

More than a number: Adel Faraj, the dancer of Baghdad

Correspondents Report

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PHOTO: Iraqi dancer Adel Faraj was killed in last week's terrorist attack in Baghdad (facebook: 'Adel Euro')

In the worst terrorist attack ever carried out by Islamic State militants, last Sunday 292 Iraqis were killed.

Yet there was not the same level of global outrage, grief and mourning as seen in the wake of the Paris attacks, Brussels, or even Istanbul.

With so much daily death and violence in the Middle East, a place like Baghdad is hard for many people to relate to. But the extraordinary story of one brave young Iraqi reminds us that the people killed that day were no different to us, they were not just numbers.

Last April, 22-year-old Iraqi, Adel Faraj, moved slowly and gracefully on a stage in front of a packed theatre in Amman, Jordan.

For him it was a dream come true; the first time the young dancer had ever left Iraq, his first ever plane trip and most importantly the first time in his life he could dance freely without fear.

In an interview given at the time, Faraj spoke of his love of the art and his struggle to perform.

"Just a few people do dance because of the problems we face in Iraq," he told the Associated Press.

"In Iraq there is an interest, but politics and religious matters are given more attention.

"The arts field — dance, acting, music, sport and all other types — are weak, very weak. There is never any support."



PHOTO: Adel Faraj practices his dancing in Baghdad. (Facebook: 'Adel Euro')

Faraj had secretly taught himself how to dance by watching YouTube videos in his cramped family home in Baghdad, hiding from a conservative society scornful of the art form and from the chaos that engulfed Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003.

He went on to make and post his own dance videos online. In 2014 Faraj's talent caught the eye of Jonathan Hollander, founder of New York City's Battery Dance Company.

"I looked at videos of his work and I was really struck by his talent," Hollander told the ABC from his studio in New York's Tribeca neighbourhood.

Adel and Jonathon began communicating on Facebook. The young dancer spoke about his inability to find a teacher or to find a community of dancers that would take the risk to dance in Baghdad.

"He said he was a break dancer and hip-hop but that he really wanted to expand his repertoire," Hollander remembers.

"I said 'let's see what we can do for you. Let's see what we can remotely, long distance. Why don't you send me some videos of your practices?'"

Thrilled with the idea, Faraj spent 10 days composing and shooting a video clip that blew Hollander away.

"He said 'don't worry I'm working on something'. And what finally came through - it was extraordinary," Hollander said.

"I thought I would see some handheld video of him doing some tricks in a gym or something, Instead I got a fully fledged miniature film. And of course from that point on I was hooked."



YOUTUBE: [Adel Faraj's Battery Dance Company audition](#)

Faraj began taking weekly lessons on Skype from one of Battery Dance Company's leading performers.

Pushing all the furniture in his parent's living room to one side, he keenly followed instructions from New York over a dodgy internet connection.

Then, in April last year, an opportunity arose for Battery Dance to perform at the Amman Contemporary Dance Festival in Jordan.



PHOTO: Adel Faraj in Jordan with Jonathan Hollander and other friends from New York's Battery Dance Company. (Facebook: 'Adel Euro')

Hollander and Faraj moved mountains to raise the funds and get the visa needed for him to join them from Baghdad.

"It was like a dream come true that we were actually able to meet in person and work together," Hollander said.

"It was like he was transported into another planet. It was completely different from Baghdad for him."

Hollander added that although Faraj travelled to Amman to learn from the dance company, he and the other dancers from New York felt they were the ones inspired and motivated by the young dancer who risked all to follow his dream.

"The dance career here is probably the worst paid thing you can do. The least secure career anyone could pick in America," said Hollander.

"But we can do it if we choose. But you can't make that choice in Iraq unless you're Adel and will go against every barrier and just leap over it."

Faraj delighted in the freedom of life in Amman compared to Baghdad and was depressed to return home once the workshop and performance was over.

But he continued his long-distance dance tutorials, got engaged, and buckled down to finish his four-year law degree, hoping to then go to America and pursue his dream of dancing professionally.



PHOTO: Adel Faraj wrote about life in Baghdad on his facebook page. (Facebook: 'Adel Euro')

Every now and then on his Facebook page, Faraj alluded to the stress and difficulty of life in the violence-riddled Iraqi capital.

On February 4 this year, he posted:

This geographical location in which I live is a storm of destruction, killing, intolerance, lying, hypocrisy, dirty, Stupid!!!! Because of this thing i decided to make a private world for me to Live away from these people and this storm.

Late last Saturday night, a week after graduating from his law program, Faraj went out to buy clothes at Baghdad's Karrada market for the Islamic holiday of Eid el Fitr.

In one swift and devastating moment, Faraj and 291 others lost their lives, **killed in the single deadliest bombing to hit Baghdad in more than a decade of war and insurgency**. The terrible news quickly travelled to his friends in New York.

"I was numb ... I was bereft," Hollander told the ABC.

"He's become a mythical creature for us. Someone so good and so talented with so much potential. And almost too good for this earth.

"I had the luxury, I had the privilege to meet this person. And to become close to him. And to see through him, how much talent and how much opportunity there would be for young people to develop and grow. Just like they do here in New York City.

"But they don't have the space, they don't have the safety, security. They don't have the opportunity. And I just hope that they will some day in the future."

Faraj was buried on Monday in a cemetery in the Shiite city of Najaf, south of Baghdad.



YOUTUBE: [Street Dance in Baghdad](#)