MUSIC A Melbourne-based film on Iraqi music in pre-Saddam Hussein days reveals the suppressed role of Jewish musicians, writes **Arnold Zable**.

Harmonies in old Iraq

WHEN ACTOR MAJID Shokor fled Iraq for Jordan in 1995, he stumbled upon a great mystery. In Amman he frequented a coffee shop where exiled Iraqi artists, writers, and theatre workers met to exchange ideas. Among the works discussed were poems written by Iraqi Jews, recently published in a literary magazine. Majid was deeply moved by the poets' love for their former homeland. It was his first encounter with the suppressed history of the once-vibrant community of Iraqi Jews.

Three years later in Beirut, where Majid had gained temporary refuge, he came across an article depicting weekly gatherings of Iraqi-Jewish musicians in Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv. The group included renowned performers of Iraqi songs Majid had loved as a child in Baghdad. Saddam Hussein had suppressed the seminal role played by Jews, and others opposed to his regime, in developing Iraqi music. The names of composers were removed and their works credited as folksongs.

In 2001 Majid was granted a refugee visa by the Australian embassy in Lebanon, and he settled in Melbourne with his wife and two daughters. He was finally free to pursue his artistic interests without fear of harassment and immediately returned to his first love, the theatre.

"I always felt safe on the stage," he says, "and it gave me hope. I cannot imagine a world without theatre." As a teenager, he was awarded a prize for acting at the Iraqi Youth festival. "I was offered roles in plays and television programs that praised Saddam Hussein," says Majid. "I felt that art was not a game, but an attempt to understand the world. Like other Iraqi artists, my refusal left me with three choices. Either I leave the country, keep silent, or succumb and join them. I decided to try to be invisible."

Apart from a stint of compulsory military service during the Iran-Iraq War, Majid's life remained on hold. In 1991, in the wake of Saddam's humiliating defeat in the first Gulf War, he was shot in the arm during an anti-Saddam demonstration in the city of Najaf. The doctors and nurses, who had set up secret clinics in their homes, and treated Majid and the many wounded, were subsequently murdered.

An Iraqi radio orchestra in the 1930s featuring Jewish and Muslim musicians.

Majid returned to the stage, and in 1994 he was invited to join the Iraqi National Theatre. His refusal to participate in propaganda-based plays placed him, and other artists who had refused, in danger. A well-known Iraqi actress who knocked back a similar offer had been tortured and jailed. Majid fled to Jordan in fear of his life.

When Majid made his Melbourne debut in 2002, in *Kan Yama Kan*, a play in which asylum seekers tell their stories, he felt an immediate affinity with the cast, many of whom were battling to remain in the country. He has since appeared regularly on the Australian stage and recently worked as a consultant and actor in *Lucky Miles*, a film that depicts the fate of Iraqi and Cambodian asylum seekers, on the run in remote Western Australia.

With free access to the internet, Majid was also able to pursue his research on the fate of Iraqi-Jewish musicians. What he discovered reads

both as a fable and a challenge to our divisive times: once upon a time, Jews, Muslims and Christians lived side by side in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. They shared a culture, and common source of pleasure, in music, art, foods, Arabic language and literature.

This culture flourished, especially in Baghdad from the 1920s onwards. Music could be heard everywhere, in coffee houses, homes, and on the radio. Iraqi-Jewish musicians and composers were highly esteemed and wrote many songs loved by all Iraqis, and popular throughout the Arab world. They made up the majority of the first Iraqi Radio Ensemble, recorded discs, and performed throughout the country. They included the legendary composers Saleh and Daoud Al'Kuwaiti and the much-loved singer Salima Pasha Murad.

"I realised it was an important part of my country's history," says Majid, "and I knew that something should be done about it, but I was not sure what." When Majid mentioned the idea in October 2004 to documentary filmmaker Marsha Emerman, she was immediately interested. It appealed to her as a story that explored music and culture as a means of uniting people. In 1991, in response to the first Gulf War, she had organised a Melbourne concert that brought together Jewish, Arabic and Kurdish performers. Says Marsha, "as a filmmaker I have always wanted to challenge the media's obsession with images of conflict and violence and concentrate on peace-making". The film project, *On the Banks of the Tigris*, was finally born.

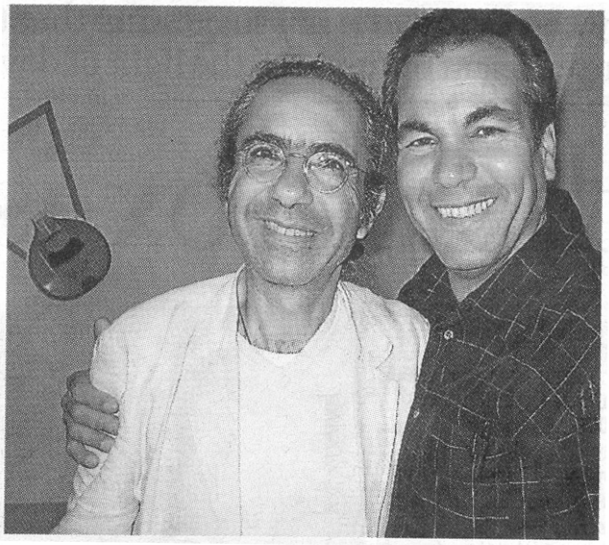
In the past three years Majid and Marsha have established contact with a global network of Iraqi musicians from Jewish, Muslim and Christian backgrounds. With development funding from Film Victoria and donations through the Australian Business Arts Foundation, they travelled to the Netherlands last December and filmed Ahmed Mukhtar, a master oud player. Ahmed shares Majid's Shiite background, and his status as an exile from Saddam's regime. The filmmakers then flew to Israel for their long-awaited meeting with the ageing community of Iraqi-Jewish musicians.

Wherever he went in Ramat Gan, Majid was greeted as a long-lost son. "Ramat Gan is a little Baghdad," he says. "It is in the markets. The restaurants. In the pickles, the popular songs, and traditional sweets. It is in the body language, the way people speak to each other, the way they use their hands to express their ideas. Everyone wanted to touch me. I felt I was in a safe environment."

MAJID ATTENDED THE weekly musicians' gatherings he had first heard of in Beirut, and he met Elias Shasha, Abraham Salman, and Alber Elias, now in their 80s, who had performed in Baghdad in the 1940s. They invited Majid into their homes and told him stories that recreated the lost Iraqi world of their youth. When Majid asked Elias Shasha to close his eyes and remember his life in Baghdad, he said, "I remember the beautiful days, beautiful hours, beautiful places. The Tigris and the Euphrates, the boats, the fish, my friends. It's very difficult. Love for the homeland is undeniable. I can't ignore I was born in Baghdad, I am an Iraqi."

Majid also spent time with musician Yair Dalal. He is filmed performing, and teaching young Israelis who are enthralled by Arabic music. The son of Iraqi Jews, Yair is a celebrated performer on the world music circuit. A virtuoso oud player, violinist, singer, and composer, his music is a haunting blend of Jewish and Arabic influences.

In recent times Yair has discovered the generation of older Iraqi Jewish musicians and brought them back into the spotlight. Passionate about peace initiatives, he was immediately pleased to participate in the film. As part of the project, Majid and Yair hope to stage a concert that brings together Jewish, Muslim and Christian musicians united in their mutual passion for Iraqi music.



Actor Majid Shokor (right) with world music star Yair Dalal.
PICTURE: MARSHA EMERMAN

"I have asked myself many times," says Majid, "if I am doing the right thing. But meeting these people and listening to them, has strengthened my conviction. These musicians and composers gave us such beautiful music, and loved Iraq. When I met them in Ramat Gan, they were like people I knew. We shared a lot of history.

"There is a bond I feel with them that I feel with all exiled Iraqis. It is very moving the way they recall cities like Baghdad over half a century later. They were victims of politics. We were all victims."

Majid stresses that the film project "is important for Iraqi people and audiences worldwide. It is important to do it in public, and to acknowledge that Iraqi culture was created by many groups, many religions. We need this if we are to live in peace. People's fate is to live with each other. There is no other way."

Majid was surprised by the extent of Arabic influence in Israeli culture. "It is in fact a Middle Eastern country," he says. "It is all about recognition. Acknowledging the rights of each other. I think it is important for Arabs and Israelis to exchange visits despite the politicians, who thrive on separation and want to conduct dialogue according to their rules. Why put it in their hands? We should talk human to human. Share food. Share music and jokes. Deep down there is no difference."

These sentiments permeate the rushes of the film-in-progress, and the trailer that Majid and Marsha have put together to interest potential investors. The star is the music itself, performed with such elation by Yair Dalal and the ageing virtuosos who gather in a community hall in Ramat Gan. It can be heard in the impromptu songs performed in the coffee houses of Ramat Gan market, and in the haunting music of Farida Muhammad Ali, the greatest living interpreter of Maqam, an ancient Iraqi singing form. Farida, who now lives in the Netherlands, was filmed in the Preston Town Hall in 2006, in a concert performed for an ecstatic audience of Iraqis in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

And these sentiments are evident as the camera follows in Majid's footsteps, and observes the warmth with which he was greeted and the goodwill he generated everywhere he journeyed.

Arnold Zable is a Melbourne writer. He co-wrote the play *Kan Yama Kan*, and has participated in a number of theatre ventures with Majid Shokor. For information about the film project contact marsha@fruitfulfilms.com.au