

What's On

High note

Cezary's Picks

'Language of emotions'

Ballet: a dramatic story narrated step by step

By Cezary Owerkowicz
Special to the Arab Times

The sign language as a way of communicating with people who are unable to hear became more popular recently. In some countries, sign language translators are required in important media functions, conferences of statesmen and other events. The language of motion will probably exist forever along with spoken language.

The language of motion was also evaluated from human beginnings in the form of dance. This has been a form of expression (and communication!?) since our very beginning. Is it possible to describe it as a language of emotions (also as rituals long ago)? I think, yes. In the advanced stage of human development, it evaluates the form of art, like music generally but also poetry, literature, painting or sculpture.

This started in 'social dances' — sometimes very sophisticated in the courts and very spontaneous in villages and suburbs. Once it took the form of a spectacle and was later called as 'ballet'; narrating to us some stories with specially written (or adapted) music and composed motion story called choreography. Ballet was born at royal and aristocratic palaces, or rather, on their floors.

It is not so common to realize that ballet has Italian origins, like opera. The form was 'formalized' in Italian courts during the 15th and 16th centuries. An Italian noble woman, Catherine de' Medici — daughter of Duke of Urbino and his French wife — became the wife of King Henry II and the Queen of France. With 'the benefit of inventory', France was gifted with Italian origin ballet as a developed form of art in the court. The first official performance was Le Paradis d'Amour (The Paradise of Love) presented by Catherine, the daughter of Marguerite and Henry of Navarre, at the wedding on Aug 18, 1572.

While searching for facts for my article, I discovered that a year later, Queen Catherine commissioned Ballet de Polonoise to honor the Polish Ambassador to Paris upon accession to the throne of Poland Henry of Anjou. Compatriot Queen Bathasar de Beaujoyeux was responsible for the ballet presentation in The Court and established the principles of Baif's Academy by integrating poetry, dance, music and set design to narrate a unified dramatic story.

In the next century, King Luis XVI Grande, also called Le Roi de Soleil — The Sun King — and the longest ruling monarch (72 years and 110 days!), was also a great lover of music. He established the Royal Academy of Music — The Paris Opera, became famous as one of the best dancers and the first soloist of ballets was organized in his court! Other roles were performed by his courtiers, mainly men. You could imagine the enthusiasm of the audience who applauded those performing at the center of the monarch's floor, isn't it? Spectacles that time were presented at the huge Royal Palace ballrooms. In the 17th century, the arrangement of dance was similar to playing chess as it was based on geometric lines and horizontal motions. Costumes and scenic designs were very important, as well as verbal and poetic explanations of the story. (They would not rely on the shrewdness of witnesses?)

In the court of Louis The Sun King, the Chief of Music Staff was an excellent composer, Jean-Baptist Lully (1632-1687), who wrote the music for several ballets. NB, Comedy ballet story was written by the genial Moliere. The King performed 80 roles in 40 ballets, among others An Egyptian in The Forced Marriage (1664) and A Moorish in The Perfect Lover (1670). Just interesting details.

When King Louis XVI left the ballet stage, he established The Royal Academy of Music (as Academy of Music both 'parents' of Paris Opera) and ballet stopped to be an exclusive entertainment for The Court society. It started to be available to a wider audience and steadily became a domain of professional dancers of both genders. Scenic space also changed, moved to theaters halls, and organized by townspeople and court's staff. There was a different arrangement for the audience — smaller, simpler, not so luxurious spaces and

a different angle of observation for the audience. This led to major changes as there was more concern for the technique of dance and vertical diversity through jumps and pirouettes.

Initially, dancers wore costumes which were actually fashionable, used in daily life. In Paris Opera, it was severely criticized by Jean-Gorges Noverre as just funny. Men clad in shorter trousers and tuxedos were in a better situation but women in heavy, ankle-length dresses, hanged on panniers, wire 'baskets' construction on hips and high heels restricted their movements very, very much. This is in addition to uncomfortable wigs, heavy jewelry, and masks which diminished the joy and lightness of lady dancers. Women liberation on stage became a very important and necessary step.

One of the first rebels was Mademoiselle de Camargo who was immortalized in the paintings of Nicolas Lancret in 1730. She cut her skirt by 20 centimeters and wore shoes without heels. Voltaire praised her as she took off from the floor with 'man certitude and power'. (Sorry, political incorrectness was unknown yet.) Four years later in London, not in Paris, Marie Salle moved too far forward: she appeared as a Greek statue with light tunic and flowing hair!!! Horrific?

La Camargo and Salle were students of ballerina Francoise Prevost. She was the first to present ballet d'action (action ballet). She was inspired by Princess du Maine, wife of Louis de Bourbon, in arranging un pas tragique based on Pierre Corneille's drama Horace with special music by Jean Joseph Mouret. Prevost, with her partner Jean Balon, 'illustrated by dance the tragedy of heroes and deeply impressed the audience'.

Starting from April 29, 1982, we celebrate yearly the International Day of Dance. Its patron is Jean George Noverre (1727-1810) upon the recommendation of the International Theater Institute. April 29 is his birthday. Why the French dancer is so honored? His father was an adjutant of Sweden King Karl XII and he dreamed of a military career for his son. But, the son liked theater and dance more. He debuted as a 14-year-old dancer at the Luis The Sun court. He got famous as the precursor of action ballet, as choreographer and pedagogue, also the theoretical aspect of dance. His Letters of the Dance and the Ballet edited in 1760 in Lyon and Stuttgart became the cornerstone of ballet reform.

Since 1749, when he presented in Paris his Ballet Chinois, he also became famous abroad. Fascinated by his art, English actor David Garrick called him 'The Shakespeare of Dance' and arranged his performances at Drury Lane Theater in London. However, even the success of his 10 consecutive ballet performances in Lyon, audience adoration and protection of Mme Pompadour were not enough for a contract with Paris Opera. He was 'a stranger', 'not ours'. He produced the next 14 ballets in Stuttgart under the patronage of Duke Karl Eugene of Wurtemberg and later Empress Maria Theresa in Vienna, where he worked with Mozart and Gluck. His 'fans' included Voltaire and King Frederick The Great. (Is it an illustration of the proverb: Nobody is a 'hero' in his own country?)

In his 'Letters', Jean-George Noverre formulated his 'I broke chains of tight scholar rules, I threw symmetric figures, with mechanic motions of hands and legs I connected with outbursts of the soul and various face expressions. Throwing out masks I turned to the most authentic costumes ... nature I accepted as my pattern and guide offered me the way: ordered the dance to speak...'

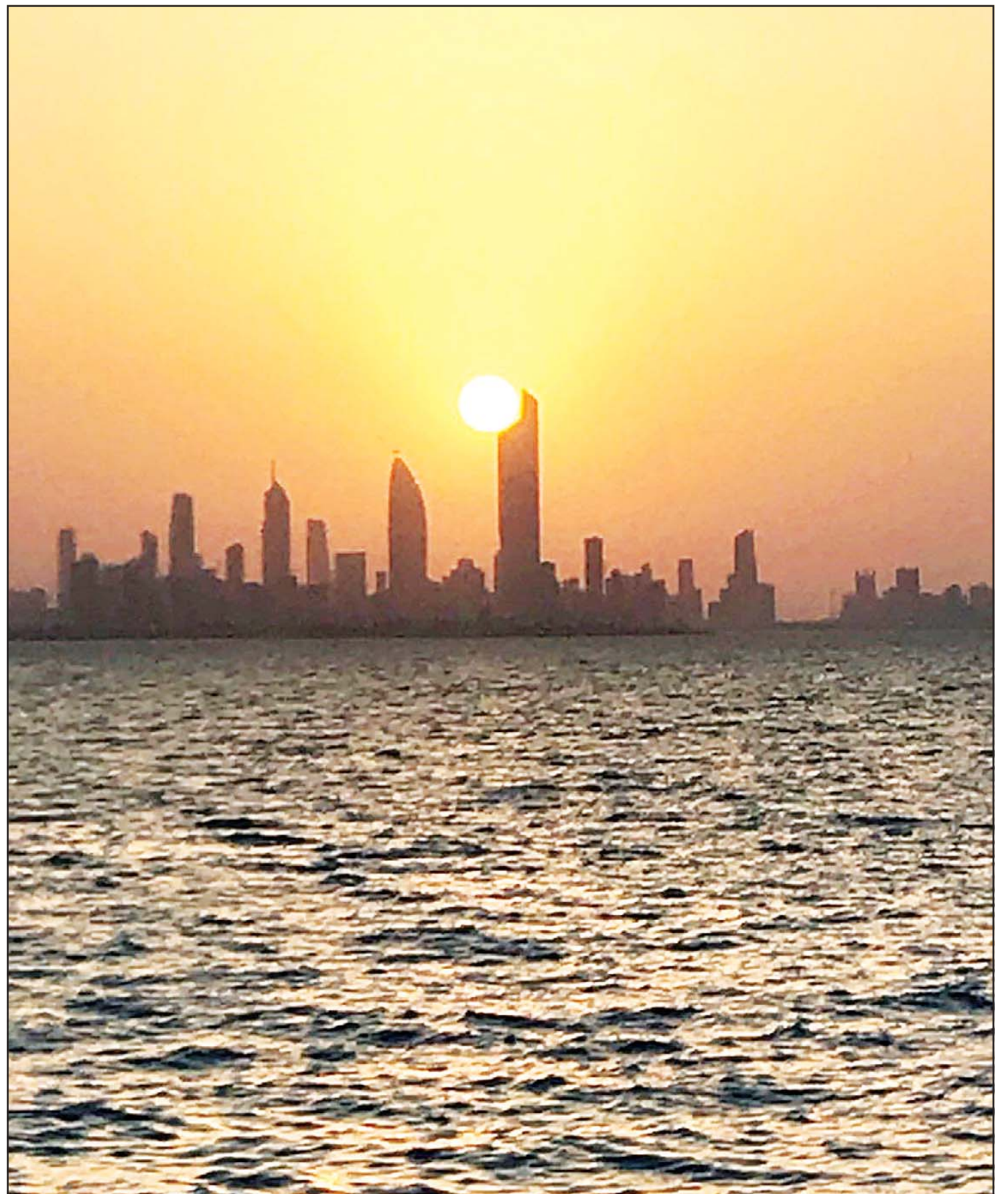
This way, step by step coming back to nature, the dance climbed up to the topics of art achievements and became one more human language of expression affiliated to music and dramaturgy. It started from primarily prehistoric roots to the highly developed and appreciated art nowadays.

PS: Maybe, the history of ballet is so long and attractive enough to come back and explain it step by step in the future?

Editor's Note: Cezary Owerkowicz is the chairman of the Kuwait Chamber of Philharmonic and talented pianist. He regularly organizes concerts by well-known musicians for the benefit of music lovers and to widen the knowledge of music in Kuwait. His e-mail address is: cowerkowicz@yahoo.com and cowerkowicz@hotmail.com



Owerkowicz



Kuwait City silhouette during a golden sunset. (Carlos Dominguez - KUNA)

Pioneers of Kuwait

His work used as resource by students, scholars

Dr Al Rumaihi an outstanding literary man

This is the second in a series of articles on Professor Mohammed Ghanim Al Rumaihi, an outstanding thinker and writer. — Editor

By Lidia Qattan

Special to the Arab Times

Though Dr Mohammed Al Rumaihi was happy in his job he was yearning to complete his post-graduation studies. He was given this chance in 1969, when the Kuwait University granted him a scholarship to study at the University of Durham in Newcastle, one of the best in the UK.

There he studied English for one year and got his PhD in Political Sociology in barely three years, because an exception was made for him to present his thesis earlier than usual.

While he was in the UK as a social worker Dr Rumaihi was Vice-Chairman of the Kuwait Students Union in Great Britain, and Chairman of the Arab Students Union.

In the summer of 1973 Dr Mohammed Al Rumaihi was back to Kuwait as an Associate Professor at the Sociology and Social Work Department at the Kuwait University. Shortly afterwards he was promoted to full member of the faculty and began to lecture at the College of Art and Education.

In his literary career, as in anything else Dr Mohammed Al Rumaihi set his mind to achieve, he was never short of initiative or courage. Motivated by an enterprising spirit and seemingly unbounded energy he always could accomplish his objective with flying colors.

Incidentally, from the first year he joined the faculty, he saw the need of a magazine for the systematic study of major steps that was underlying the complex development in the Gulf countries leading to modernization.

In 1974 he succeeded in convincing the University authorities to sponsor the project and make it feasible.

In the quaternary "Journal of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula" born in 1974, Dr Al Rumaihi was the founder, the editor-in-chief and a member of the board.

It was the first scientific approach to the issue of regional development after the oil, hence it became a very important source of reference to students and to scholars concerned about the social, economic and political development of the Gulf countries.

From its first publication, Dr Mohammed Al Rumaihi became yet more involved in his literary career as a prolific writer.

His steady production of pamphlets, articles and books went on even after he became involved in other projects, including scores of conferences and seminars held in Kuwait and abroad.

Dr Mohammed Al Rumaihi was born and grew-up in the heated atmos-

phere of Arab nationalism that affected all social, political and economical changes in the region; in his writings he reflects those early influences enhanced by his stern-independent spirit that makes his literary contribution particularly interesting.

In his writing he reveals a probing mind into the cultural, political and economic development of the Gulf countries.

Imbued

His analysis and theories are implicit and direct, imbued with human values and philosophical reflections verging on futuristic pondering.

In this respect the professor stands as one of the most outstanding literary men and thinkers in Kuwait, if not in the Arab world.

His books, columns and articles enjoy a wide reading public in Kuwait and abroad.

Besides writing books Dr M. Rumaihi has been having a weekly column in the local dailies: Al Watan, Al Ray' Al Am, and Al Bayan magazines, he also contributed with scores of articles on subjects related to political, social and economical issues in Al Hayat and Al Aham Egyptian newspapers, as well as in other daily newspapers and magazine in Kuwait and abroad.

His field in writing concerns the Gulf social-economic structure, Arab thought and Arab political trend.

Professor Mohammed Al Rumaihi published his first book, "Oil and Social Changes" in Cairo in 1974, sponsored by the Arabic University Institute Arab League. This book was reprinted in Kuwait in the following year, by then he published another book, "Kuwait before Oil", followed by other books

"Economic and Social Obstacles for Development in the Arab Gulf Countries" published in 1976; "Social and Political Change in Bahrain Since the First World War" was published in 1976.

Other books are "Social Opistical of Democracy in the Gulf" published in 1977; Oil and International

Relations "was published in 1982; "Policy and Social Changes Problems" was, published in English in 1984.

In 1986 Dr Rumaihi published "The Gulf is not Oil Alone", soon followed by "Beyond Oil" published in 1986, "Kuwait. Constructions and Promotion" appeared in 1988.

The main feature in his writing is the objective relationship of unfolding phenomena with historical events



Dr. Mohammed Al-Rumaihi

in the region; seen in retrospective and projected into the future his work makes an enlightening reading.

After the Kuwait liberation from the Iraqi invasion Dr Mohammed Al Rumaihi published "A Series of Arabic Talks" in three volumes, along with "Kuwait ... Constructions and Promotion" both published in 1991.

Much of history has to do with politics and religion, the one has been influencing the other in a cataclysmic combination that destroys humanity.

Humanity creates its own values, forms its own ethics in response to its surroundings, which reflect on people's thoughts and actions; these in turn affect their social, political and economic life.

Environmental changes along with the fascinating and strenuous interplay of old and new values influence people's behavior and action as well as their history.

In "Beyond Oil" (Unity and Development in the Gulf) Professor Mohammed Al Rumaihi expressed his philosophical view of the future, while giving a comprehensive historical background of the region. He focuses on the disrupting influence of colonialism on the tribal unity of the region, which led to the emergence of numerous independent states and the far reaching consequences on their social, cultural and political structure.

Asset

The consequences began to be more sharply felt when oil revenues became the dominant asset in their economy and new problems began facing them, Dr Rumaihi writes.

"The concept of sovereignty over land as understood in modern states did not exist in the Gulf. Tribes were migrating from one area to another and people's link with the land or lack of it was determined by the continued tribal alliance and alliances between tribes"

"The developing phase of the modern Gulf societies took place from the middle of the eighteenth century to the discovery of oil in the twenties"

He then explains the fundamental affect of modern colonialism and Western capitalist market with its policy of divide and rule, "On the social and political development in the Gulf region, which suited both the colonialist and tribal rulers, but he points out that the emergence of independent states did not radically change the old political system.

The under-current of the ancient tribal system is still plainly felt, in spite of the written constitution which differs from state to state.

Traditionally each tribe had its own territory, or tribal range, called "Al Dirah" within which it claimed ownership. This territorial range was followed season after season in search of pasture as regularly as clockwork.

Invariably dire necessity drove some tribes to attack and plunder others, but they had to observe certain codes of conduct that could not be infringed without serious consequences. One of those rules was not to kill anyone, for that would have caused a blood feud that would have unleashed a chain reaction of revenge.

Qualities

As there was an inter-tribal code of behavior, there was another equally strict rule within the tribe which all members had to observe. The most curious feature in the tribe system is the relationship between rulers and ruled, which is a paradox of democracy and feudalism.

Although the chosen Sheikh is always from within the ruling family, selection necessitates certain qualities the new ruler must have, such as courage, powers of leadership and good luck.

The Sheikh's word is law, but he is not an absolute dictator, for in any decision affecting the tribe he has to decide in conjunction with the tribal Council of Elders, only upon their approval he can assume full powers of action.

As in Bedouin society the rulers of the new states are still chosen from within the ruling family. Even in Kuwait, a democratic state with a National Assembly, the nation takes but little part in political decisions, especially in foreign affairs.

Pondering on this fundamental issue the professor writes:

"Some political modernization has occurred and it is doubtful if this transitional phase can be frozen indefinitely. If sharp contradiction between the social-economic and political structure arises, an explosion could result."

"At the start of the oil boom, the tribe was the basis of the social unit. Although the political role of the tribe was later restricted, some of its formal aspects were retained to preserve those traditional social relations which bolstered the political structure."

To be continued