

Snakes and Ladders gets spiritual in Abu Dhabi show

We speak to Iraqi American composer Amir El Saffar about the evocative dance production staged at NYUAD Arts Centre

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Written in Water Courtesy Ragamala Dance Company

For the past two generations, the version of Snake and Ladders many of us have played is the one designed by US business magnate and game pioneer Milton Bradley.

Released in 1943, and re-named Chutes and Ladders, it is a family friendly version of the dice game and draws on children engaging in either good behavior (reading and mowing the lawn) or mischievous deeds like stealing and being punished for their choices. Where you land on the board depends on how you answer the morally loaded questions.

While the game has been updated regularly through the years, the didactic element remained a constant with Chutes and Ladders being a favorite for children.

Which is why the stage production of the family game, held at the NYU Abu Dhabi Arts Centre, will be revelatory for some.

Written in Water, to be performed at the Red Theatre by the Ragamala Dance Company, harks back to the original Snakes and Ladders, which traces its roots to ancient India, while the production explores its mystical roots through dance.

Conceived and choreographed by artistic co-directors Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy, the abstract show has classic Indian dancers navigate large-scale projections

of snakes and ladders and paintings by Chennai-based visual artist Keshav and Minneapolis artist Nathan Christopher.

This will be done to a fluid soundtrack provided by Iraqi American composer Amir El Saffar.

With the production also fusing elements of Islam's mystical Sufi tradition, such as the inclusion of the 12th-century poem *The Conference of the Birds* by Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar, El Saffar says part of his job is to bring both worlds together.

"There's sort of an idea, in a sense, when it comes to the plot. It's a bit circular rather than linear," he says.

"The music is slow rising, which is done through the musical modes, which are gradually getting brighter and higher, and also the speed of the movement."

With El Saffar leading the band during the performance, he looks at his compositions less as fusion and more as connecting the dots.

"The pieces are pretty melded together. Although I come from a jazz background there's not much jazz per se. The only thing, in the sense of my jazz sensibility, is the way that I connect the music forms," he says.

"We're finding the ragas and the maqams that reflect each other or complement one another."

These musical links are more philosophical than auditory. Take for example the rumbling world of Indian ragas and the more skeletal form of Iraqi maqam; while completely different at first, El Saffar says both share a similar vision.

"Raga always has the accompaniment of a drone. That pitch is a continuous sound and everything relates to that sound. In maqam you have silence. The sound, whatever the singer or instrumentalist is producing, it begins in silence and ends in silence every time," he says. "One can say both forms reflect each other."

"With raga, you have this continuous sound that tethers everything, that unifies everything into one cohesive harmonic spectrum. While with maqam it's about taking it away, and what you have left are these sorts of infinite possibilities that somehow still arrive at the same place."

With Abu Dhabi being the first international show after a successful US tour, El Saffar is looking forward to the regional reaction to the production. It doesn't matter if you have a full grasp of what is being played out on stage, he says, the goal is to feel something.

"In terms of myself I have never been involved in anything like this before," he says. "In the US people seemed really moved in a spiritual way by the piece. There is something transcendent about the subject matter that makes its way to the music and movement. I think it's something powerful."

Written in Water by Ragamala Dance Company will be performed at the Red Theatre at NYUAD tonight and Thursday at 8pm. Full-price tickets cost Dh105. For information, visit www.nyuad-artscenter.org

<https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/on-stage/snakes-and-ladders-gets-spiritual-in-abu-dhabi-show-1.714724>