



euronews
23 janvier 2025

Dancing in the sands: Noé Soulier's nomadic choreography transforms AIUla's desert

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Published on 23/01/2025 - 8:14 GMT+1 • Updated 24/01/2025 - 16:05 GMT+1

A unique dance performance staged in AIUla's desert, marked the pre-opening of Villa Hegra, a Saudi-French cultural institution that aims to unite art, heritage, and community.

Sand, huge rocks and absolute silence. In this setting, 19 French dancers aged between 17 and 22 performed in the heart of the desert. Choreographer Noé Soulier created a new dance piece, conceived for non-scenic spaces - a nomadic work that explores the relationship between the movement of bodies and the spaces they dwell in, with site-specificity at its centre.

The performance was called "Crossings" and it took place just kilometres from the city of [AIUla](#) in northwestern Saudi Arabia. It was a part of the pre-opening programme of "Villa Hegra", a new, Saudi-French cultural institution and its partnership with the Opéra national de Paris.

"The desert was an ally, because it created a space that was shared between the audience and the performance. We are all in the same space and then the sand for example, it creates a very specific music in some way. When you dance on the sand, you hear the steps and also the sand flies, so it produces almost a kind of remnant in the air. You see the trace of the movement in the air" says Noé Soulier, the director of Angers' National Centre Contemporary Dance (CNDc).



French dancers from the Junior Ballet perform "Crossings" in AIUla's breathtaking desert. - Credit: Euronews

Performing in the desert was certainly a new experience for the dancers, all members of the 'Junior Ballet', as it was the first time they performed off stage, without music and on the sand.

Yet, it was also an unprecedented experience for us, as spectators, since instead of seats, we were surprised to see colourful carpets and pillows, which proved to be very comfortable and spacious. The setting also helped our contact with the dancers. We were all resting on the sand, we were all in contact with the ground.

As for the creator of the show, the venue was a challenge but also an opportunity.

"There is this amazing scale. There is so much depth, you could never have that much depth in the theatre. It's like 100 metres or maybe more. When the dancers go really far, you see them becoming very very small and they can also come very close. So, you really play with this depth. It was really inspiring to work and experience this environment with dance and through dance" choreographer Noé Soulier tells Euronews Culture.

Ties that bind

Villa Hegra was born from the 2021 bilateral agreement between Saudi Arabia and France. The institution aspires to become a cornerstone for creative exchange, uniting the finest elements of both countries in the exceptional environment of AIUla. It will offer residency programs for artists and researchers and will be a part of the global network of French Villas, which include 'Villa Médicis' in Rome, 'Casa de Velázquez' in Madrid and 'Villa Kujoyama' in Kyoto. According to the team behind the project, "it represents a spirit of co-creation, co-direction and co-decision".



French dancers from the Junior Ballet perform "Crossings" in AIUla's breathtaking desert. - Credit: Euronews

"It is a cultural institution that foster dialogue and co-operation between artists, researchers from Saudi Arabia and France. The goal is to create a hub of contemporary creation for all types of art, whether its visual arts, performing arts, poetry, literacy. It is also a hub for educational and artistic programming for the local and the regional community", Fériel Fodil, the Chief Executive Officer of Villa Hegra tells Euronews Culture.

NEUMA – "The Forgotten Ceremony"

This project is a symbolic gesture to the ritualistic practices of the pre-Islamic tribes. Inspired by AIUla's landscape, its local heritage and its mythologies, it unfolds across two interconnected sites. A 15-panel sculpture glass installation nestled outdoors within the canyon of Wadi Al-Naam exists in conversation with an indoor exhibition showcasing a series of hand-crafted blown-glass sculptures at Dar Tantara in the old town.

At Wadi Al Naam, the installation rises as a spectral echo of a temple, a ruin eroded by time. The landscape evolves into a ceremonial space activated by a live performance rooted in breath and ritual. In the old town, glass-sculptures are presented alongside the projection of a film, a collaboration of AIUla's resident Muruj Alemam and her kids, Dema and Ibrahim. The story centres on her poetic life and performance, the choreography of her breath binding the expansive desert with the intimate interiors of the self, each exhale carries the resonance of AIUla's ancient ceremonies to the present.

The 'Forgotten Ceremony' is an artistic fusion of works by Saudi-American artist Sarah Brahim and her French counterpart Ugo Schiavi.

"The two artists joined forces for one year. They worked with scientists, archaeologists, epigraphists from AIUla and representatives of the local community on an artwork. So, you see a sculpture in the desert, which is an artistic intervention within the landscape. A performance associating 20 members of the community using sculptures and glass blown sculptures as instruments, music instruments" says Arnaud Morand, co-curator of the pre-opening program 2023-24 season.

Neuma, the 'vital breath' in classical thought – the title chosen by the artists – finds its physical embodiment in these works, where the earthly body and breath appear entwined with the celestial body and the soul. For Aristotle, 'pneuma' was regarded as the animating principle of life, emanating from the heart and mediating between the corporeal body and the soul.

Transcending the individual in Stoic thought, 'pneuma' became the divine breath of the cosmos, a unifying presence that sustains and connects all life.

The oasis and the mountain

AIUla is situated on an ancient Incense Route, and is home to many ruins including Hegra, an old Nabatean city, Saudi Arabia first UNESCO World Heritage Site. The history and the landscape are impressive and fascinating, almost overwhelming in their strength and dimension.

The old town of AIUla is divided between a winter city, dense and compact, and a summer city, sprawled out in the oasis, under the palm trees, to take advantage of the oasis' microclimate and shadow. The wider area already receives thousands of tourists, while with the contribution of Villa Hegra, the goal is to become a world tourist and cultural centre.

"It's absolutely a unique experience coming to AIUla. I can't remember, maybe this is my 20th time that I have been here and I am still fascinated, every single time by the wonderful landscape. There is a lot to learn in terms of history, in terms of the landscape, in terms of even our movement within the space which was also part of the core thinking of our pre-opening cycle. We think of our role within the landscape, our role within this space. It's an opportunity to experience different cultures in one space" says Wejdan Reda, co-curator of Villa Hegra.

The aspiration of Villa Hegra

The site is not the old city nor the great landscape. The project engages with the city, it is part of the modernity of AIUla, reflecting its historical particularity: a fixed stop on a nomadic route. It aims to become a link between different experiences of the site: nomadic or sedentary, temporary or permanent, local or touristic, educational or cultural, urban or agricultural. The space aims to give room to all these experiences and combinations.

The programme for Villa Hegra, comprising the cultural centre, the International College for Tourism and Hospitality (ICTH) and the apartment residences, is dense and requires multiple storey buildings. Local stones, rocks, mud brick, palm and sequoia beams, and other vegetal native species growing in AIUla will be used for the construction of the building.

The cultural center and the artist residences are scheduled to launch towards the end of 2026. The project will occupy an area of 18,000m².



Concept designs for Villa Hegra - Credits: Locaton & Vissal Architects

In May 2025, the temporary home of Villa Hegra will start operating. It will have workshops, provide housing for artists, and host artistic and educational events for the locals.

"The goal of the villa is really to be completely imbedded within the community and to ensure we respond to certain needs. Doing a pre-opening programme is really a privilege to test and learn. Things that can work, things that don't, so we foster and implement and we rump-up things that do work and we make sure that the ones that are less relevant for the community are kind of decreased. The temporary site will also be a hub of testing phase for us to ensure that we have the relevant programming for the artists and the researchers at the final building" says Fodil.

Ahead of its establishment as a Saudi foundation, Villa Hegra is supported by the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) and the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA).

Revue de presse