



MIDDLE EAST

Iraqi Boy's Dream of Becoming Dancer Defied Threats, Borders

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AMMAN, Jordan — As a boy in pre-war Baghdad, Adil Faraj dreamed of becoming a dancer, inspired by a Michael Jackson performance he watched on DVD.

For over a decade, he pursued his passion despite daunting challenges and harassment by strangers and police. He taught himself by moving to dance videos in his cramped family home — hiding from a conservative society scornful of the art form and from the chaos that engulfed Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

Last weekend, the sweat and tears paid off when the now 22-year-old performed on stage for the first time, to a packed house at the Amman Contemporary Dance Festival in the Jordanian capital.

After his solo — machine-like moves to the haunting Gary Jules' song "Mad World" mixed with break dancing — the audience erupted in applause, and Faraj raised his fists triumphantly before bowing.

"I felt tremendous joy," he said, his chiseled frame sweaty after the dance. "It is like a dream."

It was a long journey from his tiny Baghdad bedroom to the Amman stage — the last stretch helped along by the New York City-based Battery Dance Company that mentored him through lessons via Skype and brought him to Jordan.

The young dancer's struggle highlights the decline of the arts in Iraq after years of political upheaval.

In the 1960s and 1970s, music and the arts flourished in the then relatively secular country. After the 1991 Gulf War, in which a U.S.-led coalition dislodged Iraqi troops from Kuwait, the space for artistic expression shrank due to Saddam Hussein's embrace of more religious themes and U.N. sanctions that prompted artists to flee abroad.

Iraq's once vivacious dance community was gutted by violent sectarianism, including the emergence of Sunni and Shiite religious extremists who rejected many forms of art and threatened artists, said Waleed Shamil, a history professor in the town of Dohuk in Iraq's autonomous northern Kurdistan region.

Baghdad, a city of 7 million, now has only three theaters for performances and one cinema.

Faraj said Iraq no longer feels like home, though he returned to Baghdad this week to finish a law degree.

"If there were no problems in Iraq with dance and people liked dance, then I would have no problem being there," he said. "But that isn't so and I can't imagine any other solution than to leave Iraq ... I will come back to teach and dance, but I will never permanently return there."

In Baghdad, Faraj's parents are proud but said it was sometimes difficult to have an aspiring dancer as a son. When they heard about the dancing, some relatives and neighbors appealed to his father, Qais, to get him to stop it.

"Some of them expressed their objection and approached me so that I could convince him to give up," said the elder Faraj, who sells air conditioners in Baghdad's commercial district of Karrada.

"I severed ties with some of them, while some of them changed their opinions when they saw his successes and are now encouraging him," said the 50-year-old father.

Faraj continued dancing, and increasingly participated in the digital world that was his classroom, social network and creative outlet. He also practiced in parks at odd hours — for the space and to avoid public scrutiny. He made short films break-dancing or "doing the robot," another street-style set of moves, considered less risqué in Iraq than modern dance.

Last year, he uploaded his first video, called "Annoying." It begins with him sitting in Baghdad's Abu Nuwas Park on the Tigris River, reading a newspaper while listening to an Iraqi love ballad. A friend interrupts the traditional setting with a boom box, and the pair dance for two minutes.

But such displays came with a price.

Once, as he danced in a park, he was assaulted by three young men. "One of them hit me, saying, 'You're dancing, you are gay, you are like a woman'," he said. He said he fought back.

Another time, a hefty police officer caught Faraj and a friend dancing in a park. The officer punched the friend and dragged him across the ground with his nose bleeding. When asked for a reason, the officer said that "dancing is not normal," Faraj said.

At the same time, the videos caught the eye of Jonathan Hollander, director of the Battery Dance Company that began teaching Faraj via Skype.

Hollander said it was difficult, with his young protege sometimes dancing into furniture in his small living room during online lessons.

"Sometimes his little brother would walk across the screen," Hollander said.

After six months of lessons, Faraj joined the New York dancers for intense practice sessions in Amman — preparing for his solo and for a performance with his two American mentors, Sean Scantlebury and Mira Cook.

For the past two weeks, he rehearsed more than five hours a day — his first experience in a dance studio — and got three floor burns to prove it. Scantlebury, the Iraqi dancer's main Skype teacher, saw the injuries and chuckled. "Now you're one of us," he said. "Welcome."

Cook praised Faraj's determination.

"It is inspiring to me to see him take on this huge work load and just do it without cracking," she said. "He's so resilient, and it reminds me how strong dancers have to be."

Associated Press writer Sinan Salaheddin in Baghdad contributed to this report.