

Volume 16 • Issue 35 | January 30 - February 05, 2004

Arab culture near the W.T.C.

By Gal Beckerman



Downtown Express photo by Ramin Talaie

Shusmo, including Tareq Abboushi, right, performed recently at Alwan, a small Arab cultural center on Beaver St.

The desert heat of the Middle East felt very far away last Friday night, but Tareq Abboushi and his band were trying hard to invoke it. In a cold and unheated Beaver St. loft, Abboushi stared out at a bundled-up audience of about 50 people and then blew on his fingers to keep them warm. "It's really cold," he said. "Well, the only thing to do is dance." And with that, he began playing his buzuq, a round-bellied Middle Eastern guitar with a long, thin neck. Abboushi picked passionately at the instrument cradled in his arms, producing the lilting and plaintive sounds of Arabic classical music.

The dark and chilly loft (apparently, the radiator was broken) is the headquarters of Alwan for the Arts, an organization whose mission is the promotion of Middle Eastern culture. It has existed since 1996, originally in Houston, Texas, but for the last six months has been housed on the 4th floor of 16 Beaver St.

Alwan has put on art exhibitions, musical concerts, film showings, readings, and has become a center for Arabic and Persian language classes. The group usually charges small admission fees to its programs and has a mailing list of about 2,500 people.

Abboushi and his band, Shusmo, which in Arabic means "What's its name?" is typical of the kind of culture Alwan is trying to highlight. Besides Abboushi, who grew up in the Palestinian city of Ramallah and has been playing the buzuq for over seven years, the band consisted of a Peruvian drummer, an American-born bassist, a Greek clarinet player, and another Palestinian percussionist. The music was

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certainly Middle Eastern, but in the mix could be heard some salsa, a hint of klezmer, and a lot of freestyle jazz.

In many ways, Shusmo perfectly embodies the message Alwan is trying to advance: Arab culture is dynamic, it is imaginative, and it can fuse, like everything else American, with the other ethnic cultures that exist around it. In the wake of 9/11, and especially in Downtown Manhattan, Alwan's organizers are trying to highlight the diversity of Arab culture, showing New Yorkers that it is more than just the destructive force we witnessed two years ago. It can also be extraordinarily creative.

"The Middle East is suffering from a deluge of stereotypes," said Ahmed Issawi, the Egyptian-born director of the center. "We want to offer a different kind of view of who these people are, what they can create, what they want."

In doing this, Issawi wants to show that the Arab world is made up of more than just Islamic fundamentalists. He believes the trauma of 9/11 has kept Americans from understanding the complexity of the Arab world. "It is hard for some people to even imagine that there can be Arab art that is not political, that is not about the Palestinian conflict or Islamism," Issawi said.

To look at Alwan's events is to see this diversity. A recent performance art piece about the Middle East's portrayal in the media included an oud player, a poet and a percussionist. An art installation last month by an Algerian-born painter looked at the African independence struggle. Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, who promotes Palestinian democracy and civil society, recently spoke.

The program leans towards the eclectic and not necessarily the political.

Abboushi agrees with this bent. After his show, the goateed and bespectacled 25-year old stood in front of a tapestry of crimson arabesques and greeted the people who had come to see him perform, some of whom eventually did start dancing. Having lived back and forth between Palestine and America since 1996, Abboushi is comfortable in both worlds and says that after 9/11 he is happy there is place to show off the artistry of his culture.

"People who went to the extreme, not wanting to have anything to do with Arabs, I am not going to get in touch with them," Abboushi said. "But if anybody else has the interest, this is a chance to see another side of the Middle East. This is a good way to do it because you are not talking politics, you are just listening to music."

Issawi said it was just a "happy coincidence" that Alwan was located in Lower Manhattan, the place most associated with the result of Arab anger and violence. The convenient subway access was more of a consideration for picking that space. But he does not discount what he calls the "serendipity" of their choice.

Anny Bakalian, a sociology professor at CUNY who has written a book about Armenian-American identity is one of the members of the Alwan board. She sees the center's location as significant for another reason. It was in Downtown Manhattan, Bakalian said, that immigrants from the Middle East first settled. It was in this neighborhood that they made their home over a hundred years ago. It is fitting, she said, that this is where a resurgence of Middle Eastern culture should occur. The number of non-Middle Easterners showing up to Alwan events proves, she believes, that the time for it is right.

“There was a silver lining to Sept. 11th,” Bakalian said. “In as much as there has been stereotyping and persecution and negative pressure on the Arab and Middle Eastern community, there has also been a generosity of spirit and an openness on the part of Americans to understand fellow Americans.”

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[Home](#)

Downtown Express is published by
Community Media LLC.
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