

Marsh Arabs pilot a mashoof



PHOTO COURTESY OF HASSAN JANALI, U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

In Paradise, Dreams Are Free

But reconstructing wetlands in Iraq isn't so easy

Despite an icy snowfall, about 90 people braved the weather Tuesday, Jan. 29, to hear a civil engineer describe his dream of a new Eden.

Azzam Alwash, an Iraqi who worked in southern California for decades before the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, called himself “a tree-hugger” who believes he and other Iraqi returnees have to “jumpstart the country.” His was the fourth lecture in the UO Department of Architecture’s Savage lecture series, “Cities in War, Struggle and Peace” — and he was the most animated of the lecturers, eliciting gasps and winning laughs from the audience in Lawrence Hall.

Alwash grew up in Nasiriyah, near the Mesopotamian marshes and the ancient city of Ur — the famed Fertile Crescent where organized agriculture first took root. He left Iraq in 1978. After earning a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California, he worked as a soils and environmental consultant until the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq toppled Hussein.

Long before he returned, he and his wife began a project called Eden Again to restore the marshes. Alwash lit up as he discussed the wetlands of his childhood, saying, “I hope to make you fall in love with this place.”

The marshes originally covered an area about 8,000 sq. miles in the spring when snowmelt pulsed down from the headwaters of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Reeds grow thickly and tall in water up to 6 ft. deep. “It’s not a desert but a waterworld in southern Iraq,” he said. “When you are a small boy in a boat in these marshes, the reeds extend to the sky.”

The people living in the marshes are often called Marsh Arabs, and those reeds are vital to their way of life, Alwash said. Though they have cultivated wheat, barley and other crops in the rich land of the floods, they have relied for other purposes upon the reeds. The Marsh Arabs create islands, build houses and make fuel from the reeds, not to mention fishing among the reeds and feeding the plants to their

water buffalo, which each give about four gallons of milk per day. And the marshes acted as a huge biofilter on the water’s way to the Persian Gulf. “In the U.S., reeds are treated as weeds,” he said, “but in the marshes, they are the skeleton of life.”

But for two reasons — the Iran-Iraq War of the ’80s and Saddam Hussein’s desire to

punish rebels who fled to the marshes following a failed uprising after the first Gulf War — this ecosystem was destroyed. Hussein’s plan, to build six massive canals that would cut off water from the marshes and end the annual flooding, worked. The 350,000 people living in the marshes were forcibly dispersed, Alwash explained, with almost a third becoming refugees in Jordan and in the U.S.

When Alwash showed photos of the central marshes before the canals and then after the project, gasps arose from the audience: What had been a lush wetlands like Fern Ridge Reservoir looked suddenly like the South Dakota Badlands. By 2000, a U.N. document said, 90 percent of the marshlands had disappeared, and by the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, even less remained.

Some former marsh inhabitants, joined by administrators from Nasiriyah, breached dams in early April, 2003, to reflood part of the marshes. Alwash spoke joyfully about the continuing breaches of embankments and dams. “People are restoring the area because they can make a daily living with fishing. They can earn \$3-\$5 a day,” he said. “That’s nothing to you,” he added, “but it can feed a family of 10.”

Now almost 60 percent of the marshes have been reflooded, and Alwash, working with Canadian, Italian and U.S. backing, is making plans for new villages. The new houses, though respecting traditional designs that go back 5,500 years, would solve some of the sewage problems present

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with a higher concentration of people, he said. There would also be opportunities for agriculture and commerce. But with Turkey damming the upper Tigris and Euphrates for irrigation purposes and with a literacy rate of only 10 percent among the people of the marshes, there are a multitude of problems to overcome. That includes high toxicity rates in the water. “Kidney stones are a dime a dozen in the marshes; gastrointestinal diseases are common,” he said.

But, as he repeated, he’s a dreamer. Besides rebuilding the marsh villages, he said, “I want to give you the passion to visit this place — hopefully when things will settle down, not too far from now.” **EW**

“History and the Future of Community in Post-Earthquake Bhuj, India” is next up at 7:30 pm on Tuesday, Feb. 5, in 177 Lawrence. Go to architecture.uoregon.edu or call 346-3656 for more information.

arts shorts

BY SUZI STEFFEN

Affordable Pretties

“Buy art,” my artist friends tell me. Good idea, but I have a student loan larger than my salary, and the paintings I like require \$20,000 to buy and a large modern house to show them to best effect.

Then again, there’s the “**Illustrated Word: An Exhibit of Letterpress Broadsides**” show at **Maude Kerns Art Center**. This one, juried by poet Kim Stafford, rare books librarian John Carmin and local letterpress publisher Sandy Tilcock, features letterpress prints made by artists from across the country. Prints will always be more affordable than huge oil paintings thanks to labor and materials, but they can still be lovely or compelling.

Balancing art, text, ink color and paper color makes for a multitude of choices for the printers, and the best prints work in an intricate equilibrium on stark backgrounds. Broadsides give Portland’s Clare Carpenter a chance to create sly postmodern Pop Art prints like *Johnny Drove* or *Bulldog Betty* (\$50 unframed, \$95 framed). In the skillful *Dada* prints by Brooklyn’s Kingsley Parker (\$250 unframed, \$280 framed), complicated letter-art-color interplay lends weight to subject matter.

Tilcock’s own prints often stand out thanks to her stunning color sense, focus on environmental writing and preference for artists like Susan Lowdermilk. But the rest of the exhibit, including the smart, moving *Shift* by Chicago’s Shawn Sheehy (\$100 unframed; \$300 framed), has a lot to say — and show — as well. It’s gorgeous, and it’s affordable; some of this art can definitely come home with me. “Illustrated Word” stays up through Friday, Feb. 8.

Memory House Extended By One Show

The **Lord Leebrick’s Memory House** (reviewed in the 1/17 *EW*, available online) will have one extra performance, a matinee, at 2 pm on Sunday, Feb. 3. “Matinees have been selling out quickly,” says Leebrick Artistic Director Craig Willis. The play, which revolves around a mother and the daughter she adopted from Russia, also features a blueberry pie baked during the course of the show. Get tix at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

CORRECTION: In last week’s review of the Very Little Theatre’s *Awake and Sing!*, we wrote that tix are available on the website. They are available at 344-7751. Also, the two talkback sessions occur on Thursday, Jan. 31, and Sunday, Feb. 3.

