

## Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmed Cultural Centre... Farewell

By Faisal Khajah

Faisalkhajah@gmail.com

---

After an exciting journey of just over four years managing this magnificent venue and following the recent decision to transfer its management to the Ministry of Information and Culture, I write these lines with pride in what my distinguished colleagues and I have accomplished: work that gave us back hope for a cultural renaissance befitting of Kuwait's latent capabilities. We wish all the best of luck to the new administration in continuing the journey with even more creativity and giving back to the public. We are hopeful that the Centre will benefit from the ministry's massive human resources and archives, and we are confident that His Excellency the Minister of Information and Culture will grant the Centre the necessary attention it deserves in order to remain a shining beacon in the sky of Kuwait.

Like a happy dream, I evoke the most prominent stations of this journey, which began with a voluntary seed of "critique" presented to the Amiri Diwan in February 2017, that grew into a tree with many branches in a short period, which included the strategy of cultural seasons, the establishment of the Centre's own orchestra, the in-house production of musical and theatrical works, the hosting of some of the world's top classical orchestras, founding a music school for children, presenting various quality publications in the Centre's name, and most important of all: the establishment of a local team that worked passionately and harmoniously, and was able to develop and translate its vision into a reality that attracted more than a quarter of a million visitors to the Centre's 328 cultural events. I give thanks to everyone who contributed to granting me this great opportunity and offer my apologies for any shortcomings on my part. My greatest gratitude of all goes to my beloved country, to whom I will never fulfill all that I owe, for as long as I live.

Many types of productions were presented, the most popular of which were our own creations, which relied heavily on our resident Orchestra. These were a total of 71 events that attracted more than 86,000 visitors, achieving the highest level of audience satisfaction at 95%. Our young orchestra was able to fill the halls without the need to rely on star singers. And it was met with a high demand to perform abroad, and we were able to meet a few of those demands, such as in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Austria – where we presented a Kuwaiti music evening in the historic Hofburg Presidential Palace in Vienna. It turned out to be the orchestra's last performance before the pandemic struck, and one with a very special memory attached to it, as it took place in the music capital of the world, where we were honoured by the attendance of Sheikh Mohammed Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, Deputy Minister of the Amiri Diwan as a representative of the late Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah (may his soul rest in peace); the Emir whose legacy, it must be mentioned here, culminated in his precious gift to the nation of establishing these cultural centres, including the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmed Cultural Centre, which he visited on three occasions, the last of which was his joyful surprise attendance to one of our shows on January 13th 2019, accompanied by his brother, His Highness the Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. It was a significant milestone

and a memory that we will always cherish, along with all of his words and messages of support and encouragement.

On the other hand, Western classical music initially presented a cultural and financial challenge, as the attempt to bring the largest international orchestras involved a risk with unknown results, taking into account their very high cost, and given that the number of participants often exceeded 100 people, yet we were pleasantly surprised with the fullness of the halls in most of the 27 evenings, which included the Philharmonic Orchestras (London Symphony, Bucharest, Prague, Zagreb and the British Royal Orchestra), during which we were keen to present new compositions by commissioned Kuwaiti composers, some of which won national awards following these collaborations. To conclude the series, we received the prestigious Italian opera house, “La Scala”, in its largest ever presentation in the Middle East, “Ballet Giselle” with four performances, attended by more than 6,000 visitors. I should mention that it was often expressed to me by these visiting companies how impressed they were with the level of reception and sophistication they found in Kuwaiti audiences.

Alongside the aforementioned types of shows, we also presented international entertainment and family shows, which were attended by more than 43,000 visitors. Lastly, each Monday, we presented a talk or a music session as part of a free weekly cultural event. The challenge within which was to continue creating renewed content that both emulated and elevated the interests of the masses.

The challenges were many. One of the most bizarre of them, in the beginning, was the Centre’s acquiescence to legislation that didn’t make sense for a cultural centre in which the state had invested a quarter of a billion dinars, such as the rule of audience gender segregation, and the banning of dance in all its forms in accordance with a ministerial decision that directly contradicts our rich Kuwaiti heritage. Are the “Zaffan”, “Samri”, “Khammari” and “Ardah” dances alien to Kuwaiti culture? This dilemma was eventually overcome by the issuance of a decision by the Cabinet of Ministers to form a new committee to license the Centre’s activities directly, and I cannot deny my fear for the renewal of future negative political impacts on the ceiling of artistic freedom that the Centre has enjoyed in the past seasons.

Ticket prices posed another challenge in our endeavour to reduce them while improving the quality and diversity of our events. Entering into the third season, we had reached a 50% reduction, bringing the average ticket price to 35 Kuwaiti Dinars, in line with international average prices in this sector despite the fact that it included the largest productions to date, some of which were disrupted when the pandemic swept us a few days before the presentation of “Kuwait Calling”, which was meant to create a new, innovative and highly entertaining template for the annual celebrations of the national holidays, simulating both minds and hearts.

Of the challenging missions that we were unable to complete, despite our arduous efforts, was the initiative to create a new official entity for the Centre that guarantees its sustainability, similar to all of the world’s leading centres for the performing arts (Paris, Sydney, the Metropolitan and many others), by operating as an independent non-profit institution, headed by a Board of Trustees that is not subject to political nor individual pressures, so that the Centre is managed according to medium and long-term strategic plans in order to achieve the required cultural, administrative and financial efficiency,

subject to the highest standards of transparency and governance in a formula that gives it the necessary flexibility. And we genuinely hope that there continue to be efforts in this direction, and away from temporary solutions.

In conclusion, thank you to everyone who contributed to this wonderful experience, thank you to our dear audience who were true partners in success with their presence, opinions, critiques and sophisticated behaviour represented by respecting deadlines and other rules and regulations. Thank you to the distinguished members of the Evaluation Committee, thank you to all the artists and participants who took part in all of the Centre's events and activities, thank you to each and every one of the Centre's 96 employees, too numerous to list here. I must however express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to my colleague Alia Al-Ghanim - our Deputy Director for all that she has given to this place, words would not be enough. And my sincerest thanks are due to my brilliant colleagues Dr. Ahmed Al-Salhi, Reham Al-Samerai, Abdulaziz Abdullah and Hamad Al-Rayes for all that they gave without any limits and under all circumstances. My colleagues and I will be very eager to return to the Centre soon, but this time to sit amongst the audience and witness a new artistic vision that maintains and even exceeds the standards of this magnificent Centre, and of Kuwait.