



CENTRE STAGE

Alia Alzougbi insists face-to-face storytelling retains its importance. "The way I work I can gauge an audience and make the story resonate with them."

Settle down for story time

A Yorkshire Dales market town will host 50 storytelling events next week. **Steve Lee** talks to Alia Alzougbi, who dismantles Muslim stereotypes with her Arabic tales

Now into its sixth instalment, *Settle Stories* is a weekend-long celebration of comedy, music and the spoken word, situated around the North Yorkshire market town. Over the years this family friendly festival has grown from featuring 10 events in its inaugural year to showcasing more than 50.

With talent drawn from across the globe, one of the most intriguing prospects this spring is vibrant Arabic storytelling courtesy of Alia Alzougbi. Born in Beirut and now based in London (via Iraq, Syria and Jordan) she is keen to explain the roots of her fascination with this oldest of arts.

"I was initially inspired by my father who would engage the family by retelling stories from the *Qur'an* – he was incredibly animated and made it such fun, so that made me fall in love with storytelling," she recounts enthusiastically. "It turned out I have a propensity for it too."

Alzougbi believes her performances continue an ancient oral tradition, one which naturally pre-dates the written word, yet while generally sticking to traditional tales she often gives these

stories a contemporary twist. An age-old *Arabian Nights* fable, for example, can be tweaked to help illustrate the corruption inherent within the current Syrian government. "The reason these stories have survived so long is because they hold an existential jewel but there's something very playful in switching them around, making them your own while continuing to use them to tackle big issues such as where we draw strength, how we find ways to adapt and how we bring about forgiveness.

"I obviously don't have the answers and sometimes I don't even have the right questions, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't put these things out there for others to think about."

Other events this year include *Romance and Ragamuffins*, where Ursula Holden Gill introduces the funny and controversial *Ladies Who Live Together*, a storytelling walk with wandering bard Dave Tonge, *Tales of the Dales* with Ian Scott Massie and *Two Parts Mischief*, a reading of Geoff Bird's eponymous children's book*. Alongside storytelling there are workshops, music, exhibitions and foodie events.

One concern for Alzougbi and her ilk is the ever-increasing tide of digital media. Does she believe her face-to-face storytelling style continues to hold a place? "No doubt about it. Firstly, don't forget there was a great fear that when the written word first came along it would destroy the skill of memorising stories," she points out. "It's so important we retain the ability to speak spontaneously, to be in the moment and embrace the ability to improvise that the traditional spoken delivery allows. The way I work I can gauge an audience and really make the story resonate with them."

Often joined on stage by her musical partner Louai Alhenawi – accompanying on the ney, an Arabic flute – Alzougbi aims to use her time to inform as well as entertain. Readily admitting to being consciously political – "in the sense of raising awareness of an Arab world which is highly contentious" – subversion and dismantling stereotypes are also declared aims.

"My part of the world is a lot more complicated and nuanced than many people think, so my goal is to address Muslim issues but not in a Muslim context.

"I'm determined to play with people's expectations, and I'm definitely on a mission."

***Arabian Nights* is on 2 April, 6-7pm, at Royal Oak. *Settle Stories* is at various venues, Settle, North Yorkshire, 1-3 April (settlestories.org.uk)**



*Read a Q&A with author Geoff Bird in the Reading Room section of bigissue.north.com

21 - 27 MARCH **BIG ISSUE NORTH** 23