

ARTS & CULTURE

Cohesion Plus, Sharjah Performing Arts Academy in joint venture



SHARJAH: Cohesion Plus has announced it will be working with Sharjah Performing Arts Academy (SPAA) in the new year, as part of the UK-UAE Cultural Professionals Connect programme. It is a grant programme funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and delivered in partnership with the British Council in the UAE to foster international mobility, networking and creative exchanges through arts and culture. Cohesion Plus is a diverse led arts organisation who produce festivals across the South East region of England and SPAA is the only dedicated performing arts academy in the Middle East. As part of the programme, Cohesion Plus will be taking a troupe of culturally diverse artists and performers to the UAE, to work with some of SPAA's performing arts students.

The project will climax with a special performance of a new piece of work in Sharjah, UAE. The work will be jointly created by Gurvinder Sandher, Artistic Director of Cohesion Plus, and

The exterior of the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy.

Alex Jessop, Dance Programme Leader at SPAA, and will focus on the themes of identity and belonging through drama and dance.

Sandher said that "there are very close ties between the UK and the UAE. We are delighted to be representing the UK as part of this project and having the opportunity to work with the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy, a well-recognised and respected cultural institution in the Middle East. "For our element, we want to showcase traditional, culturally diverse art forms, namely Bhangra dance and Dhol drumming, which we have been teaching and performing since a very young age, despite being born and bred in the UK. "It will also be an opportunity

for us to work with artists in the UAE and learn more about their artistic practices. Long-term, I am hoping that we will be able to bring the UAE artists to the UK to perform as part of our outdoor summer festival programme."

"Since launching our Dance Programme at SPAA in September 2021," Jessop said, "I have been focused on exploring many diverse and exciting genres of dance. "We represent a truly international cohort of dance students at our Academy, and the opportunity to discover and perform Bhangra with the expertise and guidance of Cohesion Plus is truly exciting. "This builds on our mission to represent the beautiful diversity and extraordinary heritage of dance artists around the world. We welcome this important, cultural exchange with the UK, and we look forward to learning from these passionate and talented creatives, as we enrich our students' education and our professional practices." Cohesion Plus will also be producing a short film, which will

Top: Cohesion Plus is made up of culturally diverse artists.

A performance by Cohesion Plus.

simultaneously be released in the UK and the UAE to underline the strong cultural links between the two nations and the emerging partnership between Cohesion Plus and SPAA.

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. It seeks to build connections and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language. The UK-UAE Cultural Professionals Connect programme aims to support new or existing connections, exchanges and collaborations between artists in the UK and the UAE. It strives to foster international opportunities for UK artists through exposure to new audiences and access to the UAE market. In parallel, the programme contributes to the creative development of the UAE.

The grant will be used to support activities with artistic expression or creativity at the core, resulting in collaborative activities, including one of the below three key elements: Artistic exchange and co-creation; Contact with UAE audiences and Academic/educational sessions to share skills, knowledge and practice. The core focus of the work of Cohesion Plus is to use the arts to break down barriers between communities, showcase culturally diverse artists and produce new shows, which fuse together different art forms from around the world.

In addition to the production of festivals, the organisation delivers workshops and consultancy around equality, diversity and inclusion, as well as writing and producing films which focus on

heritage, arts and culture from an ethnic minority perspective. Cohesion Plus has been an Arts Council England National Portfolio organisation since 2018. SPAA focuses on training and educating students in performing and production arts to succeed in a competitive and ever evolving industry. Like Cohesion Plus, SPAA is a not-for-profit institution and welcomes collaborations with diverse artists and industry professionals from around the globe.

Recent examples of their productions include A Home Away From Home, an immersive experience which explores the life of a young expat in the UAE battling the fear of deportation, alongside her lifelong dream of being the UAE's first female astronaut.

In addition, as part of Dubai World Expo 2020, SPAA has collaborated with the US Mission to the UAE to work with Step Afrika!, one of America's top ten African American dance companies, and AXIS Dance Company, an acclaimed ensemble of disabled and non-disabled dancers.

Step Afrika! is dedicated to the African-American tradition of "stepping". It is a non-profit organisation that tours nationally and internationally, presents residencies and workshops worldwide, and uses "stepping" as an educational tool. "Stepping" is a dance where the body is used as an instrument to produce complex rhythms and sounds through a mixture of footsteps, spoken word, and hand claps. AXIS Dance Company is a dance education organisation and one of the first contemporary dance companies in the world to integrate dancers with and without physical disabilities. Both professional dance companies have performed at SPAA and ran masterclasses for students of the Academy.

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