



Portrait of a project:

When Ziyarat and London's Victoria and Albert Museum said *Arabise Me*

It was 25th August 2006. Many Londoners were leaving the city to celebrate the summer's last bank holiday weekend. Others – at least 3000 of them – were getting ready to cross the grand revolving threshold of the Victoria and Albert Museum for a 'Friday Late' evening of Arab art, performance and entertainment. A significant proportion of these visitors wanted to enjoy an interactive event which would connect them to the North African and Middle Eastern parts of their own identities. The rest must have been curious to explore something less familiar to them – a dynamic and multi layered culture usually obscured by media stereotypes and misrepresentation.

Whatever its appeal to this huge diverse crowd, *Arabise Me* had taken on a whole new meaning since 2004 when the idea was first conceived. At that time, those involved could not predict that London would experience the terrorist bombings of 2005. Nor could they know that another war would break out in Lebanon only weeks before this event took place preventing some of the artists from participating.¹ The urgency for collaboration between Arab artists in Europe and those with access to the most high profile platforms for expression was and still is greater than ever before.

From Arab picnics to a city wide conversation...

Formally, *Arabise Me* was based on a collaboration between an institution, the V&A, which has collected artifacts from across the world spanning 3000 years, and Ziyarat, a small, independent cultural agency which aims to promote artistic practice related to the Arab world by 'joining the dots' between different cultures. This partnership was formed in the context of the V&A's Friday Late programme, a framework of monthly events usually based on a cultural theme or region, commissioned by the V&A and produced by external partners.²

In reality, as with the most meaningful collaborations, *Arabise Me* developed more organically than this formula suggests via the shared dreams of three individuals - all women - who were able to move within and between the big and the small as curators, producers, managers, mediators, communicators and facilitators.

Ziyarat, founded by Leila Mroueh and Mahita El Bacha Urieta, represents the independent ingredient. Mroueh, an Iranian/Lebanese media savvy with a passion for popular culture, had been organizing a series of Arab picnics and meeting points that encouraged dialogue between Arabs and 'part time Arabs' keen to cross between different cultural spaces regardless of their background. She wanted to take this popular approach to another level so that more people in London would be touched by Arab street culture, ideas and thoughts - enough for the Middle East to be perceived in a different way. El Bacha Urieta's career in curating and producing

¹ The artist Roula Haj Ismail programmed to perform "The Tabbouli Performer III" was not able to join *Arabise Me* from Lebanon.

² www.vam.ac.uk/activ_events/events/fri_late/.

international contemporary arts, which has involved her recently in the Manifesta and Sharjah biennales, complements Mroueh's affinity with Urban culture and youth communications. Half Spanish, half Lebanese, El Bacha Urieta has produced and curated other multi-art form festivals in London and contemporary art exhibitions, but had always wanted to programme and create a structure for an informative and stimulating event which would platform Arab expression and provide access to its real, multi faceted character rather than be confined by the current prevailing wave of art programming from and about the region.

Whilst the Victoria and Albert museum has a longstanding commitment to promoting collections of art and design from the Middle East including Islamic art, Ziyarat's talents were not spotted by those responsible for this region nor those programming the Friday Late event. The idea was initiated by a young officer from the V&A's Word and Image department who was born in Beirut but fled at an early age during the civil war. Eager to know more about her origins and to build links between the Middle East, her current home and place of work, Nazek Ghaddar recognized the V&A's potential to host a strong Arab event after attending the Friday Late Iranian Night which attracted perhaps the largest following of any event previously programmed in the V&A Late series.³

When Nazek came across Ziyarat, she realized that this was the agency that could produce a fresh and imaginative event which would support the V&A in its aim to attract new audiences to the museum. The Contemporary team at the V&A responsible for the Friday Late events was receptive to Nazek's proposal and recognized the opportunity for this event to take place shortly after the opening of the museum's new Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art.⁴ A straightforward period of familiarization in which Ziyarat and the contemporary team worked together quite naturally on a shared vision for an event to be conceived for one of the museum's most fashionable programmes secured the partnership that made *Arabise Me* possible.

Working with the common ground

That the idea for *Arabise Me* trickled up from another department within such a labyrinthine national institution is perhaps the most unusual and inspiring dimension of the V&A - Ziyarat collaboration. The partners' shared interest in promoting emerging creative practitioners and reaching young audiences also strengthened the basis for this relationship between publicly funded museum and fragile and comparatively new collective. For Ziyarat, the opportunity to reappropriate the world's greatest museum of art and design⁵ as a stage upon which some of the collaborating Arab artists presented their first international performances was an irresistible attraction to this project. In turn, the V&A undoubtedly benefited from Ziyarat's all embracing, street wise approach which resulted in what El Bacha Urieta described as a very "London" event - cool, varied, fun and irreverent – a strong recipe for any successful Friday night happening in a city overloaded with competing distractions.

Of course, this lively collaboration came with challenges and questions. Shared aspirations will not always overcome the inequalities presented by differences in scale, structures and resources. Furthermore, ideal conditions that allow partners to converse, negotiate and think forward in a long process of maturation are often hard to secure. A key hurdle for Ziyarat was dealing with the V&A's nervousness about

³ Friday Late Iranian Night took place in January 2005 and attracted over 4200 visitors.

⁴ The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art opened in July 2006 and was funded by the Jameel family.

⁵ Quoted from V&A's website and publicity materials.

the title of the event. For a museum not wishing to alienate other cultures, some of which might be represented by key patrons and target groups, *Arabise Me* was not immediately understood in the way Ziyarat had intended - as a cheeky but welcoming invitation.

More difficult was dealing with the lack of resources for an event of this scale. Many of the participating artists, the producers and even some members of V&A staff were contributing time voluntarily and without their overwhelming good will and commitment the event would not have been possible. One consolation for those involved was the accessibility guaranteed by the V&A's policy to ensure that attendance of this event was free of charge and it was clear from the start that the V&A Friday Lates all operate according to the same initial budget proposition. The partners were also aware that their programming for *Arabise Me* was ambitious, that museums' budgets in the UK are increasingly on hold and to support commissions of new work the V&A had pro actively sought additional funds from Arts Council England.⁶ However, it is unfortunate that sufficient time and resources were not available for Ziyarat or the V&A to work on funds development. If *Arabise Me* had been backed by a substantial private foundation as with the Friday Late Iranian night⁷, additional support and strategic positioning may have relieved the tension and embarrassment caused by limited artist fees and delayed reimbursement of their expenses.

Unusual suspects

Any difficulties experienced during the process of collaboration were not insurmountable and ultimately the outstanding quality, popularity and buzz of the resulting event represent the unique legacy that the museum and participants cling to. The most well judged and touching aspect of the programme that Ziyarat produced was its irresolute commitment to emerging artists from a wide range of aesthetic and artistic backgrounds some of whom experienced seminal moments in their careers through their performances at the V&A.

Joumana Mourad, founder of IJAD dance company has been based in London since training at LABAN. Thanks to her involvement in *Arabise Me* she now knows there is a hunger for her work after over 200 visitors were turned away from the room allocated for her performance which held an audience of 400. Reports of the audience being moved to tears by her intense delivery of 'Please Excuse the Happiness' suggests that her desire to celebrate everything that is beautiful and emotional about Middle Eastern culture had been realized.

Elsam Jawad from the contrasting commercial world of hip hop was able to reach a different audience at the V&A with his unique Foosha raps in classical Arabic – a language he has chosen for its accessibility to the widest possible audience in the region. Jawad's reason for living and working in London stems from his determination to raise the stakes for the hip hop scene in the Arab world by using his commercial success to change the way Arab artists see themselves. His long term goal is to invest profits made in the west in the sector's professional development. These are just two highlights from *Arabise Me* amidst a host of other provocative happenings which included the Freestyle Hakawatis' storytelling, Wael Hattar's Make your Own Arab art installation, soundscapes, photography and a roaming parody of an Egyptian TV presenter on a mission.

⁶ Wael Hattar's 'Make Your Own Arab' multi media installation was commissioned for *Arabise Me*. This was supported by a grant of £5000 from the Arts Council of England,

⁷ Supported by Iran Heritage Foundation in addition to private sponsors and Visiting Arts.

Nothing new for one of Europe's most cosmopolitan cities⁸?

Without wanting to undermine the idea of *Arabise Me*, many would assume that a quirky event involving independent players and institution would be old news in London, Europe's quintessential metropolitan melting pot. This capital city is perceived by many as the most obvious place for collaborations between different communities and celebrations of multiculturalism. Surely its fast growing Arab population⁹ already has a distinctive voice on the city's myriad of public and private cultural stages?

Regrettably this assumption is contradicted by the current reality. Participating artists recognize a problematic lack of space for and awareness of their European Arab culture(s) in London and throughout the UK. Compared with France, Spain and other southern European countries Arabic culture is barely visible in the contemporary cultural programming of Europe's western isles between continent and the United States.

This means that Ziyarat's provocation – *Arabise Me* – is not a complete response but an essential starting point; a taster for what must be a much longer conversation in which cultural players and audiences of all kinds are invited to put their hands up, join in and expect something to happen to them. Next stop is Madrid at Casa Arab in August 2008 with expressions of interest from Berlin, Amsterdam, China, Venezuela but let's hope London will find a way to host and support Ziyarat in other contexts as they continue on to the next step in their cultural journey.

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⁸ London 2012 Olympics website describes London as "The world in one city" which brings together more than 50 ethnic communities of 10,000 or more people. More than 70 different national cuisines are available, 300 different languages are spoken.

⁹ According to The National Association of British Arabs' study for consideration of inclusion of Arab as ethnic group in the next UK population census, November 2004, 3000 British Arabs reside in London. However this is likely to be a gross underestimate as appropriate data is not available.