Local Meets Global at “World Music Nights in Damascus”

By Shayna Silverstein

“Damascus 2008: Arab Capital of Culture” (DACC) is a year-long platform for cultural exchange and dialogue that consists of a broad range of events, lectures, and workshops affiliated with UNESCO's “Culture Capitals” program. Administered by a General Secretariat specially commissioned by President al-Asad, DACC aims not only to expand current means for cultural production by facilitating international collaborations and establishing local training programs in arts administration, but also to diversify arts audiences through creative branding, a broad network of affiliates, and the use of both nonconventional and world-class venues such as Dar al-Asad. Celebrating Damascus as a “mosaic” of Arab culture that is classicized within a historical past and projected into a globalized future, DACC demarcates a discursive public space that rearticulates local and global cultural imaginaries through processes of inclusion and exclusion among artists, audiences, and producers.

Among the six hundred or so events that have been presented to date, “World Music Nights in Damascus” invited internationally-acclaimed world music stars to the Damascus Citadel in mid-July 2008 for a week of outdoor summer concerts. The festival's curatorial team largely focused on African-based performers – from Dhafer Youssef's fusion ensemble from Tunisia to Johnny Clegg's South African rock band – and drew audiences that grew from approximately 1,500 on the first night to 7,000 ticketholders for the much-anticipated evening with Faudel. Like many of the performances presented by DACC over the course of the year, the festival set certain precedents that make possible sustainable programming such as an annual summer series of world music concerts and future collaborations between Syrian musicians and world music artists.

“World Music Nights in Damascus” aspired to integrate Damascus within world music industry networks by investing in state-of-the-art facilities, establishing administrative infrastructure and production experience, and cultivating the cultural readiness of young audiences. Jumana Ayasiri, one of DACC's three full-time music curators, was particularly interested in engaging her audiences with those artists who combine local traditions and world beats with socially resonant themes and experiences, such as Tinariwen, an ensemble from the southern Sahara region of Mali that joins blues, African percussion and poetry in Touareg. Though she recognized that not more than twenty members of the festival's audience, which was largely constituted by Syrian and non-Syrian college-age students, are familiar with either the social and political work of projects such as Tinariwen and Johnny Clegg nor world beat as a distinct musical genre, Ayasiri hoped to foster a cultural space in which young audiences may become more aware of the world at large and the possibilities for their participation in that space.

Regarding the visiting artists' perspective on this opportunity, General Secretary of DACC, Dr. Hannan Kassab Hassan, noted that musicians and other artists responded enthusiastically to the invitation to perform in Syria, and that almost no invitations have been declined to date. A New York-based drummer who arrived with Angelique Kidjo and her entourage commented that they received the most dynamic and warm reception of their summer tour in Damascus. Kidjo, who performed the last evening of the festival, staged an impromptu finale of West African-based dance and raqs sharqiyya with Syrian fans who delighted in the joyful moment with friends and cellphones.

inspired blend of Arabic vocals and jazz melodies that spoke to audiences eager to see some of their own favorites on stage. Organizers, who had deliberated at length about how to include local participation in the festival, commented in a personal interview that Syrian music has yet to emerge on the stage of world music. What arrangement might eventually bear crossover potential to world music audiences is a blend of popular lyrics sung in a coastal or perhaps Suweida-based dialect by a local mutrib and accompanied by dance rhythms, guitar, and bass. Organizers, however, predict that industry readiness for this prototype might still be two years or more in the making.

While it might still be premature to anticipate the full benefits generated by DACC's commitment to cultural life in Damascus, a new generation of cultural administrators, production crews, and emerging artists and audiences have participated in innovative encounters that open up possibilities and future directions for artistic projects and support in Syria. Through DACC's patronage, Syrian artists and cultural entrepreneurs may be moving towards a period of increased exposure and ability to realize "Damascus" as a site of cultural production.

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