

A Dancer in the Midst of War

*The Syrian war has displaced millions of people and killed hundreds of thousands. As the violence continues, 26-year-old dancer Ahmad Joudeh believes he can fight the war itself through art.
DUNJA KARAGIC spoke to him.*



PHOTO: MARC DRIESSEN



PHOTO: Courtesy of Ahmad Joudeh

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Ahmad, a stateless Palestinian refugee who was born at the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, became a ballet dancer at an early age, pursuing his passion for dancing despite war and the disapproval of his father and community.

In Syria he spent his time eagerly learning to dance and teaching orphaned children at children’s villages run by SOS, an international NGO trying to protect the rights of disadvantaged children in war-torn Damascus. A documentary last year by Dutch journalist Roozbeh Kaboly, entitled *Dance or Die*, revealed Ahmad’s story and talent, which resulted in an invitation from the Dutch National Ballet.

Ahmad is now studying in Amsterdam, improving his art in the hope of developing his talent to show his country the significance of dance. For Ahmad, dance is a symbol of strength and perseverance, a fight for freedom. He believes it can help others face loss and hardship as it has helped him.

His passion for dancing started as an eight-year-old during a school performance, where he sang and his brother played music. The whole city came to see the

performance. “I felt that moving with the music was better than making music, so I went home and started dancing. My mother asked me: ‘What are you doing? You need to stretch your knees.’ She then showed me some flexibility exercises. Then she said: ‘When you grow up you can go to Enana [Dance Theatre].’”

When Ahmad later decided to pursue dance he headed to Enana, where he took his first ballet classes. “My life was complicated living in the refugee camp, since it was not good to be a dancer in that society. So my father turned against me and tried to stop me, but he couldn’t.” In Syria, he says, parents prefer their children to become doctors, engineers or teachers. His father was an art teacher, he painted and played music, yet still he objected to Ahmad becoming a ballet dancer.

An appreciation of how dance could help children grew on Ahmad. “For me, dance was about healing people – helping them to accept themselves, to see life in a different way, have the strength to face the war, face society and develop a strong personality as well.

“Of course, if I wasn’t a dancer, I would never have this life now. Because I’m dancing I could survive, I could see the world from a different perspective, I could help

a lot of people in Syria, I could come here [Amsterdam], so dance changed my life.”

When the war started, a five-year-old girl was killed in front of him. “It shook me. I was so sad for her. Most of the time I kept thinking I should do something for those kids. I have to help them deal with war.”

When Ahmad searched for orphan organisations he found out about SOS Children Villages and made contact. Children had come from Aleppo and other cities to war-torn Damascus without parents, without anything. “I was like, ‘let me try to make them happy at least’. I was telling the director of the organisation about teaching and he was saying ‘OK, but by dancing no one will be happy, blah blah blah ... it’s something not good’. I said ‘just let me try and I will succeed’ and he said OK.

Ahmad taught children to dance on a voluntary basis. They loved it and were waiting for his classes every Saturday. The director was happy and asked him to teach more during the summer vacation. According to Ahmad, dance changed the personality of the orphan children, and “when I taught kids with Down Syndrome, they showed happiness from dancing”.

Is he still in touch with those children? “Yes. They are happier and now they have more hope. Dance could maybe help them in the future. I asked my friend to go there and teach them and keep the classes alive, so I never left them, really. Now we have this group on WhatsApp, we are in contact every week and I have videos from them saying ‘look what we did!’ I tell them every week I want a new video.

“They are working so hard; I want to keep them busy by thinking about creating something or just moving with the music. It’s better to compete through art than by the gun. I want to teach them how to fight by art, and how to present themselves through art as well.” Ahmad’s life changed radically when Kaboly came to Syria and made the documentary about Ahmad’s life. He danced in front of the camera on rubble that once was the Yarmouk refugee camp, which had been destroyed by bombs.

Dutch National Ballet director Ted Brandsen invited him to work in Holland and the Amsterdam University of Arts also invited him to study there.

“Life in Amsterdam is totally different from life in Syria,” Ahmad said. “In Syria I was surviving and now

“In Syria we were just living day to day, and if you say goodbye you say it as if you will never come back home.”

I am living – something new to me. So I’m getting used to this life where everything is safe and I appreciate the electricity, water and the beautiful house I have.

“In terms of my dancing I am improving very much because now I have teachers, studios, things to do. I am so happy now that I’m working because I can help my family I’m sending them money.”

According to Ahmad, the situation in Damascus is getting worse by the day. “I see on Facebook from my family it’s so bad, the fighting surrounding the whole of Damascus is so bad. A lot of people are being killed.”

I ask him about his plans for the future. “In Syria we were just living day to day, and if you say goodbye you say it as if you will never come back home. I really want to study, then I can build the Syrian National Ballet one day. If Syria is okay and safe I will go back.”

“After the war we will need culture and art to heal our country, so I am learning to deal with dancers, how to be a choreographer, a good dancer. When I go to Syria I will have enough experience to be able to create the Syrian National Ballet. I would love to let all Syrian people accept ballet as something very important for society.”

Dance has helped Ahmad face adversity. “When you are dancing, when you try to reach the movement, as in life if you try hard you will achieve what you want. This is what I have learnt.” R

You can watch the ‘Dance or Die’ documentary on YouTube.



PHOTO: MARC DRIESSEN