

Beat: Arts

Iraqi culture and arts in Leicester Everybody's Reading Festival

Everybody's Reading Festival

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USPA NEWS - The 7th Everybody's Reading Festival took place across many cultural centres in the city of Leicester, from 1-9 October 2016.

There was an Iraqi aspect in the festival from its opening day, as postcards with poems, including the "Children of War" by the Iraqi Malka Al-Haddad,

Had been given out to travellers by three poets in Leicester Railway Station. "Journeys: pop up poem library" was an event that ran throughout the festival, and in every postcard there was a poem taken by "Over Land, Over Sea: poems for those seeking refuge", an anthology of poems edited by K. Bell, E. Lee and S. Logan, and published by Five Leaves.

Leicester Railway Station was chosen as the setting for this event, as organisers wanted to show the commuters of a different journey, that of immigrants and refugees, suffering on their journey across counties, the sea and the forests, putting their lives in danger to reach safety and live a peaceful life, fleeing from wars and sectarian conflict who forced them on risky and daring trips.

The event was a success and the postcards run out long before the end of the festival.

In the festival's seventh day, the African Caribbean Centre hosted the launch of the anthology entitled *Welcome to Leicester*, edited by Emma Lee and Ambrose Musiyiwa and published by Dahlia Press. The subject of this book is to show how this city welcomes all people and especially refugees and immigrants. About 50 poets from Britain have contributed to this anthology, which features two poems by Malka Al-Haddad who represented the Union of Iraqi Writers. Malka's poems describe the aspects in the lives of immigrants and refugees:

Their suffering in their homeland, and their grief when finding themselves in the new country mixed with love, peace and hope to make this new country their homeland, as the old country was shattered, destroyed by the war, discrimination and conflict.

In the ninth day of this festival, there was a strong presence of the Iraqi culture in an event organised by People's Art Collective called "Walls" and hosted by New Walk Museum and Art Gallery "one of the first public museums in the UK, opened in 1849. Malka Al-Haddad was involved in three parts of this event.

A documentary film about Iraq, *Noble Najaf*, was screened in The Lord Mayor's Room. Directed by the French filmmaker Morgan Railane, produced by Al Hikmat Foundation in Iraq, it was translated from French to Arabic by Dr Mohamed Alkaraishi. The film focused on the city of Najaf, Cultural Capital of Islam for 2012, and the holiest city of Shia Islam as well as the centre of Shia political power in Iraq. The film unveils historical, political, religious and cultural aspects of Najaf City. It shows how the city was rebuilt and restructured after being bombed during the American invasion in 2003 and how the Mehdi Army fought the Americans in order to get them out of Iraq and gain independence,

and how, later, the city send ambassadors to European countries for cultural exchange and re-introduce Najaf as the capital of Islamic culture and the holiest of Shia sect, where the Libraries still hold ancient manuscripts. It showed how the clerics hold high and powerful positions in Iraq and how all people in the city follow and obey them, how they influence the decisions of Iraqi government, and even how they guide ordinary people in aspects of their everyday life. Finally, the film shows Najaf's arts and culture and how NGO charities attempt to develop women rights.

After the film, Malka Al-Haddad (who appears throughout the film, back when she was the director of Najaf's Women's Centre for Culture and Art) explained to the audience how Najaf is now a big challenge by Isis and the goal of Isis is to destroy this city and destroy the Islamic culture because the faith of this city is against the Isis faith.

At another part of the museum there was another event, with poets, musicians, and storytellers, and Malka read her poems and present some of her artwork.

The Museum and Art Gallery New Walk is the most important civilization and cultural place in this city. It was an honour for Iraqi culture to present their culture in the most valued place in this city. So there was cultural mix among documentary film, reading poems and artwork in the most important city in the UK which is Leicester after they have find the body of King Richard III and become more important for many tourists after they became the UK football champions.

Conclusion, despite the pain and sadness situation in Iraq, the Iraqi voice managed to reach their culture and their art, their civilization in a European multicultural city. So Iraqi culture was the smile of hope for Iraqi people who live in exile and to take part in these events was like Ishtar guitar.

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