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Dancing through Beirut's war



Ismene Brown on the remarkable Lebanese dancers visiting London

THE first person to die in the Lebanese civil war was a dancer. The girl sitting next to her in the car was paralysed, a bullet in her back. It was 1974, and the 18 years of conflict that followed that first act of war - launched against balletgoers and dancers leaving Beirut's Cité Theatre after a performance by the Caracalla Dance Theatre Company - left Beirut the ghostliest of cities.

It is the cunning desperation and the sheer bloody-minded determination of its director, Abdul-Halim Caracalla, which makes this week's London visit poignant and uplifting.

"Four times I put back the windows in my studio, I put back the ceiling, and each time, boom, they destroyed it for us!" One wonders where the dignified and courtly Caracalla gets his resilience from. Memory, it seems, the memory of what was: Lebanon, Garden of Arabia, the land flowing with milk and honey (something most of his dancers, in their twenties, have never known).

"At first, when I wanted to give up, I remembered the First World War and the way the Ballets Russes carried on the way Pavlova kept going. Then I thought, this is the moment when this company should prove to the world that the Lebanese are still alive. The image of Lebanon was so black, the world thought we were a people who could only kill."

In a war as complicated as the Lebanese conflict, with at least six or seven different factions, the tale of how Caracalla did it is almost unbelievable. It seems the only thing all factions agreed on was that they wanted the Caracalla Dance Company to survive.

In 1974 the company was only six years old. But it is the only professional dance company in all the Arab states. Abroad, people were curious to see that there was more to Arabia than oil, and at home there was pride in this unusual new export, even if some of Caracalla's own dance ideas - the result of training with London Contemporary Dance School and with Martha Graham - seemed a bit *outré*.

The Arab states pulled together to keep the Caracalla show on the road taking to heart its director's attempt to present a unified Arab culture from a country in whose destruction some of them were involved. The same thing got the company from sector to sector in poor, fractured Beirut and out through the mountains into the Hizbollah-dominated Bekaa Valley.

"I dealt with Walid Jumblatt, Nabih Berri, Michel Aoun - always the leader, it was too dangerous to talk to number two. The company has always been mixed Christian and

Muslim [he is Shia Muslim, his wife is Christian], but to be a Caracalla dancer was enough.”

What all those battle-hardened fighters wanted to see - so much that they would suspend their fighting - was Shakespeare. Caracalla says, “He unified the world. he spoke about our soul, he reached inside us, Arab or English, french or Chinese. Mad love, suspicion, wives and husbands - he speaks to all.”

The first ballet he made was *The Taming of the Shrew*, which went down well with Arab men; following by a *Romeo and Juliet* ballet called *The Black Tents* (which London saw in 1985). But the play that Caracalla dreamed for 12 years of making into a full-length ballet was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It was the mixture of human and fairy stories that tugged at him. The Lebanese believe in fairies, and Caracalla, who grew up in Baalbek, the Bekaa Valley city whose Roman ruins rival those of Rome itself, says, “I could sense the fairies there.”

What Londoners will see this week is considered extremely modern in Beirut. The choreographer says he is producing a new dance language, fusing modern Western and classic Arabic styles. To our eyes, though, it looks very traditional, with oriental costumes of dazzling colour, all authentic recreations of historic Arab dress.

For Caracalla also runs a dance research centre providing a singular archive of every Arabic tradition, costume, music and dance.

“I am sure Shakespeare is happy, wherever he is, to see the orientals doing his play,” says Caracalla. “I am paying him homage by bringing him back to London. This is a new book about Shakespeare - the same content, but new pictures.”

An Oriental Midsummer Night’s Dream is at the Royalty Theatre, tomorrow-Sat, tickets 071 494 5090