

MIDDLE EAST sound & stage

ENTERTAINMENT TECHNOLOGY AND PRODUCTION

SHINING LIGHT

TRANSFORMING THE BURJ KHALIFA INTO A BEACON
TO HONOUR THE MOTHER OF THE NATION

GOING GREEN

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SHINING LIGHT

***Sound & Stage* speaks to Marco Balich, president of Balich Worldwide Shows, artistic director & Olympic producer, to discover how the recent Mother of the Nation Festival was inaugurated with a stunning opening show.**

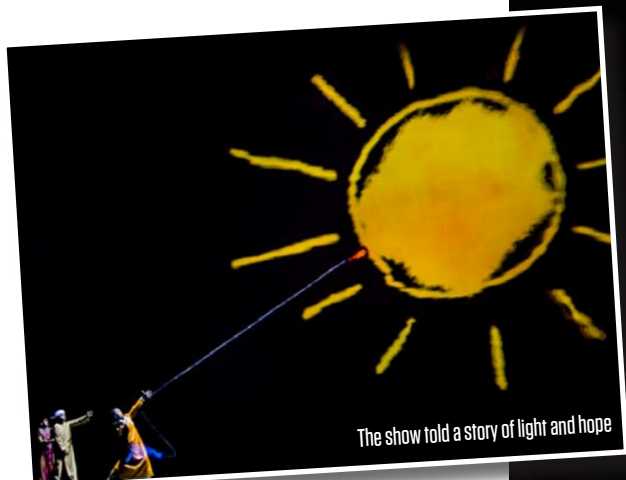
Back in March, the Mother of the Nation Festival arrived in Abu Dhabi to shed light on the vision and far-reaching contributions of HH Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, Supreme Chairwoman of the Family Development Foundation, Chairwoman of the General Women's Union, and Chairwoman of the Supreme Council of Motherhood and Childhood. Organised by Evolution Events, the festival hosted a series of displays, activities and

performances to promote the importance of family coherence as well as nurturing cultural understanding within UAE society, with a special focus on mothers' roles in promoting family cohesion and maintaining social values and traditions.

To kick off the celebrations, it was down to Olympic producer Balich Worldwide Shows (BWS), which was tasked by the Crown Prince Court to create and produce an unforgettable live performance in Abu Dhabi.



The Burj Khalifa shines for the show's climax

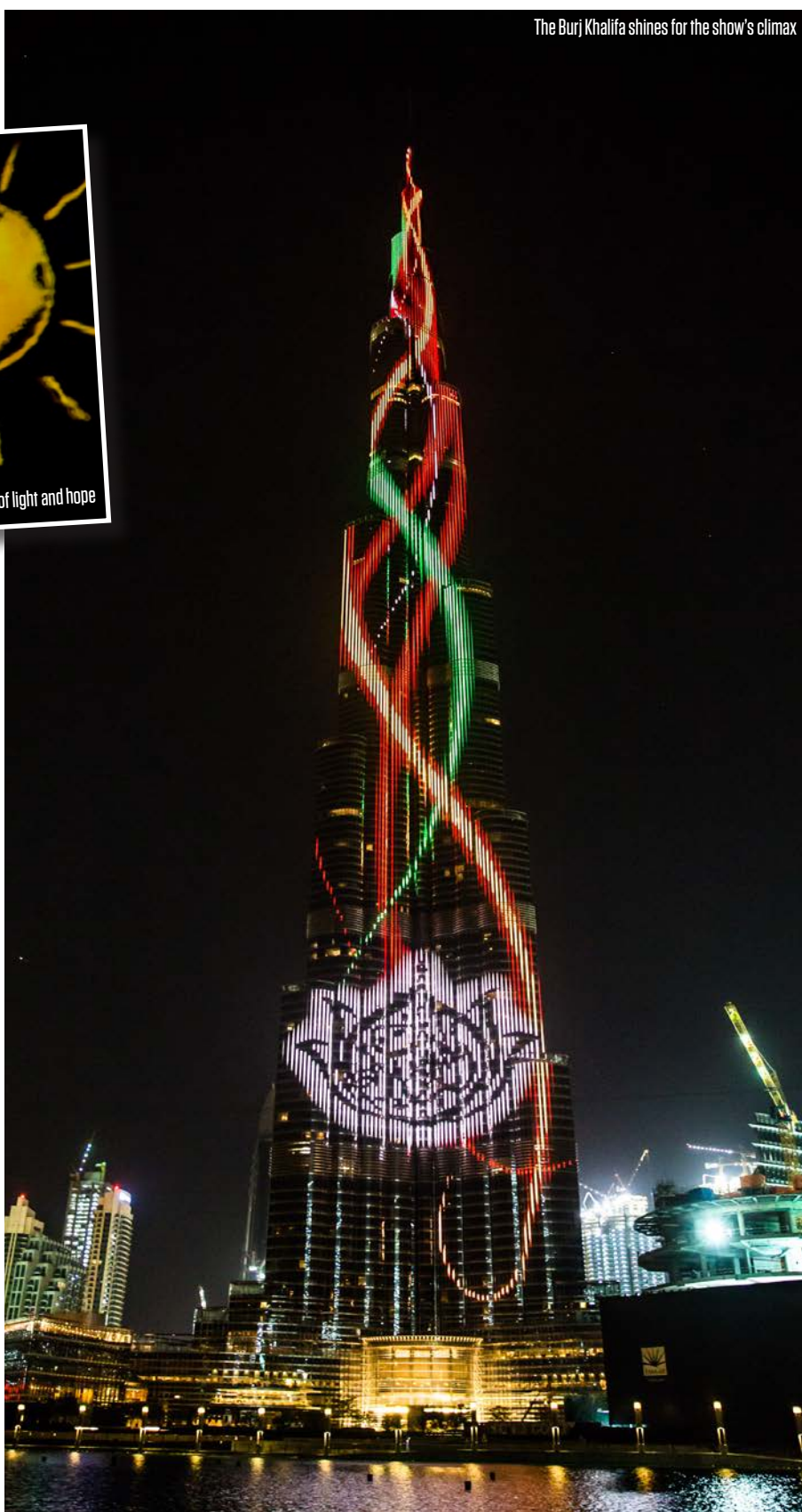


Marco Balich, president of BWS explained to *Sound & Stage*: "We produced the show that took place the day before the opening of the festival. It was a tribute to Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, conceived as a recognition of her role in bettering the lives of the Emirati women by giving them the opportunity to choose their own life, to study and to work in many different fields. In fact, it was a tribute to hope."

As artistic director of the Italian Pavilion at Expo Milan 2015, Balich was behind the 'Albero della Vita - Tree of Life' structure that took centre stage at the Expo site. And, currently the executive producer of the Rio 2016 Olympic Ceremonies, produced by CC2016, his approach to the Mother of the Nation show was never going to be less than spectacular.

He says: "The concept was 'The Mother of Light'. We researched and studied extensively her Highness' life and pledge. Her mission is to shape a new generation of conscious people, who do not forget their roots but have an open mind and are capable of determining their own path. Her light shines on the lives of people and shows them the way, giving them hope and strength to believe and to fight for their future. She is very much loved by everyone in the Emirates, so we spent time with many people who are very close to her, and with their help we looked for a way to talk about her and her achievements without actually representing her on the stage."

Balich continues: "We staged a new format, a mixture between an intense theatre piece and a grand stadium show. We created an immersive environment, with daring technical and creative solutions to allow rich scenes to be staged with surprisingly short change-





The opening show took place at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC)

overs. We had two main challenges. Firstly, we wanted to create a show based on storytelling in a different culture and language from our own – this could have been a barrier, but the professionalism and the passion of our team together with the vision, trust and support of the client and of the local people made it happen. Secondly, we had a very short time available to create, develop and deliver such a complex show: the process started in late December, with the show taking place at the end of March. Even so, we're very satisfied of the result."

Luckily, for all those involved, the show came together in time to wow the specially-invited audiences across two nights in Abu Dhabi. But it wasn't just those attending the event who were able to join in the celebration – at the end of the show a surprise performance of a different kind began at Dubai's tallest tower. Standing at 828m high, the Burj Khalifa provided the façade for the show's conclusion, which saw an LED display illuminate the iconic structure while the famous fountains below danced to a specially-composed piece, 'Song of Gratitude' by Mohamed Al Ahmed. A live broadcasting connection with Downtown Dubai brought the scenes live to those in the Abu Dhabi audience, while members of the public in Dubai watched in wonder from the ground.

Repeated each night until the end of the festival, the LED show saw lights all across the Burj Khalifa blossoming into a colourful garden, which consisted of realistic and abstract images of flowers, kaleidoscopic effects and arabesques symbols, as well as reproductions of the rose windows of the Grand Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi.

Balich explains further: "The Burj is covered by a LED surface. We produced spec-

MARCO BALICH

Balich's career began in the music world, organising concerts for international stars and one of the biggest music festivals in Europe, the Heineken Jammin' Festival. He produced many prime time television shows and music videos over 15 years. Balich is considered by many one of the top Olympic Ceremonies producers: from 2002 Salt Lake City flag handover to Torino 2006 Olympic

Ceremonies; the Rio flag handover in London 2012 to the Sochi 2014 production. He has previously received an Emmy Award for his work. For Expo Milan 2015



Marco Balich was the artistic director of the Italian Pavilion and creator of the iconic 'Albero della Vita - Tree of Life'. He has also been awarded the Order of Kurmet from the Kazakhstan Government for his professional contribution through the celebration of the 550th Anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate. Currently, Balich is the executive producer of the Rio 2016 Olympic Ceremonies, produced by CC2016.

tacular contents linked to and inspired by the theme of the final segment of the show, the 'Garden of Life'. We synchronised complex images with a beautiful original music composition created by Mohamed Al Ahmed to pay homage to Her Highness."

Considering that the entire Mother of the Nation Festival – never mind the opening show – was created to honour local heritage and culture, it seems only fitting that a host of companies from around the region were called upon in various capacities.

Balich tells us: "It was the first time we, as Balich Worldwide Shows, worked on a large-scale event in the Middle East, although we had several previous experiences in the region. We enjoyed very much creating and staging this beautiful show, together with a

group of remarkably professional and capable people, many of them coming from the Emirates – it has been a very exciting and positive experience. Our aim was to celebrate a truly enlightened person, and to make her values and ideals known to the wider public. For us it is an honour to have been chosen to produce this show."

He continues: "We worked also with local professional and suppliers. We always mix international and local resources to produce our shows. It is our trademark as Balich Worldwide Shows. In this case, we worked with Katie Veira and Abdul Rahim Janahi. We produce events of the highest quality, and are very careful to select the best available resources who, together with our staff, can guarantee the highest level of delivery. We be-



The culture and heritage of the UAE was a strong theme for the show



Photos © Luca Parisse and Paola Cominetta for BWS

Credits

- » **CREATIVE DIRECTOR** LULU HELBAEK
- » **PROJECT MANAGER** LAURA CAPPELLI
- » **DEPUTY CREATIVE DIRECTOR** SIMONE FERRARI
- » **CREATIVE DIRECTOR CONSULTANT** FRANCISCO NEGRIN
- » **LIVE ACTION DIRECTOR** GAVIN ROBINS
- » **CHOREOGRAPHY DIRECTORS** NIKOS LAGOUSAKOS, LEIGH-ANNE VIZER
- » **MUSIC DIRECTOR** PIERRE MUSCHE
- » **MUSIC COMPOSER** MOHAMED ALAHMED
- » **LIGHT DESIGNER** KOERT VERMEULEN
- » **VISUAL DIRECTOR** DIRK DECLOEDT
- » **PRODUCTION DESIGNER** RIC LIPSON
- » **PRWOPS DESIGNER** MICHAEL CURRY, NICHOLAS MAHON
- » **COSTUME DESIGNER** MARINA ROBERTI
- » **HEAD OF PRODUCTION** JON SINIGAGLIA
- » **TECHNICAL DIRECTOR** JEREMY LLOYD
- » **BURJ KHALIFA ART DIRECTION** FILIPPO BARACCHI AND JAANUS VANN



lieve in leaving a legacy and we are convinced that building a relationship with the local market is a value that brings benefits to all, both from a cultural and from a production point of view."

And, with his previous experiences working on last year's World Expo in Milan, Balich believes that there is much more to come for the Middle East in the run-up to Expo 2020 in Dubai. With local companies leading the charge in preparing and executing the mega-event, the live events industry here is one that BWS is looking to join on a more permanent basis, claiming in a statement that the company found it: "A pleasure to get to know this region and its rapid development in which we strongly believe. Therefore we would like to be present here in the future and are looking

for an opportunity to open our own branch in the region within this year."

And Balich reflects this sentiment himself, saying: "For Balich Worldwide Shows – and particularly for me – the Expo in Milan was a unique and unforgettable creative journey. The creation of the Tree of Life, the symbol of the Italian Expo and a structure that produced eight shows per day for 180 days, had a huge impact on social media, with millions of pictures and posts."

He continues: "This is something that we will never forget, so we encourage the Middle East event industry to get ready for some of the best moments of their career, and to look forward to 2020 as a bright and important professional experience. We are surely going to be a part of it!" **S&S**