

When most of the Middle East was still the playground of warring Bedouin tribes, and under the troubled overlordship of the Ottomans, when parts of it were still unknown to the rest of the world, a small number of British women courted social censure when they answered the call of adventure and ventured into yet unexplored parts of the Arab world. In the process, these women became explorers, researchers, writers and ambassadors who not only bridged cultures but also in a way became the eyes of the Western civilization into societies and people who until then had aroused scepticism and a bit of wonder. Freya Stark was one such woman who travelled through Arabia sometimes on foot, sometimes on camelback and sometimes when luck favoured — on an automobile. But the life of Freya Stark and others like her would have remained lost in yellowed pages if it had not been for the efforts of Alison Shan Price MBE, a British dramatist, presenter and teacher, who along with noted playwright Hooda Shawa showcased the life of this extraordinary woman in a monodrama titled 'Freya: Letters from Kuwait'.

One of Kuwait's most prolific theatre personalities, Alison Shan Price, Founder and Director of One World Actors Centre has made significant contributions to the field of theatrical arts in Kuwait. In 2017, Alison was awarded the MBE for contribution to dramatic arts in Kuwait and the Middle East by Queen Elizabeth II and received the award from the Duke of Cambridge at Buckingham Palace. Like Dame Freya Stark, the compatriot she portrayed on stage Alison has taken the Middle East to her heart. She has merged her passion and love for the creative arts with her interest in the region she has adopted as her second home resulting in some interesting productions like Akhnaton and Ikara that has set new standards for creative productions in Kuwait.

Alison's work with Freya Stark started her on yet another phase in her creative journey. She has built a series of presentations combining research, interviews, film footage and memorabilia titled 'Stepping Over the Horizon' that delves into the lives of award-winning early twentieth-century British women who came to work in the Middle East and made it their second home. As a continuation of that work, Alison will present a lecture titled 'Umm Saud-Dame Violet Dickson' in the 24th cultural season of Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah. Meanwhile, she continues her training and collaborating on various important productions. In September Alison will launch the new One World Theatre OWT of the BOX training programme that will teach children through drama Science on Stage, Historical Drama and the Mathemagicians.

Alison's profound and prolific work with theatre has led to the creation of the Alison Shan Price International Prize for Drama, which is awarded annually by the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, the No. 1 Drama School in the UK to an outstanding MA student who will further develop drama in their native country.

Alison Shan Price was born in the countryside to a warm Welsh family. Recalling her childhood, Alison says, "I was incredibly lucky. I had wonderful parents, my brother Richard, grandparents, and cousins. We lived in the countryside in England and Wales and travelled at regular intervals living and touring in South Africa. My fondest memories include the ocean voyages on the Union-Castle Line ships to and from South Africa." After her marriage, Alison relocated to the Middle East. "It was adventure that brought me here. My husband and I were newly married and came to Kuwait in 1984." In the years that followed, both she and her husband lived and worked in Kuwait while raising their two children. "It was an adventure. Once you learned to go at the local pace, it was wonderful, and everyone was so welcoming. My children had a great childhood. Kuwait is a country that loves children. Their early years taught them about the importance of multiculturalism. They can both speak Arabic." She continues, "It has been fascinating to learn about the rich history of Kuwait and Middle East once called the Cradle of Civilization, and for that, I am indebted to the Dar al Athar al Islamiyyah, and the Tareq Rajab Museum. It was also the time of The Iraq-Iran war and bombing could be heard over the water, with graphic photographs in all media. There were no mobile phones, and we had to book times at hotels to make international calls. Now Kuwait is a country with thriving 21st-century modernisation and retention of its cultural heritage, which together creates its unique identity. The Arts are now celebrated and their importance in developing creativity, confidence and communication are understood. To have been a part of this development is a great honour."

With time, Alison, who had a BSc Honours degree in Physics moved from teaching to creative arts. When



Alison Shan Price receiving her MBE from the Duke of Cambridge Prince William at Buckingham Palace. Photo courtesy of Alison Shan Price

SPECIAL REPORT

MBE

FOR A CLASS ACT

Alison believes that Kuwait has considerable talent. "So many people in Kuwait offer help; it is a joy to stage productions here." This year, Alison has several new productions lined up including the first Arab-Anglo Shakespeare production set in an archaeological dig in 1913, which weaves historical fact, Mesopotamian myth, and international relations through the theme of A Midsummer Night's Dream which means unquestionably theatregoers have a lot to look forward to in Kuwait.

By Chaitali B. Roy

Special to the Arab Times

asked if it was easy to make a transition from teaching to creative arts, Alison responds, "I was also a Licentiate of London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art LLAM (Distinction) as well as an Associate Actor of LAMDA ALAM so to teach Physics, direct a show and act were all possible. At the time, in 1998, children spent weekends with nothing to do so with another ALAM Gregan Davis, as administrator, and my parents who were English Speaking Board examiners and actor trainers, I opened KAST a drama school for young actors." The classes for KAST were held in Kuwait English School, and productions were staged at Kuwait Little Theatre (KLT). KAST proved to be a success with many of the young actors going on to be very successful in the entertainment business around the world. Moreover, KAST introduced accredited UK LAMDA examinations with the help of British Ambassador Richard Muir. This gave professional qualifications to actors trained in Kuwait. Alison's first production G.B. Shaw's 'Poison, Passion and Petrification' was staged at the Mousetrap Theatre at the New English School. "The wonderful Mrs Jehan Rajab, a great supporter of the

Arts had kindly lent furniture and old carpets as the play is set in Edwardian England. We had duplicated certain pieces as the set was supposed to collapse; unfortunately, no-one had explained the duplication process to Mr Rajab sitting in the front row," laughed Alison.

Performer, director, producer and scriptwriter, Alison has nurtured a lifelong love for the theatrical arts. Having worked with English theatre in Kuwait for more than two decades, Alison has always expressed her confidence in the talent available in the country. As a theatre person, she enjoys being a part of the creative process from concept to conclusion. At times, and if the situation demands, Alison also dons the cap of a producer. When asked if she prefers the role of a producer to a director, Alison answers, "A few years ago I would have said 'director' as you have artistic control of the show (budget allowing!). But having worked with experienced directors, since launching the 'Director's Programme' in 2012, I would now say 'producer'. As a director, you are 'inside' your limitless vision. As a producer, you are constantly multitasking with your closest companion, the smartphone and you are

very aware of the limitations within Kuwait regarding easy access to required materials specific to productions."

The Founder and Director of One World Actors, and the One World Shakespeare Festival Director, an annual festival of Shakespearean productions and workshops in Kuwait, Alison Shan Price, has made significant contributions to the field of theatrical arts in Kuwait. A few years back, she got together a diverse group of creative people who shared a common passion to form One World Actors. "It is a not-for-profit Arts Organization dedicated to sponsoring the Arts through the presentation and professional development of multi-cultural artists. It has the support of international artists such as Academy Award winner Dame Judi Dench and Emmy Award winner Adam Darius." The company that is made up of professional performers also runs a separate training centre for actors offering international cultural exchange workshops and professional development in the UK. According to Alison, the most exciting part about setting up One World Actors was the opportunity to work with a multicultural team. "In a continual process of creativity

you can only work with people who become true friends; I have worked with UK composer Harriet Bushman on joint projects for ten years, Hooda Shawa on TAQA Productions for five years and Dr Diana Sfeir of Lebanon on Arabic productions for three years. The actors in the company are from all over the globe." Speaking about the importance of multiculturalism and collaboration in art, she says, "A production is the sum of its participants where everyone is important, and it gives me immense pleasure to witness their outstanding talents. Our musical directors of the training programmes have included opera singers Anna Karadimitrova of Bulgaria, Jumel Carvajal of Philippines and Olwyn McCollin of Barbados. Music Director for the shows includes Maestro Richard Bushman, Mike Ricketts and Dr Sami Ibrahim of Cairo Opera House for TAQA Productions. Emmy Award winner Adam Darius from the USA and International award-winning choreographer Kazimir Kolesnik have delivered international workshops for three years, and our actors go to London for training. Cross-cultural collaboration is vital to the survival of the arts."

Setting up One World Actors was

not easy. The road was smoothed by the presence of creative individuals like Eleni Price, a brilliant actor as Managing Director, Yousef al Nasser (now an acclaimed photographer), Hamad Al Jenaia (a producer), Augustin Tchantcho (a professional actor now in Australia) who were very much a part of its development. "In 2012, the British Ambassador invited me to put on a Shakespearean production to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, and the Ambassador suggested that the company should be registered in the UK which proved an ideal situation for collaboration in Kuwait. With the right people, many difficulties can be overcome, and a process can become a joyful memory," shares Alison.

Alison attributes the continuous success of the One World Actor productions to the immensely talented and dedicated creative and production team that works tirelessly with the directors throughout the season. At times, one wonders if creative individuals like Alison would have fared better in their career if they had decided to stay back and work in the West, but Alison thinks otherwise when asked if she had any regrets. "Not at all," she smiles. "It has been the most fascinating of experiences not only learning a new culture and meeting so many wonderful people but opening the Theatre Company Kuwait Elizabethans and first multicultural community drama school KAST in 1998 under the patronage of the Ambassador's wife, Mrs Caroline Muir. Another highlight was introducing LAMDA Examinations to Kuwait in 2001 with the Ambassador Mr Muir (Since then over 1,500 students from aged 5 to 65 years old have taken exams from Introductory to accredited Diploma Level)."

Over the years, Alison has directed over 50 musicals, Shakespearean plays, classics and originals. When asked about the creative highlights of her life in Kuwait, Alison responds with a laugh, "There are so many! Playing Desdemona in Shakespeare's 'Othello' at the British Embassy directly after the Liberation of Kuwait, opening KAST the first drama school in 1999, introducing LAMDA Acting and Communication Examinations into Kuwait with Ambassador Muir, creating the One World Shakespeare Festival at the British Embassy, designing The Kuwait representation of the 'Titanic — 100 years', presenting shows in aid of Bayt Abdullah Children's Hospice, training presenters of '1,001 Inventions World Tour' in Kuwait and Bahrain, opening One World Actors Centre, playing the ongoing role of explorer Freya Stark in Hooda Shawa's 'Freya: Letters from Kuwait', being given the Award of Merit 2009 by the British Business Forum Kuwait at the British Embassy for Arts, being invited to direct an Arabic production for the National Council of Arts and Letters and representing Kuwait at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe for 2 years running with acclaimed bilingual shows. Launching TAQA Studios as Creative Manager in Kuwait City at the invitation of owner Hooda Shawa." Whew!! That is a long list. But it is not surprising considering the fact Alison Shan Price is one of the prime movers and shakers in the performing arts scene of Kuwait.

In fact, at times one wonders if creative individuals like Alison would have fared better in their fields if they lived and worked back home. But Alison disagrees. "I was incredibly lucky to begin my ventures in a country and time that had limited English language arts programmes. The support given to me in developing theatrical training programmes was overwhelming, and I am delighted to see the recent launches of the new companies and the magnificent Opera House." It has not been easy however for Alison and her company to mount productions as what is available in terms of theatres, set properties, costumes and lottery funding is not yet in place. But Alison circumvented the limitations with ingenuity. "We had to find people who could make to our specifications in wood, tin, and cloth. Our visits to souks were regular. I am forever in debt of gratitude to Wiz and CAMCO Global Events, Al Ghanim Industries, Al Abjar Holdings, JAMM, DAI Cultural Centre and TAQA Productions for their unfailing support to One World Actors Centre ventures."

The contribution of Alison Shan Price to Kuwait's theatre is by no means insignificant. Her love for the theatrical arts is self-evident as she animatedly discusses each production, the shared purpose, involvement of the entire cast and crew and her own passion. Alison believes that Kuwait has considerable talent. "So many people in Kuwait offer help; it is a joy to stage productions here." This year, Alison has several new productions lined up including the first Arab-Anglo Shakespeare production set in an archaeological dig in 1913, which weaves historical fact, Mesopotamian myth, and international relations through the theme of A Midsummer Night's Dream which means unquestionably theatregoers have a lot to look forward to in Kuwait.