

STORYTELLER SPINS TALES IN OLD DAMASCUS

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By **Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 28 December 2014

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It takes the hikayati a year to read the adventures of Antar. At the end of the year, when the 9,000-page saga ends, he begins the Baibars story. He reads a chapter a day.

To say that he read from the ancient tomes would be inaccurate: most of the time, Abou-Shadi re-enacts the tales. Sitting on a gold leaf throne and dressed in red fez, bellowing black sharwal pants, patterned silk vest, striped white shirts and red cummerbund, Abou-Shadi twirls his mustache, flashes his old sword and acts out the adventures. His eyes pop and roll for emphasis, his eye brows bristle, his voice travels from base to falsetto, and he re-creates the various male and female characters, the good guys and the bad guys of the medieval Middle East.

"To be a good hikayati, you have to be an actor-editor-producer-director," he says. "Anyone can read a book, but not everyone can be a good story-teller."

As he reads about the romance of Antar and Abla, some patrons join in, forming a raucous Greek chorus, applauding the pagan hero or warning him about an ambush by the villain. Abou-Shadi, who looks like Sony Bono, transports them from the jasmine-scented, smoke-filled café to the world of One Thousand and One Nights.

Many of Abou-Shadi's patrons are European tourists. Since German, Dutch, French and British TV have discovered the Bard of Damascus, Europeans come to Café Nofara to experience the ancient, if not primeval, mode of performance.

"The tourists don't understand what I am saying, but they like the atmosphere and the theme of the legends," says Abou-Shadi, as he sips thick black coffee. The teenage attendant hurries to refresh the hubble-bubble coal with blinding blood-red embers.

Abou-Shadi has been telling his stories since 1990. "I have been here every day since the day I started. I haven't taken a single day of holiday. This is a hobby. I used to be a merchant, but when I broke my leg in an accident, I lost my business.

"My father frequented story-telling cafes in the old days. Then suddenly, the storytellers disappeared. There were no storytellers for more than 20 years," recalls Abou-Shadi.

The owners of Café Nofara, Ahmad al-Rabbat, asked him to come to the café and read tales of ancient Arabia. "Mr. Al-Rabbat told me that people missed the old days and would probably like to hear the legends of Antar and Baibars. I was skeptical at first. I told him that people had landed on the moon and everyone could now see everything on satellite TV. Why would they want to hear the old tales?"

But al-Rabbat's guess was on the money. Since 1990 ambassadors, from both Arab and non-Arab countries, cultural groups, tourists and Damascenes have come to Nofara to hear Abou-Shadi. The hikayati has represented Syria at cultural festivals in several countries. "I am as famous in Germany as I am in Syria," he says. "Germans like Arabic traditions. These stories have a beneficial effect on the audience—they make people more patriotic, more loving, gentler, nobler, and more chivalric."

Abou-Shadi makes about \$100 a month—from tips. Nofara doesn't pay him. "Sometimes I share the tips with the owners," he says unhappily.

And is there a difference between Antar's and Baibar's adventures? "The Antar book is a pagan romance; Baibars was a nationalist: his story is about the conflict between the Saracens and the Crusaders," the Damascene storyteller explains.

For a change, Abou-Shadi would like to read another historic tome, a 10,000-page epic about the great medieval Omayyad and Abbasid dynasties. "The owner of the café doesn't want me to read the book. He says that since people like Antar and Baibars so much, we should not risk any change."

The hikayati would like to tell his stories to children too. I like children—I have two daughters and a

son. I have read to schoolchildren, but it's difficult to read to them because I am a chain-smoker. It's bad for the children." As an afterthought, he says, "I may be an old man, but my heart is 15-years-old."

Looking up at the dust-covered, darkened TV set hanging above eye-level, at the corner of the café, Abou-Shadi says: "I haven't been to the movies for more than 40 years. The last movie I saw was an Egyptian movie, starring Omar Sharif, before he became famous. I want to become as famous as Sharif. I want to tell my stories to the whole world."

