts, Folklore and Theater.

The most straightforward means of making this information widely available is to create and maintain a cultural website for Ras Al Khaimah, with dedicated pages for theatre activity. These could include crowdsourced sections, allowing users to share their memories of participating in or watching local performances, whether by the National Theatre or other troupes. Pages could likewise include short videos of interviews with current theatre practitioners, photos, trailers and clips from performance recordings, highlights from school performances, links to media coverage, and other relevant materials. Such materials could also be compiled into a short documentary film.

The National Theatre's literary magazines, *Al-Multaqa al-adabi*, *Shu'un Thaqafiya*, and their more recent publication, *Bisht*, should be digitized and made available, either as free downloads from the website or for a reasonable payment. For greater accessibility, summaries of Arabic and English language materials should be available in both languages.

Conclusion

Developing the arts and theatre sector harmonizes specifically with the goals laid out in Ras Al Khaimah Vision 2030, including "a prosperous and diversified economy," "a happy and cohesive community," increased tourism, celebration of the Emirate's culture and heritage, greater educational attainment, better connections between educational institutions and the culture and heritage sector, and encouraging young people's participation in society and their preparation to take on leadership roles (Ras Al Khaimah Vision 2030). Moreover, the actions recommended in this report will help to publicize contemporary theatre activities in Ras Al Khaimah, as well as the emirate's historical achievements in the genre; celebrate and encourage current talent and build a dedicated and diverse audience base; and ensure that future accounts of Emirati and Gulf literature and theatre give Ras Al Khaimah's contributions due consideration.

Authors

Katherine Hennessey is a Fellow with the National Endowment for the Humanities in the US, and an Assistant Professor of English at the American University of Kuwait. Her research focuses on global drama, particularly in the Middle East and Ireland. She is the author of *Shakespeare on the Arabian Peninsula* (2018) and of numerous academic articles on theatre and the performing arts in the GCC and Yemen. She also translates works of Arab theatre, most recently Wajdi al-Ahdal's *The Colonel's Wedding for Words Without Borders*.

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P.O. Box 12050, Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates
Tel: +9717 233 8060 | Fax: +9717 233 8070
E-mail: info@alqasimifoundation.rak.ae | www.alqasimifoundation.com