

**Children's Theatre in Oman 1970- 2007: Towards a
Developed Theatre**

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Abstract

Children's theatre exists along with other theatrical forms in the cultural life of the Sultanate of Oman. Despite the fact that Omani Children's Theatre started its life at the beginning of the 1970s, many challenges and obstacles continue to face its ongoing development. A significant landmark in this development was the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival which took place in 2007, thirty-five years after the first Omani children's play was produced in 1972. This festival represents a new era in the history of Omani theatre in general and the history of children's theatre in particular.

This study investigates how Children's Theatre in the Sultanate of Oman can become a viable and valued form of art for the future. It outlines the historical background and the present situation of Omani children's theatre and, through discussions with interviewees, defines the obstacles it presently faces and suggests ways to overcome them. The study provides a clear vision for a strong children's theatre culture in Oman and outlines recommendations for achieving this vision.

Presently, there is little written documentation about children's theatre in Oman. This study provides the first comprehensive historical overview.

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Statement of Original Authorship

I hereby declare that I, Kamla Al Hinai, am the sole author of this unpublished document.

A diligent attempt has been made to accurately source and cite the other researchers, theorists and artists whose writings and opinions have been quoted in this research project.

Name of Candidate: Kamla Al Hinai

Signature of Candidate: _____

Date: _____

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Chapter One: Introduction

The first encounter between Omani people and modern theatre took place in the 1940s and 1950s. The three Al Saidi schools¹, which were the only schools in existence before 1970, can be considered to be the starting point of theatrical activities in Oman. However, the real beginning of Omani theatre was in the 1970s and the 1980s. Children's theatre in Oman started later. According to Al Habsi and Al Siyabi (2006, 84), *Alfares Alshoga* or *The Brave Equestrian* was the first children's play presented in Oman in 1972. It was prepared and directed by members of the AlAhili Club.

Despite the fact that Omani children's theatre started at the beginning of the 1970s, it still faces very many challenges and obstacles, and many essential steps must be taken to develop this important theatre form within Oman. This study investigates ways of developing children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a viable and valued art form for the future. To this end, it obtains a general overview by exploring the importance of children's theatre in Oman, its historical background and its current state. It defines the obstacles that face Omani children's theatre and suggest ways of overcoming them. Finally, it creates a vision and a strategy for its further development.

Few studies have been undertaken in the area of Omani theatre in general, and research into the historic lineage of Omani children's theatre in particular shows that there is a significant gap in the literature. To my knowledge, there have only been two Omani academic investigations that have addressed this topic. Because of this lack of documents about Omani theatre in general, and Omani children's theatre in particular, interviews were an important source for this study. Through interviewing individuals working in the

¹ Al Saidia schools were the only three government schools existing in Oman before 1970 that embarked upon a modern education system. These schools were: the Al Saidia School in Muscat (established in 1940), the Al Saidia School in Salalah (established in 1951), and the Al Saidia School in Matrah (established in 1959).¹

field of children's theatre in Oman, data was collected regarding its history, the obstacles it faces and the possible strategies needed to overcome them.

This study contributes to the existing studies in the area of children's theatre in general and establishes the basis for a broader study of Omani children's theatre in particular. At the end of the study, I propose recommendations that will seek to position this field of research more strongly within Omani culture.

1.1 Research Background

A great deal of attention was given to children's theatre in the western world during the twentieth century. The Americans, Davis and Watkins, in their book titled *Children's Theatre: Play Production for the Child Audience* (1960, 2) characterise the twentieth century as 'the century of the child'. Davis and Watkins report that ideas about children have changed positively since 1900 and state:

A Children's Theatre Conference survey indicated that in 1957 some 200 colleges and universities in the country were engaged in some form of children's drama activities, about 50 of them offering formal courses in the field. (Davis and Watkins 1960, 14)

These and other facts revealed through my research have caused me to contemplate what has been done in the field of children's theatre in the Arab world in general and within Oman itself. What has been presented for children in the Arab world? Compared with the large number of studies and surveys that have been undertaken in the western world in this field since 1957, regrettably, little has been done in Arab countries, including Oman. However, some Arab countries, for example Egypt, have in the last three decades started to give some attention to children's theatre. In addition, Jordan has held a Children's Theatre Festival since 1998, and Morocco initiated the International Festival of Children's Theatre in 1999.

From my current position as a lecturer in the Theatre Arts Department at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, this thesis achieves my goal in the field of children's theatre: to undertake various studies in this important area in general, and in the field of Omani children's theatre in particular. As a foundation for this goal, I have introduced and been teaching the subject 'Children's Theatre' as a specific topic in theatre in the department. Moreover, this study further emphasises the importance of the area of children's theatre in Oman and thus achieves my goal.

The Omani 2003 census shows that children make up 40.6% of the total population of the country (Ministry of National Economy 2004, 3). A great deal of attention has been given to this important age group with regard to health and living services, but less attention has been given to the cultural and educational sectors. Therefore, I focus on this group by writing about their theatre as one important aspect of their cultural situation. I strongly believe in the importance of children's theatre in children's lives, especially in its role to educate and entertain them. Children's theatre prepares children to be better human beings and provides them with a better understanding of the world they live in.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

While there are a few studies that have briefly addressed the issue of children's theatre in the context of Omani theatre, and a study that has tackled the issue of children's drama in Oman in general, there are limited studies about Omani theatre in general. Also, to my knowledge, there is no study that focuses particularly on children's theatre in Oman. This study provides the foundation for such studies, will benefit researchers interested in studying Omani children's theatre, and contributes to the existing studies in the area of children's theatre.

This study investigates the historical background and present situation of Omani children's theatre and, as a result of discussions with interviewees, defines the obstacles it faces and suggests ways to overcome them. Through this research, therefore, the study presents a clear vision and recommendations for the development of children's theatre. In addition, it seeks to position this field of research more strongly within Omani culture.

Interviewing the people responsible for the creation and presentation of theatre in Oman and highlighting the issue of children's theatre has focused their attention on this theatrical form. Discussing the obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman may also encourage the authorities to put a strategy in place to overcome these obstacles and develop children's theatre. In addition, this study provides a history of children's theatre in Oman. This will be a valuable contribution to the field since no such documentation presently exists.

There is a misunderstanding of the definition of 'children's theatre' in Oman as the term has been confused with other dramatic forms for and by children (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 25-26; Al Zadjali 2002, 126). This study, therefore, establishes such a definition through investigating Omani people's understanding and definition of children's theatre.

State institutions that might benefit from this study include:

- Ministry of Heritage and Culture (Theatre Department)
- Ministry of Education (Educational Activities Department)
- Ministry of Social Development (Children's Department).

Other potential beneficiaries of the study include public theatre groups, youth theatres and university theatre, in particular, the Theatre Arts Department at the Arts and Social Sciences College at Sultan Qaboos University.

1.3 Background of the Research Topic (Previous Studies)

Few studies have been done in the area of Omani theatre. Those studies that have been undertaken prior to this study are unpublished academic theses. The existing research will provide a useful source for my study in discovering what has been written about Omani theatre so far, as well as providing references about Omani children's theatre. These unpublished academic studies are: *The Theatrical Experience in Oman* (Al Lwati 1988), *Elements of Myth in the Modern Theatre, with Special Reference to Current Theatre in Oman* (Al Lwati 2004) and *The Theatre in Oman* (Al Fahdi 2000).

Additionally, to my knowledge, there are three unpublished academic theses that have tackled the area of children's drama in general in Oman. These are as follows:

- A Masters thesis entitled *The Scholastic Theatre in Oman* by Mohamed Al Habsi, submitted in 1999.
- A PhD thesis, also by Mohamed Al Habsi, entitled *The Omani Theatre: A Historical and Analytical study of the Identity of Omani Theatre since its Appearance up to the Year 2000*, submitted in 2003. This is a historical study about Omani theatre in general and briefly mentions children's theatre (in five pages) as part of that history.
- A PhD thesis entitled *Children's Drama: Technical and Educational Approaches. The Development of TV and Theatre Drama in Oman* by Khaild Alzadjali, submitted in 2002. I will explain this thesis in detail because it is closely related to my study.

Alzadjali's thesis focuses on the area of children's drama in Oman, and looks at children's theatre as one aspect of Omani children's drama besides that on TV and radio. This thesis is closely related to my research topic since it covers Omani children's drama, including my particular focus, children's theatre. It is a useful source for this study

because of the notable lack of such studies in the area of Omani children's drama in general and Omani children's theatre in particular.

There are some similarities between this thesis and my study in that they both tackle the area of children's drama. However, unlike Alzadjali who studied children's drama in general, my research focuses only on children's theatre. Alzadjali covers issues such as children's theatre in the Arab world as well as British children's theatre. In addition, he tackles other issues such as cinema for children and adults, the impact of Omani TV programs on society, cultural development in Oman, classical Arabic as the spoken language of the programs and scholastic theatre.

According to Alzadjali (2002, 8), his study aimed to:

1. Understand the Omani drama strategy—especially for children's drama—and the goals they seek to attain
2. Trace the origin and development of Omani TV and theatre
3. Provide the best possible theatrical experience from the British model for Omani children's theatre and their audience (ibid.).

By contrast, however, my thesis mainly examines how to develop children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a viable and valued art form for the future.

Another source of research about Omani theatre is a recently published (2006) Omani dictionary entitled *The Dictionary of Omani Theatre: Texts and Performances*, edited by Mohamed Al Habsi and Said Al Siyabi. This dictionary proved useful for my study because, in its examination of Omani theatre in general, it includes some Omani children's plays and performance information, with brief summaries of the texts, as well as information such as names of directors and playwrights and performance locations.

This section outlines the studies that have been undertaken in the area of Omani theatre prior to this study. Since this study addresses the issue of children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman, it is important to give the reader, especially the Western reader, a picture of Oman, the country where the research topic is set. Therefore, the next section is designed to give the reader a brief overview of the Sultanate of Oman pre and post 1970, since the year 1970 was an important turning point in the history of Oman.

1.4 The Sultanate of Oman: Pre and Post 1970

1.4.1 Geographical and Historical Background

The Sultanate of Oman is located in the southeastern part of the Arab Peninsula. It shares borders with the Republic of Yemen to the southwest, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the west and the United Arab Emirates to the north. Its long coastline stretches for over 1,700 kilometres, from the Arabian Sea to the entrance of the Indian Ocean (Ministry of Information 2002). The Omani 2003 census shows that the total population of the country at that time was 2 331 391 (Ministry of National Economy 2004, 3). The capital of Oman is Muscat.

Because of its strategic geographical position, Oman was occupied by the Portuguese from 1507 for about 150 years before they were ousted by Sultan bin Saif Al Yarubi. After this, Oman entered an era of prosperity, which ended when civil war broke out following the election of the new Imam (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 22). As a result of this strategic position, Oman suffered from occupation once again, this time by Persia, which invaded some Omani coastal areas (Ministry of Information 2002).

However, when Ahmed bin Said Al Busaid was elected to be the new Imam of Oman in 1744, he successfully reached a peace agreement with the Persians and established a substantial navy (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 22). Muscat, the capital of Oman,

became an important commercial centre and meeting point for the entire Gulf area (Al Zadjali 2002, 14). Oman expanded its territory across the Arabian Gulf and East Africa, where it controlled the Island of Zanzibar (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 23).

1.4.2 Oman Pre 1970

During the 19th century Oman went on to establish political links with the other great powers of the time, including Britain, France, the Netherlands and the United States. However, in the early part of the 20th century, Oman entered a period of decline and isolation (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 23). Before 1970 Oman was considered to be less advanced in culture, economy, education and health.

The search for oil in Oman began in the 1920s, and oil was discovered in 1962 (Ministry of Information 2002). In 1967, Oman started to produce and export oil. However, before 1970, even after the discovery of oil, most Omani people lived in poverty and suffered hardships. The standard of living was low and most men had to travel outside Oman to find a job and a good income.

Before 1970, the majority of the population was illiterate. Figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicate that in 1970, Oman's adult illiteracy rate was a staggering 65.7 per cent, which comprised 43.9 per cent of men and 88.3 per cent of women (Ain-Alyaqeen 2006). Until 1970, there were only three schools in Oman and all students were male. The first state school, Al Saidia School at Muscat, was established in 1940 (Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs 1985, 63). There was no school for females except for schools that specialised in the Quran and the basics of reading and writing. These schools were the most popular form of education at that time, especially in villages.

Most Omani people did not have access to health care because there were no hospitals or health centres before 1970. People were treated with herbs and cauterisation. Some people used to go to witch doctors for treatment because they had no health awareness.

1.4.3 Oman Post 1970

The year 1970 was an important turning point in the history of Oman. The age of prosperity and the Omani Renaissance started in 1970, when Sultan Qaboos ruled Oman. In his era Oman became a developed country in all areas. Since 1970 the Omani government has implemented different development strategies, starting with the development of human resources.

There were only three elementary schools in Oman in 1970, and the number of students—all of them male—never exceeded 909. The government introduced an inclusive educational program with the aim of developing the total workforce of the country. This program made substantial achievements in the educational sector throughout Oman. The number of schools increased dramatically, from just three schools in 1970 to 926 schools in the academic year 1994-1995; and from no female students at all, to 48% of the total number of students in the academic year 1997-1998. Nowadays, there are four universities: one state university and three private universities (Ministry of Education 2006).

In addition, Oman has achieved a great deal in the field of health. Since 1970, the Omani government has worked to provide a good health service and establish health centres, even in remote villages. Today, there are 49 hospitals, 124 health centres and 12 health complexes throughout Oman (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 132).

Before 1970, Oman's economy depended basically on agriculture and fishing, even after the discovery of oil. However, since 1970, a series of well-designed five-year

development plans were compiled to make the best possible use of available resources and create a growing economy. Oman's main resource is oil; however, the Sultanate tried to diversify the economy and find other resources for income rather than depending on oil alone (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 136). Oman's economy has developed dramatically since 1970, and most Omani people now have a good standard of living.

Alongside development in all of these fields, the leadership has also sought to give the Sultanate a constructive and influential role in the Gulf, in other Arab countries and in the international arena. Omani diplomacy has been active in expanding and developing friendly relations with other states around the world since 1970 (Ministry of Information 2005-2006, 60-62).

1.4.4 The Position of the Child in the Omani Society Pre and Post 1970

Most Omani traditions are derived from the Holy Quran, and, as the Omani society is Muslim, children occupy an important position. Children, whether male or female, are the most beneficial blessing that God has favoured his people with, so the child is mentioned in the Quran four times. Islam's interest in children is clear in the Quranic verses: taking care of children is mentioned in a number of these (*The Position and worth of Children* n.d.). The Islamic religion has always catered for children and clarified children's rights fourteen centuries ago. It assures child rights and provides care and protection from the time s/he is in the mother's womb. Islam ensures the child's right to life, to nutrition, protection, education and guidance; the right to be given the love and care in all its forms and manifestations; and the right to justice in the equal treatment of a child and its siblings and protection from injustice (Al-Uthaymeen n.d.).

According to the Quran, children and money are joyful and decorative things in life: 'Al-mal wa al-banoon zenato al-hayat al-dunya'; that is, *Wealth and Children are the*

ornament of life on earth (Holy Quran: Al-Kahf, 46). The Holy Quran further explains the blessedness of a worthy child: ‘And God has made for you mates and companions of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren, and provided for you sustenance of the best’ (Holy Quran: Nahl, 72) (*Compared Translations of the meaning of the Quran* n.d.).

Based on Quranic evidence, children are thus greatly appreciated, and pre-1970 Omani women dedicated their lives to raising their children: ‘Women continue to desire many children, not only for the status, prestige, and future security associated with strong, healthy children, but because children are valued in themselves’ (Eickelman 1984, 181).

Eickelman further explains:

Omanis perceive children as signs of social strength. Children fill emotional needs and care for ageing parents in later life. People need sons to work outside the community and help them cope with an increasingly complex world. Families need daughters to build and maintain social ties within the community. The ‘value of the child’ ... helps explain why people have four, five, or six children (Eickelman 1993, 657).

The annual Omani population growth rate in 1993 was 3.8%, one of the highest rates in the world (ibid.). In another interview, older married women with several children wanted ‘as many as I can’. Previously in oases societies of the 1970s and 1980s: ‘Having many children, especially sons, increases a women’s status considerably by making her later in life the female head of a large family cluster’ (Eickelman 1984, 180). However, in the 21st century, the basis of women’s increased social and economic recognition comes mainly through education and employment status.

Nowadays, Omani women are encouraged to become involved in the social and working life of Oman. The Omani Women’s Associations that are spread all over Oman (38 branches have been opened, eleven of which were established in 2002 (Oman 2003/2004 2004, 149) aimed to help Omani women to “play a higher-profile role in the state’s

economic and social development programmes” (ibid.). A series of studies were carried out aiming to improve the position of women. So, women’s involvement in the social life is not limited because of their married or maternal status as it used to be in the 1970s and 1980s. In a report on Women and Children from Oman 2003/2004, the statement is made:

In order to improve their [children’s] status, women need training and qualifications, and rural and Bedouin women in particular need support in their efforts to improve their economic, social and cultural standards, as well as incentives to participate in the development process (Oman 2003/2004 2004, 148).

Post-1970, women’s education gradually increased and smaller families were planned because birth control clinics were provided and birth control was condoned by Imams. From three hospitals in 1970, hospitals are now widespread (60+), and education for children is available to assist child survival and schooling. The economic factor comes into play with raised living standards and increased expectations that children’s futures are interrelated with family planning and working wives. Fewer children now add to their , the Sultan (in his annual address) encouraged 1993 degree of appreciation in society. In women to restrict family size so that they could personally care for their children (Ministry of National Economy n.d.). Government policies with the establishment of clinics and workshops in villages helped spread this attitudinal change with respect to family size. Examples of government Health Services to increase child survival rates are:

In 2002, 98% of children in the government’s target group were inoculated against polio, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough and measles as part of a series of health programmes designed to reduce the incidence of contagious diseases (Oman 2003/2004 2004, 127).

To care for children with disabilities, the handicapped and those requiring rehabilitation, special centres were established in 1987, which were later upgraded to a Department.

The Children’s Care Home was opened in 1995 as a groundbreaking step designed to provide children in need with comprehensive care (Oman 2003/2004 2004, 150).

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This methodology section is designed to explain the methodological approaches that are used in this study. The study is exploratory in nature, and is based on qualitative analysis to investigate how children's theatre in Oman can be developed as a viable and valued art form for the future. In addition, this study adopts the constructivist paradigm, which is based on the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals interacting with the world.

In order to answer the main research question and other sub-questions, three qualitative methodological approaches are utilised to collect and analyse data, namely:

1. Grounded Theory.
2. Interviews.
3. Historiography.

A separate section for each of these methods explains the nature of each approach and its appropriateness for this study.

2.2 Qualitative Research

'One of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory. This means that not much has been written about the topic' (Creswell 2003, 30). When there is a lack of theory or an existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon, then a qualitative study is undertaken (Merriam and Associates 2002, 5). To my knowledge, there are no existing studies focusing particularly on children's theatre in Oman, with the exception of a PhD thesis entitled *Children's Drama: Technical and Educational Approaches. The Development of TV and Theatre Drama in Oman* (Khaild

Alzadjali, 2002). Alzadjali tackles the area of children's drama in general in Oman, including children's theatre. Thus, since this study is an almost original exploration in this field, a qualitative research methodology is appropriate.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 2-3) define qualitative research as 'a field of inquiry in its own right. It crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter'. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 8), the word 'qualitative' emphasises the quality of an entity and the processes and meanings that construct the nature of reality. 'Quantitative' study, on the other hand, focuses on the measurement and analysis of causal relationship between variables, not processes. Denzin and Lincoln outline the characteristics and the nature of qualitative research and state:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 2-3)

Additionally, one of the important aspects of qualitative research is that the research process is inductive rather than deductive. This means that the qualitative researcher gathers data to build concepts, hypotheses and theories rather than deductively deriving hypotheses or theories to be tested, as in positivist research (Merriam and Associates 2002, 5). According to Creswell (2003, 9), qualitative researchers' interpretations are shaped by their findings as well as by their own experiences and backgrounds.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 3-4) state that qualitative researchers can use a wide range of interconnected methods and strategies in order to secure an in-depth understanding of the subject at hand. They state that 'if new tools have to be invented, they should do it' because the main thing is that the 'objective reality can never be captured'. They add that the use of a combination of multiple methods in a single study is beneficial for a better understanding of the studied subject and that it adds 'rigor, breadth, and depth to any

investigation' (ibid.). Therefore, since qualitative research methods enable the researcher to collect rich data and to thus obtain a better understanding of children's theatre in Oman, three qualitative methodological approaches are utilised, namely: grounded theory, interviews and historiography.

2.3 Interpretive Paradigm of the Study: Constructivism

There are a number of terms that are regularly used with the term 'constructivist'. These include 'constructivism', 'interpretivist' and 'interpretivism' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 118). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 209), constructivism aims to reconstruct people's previously held constructions of their lived experience. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 186-187) claim that 'constructivism adopts a relativist (relativism) ontology, a transactional epistemology, and a hermeneutic, dialectical methodology'. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 118), only people or 'social actors' who have lived the situation and interact with it can give a clear definition of such a situation. Guba (1990, 78), states that the constructivist researcher believes that, in order to understand the world of human action and meaning, one must interpret it. Constructivists believe that the meaning and the understanding that they seek to know about the world and its complexity is kept in individuals' minds. They believe that 'meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (Creswell 2003, 8-9).

Considering that constructivist researchers are intent on making sense of (or interpreting) the meanings others have for the world, they do not start their inquiry with a theory, as postpositivists do; rather, they 'generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning' (Creswell 2003, 9). Consequently, constructivists consider humans as 'the primary data-gathering instruments' (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 39). Ethics are, therefore, fundamental to the constructivist paradigm. Although constructivist methodology provides safeguards against deception, 'the close personal interactions required by the

methodology may produce special and often sticky problems of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as other interpersonal difficulties' (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 215).

Ontologically, constructivism assumes that the research must be carried out in the 'natural setting or context' because it believes that 'realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts' (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 39). Additionally, Maxwell (1996, 17) claims that it is important to understand the particular context where the participants live and act to see how this context affects their actions. Thus, methodologically, constructivism seeks that the inquiry should move from the laboratory out to the natural context, where 'organizational processes create naturally occurring experiments', and dictates that 'methods designed to capture realities holistically, to discern meaning implicit in human activity, and to be congenial to the human-as-instrument be employed' (Guba 1990, 79).

Creswell (2003, 9) believes that 'Qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally'. Meanings are constructed and interpreted by people who live in a context and engage with it (ibid.). Since this study seeks to examine how children's theatre in Oman can be developed in the light of its historical and current context, it is important to seek information about children's theatre in Oman by personally interviewing Omani people who live and interact with Omani cultural and social life, especially those who practise and are involved in children's theatre there (such as children's playwrights, directors, and those in charge of the state and public institutions concerned with children's theatre in that country). In this research, their recommendations of how to develop Omani children's theatre in the future are explored. These people are an important source of data gathering for this study, especially in light of the lack of existing resources about this topic.

Finally, constructivist researchers, by meeting many participants, seek to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Creswell 2003, 8). Meanings, therefore, that constructivist researchers form from participants' views, and the meanings that have been negotiated socially and historically, are subjective meanings that are not 'simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives)' (ibid.). Accordingly, researchers believe that open-ended questions are recommended to allow participants to express their views freely (Creswell 2003, 9).

2.4 Methodological Approaches

2.4.1 Grounded Theory

Theory can be used in qualitative research in several ways, ranging from the provision of a primary explanation—as is used by ethnographers to provide an explanation for behaviour—to provision of an advocacy lens, in the way that qualitative researchers use a theoretical lens or perspective to guide their study and raise issues such as gender, class and race. Moreover, theory may be used as an end point, as in grounded theory which discovers theory through an inductive process (Creswell 2003, 131). The grounded theory approach is appropriate for this study since it is an exploratory study of ways in which to develop children's theatre in Oman.

The comparative analysis and inductive processes which the examined data go through to generate a theory are important to keep the grounded theory researchers close to their gathered data in order to obtain additional focus data and to extend and refine emerging analytical themes. Thus, grounded theory methods create a tight fit between the collected

data and the analysis of those data (Charmaz in Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 311). This closeness to the original data creates theory with a high level of accuracy (Langley 1999).

According to Glaser (1992, 11-12), it is important when utilising grounded theory to have some theoretical and social sensitivity, which is achieved by keeping an analytical distance. This distance also allows the researcher to step back from and start to conceptualise the collected data. Therefore, grounded theory is ‘a methodology that is designed to bring out skills of conceptual analysis’ (Glaser 1992, 12).

Langley (1999, 700) summarises the strategy of grounded theory and its analytical system. The system starts with empirical details expressed in interview transcripts and field notes and attempts to build a theoretical structure from this base. The following paradigm explains the inductive processes of grounded theory research—processes that will be applied in this study when analysing the data collected through the interviews.

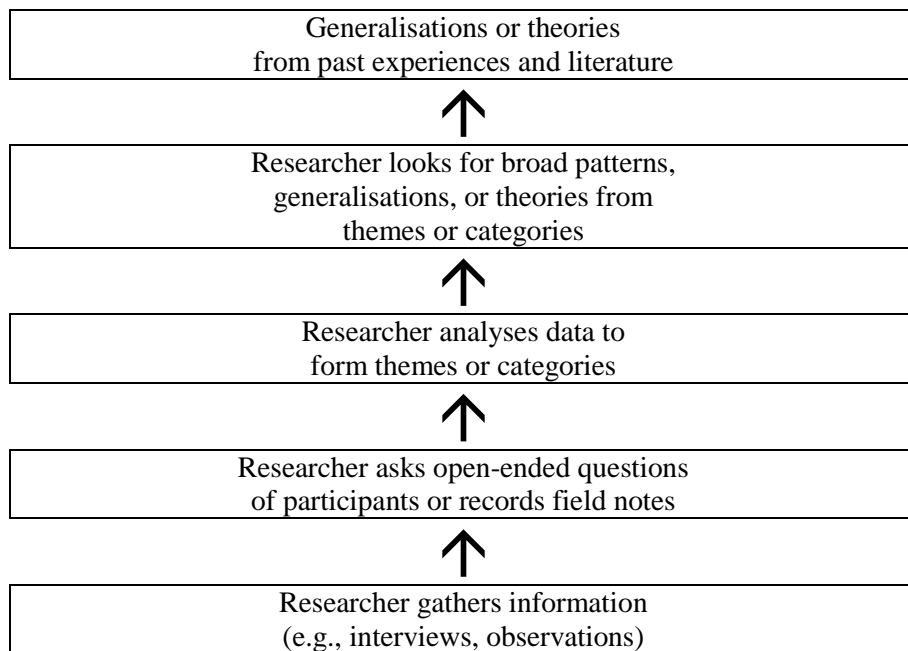


Figure 1: Inductive processes of grounded theory research (adapted from Creswell (2003, 132))

According to Creswell (2003, 31), the researcher may use the literature inductively at the end of a qualitative study by comparing and contrasting it with the findings of the study. This model is ideal for grounded theory studies. Thus, it is applied here to enrich the study with new findings as they emerge from the process.

The collected data from Oman was gathered together against the actual background of the interviewees. Later analysis in Australia, examining the original data with the hindsight of distance and time, enabled the researcher to create a new theory close to the original data that had a high degree of accuracy (Charmaz in Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 311; Langley 1999).

2.4.2 Interviews

Interviewing is a technique used to gather rich data about a specific topic to build theories that describe a setting or explain a phenomenon. It is the art of hearing data to get the story behind a participant's experience (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 56). Denzin and Lincoln (1998, 2) state that interviews and participant observation are useful qualitative research methods. Qualitative interviews are one of the most effective ways to better understand the issue under examination and provide depth to the investigation. Seidman (2006, 9) believes that the purpose of in-depth interviews is to understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they construct based on that experience. In-depth interviews are designed to understand the respondent's world, not to obtain answers to questions or to test hypotheses.

According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991, 73), 'the label "qualitative interview" has been used to describe a broad range of different types of interviews, from those that are supposedly totally "non(e)-directive" or "open" to those where the interviewer takes to the interview a prepared list of questions which he or she is

determined to ask'. Rubin and Rubin (1995, 26) state that types of interviews depend on the scope of the research field and the main object of the study. The following figure explains the different types of qualitative interviews:

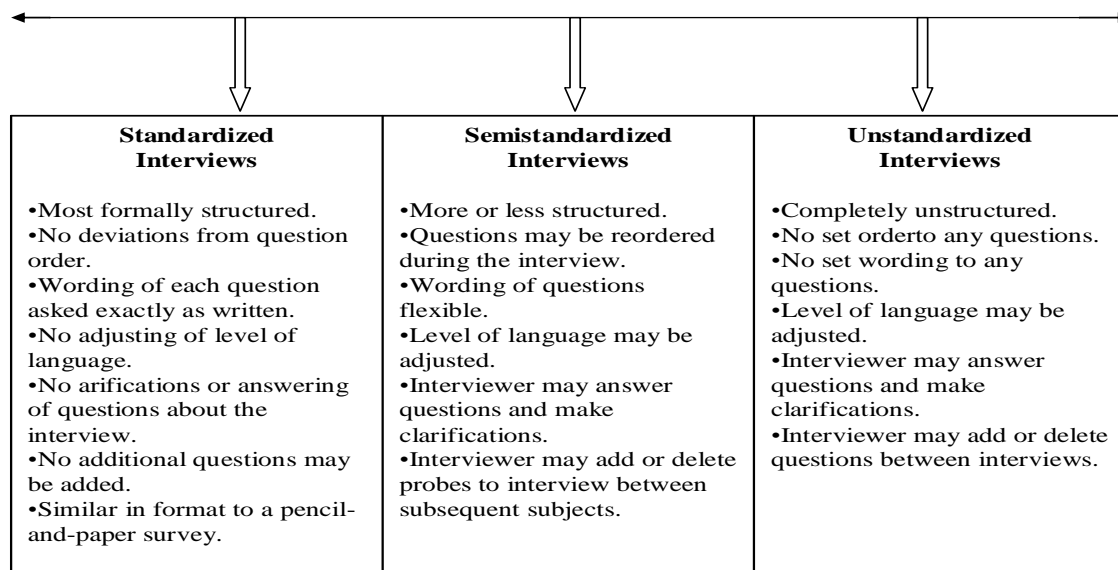


Figure 2: Types of qualitative interviews (adapted from Berg (2004, 79))

The semi-structured interview fits this type of study because it is a convenient method to capture participants' views in depth. The previously prepared script or protocol of semi-structured interviews consists merely of some key questions as a starting point to guide the direction of the conversation. This type of interview does not have a concrete set of questions that the interviewer must stick to. Additionally, the interviewer can change the set order of themes and questions (Johnson and Christensen 2004, 183). Moreover, this type of interview allows the researcher to explore other themes not previously considered and to ask new questions which arise from the participant's explanations. Semi-structured interviews also allow the participants to express their opinions and ideas freely and comfortably, and this allows the researcher to collect in-depth data.

There are, however, disadvantages in using semi-structured interviews. They rely heavily on the interviewer's skills to guide the direction of the conversation. Time management is

also an issue, and the researcher must ensure sufficient time is given to cover all the themes under consideration. Additionally, the more qualitative data collected, the more effort and time needed to classify and analyse this data (Sewell n.d.).

Qualitative researchers build theory step by step from the data collected during the interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995, 5), there are many steps in conducting and analysing in-depth interviews. First, the researcher chooses the concepts and themes to be explored. Second, follow-up interviews are designed to examine the preliminary themes, which thus suggest what questions are to be asked. The answers to these questions direct the researcher to the themes that need to be modified and those that need a deeper exploration. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991, 108) define this stage as a reflection and evaluation stage. It reflects the researcher's reaction to the collected data and the attempt to evaluate and make sense of it. At this stage, ideas begin to be formulated and reformulated.

Conceptualising is the next stage of the process. In this stage, the researcher identifies some themes and concepts that emerge through the interviews, and then considers how valid and reliable these concepts are. Later, the researcher codes and classifies these themes and concepts and records them in a manageable form. The linking stage follows; here, the researcher starts to link ideas and concepts. Theory evolves through this linking process and the subsequent comparison with the literature. This stage takes the form of tracking backwards and forwards between the literature and the evidence collected in practice. Finally, there is the revision stage where the researcher evaluates and revises findings with other colleagues in the field or with the respondents themselves to emphasise their validity and reliability (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 1991, 108).

The stages of interview analysis explained above are applied in this study to generate a theory grounded on the collected data.

2.4.3 Historiography

A historical research method is employed in this study to trace and interrogate the history of Omani theatre in general and Omani children's theatre in particular. This interrogation is an aid in understanding the nature of Omani theatre and the circumstances surrounding it in order to understand the history and nature of Omani children's theatre. This enquiry supports the research sub-question: What are the historical stages that children's theatre in Oman has undergone?

Within this part of the investigation, the theoretical perspective of hermeneutics is utilised, in particular the notion of the hermeneutic circle, which involves 'relating part to whole and whole to part to read the whole story' (Crotty 1998, 87). It is important to read and understand the whole story of Omani theatre's history in order to understand Omani children's theatre and to see how it has become part of the whole structure of Omani theatre.

The historical researcher should be concerned primarily with historiography, the interpretation of historical events, rather than simply being a historian and recording the chronology of these events. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2001, 172), 'The task of the historical researcher is not merely to describe *what* events happened but to present a *factually supported rationale* to explain *why* they happened'. Thus, the historical researcher seeks to gather primary sources such as: diaries, letters, photographs, tools, buildings and immigration records as well as other objects and non-text images. In addition, they look for secondary sources that are the works of historians who have interpreted and written about primary sources (Leedy and Ormrod 2001, 173). Historical researchers must consider the validity of this data. They should decide what is fact and what is fiction and whether or not the documents or artifacts are authentic (ibid. 174).

2.5 Research Problem

The research question this study attempts to answer is: What needs to be done to develop children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a viable and valued art form for the future? As part of this exploration, it is important to consider children's theatre in Oman from a historical perspective as well as to explore its present situation. This allows me to construct an overall picture to enable the evaluation of the situation and then posit a clear vision of how to develop this theatre.

Additionally, there are sub-questions that stem from this study:

- When was the first children's play presented in Oman?
- Why did children's theatre in Oman emerge so late?
- What were the historical stages that Omani children's theatre underwent?
- What were the social and cultural circumstances which might have affected the situation of children's theatre in Oman? (Sociological and cultural framework)
- What traditional cultural forms existed in Oman for children's education and amusement before the appearance of children's theatre? (Sociological and cultural framework)
- What are the current obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman and how can they be overcome?
- What strategies are needed to develop Omani children's theatre?

In the light of the lack of available resources in the area of children's theatre in Oman, interviews are the main data collection method used in this study. Data about the history of children's theatre in Oman is gathered using the historical method, and grounded theory is the analytical method used to generate theory through inductive processes.

2.6 Design of the Study

2.6.1 Investigation One: Interviews

There are limited studies of Omani theatre in general and very few that specifically focus on Omani children's theatre. Most of the studies that do exist are unpublished. This problem is compounded by the fact that there are no archival collections in libraries about Omani children's theatre. For this reason, and since this is an exploratory study intended to explore the historical background and the present situation of children's theatre in Oman in order to set up a proposal to develop it, qualitative interviews are used. This study aims to collect data through personal interviews with participants involved in Omani children's theatre to explore their views and thoughts on how to develop this theatre based on their experiences. As part of this study, the researcher undertook ten interviews in two different periods: from September to October, 2006 and during March, 2008.

Unit of Analysis

This study aims to collect data from different individuals involved with Omani theatre in general and Omani children's theatre in particular, so as to determine their attitudes to and opinions about the situation of children's theatre in Oman and their strategies and thoughts for developing it. Individuals who work for state institutions responsible for children's theatre in Oman are interviewed to represent the point of view of these institutions as well as their own.

The qualitative interviews concentrate on five major categories. These are:

- Children's playwrights
- Directors
- Actors

- Public/local theatre groups
- Government institutions responsible for children’s culture and theatre in Oman.

The following table gives an overview of interviewees:

Table 1: Overview of Interviewees

Names	Positions and Comments
1. Dr Abd Alkareem Jawad	An advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture. Playwright, director and a pioneer of Omani Theatre. Wrote and produced three children’s plays.
2. Abd Algafour Ahmed Al Blushi	Director of The Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. A pioneer of Omani Theatre. Produced many plays for the Omani theatre.
3. Sahiha Mubarak Al Azri	Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development.
4. Taleb Mohamed Al Blushi	Actor, director, and head of the Department of Drama at Omani Radio at the Ministry of Information. A pioneer of Omani Theatre.
5. Dr. Mohamed Al Habsi	Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts in the Sultan Qaboos University.
6. Rahima Al Gabri	Playwright and supervisor of the Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University. Wrote and directed two children’s plays; one of these— <i>The Land of Musk</i> —was the first children’s play to be presented at SQU.
7. Yousef Al Blushi	Playwright, director and the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. A specialist and supervisor of theatrical activities in the General Directorate of Arts and Education in the Albatinah Region. Wrote and produced many plays for adult and children’s theatre (four children’s plays) and presented three dramatic works for Omani TV.
8. Gasem Al Batashi	Actor, director and the director of the Muscat Al Hur Public Theatre Group. Directed many plays including children’s plays and also directed many programs and series for Omani TV, including programs and series for children. The owner and executive manager of the Alahlam Centre for Artistic Production Company.
9. Saleh Al Fahdi	Head of Alsahwa Public Theatre Group and the most active children’s playwright (having written about 13 plays, 6 children’s plays were presented).
10. Imad Al Shanfri	Playwright, director and the head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group. Wrote two children’s plays that have been produced.

Data Collection

The interviews concentrated on eight major themes, namely:

- History and general information about children's theatre in Oman
- Evaluation of the cultural/artistic position of children in Oman
- Evaluation of the current position of children's theatre in Oman
- Obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman
- The role of state institutions responsible for Omani theatre and children's culture in supporting and sponsoring children's theatre
- The contribution of Omani public theatre groups in the field of children's theatre
- Ways to overcome the obstacles facing Omani children's theatre
- The future of children's theatre in Oman.

There will be general questions to all participants and specific questions for each category. As explained above, qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that participants can freely express their views (Creswell 2003, 9). Therefore, and in order to obtain rich data, open-ended questions are utilised in this study.

2.6.2 Investigation Two: Historical Analysis

A historical research method was employed in this study, in Chapter Four (The History of Children's Theatre in Oman) to investigate the history of Omani theatre in general and Omani children's theatre in particular. Within this part of the investigation, the theoretical perspective of hermeneutics is utilised. This method allows the researcher to understand and read the whole story of Omani theatre's history in order to understand the part of it which is 'children's theatre' and to see how this has become part of the whole structure of Omani theatre.

In addition, the study researches the history preceding the existence of children's theatre in Oman (pre-1970s), in order to investigate other dramatic phenomena that might have existed to amuse and educate Omani children before the appearance of children's theatre. These activities include storytelling performances and traditional songs and games. Looking at this early stage and investigating the social and cultural aspects of that time helps to find an answer for two of the sub-questions of this study, namely: Why has children's theatre in Oman emerged so late? and What traditional cultural forms existed in Oman for children's education and amusement before its emergence?

It is also important within this historical investigation to explore the different historical stages that Omani children's theatre has undergone since its appearance in the early 1970s. Children's theatre in Oman passed through discontinuous stages, and was sometimes absent for many years before re-emerging. The social and cultural situations in place during these discontinuous stages that might have affected its stop-start nature is explored to examine what happened between historical stages. In doing so, the study constructs an overview of the history of children's theatre in Oman and identifies its strengths and weaknesses. From this background, the vision of a proposal to develop this theatre for the future emerges.

2.6.3 Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Data Collection Stages

Data collection for this study proceeded through the following stages:

Stage 1: Exploration

In this stage, the literature in the field of children's theatre in general and children's theatre in Oman in particular is reviewed and subsequently research question and proposition are defined.

Stage 2: The Interviews

Stage 3: Historiography

Stages 2 and 3 enable me to answer and support the research question because they are more descriptive.

Data Analysis (Interviews)

This section explains and analyses the data collected from the interviews through the following steps:

1. recording (the interviews are tape-recorded)
2. transcription (the recorded data is transferred to written format)
3. translation (interviews in Arabic are translated into English) and
4. interpreting and documenting the collected data.

Interviews in this study are thematically analysed, using direct quotations as the base data. Aside from its use in the chapter on data analysis, this data then becomes the foundation of other chapters of the thesis; that is, data relating to the history of children's theatre in Oman is used in the history chapter and data on the definition of children's theatre in Oman is used in the literature review chapter when tackling the issue of the definition of children's theatre.

The interviews were conducted in two different periods, from September to October 2006, and in March 2008. Eight interviews were conducted in 2006 over two sessions; two interviews were conducted in September 2006, with a one month break between the first two interviews and the second six. This extra time between sessions added an extended time period which allowed further and deeper reflection for analysis over time;

thus casting further light on the analysis revealed before 2008 and extending the interpretation.

The preliminary themes revealed from the interviews were based on the open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews. Ideas were repeated in the answers as interviewees addressed the questions. Transcriptions emphasised the importance of major themes, which were coded in the transcriptions, such as: evaluation of the cultural/artistic position of children; evolution of the current position of children's theatre; obstacles facing children's theatre; and what measures could be used to overcome the obstacles facing Omani children's theatre.

2.6.4 Ethical Considerations

As this research involves interviews with human participants, a Level One QUT Ethics Clearance to conduct interviews was requested (Ethics Application Approval Number 0600000466). The interviews were conducted in two different periods, from September to October, 2006 and during March, 2008. In addition, an Informed Consent Package was used for the understanding of interviewees taking part in the interview process (see Appendix 1, p. 295).

Chapter Three: Contextual Review

3.1 Introduction

This contextual review section of my thesis reviews the literature related to the area of children's theatre in general and, specifically, children's theatre in Oman. It considers the following topics:

- 'Children's theatre': terminology and concept
- Definitions of children's theatre
- History of children's theatre
- Children's folklore and art in the Sultanate of Oman
- The obstacles facing children's theatre in the Arab world
- The importance of the arts in children's lives
- The importance of children's theatre in Oman
- Omani government authorities responsible for children's culture in Oman.

At the outset, it is important to define the concept and the range of definitions of the term 'children's theatre'. Definitions of children's theatre accepted in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Oman are considered. It is particularly important within this investigation to review the Omani people's definitions of children's theatre, most of which will be gathered through the interviews (in the light of the lack of studies on this issue) to help understand Omani people's perspective of children's theatre. In addition, the definitions of children's theatre that are given by the international associations and organisations that are responsible for children's theatre are taken into account, such as ASSITEJ (The International Organization for Children's Theatre), the British Children's Theatre Association and the Children's Theatre Association of America. This wide exploration of definitions enables the devising of the specific definition of 'children's theatre' on which this study relies.

Within the literature review, a section is devoted to the exploration of the history of children's theatre in the West and in the Arab world. This investigation then leads to a specific investigation into the history of children's theatre in Oman (as a separate chapter). Additionally, it is important for this study to review children's folklore and art in the Sultanate of Oman, since it tackles the issue of children's theatre and researches the dramatic phenomena that existed in Oman to amuse children before the appearance of children's theatre.

The literature review also addresses the obstacles facing children's theatre in the Arab world in general and (especially) in the Sultanate of Oman. The topic is further explored in the chapter that records the analysis of the data gathered from the interviews. This investigation then allows definition of the obstacles facing Omani children's theatre and thus determines a strategy to overcome these obstacles and to develop this theatre. Moreover, two sections are designed to focus on the importance of the arts in general: theatre in children's lives; and the importance of, and demand for, children's theatre in Oman.

3.2 Children's Theatre: Terminology and Concept

'Part of the confusion surrounding the area of dramatic activity by and for children stems from terminology' (Goldberg 1974, 3). Since the appearance of the term 'children's theatre', various researchers have given many interpretations and explanations. Libman (2000, 24) states that, in 1953, Kenneth Graham wrote to Children's Theatre Conference (CTC) founder Winifred Ward about his concern about terminology: 'An attempt should be made to put down in writing a definition of Children's Theatre in the broadest sense' (ibid., 24). Despite the fact that attempts have been made to define this term since 1953, confusion remains.

The term ‘children’s theatre’ has often been confused with other similar terms that are used to refer to other dramatic and theatrical forms of children’s drama. For instance, it could be wrongly understood as ‘creative dramatics’, ‘recreational theatre’, ‘educational theatre’, ‘scholastic theatre’, ‘youth theatre’ and ‘puppet theatre’. Davis and Watkins (1960, 18) centre on this confusion surrounding children’s theatre in their book *What Children’s Theatre Is and Is Not*. Their definition of children’s theatre will be explained later.

Some Arabic writers and researchers concerned about children’s drama have used different names and terms to refer to children’s theatre. For example, Alanany (2000, 23) uses the term ‘young people’s theatre’ which, she believes, comprises ‘children’s theatre’, ‘scholastic theatre’ and ‘puppet theatre’. Zalat (1998, 192) agrees with Alanany’s division of young people’s theatre, asserting that ‘children’s theatre’ consists of ‘educational theatre’, ‘puppet theatre’ and ‘scholastic theatre’. Additionally, he suggests the following diagram to show the different types of children’s theatre:

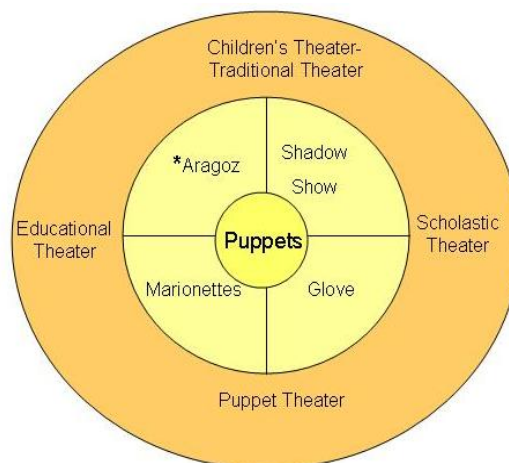


Figure 3: Different types of children’s theatre (adapted from Zalat (1998, 192)
(Note: ‘Aragoz’, also known as ‘Karagoz’, is an Arabic word that has no equivalent in English. It is a traditional puppet theatre.)

Again, Abu Almal in Saqer (2004, 43) states that there are three different terms that come under the umbrella of 'children's theatre', namely: 'general theatre', 'scholastic theatre' and 'class theatre'. Under the heading of 'general theatre', he includes 'commercial theatre'; and by 'class theatre', he means children's performances presented in the classroom. In addition, Hamed in Saqer (2004, 42) uses two different terms to refer to two children's theatrical forms, relating to the audience: 'children's theatre' for an audience of children only and 'theatre by children' for an audience of children and adults. Khawaja (2000, 5) believes that, despite the different concepts contained within 'children's theatre' and 'scholastic theatre', a lot of people concerned about children's theatre still find it difficult to distinguish between these two. Moreover, Al Saree and Badeer (1993, 57) consider children's theatre as one form of scholastic theatre besides educational theatre, puppet theatre and extemporaneous theatre.

This confusion in defining a specific term to refer to children's theatre reflects the misunderstanding of the nature of children's theatre in the Arab world. A meeting convened on the topic of *Preparation and Theatrical Education in United Arab Emirates: The Need to Establish a Children's Theatre* held during the AlSharqah Theatrical Days activities in 2001 delivered some recommendations reflecting this confusion. Specifically, these recommendations indicated the need to make a distinction between scholastic theatre and children's theatre (Aydabi 2002, 84). Swortzel (1990, 3-4), on the other hand, states that there are five main terms used in discussing theatre for children and young people. These are: 'theatre-in-education', 'drama-in-education', 'children's theatre', 'youth theatre' and 'young people's theatre'. He states that many theatrical companies in Australia 'cannot be labelled neatly or exclusively with any of these terms, as they cut across them' (ibid.).

3.3 Definitions of ‘Children’s Theatre’

‘To define is to surround a vague area of ideas with a wall of words’ (Butler in Libman 2000, 23). As seen above, there are many different concepts of ‘children’s theatre’, with some researchers defining it according to its type, place, actors, text and its target audience.

‘Children’s theatre’ is defined in *The Concise Oxford Companion of the Theatre* as ‘performances given by adults for young people’ (Hartnoll and Found 1992, 88). What, therefore, makes children’s theatre different is its **target audience** and its **performers**. According to *The Dictionary of Dramatic and Theatrical Terms* (an Arabic dictionary), children’s theatre may be presented by children or adults or by both. It defines children’s theatre as ‘the suitable and dedicated place to present performances written and directed especially for an audience of children’ (Hamadah 1985, 216-217). It states that the main distinction between adults and children’s plays is the audience, which should consist of children only when the material is suitable. Further, it says that children’s theatre is a professional theatre, and presenting a performance for an audience of children does not mean that we should belittle this category (ibid.). This dictionary defines children’s theatre with respect to its **place**; that is, where the performance is presented, as well as to its **target audience**.

Another Arabic dictionary titled *Childhood Literature Dictionary: Terminology of Child Literature and Educational* defines children’s theatre according to its **objective and its function**. It states that:

Children’s theatre is an artistic and educational medium of children’s literature. It contributes to develop children’s mentality and develop their emotional and aesthetic sense. Children’s theatre also helps to develop children’s linguistic and cultural aspects through the operation of turning the text into a performance, which will convey to its audience ideas, concepts and values in a symbolic way. (Zalat 2000, 63)

The Children's Theatre Association of America, in a definition from the late 1970s, stated that 'children's theatre' means 'all types of theatrical activity or performance involving children' (Trapido et al 1985, 151). Additionally, Davis and Watkins (1960, 18) comment: 'A children's theatre exists whenever a production of a written script is directed specifically for the child audience' (ibid. 18).

Children's theatre is defined here according to its **target audience** and to its **text**. Davis and Watkins believe that performers could be children or adults, but preferably a combination of both: adults in adult roles, children in child roles (1960, 18). In addition, they believe that child **performers** must be chosen to participate according to their qualifications. They believe that what makes children's theatre different is that the 'director is not necessarily concerned with the play's therapeutic value to his actor but rather with its dramatic value to his audience' (ibid.).

Goldberg believes that the term 'children's theatre' can be defined as:

A formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children. The goal of children's theatre is to provide the best possible theatrical experience for the audience. To this end, children's theatre employs all of the techniques and principles of the theatre, using some of them in special ways. (Goldberg 1974, 5)

According to Goldberg's definition, children's theatre is not concerned with who is the **performer** in children's performances—because it could be performed by both children and adults—but with the **experience of the actor**. Goldberg states that if 'the development and experience of the performers is as or more important than aesthetic enjoyment of the audience', then a new term should be used; this is 'recreational drama'. He believes that the term 'children's theatre' can only be applied when:

the audience enjoyment is the main consideration, and the occasional child was chosen because he is sufficiently talented to project the role, rather than because he needs the opportunity to develop poise or self-confidence. (Goldberg 1974, 5)

Goldberg bases his distinction between the terms ‘children’s theatre’ and ‘recreational drama’ on the following criteria: the quality of the performance (which must ‘provide the best possible theatrical experience’), the objective of this theatre, and the purpose of the performer’s participation.

Repeating Goldberg’s (1974) definition above, Sharon Grady (twenty five years later) adds:

The field of theatre for young audiences has historically been [the] field [for] lively debate between adult practitioners, about who should play child characters in performance? ... Any performance by adults for young people is labelled theatre for young audiences (TYA) or children’s theatre which is contrasted with youth theatre, or work that is performed by young people. (Grady 1999, 82)

Some researchers create their definition of children’s theatre based upon **the text** and on its theme and quality. Nawasra (2002, 58) states that children’s theatre is one form of educational theatre and depends on a ‘professional theatrical text’ derived from tales, myths, folklore and curriculum. Alashri (1991, 81) agrees with Nawasra and states that children’s theatre must depend on a ‘theatrical text’ written by ‘professional playwrights’ to be presented by children or adults or both for an audience of children.

Some 34 years later Poston-Anderson (2008, 362) also uses and quotes Goldberg’s definition of ‘children’s theatre’—‘a formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children’ (Goldberg 1974, 5) – because it seems to have been accepted as a standard definition to date. She adds detail to the scope of Goldberg’s definition in her 2008 book *Drama: Learning Connection in Primary Schools* by specifying the **occurrence** of children’s theatrics:

The term “children’s theatre” can refer both to a performance acted by adults for children and to a rehearsed play presented by children for others. This theatrical event may be an end of year school play performed on the school stage, a children’s play presented by a professional company at a local theatre, or a play performed by a combined cast of adults and children at a festival or other community event. (Poston-Anderson 2008, 362)

Based on all these definitions of children's theatre in the West and in the Arab world, I summarise the characteristics of children's theatre as follows:

Table 2: Summary of characteristics of children's theatre

The Discriminating Factor	Characteristic
The Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is written especially for an audience of children (Hamadah 1985, 216-217). - Exists whenever a production of a written script is directed specifically for the child audience (Davis and Watkins 1960, 18). - Depends on a professional theatrical text written by a professional playwright (Nawasra 2002, 58; Alashri 1991, 81).
Actor/Performer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children or adults or both (Hamadah 1985, 216-217). - Combination of both adults in adult roles, children in child roles (Davis and Watkins 1960, 18). - Children chosen for their qualifications (ibid.). - Not an issue; however, the experience of the performer is (Goldberg 1974, 5).
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is written and directed especially for an audience of children (Hamadah 1985, 216-217). - Its 'director is not necessarily concerned with the play's therapeutic value to his actor but rather with its dramatic value to his audience' (Davis and Watkins 1960, 18). - 'Aesthetic enjoyment of the audience' is an important aspect (Goldberg 1974, 5).
The Place/Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The suitable and dedicated place to present children's performances (Hamadah 1985, 216-217).
The Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is written and directed especially for an audience of children (Hamadah 1985, 216-217). - Is professional [Presenting a performance for an audience of children does not mean that we should belittle this category (ibid.)]. - Is 'a formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children' (Goldberg 1974, 5). - Employs all of the techniques and principles of the theatre, using some of them in special ways (ibid.).
Objectives/ Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is an artistic and educational medium of children's literature - Contributes to develop children's mentality and develop their emotional and aesthetic sense (Zalat 2000, 63). - Helps to develop children's linguistic and cultural aspects through the operation of turning the text into a performance (ibid.). - Aims to provide the best possible theatrical experience for the audience (Goldberg 1974, 5).

The next section deals with theatre for the under threes or Theatre for the Very Young, its definition and the debate on, and justification for, this special innovative theatre.

3.3.1 Theatre for the Very Young

Over the last ten years, greater international attention has been given to early years programming in arts venues and festivals and a new genre of theatre for children three years and under—‘Theatre for the Very Young’ (TVY), ‘Early Years Theatre’ or ‘Baby Theatre’—has recently developed for artistic and educational purposes.

La Baracca Theatre in Bologna started in 1987, linking quality art to progressive educational theory and practice in Italy's Romagna region. Scientific research in the 1990s revealed children under three years to be far more socially capable, aware and emotionally intelligent than previously thought (Mack 2009). With reference to Theatre for Young People in Australia, McLean and Richer (2003, 4) note that ‘An interesting trend in the last couple of years (the 1990s) has been the focus placed by the industry upon young people as future audiences’.

Tony Mack (2009) also believes some presenters may see the use of TVY as a “loss leader”, a non-profit-making activity with the 'wow' factor that attracts media attention and draws audiences to additional profitable events. Major arts festivals have programmed shows such as *Oogly Boogly*, and some festival directors feel that TVY may well be on the cutting edge of theatre practice, as it asks such basic questions as: ‘What is theatre?’ and ‘What is a human being?’ (ibid.).

Ivar Selmer-Olsen in Mack (2009) of the European Glitterbird project (2003-2006) claims that ‘small children have...skills to enjoy and a right to experience the extraordinary, to experience powerful, pleasure-giving and challenging art’. Thus, festivals, conferences

and symposia developed projects which led to significant European growth showcasing TVY work and new ideas. Michael Rockstroh, Festival Organiser of Germany's 2008 first early childhood festival noted (in Mack 2009): 'In 2006 there were about two shows we could have programmed in the whole of Germany, now there are 22 that we could select from'. This means the access to artistic experiences for the very young is now becoming recognised in Europe.

Despite the rapid growth, particularly in Europe, of this new form (TVY), there is still a debate about why theatre is of value for very young audiences under three years. In a public lecture in Brisbane (2010), Tony Mack—an Australia Council Fellow researching Theatre for the Very Young and developing an international database of youth arts organizations—posed more questions: 'Why make theatre for the very young?' and 'Do small children need quality arts?' He answers that the little child is a complete human being and has the right to experience quality art, and that adults should talk to babies as human beings. He also believes in the child's right to an aesthetic education and in the importance of play in life. Mack (ibid.) suggests that children will respond according to their developmental stages. This also agrees with Anna Vassilimis' opinion that: 'Quality theatre may have different levels and depths so that different children experience something according to their developmental stages' (Vassilimis n.d., 1).

Mark Fisher (2008), writing in the *Guardian*, discusses the existence of the TVY genre: 'There is a lurking suspicion that theatre is an extravagance for those so young', for 'an audiences still in nappies' (as he describes the very young audiences). Fisher poses the following questions: 'Is there any point in performing to children who are still mastering the art of sitting up, let alone walking and talking? Is it not vain to imagine that babies need any more stimulation than they already get from real life? According to Fisher, Jo Evans, producer of *Oogly Boogly* –a 45-minute 'event for babies and their grown-ups'—disagrees (ibid.). And Jo Belloli, an early years' theatre programmer, in Fisher (2008)

explains: 'You wonder how you'd keep a one-year old still for half an hour, but I've seen it happen on numerous occasions'.

To define the characteristics of this debatable theatrical experience and delineate exactly its nature, scope and meaning, Tony Mack (2009) poses this central question: So what exactly is Theatre for the Very Young? He asserts that, rather than providing pure entertainment (such as with balloons and clowns), the TVY movement takes a rigorous approach to **creating quality art experiences**. As Lynch (in Fisher 2008) claims, '...we give them a high-quality, other-worldly experience...' and '...a multi-sensory interactive experience...'

As summarised by Tony Mack (2009), the first most important characteristic of TVY is **quality of human engagement**. It is a serious attempt to overcome age and developmental barriers, so art can make contact with the consciousness of the very young audience members. Therefore, the art has to fit into the young child's preferred ways of interacting with the world so that they can receive information and experiences. Often, for example, the children may be welcomed into the performing space and/or be introduced to the performers. A number of recent German productions even welcome children onto the stage afterwards to play with the set and props, reflecting the idea that a 'play' is 'play.' Productions are mainly performed by trained (or experienced) professional adult performers and, design-wise, they contain the normal European touring sets for intimate theatre performances. There may be introductory workshops, and while mostly presentational, productions may have participatory elements or even interactive installation performance art. While a number of companies around the world may create performances for this age group, most of the work presently emanates from Europe (ibid.).

A second characteristic is that **less emphasis is placed on language, and more on sensory inputs** such as sight, non-linguistic sound and touch. Rather than regretting the inability of the audience to comprehend a long story based on language, theatre makers are energised by the ability of their audience to respond to rather abstract art and sensory creativity (Mack 2009). Specialising in Scottish early years theatre, Heather Fulton in Fisher (2008) opined, ‘Children learn and explore by touch’. Thus, a multi-sensory interactive experience for under-threes might include Simon Macintyre’s *The Gift*, where a small audience enters a mysterious sculptural box. Inside they go on a multi-sensory trip through fabric, wool and towelling, making fresh discoveries in hidden compartments: ‘...a high quality, other-worldly experience’ (ibid.).

Also in agreement with Mack’s (2009) second characteristic of ‘sensory inputs’, is a children’s theatre focusing on stimulating the imagination and firing the creative expression: Theatre of Image (TOI). Anna Vassilimis, discussing Australia’s TOI led by Kim Carpenter its Artistic Director, adds other aspects to definitions of children’s theatre:

Children’s theatre may be able to creatively portray images which are relevant in children’s lives and help them make sense of their world. This can be done in obvious to less obvious ways, through symbolism, metaphor, dialogue as well as using components of theatre such as sound and choreography. (Vassilimis n.d., 1)

Quotations and descriptions by directors and writers from recent news reports, interviews, lectures and other writing provide evidence since few academic analyses exist. Andy Manley, playwright and producer (in Fisher 2008) said: ‘What we do in theatre is help people understand the world they live in, and the emotions they feel...’ In his *My House* production for the 2-3 age group, the slight story focuses on child emotions—on ‘finding a friend, being rejected, being scared, discovering things. It reaffirms what they are going through emotionally’ (ibid.).

Added to this, developmental stages will determine different experiences, and theatre can ‘open doors to a new world of imagination, excitement and thoughtfulness’ (Woods 1999,

6), provided it is high quality. He adds that theatre should emotionally engage the audience, providing children with an exciting and memorable experience, both educational and entertaining. The TOI Kit by Kim Carpenter claims that live theatre:

...enriches the spirit, emotionally and intellectually, leaving indelible images to fire the imagination and ignite creative expression... to assist in a child's awakening or understanding of the world. (Vassilimis n.d., 1)

Jalongo and Stamp (1997), quoted in Vassilimis (n.d., 6), found that toddlers displayed 'heightened perceptivity that begins with sensory experience and leads to aesthetic experiences'. They assert that both toddlers and young children show full awareness or intense awareness in a theatrical experience and this feeling/perception is necessary in order to enrich the imagination. Even a one year old, according to his mother in conversation with director Kim Carpenter, was touched and responsive to a live theatre performance (*Jake and Pete*) by TOI in 1997 (ibid., 7).

Piaget (in Vassilimis n.d., 10) describes how symbolic representation is part of children's developmental processes, with differentiation between the symbol and what it stands for beginning at the age of 18–24 months. This is relevant to theatre because, according to Pateman (Vassilimis n.d., 11), imagination can fill out or concretise something from an image or outline, in a safe space where children can confidently exercise their imagination depending on their level of understanding, knowledge or experience.

Mack's (2009) third important characteristic of TVY—after 'creating quality art experiences' and placing 'less emphasis on language and more on sensory inputs'—concerns the difference in **venue or place** and the **limited audience** numbers. Performances are played in traditional venues with rarely more than 200 seats, or in intimate specially modified venues for the performance. For instance, Dschungel Wien's *Überraschung*, from Austria, is a dance piece for age two years and up that works well in

a 200 seat theatre, while Windmill's *The Green Sheep* from Australia herds its audience of up to 90 into a 'sheep pen' and performs to a captive audience from outside the pen. A British production, *Oogly Boogly*, takes place in a large inflatable tent, performing to only eight toddlers (aged 12-18 months) at a time. Participants are encouraged to move freely throughout the space while performers improvise and interact. From these examples, TVY is obviously not a viable option for presenters seeking to make a profit or break even. The lower ratio of audience members to performers may make for a great experience, but the exercise is an expensive one for presenters (Mack 2009).

To bring together world ideas on TVY, the most recent Theatre for the Very Young Forum Report was held in Bologna in Italy in 2009. It shared visions of, and reflections on, theatre and the very young from artists from Norway, Germany, USA, Argentina, Belgium, Denmark and Italy. Some major issues raised and discussed in the workshops were:

- The social impact of theatre on children—art as social intervention
- Children's need for theatre relative to other needs
- The potential of theatre to educate (since experience is the basis of learning)
- What is extraordinary? [eg. age group, audience age, production style?]
- Why theatre for ages 0 – 3?
- What kind of theatre for ages 0 – 3?
- Interactions with the audience; two audiences – adults and children, and what children are reached?
- Is TVY a middle class phenomenon? (van de Water 2009).

Van de Water added issues from her 3-6 year old discussion to the above: the relationship between audience and art. This produced two opposing views:

- 'Art is a communication of ideas, therefore the audience is central' and
- 'Art is confrontation: the aesthetics are central' (ibid.).

Agreement came on the centrality of making theatre based on, and telling through, stories and noted Gerd's observation of theatre for the very young as a middle class phenomenon. Concluding ideas were an escape from the art-pedagogy dilemma by offering art to **family audiences** because real art can be enjoyed by a wider age range

(van de Water 2009). This is the identical conclusion offered by Rosemary Myers in Rosemary Sorensen's article in *The Australian* (2010); it allows children's theatre for the very young to merge into general children's theatre under the '**family theatre**' rubric (Sorensen 2010).

With all the evidence of the awareness/competence of very young children, however, it is hard to escape the argument that children under three have a right to quality art like the rest of us. And in providing those experiences, we may end up learning more about humankind in general (Mack 2009).

3.3.2 Definition of 'Children's Theatre' in Oman

Despite the fact that the term 'children's theatre' exists in the cultural and theatrical life of the Sultanate of Oman, there is still confusion among Omani people involved in theatre about the definition and the nature of children's theatre. This term exists along with other theatrical terms that are current in Oman and refers to the different forms and types of theatre existing in Oman. These include:

Club Theatre: Theatrical activities presented by members of theatre clubs. These are basically sports clubs but also present cultural activities including theatrical works. The Al Ahli and Oman clubs played an important role in supporting Omani theatre in the 1970s.

Youth Theatre: A youth theatre group established by the Ministry of Information in 1980 is considered to be the first formal theatre group supported by the government. Youth theatre involves youth from ages 15 to 29. In addition to youth theatre in Muscat, there are six other theatres for youth spread over the regions of the Sultanate of Oman (Al Habsi 2003, 133).

Public Theatre Groups: Public/local theatre groups have formed the primary foundation for the theatrical movement in Oman since their inception in 1987 under the supervision of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture. At present there are 17 public theatre groups in Oman.

University Theatre: Theatrical activities are presented at the university by the Theatre Arts Department and Theatre Group.

Scholastic Theatre: All forms of theatrical activities are presented at schools as part of a total program of educational activities and are supported by the Ministry of Education.

The final form that falls into the category of theatrical forms in Oman is **Puppet Theatre**, and is the same form that exists within Western theatre.

Children's theatre is usually confused with other forms of theatre, especially 'scholastic theatre'. According to Taleb Al Blushi (2006, 1: 25-26), people in Oman and in other Arab Gulf Countries usually confuse children's theatre and scholastic theatre, despite the fact that they are two different types of theatre. In addition, Al Zadjali (2002, 126) points out that the general attitude towards children's theatre fails to recognise theatre for children as a separate art form.

Jawad defines children's theatre in accordance with its audience and its targeted age group. He states that:

As for me, there is no fixed definition of Children's Theatre since its definition relies on the age category that it deals with. Yet, Children's Theatre can be defined as: Theatrical performances that are presented for children generally. However, I would like to classify three age categories that these children's performances target. This includes:

- First age group: pre-school children, under 6 years of age
- Second age group: the first three grades (grades 1-3) of elementary school in Oman

- Third age group: the second three grades (grades 4-6) of elementary school. Additionally, children's performances can be further presented to an audience of preparatory stage (Jawad 2006, 1: 13-33).

Jawad believes that it is important to take into consideration the different age groups when preparing for a children's performance because what is suitable for an audience of pre-school children might not be suitable for children at elementary school level (Jawad 2006, 1:21-22). Jawad makes a distinction between children's theatre and scholastic theatre in that scholastic theatre relies basically on what is called 'curriculum dramatisation', which means that the plays' themes are derived from the curriculum. Nevertheless, he states that there is confusion between the two theatre types (ibid.).

In addition, Al Zadjali (2002, 262) says that children's theatre can be defined as 'a formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children'. He divides the target children's audience into three categories: pre-school children, primary school children and older children, who could also be included with an adult audience (ibid. 263).

Yousef Al Blushi agrees with Al Zadjali in expressing the view that most children's theatre audiences are made up of students. In addition, he believes that there is a distinction between children's theatre and scholastic theatre:

Scholastic theatre presents educational plays and usually tackles educational themes. However, children's theatre is more open and can tackle different topics and issues concerning children. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 74-77)

According to Al Habsi, children's theatre is a separate type of theatre. However, he believes that 'educational theatre' or 'scholastic theatre', as he sometimes refers to it, is one type of children's theatre:

Children's theatre is another form of theatre and serves the children and their intellect. Since theatre in general is an educational, cultural and social instrument to educate people and enrich their thinking, children's theatre can then be defined as:

an educational and cultural instrument intended to improve a child's culture and deal with a child's emotions. Children's theatre has been called through its history 'educational theatre' which is part of children's theatre. So, scholastic or educational theatre is one type of children's theatre. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 12-18)

After reviewing all these definitions of children's theatre in the West and in the Arab world, including the Sultanate of Oman, it can be concluded that, despite the early attempts to find a clear definition of 'children's theatre', there is still a fogginess surrounding this term. This misunderstanding might be caused by the fact that there are too many theatrical terms used to refer to different forms of theatre by and for children that all come under the umbrella of 'children's drama'. Such terms include: creative dramatics, recreational drama, scholastic theatre, puppet theatre, educational theatre and young people's theatre.

Since this study is addressing the issue of children's theatre in Oman, it is important within this context to define **the age category of children in Oman**. According to the Omani Personal Status Law (Ministry of Justice 2005, 171), the age of children ranges from **newborn up to the age of 15**. Additionally, since this study is researching the area of children's theatre generally and children's theatre in Oman separately, it is important to create a definition of children's theatre as a basis for the study. For this purpose, 'children's theatre' will be defined as *a formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children*. Children's theatre is professional theatre and, as for adult theatre, employs all of the techniques and principles of the theatre. It differs only in that it uses some of these in special ways that suit the stages of children's physical, social, emotional, and psychological development. Performers in children's theatre could be children or adults, or a combination of both. Children's theatre is an educational and cultural instrument to educate children. However, in addition to its aesthetic, educational and psychological value and objectives, audience enjoyment should also be one of the main objectives of children's theatre (Value and objectives will be discussed in detail

later in this chapter under the heading of ‘The Importance of the Arts in Children’s Lives’). In addition, children’s theatre must also consider the different age groups of children before presenting any play. The age range attributed to children’s theatre audiences for this study is from 4 to 15 years old. I concur with Goldberg when he says:

If the occasional child was chosen because he is sufficiently talented to project the role, rather than because he needs the opportunity to develop poise or self-confidence, then the name ‘children’s theatre’ will apply. (Goldberg 1974, 5)

While there is confusion in Oman between children’s theatre and scholastic theatre, children’s theatre is clearly a separate type of theatre and differs from scholastic theatre. ‘Scholastic theatre’ in Oman can be defined as: all forms of theatrical activities that are presented mostly for an audience of students and their families as well as the school’s staff. These activities are presented under the supervision of a teacher and, in Omani schools, any teacher can supervise theatrical activities. However, they are predominantly supervised by the Arabic teacher, who is not necessarily an expert on theatre. Scholastic theatre is basically educational in nature, and aims to educate students and develop their personality by helping them to express themselves and build their self-confidence. Therefore, presenting a complete and professional performance is not its main goal. Most themes that scholastic theatre addresses are educational themes that stem usually from the school’s curriculum. Most scholastic performances are presented inside the school on a simple stage and sometimes in theatres of other educational institutions. It is very rare for scholastic plays to be presented for an outside audience. Despite the fact that children’s theatre and scholastic theatre are two different types of theatre, they cut across the audience they target since they both present a theatrical work for an audience of young people.

3.4 History of Children's Theatre

3.4.1 History of Children's Theatre in the Arab World until 2005

According to Al Anany (2002, 182), children's theatre in the Arab world started late in comparison to its early start in the Western world. Despite the fact that adult theatre began in the Arab world in the mid nineteenth century (1848), children's theatre was unknown until 1964. According to Saqer (2004, 25-31), the emergence of Egyptian children's theatre and that of most other Arab countries differed from the emergence of children's theatre in the West. He asserts that children's theatre in Arab countries passed through three stages:

- 1) Puppet theatre
- 2) Scholastic theatre
- 3) Children's theatre.

Saqer (ibid., 25) reports that puppet theatre was popular in Egypt and many other Arab countries. Scholastic theatre emerged in the second stage in 1936 when Egypt's theatre pioneer, Zaki Tulimatt, wrote a letter to the Ministry of Knowledge requesting the establishment of theatre groups at schools. However, according to Saqer, theatrical activities remained only inside schools and did not extend to the wider community. In addition, at this stage there were no children's plays, and children's theatre was yet unknown as a separate form of theatre. Then, in 1964, children's theatre emerged in Egypt in its own right when the Ministry of National Guidance established two groups for children's theatre: one in Cairo and the second in Alexandria (Hagy 1994, 19) under the supervision of the Radio and Television Institute. After a break in activities from 1967 to 1968 (Saqer 2004, 26), the two groups started again in 1969 under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. After a three year gap, it restarted in 1973 to begin the second stage in the history of Egyptian children's theatre (Saqer 2004, 26). Although Egyptian

children's theatre experienced a stop-start history, children's performances have continued since 1973 (ibid.).

There is disagreement about the real emergence of children's theatre in Iraq. Hassan (2006) states that there were many playwrights and directors who wrote and directed for children's theatre in the 1950s. Additionally, he states that the first children's play was presented in 1964 by the Arts Institute. On the other hand, Nagem states that Iraqi children's theatre emerged in 1970, even though adult theatre started in 1927 (Nagem 2004). According to Swortzell (1990, 169), the real interest in children's theatre began in schools when acting began to be included in schools' activities in the 1930s. Sadoon Al Obaidi wrote and directed *The Daisy*, the first original children's play in Iraq in 1975. In 1977, the Ministry of Culture and Information established the Children's Culture House, which specialised in all aspects of children's culture, including a publishing house for children's books, magazines and other publications (ibid.).

In Syria and Lebanon, children's theatre emerged in 1960 (Saqr 2004, 28-29) when the first puppet theatre was established in Syria with performances in schools. In Lebanon, there were many theatrical activities presented for children in schools and theatrical clubs. Such activities created the foundation for establishing Lebanese children's theatre in the 1960s (ibid., 29).

As stated by Al Anany (2002, 182), efforts had been made by schools and children's associations to establish children's theatre in Jordan since 1964. Later, Margaret Blatjian, considered to be the pioneer of Jordanian children's theatre, established the first children's theatre in Jordan in 1971 under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. She presented her first children's play in the same year (Al Khaleel and Hewarat n.d.).

In the Gulf States, including the Sultanate of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates, children's theatre stems from scholastic theatre, as in other Arab countries. Kuwaiti children's theatre is considered to be the first professional children's theatre in the Gulf States. According to Al Haidari (Al Haidari and Masraheon 2005), since the early 1960s, Awatif Albader—the pioneer of Kuwaiti children's theatre—attempted to lay the basis of children's theatre by presenting many theatrical activities for children. In 1978, she succeeded in establishing the first specialised children's theatrical group in Kuwait: 'Albader's Theatre Group for Children'. In addition, Suliman (2004) declares that children's theatre in Kuwait started in 1978 when the children's play *Alsindipad Albahari* by Mahfood Abd-Alrahman (and directed by Mansoor Al Mansoor) was presented. Al Mansoor observes: 'Al Bader suggested the idea of presenting a children's play and I carried it out' (Suliman 2004).

Saudi pioneer in children's theatre, Abd-Alrahman Almerekhi, made many attempts to develop Saudi children's theatre (Al Khatib 1990, 54), but it was not until 1975 that children's theatre made an appearance in Saudi Arabia with performances taking place at sports clubs.

In the United Arab Emirates, Al Halian (2005) points out that interest in children's theatre started with the beginnings of Emirate Theatre in the fifties. He comments that, in 1988, the Emirates succeeded in receiving the best direction prize at the first Arab festival for children's theatre held in Egypt with a children's play entitled *Hekayat Bahlool wa Shayboob*. Moreover, Al Halian notes that, despite the acknowledgement that theatre groups showed by presenting children's performances from time to time, there was no theatrical festival for children's performances until 2005 when the first Emirate Children's Theatre Festival started.

Although scholastic theatre in Bahrain goes back to 1925, children's theatre still does not exist in Bahrain. In Qatar also, there is no children's theatrical group, despite the fact that there are many professional theatrical groups for adult theatre (Suliman and Masraheon 2004).

After reviewing this history of children's theatre in the Arab world, the next section will trace the dramatic phenomena that existed in Oman to amuse and educate children before the appearance of children's theatre.

3.5 Children's Folklore and Art in the Sultanate of Oman

The cultural heritage of the Sultanate of Oman is an integral part of its social, political, economic, geographical and religious history. Omani cultural heritage abounds with folkloric music, songs, tales, dance, sports and games. Bidwell, a traveller and historian, visited Oman in 1865 where, as reported by Al Habsi (2003, 27), he described Oman as: 'the land of amusements/arts ... of dance and song'.

Oman is well known for its narrative literature and poetry and also for its folk songs, folk music and dance. It has a very rich history of folk stories and traditional story-telling performances. Al Zadjali asserts:

The Sultanate is rich with different types of folklore for the various occasions and festivals, which differ from one region to another according to the difference in traditions, habits and the physical nature of the region itself. (Al Zadjali 2002, 28)

There are some traditional songs and dances that originated from Asia and Africa through Omani people's cultural and commercial interaction with other nations. For example, 'Al Bakit' is considered to be one of the Omani-Asian arts. This art is popular in the States of Saham and Sohar. The art of Al Bakit has three different types: Al Bakit Tamthil, Al Bakit Arai's and Al Seerwan. Al Bakit Tamthil is considered to be a dramatic

phenomenon in Oman that existed before the appearance of theatre (Ministry of Information 1990, 90-91). Al Habsi describes this art thus:

Some of the men dress as wild animals or birds or trees, and others act as comedy characters and a comic story in which the main character as the target is enacted. The actors' movement depends on the tone of the singing, and on the other participants repeating the words of the song after their leader. (Al Habsi 1998, 13)

This section is designed to focus on the traditional cultural heritage of children in Oman. Researching traditional children's songs, tales and sports and games is important for this study since it tackles the issue of children's theatre and researches the dramatic phenomena that existed in Oman to amuse and educate children before the appearance of children's theatre. These cultural heritage sources can provide traditional material for children's theatre scripts.

3.5.1 Folkloric Songs

Folkloric song is an important part of traditional Omani arts. There are several types of songs in Oman such as work songs, children's songs and songs for social and religious occasions. These songs can be performed individually or by a group and can have instrumental accompaniment. According to the Ministry of Information (1990, 46), folkloric music in Oman is based on a vocal tradition carried from one generation to the next. However, most Omani traditional songs are accompanied by drum rhythms and some are accompanied by oboe or clarinet.

Work songs

Work songs are sung while at work to energise and motivate the worker (Al Siyabi 2004, 132). Songs differ according to the job and the environment. For example, there are farmers' songs sung in harvest seasons and sea songs that sailors sing while fishing. Al Habsi states:

There are many kinds of song that are associated with work of sailors and seafarers, and which are sung as they prepare their boats for sailing, while they are out at sea, and when they return to the harbour. Each category of song has its particular tunes and style of singing, as well as its specific movements which depend on the beat of the drum, hand clapping and the rhythm of the oars. (Al Habsi 1998, 14)

Songs for social and religious occasions

There are special folkloric songs for some social occasions in Oman such as marriages, birthdays and circumcision ceremonies. Additionally, there are special chants for religious occasions such as the beginning of Ramadan, which is a holy month for Muslim people. Also, there are chants that are sung for the coming of Eids, an important Muslim festival, in addition to songs for the anniversary of the birthday of the prophet Mohamed (Al Siyabi 2004, 144).

Children's songs

From their birth, children occupy a very special and favoured position in Omani society. There are children's folkloric songs connected with a child's birth and they continue through the stages of a child's development until young adulthood. Mothers sing lullabies for their children and also sing to them at bath time and play time. There are also songs to educate the child: the mother praises her child when he is good and scolds him if he misbehaves. Additionally, there are some national songs to teach the child about his country, as well as morality songs to teach good standards of behaviour (Al Siyabi 2004, 150).

Children sing on different occasions, such as at religious and social occasions. For example, Omani children sing at the commencement of Ramadan and during Heg time, when Muslim people make a pilgrimage to Mecca. They also participate with adults in singing and clapping their hands at wedding parties. In addition, children sing for good

rainfall while they are playing in the rain, as well as singing while helping family members in farmwork (such as collecting dates).

One of the religious occasions that Omani children celebrate and sing at is the fifteenth day of the holy month of Ramadan. This celebration is called ‘Qaranqashooh’, which refers to the scratchy sound that comes from knocking two shells together. Children gather when people break their fast after sunset and then walk in a group singing and moving from one house to another, asking people for sweets and coins. The children accompany their singing by a rhythm of knocking two shells or two stones together. As they walk the children sing:

Qaranqashooh yoo nas... Atoona showayet halwa
Keet keet fee Alpakeet... Harah harah fee alsaharah
Doos doos fee Almandoos. (Ministry of Information 1990, 153)

They are saying: ‘Qaranqashooh O people... Give us some sweets’. The children then thank and pray for the people who have given them sweets or money, just as they admonish those who ignore them and do not give them anything, by singing and saying to them: ‘A ghost over your house’.

The Qaranqashooh celebration differs slightly from one Omani region to another. For example, in Hail Al Gaph in Quryat, it is not only children who celebrate on this day but adults also. The Qaranqashooh celebration in Quryat takes a **dramatic form**. A group of men go out with children, wearing animal masks and acting like wild animals; this creates a joyful atmosphere. They all walk around the village, moving from one house to another singing and drumming (Ministry of Information 1990, 153). The children’s singing is usually accompanied by acting and movement, since children are energetic and active (Al Siyabi 2004, 153).

3.5.2 Traditional Sports and Games

There are many folkloric sports and games in the Sultanate of Oman that Omani people have inherited from past generations. These traditional sports and games meet people's need for physical activity and entertainment. At the same time, they have intellectual and cultural values (Bintnet 2004). Al Habsi (1998, 17) notes that these sports and games help to maintain people's health, happiness and social relations as well as helping to build character. In addition, he believes that the entertainment factor is considerable, since people who have played such games and sports in villages and the desert areas for generations regard them as traditional hobbies. Moreover, such activity reflects the benefits of using leisure time productively, with physical and intellectual advantages for people.

There are various traditional games and sports in each region of the country. They have been designed for men, women and children to suit their nature and their physical and intellectual abilities. Most of these games and sports are simple and do not require any expensive equipment. Some are designed to be group games and some can be played individually or in pairs. Additionally, some national games and sports are similar to modern sports. For instance, there is a sport named 'Al Qapiah', also called 'Al Rod' in some regions, which is played with a ball and stick that is similar to hockey (Bintnet 2004). The Omani government tries to preserve these traditional games and sports by organising a special festival for them.

Children's traditional sports and games

Children in particular enjoy traditional games and sports, especially those that are designed specifically for them. In adults' games and sports, children are the audience, surrounding and encouraging the players. Children usually play in their spare time, such as the break time between class hours and after school time from 4.00 pm until sunset, in

addition to holiday times. They normally gather in the square of the village or town. Children can play in groups, in pairs or individually. These traditional sports and games were very important for Omani children's amusement, especially before the advent of radio (1970), TV (1974) and children's theatre.

One popular children's game that includes dramatic aspects is 'Heppoh Moh Tdoory?' or 'Grandmother...What are you looking for?' In this game, children stand in a circle holding hands and one child, a girl acting as the grandmother, stands in the middle of the circle holding a stick and looking for something on the floor. Then, the children circle the grandmother and start a singing conversation with her, saying:

- Children: O' grandmother. What are you looking for?
- The Grandmother (in an old woman voice): I'm looking for a needle.
- Children: Why do you need this needle?
- The Grandmother: For the thread.
- Children: Why do you need this thread?
- The Grandmother: For the bag.
- Children: Why do you need this bag?
- The Grandmother: For the eggs.
- Children: Why do you need the eggs?
- The Grandmother: For my children.
- Children: How many children do you have?
- The Grandmother: Ten.
- Children (amazed): Oh my God!

Then the action starts when the children start to laugh at the grandmother because she has too many children. After that, the grandmother starts to run after them in an amusing way, trying to catch and punish them.

In addition, there are some special games for girls and others for boys. One of the popular girls' games that again includes dramatic aspects is 'The House'. This game can be

played in pairs or in a group. As it is played in pairs, each girl who participates draws a square in the sand considered to be her house, stands inside the square (the house) and pretends she is the owner and the lady of the house. The girls imitate their mothers by trying to do housework or hold dolls in their hands, pretending to be mothers looking after their children. The two girls act as neighbours and friends and visit each other.

There are some children's folkloric sports and games that are accompanied by songs. For instance, there is a folkloric game named 'Baloom Baloom' and the song accompanying this game has the same name. Another game accompanied by a song of the same name is 'Althalap Fat Fat' or 'The Fox has Run Away'.

3.5.3 Folkloric Tales

Folk tales are considered to be one of the first human forms of expression before the existence of reading and writing. Al Siyabi indicates that German dictionaries defined folk tales as:

The news which is connected with an old event and which moves from one generation to another through an oral narrative. It is a free creation of people's imagination about important events, people and places. (Al Siyabi 2004, 153)

The Sultanate of Oman is rich in the folkloric heritage of folk tales. Al Habsi (1998, 19) reports that Omani poets, storytellers and thinkers have translated Omani's rich culture and literature into popular songs and tales. Omani narratives differ from one region of the country to another, depending on the nature of the region. However, there are some popular folktales known to all Omani people that have been inherited from prior generations. Al Habsi (1998, 20) reflects that Omani folk tales are inspired by history, culture, imagination, religion and humour. Some of the traditional Omani tales are told in the form of simple poetry and some of them are accompanied by music and dramatic activity that further enlivens the storytelling session. Folk tales were mainly orally

transmitted and preserved. However, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture is currently attempting to collect and document them.

Children's Folk Tales

Most Omani families are very large, sometimes with as many as fifteen children. Additionally, there is a very strong relationship between family members, and in some families, grandparents and grandchildren live together. Therefore, storytelling performances usually take place in the home and are mainly confined to members of the family. In holiday time and on special occasions (such as during the Eid festival) all the sons and their children gather in the big family house, usually the grandparents' house. As there are typically quite a large number of children, it makes for a good audience. The storyteller, generally one of the parents or grandparents, gathers the children in a circle around him and starts telling the story. Al Habsi describes the storytelling performance:

The stories begin with the exciting formulaic phrase, 'There was and there was .. in the past and in recent times...', in order to encourage the children to follow the tale from the beginning to the end and to get to know all the characters and the details of the plot. The storyteller then recounts the events of the narrative in a dramatic and exciting way, employing different voices for different characters, using movement and signs, and sometimes acting parts of the story to make it easier for the children to follow the themes and ideas in the plot. (Al Habsi 1998, 21)

The narrator uses simple language that children can easily understand. Sometimes, the narrator asks the children in the audience to participate and involves them in the storytelling performance by asking them questions about the story or asking them to act part of it or to imitate an animal's voice.

Most Omani children have heard some folk tales from their grandparents or parents. Such storytelling sessions are very important for children because they strengthen the relationship between child and parents. They are also important in strengthening the relationship between generations. Moreover, these folk tales have entertainment and

educational values for children. Most of them reflect the conflict between good and evil, with good being rewarded and evil punished.

The previous sections review the history of children's theatre in the Arab world and the dramatic phenomena that existed in Oman to amuse and educate children before the appearance of children's theatre. The next section looks at the obstacles facing children's theatre in the Arab world, including Oman.

3.6 The Obstacles Facing Children's Theatre in the Arab World

The obstacles facing children's theatre in the Arab world were discussed at the third Jordanian Festival for Children's Theatre in 2000. This discussion demonstrates the concern held by theatre people about this matter and the desire to overcome these obstacles and to develop children's theatre in Arab countries (Malha 2000, 13).

Al Zadjali (2002, 41-44) in his study entitled *Children's Drama: Technical and Educational Approaches. The Development of TV and Theatre Drama in Oman*, outlines the following areas of weakness in children's theatre in the Arab world:

- Quality of content: Al Zadjali believes that Arabic children's theatre lacks plays suited to children's different age categories in the sense that what is suitable for very young children might not suit older children. He comments that children attend all performances even if the content is unsuitable for their age and intellectual, psychological and social stage. Thus, children will not benefit from such performances which do not match their developmental stages.
- Absence of scientific pedagogical studies: Al Zadjali reflects that this ignorance of the needs of different children's age groups is due to lack of scientific studies of children's characteristics and interests.

- Lack of financial support: This scarcity of financial support for children's theatre leads, according to Al Zadjali, to the weakness of performances presented for children.
- No dedicated children's theatres: Al Zadjali (2002, 41) asserts that one of the obstacles facing children's theatre in Arab countries is the scarcity of theatres that are dedicated as children's theatre.

Al Bahi in Aydabi (2002, 67-68) reports that there are many obstacles facing children's theatre in the United Arab Emirates. One obstacle is that theatrical activities for children are presented only intermittently, usually as annual activities. Al Bahi feels sure that, given this scarcity of theatrical activities for children, children's theatre will not be able to develop. He declares that there is an absence of long-term strategies to develop children's theatre and a failure to identify goals for this theatre. The result, he believes, is a feeling of purposelessness in the field. He asserts that the absence of clear and defined strategies will cause conflict in all concerted efforts to develop this theatre (ibid.).

In Kuwait, Awatef Albader, children's playwright and pioneer in Kuwaiti children's theatre since 1978, expressed the obstacles facing her children's theatre group (Albader's Theatre Group for Children):

Only a few people and very few institutions value children's theatre and understand its importance and its goals, whereas the rest deal with children's theatre as a money making source. (Al Haidari and Masraheon 2005)

Albader believes that most children's plays that are presented do not tackle educational or cultural themes for children because some producers only think about the money they will gain from selling tickets. In addition, she mentions that most of the children's performances are seasonal and discontinuous since the majority are presented during the time of Eid (Muslim celebrations).

On the authority of Bakri (2005, 22), one of the obstacles facing Arab children's theatre is the presentation of fantasy plays, such as fairy tale plays and Cinderella stories, that are far removed from living issues and which aim only to entertain. Bakri believes that such fantasy plays encourage children to live in a dreamland which does not prepare them for the harsh realities of the world. In addition, he thinks that, despite the efforts made in the Arab world to develop children's theatre, it is not well organised. In the opinion of Bakri, theatre people lack both experience in dealing with children and an ability to express children's issues through theatre.

In Oman, one of the many barriers facing children's theatre is that it has only recently appeared on the Omani theatrical scene in comparison with adult theatre and the long history of Western children's theatre and some other Arabic theatres. Additionally, there are further limiting factors that hinder the development of Omani children's theatre. Al Zadjali (2002, 120-126) relates the numerous problems facing Omani theatre in general. This includes children's theatre, since he believes that all theatrical forms in Oman share the same difficulties. These include:

- A lack of specialised children's theatre personnel. Al Zadjali reports that, despite the existence of an advanced institute of education in theatrical performance in Oman, Omani theatre specifically lacks experienced and specialised staff, especially those able to deal with modern theatrical technology. In addition, he claims that artistic companies are undeveloped and lack trained personnel; furthermore, there is no cooperation between these companies.
- The absence of a clear strategy for theatre as a whole.
- A lack of good scripts due to the absence of professional Omani playwrights. The writing, according to Al Zadjali, lacks clarity and focus.

- The overall attitude towards children's theatre whose practitioners still tend to consider it as a secondary theatre. Also, there is a failure to recognise theatre for children as a separate art form.
- The limited scope of material prepared for children's theatre as is general in the Arab world, specifically for particular age categories.

Additionally, Al Habsi (2003, 163) reports that, in his interview with Batool Al Lawatiya (Head of the Women and Children's Department in the Ministry of Social Development), Batool stressed that the absence of a strategy for the foundation of a children's theatre is one of the deterrents facing Omani children's theatre. Moreover, Al Habsi states:

The absence of children's theatre was due to the unavailability of specialist Omani playwrights for children's plays, as was the case in the shortage of specialist Omani playwrights for the theatre in general. Moreover, I noticed that there was no cooperation between the theatrical groups and government establishments, which were supervising and managing children's activities in Oman. (Al Habsi 2003, 163)

It is obvious that there are common problems facing all children's theatre that this research has reviewed in the Arab world. Based on that review, the obstacles are summarised as follows:

- The absence of specialised children's theatre as a separate form of theatre as a consequence of the confusion between the different dramatic forms by and for children (Al Zadjali 2002, 120-126).
- A lack of strategy to develop children's theatre (Al Bakri 2005, 22; Aydabi 2002, 67-68; Al Zadjali 2002, 120-126).
- The scarcity of financial support and the poor budget allocated for children's theatre by both state and private sectors (Al Zadjali 2002, 120-126).

- The scarcity of professional and specialised people in the field of children's theatre as a result of the lack of specialised academic departments and institutes that teach children's theatre (Al Zadjali 2002, 120-126; Al Habsi 2003, 163).
- The seasonal and discontinuous nature of children's performances, which are usually only annual events (Aydabi 2002, 67-68).
- A misunderstanding of the real objectives of children's theatre, which results in some producers dealing with children's theatre as purely a moneymaking venture (Al Haidari and Masraheon 2005).

Having explored the history of children's theatre and the obstructions it faces in the Arab world, including Oman, the next section explores the importance of the arts generally, and children's theatre in particular, as a unique art form in children's lives.

3.7 The Importance of the Arts in Children's Lives

The arts encompass a range of disciplines and comprise numerous artistic forms such as literary arts, visual arts, applied arts, and the performing arts of music, drama and dance. Each art form has its unique characteristics and its special effect on human lives in general and children's lives in particular. Numerous studies have been conducted about the impact of the arts as a whole on children's lives, while others discuss in detail the speciality of each art form, including children's theatre, and its effect. Although this section is designed to briefly discuss the importance of the arts in general in children's lives, it focuses mainly on theatre as an art form, and its special impact on children's existence as human beings. The ideas which might occur to perceptive thinkers are: the importance of arts in children's lives, how a child's personal development is fostered, and what is the special nature and effect of children's theatre as an art form in children's development? Or, in other words: What makes children's theatre a unique contribution compared with other artistic forms?

As stated by W. Lambert Brittain (1979, 183), young children constantly interact physically with their environment, and this interaction takes several forms such as touching, looking at, listening to, smelling, and (even) tasting. Arts activities are one of the best and most interesting ways to encourage children to explore their world and their immediate environment.

Neryl Jeanneret (Jeanneret n.d.) believes the arts to be an expressive medium. She explains why and how the arts are important in developing children's full potential. In Jeanneret's opinion, children often understand more than they are able to verbalise, their understanding can be observed in behaviour other than verbal, and this fact has been known by teachers for many years. Jeanneret also indicates that the power of the arts stems from these facts, as arts activities allow children to express their ideas and feelings through both non-verbal and verbal forms of communication. Through arts activities, children can use sound, movement, gesture, form and image to express their ideas and feelings (Jeanneret n.d.). Jeanneret confirms the importance of arts in children's lives and affirms:

The key learning area of the arts is able to provide children with unique and multiple ways of exploring, forming, expressing, communicating and understanding their own and others' ideas and feelings. It provides students with the skills and knowledge necessary to understand how the arts reflect and depict the diversity of our world, its cultures, and traditions. (Jeanneret n.d.)

According to Perrin (1994) in Jeanneret (ibid.), 'the student artist (musician, dancer, visual artist, writer, or actor) learns by doing'. Fowler (1994) in Jeanneret (Jeanneret n.d.) believes:

When we involve students in creative problem solving, we invite their participation as partners in the learning process. Instead of telling them what to think, the arts engage the minds of students to sort out their own reactions and articulate them through the medium at hand. Their beings become embedded in the task so that they learn from the inside out rather than from the outside in feelings. (Jeanneret n.d.)

Again, Jeanneret believes that the arts encourage students to be active participants in their world rather than be mere observers of it. Jeanneret stresses the importance of including arts courses in the curriculum and balancing them with other learning areas as they would help to increase the students' academic abilities:

The results of balancing the arts with other learning areas in the curriculum have shown that where 25% or more of the curriculum is devoted to arts courses, students acquire academically superior abilities (Perrin, 1994), demonstrating an apparent relationship between learning in the arts and other areas. (Jeanneret n.d.)

Brittain (1979, 184) also believes that arts production is one of the best ways to advance young (preschool) children's cognitive growth, in that it allows them to understand, organise, and utilise concepts. Brittain also agrees with Jeanneret that the arts are an expressive medium. He avers that the child who is drawing and painting more often can not only be considered to be proficient in that skill, but also that drawing and painting 'could be one of the excellent means of facilitating cognitive development, the means through which the child organizes his concepts so that they become understandable to him and assimilated into his intellectual function' (ibid.).

Harris, in Brittain (1979, 184), claims that there is a positive and strong relationship between the number of details included in drawing and the development of children's intellectual ability. Brittain explains this relationship between arts production and the intellectual and emotional development of the child thus:

The act of drawing or painting is looked upon as an external expression of an inner state, both intellectually and emotionally. It has therefore been assumed if the child develops cognitively beyond his years, he will express this same development in his art products. Our belief is that the art activities do more than just reflect the inner child; they help to form it. (Brittain 1979, 184)

Kaori Iwai (2002, 408), in his paper entitled *The Contribution of Arts Education to Children's Lives* (presented at the UNESCO Regional Meeting on Arts Education in the European Countries, Canada and the United States of America held in Finland, 2003),

shows that appropriate arts activities in curricula not only offer children better artistic development, but also enhance their appreciation of the arts and improve their aesthetic development. According to Iwai:

An ethnographical observation of seventeen urban third and fourth-grade students in the United States shows that children, who initially considered theatre as something only fun and imitative, can gradually learn that drama is constructed by underlying structures. Playing roles as an actor, a critic, or a character in classroom *theatre*, the children understand the disciplines of dramatic expression and the nature of theatrical interpretation. (Iwai 2002, 408)

In addition, Iwai (2002, 409) explains how arts activities can promote the socio-emotional development of children, reporting on a study conducted in two inner city elementary schools in New Jersey (USA) which offered the 'Arts Alternatives Program' to students from low socioeconomic status families in Grades Four, Five, and Six. Through this drama program, and by using a variety of role-playing and story writing activities, he observed the students' attitudinal changes and found (using an attitude scale) that those students showed better attitudes of self-expression, trust, self-acceptance, acceptance of others, self-awareness and empowerment.

Furthermore, Schirrmacher (1998, 43) explains the importance of play, including dramatic play, in children's lives. Schirrmacher believes that children express their creativity through play. This takes various forms, including physical play, constructive play with blocks, dramatic play, play with natural materials and games. Dramatic play is defined by Schirrmacher (ibid.) as: the play that involves fantasy, imagination, or make-believe, and it can be played by one child or with a group of children utilising props. He explains: 'A child who is dressing a baby doll is engaging in dramatic or symbolic play' (1998, 43). He also mentions that when children play-house for instance- each child will have a role (mommy, daddy, or baby), a function, and a speaking part to play. He adds that props, such as house props (furniture, clothing, kitchen appliances etc.) must be

provided to enhance children's creativity, and when 'open-ended props are provided the children's creative possibilities will be expanded'.

Schirmacher (1998, 43) also outlines the importance of dramatic play for children's development thus: 'Children practice language and social skills, as well as planning and decision-making skills in dramatic play'. He also believes that children re-create what they know through dramatic play and can express their emotions, such as fear of abandonment or sibling rivalry. As an example, the child who has been loved and cared for will act out this scenario in dramatic play (ibid.).

The importance of theatre as an art form in children's lives and its unique nature stems from its nature as a direct form of expression, which includes the immediate interaction between audience and the artists (through live performance), with the human performer (the actor) as its main element. The difference of theatre from other art forms also lies in its combination of many art forms, such as writing, acting, directing, design, music, construction, lighting, costumes and make up. Thus, presenting a theatrical performance requires teamwork, and this collective work is another advantage. Regarding the relationship between theatre and other art forms, Goldberg (1974, 10-11) indicates that watching a well-produced children's performance could be a good way for children to study and understand the arts, since theatre includes many arts forms such as music, dance, and architecture, and vice versa, since an arts or music background helps the child to a better understanding of theatre.

Wolfgang Schneider considers theatre as one of the most important art forms in the cultural life of human society because of its involvement in all aspects of human life (Schneider 2010). He believes that children's theatre helps children to discover and understand the world, not only by representing a familiar reality to them, but also new and still unfamiliar ones. Schneider also indicates that children's theatre plays an

important role in laying common cultural foundations in a multicultural world because it enlightens the child about the concerns and dreams of the human family in general, as well as addressing his own dreams, and his own national and cultural issues (ibid.).

In addition, Goldberg (1974, 14-15) believes that good children's theatre has three main values to children, namely, aesthetic, pedagogical or educational, and psychological. He claims that the essence of aesthetic value is participation, and that the keys to children's participation are: presence, interaction with actors, and belief in the ongoing action. Thus, he believes that if the children do not understand everything happening on the stage, their participation is lessened. Al Bagday (2001, 29-30) also believes that art and creative activities foster children's aesthetic development. He comments that enhancing children's aesthetic sense motivates the child to search for the aspects of beauty in his surrounding world and to enjoy and appreciate them.

Children's theatre is also an effective educational tool, where learning is indirect and takes place within the context of play or entertainment. According to Goldberg (1974, 15), the pedagogical value of children's theatre cannot be achieved through didactic plays that tend towards formal lectures, because children learn better by being motivated. Thus, he believes that the motivational advantage of theatre for children can only be achieved through plays that are chiefly artistic products, that are entertaining, and that teach indirectly.

The psychological values of theatre to children are realised through their seeing on the stage representations of problems and learning that problems can be solved (Goldberg 1974, 16).

Another view of the positive effects of theatre emerged when the importance of children's attendance and experience of a live arts performance was explored in a longitudinal

research project, *Children's Voices* (2006). The research was conducted over a period of three years (2003-2005) in South Australia with 140 five-to-twelve year old children, in four schools. The children attended two to three arts performances per year at the Festival Theatre, Adelaide. The main question posed by the research was: *What was the impact of attending live arts performances on school-aged children in public schools in South Australia?* This research sought an understanding of how children between the ages of 5 and 12 perceived, understood and described live arts performances and how they owned, valued, interpreted, recreated, improvised and produced their own arts activities. The final report of *Children's Voices* outlines the impact of live performances on children and explains that:

Over the three years, the most noticeable impact was the children's marked gain in literacy. Children's vocabulary about performance (in particular) also expanded over the three years. They wrote about 'voice tone' (*Midnite*), 'frightedness' (*A Safer Place*), being amused and shocked (*Riverland*) so words were explored, learned, invented and used in context, after enjoying several performances and various performance styles. (Schiller n.d.)

The report explains that children's oral and written expressive language improved over the three years because they were encouraged at home and at school to read critiques of performances in newspapers, to write their own stories, plays, poems, letters, scripts, diaries and posters. The final research project report indicates that:

Children were learning about performance literacy in particular. They knew the correct terms for people's roles and responsibilities in live arts performances. They were learning to think critically about what they were seeing, and to critique and express their ideas clearly, articulately and honestly. That is, children were becoming critically aware, and applying skills learned in the *Children's Voices* project to other performances and events, and across related learning areas (e.g. society and environment, science and technology). (Schiller n.d.)

The results and findings of the research project *Children's Voices* suggest the importance of children's attendance and experience of live arts performances and outline the skills and knowledge children can gain from just being spectators at such events. The general values of children's theatre to children is summarised by Goldberg who observes:

In general, the theatre can offer the child enjoyment, a chance to participate creatively, an opportunity to learn, and a stimulus to psychological growth and mental health. (Goldberg 1974, 16)

In conclusion, the arts in general are important in children's lives as they enhance their cognitive, aesthetic and psychological development. Each art form has its unique effectiveness in children's lives; thus, children must have access to all artistic activities. The uniqueness of children's theatre stems from the fact that it is a direct form of expression and allows the child audience to directly interact with actors and other theatrical elements included in a live performance. Its uniqueness also arises from its comprehensiveness, as it encompasses many artistic forms. Theatre amuses and educates children and offers them a better understanding of their world, as it engages them in all spheres of human life.

3.8 The Importance of Children's Theatre in Oman

This section is designed to explore and answer the following questions:

- Is there is a demand for children's theatre in Oman?
- What will this theatre add to the existing cultural life of the country?

The 2003 Omani census shows that children make up 40.6% of the total population of the country (Ministry of National Economy 2004, 3). It is obvious that children are an important age category of the Omani population and they have received a great deal of attention since 1970, the new era in Oman under the rule of Sultan Qaboos. In 1985, the National Association for Child Care was established by Sultanic decree. However, although there has been a great deal of attention given to this important age group with regard to health and living standard, less attention has been given to cultural and educational sectors. This leads me to pose this question and discuss it with the interviewees: Considering the high percentage of children in the population, what is the

cultural/artistic position of children in Oman? This section will review the opinions of some informed Omani people involved in theatre about the demand for and the importance of children's theatre in Oman.

Jawad—playwright, director and advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture—poses this question: Why do we need children's theatre and why is it so important? (Jawad 2006, 1:72-73). He believes that children as an audience really enjoy watching theatrical performances, and he observes from his own experience that there is strong interaction between the children and the performances. Jawad also states:

I would wish that the foundations of theatre be taught to students so as to give them an idea about it at an early age. And I think it would be very useful to introduce them to classical plays and scripts from around the world and to familiarise them with Omani and Arabic theatre – thus it would improve their sense of appreciation and criticism and their ability to differentiate between what is offered for them on the stage. I believe that theatre is “father of the arts” because it combines different arts and it has many advantages. In my opinion, it helps to expand the horizons of students, enhance their way of thinking, and improve their mental and aesthetic functions. (Jawad 2006, 1:42-50)

Additionally, Jawad (2006, 1:122-126) believes that schools in the Sultanate of Oman, including private schools, generally present only superficial information for children regarding the arts. He feels sure that children are not given the opportunity to express their artistic side, such as in music, acting, drawing or reciting, and indicates that children must have sufficient artistic activities at schools.

Rahima Al Gabri, playwright and supervisor of the Theatre Group at the Students' Affairs Deanship in the Sultan Qaboos University, strongly believes that there is a need for specialised children's theatre in Oman that educates and amuses children. However, she supposes that, at the present time, professional children's theatre does not exist except for some occasional trial presentations of children's performances; she feels also that 'children in Oman long for theatre' (Al Gabri 2006, 1:38-40).

In agreement, Al Zadjali (2002, 216) states that, unfortunately, children's theatre does not exist in Oman despite its importance in the life of the child. He avers that, because of globalisation and openness to other cultures and societies, many traditional values and customs of Omani society have changed for the worse (ibid., 2). He thinks that aspects of Omani society such as privacy of social behaviour, clothing and lifestyle have been seriously affected by globalisation. Therefore, Al Zadjali asserts that one way in which Omani culture can be preserved is through children's theatre. He claims that children's theatre can play a significant role in the fortification of values and faith and in giving children knowledge of their culture. He also declares that through children's theatre, children can learn how to face life now and in the future, and that children's theatre is 'crucial to the mental and spiritual development of children' (Al Zadjali 2002, 240).

Yousef Al Blushi—playwright, director and head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group—reflects that there is a real demand for children's theatre in Oman because it is the basis for a developed Omani theatre and he comments on the large population of children in Oman. He pronounces: 'There is an urgent need for children's theatre because it is the basis for a developed theatre. We should also consider the fact that there is a child in every home' (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 159-161). Al Blushi explains the importance of children's theatre because of its special effect on children's lives, and also agrees with Al Zadjali that children's theatre can play an important role in preserving Omani culture and traditions:

We really need to have a developed children's theatre in Oman and I have heard this from one of the mothers who attended a children's performance presented by our group and accompanied her children; she told me how much we need children's theatre to educate our children. However, unfortunately, some people still believe that the child does not need the theatre because of the existence of computer, internet and satellite channels, but I believe that the reverse is correct. I believe that because of the globalization and the existence of the internet and satellite channels, which could have negative impacts on children besides its advantages, the Omani society culture and identity are in real danger. Many of our traditions, values and customs are beginning to disappear and are being replaced by foreign ones. So, I believe that children's theatre can play an important role in this regard, because it can present performances for children that tackle themes inspired

from our traditional culture that help to increase the child's awareness and appreciation of his culture. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 316-328)

Al Blushi also believes that, nowadays, many children are becoming addicted to video games, some of which encourage them to be aggressive; theatre, on the other hand, teaches children love and increases their sense of humanity (ibid.).

Again, Mohamed Al Habsi, Associate Professor in the Theatre Arts Department in the Sultan Qaboos University, agrees with Al Blushi and Al Zadjali that children's theatre is an important means to maintain Omani traditional heritage through introducing it to the younger generations, and he stresses the value of using Omani folk stories and history when writing children's plays. Al Habsi states:

I would like to emphasise the importance of linking children's theatre to Oman's traditional heritage, such as folk stories, folk songs and proverbs, and it is also important to link children's theatre to the history of world, Arabic history and Omani history. I would like playwrights to use these stories and history as a source of inspiration in writing their plays. We could also employ Omani folk songs in children's theatre, especially in musical productions. By doing so, we introduce traditional heritage and history to the children, and we also document it. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 248-254)

Furthermore, Sahiha Al Azri, Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development, believes in the educational value of children's theatre and announces: 'We shouldn't neglect children's theatre since it is an important means by which we can pass on educational messages to children. All the parties, both local and international, should work together to promote children's theatre' (Al Azri 2006, 1: 110-113).

Many Omani theatre practitioners and some government personnel (who work for government institutions responsible for the cultural and social sectors and theatre in Oman) believe in the importance of children's theatre in children's lives generally, and its

importance for Omani society. The interviewees' appreciation of children's theatre varies and stems from different facts. For instance, some believe that its importance comes from its comprehensive nature as it encompasses many art forms, and some believe in its educational value. However, what is significant and notable is that many Omani theatre practitioners—including Al Blushi, Al Habsi and Al Zadjali—stress the importance of children's theatre as a means of preserving the Omani cultural heritage and identity.

3.9 Omani Government Authorities Responsible for Children's Culture in Oman

3.9.1 Introduction

Keeping in mind that Oman before the 1970s was not a modern or developed state, there were no governmental Omani authorities responsible for many sectors, including the cultural sector. There was no governmental body concerned with cultural matters of which children's culture is part. Oman's economic situation was at that time very weak, especially before the discovery of oil and its export as a major commodity for the national income. The educational situation was weak too, as there were only three schools. Oman had no regional or international connections, nor did it hold membership of any organization dealing with culture and the child.

When Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970 he started to build a modern state through the establishment of ministries to deal with various important sectors, including the cultural sector, and plans and strategies were drafted to develop these sectors. One of the most important roles of the government was to focus on the development of human resources. At present, there are many government institutions responsible for culture and education as a whole. Some of these institutions have a useful role in supporting cultural activities, including those focusing on the child. These authorities are the Ministry of

Education, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Information, and the Muscat and Dhofar Municipalities.

This section elaborates on the participation of each governmental authority in supporting and contributing to child cultural activities in Oman.

3.9.2 The Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education is one of the oldest ministries in Oman. Established in 1970, its goal was to make formal educational structures widespread and to eliminate illiteracy, because the majority of Omani people were illiterate. The most important roles of the Ministry were: to institute basic and general education in a fair and just system; to provide opportunities for all citizens in all regions; to build the schools; to prepare educational plans and projects according to the national goals and the requirements of economic and social development and educational and technical development; and to undertake all responsibilities related to education (Ministry of Education 2010).

The Ministry supervises kindergarten and nursery schools, delivering technical and administrative services such as the supervision and evaluation of the implementation of the curriculum and programs in the preschool sector. It also supervises teachers and allied staff working in nursery schools (Al Mamari n.d.). Through the implementation of many activities and events to spread the awareness of human and child rights through the school curriculum, The Directorate General for Curriculum Development has merged the concepts of human and child rights in the school curriculum (Al Hinai n.d.).

The Ministry pays particular attention to the variety of educational activities in the schools, including theatre. These varied educational activities are considered to be part of the school curriculum although not specified officially, and there is a specialised

department for educational activities. This department supervises the educational and cultural activities within the schools, including sport, scouts, social and cultural activities. Cultural activities are composed of school broadcasting, media and photography, in addition to theatre and other arts activities. All students are encouraged to participate in these activities.

The following are some of the most important theatrical and cultural events that have been supervised and implemented by the Department of Educational Activities:

1. Participation in different regional and international cultural competitions. For example, Oman has participated in arts activities in Qatar, Egypt and in the United Arab Emirates.
2. Preparation and issuing of annual brochures that contain the creative work in theatre and art of students who won first prizes in cultural and theatrical writing competitions. These brochures are: Samples from school theatre (*Alwan men Almasrah Almadrasi*), and Shining Lights in the fields of the arts and literature (*Wamadat Waeidah fiee Sonoof Aladap wa Alfan*).
3. Preparation (in coordination with the Directorate General for Curricula) of a brochure entitled *Dramatized lessons from the school curriculum*; this contains a group of dramatized lessons for various curricula.
4. Organization of the general theatrical performance competition in all educational regions, including the regions of Muscat, Sharqiya, Batinah, Mosandum and Dhofar. This competition showcases the most talented students in each region and presents a developed theatrical performance.
5. Participation in the annual Gulf School Theatre Festival (Ministry of Education 2010).

The Festival of School Theatre of the Arab Gulf States (GCC) was set up by his Highness Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qasbi, UAE Supreme Council member and the ruler of Sharjah. He set up the festival to take place annually for schools in the Gulf States. The Festival is hosted and sponsored by Sharjah and invites participation of school theatre groups from all the Gulf States, including the Sultanate of Oman, United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. The festival aims to focus on school theatre in the Gulf States and to encourage students' interest in the field of theatre (Alrahal UAE Net n.d.).

The first Festival of School Theatre of the Arab Gulf States (GCC) was held in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates in 2002, as was the second festival in 2003. The third festival took place in Abha, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the fourth was held in the Sultanate of Oman in 2007, organized and supervised by the Ministry of Education. The Republic of Yemen participated for the first time in this festival, along with all the other Gulf States. (Al Anqoodi 2007)

The Ministry of Education also set up a special annual festival for scholastic theatre in Oman, with the main goal being to encourage school students to be creative in the theatrical field, especially in playwriting, acting and performing, by creating competition between schools. The first festival of scholastic theatre was held in the Al Batinah Region of Oman in 2002. Besides presenting theatrical performances by school students, there were other activities included in this festival such as an exhibition of educational activities. The second scholastic theatre festival was held in the academic year 2003/2004 (Al Qasabi 2006, 32-33).

It is also important to illustrate here that the first theatrical activities in Oman took place in the 1940s and 1950s in Al Saidiah Schools, the only three schools existing in Oman before 1970. However, the theatrical activities in Omani schools before and during the 1970s were not documented by the Ministry of Education, so many plays and their authors and producers remain unknown (Al Habsi 2003, 57). According to Al Habsi, the 1970s and 1980s were the period in which scholastic theatre activity was initially established and then further developed in the 1980s (ibid.).

At present, while each Omani school organises some theatrical activities and performances within the schools during the academic year, despite the importance of school theatre as a major part of Omani theatre in general, there are still many obstacles facing school theatre in Oman. For example, there is no time available in the general school curriculum for theatre activities, because it is not listed as a

separate timetabled subject and there are no specialised drama teachers or physical facilities (such as stages) and specialised equipment. Moreover, although the Ministry of Education has an important role in supporting children's cultural activities and school theatre, all of these activities are limited to school-aged children; they are considered to be part of the school's extra-curricular activities and are practised within the school confines for children aged seven and above. Dr. Abdul Kareem Jawad, advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture, suggested in an interview that: children of preschool age need the enrichment of cultural activities too, as most Omani children do not go to kindergarten or nursery schools, and the children in Oman are in need of cultural activities, clubs, areas and equipment to contribute to the development of their cultural appreciation from an early age (Jawad 2006, 1: 120-126).

The Ministry of Education also organises symposiums and conferences on child culture, particularly on how to develop children's culture in Oman. For example, the Ministry organized a scientific seminar entitled 'Omani Child Culture: Press Publications and its Role in the Development of the Child's Culture' in October 2008. The event took place at Sultan Qaboos University with the participation of specialists from Oman, Gulf Cooperation Council States and other Arabic countries (Al Farazi 2008). The focus of the seminar was the current situation and condition of child culture in Oman, especially issues concerning the various publications for children in different creative fields. It also called for urgent action to publish more specialized and informative publications for children of different age groups that can enrich their knowledge in all fields. The symposium also discussed the possibility of issuing a specialized magazine dealing with child culture, with contributions from the relevant authorities from public and private sectors (Al Farazi 2008).

There were nineteen research papers presented at this seminar, including: *'Magazines and Publications Addressed to Children in Oman'* by Amer Mohammed Al Aisari from the Ministry of Education; *'Books, Stories and Children's Libraries: Evaluation and Proposal'* by Dr. Mohammed Mojahid from the Department of Information and Library at the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University; *'The Reality of Radio and Television Programs Addressed for Children in Oman'* by Dr. Khalid Al Zadjali from the Ministry of Information; and *'Children's Theatres and Clubs: Vision and Expectation'* by Dr. Abdual Kareem Jawad from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (Al Farazi 2008). So it can be seen that this Ministry makes many contributions to children's culture, including theatre, but there are still some elements missing.

3.9.3 The Ministry of Heritage and Culture

The Ministry of Heritage and Culture was established in 1976 with various responsibilities dealing with the preservation of artifacts, museums and historical sites and buildings, and their effective maintenance and use. It is also concerned with the collection and protection of archives, records and scripts that are considered part of the national cultural heritage. In addition, it is responsible for the maintenance of the national traditional arts, the development of theatre, music, cinema, visual art and songs, and for encouraging national participation to develop Omani culture and literature. The Ministry also organizes local, regional and international exhibitions and festivals to promote cultural exchange between Oman and its neighbours. The Ministry is also responsible for initiating and maintaining contact with other Arabic, regional and international associations in related fields of responsibility (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2005).

The Ministry has a Directorate for Theatre, Cinema and Fine Arts with a department for each of the three branches. This Directorate aims to supervise and develop the activities

relating to these three fields and, in the process, to support talented artists. To achieve this goal, the Directorate is responsible for the following tasks:

- In coordination with the relevant departments at the Ministry, participating in visual arts exhibitions that are organized by Arabic and non-Arabic countries.
- Issuing permits for establishing public theatre groups.
- Encouraging creative and talented young people in the fields of visual arts, theatre and cinema and giving them opportunities to develop their gifts.
- Undertaking research in the artistic and cinematic fields in coordination with the Directorate of Research, Studies and Translation at the Ministry, in order to develop these fields.
- Organizing the process of inviting famous artists and experts from other countries in the areas of visual arts, theatre and cinema to exchange knowledge and technical experiences.
- Organizing exhibitions and artistic workshops, in coordination with the concerned authorities in the Ministry and other authorities, to introduce the artists and actors to the public and enrich their experiences.
- Establishing and developing positive relationships with related associations and organizations (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2005).

Jawad and Abd Algafur Al Blushi report that the Theatre Department in the Directorate of Theatre, Cinema and Fine Arts is responsible for approving the theatrical texts for all the performances presented in Oman, including children's theatre (Jawad 2006: L.251-255 and Al Blushi 2006: L.91-92). This is despite the fact that the Department is not responsible for children's theatre and that there are no children's theatre specialists in the Department. Although the Ministry of Heritage and Culture is the responsible authority for Omani theatre, it is not responsible for children's theatre. This was confirmed by Abd Algafur Al Bulushi—the Director of the Theatre, Cinema and Visual Arts Department at the Directorate General for Literature and Arts at the Ministry—and by Abd Alkareem Jawad, Advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture in the same Ministry. They stated that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture is only in charge of youth theatre and public

theatre groups (ibid.). There is no department for children's theatre and no specialists in the field working for the Ministry (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2005).

For children's culture in general, the Ministry in 1990 established The Child Museum, which is located in the capital city, Muscat. The objectives of the museum are to educate children of all ages in the fields of science and technology and to provide them with scientific information in a simple and effective way. In addition, children are introduced to the latest inventions, giving them the opportunity to understand and comprehend the vital role of science in the life of human beings. On October 6, 2003 the Ministry came into the cyber age by collaborating with a private company to establish an electronic library in the museum, to update and improve the services offered by the museum and to educate children on the benefits of technology using attractive educational tools. However, this museum is only concerned with educating children in the scientific fields, not in artistic and theatrical fields (Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2005).

3.9.4 The Ministry of Social Development

The Ministry of Social Development is the main governmental authority responsible for child and family affairs in Oman as its organizational structure includes, for the first time in Omani governmental bodies, a Directorate for Child Affairs. This directorate is mainly responsible for:

- 1- Organizing training courses for people working in child care and related fields (for example, a specialized course on preparing and designing children's programs).
- 2- Preparing and delivering studies in childhood fields (such as *The Pre-School Institution: A Comparative Study of Omani Legislations and the Terms of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*).
- 3- Preparing proposals, programs and activities related to children.
- 4- Participating in regional and international conferences and seminars that tackle issues dealing with the child sector (such as the Gulf Child Day, Arabic Child Day, Arabic Family Day and the Orphan Day, in coordination with institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Development).

- 5- Researching Arabic and international reports and studies dealing with child issues.
- 6- Studying the recommendations of Arabic and foreign conferences and meetings relating to children and suggesting means of implementation.
- 7- Participating in local and international committees that cater for children (Ministry of Social Development n.d.).

The Ministry is a member of Arabic and international associations that deal with children, such as:

- The Arabic Council for Children and Development
- United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO)
- Omani Committee for Education, Science and Culture
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- The approval/ratification of The Child Rights Agreement. Oman joined the Convention, an international committee stemming from the United Nations Commission of Human Rights, in 1996 (Ministry of Social Development n.d.).

In addition, the Ministry has sponsored a number of programs and seminars pertaining to child culture, such as 'The Symposium of Creative and Talented Children'. This was organized by the League of Arab States on the occasion of Arabic Child Day ² which is commemorated on the first of October each year (Ministry of Social Development n.d.).

In 2006 the Ministry hosted the Eighth Symposium of Arab Children, with the theme of 'The Child's Right for Comprehensive Health Care'. The symposium was organized on the occasion of Arabic Child Day celebrations, in coordination with the UNICEF office in Oman, under the supervision of the League of Arab States and with the participation of fourteen Arabic countries (Ministry of Social Development n.d.). It also organized the Child Culture Festival during the period from 12th to 17th November, 2006 on the

² Arabic Child Day: This is a celebration held every year in October to implement the decision taken by the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs, and aims to strengthen the links and connections between children in the Arabic countries. It also aims to provide support to the children of Palestine. During this event, many programs, activities, lectures, and seminars are organized. Delegations, including children from all the Arab countries, take part in this event by visiting the country where the event is held. Thus, children visit a different country each year.

occasion of celebrating Muscat as the Capital of Arabic Culture³. The celebration consisted of different activities addressed to children, including training workshops such as: My Culture; I am an Artist; My Health; and I love Science and Technology (Al Aitabi 2006).

3.9.5 The National Committee for Child Care

In 1992, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos issued a Sultanic decree to establish the National Committee for Child Care, the committee to be part of the Ministry of Social Development. Some of the Committee's responsibilities are: to propose policies for suitable child care in Oman and coordinate with the relevant and concerned ministries and authorities to prepare the programs and their related projects and method of implementation; to follow up the progress of implementing the policies and plans by the concerned authorities; to encourage the conduct of surveys, research and studies that aim to provide statistics and information on child needs; to find suitable methods to implement and finance the special child programs; and finally, to study child-related matters that are discussed in conferences, meetings and Arab and international committees and implement items that have been agreed on (Ministry of Social Development n.d.).

3.9.6 The Ministry of Information: Omani TV and Radio

The Ministry of Information supervises Omani radio, television and the press. The first radio broadcast in Oman was in 1970 and currently there are three government radio

³ Muscat is the Capital of Arabic Culture (2006): This is an annual celebration that was organized for the first time in 1996. It was suggested and approved by Arab ministers responsible for cultural affairs in the Arab world and it moves among the Arab capitals according to the alphabetical letters of the country. Muscat, the capital of Oman, was the capital of Arabic culture in 2006.

stations managed by the Directorate General of Broadcasting of the ministry. This directorate includes the Department of the Family and Child Programs. This department has produced many children's programs and competitions; for example, Omani Radio has presented the following programs for the children:

1. *Children's World in the Sea World*, produced by the Omani Radio, written by Ahmed Al Azki and directed by Talib Al Bulushi. This program was presented as a daily serial. It concerned adventures engaged in by a child in the depths of the sea, accompanied by a dolphin. The story ended by establishing a positive warm relationship between the two, and the child learned so many cultural facts and skills (Al Rahbi 2006).

2. *Children's Oasis* is broadcast every Thursday as a live program, interacting directly with children through telephone or postal correspondence. It presents topics of concern to children and offers prizes to encourage children's participation (Al Alawi 2006).

3. *Complete the Story* is a daily competition, aiming to enhance children's abilities in the field of storytelling and to encourage them to be creative. The program was written by Ahmed Al Azki and produced by Saud Al Darmaki (Al Rahbi 2006).

Omani Television began broadcasting in 1974 and currently there are two TV channels in Oman. One of them is free to air and is broadcast to the world by satellite and the other is for the local community. While there are programs designed and presented for children (most of which are Arabic and foreign cartoon series), there is no department in Omani TV for family and children's programs. However, in the holy month of Ramadan, Omani TV does produce some Omani children's programs:

- *Laith's Tales* that was first introduced in the holy month of Ramadan in 2006 and was presented by a child named Laith Al Kindi. It is a serial and it tackles in an interesting dramatic form issues related to good manners that a child should possess. Laith Al Kindi, the program presenter, is a talented blind child (Al Rahbi 2006).

- Children's puzzle programs that are produced during Ramadan such as *The Scientists' Library*, *The Trip* and *The Crafts' Treasures* by Gasim Al Batashi. [Al Batashi has won prizes in Arab countries for some of his children's programs; for instance, in the 2004 Cairo Festival for Radio and TV, he won the creativity prize for best producer of children's programs for his children's puzzle program *The Crafts' Treasures* (Al Alawi 2005)].

Despite the important role of the Ministry of Information in developing the Omani child's culture through its broadcasting programs, its role is still limited in this field. Omani TV children's programs are limited to those produced for the holy month of Ramadan while, during the rest of the year, only Arabic and foreign children's programs are presented. Even these are broadcast for just a few hours daily.

In regard to Omani children's theatre, children's performances and related activities receive only very limited coverage through Omani Television and Radio. Although Omani TV and Radio occasionally broadcast news of theatrical activities, it is very rare that they broadcast complete children's performances. Playwright Yusef Al Blushi, director and head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, states that the media avoids children's theatre, even though public theatre groups notify them of upcoming theatrical events, including details of time and place (Al Blushi 2006: L.267-268). On the other hand, Omani newspapers—such as *The Oman Daily* (operated by the Ministry of Information) and private newspapers—regularly cover cultural activities, including performances produced for children.

3.9.7 Muscat and Dhofar Municipalities

Muscat Municipality is responsible for the capital Muscat, which consists of six states. Dhofar Municipality has control over the southern region of Oman. Some of the

responsibilities of these municipalities are: the provision of technical services such as roads, lights and buildings; health services such as cleaning and nutrition (supervising restaurant services and health standards); architectural services such as the layout of cities; media services such as broadcasting of television and radio advertising programs of the Muscat and Dhofar municipalities; and entertainment services such as the organization of annual and seasonal festivals and celebrations such as the Muscat and Salalah Tourism Festivals.

With regard to the role of the Muscat and Dhofar municipalities in supporting and organizing children's cultural activities, the two municipalities have produced the Muscat and Salalah Festivals that present many theatrical activities, including theatrical activities for children.

Muscat Festival

The Muscat Festival, an annual event held in Muscat, the capital of Oman, was produced for the first time in 1998. Organized by the Muscat Municipality and supported by the Ministry of Tourism, the festival celebrates Oman's traditional arts, culture and heritage to entertain Omani people as well as to attract tourists and support the country's flourishing tourism industry (Muscat Festival 2009).

Each year, the Muscat Festival organizes children's theatrical performances presented by Arabic theatre groups invited from outside Oman, as well as by various Omani theatre groups. In addition, songs and dancing, acrobatic and artistic competitions are presented in these festivals. Most activities are presented on a 'Child Theatre' stage that is only a temporary venue, purpose-built for the festival activities and afterwards dismantled. The stage is not fully equipped with all the technical equipment needed, such as lighting and sound systems, to present professional children's performances. Furthermore, the same

stage is also used for other children's activities, like music, dancing, acrobatics and entertainments that have no relationship with 'children's theatre'. This causes confusion for the public who expect to see children's theatre, not other entertainment forms, on this stage. See below:

I have noticed that in the performances presented for children in local festivals, the performances are mainly presented under the guise of "children's theatre", but in fact they have nothing to do with children's theatre. They are mainly acrobatic shows and entertainments. There is a need to differentiate between children's theatre and other entertaining shows for children (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 174-177).

Actually there is some confusion about what is understood by "children's theatre". In the Muscat and Salalah festivals, there were acts presented for children such as music, dancing and acrobatic shows, but they had really nothing to do with children's theatre. Foreign groups presented acts with acrobatic and miming elements, but this is not children's theatre (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 119-123).

Salalah Tourism Festival

Dhofar Municipality organises the Salalah Tourism Festival in Salalah, located in the southern part of Oman, during the season of autumn (June to August) each year. In this season the climate is just perfect, with some rainy periods turning the countryside (including the mountains) very green and making it very attractive to tourists from inside and outside Oman. At this time, temperatures in other parts of Oman and the surrounding countries are quite high (Ministry of Tourism n.d.). This festival started in 1998 and aims mainly to attract tourists and support the country's flourishing tourism industry as well as to celebrate Oman's traditional arts, culture and heritage (ibid.).

Both the Muscat and Salalah festivals offer similar events and activities in regard to children's cultural programs and activities and include: cultural lectures, artistic competitions, folk songs, local and international dancing and children's theatrical performances.

3.10 Conclusion

Three Government Ministries and two municipal authorities share the responsibility for children's culture in Oman: the Ministries of Heritage and Culture (cultural sector), Social Development (child affairs) and Education (educational and theatrical activities). Each has only partial control over children's culture.

The Ministry of Education, in particular its Department of Educational Activities, which supervises the educational and cultural activities within the schools, has played an effective role in supporting and developing the cultural position of children (that is, mainly school children) in Oman. The Ministry has organised many important theatrical and cultural events for children, such as setting up a special annual festival for scholastic theatre in Oman (held for the first time in 2002), with the main goal being to encourage school students to be creative in the theatrical field. It also participated in the annual Gulf School Theatre Festival (The Festival of School Theatre of the Arab Gulf States (GCC), which was first held in the Arab Emirates in 2002, and the Ministry hosted and supervised the fourth such festival in Muscat, the capital. Additionally, the Ministry of Education organises symposiums and conferences on child culture, particularly on how to develop Omani children's culture. However, despite the important role that the Ministry has played in supporting and presenting children's theatrical activities at schools, there are still many obstacles facing school theatre in Oman; these have been discussed above and will be discussed in further detail in the history chapter when addressing the scholastic theatre in Oman (p.106-111). For example, drama is not taught in Omani schools, nor is it included as a subject in the school curriculum; no specialised theatre teachers are provided; there are no essential physical facilities such as appropriate stages and specialised theatre equipment. Also lacking are preschool-age cultural activities since most of the cultural activities that are presented are addressed to schoolchildren.

Although the Ministry of Heritage and Culture has the main responsibility for the cultural sector in Oman, it does not have an administrative division for children's culture, nor for children's theatre. It is only concerned with youth theatre and public theatre groups beginning at age 15.

The governmental authority dealing with the child and the family is the Ministry of Social Development, which has a Directorate for the Child's Affairs. Despite the fact that the Ministry has organised many cultural activities for children, including theatrical activities, these are not part of its main responsibilities, since it focuses mainly on the social position of the child and the family.

Despite the important role of the Ministry of Information in developing the Omani child's culture through broadcasting children's programs, its role is still limited. Omani children's TV programs are limited to those produced for the holy month of Ramadan, while for the rest of the year, only Arabic and foreign children's programs are presented. Even these are broadcast for just a few hours daily. Although occasional TV and radio programs broadcast partial children's performances, Omani newspapers regularly include cultural activities reports and news of performances for children.

The role of the Muscat and Dhofar municipalities in supporting and organising children's cultural activities has been in producing the Muscat and Salalah Festivals that present many theatrical activities, including those for children. Both of these Festivals offer similar events and activities for children's cultural programs and activities and include cultural lectures, artistic competitions, folk songs, local and international dancing and children's theatrical performances.

The many institutions listed above have important separate roles in supporting all cultural activities, including children's theatre, which occurs only incidentally, as a cultural by-product.

The next chapter follows the history of both Omani adult theatre and children's theatre.

Chapter Four: The History of Children's Theatre in Oman

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to trace the history of children's theatre in Oman since its appearance in the early 1970s. However, it is important within this investigation to look first at the history of Omani theatre to understand its nature and the circumstances surrounding its development. In order to understand the history and nature of Omani children's theatre as a part of the whole history, the theoretical perspective of the hermeneutic circle will be applied. This involves 'relating part to whole and whole to part to read the whole story' of the theatre (Crotty 1998, 87). Thus, this history chapter will be divided into two parts: the first will discuss the history of Omani theatre and the second will specifically investigate the history of Omani children's theatre.

4.2 The History of Omani Theatre

This section traces the three important historical stages in the development of Omani theatre. Firstly, scholastic and club theatre constituted the foundation of Omani theatre before and since 1970. The second stage saw the growth of Youth Theatre in the 1980s. The third stage—from the end of the 1980s to the present time—was the flourishing stage, featuring Public Theatre Groups and University Theatre. This section concludes with a discussion of the important achievements of Omani theatre since its inception, as well as the main obstacles still facing it.

4.2.1 The Beginning of Omani Theatre Pre and Post 1970: Scholastic Theatre (Al Masrah Al Madrasi)

Theatre was absent from Arabic culture until the nineteenth century, when European conventional drama was introduced in Beirut in 1847. The Arabs had no knowledge of theatre as it is known today or as the ancient Greeks knew it during the historical Arab eras since the Jahilia (pre-Islamic) period and after the inception of Islam in 622 (Al Anany 2002, 150; Al Habsi 2003, 22). However, there were other Arabic forms of entertainment and public performance. Faizo (1985, 21-22) claims that, before 1847, Arabs developed various kinds of public entertainment and religious rituals that contained some basic elements usually associated with drama, such as oral narrative, songs, improvisation and audience participation. Such entertainment included: Hikaya (story-telling that contains a story and involves a performance); Maqama (debate, containing satire, songs and dialogue); Tazia (passion play, containing plot, characters and scenery) and Karagoz (puppet-show) and Khayal- Alzill (shadow play).

According to Faizo (1985, 21-22), Arabic theatre did not develop directly from the old forms of Arabic entertainment mentioned above but was imported from Europe to Beirut in 1847 by Marun Al Naqash (1817-1855), who lived many years in Italy where he learned about theatre. In Egypt, theatre was introduced by Yaqub Sanu (1839-1912), who went to Italy to study theatre arts in 1853 and returned to Egypt in 1855. Prior to that, the French had introduced theatre to Egypt during their occupation under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte (1798-1802), but it was restricted to the amusement of French soldiers (Zalat 2001, 79-80). Khedive Ismail established the Opera House in 1869, and he encouraged Sanu to present theatrical performances at his palace. In Syria, Khalil Al Qabani, an Arab theatre pioneer (1835-1902), established the basis of Arab musical theatre. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Arab theatre pioneers first embraced the standard forms of Western theatre, adopting Western forms, Western styles

of production and even Western subject matter. This European influence was due to the fact that many Arab students studied in various European countries as well as to the cultural impact of European colonisation of Arab countries. However, subsequently, in the 1960s, Arab playwrights and theatre people started to employ Arab folklore and culture in their theatre. Realising its inherent theatrical power to stir the hearts of Arab audiences and deliver their concerns in a meaningful way, Arab culture and folklore was elevated to a central role in Arabic theatre and became the main source of inspiration for playwrights (Faizo 1985, 2-3). Despite this activity in Arabic theatre, Oman, which is part of the Arab world, knew nothing of theatre until (possibly) the beginning of the twentieth century (Al Habsi 2003, 22-23). Similar to other Arab societies, however, Oman did have its narrative literature and poetry as well as its folk songs, folk music and dance.

It is difficult to ascertain the real beginnings of theatrical activities in Oman because of the lack of written documents about its history. Jawad (2006, 227) states that the first encounter between Omani people and modern theatre took place in schools in the 1940s and 1950s. Before 1970, the Al Saidiah School in Muscat (established in 1940), the Al Saidiyah School in Matrah (established in 1959) and the Al Saidiyah School in Salalah (established in 1951)—the only existing schools—began theatrical activities, with most activity occurring in the Al Saidiah School in Muscat. Students from these schools, who were all male, presented the first theatrical shows in Oman.⁴

An annual celebration was held in the interior courtyard of the Al Saidiah School in Muscat at the end of each academic year in the summer. The audience was comprised of the school students and staff as well as parents and some important government people.

⁴ Females were forbidden to study at school prior to 1970. Education that was accessible to females basically centred on the study of the Quran, which was the most popular form of education at that time, especially in villages. The principles of Islam and the basics of reading and writing Arabic were taught in these schools (Al Hinai 2002, 23). Eisa Al Raisi, a student of the Al Saidiyah School in Muscat, mentions in Al Habsi (2003, 34) that those short plays and acts which included women's roles would be discarded completely, so that all the roles would be for men.

The ceremonial program included some acts or short sketches performed by students (mostly presented in 15 minutes), as well as other items such as songs and chants. These theatrical shows were very simple and the topics were taken from schoolbooks, in particular reading books of Egyptian or Lebanese origin. Twfiq Aziz, one of the Arab teachers at the Al Saidiyah School in Muscat and one of the theatrical activity supervisors, in an interview with Al Habsi stated that:

The Lebanese book *Al Morooge (The Green Fields)* was the most important book in the school curriculum, which was very useful in relation to plays, providing historical, social and Islamic stories and subjects, which could be produced in the form of dramatic dialogue. (Al Habsi 2003, 35)

Besides providing instructive and educational plays which expressed the students' lives at home and school, scholastic theatre also benefited from famous religious and historical Arabic stories, such as stories of battles, invasions and heroes. Scholastic theatre did, however, tackle some modern Omani social matters such as marriage, dowry and family relations (ibid., 35). However, these scholastic shows never went beyond the school walls. Arab teachers, especially from Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, supervised these scholastic shows (Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs 1985, 65). Teachers from these other Arab countries played an important role in supervising scholastic plays, since theatre started earlier in these countries, and the teachers were able to pass on their observations of theatrical shows to students at Omani schools.

Despite the fact that the theatrical activities presented at the Al Saidiah Schools before 1970 were very simple and undeveloped, scholastic theatre played an important role in introducing theatre to Omani people, especially to school students and their parents, and advanced the theatrical movement in Oman. In addition, some graduates from these schools later worked to establish theatrical groups in clubs in the 1970s (Jawad 2006, 232).

Since 1970, the year that the Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs was established, the number of schools throughout Oman has increased dramatically. The Al Saidiah Schools, especially in Muscat, continued theatrical activities, and since 1970, scholastic theatre has developed and taken another direction, which varied in shape and content (Al Habsi 2003, 56). Al Habsi pronounces: ‘the 1970s and 1980s were the periods in which scholastic theatre activity was first broadly established, to be further developed in the 1990s’ (ibid., 57).

Omani schools have offered a variety of educational activities⁵ including theatre since 1970. However, theatre does not exist within the current school curriculum as the Ministry of Education does not consider it a priority area. Moreover, there are no specialised theatre teachers. Usually, Arabic language teachers supervise school theatrics. However, in the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education appointed regional personnel qualified in theatre to oversee the school unqualified theatre supervisors, the teachers, and the theatrical activities within the schools. Despite very simple equipment and materials being used in presenting these theatrical performances, many plays have been presented throughout Omani schools. For instance, in 1981, Tawfiq Aziz produced *Ard Al Wafaa* (*Land of Fidelity*) during the Omani eleventh national day celebration, and it was presented on the Jabir bin Zaid Secondary School stage. Compared to the poor facilities existing at that time in other schools, this school was equipped with modern theatre facilities. *Ard Al Wafaa* (*Land of Fidelity*) is a musical play that employs Omani folklore arts and lasts for nearly two hours. *The play* demonstrates the achievements that have been accomplished in Oman in all fields since 1970, the renaissance year of Oman. It also tackles the issue of the importance of education in an adolescent’s life (Al Habsi 2003, 63-64; Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 9).

⁵ The Western term is ‘extracurricular activities’.

According to Al Qasabi (2006, 27), in addition to some comedy sketches, the plays that were presented at schools were educational plays adapted (mainly) from the school curriculum and called ‘dramatised curriculum’. However, according to Al Qasabi, they did not represent a proper development of scholastic theatre but were merely simple sketches. Additionally, Jawad (2006, 234) comments that, while scholastic theatre sometimes presents plays dealing with social issues outside the school curriculum, it remains instructive.

Recently, the Ministry of Education set up a special annual festival for scholastic theatre. The main goal of this festival is to encourage school students to be creative in the theatrical field—especially in playwriting, acting and performing—by creating competition between schools. The first festival of scholastic theatre was held in the Al Batnah region of Oman in 2002. Besides presenting theatrical performances by school students, there were other activities included in this festival, such as an exhibition of educational activities (Al Qasabi 2006, 32-33). The second scholastic theatre festival was held in the academic year 2003/2004. The Sultanate of Oman participated in the first festival of scholastic theatre of the Arab Gulf States (GCC), which was held in the United Arab Emirates in 2002.

In conclusion, scholastic theatre supplied Omani theatre with graduates who later established theatre groups in many clubs and introduced Omani people, especially students, to theatrical culture. However, in Jawad’s opinion, despite the important role that scholastic theatre plays in the Omani theatrical experience, it still does not succeed in moving theatre outside the school walls into the broader society (Jawad 2006, 235). Many performances and other theatrical activities that are presented at schools remain within the schools’ boundaries and the outside society knows nothing about them. This is also due to a lack of media coverage.

4.2.2 Club Theatre (Masar'eh Al Alandiah): Al Ahli Club

The term 'Club Theatre' (Masar'eh Al Alandiah) in Oman refers to clubs that have existed in Oman since the 1960s that are basically sports clubs for young people (both male and female) but which also present cultural activities, including theatrical works. One of the most vibrant club theatres that played an important role in supporting Omani theatre in the 1970s was the Al Ahli club. Other club theatres, such as the Oman Club (established in the 1960s), the Al Nahdah Club and the Ibri Club existed; however, apart from the Al Ahli Club, there is no written documentation about the activities of these clubs.

Since the 1960s, students of the Al Saidiah School in Matrah who were still studying and who were interested in theatre joined club theatres, especially the Al Ahli and Oman clubs. Some students who had finished their primary studies at Al Saidiah Schools went abroad—mostly to Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar—to study to complete their high school education and undertake university studies. Those students who were interested in theatre witnessed some theatrical shows in the countries where they were studying. After their graduation, or during summer holidays, they came back to Oman with enthusiasm to work in the theatre and to apply their theatrical observations; thus, they joined club theatre.

Al Habsi (2006, 359) states that the play *Saqoor Kurish (Kurish Falcons)*, taken from Islamic history and lasting nearly one and a half hours, was considered to be the first and longest play produced by the Al Ahli Club in the 1960s. On the other hand, Jawad (2006, 238) reports that the Al Ahli Club started to present short plays and sketches from 1967. In 1968, Mohammed Iliyas wrote and produced a play titled *Ayam Al Asal (Honey Days)* (Al Habsi 2003, 81). Jawad reports that, despite the lack of available materials needed to present theatrical shows at that time, the spirit and enthusiasm of the club members to

work in theatre was very high. Ali Abed-Atatif, a pioneer of the Al Ahli Club, in Al Habsi (2003, 47) describes the available materials and reports that: 'the stage was mere wooden planks fixed on top of wooden boxes, or tables covered by carpets on which plays were performed'. He mentions that the sets consisted of simple lighting and simple decor drawn on a cloth backdrop. Moreover, most club theatres that existed during the 1960s and 1970s were financially supported by their members who paid an annual subscription to support the club's budget. The club theatres also received donations from businessmen.

Ali Abed Allatif (in Al Habsi) states that preparations to present short plays and acts started early: the rehearsals would begin during the summer holiday and last for a period of two months, from June until August (ibid., 43). The theatrical shows presented by the Al Ahli Club made use of comic social plays, usually consisting of one act lasting between 15-30 minutes. However, gradually, these short plays were further developed to include more than one act, with scenes lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. The Al Ahli Club also presented different theatrical styles and directions in authorship and production, varying from symbolic and experimental styles to romantic and musical styles (Al Habsi 2003, 80-81).

Jawad (2006, 238) states that the most productive period in Al Ahli club history was 1971 to 1976. In 1974, the club presented a play entitled *Ogniyat Al Houb wa Al Ardh (Land and Love Song)*, written and produced by Rida Abed Alatif. It centred on the love of an Omani for his country and his willingness to defend it against its enemies, and was produced as a musical with a cast of about 50 actors (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 13).

While the Al Ahli Club played an active role in strengthening the position of theatre in Oman during its flourishing era, its theatrical activities started to decline from 1976 for many reasons. These included the abandonment of theatrical work by the club's pioneers

to study and work abroad, and their need for permanent paid employment (as most of them were amateurs and worked for free). Audience numbers declined because of the transfer of the club's original residence in Matrah, a popular region where most of the club's members belonged, to a new place in Dar-Siet far away from Matrah. Furthermore, the reluctance of women to join and work for the Al Ahli Club was one of the main reasons behind the closing of the theatre at the club in 1976 (Jawad 2006, 238-239; Al Habsi 2003, 82). Many difficulties and challenges prevent Omani women from working in the theatre. The negative attitude of Omani society towards actresses is one of the main reasons for the lack of women in the theatre. Aisha Alyas Fakir, a retired actress, believes that it is generally understood that theatre work by women is taboo and that decent women should not be part of it (Al Hinai 2002, 36-37). Additionally, many actresses abandoned theatrical work after marriage since a housewife cannot usually afford the time needed for theatre. In addition, some Omani actresses deserted theatre for financial reasons since, as mentioned before, most theatre people in Oman work for free and the government does not usually give financial support to theatre groups. The lack of good scripts and the rarity of good roles for women are regarded as other reasons for the reluctance of women to take part in theatre work (ibid., 36-38).⁶

From 1977 to 1994, the Al Ahli Club confined its activities to social, cultural and sporting events from which theatre was absent. However, the club restarted its theatrical activities in 1994 (Al Habsi 2003, 92). In addition, Al Habsi states that in 1991 the government encouraged and supported youth activities through the General Organization for Youth Sports and Cultural Activities (GOYSCA). He reports that the number of clubs increased in many districts of Oman in the first half of the 1990s. Amongst these clubs were the Yanqul Club (established in 1990), the Barkaa Club (established in 1991), the Berkat al-Mooz Club (established in 1991) and the Quriyat Club (established in 1995)

⁶ For more information about women and theatre in Oman, see Al Hinai K.A.(2002) *The Representation of Women in Omani Theatre*, UK: University of Exeter (Unpublished Research).

(ibid., 102-106). These clubs' theatres mostly presented social plays that tackled issues such as family relations, arranged and forced marriages, the impact on Omani society of oil wealth and the cultural openness of the country after 1970. These clubs also presented some national plays centring on patriotism and the political and social development of Omani society after 1970 under the rule of Sultan Qaboos. Most performances at club theatres were presented on stages that existed in all clubs: stages that were simple and not equipped with theatrical facilities. The audience basically consisted of club members as well as youth, men, women and children who lived near the club.

4.2.3 Youth Theatre (Masr'ah Alshapap)

In the 1970s, the government was still busy with constructing the infrastructure of the country; however, in the 1980s—and after the establishment of the Ministry of Information and Youth which was responsible for youth activities, including theatre—the government started to pay attention to the youth and cultural sector, including theatre. After the sudden cessation of theatrical activities at Al Ahli and Oman clubs (which had been very active in participating in the annual national day ceremonies by presenting theatrical shows) and the disappearance of the first generation of founders of Omani theatre, the Ministry established Youth Theatre (*Masrah Al Shapap*) in 1980 in Muscat to inject new life into Omani theatre. In fact, in 1974, a 'Youth Theatre Group' had been established by a group of Omani youths without any official support. However, as it was weak, the Ministry decided in 1980 to develop it and to change its name to 'Youth Theatre' (Al Habsi 2003, 118). Youth Theatre is considered to be the first official theatre group to be supervised and financially supported by the Ministry of Information and Youth (Jawad 2006, 243).

Despite the fact that the Al Ahli Club Theatre and other club theatres produced good Omani actors and directors, there were still no specialist Omani playwrights and

producers as most club theatre members were amateurs. Therefore, the Ministry of Information and Youth asked Arab theatrical specialists for assistance in forming a strong base for Omani theatre. The Ministry appointed Mustafa Hashish as director and Mansoor Makawi as playwright (both from Egypt) to work with Youth Theatre and to supervise Omani theatre amateurs and work alongside them to produce professional theatrical works.

In the early stages, in the light of the absence of Omani texts and playwrights, Youth Theatre presented Western and Arab texts. *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare (directed by Mustafa Hashish) was the first play produced by Youth Theatre. The second play, *Caption's Sons*, adapted from the Egyptian play *Ailat Al Doghray (Al Doghray Family)* by Abd Al Kareem Jawad, was presented in 1981 (Jawad 2006, 245-246). Later, in 1985, Mustafa Hashish resigned as producer of the Youth Theatre to allow local Omani artists to emerge in the theatrical field (Al Habsi 2003, 125). The Egyptian playwright Mansoor Makawi followed suit and wrote his last two plays for Omani theatre in 1986 to allow Omani playwrights to take over. Gradually, Omani nationals started to hold the leading positions in the Youth Theatre in playwriting, directing, administration and management.

In 1987, Omani theatre, through the Youth Theatre, participated abroad for the first time in a theatrical event in the Second Gulf Competition for Youth in the United Arab Emirates, presenting *A- Safinah la Tazal Waqefah (The Ship still Docked)*, written and directed by Omani playwright and director Abed Al Kareem Jawad. The theme is constructed around the relationship between the captain and the sea. This play gained first prizes for best actress and best set designer (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 56; Jawad 2006, 251).

Youth Theatre later expanded its theatrical activities outside the capital Muscat, and started to present theatrical shows in other Omani regions. This encouraged young people of these regions, especially those interested in theatre, to form other youth theatre groups in their areas. In 1985, a second youth theatre group was established in Salalah. Other youth theatre groups were established in 1990 in Sohar, Sur, Nizwa and Al Birami, and in 1993, a Youth Theatre Group in Masandam was established (Al Qasabi 2006, 123-127). Today, there are seven youth theatre groups, all supervised by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture.

Jawad (2006, 242) states that the decade of the 1980s is considered to be the real foundation stage of Omani theatre because it was founded on the primary experience of the early beginnings of scholastic and club theatres in the 1970s and, also, because it was established by Omani theatre specialists. He believes that the quality of the theatrical performances that were presented in the 1980s showed a marked improvement, so much so that Omani theatre groups participating in Arabic and international theatrical festivals often won prizes.

4.2.4 Public/Local Theatrical Groups (Al Feraq Al Ahlih)

From their experience of working in youth theatre groups, Omani artists were motivated to establish 'Public/Local Theatre Groups' (Al Feraq Al Ahlih), in order to have more theatrical space in which to practise (Jawad 2006, 264). A 'Public Theatre Group' is defined in the official schedule of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture as:

A complete team of artists practised theatrical work. This team consists of ten people, specialists and amateurs, who work together to present good theatrical works inside and outside Oman. (Al Qasabi 2006, 97)

According to Al Qasabi (2006, 98), a local theatre group is established when a team of artists and amateurs decides to form a theatrical group and then applies to the Ministry of

Heritage and Culture to officially register their group. The Ministry supervises the group after the official registration: it censors the texts by firstly reading them and then approving the production of the play. Abd Alkareem Jawad, advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture, advises that, with regard to the censoring of theatrical texts and performances:

The ministry in general does not have a specific policy in regard to censorship. The ministry doesn't interfere in allowing or not allowing certain scripts to be staged. However, we evaluate the script and the themes and lessons included, but we give a lot of freedom to the playwrights to create their own work and depend on them to be responsible. (Jawad 2006, I: 317-321)

However, Jawad also states:

But if there are taboos then we intervene, since theatre is meant to teach love, kindness, cooperation and morals, and we eliminate such offences or insults that can be seen in some shows that do not conform to the ideas and beliefs of our culture and religion. (Jawad 2006, I: 322-325)

Although the ministry does not allocate a fixed annual budget for public theatre groups, it does give them financial rewards from time to time. For instance, the Ministry allocated 2000 Omani Riyal for each theatre group in the first and second Omani Theatre Festivals.⁷ Members also finance their group by levying annual membership fees.

⁷ Omani Theatre Festival is a theatrical festival that is organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. It allows public theatre groups in Oman (seventeen groups comprising professionals and amateurs) to participate by presenting theatrical performances, and creates a theatrical atmosphere where all people interested in theatre can gather and discuss different theatrical issues that are relevant to Omani theatre through meetings and seminars. Many guests (theatre specialists from different Arab countries) were invited to attend and participate in the first and second Omani Theatre Festivals. The first Omani Theatre Festival, where nine performances were presented by different public theatre groups, was held in 2004, from 27 September to 2 October. The second festival was held two years later (27 March until 4 April, 2006). Eight performances were presented in this festival. All the public theatre groups in Oman are invited to participate in this festival, but only the best texts and performances are accepted for performance. The Ministry appoints a jury committee to choose the best texts and performances. There is a prize for best performance, best actor, best actress and best scenery at the end of the festival. In addition, the Omani artists who have worked hard to develop Omani theatre are rewarded in this festival (Al Qasabi 2006, 144-145; Jawad 2006, 319).

Al Habsi (2003, 135) reports that, since their inception in 1987, local theatre groups have formed the primary foundation for Omani theatre. However, Jawad states that, before 1987, an unofficial public theatre group existed; this was established in 1975 by a group of Omani artists, the 'Folkloric Theatre Group' (Ferqat Al Masrah Al Sha'py). However, this group did not present any performances due to the difficulties that it faced, such as the travel of some of the group's founders to study abroad and the lack of available theatrical equipment (Jawad 2006, 264-265).

The first Omani public theatre group, 'Al Sahwah Group' (Ferqat Al Sahwah), was established in 1987 and presented its first play, *Al Sahwah Al Kubra (The Big Awareness)*, in the same year. The theme of this play centred on the political and social development of Omani society under the rule of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, which commenced in 1970 (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 67). 'Magan Group' (Ferqat Magan) was the second public theatre group, set up in 1988 (Jawad 2006, 265). The members of Magan and Al Sahwa Public Theatre Groups were also members of Youth Theatre in Muscat. In 1990, the Al Sahwa Group presented its second play entitled *Al Mofatih (The Key)*, and in 1993, after the production of *Al Bahith an Al Daman (Looking for Assurance)*, ceased theatrical activities. They recommenced production in 1996 and continue to the present time (Al Habsi 2003, 138). The group presents many plays that tackle social and universal human issues.

Many public theatre groups were later established in Muscat and other regions of Oman. These included the Mazoon Group (established in 1991), the Muscat Al Hurr Group (set up in 1998) and the Dofar Theatre Group (founded in 2001) (Al Qasabi 2006, 101-108). Nowadays, there are seventeen public theatre groups spread throughout all Omani regions. In 1997, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture issued an official schedule that systematised the rules for public theatre groups.

According to Jawad (2006, 265-276), Omani Public Theatre Groups have had many achievements; for instance, participating in regional and international theatrical festivals and often winning prizes. Additionally, one of the important stages in the development of these groups was the establishment of the first Omani Theatre Festival for Public Theatre Groups in 2004, in which nine groups participated. In addition, in 1999, the Sultanate of Oman organised and held the sixth Theatrical Festival for Public Theatre Groups of the Gulf Countries. However, despite all these achievements, public theatre groups in Oman face many obstacles such as lack of financial support, since, as mentioned previously, there is no fixed budget allocated to these groups from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. In addition, there is a lack of specialist theatre people, theatrical equipment, prepared theatres and suitable texts. Therefore, the theatrical performances presented by these public groups are intermittent and seasonal (Jawad 2006, 283; Al Qasabi 2006, 110).

4.2.5 University Theatre (Masrah Al Gam'ah)

The term 'University Theatre' (Masrah Al Gam'ah) refers to all kinds of theatrical activities presented by the Theatre Arts Department in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Theatre Groups (Gamaet Al Masrah), supervised by the Student Affairs Deanship, at Sultan Qaboos University.

Theatre Arts Department

In 1991, the Theatre Arts Department was established at Sultan Qaboos University as the first academic theatrical institution in Oman, and was considered to be a significant theatrical achievement for Omani Theatre. According to Dr Othman (in Al Habsi), the opening of the Theatre Arts Department was intended to:

Locate a strong base of Omani youth (boys and girls) theatrically educated and academically able to participate in theatre development and to strengthen its

activity in Oman through the creation of specialist Omani theatrical cadres in the many differing fields and the production of quality plays. (Al Habsi 2003, 154)

The Theatre Arts Department includes three main specialisations: Acting and Directing, Theatrical Criticism, and Set Design. It aims to academically qualify students to be specialists in one of these fields. The curriculum contains both theoretical and practical subjects.

At the end of the academic year, each final year student (Set Design, and Acting and Directing students) is required to present a graduation project. This is in the form of a theatrical performance, through which the student is evaluated in practical work. These graduation projects are supervised and produced by specialist lecturers in the department, with the assistance of final year students. Additionally, there is an annual pre-fixed budget to finance these theatrical projects. Thus, many theatrical works have been presented by the Theatre Arts Department since 1995, the year that the first group graduated from the department. *Markep bela Sayad (Boat without a Fisherman)*, by the Spanish playwright Alejandro Casonna and directed by Dr. Hani Mutawa, was the first play produced by the Department in 1995. The theme of this play is constructed around Faust's myth with an Arabic perspective. Subsequently, diverse performances – by Arabic, Western as well as Omani playwrights – were presented as graduation projects up until the year 2004, when the last group (the tenth group) of Theatre Arts Department students graduated.

In 2004, Sultan Qaboos University issued a decree that the Department would no longer accept any new students until a new plan had been decided for the department. This decree was issued because it was believed that there was no need to train new groups of graduates since the previous graduates were still not employed. It was believed that there were not enough suitable places in the state and private sectors to employ the

department's graduates. However, there were many suitable places to employ these graduates, such as in the Ministry of Education as supervisors for school theatrical activities to replace non-specialist teachers (such as Arabic language teachers). Additionally, they could have been employed at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (in the Theatre Department) and at the Ministry of Information to work on national television and radio. The private sector does not employ Theatre Arts Department graduates because there are no theatre companies to absorb them. Fault also lies with the university system in that it does not have a broad enough curriculum to provide students with skills in areas that are required by private companies, such as design, IT technology, lighting, costume making and sound. Such skills could also be transferred to aspects of private enterprise.

Finally, too many Omani people, both educated and uneducated, do not believe in theatre and its importance. Moreover, the seasonal and discontinuous nature of theatrical performances does not help to create a fertile theatrical atmosphere in the country, and does not instil a culture of theatre-going in Omani audiences.

Theatre Group (Gamaet Al Masrah)

'Jamaet Al Masrah' or 'The Theatre Group' that is supervised by the Student Affairs Deanship at Sultan Qaboos University was officially established in 1992. However, according to Al Habsi (2003, 157), there were attempts by a group of university students to form The Theatre Group in the period between 1986 and 1992. The group at that time succeeded in presenting some simple theatrical sketches and short plays during the university celebrations at mid-term as well as at the end of academic year student activities.

The aim of establishing The Theatre Group at the university was to give university students from all faculties who were interested in theatre the opportunity to practise

theatre and improve their theatrical abilities through training sessions and workshops. In addition, it aimed to spread cultural and theatrical awareness amongst university students (Al Qasabi 2006, 55; Al Habsi 2003, 158). The group was supervised by Mustafa Hashish, an Egyptian director, from its official inception in 1992 until 1996. The skills of Mustafa Hashish were needed at this time as there were no Omani graduates in theatre direction until 1995. The university issued a decree in 1996 that the Theatre Arts Department would undertake technical supervision for the group alongside the administrative supervision of the Student Affairs Deanship. Later on, in 1998, Rahima Al jabri and Gaber Al Harasi, two graduates from the Theatre Arts Department, took over the supervision of the group and continue to the present time.

In 1992, The Theatre Group presented its first play, *Bagey Atzawag (I Wish to Marry)*, which was written and produced by Mustafa Hashish. This was a comedy looking at the issue of marriage: an aged man, Kadaan, wants to marry a young woman, even though she is engaged to his nephew, Saif (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 17). *Hathehee Haratna (This is our Precinct)* by Bader Al Hamadani and produced by Mustafa Hashish was the second play presented by the group in 1994. *Hathehee Haratna* is a comedy that describes life in a precinct where too many people live close to each other and know everything about each other. It comments on relationships between two generations: youth and old people. Also, the Theatre Group presented this play outside the university—the first time they had participated external to the university (ibid., 122). They also succeeded in organising the first theatre competition among university colleges in 1996. The group presented further theatrical performances outside the university and outside Oman by participating in local and Arabic theatrical festivals. For instance, it participated in two local festivals—the Salalah Festival⁸ in 1998 and the Muscat Festival⁹ in 1999—by

⁸ Since its inception in 1995, Khareef Salalah Festival (Salalah Autumn Festival) has been held in Dhofar, Oman's southern region of which Salalah is the chief town, by Dhofar Municipality. It is an annual festival that encompasses many cultural, heritage and entertainment activities. Salalah,

presenting a play entitled *Qafelat Al Tabreizi (Al Tabreizi Caravan)*. This play was written by Alfred Faraj and directed by Dr. Hani Mutawa, and was produced by the Theatre Group jointly with the Theatre Arts Department for the first time in 1997 (Al Habsi 2003, 160). Moreover, in 1999, the group participated in the Eighth International Theatre Festival for Universities in Tunisia as well as in the Gulf Cultural week in Muscat, on both occasions with a play entitled *Al Gorapaa' la Yashrapoon Al Qahwah (Strangers do not Drink Coffee)*.

In summary, The University Theatre played an important role in developing Omani theatre and in providing it with Omani specialist theatrical artists. It also presented many professional performances following modern theatrical schools of production. However, Jawad (2006, 285) believes that the University Theatre failed to build strong links with non-university theatrical institutions in Oman, although it presented many performances outside the university. This was also confirmed by Al Habsi (2003, 162), who believes that there is a chasm between the university theatre and other theatrical groups. However, Al Habsi also believes that the students and members of the university theatre were not given a proper chance to participate in other theatre groups outside the university.

I think that this chasm between the university theatre and other theatrical groups and institutions in Oman is due to the absence of any linkages between them. The Ministry of Heritage and Culture, as the official body in charge of Omani theatre, can play a more effective role in gathering all the Omani theatrical institutions and groups under its umbrella and coordinating them. One possible way of achieving this goal is through

the second town of the Sultanate of Oman, attracts tourists from Oman and other countries (especially Gulf countries) who are seeking refuge from the raging summer heat, as temperatures in Salalah range between 15 to 22 degrees during autumn (Ministry of Tourism. n.d.).

⁹ The Muscat Festival, since its inception in 1998, is an annual festival held in Muscat, the capital of Oman. It is organised by the Muscat Municipality and supported by the Tourism Ministry. It celebrates Oman's traditional arts, culture and heritage to amuse Omani people as well as to attract tourists and support the country's flourishing tourism industry (Muscat Festival 2009).

organizing and supervising regular meetings for theatre practitioners. However, recently, it has been observed that there is more coordination among the theatrical groups in Oman. For instance, some recent theatrical events, such as the Omani Theatre Festival, helped to gather all the Omani theatrical parties and allowed them to discuss their theatrical interest and concerns. In addition, the University Theatre became more active recently because a number of Omani academic teaching staff completed their overseas studies, and their return to the Theatre Arts Department helped to increase and activate the department's external participation in theatrical events. For instance, they presented many lectures and workshops at schools and educational colleges, and also participated in the judge and jury panels of the local theatre festivals.

Al Habsi states that the university theatre faces some problems and obstacles such as 'the non-existence of a theatre hall specifically for theatrical shows and the reliance on a multi purpose Conference Hall as a stage' (Al Habsi 2003, 162). The absence of television and other media taking a role in filming and recording the plays presented by the university theatre as well as poor advertising for their theatrical activities are also problematic.

Omani theatre has developed and passed through different historical stages since its inception; it has developed from the Scholastic Theatre in the 1940s and 1950s, through Club Theatre and Youth Theatre in the 1980s, to Public Theatre Groups and University Theatre. It has had very many achievements and successes inside and outside Oman through its participation in theatrical festivals in the Gulf and Arab countries. One of the important achievements in the journey of Omani theatre was the establishment of the biennial Omani Theatre Festival in 2004 under the supervision of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. Another important milestone was the establishment of the first academic theatrical institution in Oman in 1991, the Theatre Arts Department at Sultan Qaboos University, which provided Omani theatre with graduates specialising in different

theatrical fields. Moreover, at the present time, there are seventeen public theatre groups and seven youth theatre groups spread throughout Oman.

Despite all these achievements, Omani theatre still faces very many obstacles such as: the absence of a clear strategy for development, a lack of prepared and developed theatres and a lack of financial support for Omani theatre groups. In addition, theatrical performances tend to be seasonal and discontinuous to the extent that sometimes a year passes without any performances. However, this phenomenon is starting to gradually disappear.

4.3 The History of Omani Children's Theatre

As explained above, a historical research method is employed in this study. In this section historiography is employed to analyse and interpret the chronology and different stages of Omani children's theatre.

Children's theatre in Oman has passed through different historical stages since its inception. This part of the history chapter explores these four historical stages which mark important transformational periods in Oman's recent history. Stage One is the period between 1970 and 1980; Stage Two is the period between 1981 and 1991; Stage Three is the period between 1992 and 2001; and Stage Four is the period between 2002 and 2007. Additionally, this investigation of children's theatre history in Oman looks at all texts and performances that have been written and/or presented for Omani children in historical sequence, and is divided into two main parts: the first is a survey of children's performances and theatrical texts that are not produced for the stage; the second is an analysis of the four historical stages and of the development of children's theatre within those four stages. In this second part, emphasis is given to the social and cultural

circumstances that might have affected the situation of children's theatre in Oman through its different historical stages.

Because there are no archival collections in libraries about Omani children's theatre, and since this is an exploratory study intended to explore the historical background and the present situation of children's theatre in Oman, the data for this part of the history chapter is gathered from other sources. These include: personal interviews with participants involved in Omani children's theatre (mainly playwrights and directors); pamphlets that are published by some youth theatres and public theatre groups that document their theatrical works; previous studies about Omani theatre in general (especially unpublished academic theses); and a recently published (April 2006) Omani dictionary entitled: *The Dictionary of Omani Theatre: Texts and Performances*, edited by Mohamed Al Habsi and Said Al Siyabi. This dictionary gathers together all Omani texts and performances, including children's plays and performances and brief summaries of the texts.

4.3.1 Survey of Children's Performances and Theatrical Texts

Children's performances 1970-1980

According to Al Habsi and Al Siyabi (2006, 84), *Al Fares Al Shoga'a (The Brave Equestrian)* was the first children's play presented in Oman in 1972. It was adapted from a story from *One Thousand and One Nights*¹⁰ and produced by Al Ahli Club members. It

¹⁰ *One Thousand and One Nights (Alf Laylah Wa-Laylah)*, also known as *The Arabian Nights*, is a collection of stories collected over thousands of years by various authors, translators and scholars. These collections of tales trace their roots to ancient India, ancient Persia, ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamian Mythology and medieval Arabic folk stories from the Caliphate era. Though an original manuscript has never been found, several versions date the collection's genesis to somewhere between AD 800-900. What is common throughout all the editions of *The Nights* is the initial frame story of the ruler Shahryar and his wife Scheherazade and the framing device incorporated throughout the tales themselves. The stories proceed from this original tale; some are framed within other tales, while others begin and end of their own accord. Some editions contain only a few hundred tales, while others include 1001 or more stories and 'nights'. Well-known stories from *The Nights* include 'Aladdin,' 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,' and 'The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor' (Jahsonic n.d.).

was presented in a musical and singing style. Neither Al Habsi, Al Siyabi nor the Al Ahli Club pamphlet mentions where this was presented. *Al Fares Al Shoga'a* tells the story of a young equestrian who meets a young princess playing with her maids. He presents a flower to the young princess and then she falls in love with him (Theatre in Al Ahli Club in Sultanate of Oman 1977, 14).

Because of the scarcity of documentation about the history of Omani theatre in general and the history of Omani children's theatre in particular between 1970 and 1980, many interviewees (including pioneers of Omani theatre who experienced the early stages of the theatrical movement in the seventies and researchers who have conducted historical studies about Omani theatre, its playwrights and directors) were questioned about the history of children's theatre and the first performance presented for children in Oman. All the interviewees confirmed that they do not know much about the history of children's theatre in Oman since it is not documented. Additionally, most of them were not certain about the first performance presented for children in Oman.

Abd Alkareem Jawad (2006, 1: 184), a pioneer of Omani theatre and a pioneer in writing about the history of Omani theatre, states that he had not conducted separate research concerning children's theatre. He also says that he does not know if the play "*The Brave Equestrian*" was the first children's play to be presented in Oman in 1972 (as was mentioned in the guidebook of the Al Ahli Club): 'Maybe, I am not sure of that; maybe it happened at the very beginning. The Al Ahli Club might have performed one of its children's plays at that time' (Jawad 2006, 1: 206).

Taleb Al Blushi, (actor, director, and pioneer of Omani theatre in the 1970s) reports that, in the 1970s, the Ahli Club Theatre used to have theatrical seasons where they presented a number of performances, including children's performances. However, he could not remember the dates of these performances: 'Unfortunately, I cannot remember the dates of these performances, but I do remember that the Al Ahli Club presented a performance for children named *Alfares Alshoga*' (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 13-36). In addition, Gasem Al Batashi, (actor, director and the director of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group) reports that: 'when the Al Ahli and Oman clubs were established in the 1960s, they tried to present some performances for children somehow but they did not succeed' (Al Batashi 2008, 1:17-18).

Mohamed Al Habsi, Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts in the Sultan Qaboos University, who had conducted an academic historical study tracing and documenting the history of Omani theatre in Oman, was asked about the history of children's theatre and its beginnings, and he reports:

The first performance presented for children in Oman was *Alfares Alshoga (The Brave Equestrian)*, which was prepared and directed by members of the Al Ahli Club. This play was presented as children's theatre and not as a scholastic play because it was far removed from scholastic issues and the school curriculum and did not have any educational content. It was addressed to children and tackles their issues. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 58-63)

Apart from Mohamed Al Habsi, many interviewees were not sure about the date and details of the first performance presented for children in Oman. However, according to the guidebook (1977, 14) of the Al Ahli Club Theatre (in the Al Ahli Club in the Sultanate of Oman), to Mohamed Al Habsi (2006, 1: 58-63), and to Al Habsi and Al Siyabi (2006, 84), *Alfares Alshoga (The Brave Equestrian)* was the first children's play presented in Oman in 1972 and the only known play to be presented in the period between 1970 and 1980.

Children's performances 1981-1991

There were six performances presented for children during the period from 1981 to 1991 and, to my knowledge, there were no children's texts written other than those that were produced.

As in the 1970-1980 period, where the first and only children's play to be presented, *The Brave Equestrian*, was adapted from a story from *One Thousand and One Nights*, the first children's play presented in the second decade of the Omani children's theatre history (1981-1991) was also adapted from stories of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, namely, *Ali Baba Conqueror of Thieves*, adapted and produced by Abd Alkareem Jawad. Additionally, the commonality about the other five plays that were presented in this era is that, although they were all produced by Omani directors, they were all written by non-Omani playwrights, most of them Arab playwrights from Egypt and Iraq, such as Ibraheem Sharawi and Weaam Abd Al Gafoor. This was necessary because of the scarcity of Omani scripts in general and children's scripts in particular in the 1970s and 1980s (the establishing stage of Omani theatre). Omani directors depended heavily on adaptations from Western and Arab scripts and literature for both adult and children's theatre. Nevertheless, this era also witnessed the appearance of some Omani playwrights, such as Mohammed Al Shanfri and Abd Alkareem Jawad.

Most of the presented performances in this second era tackled educational and social issues. In 1984, Al Nahdah Club presented *Ali Baba Qaher Al Haramiah (Ali Baba Conqueror of Thieves)* which was adapted and produced by Abd Al Kareem Jawad. Jawad (2006, 240) mentions that this play was the first musical play for children. He states that it was adapted from the story of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* that was included in the *One Thousand and One Nights* stories which tell the story of Ali Baba, a poor woodcutter, who defeated the forty thieves and succeeded in taking the treasure they

were hiding in a cave. In an interview with Jawad, he talks about the play *Ali Baba Qaher Al Haramiah*:

It was my first play aimed at children. It had the same plot as the Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves story. I adapted the script and also directed it. It was the beginning for a large number of actors and actresses well known nowadays in the arena of local drama. (Jawad 2006, 1: 188-192)

He also reports that this play was presented on the Omani Women's Society stage in Muscat and documented and broadcast by Omani TV. Jawad states that the Omani TV paid the sum of one thousand Omani Rial for this show: the first time they had paid for a theatrical show to be broadcast on television. This was considered to be good financial support for Al Nahdah Theatre Club at that time (Jawad 2006, 240).

In 1986, Youth Theatre in Muscat presented a children's play entitled *Naa'm Aqwiyyaa* (*Yes, We Are Strong*) on the Oman Club stage. It was written by Ibraheem Sharawi and produced by Mohammed Noor Al Blushi. Al Habsi states that this play was the first educational play presented for children that also had a social content. *Naa'm Aqwiyyaa* tackled the issue of cooperation between all people and the rejection of bad habits and behaviours (Al Habsi 2003, 125; Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 20; Jawad 2006, 251).

Abd Alghafour Al Blushi, a pioneer of Omani theatre and one of the founders of Youth Theatre in Muscat, here talks about the play *Yes, We Are Strong* (as presented by the Youth Theatre):

As for Youth Theatre, when we started it in the 1980s, we did present some theatrical works for children but some of them are not documented. One of those that has been documented is *Na'am Aqwia'a* (*Yes We Are Strong*) which was directed by Mohammed Noor Al Blushi, which was presented in 1986. There may be other attempts, but I do not remember any information. Mohammed Noor Al Blushi has the ability to produce plays for children, not only because of his experience in the theatrical field but also because he loves children's theatre, he wants to present theatrical work for children and he believes in what he has presented. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 57-65)

Batool Al Lawatiya, in an interview in Al Habsi (2003, 164), states that in 1987, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (as it was then known; now the Ministry of Social Development), with the cooperation of the Omani Women's Society in Muscat, established a big theatrical celebration. This included a collection of children's plays as well as some scholastic plays and puppet theatre, in which a group of children participated (Al Habsi 2003, 164). However, neither Batool nor Al Habsi mentions specific details of these plays.

*Al Qina'a (The Mask)*¹¹ is a children's play written by Weaam Abd Al Gafoor and directed by Mohammed Noor Al Blushi. It was presented in 1988 on the stage of The Ministry of Heritage and Culture. The theme of this play was constructed around a person who is two-faced and tries to hide his real personality, as if he were wearing a mask. It shows the impact of such a negative personality on other people and the society (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 90). In addition, Batool Al Lawatiya, in an interview in Al Habsi (2003, 164), states that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment presented some children's plays with the cooperation of some governmental establishment, such as Youth Theatre in Muscat. One of these plays was entitled *Layla wa Al Thieab (Layla and the Wolf)*—its author and producer are unknown—and was presented at the Al Bustan Palace stage in Muscat in 1989.

Gasem Al Batashi (director, actor, and the director of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group) who was also a member of the Sidab Club, a sports club that presents cultural and theatrical activities, reports that:

I presented many performances for the Sidab Club in the 1980s, among which were children's performances. We presented these performances in the middle of Ramadan in a celebration named 'Qaranqashooh' which is, as you know, a

¹¹ This play (*The Mask*) was also presented for the second time on the stage of the College of Education in Sohar within the activities of the Third Meeting of Club Theatres in Al Batnah region, which was organised by The Ministry of Heritage and Culture and held from 22 to 27 November 2005 (Al Mahrzi n.d.).

religious occasion that Omani children celebrate on the 15th day of the holy month of Ramadan. The children really looked forward to these performances. However, unfortunately, I didn't document them. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 47-52)

In 1990, the Al Sahwah Theatre Group presented *Al Moftah (The Key)*, which was written by Yousef Alany and produced by Khalifah Al Blushi. According to Al Habsi (2003, 138), *Al Moftah* was the first Omani play shown using a box-office system for admission. It was presented for seven days, which reflects its public success (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 109).

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (the Ministry of Social Development as it is known today) organised the second Children's Festival¹² in 1991 in Muscat and presented a children's play within the festival program. This play is *Youam Al Mahabah wa Al Ta'awin (Day of Love and Cooperation)*, which was written by Bahraini writer Fatima Anwar and produced by Abd Alkareem Jawad in the early 90's, who mentions this in his interview (Jawad 2006, 1: 192-194). It was shown on a stage established in the Oman International Exhibition Centre in Al Seeb in Muscat (Al Habsi 2003, 164).

Moreover, Yousef Al Blushi—playwright, director, and the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group—states in his interview that he started to present children's play in 1991. However, he does not specify any details of these performances as they are not documented. Al Blushi states:

When I joined the Faculty of Education in 1991, I began to present some plays for children, and this was my beginning with children's theatre, but I expect that there

¹² The Children's Festival in Oman is organised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (as it was previously known) and aims to activate children's cultural activities and develop their artistic and scientific abilities and skills. It encompasses a wide variety of activities such as children's folk arts performances, theatrical shows and seminars that tackle childhood issues. The last Children's Festival was held by the Ministry of Social Development as well as the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in 2006 and was called the Children's Culture Festival (Ministry of Social Development n.d.).

are people before me who presented plays for children in the eighties, or maybe it started before that, in the mid-seventies or the end of the seventies at Al Saidia schools, since, as I remember when I was a student, there were Arab and Egyptian teachers who presented performances for children at schools. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 35-41)

Children's performances 1992 - 2002

During the third stage, 1992 to 2002, the number of children's performances presented increased from six to twelve. At the beginning of the third stage, specifically in 1992 and 1993, the children's plays that were presented were written by Arab playwrights such as Khalaf Ahmed from Bahrain and Sadoon Alubaidi from Iraq. This initially replicates what occurred during the previous stage (1981-1991) where most of the plays presented were non-Omani texts. However, from 1996 onwards, many Omani playwrights started to write children's scripts that were also produced; they include Sameer Al Urami, Saleh Al Fahdi, Yousef Al Blushi, Imad Al Sahnfri and Abd Alazeez Al Batashi. Two Omani female playwrights, Rahima Al Gabri and Badria Al Blushi, also wrote children's scripts for the first time. Additionally, many Omani directors from the young generation of Omani theatre practitioners appeared in this era and started to produce children's performances; they include Gasem Al Batashi and Gehad Al Shanfri.

Children's performances presented during the third stage (1992-2002) tackled some new themes, such as magic, as in *The Magic Light* and *Amal and the Magician*. Other themes were constructed around the classic conflict between good and evil such as in *Shamas and the Monster*. This was a departure from the previous two eras, where most of the plays were constructed around moral, educational and social themes. In addition, some Omani playwrights such as Jawad and Al Gabri wrote and presented children's texts that were derived from world classic folk tales such as *Cinderella* (adapted and written by Jawad) and *Alice in Junior School*, based on the popular classic tale *Alice in Wonderland*. These two performances, in addition to *Rakaskoo and the Lad Mansoor* by Sameer Al Urami, also centred on popular cartoon characters (such as Cinderella, Alice and

Rakasko) that were featured in Omani TV cartoon movies broadcast in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, Omani playwrights tried to utilise these popular cartoon characters in their children's scripts to amuse and educate the child audience who knew and loved these characters. In contrast, this era (1992-2002) also witnessed the presentation of an Omani play *The Land of the Musk*, written by Al Gabri, that was drawn from an Omani folk story and utilised Omani traditional songs and dances.

The performances presented in the era from 1992 to 2002 are now outlined in detail.

In 1992, Youth Theatre in the Al Batnah region presented *Almoosbah Alseehry (The Magic Light)* for children on the stage of Sohar Secondary School. It was written by Khalaf Ahmed and produced by Abdalah Al Farsi and was presented for a second time on the stage of Al Burami Club. It concerns Alaa Aldeen's story and his magic light (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 107).

Al Habsi and Al Siyabi (2006, 15) report that the play *Amal wa Al Saher (Amal and the Magician)*, written by Sadoon Alubaidi and produced by Mohameed Noor Al Blushi, was presented for children in 1993 on the stage of Sohar Secondary School and the stage of Muscat Private School. It raised the issue of the conflict between good and evil.

Al Habsi (2003, 164) also reports that the Ministry of Social Development (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment previously), with the cooperation of Youth Theatre in Muscat, presented *Amal wa Al Saher (Amal and the Magician)* in 1999 on the stage of Muscat Private School.

Sameer Al Urami wrote a children's play entitled *Rakaskoo wa Alfataa Mansoor (Rakaskoo and the Lad Mansoor)* which was performed in the Technical College Theatre in Muscat in 1995 (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 51).

In 1996, the Ministry of Social Development (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment previously), with the cooperation of Youth Theatre in Muscat, presented *Cinderella*, a musical aimed at children, written and produced by Abd Alkareem Jawad, and performed on the Omani Women's Society stage in Muscat (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 51; Jawad 2006, 1: 194-195).

In 1997, the Omani Women's Society in Alseep presented a children's play *Alice fee Madrasat Albaraaem (Alice in Junior School)* within the Ramadan Night's program that the society arranged for children (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 14). Rahima Al Gabri, the play's writer and producer, states:

I also presented an educational play for children at Albaraeam School entitled *Alice fee Madrasat Albaraaem (Alice in Junior School)* and it concerns Alice, the famous children's character from Western literature in *Alice in Wonderland*, who visits the junior school and surprises the children in their classroom with her sudden visit. The children are happy to see Alice at their school. She takes them on a trip where she tries to educate them and correct their bad behaviour. Alice ends her visit to the school and leaves after successfully changing the children's behaviours for the better. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 82-89)

Regarding her source for the theme of *Alice in Junior School*, Rahima Al Gabri's relates:

As this was my first experience in presenting a children's performance, I wanted to write about the Western character Alice that children love and are familiar with. Children love Alice, so I tried to use this character to educate the children and to promote their good behaviour, and the audience for this play consisted mostly of schoolchildren. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 172-176)

In the same year, 1997, the Al Sahawa Public Theatre Group presented another children's play titled *Alkanz Almafqood (The Missing Treasure)*, written by Salih Al Fahdi and produced by Ahmed Al Blushi. The Muscat Municipality supported the play, which was staged at the Al Madinah Theatre in Muscat (Al Habsi 2003, 139; Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 94). Salih Al Fahdi, playwright and head of the Al Sahawa Public Theatre Group, also confirms when interviewed that his group presented the play *The Lost Treasure*: 'The

Al Sahawa Group presented one of my plays, *Alkanz Almafqood*, at the Almadinah Theatre' (Al Fahdi 2008, l: 66-67).

Ardh Almisk (Land of Musk) was written and produced by Rahima Al Gabri in 1999. It was the first children's play presented by The University Theatre (Theatre Group at the Sultan Qaboos University). Al Gabri reports that the play she presented for children, *Ardh Almisk*, was a mature production, unlike previous theatrical works she had presented for children, and was sponsored by the Omani Women Society. She states:

I really wanted to present theatrical works for children. And I did, even though I didn't have any past experience in this field, except for some theatrical works that I presented for children at the Women's Society. However, the play I presented for children at the university, *Ard Almisk (The Land of the Musk)*, was a mature work. It was presented in 1999 and I wrote and produced it. (Al Gabri 2006, l: 77-81)

The story was adapted from an Omani folk tale that is constructed around a man, Hassan, who leaves his land and children to seek his fortune. During his journey, he meets a blind lion and a dried tree that cannot reach the stream and they both ask Hassan to search for their luck as well. Finally, Hassan meets the Luck's Sheik, requests good fortune for the lion and the tree, and their problems are then solved. However, he forgets to ask the Sheik about his own luck and how to solve his problems. At the end of the play, Hassan returns to his home and is surprised to see his farm has become green and full of fruit, because when he left the land was barren. He discovers that his children have worked hard to make his farm productive. Hassan then realises that his luck exists in his land, which symbolises the homeland (Al Habsi 2003, 160; Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 9). *Ardh Almisk* takes a narrative form from the beginning with the appearance of the grandmother sitting on the floor surrounded by children. She starts narrating the story of Hassan and then she appears again at the end of the play to tell the children the end of the story (ibid.).

Ardh Almisk was also presented at Salalah Autumn Festival 1999 and was watched by nearly 2500 children (Al Habsi 2003, 160; Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 9; Al Gabri 2006, 1: 94-95). Regarding the children's participation in the performance of *Ardh Almisk*, its director, Rahima Al Gabri, states:

It's important to give children who are gifted in theatre a chance to participate. In the play that I presented, *The Land of Musk*, child actors play an important role. They even inspired me with new ideas that benefitted me, and I tried to give them a chance to express themselves. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 108-111)

Rahima Al Gabri (2006, 1:171-172) also says that the idea for *The Land of Musk* play was drawn from an Omani folk story as she believes that playwrights can benefit from Omani traditional heritage and history as sources when writing children's plays. Al Gabri also comments on the critique of her play and states:

In my play *The Land of Musk*, some critics liked it and some didn't, because in this play I depend on the character of the Grandmother as the main protagonist. And some people believe that we live in the age of technology – yes, we do live in this age, but we still long for Grandma stories that teach the children good values and principles. Many children grow up with these stories that expand their imagination. Why don't we use them in theatre? This play was written up in The Oman newspaper by more than one critic. They were interested in this play, because it was the first children's play to draw inspiration from Omani folk stories as a theme. That's why it was different and new. In contrast, most children's performances take inspiration from world stories. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 180-189)

Also in 1999, the Salalah Public Theatre Group presented a children's play titled *Ali wa Alhayawanat (Ali and the Animals)*, written by Imad Al Shanfari and directed by Gehad Al Shanfari. It was presented at the Municipality Entertainment Centre in Muscat as well as at the Salalah Autumn Festival of 1999. *Ali wa Alhayawanat* tackled many social and educational issues that aimed to improve children's behaviour (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 77).

Alqerd Sadeeqi (The Monkey is my Friend) was the first children's play presented by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group in 2000. *Alqerd Sadeeqi* was presented in Tabarak Private

School in Muscat as well as at the Salalah Autumn Festival of 2000. In addition, it was presented many times in many different Omani regions. This play comments on the issue of the selection of good friends and how this could have an effect on the child's morals and behaviour (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 89). Yousef Al Blushi, author of the play and head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, reports that since the first presentation of *The Monkey is My Friend* in 2000, it has been developed and presented many times. Al Blushi states:

Since you attended the first show, *The Monkey is My Friend*, in 2000, we have developed our performances and have presented it again about 50 times, up until 2004. The income from one of these performances we donated to charity, to Palestinian children. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 216-219)

Al Blushi also states that the large audience at the *Alqerd Sadeeqi* performances proved that audiences were interested in children's theatre:

Audiences who love theatre do exist in Oman, and the proof is the large audiences that attended our performances in all Omani regions. For instance, we presented *The Monkey is My Friend* many times in different Omani regions and it always had very large audiences. From this I discovered that audiences for children's theatre are much larger than audiences for adult theatre. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 201-206)

Shams wa Alwahsh (*Shams and the Monster*) is a children's play that was presented on three occasions by the Muscat Alhurr Public Theatre Group in 2000: the first was in Al Qurm Park within the Alahlam Festival program in 2000; the second, in the same year, in Eid Al- Adha¹³; and the third, in 2002, on the stage of the Youth Complex in Nizwa. *Shams wa Alwahsh* was written by Abd Alazeez Al Batashi and produced by Gasem Al Batashi (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 63).

¹³ Eid Al- Adha: There are only two Muslim festivals set down in Islamic law: Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha (Eid is a word signifying festival).

Gasem Al Batashi, producer of the play *Shams and the Monster* and director of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group, confirms that this play was presented many times on different stages:

Regarding the Muscat Alhur Group, we presented two performances for children. One was *Shams and the Monster* in 2000, presented within the activities of Al Halam Festival, at Al Seeb, at Al Qurm Park and in the Bushar and Nizwa districts. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 54-56)

Al Batashi also performed the roles of actor and director in *Shams and the Monster* and he comments on this, as well as on the children's audience interaction:

In the play *Shams and the Monster*, I was the director and acted in it as well. In this play I also involved the audience of children to participate in the performance, and they played main roles. Some of the children got on the stage and helped to guide Shams, the hero of the play, to the place where the monster hid. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 75-79)

Also in 2000, the Salalah Public Theatre Group presented a children's play entitled *Altefel wa Alesoos (The Child and the Thieves)*, written by Imad Al Shanfri and produced by Gehad Al Shanfri (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 63).

In 2001, the College of Education in Ibri presented *Yasmeen wa Ageeb (Gasmen and Ageeb)* for children. It was written and produced by Badriah Al Blushi, a graduate of the Theatre Arts Department at Sultan Qaboos University. The theme of *Yasmeen wa Ageeb* concerns a grandmother who gives three sheep to each of her three granddaughters and asks them to search for the strongest creatures on the earth to present the sheep to this creature. Yasmeen, one of the granddaughters, starts to search and during her journey meets many animals and features of nature such as the sky and mountains. At the end of her journey, she discovers that the human is the strongest creature on the earth (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 129).

Children's theatrical texts 1992-2002

Unlike the previous stage (1981-1991), where there were no written texts other than the six plays that were presented, the period 1992 to 2002 saw two plays written for children: *The Lazy Bees* (1997), a children's musical play written by Nawal Al Blushi, and *The Kingdom of the Chicken* by Hilal Al Ourami in 2000. Although these plays were not staged, the first-mentioned won third prize in a competition for the best three theatrical texts organised by Al Mountada Al Adabee (The Literary Club) (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 119); the second was included in a published book of children's plays by the play's author (Al Ourami).

The theme of both plays centred on the world of animal characters (bees and hens) and both plays were fables that aimed to educate children in morals through the characters of the animals. *Alnahl Alkasool (The Lazy Bees)* centres on the life of a lazy bee that spends most of the time sleeping and does not help the other bees in guarding the beehive. A bad spider lies to the lazy bee and tells him that she will help him to get rid of the queen and the other bees that always criticise him for being lazy. So then he helps the spider to enter the beehive in order to kill the queen bee after tricking the beehive guards and getting rid of them. However, the lazy bee realises that the spider is using him for her own purpose, which are to eat the queen and occupy the beehive after killing her. In the end, the lazy bee succeeds in getting rid of the spider with the help of the queen, who was aware of the spider's plan from the beginning. He apologises to the queen and the other bees and promises to be an active bee just like the others (The Ministry of Heritage and Culture 2001, 78-100). The theme of *Mamlakat Aldagag (The Kingdom of the Chicken)* concerns the importance of unification and cooperation among all people and the elimination of conflict (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 111).

Children's performances 2002-2007

The number of children's plays presented increased significantly to twenty performances during the fourth era (2002-2007), compared with twelve performances in the previous era (1991-2001). Nine performances were presented in the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival, which was held in 2007, and these performances will be discussed in detail in a separate chapter about the festival. What characterised this era from the previous eras is that all of the presented children's plays were written and produced by Omani playwrights and directors. As already discussed, in previous eras, many plays that were presented were written by Arab writers or adapted from literature. However, many plays that were presented in this stage (2002-2007) still took the educational path and tackled educational and moral issues, with the chief aim being to educate children and correct misbehaviour. This is evident in the plays' titles and in the government bodies that sponsored them. For instance, *Our First Choice*, written by Saleh Al Fahdi, aimed to educate children about the importance of supporting Omani consumer goods as the first choice of Omani people, and this play was sponsored by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Similarly, *The Chiggers*, also written by Saleh Al Fahdi, was sponsored by the Department of Instruction and Enlightenment at Muscat Municipality and aimed to increase children's awareness of the importance of maintaining public utilities.

Rahima Al Gabri, a playwright and director, and the head of Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University, was questioned (in 2006) about her attitude to the common themes and issues that have been addressed in children's performances in Oman. She replies:

I think that the educational and didactic themes are the most common themes that have been tackled in Omani children's performances. Even in the performances that are presented by the public theatre groups, didactic and prescriptive issues predominate. I think the playwrights should diversify in the themes and issues they address to children. For instance, they could derive their ideas from Omani traditional heritage, as it is a very rich source. In addition, the writers should tackle issues that are suitable for the child's mentality. Messages and ideas should be presented for children in an interesting way, not in a direct and didactic way. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 123-130)

Again, as in the third stage (1992-2002), some plays were constructed around popular cartoon characters, such as *Mickey in Salalah* and *City of Dreams*. These were both written by Hilal Al Ourami and, although both of these plays centred on Mickey the famous Disneyland cartoon character, most of the events took place around the Omani city Salalah. Again, there were some children's performances that revolved around the topics of magic and magicians such as *Saper and the Magician* and *The Magic Stick*. However, although similar—even in the titles—to *The Magic Light* and *Amal and the Magician* which were presented in previous stages, these plays differed in that they tackled realistic issues and were not simply fictional or magical plays as their titles would suggest. More detail of the children's performances presented within this era follow.

1 - The Dofhar Public Theatre Group presented *Mamlakat Al Ashraar (The Kingdom of Evils)* for children as part of the activities of the Salalah Autumn Festival in 2002. *Mamlakat Al Ashraar*, written and produced by Mohammed Almohandes, was also presented on the stage of the Omani Women's Society in Salalah and was recorded by Omani TV. This play comments on children's misbehaviour, such as lying, and it depicts the story of a child who was in the habit of lying. It shows how he was punished by being sent to the kingdom of evils. At the end of the play, the child realises that lying is a bad habit and he becomes a good person. He is sent back to his home after suffering in the kingdom of evils (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 110).

2 - In 2003, the Opaar Public Theatre Group presented a children's play titled *Alassa Alsehriyah (The Magic Stick)* within the program of the Salalah Autumn Festival 2003. This play was written by Salaah Obaid and treats the issue of illusion and imagination and how parents should encourage their children to achieve their goals and ambitions through hard work rather than daydreams (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 73).

3 - Also in 2003, another children's play, *Madienat Alahlaam (City of Dreams)*, was presented on the stage of the Omani Women's Society in Merpat. *Madienat Alahlaam* was written and produced by Hilal Al Oraimy and it is about Mickey, the famous cartoon character, who comes from the City of Dreams and visits Salalah, an Omani city. He meets Salalah's children and tells them about the beauty of their city, Salalah, and encourages them to explore it and enjoy the beauty of its landscapes. It also shows the conflict between good and evil (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 103).

4 - *Alhadiyah (The Present)* is a children's play presented in 2004 by the Al Sahwa Public Theatre Group during the activities of the Muscat Festival of 2004, and produced on the stage of the Oman International Exhibition Centre. It was presented for a second time on the stage of the Press Club in 2005. *Alhadiyah* was written by Saleh Al Fahdi and produced by Khamiees Al Meshaykhy (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 121-122). Saleh Al Fahdi, writer of *The Present* and head of the Al Sahwa Public Theatre Group, records how: '*The Present* was sponsored again by the Muscat Municipality and the Ministry of Information' (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 70).

5 - The Al Sahwa Public Theatre Group, again within the activities of the 2004 Muscat Festival, presented another children's play titled *Alsae'g Moemen wa Alkhatem (The Goldsmith, Moemen and the Ring)*, written by Saleh Al Fahdi and produced by Khalid Al Rashdi, on the stage of the Oman International Exhibition Centre. Because of its huge success, it was presented for four continuous days (Al Farsi 2005). This play was also presented in 2005 on the stage of the Muscat Private School (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 66). Saleh Al Fahdi (2008, 1.68-69) notes that: '*The Goldsmith, Moemen and the Ring* was sponsored by the Muscat Municipality and the Ministry of Information'.

6 - The production of many other plays occurred in 2005. These include:

a - *Mygoo Sadeeqy (My Friend Mygoo)*, written by Hilal Al Oraimy, was presented in Kuwait in 2005 by Omani students studying at The Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Kuwait. The events of the play shift between reality and dreaming, showing Mygoo's bedroom and how he travels to many places and meets many characters through dreaming. Characters include: humans such as Mohammed (Mygoo) and his father, as well as abstract characters such as planets, the bridge representing good and the hole representing evil. The writer, Hilal Al Oraimy, aimed to convey many educational messages to children through his play, such as being honest and not interfering in other people's business (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 116).

b - *Mickey fee Salalah (Mickey in Salalah)* is a comedy play presented by Salalah Public Theatre Group within the Al Eid Festival¹⁴ activities. It was written and produced by Hilal Al Oraimy. The plot of *Mickey fee Salalah* is similar to that of *Madienat Alahlaam* by the same writer, since both plays revolve around Mickey, the famous cartoon character, who visits Salalah, the Omani city. According to Al Habsi and Al Siyabi (2006, 117), *Mickey fee Salalah* is an educational play that is constructed around Mickey who gives children and adolescents a great deal of advice that is useful for them and their society.

c - *Moa'ath fee Albustan (Moa'ath in the Garden)* was presented by the Alsahwa Public Theatre Group on the stage of The Press Club during the activities of the Muscat Festival 2005. This play was written by Saleh Al Fahdi and produced by Darweish Al Mbsly. Saleh Al Fahdi (2008, 1: 75) acknowledges that '*Moa'ath in the Garden* was sponsored by the Ministry of Information'. The theme of the play centres on fidelity. It presents two characters, one loyal and one disloyal, and shows both characters the consequences of their behaviour (Al Farsi 2005).

¹⁴ Eid Festival: The Eid Festival is a Muslim Festival held in Muscat in Oman. It is a shopping event in which many local and international exhibitions participate by offering a wide range of products. It also has a variety of entertaining and cultural events, including theatrical shows for children and adults (Muscat Eid Festival Opens 2006).

d - *Mazen Yatahadaa Alokhtoboot (Mazen Defies the Octopus)* is a comedy, written by Hilal Al Ourami and produced by Faisal Al Shanfri. It concerns Mazen, the brave child who defeated the octopus, and his bad friends who tried to steal the villagers' property. The play depicts the conflict between good and evil. In addition, it educates children to abandon bad habits and to hold on to their good traditions and customs. It also includes some songs and musical scenes (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 98).

e - *Saper wa Al Saher (Saper and the Magician)* was presented by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group during the activities of the Muscat Festival of 2005. This play was also presented on the stage of the Women's Society in Barka and on the stage of the Alhamraa Club in Aldakhilah region. *Saper wa Al Saher*, written and produced by Yousef Al Blushi, emphasises the importance of cooperation among family members. It employs cartoon characters to attract children's interest (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 108). Yousef Al Blushi, writer and producer of the play and head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, reports that *Saper and the Magician* was presented within the activities of The Child Assembly that was held by the Ministry of Social Development:

The Child Assembly held by the Ministry of Social Development presented many activities for children for six days, including children's performances, and we presented two performances over three days: *Saper and the Magician* was presented once, and *Galgool and Shamlool* was presented twice. The Mazoon Public Theatre Group was chosen to participate in this event because we have presented many children's works previously. (Al Blushi 2006, l: 166-171)

f - *Ikhteyarana Alawa'al (Our First Choice)*, presented by the Alshawa Public Theatre Group at the Almadienah Theatre in Muscat as well as in Salalah, was written by Saleh Al Fahdi and produced by Khamiees Al Mshaykhi (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 8). According to Saleh Al Fahdi (2008, l: 74), '*Our First Choice* was sponsored by the Ministry of Trade and Industry'.

g - *Albarageeth (The Chiggers)* was written by Saleh Al Fahdi and produced by Naser Al Habsi and staged at the Al Madinah Theatre in Muscat. This play was arranged and presented by the Department of Instruction and Enlightenment at Muscat Municipality to make children aware of the importance of maintaining public utilities and saving them from vandalism (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 19). Speaking about this, Saleh Al Fahdi, author of the play, reports: 'I wrote seven texts for children sponsored by the Muscat Municipality; only one was presented, *The Chiggers*' (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 79-80).

h - *Toolab Akher Zamn (Last Times' Students)* was presented by Al Rustaq Club on the stage of the Sama'el Club. This play was written by Yousef Al Salhi and produced by Abdullah Al Remhy and presented in Sama'el within the activities of the fourth Al Rasheed Festival, which is organised jointly with the Sama'el Municipality. As the title suggests, the play tackles an educational issue of the parents' negligence in observing their children's manners and their educational levels at school; such negligence leads to bad ends for both parents and children (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 69).

Children's theatrical texts 2002-2007

The number of children's plays that were written but not staged increased dramatically to thirteen texts during this period, compared with only two texts in the previous era (1991-2001). Hilal Al Ourami and Saleh Al Fahdi, the most active Omani children's playwrights, wrote many children's texts (fifteen texts) in 2004 and 2005, considered to be the most prolific years for children's productions. In 2004, Hilal Al Ourami—a playwright, director and actor—wrote many children's plays; he collected and published five of them in a book entitled *Children's Theatre: Selected Children's Plays*, considered to be the first book to be published in Oman in the area of children's theatre. The plays in this collection are: *Asheqa'a Al Arba'ah (The Four Brothers)*, *Al Malekah wa Al Ameerat*

Althalath (The Queen and the three Princesses), Al Qet Samsoom (The Cat Samsoom), Megoo Sadeqee (My Friend Megoo) and Hamoory Al Thaki (The Clever Hamoory).

So far, up to the date of writing this study, only two of these plays have been presented, namely, *The Cat Samsoom* and *My Friend Megoo*. Al Ourami also wrote two other texts in 2004 and Saleh Al Fahdi wrote five children's plays in 2005, none of which has yet been produced. The non-presentation of thirteen written texts can be explained by the fact of the seasonal and intermittent nature of children's theatre in Oman, the high cost of this theatre and the lack of financial support allocated to the local theatre groups to present children's performances.

Again, as for the previous eras, most of the texts written in this era (2002-2007) were educational and fables with morals. However, *The Clever Mansoor* addresses a new theme, that of preserving the skills and handicrafts of our parents. This play centres on the child Mansoor who learns the skills of his father's pottery work. This play demonstrates that children's theatre is a possible way of maintaining Omani heritage and culture through educating children. The scripts written during this period are described below.

1 - *Al Asheqaa Al Arbaah (The Four Brothers)* consists of three scenes and seven characters, namely: the four brothers (four rabbits – Bobby, Hali, Sali and Lali), the farmer (Anees – their friend and neighbour), the wolf (Sharoori) and his partner (Samoory). The theme centres on the four rabbit brothers who live happily together in a cottage in a farm near their neighbour, Anees, the owner of the farm. One day Anees asks the rabbits to look after his farm and to take care of each other because he is leaving to go to nearby farms in another village to reap the crops, after having gathered the fruit from his farm. He tells them to beware of strangers and to unite together to be stronger. However, the bad wolf, Sharoori, and his partner, Samoory, follow the rabbits after Anees leaves the

farm and are planning to take the rabbits' cottage and keep it for themselves. Sharoory, disguised as a poor old man, and Samoory acting as his sick son, introduce themselves to the rabbits who do not recognise their real identity. Sharoory tells them that he is a poor man on his way to the town of Dates; however, his son has become ill, so he asks the brothers if they could put them up for one night. The kind rabbits believe him, even though they remember what Anees had told them about strangers. Then Sharoory succeeds in dividing the four brothers by lying to them. Later on, the rabbits realize that the wolf lied to them to separate them and take their cottage. They reunite and wait for their neighbour Anees to help them to recover their home. At the end of the play, the wolves apologise to the four brothers and promises that they will leave the cottage and will not lie to them again. The rabbits forgive the trapped wolves and rescue them from the hole. This play was constructed to educate children that strength is in unity and not to trust strangers (Al Ourami 2004, 107-138).

2 - The story of the donkey (Hamoory) and his friend the horse (Hasoony) is the subject of *Hamoory Al Thaki (The Clever Hamoory)*. This play poses the question: Why are donkeys always portrayed as stupid creatures? The play starts when Hasoony, the horse, asks Hamoory why people describe donkeys as stupid animals. Hamoory replies that donkeys are clever sometimes and stupid at other times, just like horses and other animals. Then, Hamoory tells Hasoony a story to prove that he is clever, by explaining how he helped the poultry man to discover the thief who stole the eggs. In the story, Hamoory relates that the man and the animals laugh at him at the beginning and say that he is stupid and that donkeys do not know how to think; however, they apologise to Hamoory later on and tell him that they were wrong and that they now understood how clever he is. They then appoint him as the judge of the animals. At the end of the play, Hasoony wakes Hamoory up in the middle of his dream of success as a clever and fair judge (Al Ourami 2004, 141-163).

3 - The narrative line of the play *Al Malekah wa Al Ameerat Althalath (The Queen and the three Princesses)* centres on the life of the queen, Waffaa, and her three sisters, the princesses, Dalal, Sanaa and Maram, who live together. Waffaa loves her three sisters but the three princesses are unhelpful, each one busy with her own life and with no care for the other sisters. One day Dalal goes to the market to buy clothes when the thief Temaar and his assistant Qursan see her and decide to kidnap her to ask the queen for ransom money. The queen Waffaa goes with Sanaa and Maram to look for her missing sister and receives a letter from Temmar asking her for money to free her sister. Unlike Waffaa, Sanaa and Maram feel tired and decide to return to the palace and not worry about Dalal. Then, the thief decides to kidnap Sanaa and Maram as well in order to get a bigger ransom. In the end, Temmar and his assistant are arrested and the three princesses become free and thank the queen for her love and care. They also feel guilty for being selfish and irresponsible (Al Ourami 2004, 41-72).

4 - Hilal Al Ourami wrote other children's plays in 2004 that were not included in his published collection. These plays are *Teletabis wa Alshater Anees (Teletabis and the Clever Anees)* and *Al Haqeepah (The Bag)*. *Teletabis wa Alshater Anees* centres on Teletabis, four cartoon characters and their friend Anees, who come together to face the enemy. It tackles the issue of cooperation and how, by collaborating, the four Teletabis and their friend Anees succeed in defeating their enemies (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 24).

The theme of *Al Haqeepah (The Bag)* is constructed to encourage children to be good students and to work hard at school in order to be well educated and help their country to prosper (ibid., 36).

5 - Saleh Al Fahdi, a playwright and head of the Al Sahwah Public Theatre Group, is one of the most active children's playwrights in Oman. He has written many children's plays that were presented on different occasions. In addition, he wrote many scripts that have still not been produced, including the following, written in 2005: *Baeaat Al Yasameen (The Jasmine Seller)*, *Al Tahady Al Kapeer (The Big Challenge)*, *Al Gaezah (The Prize)*, *Al Gameiah (The Sodality)*, *Al Wagbah Al Sehriyah (The Magic Meal)* and *Al Laqtah Al Akheirah (The Last Shot)* (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 17-125).

6 - Also in 2005, Hilal Al Ourami wrote many children's plays that have not yet been presented including: *Mogamarat Anas (Anas' Adventures)*, *Mansoor Al Thaki (The Clever Mansoor)* and *Harah 13 (District 13)*. The story of the child Anas, who lives with animals in the forest, and his adventures and discoveries about the animal world is at the centre of *Mogamarat Anas (Anas' Adventures)*. This play educates children about how to treat animals gently and to live with them in peace. It also shows how people can learn positive habits from the animals' world such as hard work and cooperation (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 108). *Mansoor Al Thaki (The Clever Mansoor)* centres on the child Mansoor who learns the skills of his father's pottery work. After his father passes away, Mansoor does not give up but continues to work hard. Alongside the idea of working hard, this play addresses the idea of preserving the skills of our parents (ibid. 2006, 111). The issue of children's obedience to their parents as well as the importance of education in people's lives is discussed in *Harah 13 (District 13)* (Al Habsi and Al Siyabi 2006, 35).

4.3.2 Analysis of the four Historical Stages

The result of reviewing all the theatrical texts and performances that have been written and presented for Omani children's theatre through the different historical stages is summarised in the following graph:

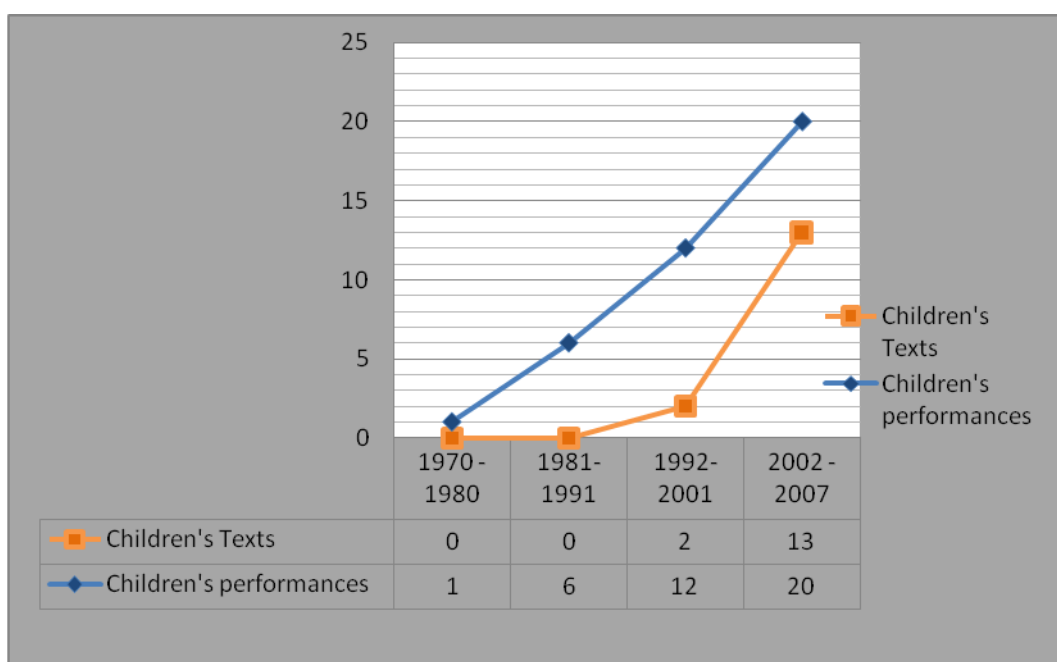


Figure 4: Historical summary of texts and performances for children in Oman

From the above graph, it can be seen that there was only one children's play written and presented in **the period from 1970 to 1980**. The scarcity of children's texts and performances during this period was due to the political, social and cultural climate of the time. First of all, this period (1970-1980) is considered to be a transformational point in the history of Omani society in all aspects of life, dating from 1970, when Sultan Qaboos took over as ruler of Oman and decided to modernise the country with a series of development plans. The main concern for the Omani government at that time was to develop a modern infrastructure for the main services needed as a priority such as schools, hospitals and roads. The development of the cultural sector was not considered a main concern at that time; thus, the ministries and institutions responsible for cultural and youth affairs had not yet been completely established. The majority of Omani people were not educated, although the development of the educational sector was considered as a main concern for the government. Although some Omani people went to study abroad, their education did not at this time result in new developments for Oman.

Nevertheless, the 1970s witnessed the formation of the primary roots of Omani theatre through sketches and plays that were presented by scholastic theatre (Al Saidiyah schools' theatres) and club theatres (Al Ahli and Oman clubs). At this stage, Omani theatre was established and developed through the efforts of individuals (mostly amateurs) who loved theatre, and there were no state institutions that supported theatre financially or in a supervisory role.

The Al Ahli Club was the most active theatre in Oman in the 1970s, and its most productive period was between 1971 and 1976. In 1972 it presented the only children's play produced in Oman in the 1970s. However, and as mentioned previously in this chapter, the theatrical activities of this club ceased from 1977 to 1994. This led to a period of stagnation in the movement of Omani theatre and there were no more plays presented.

The appearance of TV for the first time in Oman in 1974 had an impact on the position of Omani theatre in the 1970s, in turning people's attention away from theatre, even though many Omani people during the 1970s still did not have televisions in their home and many parts of Oman still did not have electricity. Since the 1970s and up to the present time, however, electricity is widespread and TV is considered to be the main entertaining and educative medium for Omani children.

Therefore, after reviewing all circumstances of, and difficulties faced by, Omani society in general and Omani theatre in particular when Omani society and theatre were in the foundation stages, and despite the fact that there was only one children's play presented in a period of ten years, I think that it was a creditable achievement that the seventies witnessed the presentation of the first children's play *Al Fares Al Shogaa (The Brave Equestrian)*.

The graph also reveals that the number of children's performances presented increased to six plays during **the second stage (1981-1991)** of the history of Omani children's theatre. However, to my knowledge, there were no children's scripts written other than those that were produced. This increase in presented performances was due to the many factors listed as follows:

1- Omani society enjoyed a stable political and economic situation during the first decade of the renaissance era that began in 1970. During the 1980s, many governmental institutions responsible for cultural affairs and supporting youth and cultural activities, including theatre, were already established and had started to implement their programs. These include The Ministry of Information and Youth, The Ministry of Heritage and Culture, The Ministry of Social Development and Employment Affairs and the General Organization for Youth Sports and Cultural Activities (GOYSCA). Also, in 1986, Sultan Qaboos University was established as Oman's first university.

Furthermore, in 1980, the Ministry of Information and Youth, as it was then known, established Youth Theatre (Masrah Al Shapap), which was considered to be the first official theatre group to be supervised and financially supported by a state institution. Dr Shuper Al Musawi, who conducted a study of Youth Theatre, describes the Youth Theatre's contributions in establishing the Omani Theatre in 1980s and its contribution in presenting children's performances and also in educating children in the theatre:

Youth Theatre tried to present diverse performances and not to limit its performances to a defined age category whether for adults or young people. Thus, it presented children's performances as well, such as *Yes, We Are Strong* and *The Mask*. Through these presentations, Youth Theatre contributed to create the children's awareness of theatre, either through their observation of the presented children's performances or through their participation in these performances. This has led to the emergence of many talented children, and so Youth Theatre contributed to support those talented children, and at the same time contributed to create a base of child audience, who can be counted on to develop and support the theatre in the future. (Al Musawi n.d.)

In 1991, the Theatre Arts Department was established at Sultan Qaboos University as the first academic theatrical institution in Oman. The establishment of these official institutions responsible for culture, including theatre, had a positive effect on the development of Omani theatre and resulted in the eighties being a thriving era in the history of Omani theatre. Many public theatre groups were established during this time, such as the Alsahwa Public Theatre Group (established in 1987) and the Mazoon Group (established in 1991). In addition, other youth theatres were established outside the capital Muscat in other Omani regions, such as the Youth Theatre Group in Dophar (established in 1985) and the Youth Theatre Group in the Al Thahrah region (established in 1990). Since 1990, the number of theatres has increased¹⁵.

2- The appearance of the first group of Omani pioneers in theatre returning from studying abroad had a positive impact on the development of Omani theatre. These pioneers were also founders of Youth Theatre in Muscat and produced many Omani plays, including children's plays. For instance, Mohammed Al Shanfri, a playwright and director, wrote and directed many plays after he finished his higher studies in Britain and he later also supervised Youth Theatre in Muscat. Additionally, Abd Alkareem Jawad (who studied in Beirut and the USA) and Mohammed Noor Al Blushi, playwrights and directors and founders of Youth Theatre in Muscat, wrote and presented four children's plays during the eighties.

However, despite the fact that the number of children's performances increased in this era (1981-1991) from one to six plays, and despite stability in both the Omani society in

¹⁵ Theatres existing in Oman:

- The two theatres of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in Muscat and Salalah
- The Youth Theatre (Organisation for Youth, Sports and Cultural Activities)
- City Theatre (Muscat Municipality)
- Falajj Castle Theatre (Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Directorate General of Tourism)
- Technical College Theatre (Ministry of Social Development).

general and in Omani theatre in particular, still not much was achieved in the area of children's theatre in Oman, especially if one considers the number of theatre groups that existed at that time (three public groups and five youth theatres). As well as this, there was no state or private institution responsible for children's theatre during this period; neither were there specialist Omani people in this field.

The number of presented children's plays increased during **the third stage (1992-2001)** from six performances to twelve; in addition, two scripts were written but not staged. This increase reflects the better socio-political and economic circumstances in Oman which create more stability. The Omani economy has experienced an economic surge since 1990. The statistics show that the annual growth rate of the Omani economy increased from 3.4 % in 1995 to 7.6 % in 2000. This dramatic increase is due to the increase of local production in the oil industry (The Annual Growth Rate of the Omani Economy 2004).

In addition, the increased experience of Omani theatre people that has been built up over the last two decades of the history of Omani theatre has made a positive impact on developing Omani theatre, including children's theatre. This period witnessed the graduation of many Omani students who studied theatre in Oman at Sultan Qaboos University and those who studied outside Oman; for example, in Egypt and at The Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Kuwait. In 1995, the first group graduated from the Theatre Arts Department in Oman. These graduates, who specialised in theatre in Oman and abroad, worked beside the pioneers of Omani theatre in Youth Theatre and other public theatre groups and contributed to developing Omani Theatre. For instance, Rahimah Al Gabri, a graduate of the Theatre Arts Department, supervised the Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University after her graduation in 1995 and presented a children's play entitled *Ardh Almisk (Land of Musk)* in 1999. Badriah Al Blushi is also a graduate of the same department and presented a children's play entitled *Gasmen and Ageeb* in 2001.

The inception of two local festivals, Salalah Autumn Festival in 1995 and Muscat Festival in 1998, within this period (1992-2001) also had a positive effect in activating theatrical activities and increasing the number of children's performances produced.

The number of written children's plays increased significantly to thirteen scripts within **the fourth era (2002-2007)**, compared with only two written scripts in the previous era (1991-2001). The number of performances went from twelve to twenty. This increase could be explained by the fact that, during this period, the main state institutions and infrastructures that form the basis of a developed country had become firmly established in Oman. The Omani economy was thriving because of its oil resources as well as non-petroleum activities. The statistics indicate that the commercial exchange rate with other countries rose to 20.2% in 2006 due to the increase of Omani exports (Ministry of National Economy 2007). In the education field, the illiteracy rate had decreased dramatically amongst Omani people because of the spread of schools throughout Oman, even in isolated villages. There were 1046 schools in the academic year 2005/2006, compared to only three schools that existed in 1970 (The Development of Education in the Sultanate of Oman 2007). Today, there are five private universities besides the one state university (Sultan Qaboos University) compared to only one university two decades ago.

In the theatrical field, many achievements were accomplished during this era. Many public theatre groups and youth theatres were established, so that there are now seventeen public theatre groups and seven youth theatres spread throughout Oman. Additionally, many Omani theatre specialists finished their higher studies abroad in theatre, with Masters and PhDs, most of them from universities in the UK and the USA. They now

hold leading positions in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Information, as well as academic positions at Sultan Qaboos University.

This era also witnessed the inception of the first Omani Theatre Festival for public theatre groups that was set up by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in 2004, and which it plans to hold every two years. The second Omani Theatre Festival was held in 2006. In this festival, many theatrical groups competed to present the best scripts and performances. While no children's performances were presented within these two festivals, festivals do, however, create a vibrant theatrical atmosphere and enrich Omani theatre. In addition, this era witnessed a significant event in the history of Omani children's theatre: the inception of the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival in 2007. These three festivals bring to light gifted Omani actors, directors and playwrights as well as help to assemble all Omani theatre people so that they can discuss their concerns and issues about Omani theatre.

Chapter Five: The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival (2007)

5.1 Introduction

The first Omani Children's Theatre Festival took place thirty-five years after the first Omani children's play was produced in 1972. This festival took place in Alrustaq from 1 to 8 December, 2007. Unlike the Omani Theatre Festival, and other theatrical activities that are held and sponsored by state institutions (mainly by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture), the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival was sponsored by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, a local theatre group. The evidence in this chapter has been collected from different sources, such as newspapers, the festival program and discussions with festival organizers. The latter include Yousef Al Blushi, the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, and Mohamed Al Habsi, the head of the jury committee.

The establishment of the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival is considered as a milestone event in the history of Omani children's theatre. This chapter describes the shaping of the festival from its conceptualisation, through the different stages of its preparation, and reflects upon the resultant Festival performances. A detailed description of the festival program and the various performances presented is undertaken. Finally, the outcomes of the festival and participants' recommendations arising from these outcomes are tabled.

5.2 The Emergence of the Idea of Establishing a Children's Theatre Festival

Prior to the occurrence of the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival held in December 2007, interviews were conducted with a number of Omani theatre people who are interested in children's theatre. Interviewees were asked the following questions: What

are the reasons behind the absence of theatre performances for children in local theatrical festivals? and Why is there no theatrical festival catering to children in Oman?

Among the people interviewed were: Abd Alkareem Jawad, an advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture, Yousef Al Blushi, the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, and Rahimah Al Gabri, the head of the Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University. From the interviews, it is evident that many of the interviewees agreed that it is important to have a special theatre festival catering to Omani children, and that there is a need for such festivals to highlight the important field of 'children's theatre'. Furthermore, it is also clear that some of the interviewees had previously mooted the idea of setting up a children's theatre festival in Oman as they strongly believe in the importance of children's theatre and the importance of setting up such a festival for Omani children. Jawad states that there are no theatre performances catering to children in local theatrical festivals because he believes that festivals such as the Omani Theatre Festival (organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture) have no connection with children's theatre: 'they are only for youth and adults' (Jawad 2006, 1: 385-387). Jawad comments, however, that the Ministry of Heritage and culture may hold a festival of children's theatre in the future (ibid.).

Both Yousef Al Blushi and Rahimah Al Gabri had the idea of setting up a children's theatre festival in Oman prior to its first occurrence in December 2007. Al Gabri says that, as part of her future plans to promote children's theatre in Oman, she sought to organise a festival of children's theatre within the activities of the Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University, which she heads. She planned to invite all Omani public theatre groups to participate in this festival. Al Gabri states:

I hope to organise a children's theatre festival where all the schools of the university can participate by presenting theatrical works for children. At the beginning, I plan to hold this festival every two years, and also plan in the future to expand it by inviting public theatre groups from outside the university. All groups

can compete in the festival and, by so doing, we will stimulate new theatre people to work in children's theatre. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 99-104)

However, Al Gabri does not explain the causes that prevented the group from carrying out such a festival. The organising and coordinating of such a large event as the first children's theatre festival requires numerous abilities and skills, and substantial support, not only financially but also professionally. An appropriate venue that is appropriately equipped is also necessary. As mentioned in the history chapter of this study, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture offers only supervision, with no general financial support, to public theatre groups. However, they do receive some financial support from the Ministry for their participation in the Omani Theatre Festival that is held every two years and caters for adult theatre only. Thus, the groups depend mainly on their members to finance activities and the Mazoon group and other theatrical groups find it hard to stage a festival that requires a large budget. While it is normal practice for the Omani government to financially support large festivals (for instance, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture sponsors the Omani Theatre Festivals that cater for adult theatre), it did not sponsor the first Children's Theatre Festival. Thus, although some theatre practitioners had the idea and the desire to establish the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival a long time ago, the festival did not take place until 2007.

Also, Yousef Al Blushi, the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, states that he had been trying to set up a children's theatre festival since 2003. He maintains that he had contacted the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Social Development to assist him and his group to establish this festival, with no response. Al Blushi indicates that he had submitted a detailed project to the Ministry of Heritage and Culture regarding this festival, stating that:

Basically, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture does not recognise such an entity as children's theatre, neither do they support children's theatre festivals to be held in Oman. So, in the end I went to the Ministry of Social Development to seek their

help because they do have a Department of Women and Children. I suggested that the Mazoon Public Theatre group would hold a children's theatre festival and at the beginning they were positive about the idea, but later they called me and again refused my proposal for the same reason, that there is no budget. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 137-150)

Furthermore, Al Blushi states that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group had tried to hold a children's theatre festival jointly with other public theatre groups in Oman with the assistance of experts from outside the country; however, the private sector in Oman did not financially support his project. He mentions, however, that he did not intend to give up and was determined to establish this festival: 'I will never give up. And I will hold a children's theatre festival in Oman' (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 104-106). Eventually, the goal of Al Blushi and Rahimah Al Gabri to establish a theatre festival for children became a reality at the end of 2007. Although no dramatic or significant change had occurred in the condition of the Omani theatre in general and children's theatre in particular to allow the establishment of the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival, the will of enthusiastic amateurs provided the critical motivation to change the situation.

5.2.1 The Mazoon Public Theatre Group

The Mazoon Public Theatre Group, since its foundation in 1991, has presented many performances for children such as: *The Monkey is my Friend* (Alqerd Sadeekey), presented in 2000; *Saber and the Magician* (Saber wa Alsaher); and *Galgool and Shamlool* (Galgool wa Shamlool). These performances were presented many times in different Omani regions and also outside the country.

Despite the fact that there are seventeen public theatre groups in Oman which are sponsored by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, only a few of them cater to children's theatre. The Mazoon Public Theatre Group is one of these groups. According to the group's director, Yousef Al Blushi (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 232-233), the Mazoon Group

members have always cared about children's theatre and believe in its importance. He states that the group presented many children's performances inside Oman and outside the country. The group also participated in many international children's theatre festivals in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Emirates and Morocco, and won several awards. Al Blushi reports that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture does not support the group financially to participate in these festivals; rather, the group members have had to self-fund to participate (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 130-137). Al Blushi also states that one of the main purposes of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group is to present valuable messages to children through theatre, and adds that the child is a fundamental target for the group (ibid.).

Yousef Al Blushi— as a graduate of Education College in Oman, theatre specialist for the Ministry of Education in the General Directorate of Arts and Education in the Al Batnah Region, and director of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group—is among those well qualified to be a leader in the field of children's theatre in Oman. This is not only because of his academic qualifications, but also because of his foresight, his energy, and his enthusiasm to drive the process forward.

The Mazoon Public Theatre Group's tradition of caring for children's theatre, established through their many productions and their achievements in the limited field of children's theatre, enabled them to establish the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival in December 2007. The Mazoon Public Theatre Group members held many meetings to discuss the issues concerned with setting up the first children's theatre festival in Oman and methods of overcoming difficulties that might arise in different stages of preparation. Abdullah Al Luehi, an *Alwatan* newspaper reporter, attended this first meeting and reports:

Based on the importance of sponsoring children's culture in Oman and in the light of the importance of theatre as an effective medium to maintain and spread children's culture, Mazoon Public Theatre Group's members met to discuss the program of the first theatrical festival for children, the first of its kind in the history

of theatrical movement in the Sultanate of Oman. The meeting was attended by the groups' members in addition to a group of journalists. (Al Luehi 2007)

The heads and members of each festival organising committee were identified in this meeting. The heads of each committee were selected according to each member's experience and interest as well as the professional work they had done. Most members of the committees were also members of The Mazoon Public Theatre Group. Yousef Al Blushi, director of the festival, and Salim Al Fory, head of the festival organising committee, announced the festival organising sub-committees, naming the head of each committee. Dr. Mohamed bin Saif Al Habsi, due to his role as a lecturer at the Theatre Arts Department at Sultan Qaboos University, was appointed as the head of the Jury Committee, while Mohamed bin Hilal Al Kharousi headed the Media Committee and liaised with all electronic and print media. Hassan Al Ajami and his committee would undertake the huge responsibility of financing this festival by heading the Finance Committee. Al Ajami also headed the Public Relations and the Marketing Committee that oversaw all matters relating to publicity, while the Technical Committee was headed by Khalid Al Duwiyani (Al Luehi 2007). The starting date for the festival was also fixed; it was to run for eight days, from 1 to 8 December 2007.

The Mazoon Public Theatre Group invited all the local theatre groups to participate in the festival. In addition, a number of local companies were contacted by the Public Relations and Marketing Committee and invited to sponsor individual events at the festival. This was a necessary step, as the Mazoon Public Theatre Group were responsible for financing a festival that required a large budget and received no government funding. Moreover, since there was a lack of specialist Omani people in the field of children's theatre, the festival's organizing committee also invited a number of interested overseas specialists in the field with the aim of enriching the festival with their comments and constructive criticism.

Many groups from local theatre and educational institutions confirmed their participation in the first children's theatre festival in Oman, including: the Salalah Public Theatre Group, Alfah Alhadeeth Public Theatre Group, Alahli Public Theatre Group, Aldan Public Theatre Group, Dhofar University Theatre Group, the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, the Theatre Group of the Technical College in Shinas and the Razan Private Company. In addition, there was to be an honorary performance presented by Alsharqah Theatre Group from Alsharqah Principality in the United Arab Emirates (Al Luehi 2007).

All these Omani theatre groups agreed to participate in the festival by presenting free performances for children to educate and motivate them about theatrical appreciation and experimentation. This fact strongly demonstrates the interest that many Omani theatre practitioners have in children's theatre and their belief in its importance. The large number of groups mentioned reflects a widespread desire to produce children's performances from their own budgets despite the absence of government financial support.

However, given that the first children's theatre festival held in December 2007 was the first of its kind in the history of theatre in the Sultanate of Oman, many difficulties arose in different stages of preparation. According to Youssef Al Bloushi, the Mazoon Public Theatre Group faced many difficulties in the preparation stage of this festival as well as during the festival activities, often causing frustration for group members (Al Bloushi 2008). Al Bloushi states that one of the main obstacles facing the group during the preparation stage was in convincing the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (which is responsible for theatre) and other government parties (such as the Ministry of Social Development) to believe in the importance of the festival and to help to organise and support it. As previously stated, while The Ministry of Heritage and Culture is officially responsible for theatre, it allocates its budget for adult and youth theatre only, not children's theatre. In interview, Abd Alkareem Jawad also confirms that: 'Nowadays the

only section that the ministry is concerned about is youth and professional theatre, and the childhood area is not part of its responsibility' (Jawad 2006, 1: 255-256). Al Blushi also adds that many people, including those involved in theatre, did not encourage him and other group members to carry on a children's theatre festival due to the difficulties they might face in setting up such a festival, in particular, the lack of basic theatre infrastructure that is required for such an event. This created an atmosphere of frustration amongst the group members (Al Blushi 2008).

Group members were particularly concerned about the lack of financial support to set up the festival. Al Blushi reports that neither the Ministry of Heritage and Culture nor the private sector offered sufficient funds to cover all the festival expenses, adding that the financial support offered by the private sector companies was not even enough to cover the festival staff's meals. In addition, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture did not initially financially support the Mazoon Public Theatre Group to set up the children's theatre festival; however, it did make a payment to the group after the success of the festival. Again, according to Al Blushi, this money was not enough to cover the costs of the festival (Al Blushi 2008). Yousef Al Blushi states that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group relied on its own budget, collected over many years through its activities, and spent it all to organise this festival because they strongly believed in its importance (ibid.).

Other difficulties that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group experienced prior to the first children's theatre festival included finding a proper theatre fitted with all the equipment necessary to rehearse and to present the theatrical performances (Al Blushi 2008). In addition, according to Youssef Al Blushi, it was discovered that the Rustaq Theatre, which hosted the festival, was not adequate to accommodate such a large audience; similarly, as there was only one hotel in the town of Alrustaq, finding accommodation for

festival guests and theatre group members from other regions was a major problem (ibid.).

5.3 The Commencement of the First Children's Theatre Festival Activities

The first Omani Children's Theatre Festival commenced (December 1, 2007) after five months of extensive planning, fundraising and preparation by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. Members of the group worked tirelessly to overcome the obstacles facing them in the preparation stage. They were able to locate a free venue supplied by the Alrustaq College of Education. In addition, all the Omani public theatre groups that accepted the invitation to participate in the festival agreed to present children's performances with no financial support, and financed them from their own budgets. Thus, the efforts of the Mazoon group, together with those of other Omani groups, made the dream of setting up this festival a final and triumphant reality.

The opening ceremony of the festival was performed by His Excellency, Hamed bin Hilal Al Mamari, Undersecretary for the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. It was hosted by the Theatre of Alrustaq College of Education, in the presence of many mayors of different cities and regions, and their excellencies, the members of Alshura and State councils. While the Ministry of Heritage and Culture did not offer any financial support for the festival at its inception, it was pleasing that the Undersecretary for the Ministry did attend the opening ceremony, signifying that the Ministry was happy to give its moral support to the event and seemed happy to take some official credit for the hard work of volunteers.

The opening ceremony of the festival also announced the arbitration committee to be headed by Dr. Mohamed Saif Al Habsi from Oman with a membership of five from Oman and other Arab countries; amongst them were Hassan Hussain from Qatar,

Abdullah Abu-Aabid from UAE, and Dr. Anwar Ahmed Al Ramadi from Egypt (Al Habsi 2008). (See Appendix for the full list of the arbitration committee).

The opening ceremony included a speech by the director of the festival, Yousef Al Blushi, in which he outlines his belief in the need for attention to children's development:

Children are an important segment of society and giving them enough attention is a distinctive sign for developing nations. The development of children's thinking and culture is the responsibility for all of us, that covers their different ages and levels of thoughts. (Al Blushi 2008)

He adds that, due to the importance of theatre and the effect of its educational, social and cultural role in our everyday life, and the life of children in particular, children's theatre is important for children and needs to be promoted (ibid.). In front of the government personnel and the public audience, Yousef Al Blushi wanted to highlight the importance of supporting children's culture, including children's theatre, and stresses that this task is everyone's responsibility. He aimed to increase official and public awareness of the importance of theatre in general and children's theatre in particular, by explaining that theatre is an effective cultural and social part of people's lives generally.

Omani children have traditionally participated as performers in the local cultural festivals and national ceremonies and celebrations (such as the annual Omani National Day) that are presented for both adults and children. In addition, Omani children have also participated as performers in theatrical presentations for both adult and children's theatre, as evidenced by Taleb Al Blushi (2006, 1: 18), actor and pioneer of Omani theatre since the 1970s: 'Children also used to be involved in adult theatre'. He also states that: 'I remember the most famous child actor in the seventies, Qusay Makki, who acted for school theatre and the Al Ahli Club Theatre' (ibid., 1: 22-23). Since the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival, which is addressed specifically to an audience of children, large numbers of children have also played an important role in presenting its activities

and musical and dance performances. The appearance of children on stage before an adult audience signifies a possible basis for the future development of child actors.

Illustration 1. The first picture demonstrates children participating in activities. The one below shows the director of the opening ceremony giving instructions to the child performers, who are listening carefully. Instructions given during rehearsals created an experimental and educational environment for children where they could learn about the theatre and theatrical works as well as social values through the group work.



After Yousef's speech, the Almilad tableau—*The Birth Tableau*—was performed. This embodied the idea of organising the first children's theatre festival in the Sultanate of Oman (Al Luehi and Al Ghafri 2007). Yousef Al Blushi describes the birth tableau thus:

the scene opens with a group of actors lying under a big piece of nylon material, representing babies in the womb, who then struggle to leave the womb to the sounds of crying from the baby and painful screams from the mother. When they emerge from the plastic, they move slowly looking at the world around them as different colours appear that symbolise childhood. Then darkness falls, representing the difficulties and obstacles that the first children's theatre festival has witnessed before it saw the light. After the darkness leaves, the actors gather around the piece of plastic that is lit by a spotlight and try to uncover it, revealing a small child underneath. The child approaches the audience holding a signboard with the words "The First Children's Theatre Festival" and displaying the symbol of the festival. This scene announces the start of the festival. (Al Blushi 2008)

Then a scene called *Atfal Oman (Oman's Children)* was shown; this described Oman's renaissance achievements. It was presented by the students of Yanapee' Alhikmah School (Al Luehi and Al Ghafri 2007) and, as described by Yousef Al Blushi, represented Omani children. It was presented by a group of costumed children wearing Omani traditional clothes and shows Oman's children as witnesses to all recent achievements in the Sultanate of Oman. The scene started with the children singing 'We are the children of Oman' with the Omani flag as the scene background (Al Blushi 2008).

Illustration 2. The photo following shows this scene from *'Oman's Children'*, presented by a group of children. Here, we see the children in traditional garb singing and dancing, while waving Omani flags.



Later, the children presented another musical scene, performing Omani folkloric dance accompanied by Omani folk song (ibid.). Following this, the Albadri Group performed *The Almanateq* scene (*The Regions* scene) which represented the participating regions (Al Luehi and Al Ghafri 2007). According to Yousef Al Blushi (Al Blushi 2008), *The Regions* tableau is an inclusive scene that consists of many short scenes, each scene representing an Omani region and incorporating the traditional music and songs of that region. The performers wear the traditional clothes of each region in the different scenes.

Then, the participating theatrical groups were introduced, followed by the showing of a historical documentary film on the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. The ceremony was a

good opportunity to reward the many actors and experts involved in children's theatre and children's programs from within and outside Oman. The ceremony concluded with a performance by all participants in the festival (Al Luehi and Al Ghafri 2007).

The event highlighted the key people in the field of children's theatre in Oman and the Arabic Gulf states. The festival booklet contains the names of the actors and experts from Oman and the Arabic Gulf states who contributed to children's theatre in particular and children's drama in general and who were honoured in the opening ceremony. These include: the actor and children's performance director Mohamed Noor Al Blushi (Oman); the children's playwright (the most active, having written about 13 plays) and head of Al Sahwah Theatre Group, Saleh Al Fahdi (Oman); the playwright Hilal Al Oraimi who wrote many children's plays and was the first playwright whose children's play was published in book form (Oman); the director and the head of Salalah Public Group for Theatre, Imad Al Shanfari, who has presented four children's plays (Oman); the director Hassan Hussain (Qatar); and the director Abdullah Abu-Aabid (UAE) (The Festival Booklet 2007). (See Appendix 2 for the full list of honoured people.) The festival also hosted actors and theatre people from the Arabic Gulf states who contributed to children's theatre, such as Thikriyat Al Baker from Qatar and Hussain Ibrahim from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (The Festival Booklet 2007).

5.4 The Participant Theatre Groups and the Festival's Performances

Many Omani public theatre groups and theatrical groups from educational institutes such as universities and colleges as well as one private company (Arzan Company) participated in the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival. The organising committee of the festival arranged a theatrical competition, where all the participant theatrical groups could compete for festival awards. All the Omani theatrical groups presented their plays at the assigned times and places set by the organising committee. The only change was

the cancellation of the performance by Sharja Theatre (*Alkanz Althamin*) from the United Arab Emirates; this was replaced by the Omani play *Galgool and Shamlool*, which was presented for the second time. This cancellation was due to the delay of obtaining visas for some actors to enter the Sultanate of Oman, so they were not able to attend on time to participate in the festival (Al Kharusi 2007). Honorary performances were also presented within the festival program outside of the festival competition, in order to enrich the festival with diverse performances by theatrical aficionados.

Illustration 3. The photo below shows one of the opening ceremony scenes that introduced the theatrical groups participating in the festival. It depicts five children wearing traditional Omani clothes and holding signs with the names of the participating theatre groups.



Nine performances were presented in all: *Lahn Al Itihad*, *Shkbat Shakabeet*, *Galgool wa Shamlool*, *Al Qet Samsom*, *Alarnab wa Alsolhafah*, *Ayam Altifoolah*, *Albaea' Alsagheer*, *Madinat Alahlam*, and *Ah Ya Zaman*. These performances were presented in the Theatre

of Alrustaq College of Education and the Theatre of the General Directorate of Arts and Education in the Al Batnah Region (The Festival Booklet 2007).

Yousef Al Blushi (2008) states that, despite the fact that the Theatre of the Alrustaq College of Education, where most of the performances were presented, was not fully equipped with modern theatre facilities such as lighting and sound equipment needed to present a polished performance, many public theatre groups attempted to overcome this difficulty by hiring theatre equipment (Al Blushi 2008). For instance, there were some technical problems with the lighting and sound systems when the performance of *Madinat Alahalm (City of Dreams)* was about to start: the sound was very poor and the lightning was not working. This caused Khalid Al Shanfari, the director, to announce that he was going to withdraw from the festival competition. However, the audience—especially the children—and members of the group convinced him to carry on. Many technical problems were solved and the performance presented after a slight delay.

Some of the performances presented in the festival are described here, while the remainder are tabled and attached in the appendix. Those selected were only superficially analysed in the media; however, the detailed discussion below gives examples of themes, content and styles used. Moreover, two performances described here are particularly appropriate examples because they won the first and second prizes at the festival, thus demonstrating their excellence. A description of the performances follows:

1- Ayam Altifoolah (The Days of Childhood)

Ayam Altifoolah is a comedy written and produced by Yousef Al Ansari and presented by the Shinas Technical College Theatre Group (Al Luehi 2007). As described by Yousef Al Blushi, the theme of this play revolves around childhood memories and is presented in a comedic way. It includes some folkloric songs that are part of an Omani childhood, such as ‘Qaranqashooh’, which is one of the religious occasions that Omani children celebrate

and sing at on the fifteenth day of the holy month of Ramadan. *Ayam Altifoolah* also includes folkloric songs connected with a child's birthday (Al Blushi 2008).

2- Alarnab wa Alsolhafah (The Rabbit and the Turtle)

Alarnab wa Alsolhafah (The Rabbit and the Turtle) was presented by the Alahli Pubic Theatre Group, written and produced by Hilal Al Hilali (The Festival Booklet, 2007). This play tackles many social and educational issues with the aim of improving children's behaviour. Yousef Al Blushi (Al Blushi 2008) reports that this play concerns the famous children's story constructed around the rabbit and the turtle who were running a race. *The Rabbit and the Turtle* criticises the rabbit for being overconfident and for laughing at the turtle for being so slow. This play aims to educate children not to be proud and overconfident or place themselves above other children.

3- Al Qet Samsoom (The Cat Samsoom)

Al Qet Samsoom (The Cat Samsoom) was presented by Dhofar University Theatre Group, written by Hilal Al Erami and produced by Khalid Ghalep. The theme of *Al Qet Samsoom* revolves around the cat Samsoom who is a naughty cat that hangs around his bad friends and gets into a lot of trouble by not listening to his good friends' advice. He is a bad cat and a thief. However, at the end, Samsoom feels guilty and regrets everything. (Al Ourami 2004, 75-104). The characters in this play are animals and cartoon characters.

4- Galgool wa Shamlool (Galgool and Shamlool)

The Mazoon Public Theatre Group presented a play entitled *Galgool wa Shamlool*, that was written by Yacup Al Khangari and produced by Yousef Al Blushi. The theme of the play revolves around two children named Galgool and Shamlool, who are direct opposites in their actions and behaviours. Whether in school, in the house or in the broader society, Shamlool has a positive attitude and Galgool has a negative one. Galgool writes on the walls at school and at home, tears papers, breaks furniture in the house and never does his

homework. Shamlool, on the other hand, assembles the children at school and discusses these negative actions with them, and with the children in the audience; he enters into a conversation with them to find solutions for such negative actions. At the end of the play, Galgool regrets his actions and apologises for all his mistakes (ibid.).

Galgool and Shamlool targets children between the ages of six to twelve and aims to improve children's behaviour by showing two main different characters, one of whom is good and the other bad, in order to raise children's awareness of what is good and what is bad (Naser 2007). The play includes three songs—Galgool's song, Shamlool's song and a song for the mother—and uses traditional Omani music. According to Yousef Al Blushi, twenty children participated in presenting the musical scenes of the play as well as other scenes. He notes that the child audience liked the performance, especially the musical scenes, and they interacted enthusiastically with the whole presentation (Al Blushi 2008). Al Blushi also reports that the décor of *Galgool and Shamlool* consisted of six tableaux that were used as backdrops; they were made of different bright colours to attract children's attention (ibid.).

5- *Shkbat Shakabeet*

The Aldan Public Theatre Group presented two performances during the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival: *Shkbat Shakabeet*, which was an honorary performance not involved in the competition, and *Lahn Al Itihad (The Uniting Melody)*, which was a festival competitor. Some of the jury committee members praised *Shkbat Shakabeet* and would have preferred the performance to have been included in the festival competition rather than being one of the honorary performances, to give it the opportunity to win prizes (Al Kharusi 2007).

Shkbat Shakabeet was written and produced by Faisal Al Ofi. It is a comedy that raises educational issues, such as the relationship between teacher and students at school, and

students' behaviour at school and home. The events of this play take place in the classroom, where the teacher has a conversation with his troublemaker students, trying to convince them to respect the teacher and the school rules. *Shkbat Shakabeet* revolves around a group of naughty students who have bad manners such as writing on the school's walls and damaging school books and furniture, as well as some negative behaviours at home such as staying up late and watching too much television instead of doing their homework (Al Blushi 2008).

The actors of *Shkbat Shakabeet* who play the roles of the school students were all adults wearing school uniforms. According to Faisal Al Ofi, the writer and producer of the play, *Shkbat Shakabeet* also contains educational messages for parents on how to deal with their children at home after school hours, and how to cooperate with teachers in educating their children (Al Luehi 2007). He comments that he was happy to see the children in the audience interacting with the performance, and the success of the performance, despite the fact that most of the actors were acting for the first time. Al Ofi also mentions that he was pleasantly surprised to see the performance hall full of spectators and that there were not enough seats for all (ibid.).

Faisal Al Ofi, the writer and producer of *Shkbat Shakabeet*, reports that the Aldan Public Theatre Group members contributed money (200 Omani Riyal) from their own pockets to pay for the sets of this performance, despite the fact that most of them were college students. In contrast, some private companies spent very little on costumes. He states that Aldan Public Theatre Group members tried to overcome financial difficulties in order to present a performance for children for the first time to educate and amuse them (Al Luehi 2007).

6- Lahn Al Itihad (The Uniting Melody)

The Uniting Melody was the second performance presented by the Aldan Public Theatre Group, and it was written by Hilal Al Abri and produced by Edrees Al Nabhani. *The Uniting Melody* poses the question: What is the most important thing in our life—money, power or education? At the end of the performance, the heroes of the play discover that education is the most important of the three, as it is the key to lifting the human being towards the highest ideal levels, although money and power are also important. The events of the play take place in a forest (Al Blushi 2008).

Analysis of six plays above

In analysing these six plays, the universal theme is found to be educational with a broad range of scholastic themes; however, the play *The Days of Childhood* tends more to comedy and pure fun. Many plays such as *The Rabbit and the Turtle*, *Galgool and Shamlool*, and *Shkbat Shakabeet* are constructed around schools and classroom settings, and most are morality plays, with the aim of improving children's behaviour. *Shkbat Shakabeet* also contains educational messages for parents on how to deal with their children at home after school hours, and how to cooperate with teachers in educating their children. This appeals to a wider audience and has a broader social purpose.

According to Yousef Al Blushi (2008), the performances presented in this festival varied from comedic, educational, to musical plays. Five of the six children's plays that were listed were about morals and educational themes, signifying that there is still confusion among Omani theatre people about the definition and the nature of children's theatre, as it is usually confused with 'scholastic theatre'. This fact also accords with what was discussed in the contextual chapter of this study: that many Omani people, including theatre practitioners, are still confused about the difference between children's theatre and other dramatic forms presented with and for children, particularly scholastic theatre.

Children's theatre is broader than scholastic theatre as it is more open to real life situations, can tackle many themes concerning children in different stages and ages, and is not limited to educational and scholastic themes as scholastic theatre is. Thus, for future festivals, Omani playwrights might consider this variety of themes that children's theatre allows and introduce new, non-didactic themes.

The Uniting Melody, the play that won the prize for the best performance and best script in the festival, is a morality play with no obvious comic elements or songs. Yet, it offers an increasing level of complexity of thought and application to life. In addition, many of the plays are constructed around the classic good versus evil conflict; thus, the two-dimensional characters—representing good versus evil—do not require a depth of acting ability. This is specifically true for the fables *The Rabbit and the Turtle*, *The Cat Samsoom* and the morality plays. For instance, *Galgool and Shamlool* engages two characters that are direct opposites in their actions and behaviours: Shamlool represents a positive attitude and Galgool depicts a negative one. Similarly, *The Cat Samsoom* revolves around the cat Samsoom who has some bad friends and also some good ones. *The Rabbit and the Turtle* shows two different characters: the rabbit, the fast and proud animal, and the slow, realistic, self-accepting turtle.

Illustration 4. This photo below represents a dramatic scene that was presented in the opening ceremony and performed by both children and adults. It also shows the fabulous animal characters that were involved in many performances in this festival. The board in the background has the words ‘The First Children’s Theatre Festival’.



A repeated credible conclusion of redemption is illustrated in plays such as *The Rabbit and the Turtle*, *The Cat Samsoom* and *Galgool and Shamlool*, where the characters feel guilty and regret everything at the end: the type of ending that is to be expected in good versus evil scenarios. Apart from the generally good versus bad themes, it is obvious that many of the plays have didactic intent and this can be seen through the educational and morality themes utilised.

There was also some use of songs and traditional Omani music in *The Days of Childhood* and *Galgool and Shamlool*. *The Days of Childhood* acts as a conduit for the preservation of traditional Omani cultural heritage as it includes some folkloric songs that are a common part of Omani childhood. As previously discussed in the Contextual chapter on the importance of children’s theatre in Oman, Al Zadjali (2002, 216) believes that children’s theatre can play an important role in preserving the unique Omani traditional

culture. He indicates that, because of globalisation and openness to other cultures and societies, many traditional values and customs of Omani society have changed for the worse, and he believes that one way in which Omani culture can best be preserved is through children's theatre. He claims that children's theatre can play a significant role in the fortification of values and faith and in giving children knowledge of their culture. The example of *The Days of Childhood* proves that children's theatre in Oman is a possible site and inspiration for the preservation of Omani cultural traditions. This fact was also confirmed by the jury panel that stressed the importance of utilising Omani folk literature as one of the main sources from where children's playwrights can draw their themes. (This recommendation is discussed later in this chapter when addressing the jury panel's recommendations). However, *The Days of Childhood* was not the only Omani children's performance to use Omani traditional songs; a few other children's performances, such as *The Land of the Musk*, written and produced by Rahima Al Gabri, also uses traditional songs and draws themes from Omani folk stories. Since the festival's jury panel emphasised the importance of utilising Omani folk literature in writing for children's theatre, there is the possibility that a new trend will emerge in Omani children's theatre, as many playwrights may consider this recommendation when writing future scripts for children.

The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival introduced some first-time award-winning Omani playwrights and directors: the author of *The Uniting Melody*, Khalid Al Abri, won the award for best script despite the fact that he was writing for children's theatre for the first time; Al Nabhani won best director award for the same performance. Thus, the Festival was a good starting point for such artists, considering the fact that children's theatre in Oman is still in its establishment stage and, although dating back to 1972 when the first children's performance was presented, still lacks Omani specialists. The continuity of the festival into the future will help to create a stronger base for Omani children's theatre, as theatre practitioners will have a creative space where they can

compete in presenting the best children's scripts and performances. Their experience in the field will increase through practice and will build a performing arts knowledge base of experience and appreciative audiences who may request more such entertainment and enlightenment for children.

5.5 Conclusion of Festival Events

The opening and closing ceremonies of the festival had official governmental representation, under the auspices of Abdullah bin Nasser Al Rahbi, Chief Executive Officer of the Oman Association for Press, Publishing and Advertising. The closing ceremony of the festival was held at the Theatre of Alrustaq College of Education.

The ceremony included a scene enacted by representatives of the participating teams. Following this, a film was shown which gave an insight into the historical background of the first seven days of the festival. At the end of the program, members of the festival panel made some announcements, and this was followed by the distribution of awards to the winning teams. The festival awards were divided into two main types: major awards and incentive and appreciation awards. There were ten major awards that were defined in advance by the festival organising committee, to be awarded to recipients chosen by the jury committee. The incentive and appreciation awards were specified by the jury committee to be given to those who presented creative and distinctive works, especially those who presented theatrical works for children for the first time, in order to encourage them to produce more creative works and to show moral support.

Illustration 5. The two photos below represent the closing ceremony that had official governmental representation, under the auspices of Abdullah bin Nasser Al Rahbi, Chief Executive Officer of the Oman Association for Press, Publishing and Advertising. Al Rahbi honoured the winning teams as well as some performers, including children.



5.5.1 Incentive Awards

The festival arbitration panel decided to grant an incentive and appreciation award to the playwright Hilal Al Oraimi, who wrote many children's plays and was the first playwright whose children's play was published in book form. It also granted an award to the poet Zahran Al Shaqsi for the best lyrics to songs for children's theatre in *Galgool and Shamlool*, which was performed by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. The child actor Khalfan Al Nabhani received a distinguished actor award for *Lahn Alittihad*, a

performance by the Aldan Public Theatre Group. Awards for the first and second best actress were not given; however, the panel decided to grant an appreciation award to Shaikha Al Habsi for her role in *Galgool and Shamlool* by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, and to the actress Manal Ali Al Saidi for her role in *Ayam Altofoolah*, performed by the Shinass Technical College Theatre Group. The poet Ibrahim Al Rawahi was granted an award for lyrics to the songs for *Lahn Alittihad*, performed by the Aldan Public Theatre Group. The décor design appreciation award was given to the Aldan Public Theatre Group. The child actor Tasneem Al Mahthori received an award for her role in presenting the opening ceremony of the festival. Acting awards were given to Mohamed Jadad for his role in *Madinat Alahlam*, a performance by the Salalah Public Theatre Group; to Omar Al Basrawi for his role as a clown in *Madinat alahlam*, a performance by the Salalah Public Theatre Group; to Abdullah Al Hashmi for his role in *Ah Ya Zaman*, a performance by the Alfani Alhadeeth Public Theatre Group; to Adil Al Badi for his role as a child in *Ah Ya Zaman*, a performance by the Alfani Alhadeeth Public Theatre Group; to Abdulah Al Rawahi for his role as Shamlool in *Shamlool and Galgool*, a performance by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group; and to Mohamed Rashid for his role in *Alqet Samsoom*, performed by the University of Dhofar Theatre Group (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

The jury panel granted an appreciation award for direction to Mansoorah Al Siyabiah for *Ayam Altofoolah*, performed by the Shinas Technical College Theatre Group. It also granted awards for best makeup to *Aah Ya Zaman*, performed by the Alfani Alhadeeth Public Theatre Group; for theatre accessories to *Galgool and Shamlool*, presented by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group; and for best costumes and music to *Lahn Alittihad*, presented by the Aldan Public Theatre Group (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

5.5.2 The Major Awards

The arbitration panel granted major awards as follows:

- a. Best actor to Mazin Al Ansi for his role in *Alqet Samsoom* by the University of Dhofar Theatre Group
- b. Second best actor to Nagm Al Gradi for his role in *Galgool and Shamlool* by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group
- c. Best theatre performance to *Lahn Alittihad* by the Aldan Public Theatre Group
- d. Second best theatre performance to *Galgool and Shamlool* by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group
- e. Third best theatre performance to *Madinat alahlam* by the Salalah Public Theatre Group.
- f. Best child actress to Zainab Al Owaisi in *Alarnab wa Alsohahfah* by the Alahli Public Theatre Group
- g. Best lighting to *Madinat Alahlam* by the Salalah Public Theatre Group
- h. Best script to Khalid Al Abri for *Lahn Alittihad* by the Aldan Public Theatre Group
- i. Best director to Idris Al Nabhani for *Lahn Alittihad* by the Aldan Public Theatre Group (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

The honouring of these people and groups above taking part in in the opening ceremony of the First Children's Theatre Festival in Oman had a positive impact on the people who were honoured and, as some of them declare, this will inspire them to contribute more in the field of children's theatre. The director Idris Al Nabhani, head of the Aldan Public Theatre Group who produced *Lahn Alittihad* and who won the festival award for the best director, comments that he and his colleagues at the Aldan Public Theatre Group had not expected to get the best performance, best script and best directing awards (amongst other awards) as they were competing with such high quality works presented by other participating groups. However, he states that the dedication and tireless efforts of the group members led to their success in winning the awards, despite the heavy workload and challenges they encountered:

The performance of *Lahn Alittihad* was the first performance presented for children by our group. The group members have been very successful, despite the difficulties we have had such as financial problems and some members having heavy study commitments at the same time, but we managed to make a difference by the excellent dedication and efforts made by the group members. The achievement of winning the first prize for the best performances, even though this is our first participation in the field of children's theatre will encourage our group to produce more high-quality performances for children. (Al Rawahi 2007)

Khalid Al Abri, the author of *Lahn Alittihad*, which won the award for best script, says that he was extremely happy to win the top award in the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival despite the fact that he was writing for children's theatre for the first time (Al Rawahi 2007). He indicates that the dedicated efforts made by Aldan group members, in addition to the creative acting and directing, qualified the group to be in the top positions and qualified *Lahn Alittihad* to win the award for best performance (in addition to eleven other awards). Al Abri also states that: 'This award was a big incentive that would encourage me to write more children's plays' (ibid.). The actor Salim Al Hadrami also received an appreciation award for his role in *Lahan Alitihad*, performed by the Aldan Public Theatre Group. He states:

I am very happy to have participated in this festival, which I hope will continue every year. The prize that I won represents a new era for me, and I would like to participate in future works with my colleagues in the Aldan Public Theatre Group. (Al Rawahi 2007)

5.6 The Arbitration Panel Recommendations

In its concluding address, the arbitration panel of the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival gave some important recommendations to improve future children's festivals (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007). These are based on their observations of the festival performances and are recorded below, together with an analysis of these recommendations. This analysis is based on a discussion with Mohamed Al Habsi, the head of the jury panel, and on my own observations and findings. The recommendations are formatted in italics so as to distinguish them from my commentary.

1- Continue to nurture and organise a children's theatre festival every year in Oman with participation and contributions from all institutions concerned with all aspects of theatre, and consider holding the festival in different regions of Oman.

Mohamed Al Habsi comments that holding the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival was a big achievement for children's theatre; he stresses this milestone event should be only the beginning, and that this festival should continue to be held every year (Al Habsi 2008). Further, Al Habsi (in discussion) says the committee members had witnessed the public interest in attending the festival performances, and that such festivals should be held in different Omani regions. This would attract all people from Oman interested in the field of children's theatre, and also those from other countries with whom Omanis could share their interests and knowledge (ibid.).

The committee stresses the importance of the participation of all parties and bodies responsible for theatre in Oman in forthcoming festivals. This recommendation was perhaps made mainly to encourage the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (in charge of theatre in Oman) to organise or sponsor this festival, instead of its being handled by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. Some government officers sponsored the festival opening and closing ceremonies and partly reimbursed the Mazoon Public Theatre Group later. This passive attitude of the Ministry confirms what Yousef Al Blushi, the director of the festival, sees as being one of the main obstacles that faced the Mazoon Group during the preparations for the festival: that of convincing the officers of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture to believe in the importance of this festival and to help to execute it (Al Blushi 2008). In the next festival, Al Blushi hopes sponsorships by both government and private sector will solve technical complications in lighting and sound experienced by this presentation through providing a developed stage with all the necessary theatrical equipment (ibid.).

2- *Organise workshops for children's theatre in the areas of scriptwriting, directing and acting, using modern techniques in children's performance. (The panel stresses the importance of improving theatre activities in schools, as they play a vital role in developing professional children's theatre, as well as introducing theatre as one of the main subjects in the academic curriculum in schools.)*

The jury panel nominates three significant areas: organising workshops for children's theatre, using modern techniques in children's performances and including theatre as a subject within the school curriculum. The First Children's Theatre Festival's program lacked theatrical workshops as part of its activities, despite the fact that many specialists in children's theatre from Oman and other Gulf states could have handled such workshops for children. Furthermore, they could train people interested in children's theatre and introduce many subjects such as children's playwriting, actor development, and modern techniques for children's performances (Al Habsi 2008).

With regard to introducing 'modern techniques', many theatrical groups participating in the festival used simple techniques and designs instead of modern theatre techniques valuable for children's performances; this was due to lack of knowledge, absence of a proper theatre equipped with all the facilities needed, and lack of financial support given to theatre groups (especially considering that children's theatre is expensive).

Improving theatre activities in schools and including theatre as one of the main subjects in the school curriculum is highlighted. Mohamed Al Habsi says that it is important for future theatre development to introduce school children at an early stage to the importance of theatre in human life, and thus an educated and aware generation will be produced to help develop future Omani theatre (Al Habsi 2008).

3- *Form a committee to study and select texts for submission to children's festivals according to defined rules and regulations, because of the specificity of children's literature and drama needed to serve the ideology and culture of the child.*

Mohamed Al Habsi notes the jury panel believes in the need to set up an arbitration committee to authorise and approve theatrical scripts for future children's theatre festivals to distinguish the good scripts from the bad before presenting them to a children's audience (ibid.). Al Habsi reports that the arbitration committee found that some of the theatrical texts presented in the First Children's Theatre Festival were not suitable for children's theatre, and needed to be developed. He says that, while these texts tackle good ideas, the way they are handled is not good and their dramatic structures are weak (Al Habsi 2008). The question then is this: The Ministry of Heritage and Culture established arbitration committees to oversee theatrical scripts to be presented at the first and second Omani Theatre Festivals (that they organized), so why was there no such committee for the children's theatre festival, despite its importance?

4- Involve children as much as possible in the performances, as they will gain more knowledge and their horizons will expand.

Children need a greater involvement in a children's theatre festival since it is directed mainly at them, and their participation in the festival should not only be through acting, but through other theatrical tasks such as playwriting, directing and technical exercises (Al Habsi 2008). The misunderstanding of the term 'children's theatre' in Oman is exacerbated by confusion among Omani people involved in theatre about the definition and the nature of children's theatre. Goldberg's definition of children's theatre may provide some clarity around notions of children's theatre in Oman. He states that: 'Children's theatre is professional theatre, just like adult theatre, and children's theatre is not concerned with who is the performer in children's performances – because it could be performed by both children and adults – but looks at the experience of the performer' (Goldberg 1974, 5). The definition points to one possible goal of children's theatre: to provide the best possible theatrical experience for the audience, not to train the children in theatre arts—although that is also important. Training Omani children in theatre arts may

be achieved through teaching drama at schools and including it as a subject in school curricula in the future.

5- Diversify the subject matter of children's plays, and encourages the use of diverse topics, including folk literature, history, science fiction and any other sources that contribute to the development of children's theatre.

The Committee found most of the plays presented at the festival tackled overused topics, and most employed stereotypical animal characters. Al Habsi adds that children's theatre has a wide range of topics that can be explored and that there are many rich sources to draw from, such as Omani folk tales and other contemporary topics suitable for children (Al Habsi 2008).

6- Support children's theatre through the participation of people actively involved with children's theatre, such as writers, actors and directors, to establish a creative environment and positive feelings for children.

Many Omani theatre people, including some people who were honoured in the festival and a large number of Omani theatre group members, did not participate in, or even attend, the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival. Of the seventeen public theatre groups that exist in Oman, only five participated in the festival. This negative attitude reflects the difficulties and frustration Yousef Al Blushi describes with the Mazoon Group in trying to convince some members of public theatre groups to participate in this festival and assist in setting it up (Al Blushi 2008). This recommendation aims to encourage playwrights, actors and directors to actively support children's theatre in Oman, because many Omani theatre people, including experts, did not recognise the importance of children's theatre and did not present any theatrical works for children.

7- Eliminate direct instructional messages addressed to children's audiences and establish reasons and justification for all the theatrical events.

Mohamed Al Habsi reports that many of the subjects addressed in the festival performances had been approached in a direct way, using direct and instructive language. He believes that directly instructional text is not appropriate for children's theatre; instead, it should be interesting and thrilling. In addition, he states that children are clever, and the writers should not underestimate their mentality by portraying unreasonable and absurd events (Al Habsi 2008).

Al Habsi sees an urgent need for professional playwrights for children's theatre in Oman (ibid.) as there is currently a lack of children's playwrights and good scripts. Few Omani playwrights write for children; those who do, write because they love doing it, not because they are professionals in the field of children's scriptwriting. Such writers should be encouraged and supported. Moreover, they could benefit from children's theatre workshops on scriptwriting if the committee's second recommendation comes to fruition. If there were an arbitration committee for theatrical scripts as proposed, it can be assured that only good and interesting scripts will be presented at children's theatre festivals.

8- Organise side events in forthcoming festivals (especially practical seminars that follow performances to critique and review them), and invite specialists in children's theatre from outside Oman to hold such activities and thus enrich the experience.

It is obvious that the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival's program focused on the performances as the main event, and the festival organiser did not consider auxiliary activities such as developmental workshops and seminars, as proposed by the jury committee in its second and eighth recommendations. Al Habsi reports that the committee recommends holding such seminars. Critiquing plays and their presentation by invited international experts in the field in future festivals would develop and enrich the events and the entire Omani theatrical field. However, he concedes that he understands that this festival was the first of its kind in Oman and he values the great efforts that had been made by the organising committee to set it up (Al Habsi 2008).

9- *Promote a theatrical culture in society to show its importance in the life of children, and its intellectual, educational, cultural and social role.*

The committee makes strong statements about the position of children and of theatre in the cultural lives of children in Oman, asserting the importance of spreading theatrical culture in Omani society to educate the people about its importance, especially in the life of children. However, this recommendation does not outline the means and the instruments needed to achieve this goal. However, some ways of introducing theatrical culture in Omani society are included in the first and the second recommendations: the importance of incorporating theatre as a main subject in the school curriculum and holding future children's theatre festivals in different regions of Oman to spread theatrical culture.

10- *Encourage financial support and other contributions from the private sector.*

In general, the private sector in Oman does not play an important role in financially supporting cultural activities, and even when some private companies do support such activities, the contribution is minimal. As Youssef Al Blushi comments, the funding offered by the private sector was not enough to cover even the festival staff meals (Al Blushi 2008). This is confirmed by Faisal Al Ofi, the writer and producer of *Shkbat Shakabeet*, who comments that funding from some private companies scarcely covered the cost of costumes, even though there were four companies involved (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

5.7 Conclusion: Research Findings

The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival organised by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group represented a new era in the history of Omani theatre and in the history of children's theatre. It was a historical turning point for the Omani culture.

The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival emerged thirty-five years after the first children's play was presented in Oman in 1972. Despite the delay in its appearance, the festival highlighted the importance of children's theatre in Oman and helped to promote the position of theatre in the cultural life of Omani children. It succeeded in attracting the attention of the public and the government officers in charge of culture in Oman to the importance of theatre as a means to educate and amuse children. It is hoped that there will subsequently be a positive response from the government towards children's theatre festivals. The government's sponsorship of the opening and closing ceremonies of the festival, despite their disregard of the preparatory stage of the festival, is a good initial indicator that this may happen. In similar vein, and according to Youssef Al Blushi, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture did not initially financially support the Mazoon Public Theatre Group to set up the children's theatre festival, but reimbursed the group after the success of the festival (Al Blushi 2008). This situation reflects a positive change in the Ministry's understanding of children's theatre.

Furthermore, Abdullah Al Rahbi, Chief Executive Officer of the Oman Association for Press, Publishing and Advertising, who sponsored the closing ceremony of the festival, announced that he was very proud of the excellent efforts and dedication that had been made by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, and hoped that the group would continue children's theatre activities. He also mentions that the official government bodies and the private sectors would sponsor and nurture children's activities (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007). From an Omani of high official status, Al Rahbi's statement is significant, as it shows an understanding of the importance of theatre in the life of children and the importance of holding children's festivals. In addition, Yusef Al Blushi (2008) states that some of the officials from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (whom he met after the festival) showed an increased understanding of the importance of children's theatre and the importance of holding the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival.

It is important here to highlight the media's role in covering the festival activities. The print media, especially *Oman*, the government-owned daily newspaper, and the privately owned *Alwatan* and *Alshabibah* newspapers, were extensively available and gave daily reports covering the event. The festival was completely ignored by the Omani satellite channels, although *Ajman* and *Alsharqah* channels from the United Arab Emirates did report extensively on the festival (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

Despite the fact that the festival was held in Alrustaq, which is far from the capital Muscat, many people from various social categories attended the festival's performances. This was evidenced by the large audiences that filled the theatres where the festival performances were held. Many parents were interested to take their children to the theatre and many schools organised trips for its students to attend the performances (Al Blushi 2008). These visits and the large audiences demonstrate that the holding of the festival has brought about a change in the Omani people's appreciation of children's theatre.

Furthermore, the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival achieved some specific theatrical goals. For example, this festival witnessed the appearance of actors (child and adult), and playwrights and directors who presented theatrical works for children for the first time. The festival engendered a creative atmosphere in the field of children's theatre and encouraged those people to consider children's theatre seriously. Furthermore, many theatre people who attended and participated in the festival performances, and those who were honoured, commented that the festival made them reconsider children's theatre as an important theatre and encouraged them to produce more works for children. In addition to all these achievements, the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival introduced non-Omani people to Omani theatre in general and Omani children's theatre in particular. It provided a chance for all people interested in children's theatre from Oman and other Arab countries to assemble and share their knowledge.

Chapter Six: Data Analysis

6.1 Introduction

The major focus of this study articulated in the research question is what needs to be done to develop children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a viable and valued art form for the future. Few Omani children's theatre studies exist, even fewer are published, and there are no related archival collections available in libraries or cultural institutions. Consequently, this is an exploratory study of the historical background and the present situation of children's theatre in Oman, and qualitative interviews were selected for use.

Data for this chapter is derived from themes drawn from transcripts of ten in-depth interviews conducted with participants involved in Omani general theatre and children's theatre. These interviews were designed to explore and analyse participants' views on the state of children's theatre. To inductively generate material for analysis and to arrive at the findings, the data was extracted from experienced interviewees in the field whose ideas were used to suggest strategies for developing Omani children's theatre.

Individuals who work for State institutions responsible for the cultural sector and theatre in Oman were also interviewed to represent the institutional points of the view as well as their own. These people were: Dr. Abd Alkareem Jawad (playwright, director and advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture); Abd Alghafour Al Blushi (theatre director and Director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture); Saheha Al Azri (Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development); Taleb Al Blushi (actor, director, and Head of the Department of Drama at Omani Radio at the Ministry of Information); Dr. Mohamed Al Habsi (Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts in the Sultan Qaboos University); Rahima Al Gabri (Head of Theatre Groups at Sultan Qaboos University);

Imad Al Shanfri (playwright, director and Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group); Yousef Al Blushi (playwright, director and Head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group); Saleh Al Fahdi (playwright and Head of the Alsahwa Public Theatre Group); and Gasem Al Batashi (actor, director and Director of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group).

As a constructivist practitioner, I inductively generate the research theory from studying and analysing transcribed interview data thematically; then, via comparative analysis, the interview results are contrasted with literature findings to arrive at new, enriched theoretical findings. Because this grounded theory is derived from humans as the primary source and from data gathering instrument representing and reporting realities within their context, meaning can be ‘constructed by (these) human beings as they engage with the (theatrical) world they are interpreting’ (Cresswell 2003, 8-9) [Parenthesis mine]

General questions were addressed to all respondents and specific questions catered to each respondent’s specialisation and position, because realities cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts but carried out in their natural settings. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 118) hold, only people (or ‘social actors’) living within a situation and interacting with it can clearly define and interpret such a situation.

The interviews were conducted in two different periods, from September to October 2006, and in March 2008. It is important to note that some of the respondents’ answers might not be consistent with the position of children’s theatre at the present time as the first Omani children’s festival, held in December 2007, occurred after the majority of the interviews.

The data gathered fell into three main themes as follows:

- Evaluation of the cultural/artistic position of children in Oman
- Evaluation of the current position of children’s theatre in Oman

- Obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman.

These themes were developed after considerable reflection on personal theatrical experience and theoretical studies, and the interviews were constructed in such a way as to allow maximum flexibility for the emergence of new ideas from the experienced interviewees. In the process of interviewing a variety of practical and official interviewees who are actually involved in or responsible for children's theatre, I developed a very realistic picture of the current situation. At the same time, confirmation and consolidation of the majority of questionnaire themes occurred while building upon the available data. At the same time, new ideas to assist in moving children's theatre into the future emerged.

To decide the direction and order of discussion and to allow for the expansion of these themes, the following process was undertaken. My first theme intended to broadly capture the widest possible perspective of the cultural and artistic position of children in Oman. Then, it was essential to draw out interviewees' ideas on the current situation of children's theatre. Simultaneously, it was planned for interviewees to critically analyse this position and (ideally) suggest useful changes. Their resulting evaluation leads naturally to the third theme: obstacles facing children's theatre and ideas on how to overcome them. Thus, the third theme looks at the obstacles currently existing from diverse viewpoints. These three main themes were planned with the intention of revealing the broadest picture of the present as a springboard to the future, thus addressing the main research question: What needs to be done to develop children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a viable and valued art form for the future?

Other issues were discussed within the three main themes, namely: the role of state institutions responsible for Omani theatre and children's culture in supporting and

sponsoring children's theatre; the contribution of Omani public theatre groups to children's theatre as a base for Omani children's theatre; and additional issues raised by some interviewees. The issue of how to overcome the obstacles facing Omani children's theatre is interrogated in the concluding chapter. It was felt that since these ideas are largely hopeful thoughts about possibilities for the future without substantial evidence for the projected changes, they are viewed more in the nature of recommendations for future development and study. As such they therefore belong rather in the conclusions and findings of Chapter 7.

6.2 Evaluation of the Cultural Position of Children in Oman

In order to understand and examine the specific position of children's theatre in Oman, it was important first to investigate children's general cultural position. Thus, an interview question that explored participants' opinions and evaluation of children's cultural/artistic position was framed. This issue arose because children comprised 40.6% of the total population of Oman in the Omani 2003¹⁶ census (Ministry of National Economy 2004, 3). The question posed to interviewees was: 'The Omani 2003 census shows that children comprise 40.6% of the total population of Oman. Compared with this high percentage, what is the cultural/artistic position of children in Oman?'

The respondents' answers vary: some—Al Habsi, Al Fahdi and Jawad—believe that, while some efforts have been made, still more needs to be done to develop children's cultural position; others are amazed at the high percentage of children in the population and believe that they deserve more concern as part of their rights; and others are not satisfied with the current position of children's culture in Oman.

¹⁶ The Omani 2003 census was the last census conducted in the Sultanate of Oman. The first population census conducted in Oman was in 1993. Ten year later, in 2003, the second census on population, housing and establishments was conducted. A new census will be conducted this year, 2010 (Ministry of National Economy 2007).

Mohamed Al Habsi (Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts in the Sultan Qaboos University) believes that the efforts made so far are still insufficient. He suggests some cultural activities that should be offered and presented for children. He also stresses the importance of involving children in the cultural activities both within and outside Oman:

With regard to the position of children in the cultural life of Oman, there have been some efforts made to develop their involvement, but there still needs to be more work done – for example, we need more lecturers, workshops, and we also need to provide greater involvement of children in cultural activities both within and outside Oman. An example of the kind of involvement was the Creative Child Festival, held in 2006 by the Ministry of Education, where I presented a paper about preparing actors in scholastic theatre. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 84-90)

Al Habsi indicates that the Creative Child Festival held in 2006 included many creative fields for children such as visual arts, educational trips to exhibitions and museums and theatre—all with the aim of enhancing children's cultural experiences. He adds:

So although some progress has been made, still more needs to be done to promote children's culture utilising many different means that will stimulate children's interest. Each stage of a child's development has its own specific requirements, and we need to cater for children's different stages of development, and theatre has an important role to play here. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 96-100)

Al Habsi emphasises the importance of understanding the developmental needs of the child in each stage of his/her life and of fulfilling these needs through special cultural means, especially theatre, to suit each stage.

In the contextual chapter, the ideas of Neryl Jeanneret were drawn upon to explain why and how the arts, including theatre, are significant in developing children's full potential. She believes the arts to be an expressive medium in which children often understand more than they are able to verbalise, and that their understanding can be observed in behaviour other than verbal, as known by teachers for many years. Jeanneret also

indicates that the power of the arts stems from here, because arts activities allow children to express their ideas and feelings through both non-verbal and verbal forms of communication. Through arts activities, children can use sound, movement, gesture, form and image to express their ideas and feelings (Jeanneret n.d.). Jeanneret confirms the importance of arts in children's lives:

The key learning area of the arts is able to provide children with unique and multiple ways of exploring, forming, expressing, communicating and understanding their own and others' ideas and feelings. It provides students with the skills and knowledge necessary to understand how the arts reflect and depict the diversity of our world, its cultures, traditions and belief systems feelings. (Jeanneret n.d.)

Al Habsi (2006, 1: 154-156) also questions the failure of state institutions to cater for children's culture asking: 'Why don't we have bodies that cater specifically for children's culture, including children's theatre?' He also believes that:

All ministries and bodies in charge of the cultural sector in Oman should cater for children's culture, including children's theatre. Each body should perform its role according to its own specialisation. Promoting children's culture and children's theatre should be the responsibility of every government institution, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and Sultan Qaboos University. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 239-244)

Abd Alkareem Jawad (playwright, director and advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture) agrees with Al Habsi that the current cultural position of children in Oman needs more attention. He indicates that cultural activities should not just be limited to children at schools, but also be included at the pre-school stage. Jawad claims:

Most children do not attend kindergarten or preliminary level, which are the early educational stages, and only a small percentage have the privilege of studying in non-government schools. Schools in general, including private schools, present superficial information for children regarding the arts. It is very rare that children are educated in this area. Children are not given the opportunity to express their artistic side, such as music, acting, drawing or reciting. This is the situation in the Sultanate of Oman in general. But of course there are some exceptions to this. (Jawad 2006, 1: 120-127)

Jawad focuses on the cultural activities that are presented for school children and highlights that the general situation in the Sultanate of Oman neglects the artistic side, while focusing more on scientific fields; he reports that this general attitude towards the arts is evident at schools where children are not given the opportunity to express their artistic side such as through music, acting, drawing or reciting. According to Jeanneret (n.d.), 'To deny access to the arts is to deny access, as Reimer (1989) states, to "a basic way that humans know themselves and their world"; they (the arts) are a basic mode of cognition'. Because of this, Jeanneret believes that everyone, including children, should have sufficient and equal opportunities to experience and participate in the arts through their lives. She explains how the arts, including children's theatre, can convey the spirit of the people who create them and how they help children to understand their culture and other cultures. The arts also help them to develop their capacity for compassion and humaneness, as the arts put them in touch with their own and other people's feelings (Jeanneret n.d.).

Jawad seeks to justify this failure by saying:

The reason for the neglect of the arts is the increasing concern about the scientific side as one of the priorities that must be satisfied first, while it is obvious that the arts domain is secondary and has less importance than the scientific and the practical ones. (Jawad 2006, 1: 149-152)

Jawad's view of the ignorance and neglect of the arts on the one hand, and the valuing and appreciation of science on the other, reflects the general beliefs and culture that is prevalent in Omani society, which values science. Many Omani parents believe that if their children are educated in science, then they will have a good future and will easily find jobs.

The Omani government also pays greater attention to science than to the arts. This is evidenced by the fact that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in 1990 established The

Child Museum, which is located in the capital city Muscat. The objectives of the museum are to educate children of all ages in the fields of science and technology and to provide them with scientific information in a simple and effective way. In addition, children are introduced to the latest inventions, giving them the opportunity to understand and comprehend the vital role of science in the life of human beings. This museum is concerned only with educating children in science, and there is no similar provision for educating children in the artistic fields. Furthermore, the government's valuing of science is demonstrated in Sultan Qaboos University, Oman's only State university, where there are five scientific colleges. On the other hand, there is only one college of arts, and the only department that existed within this college and concerned arts and theatre (The Department of Theatre Arts) was terminated in 2004, as explained later.

According to Ewu (1990, 65), the industrial countries of the world, including Western countries, tended at the beginning of the technological age to encourage and focus on science, so that the science subjects dominated schools' curricula, as is evidenced by the vast amount of funds allocated for such subjects. However, later on, as Ewu mentions, countries like Britain and the United States, began to realise that an overemphasis on science and the neglect of arts increases the risk of society becoming more and more dehumanized (ibid., 66).

Jawad's view of the ignorance and neglect of children's artistic activities concurs with what Al Zadjali (2002, 126) reports: that the general attitude towards children's theatre in Oman still tends to relegate it as a second or even third priority, and fails to recognise it, despite its importance as part of children's cultural and artistic activities. Abd Alkareem Jawad is dissatisfied with the cultural and artistic position of children in Oman, and recommends promoting cultural activities for children at schools, mainly in the artistic fields:

From my point of view, I believe that Omani children need more care and they need cultural, non-scholastic programs to be offered outside the four walls of the school, not just in the classroom. Most Omani schools need services and equipment to enable the child to practise his artistic hobbies, to enrich his mentality and to develop him to reach his potential. Establishing the Child Museum was a great idea in the area and it would be good to establish museums in other regions of the Sultanate. In addition to children's theatre, clubs should also participate to provide creative activities for children. (Jawad 2006, l: 127-134)

Although Jawad comments that cultural activities presented for children should not just be limited to students at schools, he also strongly believes in the important role that schools could play in educating children in the artistic fields by running artistic activities for children. However, he believes that schools need materials and further development to play this role. Jawad suggests:

As a first step, the schools need to be engaged more and to utilise the facilities, and thus will benefit from visits to the various arts, music, folkloric and other exhibitions held at the museum. One thing that troubles me is the huge gap between the educational institutions in the practice of their duties in supervising and running activities. I noticed that if there is a children's play discussing a children's issue, it is the parents who attend, not the expected number of children who are the targeted audience. The same thing happens if there is a painting exhibition. It is unusual for a school to arrange a visit to the gallery or to attend a play or symposium. It shows there is no coordination between the government bodies at all. (Jawad 2006, l: 139-146)

Jawad reveals an important point here: the lack of coordination between the governmental bodies in charge of children's education and those in charge of cultural activities for children—coordination that would allow most children to attend these activities and benefit from them. He also claims that schools limit cultural activities to within the classrooms and the four walls of schools, thus not allowing other children and society in general to benefit from such activities. At the same time, schools deny children the opportunity to attend cultural activities presented in the outside society by failing to arrange visits to museums and art galleries, etc. In Jawad's opinion, this gap between the schools and the outside society will not help to promote children's cultural position.

Jawad's comment on the absence of coordination among the governmental bodies in charge of children's culture agrees with previous statements in the introductory chapter: that, although the ministries and authorities concerned with children activities (including cultural activities) confer among themselves when planning children's programs, further strong and consistent coordination is sometimes needed to prepare plans and strategies to develop the culture of the Omani child.

Lack of coordination between the Ministry of Education in charge of Omani schools, on one hand, and other governmental and public bodies on the other hand, concerning the attendance of school students at cultural activities, is also tackled by Said Al Siyabi. Al Siyabi notes that, despite the variety of cultural productions, attendance is poor and the concerted efforts made by the organisers are wasted. He also believes that, despite the large population of students in Oman that constitute potential audiences, many do not have the opportunity to attend these cultural activities because of the lack of coordination between the schools and the bodies and individuals organising them. The resulting failure to develop a future audience will also be to Oman's cultural disadvantage and is detrimental to any ongoing cultural development. According to Al Siyabi, better coordination will have two major benefits: developing a future audience and culturally enriching the students (Al Siyabi 2008).

Saleh Al Fahdi (playwright and the Head of Alsahwa Public Theatre Group) believes that, although some cultural activities are presented for children in Oman, they remain hidden because of the absence of media coverage of such activities:

There are some cultural activities that have been created for children, such as competitions organised by the Ministry of Education but, because the media does not cover them, the general public is not aware of them. (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 53-55)

Al Fahdi here focuses on a vital point: the role that the mass media could play in publicising the cultural activities presented for children. Al Fahdi observes that the public

are unaware of the cultural activities directed for children because of the absence of media coverage. Al Fahdi's view echoes a point in the introductory chapter (when discussing the role of the state institutions in supporting children's cultural activities, including the role of the Ministry of Information and the role of Omani Television and Radio): that there is a deficiency in media coverage of children's cultural activities such as children's theatre activities. Children's performances and related activities receive only very limited coverage through Omani Television and Radio. Although Omani media occasionally broadcast news of theatrical activities, it is very rare that they broadcast complete children's performances.

Abd Algafour Al Blushi (playwright, director and the Director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture) is amazed at the high percentage of children in Oman's population and asserts:

I am surprised that there is such a high percentage of children in Oman. I believe that it is everyone's duty to take care of this large section of our society. Children have the right to be cared for. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 149-151)

Considering Abd Algafour's position as Director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, his answer is brief and general since he does not evaluate and analyse the cultural and artistic position of children in Oman. Moreover, the fact that he is not aware of the high percentage of children in Oman's population may indicate that children's culture is not an important concern of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, despite Abd Algafour stressing the importance of catering for children. Both Abd Alkareem Jawad and Abd Algafour Al Blushi, employees at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, report that there is no department for children's culture or for children's theatre within that Ministry (Jawad 2006, 1: 255-256; Al Blushi 2006, 1: 121). Again, this is confirmed in the introductory chapter when examining the support of formal institutions for children's cultural activities. It is noteworthy that, although the Ministry of Heritage and Culture holds the main responsibility for the

cultural sector in Oman, it does not have an administrative division for children's culture, nor for children's theatre; the governmental authority that deals with the child and the family is the Ministry of Social Development, which has a Directorate for Children's Affairs. Despite the fact that the Ministry has organised many cultural activities for children, including theatrical activities, this is not part of its main responsibilities, since it caters mainly for the social position of the child and the family. Moreover, the Ministry does not have specialised personnel in the field of children's culture.

Gasem Al Batashi—actor, director and Head of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group—is not satisfied with the current cultural position of children and believes that children deserve more concern since they comprise a high percentage of the Omani population:

Because children comprise 40.6% of the total population in Oman, it is important that there be a greater focus on children's culture, including children's theatre. Unfortunately, there is no such focus because there is no specific institution that has the responsibility for this matter. (Al Batashi 2008, I: 39-42)

Al Batashi believes there should be a specific formal institution that caters for children's culture and theatre in Oman. However, governmental attention to children's culture receives only second priority—even though the governmental authority concerned with the child and the family is the Ministry of Social Development, which has a Directorate for Children's Affairs. Yet, the Ministry caters mainly for the social position of the child and the family despite the fact that the Ministry has organised many cultural activities for children.

Taleb Al Blushi, actor, director, and Head of the Department of Drama at Omani Radio is also dissatisfied with children's cultural position, including theatre, and believes there is no state attention given to the field of children's culture:

I am not satisfied with the position of children's culture in Oman. I believe there is a deficit in this area because the bodies responsible for culture in Oman, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, do not perform

their proper functions with regard to children's culture. For example, when we build a school, we make all the physical structures for classrooms and playgrounds, but we do not build a space for theatre with a stage and other associated equipment. Unfortunately, the interest shown by government institutions in theatre for children is very weak. (Al Blushi 2006, l: 43-50)

Taleb Al Blushi places responsibility firmly on government institutions, mainly the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, for ignoring the cultural field of children and for not providing the infrastructure, such as a theatre, for presenting cultural activities.

While Yousef Al Blushi (2006, l: 92-93) fails to evaluate the general cultural position of children in Oman, he comments on the general understanding of children's theatre: 'Unfortunately, the idea that theatre should be a part of children's culture does not exist in Oman' (ibid.). His statement focuses on the misunderstanding some Omani people hold about the importance of children's theatre as an educational and cultural means.

In the Contextual chapter, Al Habsi, when defining Omani children's theatre, equates its contribution and value with that of theatre in general:

Since theatre in general is an educational, cultural and social instrument to educate people and enrich their thinking, children's theatre can then be defined as: an educational and cultural instrument intended to improve a child's culture and deal with a child's emotions. (Al Habsi 2006, l: 13-16)

There is a need to increase public awareness of the importance of theatre as a cultural and educational means in addition to its entertainment value, and this understanding should begin in the schools to educate new generations in theatre. Al Blushi's statement, however, contradicts what is mentioned in the state support of children's cultural activities section of the introduction: government institutions do usually present some theatrical activities as part of cultural activities for children, and this indicates that they do consider children's theatre as part of overall cultural activities. For example, there are

always performances presented for children in the Muscat and Salalah Festivals amongst other children's cultural activities.

In reviewing the interviewees' evaluation and opinions of the cultural and artistic position of children in Oman, the consensus is that most are not satisfied with the current cultural position of children and believe that there is a need for further developmental steps to promote this sector. They also believe that children deserve more governmental attention in terms of policy and infrastructure, considering that children comprise two fifths of the total population. Many interviewees place the responsibility for the weak cultural position of children on the state institutions: specifically, on the Ministries of Education, Information and Heritage and Culture.

6.3 Evaluation of the Current Position of Children's Theatre in Oman

Because the central aim of this study is to investigate how children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman may be developed as a viable and valued art form for the future, this section explores the present situation of children's theatre. A question on evaluation of the current position of children's theatre in Oman was directed at interviewees. However, even before evaluating the present situation, it was important to pose this preliminary question: Do you believe that children's theatre exists in Oman, since there are some Omani people who deny its existence altogether? The data shows that all the interviewees believe that children's theatre does exist in Oman, although they have various views on the form that it takes and its present condition. These variations are explored below.

Abd Algafour Al Blushi believes that no professional children's theatre exists in Oman, and continues:

We cannot say that there is a developed children's theatre in Oman – there are some attempts to present children's performances, but still it does not constitute a culture of professional children's theatre. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 156-158)

When Al Blushi was asked (2006, I: 117-121) about whether the term ‘children’s theatre’ officially exists within the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, he replies: ‘No, because it is not part of our responsibilities’. While many interviewees agree about the importance of children’s theatre and the importance of its existence in Oman, they provide conflicting opinions. Abd Alkareem Jawad, who also works at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture as an advisor to the Minister, believes that children’s theatre does exist in Oman, albeit only in the form of intermittent performances that are presented by the enthusiasm and desire of some theatre people with an interest in children’s theatre, not as a systematic theatre. Jawad asserts:

We can’t say that we have systematic theatre for children, but rather I can say we have some theatrical performances that are presented from time to time. Children’s theatre is run by the enthusiasm, diligence, energies and desire of those who are involved in the theatre who carry out their duties and want to offer shows for children. I don’t know how far we have progressed in this field. (Jawad 2006, I: 176-180)

Abd Alkareem was questioned about his role in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in supporting the position of children’s theatre in Oman. In the interview he was directly asked whether he agreed that the current position of children’s culture is weak. Along with Abd Algafour Al Blushi, Jawad also confirms that children’s theatre is not part of the ministry’s functions and states: ‘Nowadays the only section that the ministry is concerned about is youth and professional theatre, and the childhood area is not part of its responsibility’ (Jawad 2006, I: 255-156). According to the Omani Personal Status Law, the age of children ranges from newborn up to age of 15 (Ministry of Justice 2005, 171). In addition, the seven Youth Theatre groups that exist in Oman supervised by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture involve youth from age 15 to 29.

Mohamed Al Habsi agrees with Jawad that children's theatre does exist in Oman but not in a systematic and developed way. Al Habsi names some Omani playwrights and directors who presented performances for children. He comments:

We cannot say that children's theatre does not exist in Oman; at the same time, neither can we say that we have developed a systematic theatre. There are Omani playwrights who write for children, such as Hilal Al Oremi, Saleh Al Fahadi, Mohammad Noor Al Blushi and Imad Al Shanfri, who write and present children's plays from time to time. Such attempts do exist, but we do not have a developed theatre or the proper infrastructure for presenting children's theatre as they have in European countries. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 141-147)

In his evaluation of the current position of children's theatre in Oman, Al Habsi compares the position of children's theatre in Oman with that in European countries, and he seeks to define the obstacles facing Omani children's theatre that prevent it from being a developed theatre as in European countries. Al Habsi observes:

In European countries, institutions exist to support children's theatre, and they have theatrical groups that just present children's plays. Unfortunately, in Oman there is no specific body that provides financial and moral support for groups that would cater for children's theatre, in spite of the existence of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture that is in charge of Omani theatre in general. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 147-151)

Al Habsi mainly stresses the absence of bodies that cater specifically for children's theatre and that offer the requisite moral and financial support, and he primarily questions the role of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in this regard; specific governmental bodies catering for children's theatre can play an important role in developing the current position of Omani children's theatre.

Al Habsi's statement indicates that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture should have an administrative division dealing with children's culture, as it is the only authority responsible for the cultural and theatrical sector in Oman. In contrast, the Jordanian Ministry of Culture, for example, has a Directorate of Child Culture, which has divisions for (among other things) children's culture, music, literature, and a mobile library for

children. It is important that the Omani ministry reconfigure its organisational structure to include an administrative division or a Directorate responsible for Omani children's culture to meet the needs of the many Omani children. Al Habsi ends his evaluation by confirming his dissatisfaction, remarking: 'I am not happy with the current position. I cannot say that it does not exist, but there is a void in the theatrical field in Oman' (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 185-186).

Rahima Al Gabri is similarly dissatisfied with the current position of Omani children's theatre and thinks that children yearn for theatre. She comments: 'From my point of view, in general I believe that children in Oman long for theatre' (Al Gabri 2006, 1:38). 'I also believe that we cannot say that we have a developed theatre for children to educate and amuse them' (ibid., 1: 39-40). In asking Al Gabri if this statement means that she denies the existence of children's theatre in Oman, she replies:

No, it does exist, but it is intermittent, and is used only for special occasions. There is no permanent and continuous children's theatre, and it does not exist as an independent entity. Moreover, there is no institution that supports children's theatre and that believes in its importance. (Al Gabri 2006, 1: 45-48)

She, along with Al Habsi, criticises the absence of governmental bodies that cater for children's theatre in Oman and that believe in its importance.

Al Gabri, Al Habsi and Jawad all agree that children's theatre in Oman does not exist as a systematic and developed theatre, but rather as an intermittent and seasonal theatre. This story of development was previously revealed in the History chapter of this study, which points to the fact that very few children's performances have been presented to children through the years, although the number of performances increased in the last decades. For instance, as reported in the History chapter, from 1970 to 1980, only one children's performance was presented, and from 1981 to 1991 six performances were presented.

Saleh Al Fahdi, playwright and head of the Alsahwa Public Theatre Group, believes that:

Since theatre is an important part of culture for children, schools do offer some theatrical activities, but outside of that, the interest in children's theatre is almost nonexistent, and it exists through the efforts of members of public theatre groups. (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 55-58)

Al Fahdi agrees with Al Habsi and Al Gabri that there are no institutions or bodies that cater for children's theatre. He also agrees with Jawad that children's theatre exists only through the desires and efforts of some theatre groups and others interested in children's theatre.

Yousef Al Blushi, head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, disagrees with people who deny the existence of children's theatre in Oman. By so doing, according to Al Blushi, they disregard all the efforts that have been made by individuals and public theatre groups in this field who have struggled to present theatrical works for children and to establish a developed children's theatre in Oman. He argues:

Yes I do (disagree with them). Because if I agree with them, that means that we will ignore all the individual efforts that have been made by some independent theatrical groups that try to present works for children's theatre. I am not just talking on behalf of myself and the Mazoon Public Theatre Group that I represent, but I am talking about other people's attempts that are valued. Personally, I presented three theatrical performances for children for the Ministry of Education in addition to performances that were presented by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. So people do try to provide theatrical experiences for children, and I also continue to do so in order to establish a developed children's theatre in Oman, and I will never give up. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 97-106) [Parenthesis mine]

Again, Yousef Al Blushi, like the other respondents, believes in the existence of children's theatre in Oman and this concurs with what is confirmed in the contextual chapter, that the term 'children's theatre' exists in the cultural and theatrical life in the Sultanate of Oman along with other theatrical forms.

Gasem Al Batashi, a director and Head of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group also believes that children's theatre still needs strong governmental support. He finds all the efforts made by people interested in children's theatre are scattered since Oman lacks a state institution in charge of children's theatre that can gather all these efforts under the one umbrella and direct them to serve Omani culture in general, including children's theatre. Al Batashi states:

Children's theatre in Oman needs support – not only token support, but practical and wide-ranging support. In Oman there are people who have the energy and are ready to create, but unfortunately as there is no state institution to provide the infrastructure for them, who can administer and direct the personnel necessary to serve the Omani culture in general and Omani children in particular, their efforts will be scattered. The situation is that there are groups who present intermittent performances, but there is no umbrella group to organise them into one entity. For example in the group that I'm in charge of, Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group, the children's performances we present are intermittent, and the works of other theatrical groups are not documented, so there is no continuity, and all the work will be wasted. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 109-123)

Al Batashi suggests that an important point is the lack of documentation of performances presented by the theatrical groups. Both factors, the discontinuity of children's performances and the lack of documentation and archival collections in the field of children's theatre in Oman, are discussed and confirmed in the History chapter of this study.

Imad Al Shanfri, who is also Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group, like the other respondents, is not satisfied with the current position of children's theatre in Oman and believes that there is no developed children's theatre in Oman. He says:

There are some attempts to present children's performances in Oman, but honestly it is not really a well-developed theatre. However, recently, these attempts have increased. (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 44-46)

Taleb Al Blushi, actor, director, and Head of the Drama Department at Omani Radio, evaluates the position of culture in Oman in general within his evaluation of the current

position of children's theatre. He believes that the broad definition of culture that exists in Oman neglects artistic culture, including children's theatre, and is limited to poetry and literature generally, which receives generous funding. Al Blushi observes:

I would like to say something, and I will take responsibility for what I say. Oman is lacking a theatrical culture in general. Unfortunately, the general belief in Oman is that culture means a group of poets and writers, and that's enough. By doing so, we reduce the broad definition of culture and we spend a lot of money for these writers and their associated activities, and we neglect other culture and branches of art including children's theatre. (Taleb Al Blushi 2006, 1: 55-60)

Taleb Al Blushi here addresses a key point: that is, the position of theatre in general, including children's theatre, within the general milieu of culture in Oman (of which theatre is one of its broad branches). Al Blushi believes that the theatrical culture in Oman occupies a weak position compared with literature such as poetry with an ancient tradition. This finding is confirmed by Al Anany (2002) and Al Habsi (2003) who report that theatre was non-existent in Arabic culture until the nineteenth century, when European conventional drama was introduced in Beirut in 1847; however, other Arabic forms of entertainment and public performance did exist. In addition, Oman, which is part of the Arab world, knew nothing of theatre until possibly the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, theatre was imported from European countries and did not exist originally in Omani culture as literature and poetry did; this fact explains the reason for the weakness of the position of theatre compared with the strong position that poetry, for instance, occupies. Theatre, until recently, has been considered by some Omani people as a foreign form of culture.

Additionally, Taleb Al Blushi compares the position of children's theatre in the 1970s and its current position, and believes that the position of children's theatre in the 1970s was better and more active than it is now, since there were more theatrical activities, including children's performances, presented by the Al Ahli Club Theatre. He also

reports that the participation of children as actors in adult performances was more widespread then than their participation at the present time. He outlines:

I believe that children's theatre in the past, in the seventies, was more active; there was the Al Ahli Club Theatre that used to have theatrical seasons where they presented a number of performances including children's performances. Furthermore, schools in the past used to present theatrical activities more frequently and of better quality than exists now. There was competition between schools in different Omani regions. Children also used to be involved in adult theatre, but now it is rare to see children acting in adult theatre; this could be because of the appearance of television and radio that attracted children, so they kept away from theatre. I remember the most famous child actor in the seventies, Qusay Makki, who acted for school theatre and the Al Ahli Club Theatre. (Al Blushi 2006, I: 13-23)

Al Blushi's statement that children's theatre in the 1970s was more active than now disagrees with the findings of the History chapter, which show that children's performances presented in the 1970s were very few in number, but increased in recent decades. For instance, from 1970 to 1980, only one public children's performance was presented, while from 1992 to 2001 there were 12 presented performances. Taleb Al Blushi also poses the following queries regarding the position of children's theatre in Oman and states:

There is no planned or developed children's theatre in Oman. For instance, I ask you, as a lecturer at the Theatre Arts Department in the Sultan Qaboos University, how many graduates do you have from your department? There are very few. How many graduates have been employed by the ministry to activate Omani theatre and children's theatre in particular? Where are those graduates employed in the more than 50 districts of Oman? How many texts and performances were presented for children in one year in Oman? How many people patronise these shows? All these questions need real answers. (Al Blushi 2006, I: 125-132)

Taleb Al Blushi poses fundamental questions that deal with many aspects of the position of Omani theatre in general and the position of children's theatre in particular, and tackles several issues concerning general Omani theatre such as: the graduates of the Theatre Arts Department and their chances of employment, the number of texts and performances presented for children, and the role of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in supporting theatre and theatre graduates. Taleb Al Blushi here directs implied criticism to the

Ministry of Heritage and Culture, in that it fails to employ graduates of Theatre Arts Department, even though they are very few in number, and despite the important role they can play in developing Omani theatre as educated theatre people. Al Blushi also criticises the 2004 decision to cease accepting any new students at the Theatre Arts Department of the Sultan Qaboos University because it is believed that there are not enough suitable places in the state and private sectors to employ the department's graduates. However, as Al Blushi believes, many suitable places do exist to employ these graduates.

Finally, after reviewing all the respondents' views about the current position of children's theatre in Oman, it can be seen that:

- Most of the respondents demonstrate that children's theatre does exist in Oman through the intermittent and seasonal performances that are presented by the public theatre groups, although it does not exist continuously. Thus, because of its seasonal and sporadic nature and because of the absence of state institutions that sponsor it, children's theatre in Oman does not have a strong base, nor is it an independent entity.
- All of the respondents are dissatisfied with the general present position of children's theatre in Oman. Moreover, most of them agree that there is no developed and professional children's theatre in Oman, since what is presented in this field are merely trials and attempts made by individuals and public theatre group members to present theatrical works for children (because they are interested in children's theatre and believe in its importance), rather than by professionals and experts in this field.
- Most of the interviewees agree that this weak position results from the fact that there is no specific state institution in charge of children's theatre in Oman to lead, support and develop this theatrical field. Many of them believe that the Ministry of Heritage

and Culture should be responsible for it since it is the ministry in charge of culture in general and theatre in particular in Oman.

6.4 Obstacles Facing Children's Theatre in Oman

Despite Omani children's theatre beginning in 1972, it still faces very many challenges and obstacles, and numerous essential steps must be taken to develop this important theatre. After reviewing the interviewees' evaluation of its current position and finding that most of them are dissatisfied with its present situation, it was important to question the interviewees on the issue of the obstacles facing Omani children's theatre to specify and analyse what hinders its development from their point of view and based on their own experiences as theatre people (playwrights, directors, heads of public theatre groups and government people in charge of culture and theatre in Oman). It is found that the obstacles interviewees raise fall into two groups: general obstacles facing Omani children's theatre and specific obstacles faced by Omani public theatre groups when presenting children's performances.

Note that some of the government people interviewed are also theatre people, such as Abd Al Kareem Jawad and Abd Algafour Al Blushi. Both work at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, in addition to being directors and pioneers of Omani theatre. Thus, they sometimes present their views as theatre practitioners and sometimes as government officials.

6.4.1 The General Obstacles Facing Children's Theatre in Oman

Abd Alkareem Jawad, playwright, director and advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture, believes that children's theatre in Oman faces numerous obstacles. He was asked about whether he agrees with Khalid Al Zadjali, who reports in his thesis entitled *Children's Drama: Technical and Educational Approaches. The Development of TV and*

Theatre Drama in Oman that: ‘children’s theatre in Oman is weak’, and that ‘all of it suffers from low quality of production and a lack of trained actors, writers and technicians’ (Al Zadjali 2002, 125). Jawad (2006, 1: 412-413) replies: ‘Basically I agree since children’s theatre has faced numerous difficulties through its course. It lacks the funds to carry out its duties’.

Jawad stresses the lack of funding allocated to children’s theatre as the main obstacle and believes that this lack prevents children’s theatre from functioning properly. Another question was addressed to Jawad to understand the obstacles that he faces personally, as a theatre person presenting children’s performances, especially when comparing the large number of plays that he produces for adult theatre with only three intermittent performances presented for children. He states:

In order to arrange for a play to be produced there must be enough facilities, funds and sponsorship. We need a stage and a budget to produce a play, and, to be honest with you, it is difficult to provide these needs. As for the last two shows I presented, the Ministry of Social Development was in charge of sponsoring them. I felt an overwhelming desire to produce more children’s plays. (Jawad 2006, 1: 218-222)

Jawad explains that the general obstacle in producing any play, whether for adults or children, is lack of funds and facilities. Jawad also admits that there is a need for a sponsoring body to finance the performances: the Ministry of Social Development sponsored his last two children’s performances. Jawad’s statement highlights that Omani theatre in general, including children’s theatre, still lacks many basic needs such as stages and financial support, and it is difficult to provide these basic needs in order to produce a play. Despite the fact that Omani theatre has quite a long history, going back to the 1940s, the basic infrastructure is still lacking.

Taleb Al Blushi, who is also a pioneer of Omani theatre since the 1970s, agrees with Jawad and emphasises that Omani theatre in general still lacks many basic needs that hinder its development:

Actually we don't really have a developed Omani theatre in general, so how can we have a developed children's theatre? Unfortunately Omani theatre lacks too many things, such as planning, organisation and leadership from management. There is no such thing as a 'cultural map' outlining a schedule of performances. (Al Blushi 2006, I: 65-68)

What Taleb Al Blushi here reports about—the absence of planning and organisation—is also mentioned by Khalid Al Zadjali (2002, 120-126), who considers the absence of a clear strategy for theatre as a whole as one of the many obstacles hindering development of the Omani theatre. This recognised lack of a strategy for the cultural sector (including theatre) in general, also concurs with what is mentioned in the introduction to this study, when describing Oman after 1970. In summary, since 1970 the Omani government has implemented different development strategies, including a series of well-planned five-year development plans that were compiled to make the best possible use of available resources and create a growing economy. However, there is no such plan currently in place for the cultural sector, including theatre; it was only recently (September 2008) that a Sultanic decree was issued to form a higher panel to study and evaluate the condition of theatre and drama in the Sultanate of Oman and to set up a plan for the development of this vital sector.

The Royal Orders of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos to form this higher panel stems from the fact that many Omani observers of the Omani TV and Theatre, including educated people and artists, are not satisfied with the current situation and portrayal of reality of the Omani television drama, mainly the drama broadcast during the month of Ramadan (the season of Omani television drama where most of the local drama works are presented). Consequently, they started to criticise the low quality of presented drama as well as the weak position of theatre in Oman—where the basic needs and basic infrastructure, such as well-equipped theatres, are not provided—expressing their disappointment through the mass media and writing about it on the websites. As this developed into a public issue, and since it concerns so many Omani people, this panel was formed. The committee

includes a number of Omani specialists in drama and theatre under the chairmanship of Ali bin Hamoud Al Busaidi, minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, and comprises a number of eminent government personalities such as ministers. This panel is also assisted by foreign experts in the field of drama and theatre to assist in putting developmental strategies in place (Al Zedjali 2008). However, there have been no outcomes from this panel as yet.

Many theatre practitioners welcomed the establishment of the higher panel to study and evaluate the condition of theatre and drama in the Sultanate of Oman, with the hope that it would promote the position of theatre and drama in Oman. They also recognized its importance for the field of children's theatre, as they hoped the panel would recognise children's theatre as a part of Omani theatre as a whole and instigate a plan for developing this vital sector.

The issue of absence of a strategy set up for children's theatre is also mentioned by Albahi in Aydabi (2002, 67-68) and is discussed in the contextual chapter. Albahi reports that the absence of long-term strategies to develop children's theatre is one of the main obstacles facing children's theatre in the United Arab Emirates. He believes that children's theatre will not have the opportunity to develop, given the scarcity of theatrical activities for children, and states that there is an absence of long-term strategies to develop children's theatre and a failure to identify goals that this theatre must achieve. The result, he believes, is a feeling of purposelessness in the field, and he claims that the absence of clear and defined strategies will cause conflict in all the concerted efforts to develop this theatre (ibid.). This also shows that most of the Arab countries share common problems regarding children's theatre.

Taleb Al Blushi also believes that children's theatre in Oman is not given the attention it deserves. He raises another obstacle facing children's theatre: lack of documentation of

texts and performances that have been presented for children. He mainly asserts that Omani TV fails to understand the necessity of broadcasting Omani children's plays:

It is not only ignoring that is the major element, but there is also a lack of documentation. I would like to give an example here: through my reading of the Omani Theatre Dictionary, written by Mohammad Al Habsi and Said Al Siyabi, I was surprised to find a long list of theatrical texts and performances that have been presented for children in Oman. However, despite this large number of plays, to my knowledge, there has not been one children's play broadcast by Omani TV in its programming, and there have been no plays recorded on video. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 74-80)

Al Blushi's statements are evidence that many Omani people, including theatre people like himself, do not know about the texts and performances written and produced for children, and he was surprised to find a long list of theatrical texts and performances presented for children in Oman. He places responsibility on the Omani mass media, mainly Omani TV, for this lack of knowledge, since it does not publicise or broadcast the presented children's performances.

The issue of the lack of documentation in the field of children's theatre raised by Taleb Al Blushi is mentioned previously in this thesis, where it is noted that there are no archival collections in libraries about Omani children's theatre. However, Al Blushi's statement that 'there has not been one children's play broadcast by Omani TV' (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 79-80) contradicts what Jawad (2006, 240) mentions: that, in 1983, Omani TV video-recorded and broadcast one of the three children's plays he produced, *Ali Baba Qaher Al Haramiah (Ali Baba Conqueror of Thieves)*. Yet Jawad (2006, 1: 167-168) also believes that there is a deficiency in the role of the mass media in broadcasting theatrical activities in Oman, and he states that the outside society knows nothing about the successful performances presented for children at schools because the mass media, especially TV, does not broadcast it, as mentioned previously.

On the other hand, Abd Alghafour Al Blushi, Director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, does not mention any obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman, commenting:

You should ask people specialised in children's theatre who are more able to describe the difficulties because they are the ones presenting the children's performances. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 162-163)

Although Abd Alghafour's answer sounds reasonable, since he has not presented any theatrical works for children and is not involved in the field of children's theatre, his answer is still unexpected since he occupies a significant position at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture as well as being a director and theatre person.

Mohamed Al Habsi (Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts in the Sultan Qaboos University) outlines six obstacles that Omani children's theatre faces from his viewpoint, and considers the non-existence of a professional children's theatre and its intermittent and seasonal nature as the first difficulty. He also defines other obstacles such as the absence of a body or institution sponsoring and taking charge of children's theatre, the lack of facilities such as theatres, and the lack of financial support. Al Habsi believes and comprehensively summarises the many difficulties facing children's theatre as follows:

Children's theatre in Oman faces many obstacles. Firstly we don't have professional or developed children's theatre. Children's theatre only exists in intermittent performances, presented from time to time. It also faces many challenges in that there is no overall body or institution that manages or oversees it. There is also no special building allocated to children's theatre. There is a lack of financial support and equipment. There is no Omani professional cadre specialised in children's theatre, such as playwrights and directors. Moreover, there is no theatre group that exclusively presents performances for children. (Al Habsi 2006, 1: 191-198)

Some obstacles that Al Habsi reports are also raised by Al Zadjali (2002, 41-44), who outlines the obstacles facing children's theatre in the Arab world, including Oman, that hinder its development, such as the scarcity of financial support for children's theatre and

the scarcity of theatres that are dedicated to children's theatre. Al Habsi also agrees with Al Zadjali, who reports that there is no specialised or developed children's theatre in Oman and that there is a lack of experienced and specialised people in this field (ibid. 120-126). In addition, Al Habsi mentions that the seasonal and intermittent nature of Omani children's theatre is one of the obstacles facing this theatre. This is also confirmed by Albahi in Aydabi (2002, 67-68), who reports that children's theatre in the United Arab Emirates also faces the same problem in that theatrical activities for children are presented only intermittently, usually as annual activities. Furthermore, this situation also applies to Kuwait, as Awatef Albader reports, and she states that most of the children's performances presented in Kuwait are seasonal and discontinuous since most occur during the time of Eid (Muslim celebrations) (Al Haidari and Masraheon 2005). This demonstrates that children's theatre in many Arab countries shares the same nature and the same problems.

Mohamed Al Habsi raises the issue of the non-existence of a theatre group that specialises in presenting children's performances. Al Habsi's view is confirmed by the fact that, although there are seventeen public theatre groups and seven youth theatre groups in Oman, not one theatre group specialises in children's theatre. However, there are some public theatre groups that cater for children's theatre and present many children's performances as they are interested in children's theatre and believe in its importance. Despite the fact that the members of these groups are not specialised in children's theatre, they have worked diligently to present children's performances, in spite of the lack of the moral and financial support offered to them and the lack of other needed theatrical facilities.

Al Habsi, within his obstacles list, highlights another important point: the lack of a specialised cadre such as playwrights and directors in Oman in the field of children's theatre. Imad Al Shanfri (director and Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group) also

agrees with Al Habsi: 'There is also a lack of specialists in the field of children's theatre. For example, you are the first person who is undertaking a study of Omani children's theatre' (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 93-95).

This absence of a specialised Omani theatre cadre faced Omani theatre development in its early stages in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, the Ministry of Information and Youth (as it was then known) which was responsible for youth activities, including theatre, solved the problem of the absence of Omani specialised theatre people by asking Arab theatrical specialists for assistance in forming a strong base for Omani theatre. Thus, the Ministry appointed Mustafa Hashish as director and Mansoor Makawi as playwright (both from Egypt) to work with Youth Theatre (*Masrah Al Shapap*), which was established in 1980, to supervise Omani theatre amateurs and work alongside them to produce professional theatrical works (Jawad 2006, 243). Youth Theatre is considered to be the first governmental theatre group to be supervised and financially supported by the Ministry of Information and Youth. Furthermore, in 1980, the Ministry of Information and Youth also sent a group of nine Omani actors, actresses and directors to Cairo in Egypt and gave them a scholarship for three months to study theatre and to allow them to learn from the Egyptian theatre people's experience. This state institution initiative to invite Arab and Western experts in theatre and to send some theatre students abroad to study theatre could also be applied to Omani children's theatre. Unfortunately, this intention that the government had in 1980s to support theatre seems to be lacking now, as evidenced by the decision in 2004 to cease accepting any new students at the Theatre Arts Department of Sultan Qaboos University. This decision is, unfortunately, still in force at the present time. Despite the existence of diverse state cultural institutions, and despite the strong position of the current Omani economy and all its resources, culture and theatre are still regarded as a second priority.

The obstacle of the lack of equipped theatres appropriate to present theatrical performances, including children's theatre, is addressed by Saleh Al Fahdi (playwright and Head of the Al Sahwa Public Theatre Group), who agrees with Jawad and Al Habsi that there is no equipped theatre. Al Fahdi (2008, 1: 93-94) states: 'There is a lack of theatres that are properly equipped for children's theatre in schools and other institutions'.

There is agreement amongst three of the interviewees—Gasem Al Batashi (actor, director and Head of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group), Imad Al Shanfri and Al Habsi—that the absence of a body or institutions to sponsor or organize Children's theatre is a problem. Gasem Al Batashi, for example, believes that one of the main problems facing children's theatre is 'the lack of institutions and bodies that support and manage children's theatre' (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 110-113). He stresses the importance of a state institution to be in charge of children's theatre and says that, while people cater for children's theatre in Oman, there is no state institution to direct them and provide the financial and moral support needed (ibid.). Imad Al Shanfri also reports that 'there are obstacles such as the nonexistence of public and state institutions in charge of children's theatre' (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 89-90).

In the Ministry, Abd Alkareem Jawad (advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture), states: 'I urgently request that there be a department to supervise and be fully in charge of children's theatre' (Jawad 2006, 415-416). Jawad also admits that, at the moment, there is no specific state institution in charge of children's theatre, nor are there strategies to develop it; and he confirms that children's theatre is mainly supported by individual efforts:

Further review needs to be conducted because there is no establishment in the Sultanate in charge of children's theatre to supervise such performances and develop children's theatre. The Department of Women and Children at the Ministry of Social Development is not officially in charge but they, on some occasions, run some children's shows to supplement a certain program, festival or activity. But for the moment we have only this department that is concerned with children in general, not children's theatre. And, in fact, there are no plans or arrangements in place to activate children's theatre. I agree that there is school theatre, but it has its own programs and plans and doesn't carry out its responsibilities in a highly professional way. Children's theatre is supported mainly through the personal efforts and diligence of a few individuals. (Jawad 2006, 1: 235-245)

In addition, Abd Alghafour Al Blushi (director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture) admits that there is no state institution in charge of children's theatre, and also recognises that it only exists through the attempts of interested theatre people who, in his belief, need support. Al Blushi comments:

Such efforts make us happy, because there is someone who is making an attempt, but at the same time we feel sad because there is no recognition of children's theatre from the bodies who are supposed to be in charge. Those people who are attempting to present children's work need support and encouragement to fulfil their requirements. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 71-75)

When Abd Alghafour Al Blushi was questioned about the bodies that 'are supposed to be in charge of children's theatre', and whether he believes that this should be the role of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (the government institution responsible for Omani theatre) he replies: 'We, as responsible people at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, only supervise youth theatre and public theatre groups' (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 91-92).

On the other hand, the issue of the deficiency in appreciating and recognising the importance of children's theatre by the public and by governmental people in Oman is also raised by many interviewees as one of the main obstacles facing Omani children's theatre. This issue is addressed by Imad Al Shanfri, Saleh Al Fahdi, Gasem Al Batashi and Yousef Al Blushi, who are all heads of public theatre groups. For example, Saleh Al Fahdi reflects:

There is a cultural and social deficiency in the understanding and appreciation of the value of children's theatre from government and public institutions and the private sector. (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 89-91)

In addition, Al Fahdi explains that there is a common culture in Oman that belittles children and the works presented for them, and this general attitude towards children is

exhibited by even educated people such as teachers and some theatre people, with the result that teachers of children and actors who present performances for children feel ashamed of what they are doing. Consequently, Al Fahdi believes that there is a need to firstly increase the awareness of theatre people to make them believe in the value of children's theatre, before increasing the awareness of the general public. He states:

There is a cultural problem that is common in Oman in the way they look at theatrical works that are presented for children. For example, many teachers in Omani schools are ashamed to admit that they teach children! This way of thinking can also be applied to actors who do not really feel encouraged to present theatrical works for children because they think – and this is something wrong with their perception of the arts in general – that participating in such activities will lower their position. By this kind of thinking, they are not looking at the issue from an artistic point of view, because if they did, then they would understand that playing a role in children's performances needs a very high qualification! So before we can talk about increasing the awareness of the general society to understand the importance of children's theatre, there is a great need to improve actors' culture so they can firstly appreciate art and believe in what they are doing. (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 198-209)

Al Fahdi's statement also agrees with the opinion of Awatef Albader, children's playwright and pioneer in Kuwaiti children's theatre since 1978, that: 'in Kuwait only a few people and very few institutions value children's theatre and understand its importance and its goals' (Al Haidari and Masraheon 2005). Gasem Al Batashi (2008, 1: 163-164) also considers the lack of public awareness of the value of children's theatre as a primary obstacle, and he reports: 'Also one of the main problems facing children's theatre in Oman is the lack of awareness of the importance of children's theatre'. Yousef Al Blushi (playwright, director and Head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group) also believes that there is a deficiency in understanding the value of theatre generally by many Omani people, including educated people, and he highlights an important point: the lack of interest in theatre by the Omani audience and the absence of a culture of theatrical attendance. Al Blushi states:

Another obstacle that we face is that people, including parents, believe that theatre is not important for their children and they are unaware of the expenses and efforts involved in presenting a performance. That's why they refuse to pay even a small amount of money for tickets for their children to attend performances. However, on

the other side, they pay a lot of money for their children to play electronic games and to go to the cinema. Unfortunately, people in Oman don't have a culture of attending theatre – even many educated people are not interested in theatre. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 250-256)

However, Yousef Al Blushi disagrees with the above statement that assumes that people in Oman are not interested in theatre and do not have a culture of attending theatrical performances, when he says in the interview:

The child is the basis for establishing strong theatre and an aware audience; so we should start educating children so that for the future we will create an aware audience. Audiences who love theatre do exist in Oman, and the proof is the large audiences that attended our performances in all Omani regions. For instance, we presented *The Monkey is My Friend* many times in different Omani regions and it always had very large audiences. From this I discovered that audiences for children's theatre are much larger than audiences for adult theatre. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 199-206)

However, Al Blushi still believes that there is a need to educate people in theatre and that this should start by educating children's audiences at schools, in order to have an educated theatrical audience for the future.

Additionally, Imad Al Shanfri (director and Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group) also approaches the lack of people's awareness of the importance of theatre generally, including children's theatre, declaring:

The main problem facing Omani theatre in general, including children's theatre, is the lack of people's awareness of the importance of theatre. For example, the people responsible for culture do not cater for children's theatre to the same extent that they do for sports clubs. (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 83-86)

Al Shanfri raises a similar point to that raised by Taleb Al Blushi, who states that the state institutions cater for poetry and literature more than they do for theatre. Again, both points demonstrate the lack of recognition by state institutions of children's theatre and the frustration that many Omani theatre people have with regard to the state interest in theatre.

It is remarkable to discover that five interviewees believe that both public and state people in Oman have a deficient understanding of the value of theatre in general and the value of children's theatre in particular. This misunderstanding of the value of theatre generally (including children's theatre) amongst many Omani people, as the interviewees believe, might stem from many sources. Some Omani people still consider theatre to be a new cultural form existing only recently (in the 1940s and 1950s) in Omani society and do not consider it to be an original cultural form. Furthermore, some of the interviewees, such as Yousef Al Blushi, attempt to suggest solutions to overcome this obstacle, such as teaching theatre at school and educating the young generations in the value of theatre.

Al Blushi's suggestion of teaching theatre at schools to educate Omani children in the theatrical field is an important point since theatre is not presently included in the school curriculum. This issue is accompanied by the fact, mentioned previously by Jawad, that many Omani schools, including private schools, present superficial information for children regarding the arts (Jawad 2006, 1: 123-124). The deficiency in educating people in children's theatre results from the ignorance of many Omani people about the nature and the value of children's theatre, where there is still confusion among people (including theatre people) about the definition and the nature of children's theatre. This is despite the fact that the term 'children's theatre' exists in the cultural and theatrical life of the Sultanate of Oman. What makes matters worse is the deficiency of the Omani mass media in raising people's awareness of arts generally and theatre particularly, in addition to the inadequacy in covering theatrical activities that take place in Oman.

After reviewing all the respondents' views about the general obstacles facing Omani children's theatre, these obstacles can be summarised as follows:

- the absence of a state institution that is fully in charge of children's theatre to lead, manage and sponsor it financially and to provide the necessary moral support

- the lack of both public and state awareness of the importance of children's theatre and the deficiency in appreciating it as an important cultural form for children
- the absence of a professional or developed children's theatre in Oman, since it only exists as intermittent performances presented by non-professionals in the field
- the lack of an Omani professional cadre specialised in the field of children's theatre
- the non-existence of a theatre group that presents performances exclusively for children
- the lack of funding allocated to children's theatre that prevents children's theatre from functioning properly
- the lack of documentation of texts and performances presented for children
- the deficiency of the Omani mass media in supporting and broadcasting theatrical activities and children's theatre activities particularly
- the absence of a clear strategy for the development of Omani theatre as a whole, including children's theatre.

6.4.2 The Obstacles Facing Omani Public Theatre Groups

The question of the obstacles facing Omani public theatre groups when producing children's performances was addressed to the heads of four different Omani public theatre groups, namely: Imad Al Shanfri (Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group), Yousef Al Blushi (Head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group), Saleh Al Fahdi (Head of the Alshwa Public Theatre Group), and Gasem Al Batashi (Director of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group), in order to draw a picture of the sort of problems that theatre groups catering for children's theatre encounter. The respondents tackled the obstacles concerning public theatre groups in general regarding children's theatre, as well as some particular obstacles that each theatre group encounters separately. Some of the obstacles that are raised by members of the theatre groups are similar to the ones examined

previously regarding the general obstacles facing Omani children's theatre. However, the obstacles are tackled here from a different perspective; that is, the perspective of members of theatre groups who are involved in a practical way in children's theatre.

Yousef Al Blushi, head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, reports many obstacles facing his group regarding children's theatre that hinder the group from presenting more children's performances. However, he mainly stresses the absence of state support for children's theatre, especially by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, since, although it is the ministry in charge of culture and theatre, it rather disregards this theatre. Al Blushi describes the sorts of obstacles that face the Mazoon group when seeking the ministry's help to enable them to participate in the external festivals of children's theatre, stating:

The Ministry of Heritage and Culture responsible for theatre in general does not even recognise the term 'children's theatre'. They do nothing about it. As head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, I received invitations from Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to participate in children's theatre festivals there, and when I approached the ministry for some support, they told me that since there was no department responsible for children's theatre, they had nothing to offer. They don't support children's theatre, but I insisted on participating in these festivals to gain the benefit from other people's experiences in theatre. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 119-125)

Yousef Al Blushi's comment that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture 'does not even recognise the term 'children's theatre' is confirmed by Abd Alghafour Al Blushi (2006, 1: 117-121), Director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, who states that the term 'children's theatre' does not officially exist in the ministry because 'it is not part of our responsibilities'.

Yousef Al Blushi also indicates that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group did not receive any financial support from the ministry in all their previous participation in external events, despite the significant expenses required for such participation, commenting:

The ministry does not offer any support. Whenever we present a proposal to the ministry to participate in external festivals, they send a written reply saying that they agree and support the group's participation, but the group should rely on its

own budget and the ministry does not offer any financial support. They will not even pay for travel or accommodation costs or the cost of transporting sets for festivals outside Oman. For example, our group went to Iraq, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and twice to Egypt to participate in children's theatre festivals, and on all these occasions we paid from the group's budget. Basically, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture does not recognise such an entity as children's theatre, neither do they support children's theatre festivals to be held in Oman. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 130-139)

As mentioned in the chapter on the First Children's Theatre Festival, the Mazoon Public Theatre Group organised and sponsored the first Children's Theatre Festival in Oman without the initial financial support from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. As Al Blushi reports, the ministry did make a financial contribution to the group after the success of the festival, which was not enough to cover the costs of the festival. So, what support do public theatre groups receive from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in general? This question was addressed to Yousef Al Blushi, since the Ministry of Heritage and Culture is in charge of seventeen public theatre groups in Oman. Al Blushi replies:

The ministry only supervises public theatre groups and does not offer any financial support. The groups depend mainly on their members to finance the activities. The only financial support we receive from the ministry is for our participation in Omani theatre festivals that are held every two years. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 175-178)

On the other hand, Yousef Al Blushi states that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group's members were disappointed because of the default of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in supporting and financing the group's participation in international children's theatre festivals, so they sought the help of the Ministry of Social Development, as it has a Department of Child Affairs. However, as Al Blushi reports:

In the end I went to the Ministry of Social Development to seek their help because they do have a Department of Child Affairs. I informed them that I would like to participate in an external children's theatre festival in their name. At the beginning they gave me hope, but unfortunately they later rejected my proposal, justifying it by saying there is no budget for such a project. I also suggested that the Mazoon Public Theatre group would hold a children's theatre festival and at the beginning they were positive about the idea, but later they called me and again refused my proposal for the same reason, that there is no budget. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 143-150)

A question was addressed to Yousef Al Blushi as to the reason behind the rejection of the group's project and whether the Ministry of Social Development officers informed Al Blushi (as the head of the Mazoon Group) that the ministry was not in charge of children's theatre. Al Blushi replies:

The ministry official told me that they do have programs for children, but they cannot support theatrical groups financially to participate in external children's theatre festivals, because, as they said, it is not part of their programs and duties. Moreover I suggested to them that they help in setting up a children's theatre festival, and they said they would need time to consider it. This consideration will take many long years, and now at the present time, there is an urgent need for children's theatre because it is the basis for a developed theatre. We should also consider the fact that there is a child in every home. (Al Blushi 2006, l: 154-161)

Sahiha Al Azri (Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development) agrees with Yousef Al Blushi, when questioned about the department's role regarding children's theatre in Oman, and confirms that the Ministry of Social Development is concerned about children in general but is not concerned about children's theatre specifically. Al Azri observes:

The role of our department is to serve the Omani child in general. We consider theatre as one of the important means to educate children. Thus the department recently participated in supervising and presenting theatrical works for children within the activities held by the ministry. We don't have a special program for children's theatre, but instead theatrical activities are a part of our program in general. We do not have a specialised officer in the field of children's theatre within the department, but we seek help from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and public theatre groups. (Al Azri 2006, l: 23-29)

Sahiha Al Azri also believes that children's theatre should be the responsibility of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Information. She comments:

Honestly, it is not only the Ministry of Social Development that should be in charge of this sector, but other government parties could play a role in this regard, such as the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Information. (Al Azri 2006, l: 45-47)

When Al Azri is questioned about whether she believes that it would be better to have only one state institution that is fully in charge of children's theatre rather than having many institutions, she replies:

As the Department of Child Affairs, it is difficult for us to be the body in charge of children's theatre, because there are government institutions that already have theatrical resources such as actors, directors and technicians, who can play a role in this regard. But our departmental role should be complementary. However, we do support the presentation of theatrical works for children within our programs and activities. (Al Azri 2006, 1: 51-56)

Of all the obstacles that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group encounters, Yousef Al Blushi indicates that one of the main obstacles facing public theatre groups concerning children's theatre is the lack of financial support, especially when contrasting the high expense of children's theatre with the group's limited budget. He explains:

The main obstacles public theatre groups face is the lack of financial and moral support. There is no financial support for public theatre groups to encourage them to present children's performances, and neither is there support to encourage them to participate in international children's theatre festivals. Moreover, children's theatre is very expensive and needs a lot of money and much financial support. For example, recording a song for a children's play is very expensive, and the decor, costumes etc. are also very expensive. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 258-264)

Al Blushi indicates that the Mazoon Public Theatre Group presents children's performances and accepts all the difficulties such as the lack of financial support because they strongly believe in the importance of children's theatre and they are not doing it for financial profit. He also reports that the group's members pay from their own budget in order to represent their country, Oman, in international cultural activities. Al Blushi expands:

The Mazoon Public Theatre group doesn't seek financial profit. We just aim to present theatre for children that has valuable messages. This is our aim. We also have a sense of patriotism, which is demonstrated as, when we are invited to other countries to participate in children's festivals, we go in the name of Oman, to represent Oman in such cultural activities, even though we are using our own budget to achieve this aim. Sometimes we really face very difficult financial situations in which we are not even able to pay for transporting sets to overseas festivals. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 231-238)

The difficulty of presenting children's performances in Omani regions other than the capital of Muscat is captured in discussion with Yousef Al Blushi who relates:

As a group, we try to present performances for children in other Omani regions and districts, and not only focus on Muscat, the capital. However, we face obstacles in regional areas such as lack of proper stage facilities to present a polished performance. For example, in one of our visits to the Alburemi district to present a children's performance in cooperation with their Women's Society, on our arrival we were surprised that there was no equipped stage, and we had to work all night to clear a sandy area full of stones in order to flatten it enough to make a proper stage. On another occasion we were presenting our show outdoors and strong winds started up that blew away all our sets; despite this, we continued with the show and the children loved it! (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 241-250)

The above examples demonstrate the lack of proper and equipped stages existing in Oman, especially in the regional areas. This concurs with the opinions of Jawad, Al Fahdi, Al Batashi, Al Habsi and Al zadjali. It also reinforces what Jawad (2006, 1: 177-179) and other respondents report when discussing the position of children's theatre in Oman: that Omani children's theatre only exists through the efforts of individuals who believe in its importance and that it runs on the enthusiasm, diligence, energies and desire of those who are involved in the theatre and want to offer shows for children.

Yousef Al Blushi also stresses significant points about the absence of the role of the Omani mass media in supporting children's theatre activities, namely, the deficiency of the Omani mass media generally in covering the Mazoon Public Theatre Group's performances and the high budget needed to advertise the group's theatrical activities in the mass media. Al Blushi (2006, 1: 264-265) believes: 'unfortunately the media stays away from children's theatre'. He adds:

There is a deficiency in the role of the media. Where is the Omani TV to record children's plays? Unfortunately, even though we notify them of the performances many times, and advise them of the times and places, they don't come. One of our plays, *The Monkey is My Friend*, was presented more than 40 times, and not once did the media cover it! (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 269-277)

In addition, when asked about the inadequate advertising of theatrical performances presented by public theatre groups, so that many people know nothing about them since there is no advertised schedule of performances, Yousef Al Blushi comments:

There are other problems, in that advertising and publicity is very expensive. As a group, if we want to advertise in a newspaper, it will cost us a lot of money. So as a theatre group, we wish that Omani TV and newspapers would cooperate with us and advertise our performances. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 281-284)

The obstacle of the deficiency of the Omani mass media in supporting theatrical activities generally and children's theatre activities particularly is also discussed by Taleb Al Blushi and Saleh Al Fahdi who both believe that there is deficiency in the role of the Omani mass media, mainly Omani TV, in covering children's theatre activities, including performances. This fact is also detailed previously, in the chapter on the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival, which demonstrates that the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival that was held in 2007 was completely ignored by the Omani satellite channels, although it was covered by Ajman and Alsharqah channels from the United Arab Emirates (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

Imad Al Shanfri (Director and Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group) addresses the obstacles facing his group in presenting children's performances. Al Shanfri concentrates mainly on financial obstacles that the group encounters and that limit the children's performances presented by the group, and he compares the high expenses needed to present children's performance with the low income gained from the box office:

Children's theatre is very expensive to mount and also the income from the box office is low compared to that of adult theatre. Our group doesn't benefit financially from children's theatre. The lack of financial and material support given to theatre groups hinders the groups in presenting children's performances. The limited resources mean that when we are selecting a play to present, we choose one that is less expensive. This limits our creative expression. Even when we are producing children's plays, I will choose, for example, those that need fewer materials, and materials that are available from our immediate environment. If we had financial support, then the performances would be better. For example, if a child sees something magical on stage, such as a butterfly suspended from the

ceiling, that would be more attractive to him, rather than seeing a stage empty of imaginative elements. (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 70-80)

Al Shanfri explains how the lack of financial support and materials limits the group's options when choosing a children's play to be staged; he also explains how such a choice affects the quality of the presented performances, an important factor since low quality performances could result in a negative effect on children, especially if the texts are chosen because they are cheaper and not because they are the best ones. Additionally, Imad Al Shanfri explains how the lack of moral support, funding and materials allocated for Omani theatre groups affects children's theatre negatively and reduces the number of presented children's performances, making children's theatre an occasional event. Al Shanfri states:

The lack of equipment and financial and moral support leads to making children's theatre just a theatre for special occasions. If these occasions are not present, then there are no performances. (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 91-93)

Al Shanfri's statement about the nature of children's theatre in Oman as, in essence, an occasional theatre is also confirmed by Taleb Al Blushi:

Most of the ministries consider children's theatre as a supplementary part of their program. So for example, if the Ministry of Social Development or the Ministry of Education or the Muscat or Salalah Municipality are planning an activity, such as a festival, then they will seek out children's performances to complement this event. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 120-123)

Sahiha Al Azri (Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development) also confirms that the Ministry of Social Development only presented children's performances within its existing programs and occasions and did not hold any theatrical activities for children as a special occasion itself. Al Azri explains:

No, we didn't present a specific children's theatre activity, but all the children's performances were presented as a part of a larger celebration held by the ministry. We take variety into consideration when presenting activities, so that's why we welcome children's performances. (Al Azri 2006, 1: 77-80)

Sahiha Al Azri again confirms the fact that the Ministry of Social Development considers children's theatre, specifically children's performances, as a supplementary part of its main program. When asked about the ministry's criteria in selecting children's texts and performances to be presented, she replies:

We choose texts and performances that match the goals of our program: for example if the topic is child health, then we will choose a play that matches this issue. If we find a play that has already been written that is suited to the goals of our program, then we choose this play. Sometimes we also seek the help of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture to guide us as to who is the best group to be invited to participate. (Al Azri 2006, I: 86-90)

Moreover, Al Shanfri agrees with Yousef Al Blushi, that an obstacle facing Omani public theatre groups is the lack of financial support to participate in external children's theatre festivals. However, Al Shanfri also criticises the lack of support from the private sector as well, besides the lack of support by state institutions. He reports:

We also hope to participate in external Arab festivals. For instance, we were invited to participate in a children's festival in Jordan, but unfortunately we weren't able to participate because of a lack of financial support. No parties offered financial support for us to participate. Here I would like to indicate the inadequacy of support from the Omani private sector in supporting theatre and theatre people generally. We have spoken to many officials of companies and banks that deal with children; in the case of the banks, some of them have accounts for children and use cartoon characters in their advertising, and we offered to use these characters in our plays to promote the banks, but they rejected our proposal and didn't offer any financial support. This shows the lack of support from the private sector for cultural activities, including theatre, for children. (Al Shanfri 2006, I: 119-129)

Al Shanfri highlights a significant point—the role of the private sector in supporting children's theatre in Oman—and, as Al Shanfri believes, this is a deficiency. Children's theatre needs major support by both state and private sectors. There must be a defined state institution that is officially in charge of it as a first step, and then the efforts of the civil society and individuals as well as the efforts of the private sector can be organised under this governmental body umbrella. As Al Blushi reports, at present, children's theatre mainly exists through the efforts of individual members of theatre groups, who

sometimes pay from their own pocket in order to present children's performances and participate in international children's theatre festivals in the name of Oman.

Al Shanfri addresses a different obstacle facing the Salalah Public Theatre Group when intending to present a children's performance: the difficulty of searching for new themes.

He comments:

Also, one of the main problems is searching for new ideas and themes to be presented for children. This is very difficult. If we compare what is presented for adult theatre around the world, it is much more than what is available for children's theatre, and in Oman it is the same. (Al Shanfri 2006, 1: 86-89)

Al Shanfri's statement about the difficulty his group faces when trying to find new issues and themes to be tackled in children's plays concurs with what is mentioned in the festival chapter of this study: the fact that the arbitration committee of the First Children's Theatre Festival in Oman stressed the importance of diversifying the subject matter of children's plays, and encouraged the use of diverse topics. This was because the committee members found that most of the plays presented at the first festival tackled overused topics, and most employed stereotypical animal characters. Al Shanfri (2006, 1:87-89) claims that worldwide, as well as in Oman, written texts for adult theatre are much more numerous than those written for the children's theatre, and this scarcity of children's available texts makes the task of choosing a children's play with a new theme very difficult for the Salalah Group.

The obstacle of the scarcity of texts written for children is also raised by Yousef Al Blushi, and Gasem Al Batashi, who both agree with Imad that there is a lack of plays written and presented for Omani children's theatre. Gasem Al Batashi, head of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group, reports: 'There is a large gap between adult theatre and children's theatre in Oman. Performances for adult theatre are much more numerous than for children's theatre' (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 161-162). And Yousef comments:

Children's performances that have been presented are good since they tackled important issues. I think they are appropriate for the age group that they were presented to; however, the problem is that the numbers of performances are very few, and this is because of a lack of theatrical texts that have been written for children. (Al Blushi 2006, l: 110-114)

Yousef Al Blushi also comments that some good Omani playwrights need to be sponsored and supported:

There are also good playwrights in Oman for children's theatre, but unfortunately they are undiscovered because of a lack of support offered for playwrights and a failure to nurture the talents of young people. (Al Blushi 2006, l: 84-86)

The scarcity of presented children's texts, the intermittent nature of children's performances and the lack of media coverage of these performances explain why many Omani people, including theatre and government people, are ignorant of Omani children's theatre generally. However, the establishment of the biennial Omani Theatre Festival in 2004 under the supervision of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the establishment of the first Omani Children's Theatre Festival in 2007 helped to create a vibrant theatrical atmosphere, where many theatrical groups competed to present the best texts and performances. These festivals brought to light gifted Omani actors, directors and playwrights and increased the number of texts written for both adult and children's theatre.

As Director of the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group, Gasem Al Batashi describes the sort of obstacles his group encounters when producing children's performances: lack of funding and support shown for the local theatre groups, and a preference by governmental institutions for foreign groups to participate in local festivals rather than giving the opportunity and assistance to local groups. Al Batashi recounts:

As a public theatre group, when we approach the Ministry of Heritage and Culture or the Ministry of Social Development for a request for funding to participate in local festivals, our request is rejected because they consider the cost is excessive. However, they then sponsor foreign groups to come into the country and present

performances and they end up paying double what it would have cost them to sponsor local performances. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 141-146)

Al Batashi gives an example that demonstrates the government preference given to foreign theatre groups:

For example, in 2004, our group, Muscat Al Hur, submitted a project proposal to the Ministry of Social Development to participate in one of the cultural activities by presenting a performance, with a budget of 5000 Omani Real. This amount included costs of decor, costumes, music and rehearsals, but our project was rejected because the Ministry considered the budget too high. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 146-150)

Al Batashi tackles an important issue: the lack of support, funding and trust given to local theatre groups by governmental bodies and the preference for foreign theatre groups to participate in the local festivals, even though they are more expensive. Yousef Al Blushi also reports that the Ministries of Heritage and Culture and Social Development do not support the Mazoon Public Theatre Group in participating in external children's theatre festivals. This is again confirmed by Gasem Al Batashi, who also states that the two ministries do not support the Muscat Alhur Public Theatre Group, even when participating in local festivals. Both statements prove the lack of state support of children's theatre generally, and the lack of support given to public theatre groups that are interested specifically in children's theatre. Gasem Al Batashi confirms that the local festival organisers should support the Omani public theatre groups and provide them with all the requisite materials. He reports:

The local tourism festivals, such as Muscat and Salalah festivals, should support children's theatre by encouraging public theatre groups to participate and should support them financially and provide the proper infrastructure for the performances. (Al Batashi 2008, 1: 169-171)

Taleb Al Blushi (actor, director, and Head of the Department of Drama at Omani Radio) also raises the issue of inviting foreign theatre groups to present children's performances in local tourism festivals instead of Omani public theatre groups; however, he approaches

it from a different perspective. Gasem Al Batashi believes that the governmental bodies in charge of the local tourism festivals and other theatrical activities—including the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the Ministry of Social Development, Muscat and Salalah Municipalities—are the ones who lack confidence in Omani theatre groups while they do have faith in foreign groups and pay them twice the amount. However, Taleb Al Blushi believes that the Omani public lacks confidence in Omani theatre groups:

Unfortunately there is also a lack of public confidence about what is presented for children by Omani groups, and thus, regrettably, when there are festivals, foreign and Arabic groups are used instead to present children's performances. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 68-71)

In contrast, Yousef Al Blushi, Head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, believes that the Omani public does trust local theatre groups and attends their presented performances.

Yousef Al Blushi's statement about the large Omani audiences of children's theatre concurs with what is mentioned in the chapter on the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival: that despite the fact that the festival was held in Alrustaq, far from the capital Muscat, many people from various walks of life attended the festival's performances. Many parents were interested in taking their children to the theatre, and many schools organised trips for their students to attend.

However, Taleb Al Blushi believes that there are other reasons besides a lack of public confidence that account for the preference for foreign theatre groups to participate in the local festivals instead of the neighbourhood groups:

Unfortunately, this is because the organisers of these festivals are still unaware of Omani theatre in general, and this lack of awareness could be because of the limited and intermittent performances, among other reasons. The organisers of local festivals might also look at the fame of some Arab stars, so they seek to invite them and benefit from their fame to attract a larger audience to the festival. However, unfortunately, by bringing in overseas theatre groups and not giving a chance to Omani groups, they will disadvantage Omani theatre in general. Because the overseas groups come to Oman with their star actors and expensive shows, this

comparison with the relatively young Omani theatre is unfair. These groups have many advantages that Omani groups lack. (Al Blushi 2006, l: 89-98)

Gasem Al Batashi also addresses another obstacle when producing children's performances, and that is the lack of prepared and equipped theatres, and like Al Shanfrin, who mentions that the lack of financial support and materials may result in poor performances, Gasem also believes that the lack of equipped stages can result in weak performances. Al Batashi notes:

There are also other obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman, such as lack of theatres – for example there are theatres at Al Qurm Park, at the Al Bustan Palace [a five-star hotel in Muscat] and the Ministry of Labour's theatre at the Technical College. Despite all these theatres, public theatre groups cannot find a venue to present their performances, because all the theatres are reserved for other functions. Then the groups must present their performances in unequipped venues such as theatres belonging to women's societies. This leads to a weakness of performances presented for children. Children's theatre should be impressive and thus requires a high standard of staging, for example in costumes, sets and lighting and sound. (Al Batashi 2008, l: 150-159)

Al Batashi's statement about the lack of suitable venues for children's theatre is supported by Jawad 2006, Al Habsi 2006, and Yousef Al Blushi 2006. Moreover, the views of those respondents agree with what is mentioned in the fifth chapter of this study about the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival held in Oman in 2007: that one of the difficulties that the festival's organiser experienced prior to and during the festival was finding a proper theatre fitted with all the equipment necessary to rehearse and present the theatrical performances. The Theatre of the Alrustaq College of Education, where most of the festival's performances were presented, was not fully equipped with modern theatre facilities such as the lighting and sound equipment needed to present a polished performance; thus, many public theatre groups tried to overcome this difficulty by hiring theatre equipment.

The difficulty of finding a developed stage to present theatrical performances is a common problem many Omani theatre groups face whenever they decide to present

performances, since there is a significant lack of equipped theatres. Most performances are presented on stages not designed for theatrical performances, such as in conference halls and hotels. However, after frequent complaints by Omani theatre people who have threatened to withdraw from various theatrical events such as the Omani Theatre Festival because of the absence of the basic theatrical infrastructure, a plan has recently emerged to build many equipped theatres.

The lack of state support for public theatre groups, as well as the lack of materials and equipped theatres, is again confirmed by Saleh Al Fahdi, head of the Al Sahwa Public Theatre Group, who states:

There is very little support from institutions in charge of theatre for public theatre groups in order to present children's performances. On the few occasions that support is offered, it only happens because of personal relations. (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 94-96)

Al Fahdi believes that state institutions are deficient in the role of supporting public theatre groups in producing children's performances. Here, he may be referring to the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, even though he does not name it directly, since it is the governmental body in charge of Omani theatre and public theatre groups in Oman. Al Fahdi also strongly criticises the fact that the state institution will only cooperate with members of theatre groups if good personal relationships exist between the theatre people and state officials, in which case they will agree to sponsor the performance and finance the group. Unfortunately, as Al Fahdi believes, it does not happen because of the state institutions' lack of belief in the importance of children's theatre.

Saleh Al Fahdi states that the lack of the financial support, the limited materials allocated for public theatre groups and the lack of theatres and physical space also prevent the public theatre groups interested in children's theatre from carrying out their duties in training children interested in theatre. He also reports parents' lack of awareness of the

importance of theatre for their children, and that they do not understand the length of time needed and the long hours of travel for rehearsals. Al Fahdi reports:

Public theatre groups face many difficulties in training and educating children who have an interest in theatre because of a lack of the proper materials and a physical space for training. In addition there are other societal obstacles that prevent children from practising theatre skills. Parents question the time needed for rehearsals and the distance children must travel. (Al Fahdi 2008, 1: 97-101)

Al Fahdi mentions the efforts by members of public theatre groups in training children with theatrical interests, despite the lack of support and materials. In addition, Yousef Al Blushi, Head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, gives an example demonstrating the Mazoon Public Theatre group's efforts regarding sponsoring children with creative and theatrical abilities, and stresses the importance of supporting talented children. Al Blushi explains:

We also participated in a children's theatre festival in Iraq and we won two awards – one was for a promising child actor, which was won by one of our child actors. If this child is given support and encouragement, in the future he will be one of the creative people in the field. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 182-185)

Yousef Al Blushi also mentions his support of the Omani child who won the award for best talented child in the festival held in Iraq and the need to support other talented children. He describes:

He was one of my students at school, in the elementary grade. I noticed that he was a talented and creative child. Then I decided to cast him in the play and take him to participate in Iraq. He also worked with me in another TV drama that I produced for children. In Oman we do have many talented children, but they need to be supported to develop their creative abilities. This is the main point. (Al Blushi 2006, 1: 195-199)

The obstacles facing Omani public theatre groups with regard to children's theatre have been reviewed from the perspective of members of theatre groups directly involved in the field of children's theatre, and can be summarised as follows:

- The failure of state institutions in charge of culture and children in Oman to recognise and identify children's theatre as a special entity (Governmental recognition of children's theatre only exists when the institution organises an occasion in which children's theatre is incorporated and considered as a supplementary part of the governmental program, but not as a special occasion in its own right.)
- The lack of moral and financial support by the State, especially the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, directed to public theatre groups when presenting children's performances, in addition to the high expense of children's theatre compared with the groups' lack of funds
- The failure of governmental bodies to support and finance the participation of public theatre groups in internal and international children's theatre festivals
- The absence of the role of the private sector in supporting and financing children's theatre activities in Oman
- The lack of basic infrastructure and facilities needed to present children's performances (such as properly equipped stages) throughout Oman, in both the capital Muscat and regional areas
- The lack of confidence shown in local theatre groups by the governmental bodies in charge of local tourism festivals and other cultural and theatrical activities, and the preference for foreign theatre groups who are welcome to participate and paid more than local groups
- The lack of plays written for children's theatre compared with the numerous plays written for adult theatre, which makes the task of choosing a children's play with a new theme difficult for some theatre groups
- The failure of the state institutions in charge of children and culture in Oman to support and sponsor talented children with theatrical and creative abilities, in addition

to a lack of funding and materials allocated for public theatre groups willing to undertake this role.

In reviewing the interviewees' evaluation and opinions of the cultural and artistic position of children in Oman, and the current situation of Omani children's theatre, the consensus is that most are dissatisfied with the current situation, as they believe that children should be paid more government attention in terms of policy and infrastructure, especially when considering that children comprise 40.6% of the total population in Oman. All the interviewees believe that, although children's theatre does exist in Oman, it does not have a continuous presence; rather, it only appears through the intermittent and seasonal performances presented by public theatre groups. The majority of respondents believe that, because of this discontinuous nature of children's theatre and because of the absence of government institutions that sponsor it, children's theatre in Oman does not have a strong base, nor is it an independent entity. In addition, most of them agree that there is no developed and professional children's theatre in Oman; rather, what is presented in this field are merely trials and attempts made by individuals and public theatre group members who present theatrical works for children because of their interest in this field and their belief in its importance.

6.5 Conclusion

Children's theatre in Oman still faces many obstacles that hinder its development. According to the respondents, these obstacles are varied, but they mainly focus on the absence of a government institution that is fully in charge of children's theatre and can lead, manage and sponsor it morally and financially. They also consider the lack of both public and state awareness of the importance of children's theatre and the deficiency in appreciating its cultural value for children as other major obstacles.

In addition, the heads of four public theatre groups who were interviewed agree that many obstacles still face their groups when presenting children's performances, hindering them from presenting more theatrical works for children. They focus mainly on: the lack of moral and financial support by the government bodies, especially the Ministry of Heritage and Culture; the high cost of children's theatre in light of the groups' lack of funds; and the lack of basic infrastructure and facilities needed to present children's performances. Finally, the majority of interviewees emphasise the urgent need for further developmental steps to promote the children's theatre sector in Oman.

Chapter Seven: Findings and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This study investigates how Children's Theatre in the Sultanate of Oman can become a viable and valued form of art for the future. The study outlines the historical background and the present situation of Omani children's theatre and, through discussions with interviewees, it defines the obstacles it faces, suggests ways to overcome them and, finally, provides a clear vision for its future.

This chapter is designed to illuminate all the key findings from the study and provides recommendations about how these findings might be implemented. Conclusions are drawn from key ideas in the Contextual Review and the Data Analysis chapters to sum up the entire study and to position the study in the field of Omani Theatre in general, and Omani children's theatre in particular.

7.2 The Problem of Defining the Term 'Children's Theatre' in Oman

Since the appearance of the term 'children's theatre', various researchers in the West and Arab countries have provided varied interpretations and explanations of the term. However, after reviewing the wide range of definitions of 'children's theatre' discussed in the literature in both the West and in the Arab world, it is found that, despite attempts being made to define this term since 1953, there is still foginess surrounding the term. This misunderstanding may be because there are too many theatrical terms used to refer to different dramatic and theatrical forms by and for children that all come under the umbrella of 'children's drama'. Such terms include: creative dramatics, recreational drama, scholastic theatre, puppet theatre, educational theatre and young people's theatre.

It is additionally found that some researchers define 'children's theatre' according to its type, place, actors, text and target audience.

Despite the fact that the term 'children's theatre' exists in the cultural and theatrical life of the Sultanate of Oman, along with other theatrical terms referring to the different forms and types of theatre existing in Oman, there is also confusion among Omani people—including some people involved in theatre—about the definition and the nature of children's theatre. The main confusion with children's theatre, among other forms, is usually 'scholastic theatre'. This can be clearly seen through the presentation of many didactic and instructive children's plays that tend to be merely directly educational rather than artistic products that are entertaining and indirectly educative. Educational and didactic themes are the most common themes that have been tackled in Omani children's performances.

The confusion surrounding the definition and the nature of children's theatre in Oman were reflected in the didactic performances that were presented in the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival held in 2007. As a result of their observations of these festival performances, the festival arbitration panel recommended the 'Non-use of direct instructive messages address to children's audience' and the establishment of 'reasons and justification for all the theatrical events' (Sarah and Al Salmani 2007).

This study, therefore, creates a definition of children's theatre based on the definitions discussed in the literature and on an investigation of Omani people's understanding and definitions of children's theatre. From these sources, 'children's theatre' is defined as a *formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children*. Children's theatre is professional theatre, like adult theatre, that employs all of the techniques and principles of the theatre, using some of them in special ways to suit children's mental and psychological stages of development. Children's theatre performers

could be children or adults, or a combination of both. This theatre is both an educational and cultural instrument to educate children. However, besides its several objectives— aesthetic, educational, and psychological—audience enjoyment should be one of the prime objectives of children’s theatre. In addition, children’s theatre must consider the different age groups of children before presenting any play. The age range attributed to children’s theatre audiences for this study is 4 to 15 years old. Finally, I concur with Goldberg (1974, 5) when he says that only when child performers are chosen on the basis of talent rather than for reasons of their developmental or other needs, then the term ‘children’s theatre’ may be applied (ibid.).

7.3 Government Efforts on Children’s Cultural Situation

The division of responsibility for children’s culture was discussed in Chapter 3 and summarised in Section 3.10. The Ministry of Education, in particular the Department of Educational Activities, which supervises the educational and cultural activities within schools, has played an effective role in supporting and developing the Arts for school-aged children. The Ministry has organised important theatrical and cultural events for children, such as setting up a special annual festival for scholastic theatre in Oman to encourage school students to be creative in the theatrical field; it has financed participation in the annual Festival of School Theatre of the Arab Gulf States; it has hosted and supervised the fourth such festival in Muscat; it organises symposiums and conferences on child culture, particularly on how to develop Omani children’s culture. However, despite the Ministry’s good work in supporting and presenting children’s theatrical activities at schools, there are still many obstacles facing school theatre, details of which have been discussed in the history chapter. For example, drama is not taught in Omani schools as a separate subject in the school curriculum; no specialised theatre teachers are provided or essential physical facilities such as stages and specialised theatre

and lighting equipment. Preschool-age cultural activities are also lacking, since most of the cultural activities presented are addressed to schoolchildren.

Although the main responsibility for the cultural sector in Oman lies with the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, it lacks an administrative division for children's culture, since it is responsible only for youth and adult theatre for the demographic aged 15 and over. The Ministry of Social Development, dealing with the social development of the child and the family through its Directorate for the Child's Affairs, has organised many cultural activities for children, including theatrical activities.

Surprisingly the Ministry of Information has played only a limited role, given its importance in developing Omani children's culture through its broadcast children's programs, which occur only during Ramadan, and are supplemented by Arabic and foreign children's programs during a few hours daily for the other 11 months. Radio and TV make small contributions, but newspapers cover cultural activities well and report on performances for children.

Beyond government contributions, most credit for support of children's theatre goes to the Muscat and Dhofar municipalities in supporting and organising children's cultural activities during the Muscat and Salalah Festivals, which include children's theatrical performances.

From this list of divided responsibilities, it emerges that children's theatre is regarded as an additional occurrence or add-on entertainment, rather than as a recognised right of children. To manage this essential cultural need, a specific, comprehensive umbrella

institution is required to coordinate children's theatre, as suggested by some interviewees in Analysis Chapter Six, for example Jawad, Al Habsi and Al Gabri.

7.4 The Importance of a Theatrical Education in Oman

The confusion surrounding the definition and the nature of children's theatre amongst many Omani people can be resolved through educating people in theatre generally. This theatrical education should start in Omani schools, where drama should be taught and included in the curriculum. In addition, the mass media can play an important role in educating people about the arts in general and their different types and forms, and about children's arts in particular, including children's theatre. Omani theatre practitioners can also play a role in this regard by presenting lectures and organising workshops for those who are interested in children's theatre to explore its definition, nature and style.

This study also researches the dramatic phenomena that existed in Oman to amuse and educate children before the appearance of children's theatre. It is found that the traditional and cultural heritage in Oman abounds with folkloric music, songs, tales, dance, sports and games designed for children's physical, educational and recreational needs. Some of these children's folk games, songs and tales take a dramatic form, such as songs accompanied by acting and movement and storytelling performances. Some of the Omani folk tales are told in the form of simple poetry and some are accompanied by music and dramatic activity that further enliven the storytelling session. Al Habsi describes the storytelling performance:

The stories begin with the exciting formulaic phrase, 'There was and there was ... in the past and in recent times...', in order to encourage the children to follow the tale from the beginning to the end and to get to know all the characters and the details of the plot. The storyteller then recounts the events of the narrative in a dramatic and exciting way, employing different voices for different characters, using movement and signs, and sometimes acting parts of the story to make it easier for the children to follow the themes and ideas in the plot. (Al Habsi 1998, 21)

The narrator of the storytelling performance uses simple language that children can easily understand. Sometimes, the narrator asks the children in the audience to participate and involves them in the story-telling performance by asking them some questions about the story and sometimes asking them to act part of it or imitate an animal's voice.

Such dramatic phenomena that existed in Oman to amuse and educate children before the appearance of official children's theatre helped to create the basis of the culture of theatre in Oman. These phenomena contributed to the appearance and the development of children's theatre, since they included the most important theatrical elements, that is, the performer and the audience. They also included other dramatic elements such as plot, music, song, dance and, sometimes, acting and imitating.

7.5 The History of Children's Theatre in Oman

It is difficult to ascertain the real beginnings of children's theatre in Oman because of the lack of written documents about its history. There are no archival collections in libraries about Omani children's theatre. In this regard, a question was addressed to many interviewees (including pioneers of Omani theatre who experienced the early stages of the theatrical movement in the seventies, researchers who have conducted historical studies of Omani theatre in general, and playwrights and directors) in an attempt to develop an understanding of the history of children's theatre and of the first performance presented for children in Oman.

All the interviewees confirm that they do not know much about the history of children's theatre in Oman since it is not documented, and that they are not certain about the first performance presented for Omani children. However, according to the guidebook of the Al Ahli Club Theatre (in the Al Ahli Club in the Sultanate of Oman 1977, 14), Mohamed

Al Habsi (2006, 1: 58-63), Al Habsi and Al Siyabi (2006, 84), report that *Alfares Alshoga* (*The Brave Equestrian*) was the first children's play presented in Oman in 1972 and the only known play to be presented in the period between 1970 and 1980.

The lack of documentation about Omani theatre and, concomitantly, about Omani children's theatre is considered to be one of the main obstacles facing Omani theatre generally. It reflects, perhaps, the low regard for theatre in the nation. When discussing the obstacles facing children's theatre, several of the interviewees also raise the issue of the lack of documentation of texts and performances presented for children by the Omani theatrical groups. In addition, many live performances and other theatrical activities presented for children in Oman remained within the original venue, had limited audiences, and the wider society knew nothing about them. This was due to the lack of media coverage and the high cost of advertising such performances—a cost that, according to some heads of these Omani theatre groups—could not be met with their low budgets.

An investigation of the history of children's theatre in Oman reveals that children's theatre passed through four different historical stages. Since its inception in 1972, children's theatre has moved through similar shifts to those which mark important transformational periods in Oman's recent history: Stage One of the history of children's theatre is the period between 1970 and 1980; Stage Two is 1981 to 1991; Stage Three is 1992 to 2001; and, finally, Stage Four is 2002 to 2007.

In looking at texts and performances written and presented for Omani children in historical sequence, and in analysing the development of children's theatre and the social and cultural circumstances that affected its situation through its different historical stages, it is found that children's theatre in Oman has developed in an upward trend. For instance, the number of plays written and presented for children has increased significantly through the different stages: from just one children's play written and

presented in the period from 1970 to 1980, to six plays during the second stage (1981-1991), to thirteen texts and twenty performances presented during the fourth stage (2002-2007). This rising trend demonstrates that there is an increasing interest in children's theatre in Oman shown by theatre practitioners, and it may also signify that their level of appreciation and understanding of this theatre's value and importance for Omani children's lives has also increased. Again, increased interest in this field from Omani theatre practitioners may point to a promising future for children's theatre that may reposition it favourably within Oman's existing cultural life.

Besides the increasing numbers of children's texts and performances presented in Oman, children's theatre also witnessed many achievements during its different historical stages. For instance, many public theatre groups and youth theatres were established. There are now seventeen public theatre groups and seven youth theatres spread throughout Oman. Some of these groups are also interested in children's theatre, and their interest has increased recently; this is reflected in the growing numbers of children's performances presented by these groups. Additionally, all of the children's plays presented during the fourth stage (2002-2007) were written and produced by Omani playwrights and directors, while in the previous stages, many of the plays presented were written by Arab writers or adapted from literature. Moreover, the increased experience of Omani theatre people built up over the last two decades of the history of Omani theatre has made a positive impact on developing Omani theatre, including children's theatre.

7.6 The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival (2007)

The year 2007 witnessed a significant event in the history of Omani children's theatre: the inception of the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival organised by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. This festival was a historical turning point for Omani culture and represents a new era in the history of Omani general theatre and in the specific history of

children's theatre. Despite its delayed appearance, the festival highlighted the importance of children's theatre in Oman and helped to promote the position of theatre in Omani children's cultural life. It succeeded in attracting the attention of the public and the government officers in charge of culture in Oman to the importance of theatre as a means to educate and amuse children. In addition, this festival witnessed the appearance of actors (both children and adults), and playwrights and directors who were presenting theatrical works for children for the first time.

One of the key successes of The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival was the large Omani audience interested in children's theatre. Despite the fact that the festival was held in Alrustaq, far from the capital Muscat, many people from various walks of life attended the festival performances. This was evidenced by the large audiences that filled the theatres where the festival performances were held. Many parents were keen to take their children to the theatre and many schools organised trips for their students to attend performances (Al Blushi 2008). This demonstrates that holding the festival brought about a change in Omani people's approach to children's theatre.

However, despite the many goals achieved by the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival, the continuity of this festival is the main concern. The arbitration committee of the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival made some strong statements about its continuation, recommending that it be organised every year. In addition, many interviewees—including Al Habsi, Al Fahdi, Taleb Al Blushi and Gasem Al Batashi—recommend setting up the children's theatre festival in a methodical way, as well as organising competitions and other theatrical activities for children. However, despite its importance, no other children's festival has been organised in Oman since 2007. The continuity of the festival into the future would help to create a stronger base for Omani children's theatre for theatre practitioners. It would provide a creative space where they could compete in presenting the best children's scripts and performances Theatre

practitioners' experience in the field would increase through practice; a performing arts knowledge base of experience would be built; and appreciative audiences would request more such entertainment and enlightenment for children.

7.7 Interviewees' Critical Evaluation of Cultural Position of Omani Children

In summarising the position of children's theatre within Oman's broad cultural environment (Chap.3. section 3.9, Chap. 6 section 6.2. and Chap. 7 section 7.3), it was found that there are definite shortages in cultural events and activities targeting the child, including theatrical activities. The body of literature addressed to children is very limited and there are few Omani specialists in the field of children's culture, such as intellectuals, writers, theatrical producers, technicians and musicians. Moreover, there is a significant lack of children's libraries and other cultural venues. There is no public library for children, despite a plan to build one.

To broaden the picture, after reviewing the interviewees' evaluations and opinions, the consensus is that most are not satisfied with the current cultural and artistic position of children in Oman and believe that, in response to this situation, immediate attention is required for further developmental steps to promote this vital sector. Interviewees also believe that children should be paid more government attention in terms of policy and infrastructure in state institutions, particularly in the Ministries of Education and Information and the Ministry of Heritage and Culture.

Despite agreement between Omani theatre practitioners and personnel who work for the government institutions responsible for the cultural (including theatre) and social sectors that children's theatre is an effective cultural and educational medium in children's lives, the position of children's theatre in Oman is still weak and underdeveloped. Through the investigation of its current position and through investigating the views and evaluations

of interviewees—particularly of those involved in Omani children’s theatre—the evidence demonstrates that:

- State institutions in charge of culture and children in Oman fail to recognise and identify children’s theatre as a special entity. Government recognition of children’s theatre only exists when the institution organises an occasion on which children’s theatre might be considered as a supplementary part of the government program, but not as a special occasion in its own right.
- There is presently no developed professional children’s theatre in Oman. The children’s theatre presented consists of trials and minor attempts by individuals and members of public theatre groups who present theatrical works because of their interest and belief in their importance, not because they are professionals or experts in this field.

All respondents are dissatisfied with the present position of children’s theatre. Most believe its weak position results from lack of a specific state institution to lead, support and develop this children’s theatrical field, and most emphasise its importance by advocating immediate developmental steps to promote this sector.

7.8 The Obstacles and Difficulties Facing Children’s Theatre in Oman

There are multiple challenges facing Omani children’s theatre. According to the respondents directly involved, the obstacles to be overcome are varied, but mainly focus on: the absence of a government institution fully in charge of children’s theatre to lead, manage and sponsor it morally, financially and strategically; the lack of a specialised professional theatrical cadre; lack of documentation of texts; lack of attention and publicity from the media; lack of both public and state awareness of the importance of children’s theatre; and a lack of appreciation of theatre’s cultural value for children.

In addition, the heads of four public theatre groups interviewed agree that many practical impediments to children's performances still face their groups, hindering them from presenting more children's theatrical works. They mainly stress the lack of moral and financial support from the government and private bodies (especially the Ministry of Heritage and Culture), the high cost of children's theatre (compared with the groups' available funds), and the lack of basic infrastructure and facilities needed to present children's performances.¹⁷

Interviewees were questioned about their views, as theatre people (playwrights, directors, heads of public theatre groups and government people in charge of culture and theatre in Oman), on how to overcome the barriers facing Omani children's theatre and the means of developing it as a viable and valued art form for the future. Additionally, they were questioned about their views and visions about the future of children's theatre in Oman in the next ten years. The interviewees' views on these two themes vary and are documented below.

Abd Alkareem Jawad (advisor to the Minister of Heritage and Culture, playwright and director) believes that, in order to overcome problems facing Omani children's theatre, there must be only one specific government body in charge of children's theatre to set up plans and programs for its development and to provide all the necessary finance and facilities needed to achieve its goals. This department should be managed by experts in the field, rather than being supervised by several ministries, as is the current position. However, according to Jawad, setting up such a body needs an official decision. Jawad reflects:

My hope is for a government authority to be in charge of children's theatre, which will establish the basics and conduct plans and programs, and I would like to see a

¹⁷ A detailed list of the general obstacles facing Omani children's theatre and the particular obstacles facing public theatre groups when presenting children's performances is included in summary in the Data Analysis chapter of this study.

government decision issued in this regard. I believe that there should be only one institution in charge of children's theatre, instead of multiple ministries that are at present responsible for children, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Heritage and Culture. If that happened, that department would provide experts, administration and funds to carry out its responsibilities. (Jawad 2006, 1: 299-307)

Jawad (2006, 1:415-416) also says that the need for the department of children's theatre is urgent, and must be met before children's theatre can be developed: 'I urgently request that there be a department to supervise and be fully in charge of children's theatre'. Jawad (2006, 1:166-168) also recommends that the role of the mass media should be activated and encouraged to serve and support children's theatrical activities in Oman through broadcasting successful performances (including the ones that are presented inside the schools) so the wider community can access them. Al Fahdi (2008, 1:129-130) and Al Habsi (2006, 1:262-264) also stress the importance of the role of the mass media in supporting children's theatrical activities by broadcasting them, and also in increasing the public awareness of theatre generally.

Abd Alghafour Al Blushi (Director of the Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and theatre director), stresses the importance of giving children's theatre more attention and support by all the institutions in charge of culture and theatre in Oman in order to overcome the disadvantages it encounters. Al Blushi emphasises one important issue, which was also addressed by Jawad: the need for specialist people in the field of children's theatre to take the responsibility to develop this theatre. He suggests that the concerned authorities could seek the assistance of Arab experts in children's theatre, since there is lack of Omani specialists in this field; these experts could also help in training Omani young people interested in the field by organising theatrical workshops (Al Blushi 2006, 1:165-171). Al Blushi believes that presenting successful and high quality performances for children would satisfy the audience and help to gain their appreciation. Al Blushi feels this could only be achieved if

these performances are presented by experts in the field of children's theatre who also hold high educational qualifications (of PhD and above), including the producers, designers, musicians and choreographers (Al Blushi 2006, 1:177-181).

Rahima Al Gabri (playwright and supervisor of the Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University) also makes an important recommendation about children's theatre specialists: academic scholarships should be allocated to sponsor Omani people interested in the field of children's theatre to study abroad. However, she stresses that the most important step towards a developed children's theatre in Oman is for government interest in this field, and its belief in children's theatre and its importance in children's lives. Al Gabri also suggests establishing a cultural centre, a library, and venues that are designed specifically for children's culture in order to satisfy children's cultural needs.

In addition, Saheha Al Azri (Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development) believes that children's theatre in Oman requires more attention (Al Azri 2006, 1:108). Al Azri also suggests methods that could be implemented in order to activate children's theatre and enable it to play a more effective role in children's lives and serve their culture; such methods include: 'inviting international theatrical groups to present children's performances to enrich the minds of Omani children and to promote cultural exchange between Oman and other countries' (Al Azri 2006, 1:113-115). Additionally, Al Azri, Al Fahdi (2008, 1:121-143), Al Habsi (2006, 1:219-221) and Taleb Al Blushi (2006, 1:174-184) stress the importance of state institutions in charge of children's culture and theatre in Oman setting up a clear strategy to promote children's theatre for the long term.

On the other hand, Al Fahdi (2008, 1:120-121), when questioned about what he would like to see happen to promote children's theatre in Oman in the next ten years, replies: 'I wish for the cultural institutions in Oman, including the educational institutions, to be

revived to appreciate the value of children's theatre'. Al Fahdi concurs with the views of Jawad, Taleb, Abd Algafour Al Blushi, Al Gabri and Al Habsi, who stress the importance of the role of government institutions in developing children's theatre in Oman.

Al Fahdi further defines the specific responsibilities and tasks of each government institution with regard to the promotion of children's theatre in Oman and lists them as follows:

- Ministry of Education: should be responsible for teaching drama in schools, forming theatrical groups, setting up festivals in a methodical way (not randomly as now) and with a clear strategy in mind.
- Ministry of Heritage and Culture: should establish a cultural centre that should include special venues for children's theatre, and organise a special theatrical festival for children.
- Ministry of Information: should support theatrical works presented for children and broadcast them on TV.
- All Ministries that give directives to the public and who allocate an annual budget for the media and for social awareness should make provision for the promotion of children's theatre within its agenda in order to create an aware generation.
- Public theatre groups: should make provision for children's theatre by creating a schedule for children's performances within their theatrical agenda, even if they lack the necessary equipment and facilities.
- The private sector: should support children's theatre as part of what we would call their 'corporate social responsibility'.
- Art production companies: should support children's theatrical productions within their charter.
- The Muscat, Salalah and other festivals: should give pride of place to children's theatre and should be well publicised (Al Fahdi 2008, 1:121-143).

One of the most significant recommendations of most of the interviewees, including Al Fahdi (2008, 1:123), Jawad (2006, 1:168-171), Taleb Al Blushi (2006, 1:102-108) and Rahima Al Gabri (2006, 1:52-62), is for the teaching of theatre in Omani schools as an essential step to promote the position of theatre in general and the position of children's theatre particularly. They believe that educating the young generation theatrically, and raising their awareness and understanding of theatre, will help to create an Omani generation that is theatrically aware for the future. In addition, Taleb Al Blushi (actor, director and Head of the Department of Drama at Omani Radio at the Ministry of Information) also believes that the developmental steps of promoting children's theatre and resolving the obstacles it encounters starts with the schools, by catering for young Omani people and educating them theatrically. This goal, Al Blushi believes, can be achieved through sponsoring gifted students in theatre and by providing qualified and specialist supervisors for them, as well as through providing the equipment needed for theatrical activities (Al Blushi 2006, 1:102-108). He comments that currently, theatrical activities are usually supervised by Arabic teachers and other non-specialist teachers.

Furthermore, the heads of the Omani public theatre groups who were interviewed (Saleh Al Fahdi, Gasem Al Batashi, Yousef Al Blushi and Imad Al Shanfri) all stress the importance of encouraging and supporting (both morally and financially) Omani theatre groups and theatre practitioners interested in children's theatre, and providing all the equipment needed to enable them to present performances and other theatrical activities for children. They believe that this support should be provided by the state, and by private and public institutions. The significant recommendations given by the arbitration committee of the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival (2007) are important in improving future children's festivals and performances, and they should be taken into consideration by relevant authorities.

7.9 Findings from the Study

Undertaking this study and investigating children's theatre history and its current position, reviewing the barriers it faces and that hinder its development, and analysing the interviewees' views and recommendations on these issues, has resulted in a list of findings with respect to the promotion of the position of children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a future viable and valued art form. These findings are as follows:

1. *There is a real need for one specific government institution to be fully in charge of children's theatre: to energize this theatre and to lead, manage and sponsor it morally and financially. This would replace the roles of the multiple ministries that are at present responsible for children's theatre such as the Ministries of Education, Social Development and Heritage and Culture.*

Children's theatre could be under the responsibility of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, because it is the Omani ministry in charge of culture and theatre. Therefore, it is important that the Ministry reconstruct its organisational structure to include an administrative division or a Directorate responsible for Omani child culture, including a separate division for children's theatre, so as to meet children's cultural needs. Within this context, any institution in charge of children's theatre in the future should employ specialised personnel in that field. As a primary step, there is a need to seek the help of theatrical experts, both Arab and Western, to help establish a strong Omani children's theatre base. This type of skilling has a precedent when, in the 1980s, Arab theatre specialists from Egypt were invited to help in establishing Omani theatre and to train interested Omani people. The second step could be to allocate scholarships for Omani theatre practitioners interested in children's theatre, to send them abroad to study children's theatre in countries with developed children's theatres and to gain the relevant academic qualifications. It is important to prepare an Omani professional cadre specialised in the field of children's theatre to overcome the current lack.

An urgent step to be taken to develop Omani theatre, including children's theatre, is the reopening of the Theatre Arts Department at the Sultan Qaboos University. Established in 1991, the Theatre Arts Department is the only academic department in Oman that teaches theatre. The department was frozen by a decision (in 2004) to cease accepting new students, because it was believed that there were not enough suitable places in the state and private sectors to employ the department's graduates; the reality is that there is a significant lack of theatre specialists in Omani schools (more than 1000 schools) where theatrical activities are now usually supervised by other subject teachers. The decision to abolish the department, unfortunately, still stands.

2. Strategies need to be developed for the future of Omani children's theatre. Since 1970, the Omani government has implemented different advancement strategies, including a series of strategic five-year development plans to create a growing economy. Such a plan is also needed for the cultural sector (including theatre).

Currently there is no such overall plan for the cultural sector (including theatre). However, only recently (September 2008), a Sultanic decree was issued to form a higher panel to study and evaluate the condition of theatre and drama in the Sultanate and to set up a development plan for this vital sector. This can be an important step towards developing Omani theatre, including children's theatre, as it includes a number of Omani specialists in drama and theatre and the assistance of foreign experts in the field of drama and theatre coming together to implement these developmental strategies. Perhaps, as an outcome, the panel will recognise children's theatre as a separate art form within Omani theatre and instigate an urgent short-term as well as a long-term plan to develop this essential area.

3. *To increase public and state awareness in Omani society of the importance of the arts and children's theatre in the lives of Omani children, it is important to spread a theatrical culture amongst the public and state institutions in charge of children's culture. As a separate art form, theatre has a unique importance and effect on children's lives that distinguishes it from other artistic forms directed to children. This children's theatre art form needs a separate strong base. Thus it is important to position children's theatre within the broad context of children's culture in Oman, yet to recognise its specific and special contribution.*

This public and state understanding and appreciation of the value of children's theatre as an effective educational and cultural medium in children's lives is absolutely necessary, and is the first step to be satisfied towards the development of children's theatre. To achieve this goal, many steps must be considered and implemented by relevant authorities. Firstly, it is necessary to teach drama in Omani schools and to include theatre in the school curriculum. It is also important to appoint theatre specialists to teach this subject and to supervise the theatrical activities presented at school, since at the present time, there are no such specialists. Graduates of theatre from the theatre departments of Oman and other countries could be employed at schools. Teaching drama in schools to the emerging generation will increase awareness of theatre and its importance in developing cultural appreciation within Omani society. It is also appropriate to stress here the importance of theatre as an expressive and educational medium which allows children to understand themselves and their surroundings; therefore, there is an urgent need to give Omani children access to the arts and the opportunity to practise and appreciate them at school and in the outside society.

This need can be satisfied by organising and presenting many artistic activities and workshops for children throughout the year (rather than seasonally) and throughout the country, and by providing all the physical equipment needed. Omani children need to be

given the opportunity to express their artistic side through activities such as music, acting, drawing and reciting. However, unfortunately, as Jawad mentions, and many other respondents agree, the general situation in the Sultanate of Oman neglects the artistic side, while focusing more on the scientific fields. The arts, including theatre, are still regarded as a lesser priority in the cultural life of Omani children. Such a negative attitude towards the arts and theatre needs changing, and again, this can only be achieved through arts education in the Omani schools.

The Omani mass media could play a role in increasing public awareness of the arts, particularly theatre and its importance in people's lives, and ultimately the value people accord to children's theatre. The special importance of theatre in children's lives needs to be recognised as a main means of assisting their cognitive, social and psychological development. Increasing public awareness of theatre can be achieved through nationally broadcasting children's cultural and artistic activities, including children's theatre, to the wider community through the various mass media. In addition, Omani satellite channels and press media could prepare and broadcast TV programs and print newspaper articles designed precisely to educate the people theatrically. This is a major role that could be played by the Omani mass media in spreading a theatrical culture through Omani society to position it within the existing cultural life. Furthermore, the Omani mass media could support local public theatre groups interested in children's theatre (as recommended by the directors of the four public theatre groups interviewed) by recording and broadcasting children's performances presented by these groups on Omani TV, and by giving free publicity to children's theatrical activities presented by these groups, which suffer from lack of funds.

During the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival held in Oman in 2007, the print media was extensively available and sponsored the event with full coverage (especially *Oman's* government-owned daily newspaper, *Alwatan*, and the *Alshabibah* newspapers).

Unfortunately, the festival was completely ignored by the Omani satellite channels, yet was covered by foreign channels from the United Arab Emirates: Ajman and Alsharqah.

4. *To establish a strong base for Omani children's theatre and create a culture and an audience that values it, children's theatre should change from being seasonal and intermittent (the present situation) to becoming permanent and continuous. This can be achieved by presenting more children's performances and other theatrical activities throughout the year and in all Omani districts.*

To enable Omani public theatre groups and practitioners interested in children's theatre to present more performances and activities for children, there are a number of important and necessary first steps to be considered. These include:

- *Financing of Omani public theatre groups by Government bodies in charge of culture, theatre, and children in Oman*

Offering these groups all the necessary moral and financial support to present children's performances and other theatrical activities is needed. The role of the private sector in supporting and financing children's theatre activities in Oman should be emphasized to help add to the support of public bodies. Imad Al Shanfri, Head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group, explains how the lack of financial support and materials limits the group's options when choosing a children's play to be staged, in that the group would choose the play that requires the least expensive budget. This also explains how the lack of finance results in low quality performances that impact negatively on children, especially if the texts are chosen for reasons of cost, not because they are the most appropriate.

- *Providing the basic infrastructure and facilities needed to present children's performances, such as properly equipped stages, throughout Oman, in both the capital Muscat and regional areas*

5. *Organising an annual or biennial festival of children's theatre sponsored by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the body officially in charge of Omani theatre*

The festival's importance is especially evident when considering the success of the First Omani Children's theatre Festival in 2007, organised by the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, and the goals achieved through this festival: highlighting the importance of children's theatre and promoting the position of theatre in the cultural life of Omani children. However, the relevant governmental authorities should financially support the participating public theatre groups in the internal children's theatre festivals, instead of requiring public theatre groups to pay for children's productions from their own budgets (as occurred during the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival). It is important to enable and encourage public theatre groups and individuals interested in children's theatre to participate in external children's theatre festivals, by supporting their participation financially and morally. Such encounters would help Omani theatre practitioners to gain the benefit of other theatrical personnel's experiences in the field to broaden their knowledge of children's theatre.

6. *Documenting all the plays and performances produced for children in Oman (in either written or video format), and keeping an archival collection of children's theatre in Omani libraries*

The studies conducted about Omani theatre and children's theatre and drama need permanent documentation through printing and publishing. This would provide the necessary data in this field and allow and encourage future researchers to undertake studies on children's theatre in Oman. Again, the Omani mass media can play an important role here.

Despite the importance of learning and benefiting from other countries' developed experiences in the field of children's theatre, and studying their literature, it is also critical to ensure the establishment of a children's theatre in Oman that reflects the unique Omani cultural identity. This goal can only be achieved if there is a clear strategy and policy for Omani children's theatre designed by the relevant government authorities. In addition, inspiration from Omani traditional and folkloric culture when writing and presenting children's plays will help to create a special national identity for Omani children's theatre.

7.10 Conclusion, Summary and Future Study Recommendations

The major focus of this study, as articulated in the research question, is: what needs to be done to develop children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman as a viable and valued art form for the future. This study aimed through its various chapters to investigate and explore the historical background and the current position of children's theatre in Oman, its nature, the obstacles facing it, and the suggested ways of overcoming them, in order to obtain a general overview of children's theatre and thus create a vision and a strategy to develop it as a viable and valued art form for the future.

In addition, this study explored the range of definitions of the term 'children's theatre' found in the literature. Despite the fact that the term 'children's theatre' exists in the cultural and theatrical life of the Sultanate of Oman, along with other theatrical terms referring to the different forms of theatre existing in Oman, there still remains confusion among Omani people about the definition and the nature of children's theatre. Children's theatre is often confused with other forms of theatre, especially 'scholastic theatre'. This study, therefore, created a definition of children's theatre based on definitions in the literature and on interviewees' understandings and definitions of the term.

Aiming also to explore the general cultural position of children in Oman, the study located children's theatre within the broader Omani cultural context. Additionally, it addressed the importance of the arts in children's lives in general and, specifically, the importance of, and the cultural need for, children's theatre in Oman.

While this study of Omani children's theatre reflects all the main aspects of children's theatre that enabled me to extract and formulate a vision and to proffer suggestions for the future development of this vital theatre, it confronted multiple deterrents and disadvantages. The main difficulty was the significant lack of literature in the field of Omani children's theatre, limited records and documentation about Omani theatre and children's theatre, and very few research studies.

To overcome the difficulty of the scarcity of studies and documents on Omani children's theatre, ten in-depth personal interviews were conducted with participants involved in Omani theatre and Omani children's theatre, and with individuals who work for State institutions responsible for the cultural sector and theatre in Oman. These interviews explored participants' views on the situation of children's theatre in Oman, and their suggested strategies for its development based on their experiences. These interviews were an important data source for this study and were utilised in most of the chapters of this study. This study, therefore, comprises the first comprehensive historical survey of children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman, which also uses historiography.

It is hoped that interviewing the people responsible for theatre in Oman and highlighting the issue of children's theatre has focused their attention on this important theatre. Discussing the obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman may also encourage them to put a strategy in place to overcome these obstacles and to develop children's theatre.

This study can provide the foundation for further studies and benefit researchers interested in studying this area. It contributes to the existing studies in the area of children's theatre and, more broadly, helps to establish the basis for studies about Omani children's theatre. The study traced the history of children's theatre in Oman since its appearance in the early 1970s and analytically explored the different historical stages that it passed through. It looked at all texts and performances written and presented for Omani children in historical sequence and examined the social and cultural circumstances that have affected the situation of children's theatre in Oman through its different historical stages.

In addition, the fifth chapter of this study, on the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival, provided an overview of this festival, which is considered to be a milestone event in the history of Omani children's theatre. Here the shaping of the festival from the conception of the idea, through the different stages of its preparation was described, followed by reflection upon the resultant performances of the Festival. It also provided a detailed description and analysis of the festival program and the various performances presented, as well as of important recommendations by the arbitration panel of the Festival. It analysed these recommendations, based on a discussion with Mohamed Al Habsi, the head of the jury panel, and on my own observations and findings.

Rahima Al Gabri, playwright and Head of the Theatre Group at Sultan Qaboos University, when interviewed and questioned about any additional issues she would like to mention about Omani children's theatre, replied:

I wish that this study that you are doing now would be a starting point for all those interested in children's theatre. I hope that it will introduce the importance of children's theatre to people in state and private institutions so they will cater more for children's theatre. (Al Gabri 2006, 1:193-196)

Agreeing with Al Gabri, I also hope that this present study may be the starting point for further research in the area of children's theatre in Oman. Regrettably, little has been done in Arab countries, including Oman, in this significant field, despite the large child proportion of the population represented, and especially when compared with the large number of studies and surveys that have been undertaken in the western world in this similar theatrical field since 1957. However, the interest in this important field has increased in the Arab countries in the last three decades and children's theatre is beginning to receive some attention. This interest can be seen through the number of children's theatre festivals taking place recently in many Arab countries, including Oman.

More studies and research needs to be conducted in the Arab world, including Oman, in children's theatre, especially in the theory, definition and nature of children's theatre and characteristics that distinguish it from other theatrical forms. There is an obvious confusion about the definition of the term 'children's theatre' in the Arab world, in that it is confused with other terms referring to different dramatic forms presented for and by children. This can be clearly seen in the Arabic literature, where there is no defined and clear definition of the term 'children's theatre'. Many terms are used to refer to 'children's theatre'; thus, there is a need for theoretical studies that discuss this term.

Further critical and analytical studies also need to be undertaken of the scripts and performances presented for children in Oman. Such critical and analytical studies are important, not only because of the significant gap in this area, but also because such studies will help to promote the position of children's theatre, especially when setting up developmental plans and strategies. In addition, due to the lack of documentation and studies that trace the history of Omani theatre in general and the history of children's theatre specifically, more historical studies should be conducted to trace and analyse this history.

Theoretical and practical studies are needed to examine the importance of the arts in general in children's lives in Oman, and particularly the importance of children's theatre, and its effective role in supporting the cognitive, social and psychological development of the child. Such practical studies, which could be conducted mainly in schools where there are large audiences of children available for research, are common and widespread in the Western world. However, unfortunately, such practical studies are completely ignored in Oman. I hope to conduct such studies in the future.

Moreover, from my current position as a lecturer in the Theatre Arts Department at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, I have tried to compensate for the deficit in theoretical and practical studies into children's theatre by teaching the subject 'Children's Theatre' as a specific topic in theatre for students in the Department for the first time. By now undertaking this study in the area of children's theatre in Oman, and reviewing the literature, it is hoped to teach the subject of children's theatre in a more effective way and to pass on knowledge in this field to the university students and the wider community. The hope is to emphasise the importance of catering for children's culture in Oman, the importance of children's theatre in their lives, and the real demand for it as an important cultural medium that serves Omani children's cultural needs. This can be achieved through presenting public lectures, as well as through writing and publishing articles in Omani newspapers and magazines.

A future plan is to translate this study from English to Arabic to also make it available for Arabic readers. Included is a list of recommendations for the future development of Omani children's theatre, and these recommendations will also be translated and submitted to the government bodies in charge of children's culture, theatre and education in Oman. The State institutions that will benefit from this study include:

- Ministry of Heritage and Culture (Theatre Department)

- Ministry of Education (Educational Activities Department)
- Ministry of Social Development (Children's Department)

Other potential beneficiaries of the study include public theatre clubs, youth theatres and university theatre, in particular the Theatre Arts Department at the Arts and Social Sciences College at Sultan Qaboos University.

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Appendix 1

Appendix 1: Informed Consent Package



'Children's Theatre in Oman 1970- 2007: Towards a Developed Theatre'

Research Team Contacts	
Name & Position	Kamla Al Hinai, PhD (Research) Student
Phone	0406286980
Email	k.alhinai@student.qut.edu.au

Description

This project is being undertaken as part of [PhD] for [Kamla Al Hinai].

This study investigates how Children's Theatre in the Sultanate of Oman can become a viable and valued form of art for the future. The study outlines the historical background and the present situation of Omani children's theatre and, through discussions with interviewees, defines the obstacles it faces and suggests ways to overcome them. Through this research the study provides a clear vision and outlines recommendations to set up a strong children's theatre culture in Oman. The first Omani Children's Theatre Festival took place in 2007 thirty-five years after the first Omani children's play was produced in 1972. Despite the delay in its appearance, the festival represents a new era in the history of Omani theatre in general and the history of children's theatre in particular.

The researcher requests your assistance because there is an absence of documentation of Omani children's theatre, and your participation in the data collection through the interviews will enable the researcher to fill this gap by discussing with you the situation of children's theatre in Oman and other issues which are mentioned above.

Expected benefits

The information gathered from this project will be used as part of the researcher's PhD thesis. In addition, the outcomes of this study might be used by some state institutions such as: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education and Sultan Qaboos University. Moreover, all researchers interested in the area of children's theatre in general and children's theatre in the Sultanate of Oman in particular could benefit from this study.

Participation

Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you do agree to participate, you can withdraw from participation at any time during the project without comment or penalty. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT.

Your participation will involve an interview. Each interview will take about 40-60 minutes. All the interviews will be held in Oman in any place that suits you.

Potential Risks

You are assured that the study does not expose you to any potential risk as a result of your participation. However if you have any concern about this issue, please feel free to raise it.

Confidentiality

All comments and responses are anonymous and will be treated confidentially. The names of individual persons are not required in any of the responses and in the research thesis, any names used will be changed.

- All audio recordings are to be verified by participants prior to final inclusion;
- All audio recordings will be retained after the contents have been transcribed for the purposes of further study;
- If these audio recordings need to be used in the future for any other purpose, further permission will be sought from interviewees;
- Only the researcher will have access to the audiorecording for confidentiality purposes; and
- it is not possible to participate in the project without being recorded

Consent to Participate

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.

Questions / further information about the project

Please contact the researcher named above to have any questions answered or if you require further information about the project.

Concerns / complaints regarding the conduct of the project

QUT is committed to researcher integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Officer on 3864 2340 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The Researcher Ethics Officer is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thesis title: ‘Children’s Theatre in Oman 1970- 2007: Towards a Developed Theatre’

Interview Questions

General

- 1- What is your current position and what does it entail?
- 2- What do you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?
- 3- What is your contribution, as a director, playwright or as educated theatrical person, to this field?
- 4- What is your opinion about the situation of children's theatre in Oman?
- 5- How do you evaluate it?
- 6- What do you think of what have been presented to children's theatre in Oman?
- 7- From your point of view, what are the challenges facing children's theatre in Oman?
- 8- How do you think we can overcome it?

- 9- The Omani 2003 Census shows that 54% of the total populations of the country are children. Comparing with this high percentage, what is the cultural/artistic's position of children in Oman?
- 10- How important is the artistic's experience for children do you think?
- 11- What are the major themes in Omani children's plays?
- 12- What would you like to see happen to promote children's theatre in Oman in the next ten years?
- 13- Are there any important issues you could think of that I have not covered yet?

CONSENT FORM for QUT RESEARCH PROJECT

'Children's Theatre in Oman 1970- 2007: Towards a Developed Theatre'

Statement of consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- have read and understood the information document regarding this project;
- have had any questions answered to your satisfaction;
- understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team;
- understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Officer on 3864 2340 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project;
- agree to participate in the project.
- understand that the project will include audio recording;

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Further information

If you have any questions or concerns after the interview has been conducted, please feel free to contact the researcher, Kamla Al Hinai on 99838882 (Oman) or +61 406286980 (Australia), E-mail: kamla@squ.edu.om.

The interviews guide provides a framework for the interview.

Inter. No.Date: Interview time:

Interviewee's name:

Interviewee's title:

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 2

Appendix 2: The First Omani Children's Theatre Festival

People honoured in the opening ceremony of the First Children's Theatre Festival in Oman include the following:

- Mohamed Noor Al Blushi (Oman)
- Abdel Ghafour Ahmed Al Blushi (Oman)
- Abd Alkareem Jawad (Oman)
- Saleh Al Fahdi (Oman)
- Imad Al Shanfari (Oman)
- Abdullah Sakhar Al Aamri (Died/ Oman)
- Hilal Al Oraimi (Oman)
- Hilal Al Hilaly (Oman)
- Saleh Zaal Al Farsi (Oman)
- Suaad Al Darmaki (Oman)
- Aminah Abd Alrasool (Oman)
- Ahmed Al Azki (Oman)
- Salim Bahwan (Oman)
- Khalid bin Saleh Al Zadjali (Oman)
- Fakhriyah Khamees (Oman)
- Shamah Mohamed (Oman)
- Talib Mohamed Al Blushi (Oman)
- Ibraheem Al Zadjali (Oman)
- Ibraheem Al Qasmi (Oman)
- Nasser Al Akhzami (Oman)
- Saleh Al Khodori (Oman)
- Rahimah Al Gabri (Oman)
- Mohssen Al Blushi (Oman)
- Sameerah Al Wihabi (Oman)
- Waleed Al Kharosi (Oman)
- Jasem Al Batashi (Oman)
- Mohamed Saif Al Habsi (Oman)
- Hassan Hussain (Qatar)
- Abdullah Abu-Aabid (UAE)
- Yasser Saif (Bahrain) (The festival booklet 2007).

The Arbitration Committee Members of the First Omani Children's Theatre Festival (The Festival Booklet 2007):

- Dr. Mohamed Saif Al Habsi (Oman)
- Hassan Hussain (Qatar)
- Abdullah Abu-aabid (UAE)
- Dr. Noor Ahmed Al Ramadi (Egypt)
- Fahad Al Baker (Qatar)
- Talib Kahailan Al Shahri (Oman).

The following table lists the festival program showing the participating theatre groups and performances, in addition to the opening and closing ceremonies (The Festival Booklet 2007).

Table 3: Festival Program Participants

Title of Art Work	Day & Date	Presented by	Performance Venue	Form
Opening ceremony	Saturday: 1 Dec.2007	Mazoon Group	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	College Drama Dance and Movement Music and Song
<i>Ayam Altifoolah</i>	Sunday: 2 Dec.2007	Shinas Technical College	Theatre of the General Directorate of Arts & Education	Comedy play and includes folkloric songs
<i>Alarnab wa Alsolhafah</i>		Alahli Club	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	Social and educational text
<i>Al Qet Samsoom</i>	Monday: 3 Dec.2007	University of Dhofar	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	Comedy & Educational text
<i>Albaya Alsagheer (Mwazi)</i>	Tuesday: 4 Dec.2007	Arzan Company	Theatre of the General Directorate of Arts & Education	Movement, music & song
<i>Galgool and Shamlool</i>		Mazoon Group	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	Comedy play includes three songs
<i>Shkbat Shakabeet (Mwazi)</i>	Wednesday: 5 Dec.2007	Den Group	Theatre of the General Directorate of Arts & Education	Comedy & educational text Music and song
<i>Madinat Alahalm</i>		Salalah Group	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	Fiction Includes educational content
<i>Ah ya zaman</i>	Thursday: 6 Dec.2007	Modern art Group	Theatre of the General Directorate of Arts & Education	Educational text Dance & song
<i>Lahn Al Itihad</i>		Den Group	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	
<i>Galgool wa Shamlool</i>	Friday: 7 Dec.2007	Mazoon Group	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	Comedy & educational text Song & Dance
Closing ceremony	Saturday: 8 Dec.2007	Distribution of awards	Theatre of Education College at Alrustaq	

Appendix 3

Personal Interviews

An interview with Dr. Abd Alkareem Jawad dated 27-09-2006, in his office at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, at 12 pm.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

At present, I work as an advisor to His Excellency, the Minister of Heritage and Culture. I have worked as a director and playwright and was a director of the Theatre Department for a long time. I was involved in conducting studies in Omani, Arabic and global theatre.

Q2 What is your definition of children's theatre?

There is no absolute definition since, in my opinion, it depends on the age category. However, children's theatre can be defined as "theatrical performances that address children in general". To elaborate on this point, I would categorise it in at least three levels relating to the age of the child:

The first level is theatre delivered to pre-school children, the second level is the first three grades of elementary school, and the third level is the third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades of elementary school, which sometimes continues to the next level. This age categorisation is important, since what is suitable for pre-school students may not be suitable for others at a higher level. This is due to the ability of children to comprehend and grasp concepts, which is different from one age category to another, so we must bear this in mind.

The general definition of children's theatre is "theatrical shows addressed to all these age categories, taking into account the disparities that need to be analysed and differentiated". Further, we have to distinguish between "children's theatre" and "scholastic theatre". And to further differentiate them, perhaps scholastic theatre is closer to and concentrates more on the school's curriculum, which is called "curriculum dramatised", which means that the content of the theatrical performance is taken from the subject area of the school curriculum in order to help students understand the lesson.

From my point of view, even in scholastic theatre, there are two sides: the first is the curriculum-based theatre, which consists of simplifying scientific subjects through performing short acting scenes. But to be true to the art of theatre, performances should be given to provide entertainment and knowledge at the same time, not be based solely on scientific facts.

Q3 Do you mean that scholastic theatre focuses only on the educational side?

Yes, and besides that I would wish that the foundations of theatre be taught to students so as to give them an idea about it at an early age. And I think it would be very useful to introduce them to classical plays and scripts from around the world and to familiarise them with Omani and Arabic theatre – thus it would improve their sense of appreciation and criticism and their ability to differentiate between what is offered for them on the stage. I believe that theatre is "father of the arts" because it combines different arts and it has many advantages. In my opinion, it

49 helps to expand students' horizons, enhance their way of thinking, and improve
50 their mental and aesthetic functions.

51 **Q4 Does scholastic theatre have any features in common with children's**
52 **theatre in your opinion?**

53 Certainly, there are similarities and differences at the same time. With children's
54 theatre, it is not necessary to present scientific and instructional subjects, while
55 scholastic theatre is more dependent on the curriculum of the school and the
56 themes arising from it. I notice that children's theatre in all the Gulf countries
57 usually tackles stereotyped themes. I hope this problem will be reduced in the
58 Gulf countries.

59

60 **Q5 Do you mean the pattern of the themes and the issues tackled?**

61 Yes, that is what I mean. There are stereotyped themes to be found in most, if not
62 all, children's performances in addition to the typical style of presenting
63 children's performances. Most of these start with simple plots interspersed with
64 some typical dances and songs, and always the same kinds of sets such as trees
65 and houses – such things impede the children's imagination and restrict their
66 horizon. This has to be tackled to improve children's theatre in the Arabian Gulf.

67

68 **Q6 Do you mean that we shouldn't underestimate children's mentality**
69 **nowadays in the light of their awareness with today's technology? And do**
70 **you agree with the point of view of playwright Jean Hall, who says "most of**
71 **the plays presented for children were fantasy, but for today's children 'plays**
72 **of ideas' should have a place in their theatre" (Hall, p.261)?**

73 At the beginning I would like to pose a question: why do we need children's
74 theatre and why is it so important? Children as an audience really enjoy watching
75 theatrical performances, and from my own observations, I found that there is
76 strong interaction between the children and the performances. Who is defining
77 what is suitable for the child? Is it the child's carer or is it the society? We can say
78 that in fact the child makes his own choice of performances in the light of his
79 reactions to it. The child's interaction with the performance does not necessarily
80 mean that it is beneficial for him. The child's interaction cannot be considered as
81 a criterion for success of the performances. This is because the child's reaction is
82 spontaneous and he is not able to evaluate the quality of the performance. If we
83 return to the question of "why do we need children's theatre", and "who decides
84 whether or not we need children's theatre", we must refer to the formal
85 institutions responsible for children's culture and who is responsible for defining
86 the instruments needed to develop children's culture. Theatre is one of these
87 instruments. These institutions need to put in place a well-thought out strategy for
88 how to deal with the child by consulting experts experienced in dealing with
89 children and who understand their psychology. All of this should be in place to
90 provide suitable theatrical works for children that have meaning, ideas and
91 aesthetic aspects for the child. There are many theories about how to deal with the
92 child. Some people believe that we should make children's theatre an active
93 experience and not consider the child as a mere observer or passive recipient.
94 Children can also participate in the performance, which makes them happy. In
95 most theatrical performances we can see the child's interaction with the
96 characters, going on to the stage, and dancing and singing with them. Some
97 people believe that the child is not a good observer unless he participates in the
98 performance.

99

100 The problem relating to the official establishment is that there is no place for
101 improvisation. From this, we can move to another important point which is that
102 just because an actor has a successful acting career does not mean that he will be a
103 good actor in children's performances. Whoever is presenting for children's
104 theatre must have a good knowledge of the psychological and educational needs
105 of children to be able to present a successful children's performance. He must be
106 aware of all children's theatre instruments. Another thing is that children's theatre
107 must be within two contexts: the State theatre of the country and the civil society.
108 The civil society can also contribute by providing groups to serve children's
109 theatre; for example the Omani women's association could establish a group to
110 present theatrical shows for children. In addition, clubs and the private sector
111 could also contribute in this field. Unfortunately, however, when it comes to the
112 private sector, they concentrate mainly on the money-making aspect more than the
113 cultural or cognitive aspects. Profits are necessary, but not at the expense of the
114 quality of the plays being shown. Good and bad performances can be seen and
115 unfortunately most of these performances that are presented for children are
116 superficial and do not focus on the culture of the child, because they are presented
117 by non-specialists in the field. Studies must be conducted in the area of child
118 psychology and children's needs.

119

120 **Q7 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15**
121 **years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do**
122 **you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in**
123 **general?**

124 Children acquire their cultural references from the environment around them and
125 are influenced by their family and their community. Most children do not attend
126 kindergarten or preliminary level, which are the early educational stages, and only
127 a small percentage have the privilege of studying in non-government schools.
128 Schools in general, including private schools, present superficial information for
129 children regarding the arts. It is very rare that children are educated in this area.
130 Children are not given the opportunity to express their artistic side, such as music,
131 acting, drawing or reciting. This is the situation in the Sultanate of Oman in
132 general. But of course there are some exceptions to this. From my point of view, I
133 believe that Omani children need more care and they need cultural, non-scholastic
134 programs which are offered outside the four walls of the school, not just in the
135 classroom. Most Omani schools need services and equipment to enable the child
136 to practise his artistic hobbies to enrich his mentality and to develop him to reach
137 his potential. Establishing the Child Museum was a great idea in the area and it
138 would be good to establish museums in other regions of the Sultanate. In addition
139 to children's theatre, clubs should also participate to provide creative activities for
140 children.

141

142 **Q8 Do you believe that the Children's Museum focuses on the**
143 **scientific/practical or mainstream art in a child's life?**

144 Yes, there must have been some misunderstanding as the first priority was the
145 infrastructure. As a first step, the schools need to be engaged more and to utilise
146 the facilities, and thus will benefit from visits to the various arts, music, folkloric
147 and other exhibitions held at the museum.

148

149 One thing that troubles me is the huge gap between the educational institutes in
150 the practice of their duties in supervising and running activities. I noticed that if
151 there is a children's play discussing children issues, it is the parents who attend,
152 not the expected number of children who are the targeted audience. The same
153 thing happens if there is a painting exhibition. It is unusual for a school to arrange
154 a visit to the gallery or to attend a play or symposium. It shows there is no
155 coordination between the government bodies at all. The reason for the neglect of
156 the arts is the increasing concern about the scientific side as one of the priorities
157 that must be satisfied first, while it is obvious that the arts domain is secondary
158 and has less importance than the scientific and the practical ones.

159

160 **Q9 In my experience of attending a children's theatre festival in Brisbane,**
161 **Australia (*Out of the Box*), which was held for children between the ages of 4**
162 **and 8, I noticed that this was a well-organised event and, besides**
163 **performances for children there were other activities such as art and music**
164 **exhibitions. I also noticed that large numbers of children obviously enjoyed**
165 **attending such events. They arrived in school buses and wearing school**
166 **uniforms. Why don't we have such events for children in Oman?**

167 This is a very valuable idea. I believe that artistic and cultural activities will
168 expand children's educational area not limited only to the school, but also
169 learning from the culture of the society and from observing other people's
170 experiences. Such experience is very important to construct the child's personality
171 in the early stages. I also believe that schools can provide good performances for
172 children if they are presented by specialists. I wonder why, when there are
173 successful performances in the school, they can't be re-presented on TV and in
174 other regions of the country. They should not be limited to the school audience,
175 but should be offered to the wider community. Why is drama not taught within the
176 school? We cannot ask for a generation that is theatrically aware if we don't
177 educate them in the arts, and therefore we will not have a generation of adults who
178 are artistically educated.

179

180 **Q10 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the**
181 **Sultanate? Some deny that there is any such theatre in Oman. Do you agree**
182 **with this statement?**

183 We can't say that we have systematic theatre for children, but rather I can say we
184 have some theatrical performances that are presented from time to time.
185 Children's theatre is run by the enthusiasm, diligence, energies and desire of those
186 who are involved in the theatre who carry out their duties and want to offer shows
187 for children. I don't know how far we have progressed in this field.

188

189 **Q11 Since you are a pioneer in writing about the history of Omani theatre,**
190 **what is your background with reference to children's theatre?**

191 Actually, I haven't conducted separate research in this regard. I remember when I
192 produced *Qahir Al Haramia'a* – at that time I didn't know much about that area.

193

194 As far as I remember, I presented a children's play entitled *Qahir Al Harmi'aa* in
195 1983 that was performed at the Al Nahdha Club, which was my first play aimed at
196 children. It had the same plot as the Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves story. I
197 adapted the script and also directed it. It was the beginning for a large number of
198 actors/actresses well known nowadays in the arena of local drama. The TV video–

199 recorded and broadcast the play. I also presented another play entitled *Yawm Al*
200 *Mahabbah Wa Al Ta'awon (Day of Love and Cooperation)*, by Fatma Al
201 Sh'aaban, performed in the early 90s. I also presented *Cinderella*, staged in 1996,
202 a musical aimed at children. You will notice that there was a big time lapse
203 between these three performances. Most of these plays were supported by the
204 Department of Women and Children within the Ministry of Social Affairs.

205

206 To my knowledge there were some attempts to perform plays for children; one of
207 these was by the Barka Theatrical Group which gave intermittent performances,
208 yet on the whole these were too irregular and did not meet the standards of
209 proficiency.

210

211 **Q12 What do you know about the first performance of a children's play in**
212 **Oman? According to the guidebook of the Al Ahli Club, the play *Al Faris***
213 ***Asshuga'a* was the first to be staged in 1972.**

214 Maybe, I am not sure of that, maybe it happened at the very beginning. The Al
215 Ahli Club might have performed one of its children's plays at that time. But you
216 may discover the truth, if you are interested, through conducting some meetings
217 and this would actually be worth confirming and documenting.

218

219 **Yes, Doctor. I am still researching the history of Omani children's theatre.**

220

221 **Q13 Since you have been engaged in children's theatre for a not insignificant**
222 **period of time, we would like to ask you about the obstacles that you have**
223 **encountered based on your extensive experience. And what is your response**
224 **if we compare and contrast the large number of plays that you produced for**
225 **adult theatre but only three intermittent performances for children?**

226 Actually I agree that in order to arrange for a play to be produced there must be
227 enough facilities, funds and sponsorship. We need a stage and a budget to produce
228 a play, and, to be honest with you, it is difficult to provide these needs. As for the
229 last two shows I presented, the Ministry of Social Development was in charge of
230 sponsoring them. I felt an overwhelming desire to produce more children's plays.
231 To draw a clear picture for you, I don't want to say that my experience in the field
232 of children's plays was very successful at the general level because, as I
233 mentioned, such plays were not directed to a specific category of children or to a
234 specific age. In fact, they revolved around children's theatre in general. We try
235 very hard to conform to the common pattern when it comes to children's theatre.

236

237 **Q14 Does that mean you are emphasising the idea of age category for**
238 **presenting children's plays? For example, I found in Australia that this age**
239 **category is shown on the ticket and the program for the particular show, as:**

240

This show is suitable for children from age ... to age....

241

242 It is essential to apply this categorisation based on the ages of the children in order
243 to deliver the message intended for the target age group. Presenting for children
244 needs to be under supervision. Further review needs to be conducted because
245 there is no establishment in the Sultanate in charge of children's theatre to
246 supervise such performances and develop children's theatre. The Department of
247 Women and Children at the Ministry of Social Development is not officially in
248 charge but they, on some occasions, run some children's shows to supplement a
certain program, festival or activity. But for the moment we have only this

249 department that is concerned with children in general, not children's theatre. And,
250 in fact, there are no plans or arrangements in place to activate children's theatre. I
251 agree that there is school theatre, but it has its own programs and plans and
252 doesn't carry out its responsibilities in a highly professional way. Children's
253 theatre is supported mainly through the personal efforts and diligence of a few
254 individuals.

255

256 **Q15 So we understand that no ministry is in charge of children's theatre**
257 **exclusively, neither the Ministry of Social Development or the Ministry of**
258 **Education. But what about the role of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture**
259 **in this regard?**

260 The Education and Social Development Ministries only support children's theatre
261 to a limited degree. However, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture has a role in
262 supporting this kind of theatre since it is responsible for theatre in general.
263 However, we don't have within this ministry any strategy or programs especially
264 designed for children's theatre. Nowadays the only section that the ministry is
265 concerned about is youth and professional theatre, and the childhood area is not
266 part of its responsibility. Children are outside the ministry's concern, except for
267 the Children's Museum, which comes under our supervision, and this Museum, as
268 I mentioned previously, focuses only on scientific areas.

269

270 **Q16 Why don't we take the advantage from the youth theatre experience and**
271 **its professionals to benefit children's theatre?**

272 From my point of view, I can only focus on the work that comes under my own
273 specialisation, and children's theatre does not fit into that category. The Ministry
274 of Culture and Heritage arranges a lot of workshops for theatre people with regard
275 to acting, writing and directing. Despite all these workshops that the ministry runs
276 that aim to develop theatre people, we still cannot turn out people trained to work
277 in children's theatre, because, again, we focus only on youth and adult theatre. If
278 we complete our present plans and programs, we may expand to children's theatre
279 after that. If any local theatre groups came to us asking us to hold workshops in
280 children's theatre, we would then support this. This would be most welcome and
281 we would encourage such an attempt. Actually, there are many local theatre
282 groups that perform shows and we support them to the best of our ability.

283

284 **Q17 We notice that, at present, the ministry is preoccupied by youth theatre**
285 **and public theatre groups. How can theatre begin from these age categories,**
286 **that is youths or adults, and not before?!**

287 Some young people come to us from school theatre where they have developed
288 their theatrical skills seeking our guidance, and we then guide them in joining
289 youth theatre groups, and some of them later continue with public theatre groups
290 and their careers develop.

291

292 **Q18 Do you think that it is vital to diversify the subjects and themes in**
293 **children's theatre and what are, based on your experience, the main subjects**
294 **and issues that you have focused on until now?**

295 Yes. As for the plays that I produced, I will talk about the three plays that I have
296 presented. These three plays represent the three common styles in theatre. *Qahir*
297 *Al Haramia'a* is a play taken from the *Thousand and One Nights* stories derived
298 from the stories of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, while the play *Al Mahabbah*

299 *Wa Att'awan* is a story that is very suitable for the early childhood age group and
300 has lessons about cooperation and love. Actors played the parts of animals,
301 wearing animal costumes; this is a popular feature of children's theatre.
302 Meanwhile, the third one, *Cinderella*, is one of the world theatre classics, which
303 was modified to fit the language level of the children to make it easy for them to
304 understand. These classic stories have inspired many playwrights.

305

306 **Q19 What would you like to see with regard to the condition of children's**
307 **theatre and the means of developing it in the Sultanate?**

308 My hope is for a government authority to be in charge of children's theatre, which
309 will establish the basics and conduct plans and programs and would like to see a
310 government decision issued in this regard. I believe that there should be only one
311 institution in charge of children's theatre, instead of multiple ministries that are at
312 present responsible for children such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of
313 Social Development and Ministry of Heritage and Culture.

314

315 If that happened, that department would provide experts, administration and funds
316 to carry out its responsibilities.

317

318 **Q20 Do you think the Ministry of Heritage and Culture may adopt a plan in**
319 **the future to establish a section or department in charge of children's**
320 **theatre?**

321 This needs an official decision to gain approval, but there must be concurrence
322 between all the government establishments. However only one can be fully in
323 charge.

324

325 **Q21 There are many performances that are presented for children under the**
326 **guise of "children's theatre". What is the role of the ministry with regard to**
327 **copyright of plays and other performances presented for children?**

328 The ministry in general does not have a specific policy in regard to copyright.
329 The ministry doesn't interfere in allowing or not allowing certain scripts to be
330 staged. However, we evaluate the script and the themes and lessons included, but
331 we give a lot of freedom to the playwrights to create their own work and depend
332 on them to be responsible as well in using their own judgement and assessing their
333 work as being suitable for children. But if there are taboos then we intervene,
334 since theatre is meant to teach love, kindness, cooperation and morals, and we
335 eliminate such offences or insults that can be seen in some shows that do not
336 conform to the ideas and beliefs of our culture and religion.

337

338 **Q22 You mentioned previously that everyone involved in children's theatre**
339 **must understand child psychology. What do you think of, for example,**
340 **horrifying scenes that might have a strong negative influence on the child?**

341 Yes I agree with you that such scenes would negatively affect the child. I
342 recommend that psychologists and educational experts should read the script and
343 assess it to see if it is suitable for the age category for which it is designed. We
344 shouldn't act independently without consulting specialists, and there is no place
345 for amateur theories when it comes to children. There are many psychological and
346 educational theories dealing with children's needs and the ways of dealing with
347 children, and a lot of studies have been conducted in this area. We should be
348 aware of all these things.

349

350 **Q23 We have local theatre groups and a theatrical festival that is held in the**
351 **Sultanate once a year. Why are there no initiatives to take advantage of these**
352 **things and benefit from them in presenting theatrical performances for**
353 **children?**

354 There are many shows that have been produced for children's theatre from troupes
355 invited from abroad. But these performances are not only highly expensive but
356 also dangerous with reference to morals, feelings and protecting the innocence of
357 the children. On some occasions, we have witnessed such shows undervalue the
358 aesthetic taste and sense of everything we rate so highly. In some of these, the
359 dramatic connection and the laws of movement and acting are ignored, and on
360 some occasions, we see famous stars, while they are acting, performing
361 meaningless and unsystematic body language and gestures because they are
362 ignorant in the area of children's theatre.

363

364 From my point of view, since there is no such authoritative body in charge of
365 children's theatre, then we should resort to the other available option, the public
366 troupes, to carry out these duties, and we must support them financially and also
367 in kind. This can be implemented by providing expert writers, directors and
368 appropriate sets and stage design for their performances.

369

370 **Q24 The performance troupe that participates in the Muscat and Salalah**
371 **festivals is mistakenly understood to offer children's theatre. That is not true**
372 **since it has nothing to do with children's theatre and what is offered is only**
373 **acrobatics. What is your opinion?**

374 We have to be very semantically accurate and cautious in using the term
375 "children's theatre", as some unscrupulous people may use that label for money-
376 making purposes. Parents should be cautious about taking their children to watch
377 performances that are not suitable. Institutes also should be careful about this.

378

379 **Q25 Who evaluates such performances from your point of view?**

380 There is a problem with regard to censorship. This is a very controversial issue
381 and it is difficult to explain. Sometimes, censorship is applied to good as well as
382 bad performances. I don't want to emphasise our role in censoring actors. Rather,
383 I want actors to be self-censoring. And we don't neglect the importance of the
384 community in expressing points of view about the work being performed. I would
385 like to confirm that this evaluation has to be made on the basis of experts'
386 opinions in order to obtain a fruitful production.

387

388 **Q26 Does the term "children's theatre" officially exist in the ministry's**
389 **vocabulary?**

390 We don't deal with children's theatre, but there are some theatre troupes that ask
391 for approval about the suitability of a script and whether or not it is in compliance
392 with the community rules before proceeding to stage it. Having received the
393 script, we assess it. Based on that, we issue general approval, but that is not
394 deemed to be from the point view of the specialists who are further engaged in the
395 psychology of the children and their needs because we simply don't have any.

396

397 **Q27 What are the reasons behind the absence of theatre performances**
398 **addressed to children in the local theatrical festivals?**

399 Simply because such festivals have nothing to do with children's theatre; they are
400 only for youth and adults. But we may hold a festival of children's theatre in the
401 future.

402

403 **Q28 Since you have been engaged in children's theatre for a not**
404 **inconsiderable period of time, we would like to ask you about the obstacles**
405 **that you have encountered based on your extensive experience. And what is**
406 **your response if we compare and contrast the large number of plays that you**
407 **produced for adult theatre but only three intermittent performances for**
408 **children?**

409 Actually I agree that in order to arrange for a play to be produced there must be
410 enough facilities, funds and sponsorship. We need a stage and a budget to produce
411 a play, and, to be honest with you, it is difficult to provide these needs. As for the
412 last two shows I presented, the Ministry of Social Affairs was in charge of
413 sponsoring them. I felt an overwhelming desire to produce more children's plays.
414 To draw a clear picture for you, I don't want to say that my experience in the field
415 of children's plays was very successful at the general level because, as I
416 mentioned, such plays were not directed to a specific category of children or to a
417 specific age. In fact, they revolved around children's theatre in general. We try
418 very hard to conform to the common pattern when it comes to children's theatre.

419

420 **Q29 In Dr Khalid Al-Zadjali's thesis for his doctorate degree entitled**
421 ***Children's Drama: Technical and Educational Approaches. The Development***
422 ***of TV and Theatre Drama in Oman*, he states: "Youth theatre is the only**
423 **professional theatre in Oman. On the other hand, children's theatre is the**
424 **weakest part of youth theatre, and all of it suffers from low quality of**
425 **production and a lack of trained actors, writers and technicians" (Al-Zadjali,**
426 **2002, p.125). Do you agree with him? If yes, why?**

427 Basically I agree since children's theatre has faced numerous difficulties through
428 its course. It lacks the funds to carry out its duties. However, the youth theatre is
429 not concerned with children's theatre; rather it is responsible for youth aged from
430 15 to 29 years old. Therefore, I urgently request that there be a department to
431 supervise and be fully in charge of children's theatre.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Yousef Al Blushi dated 08-10-2006.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I am a graduate of the Education College in Oman and I'm currently studying and doing a Master at Cairo University in the Department of Information. I am currently working as a specialist and supervisor of theatrical activities in the General Directorate of Arts and Education in the Albatinah region. I am also the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group. I wrote and produced many plays for adult and children's theatre and I presented three dramatic works for Omani TV.

Q2 Regarding your job as a supervisor of theatrical activity, what is the nature of your work? Tell us more about it.

My job is to supervise and evaluate the theatrical activities in the Albatinah region, to organise and hold theatrical competitions between schools, and supervise the plays presented in schools for students of different educational levels, focusing in particular on plays presented to students in the elementary stage from grades one to four. Most of the plays presented in this category focus on improvement in child behaviour. In addition, I organise theatre workshops for teachers and supervisors in schools, as well as presenting plays and organising other events on different occasions and celebrations, whether for the General Directorate or other party in Oman.

Q3 What is your definition of "children's theatre"?

I have a great interest in children's theatre and its development. However if we try to trace the history of children's theatre in Oman, we will not find any documentation about its beginnings.

Q4 Yes, I was going to ask you this question later, which is about what you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman.

I think that the real beginning of children's theatre started from schools, and we can say that theatre in Oman in general started at the end of 60s. However the real beginning of Omani theatre was at the beginning of the 1970s, and it developed when Youth Theatre was established in 1980. I believe that children's theatre also started at the beginning of the 1970s through scholastic theatre, just like Omani theatre. When I joined the Faculty of Education in 1991, I began to present some plays for children, and this was my beginning with children's theatre, but I expect that there are people before me who presented plays for children in the eighties, or maybe it started before that, in the mid-seventies or the end of the seventies at Al Saidia schools, since, as I remember when I was a student, there were Arab and Egyptian teachers who presented performances for children at schools.

Regarding the definition of children's theatre, and the difference between it and school theatre, I see that there is a difference between them, but children's theatre and scholastic theatre intersect at a certain point, in that most children's performances are presented to an audience of school students. However children's theatre can be distinguished from scholastic theatre through the nature and type of play presented. Scholastic theatre presents educational plays only, while

51 children's theatre is more open and broad, and addresses multiple topics; it also
52 deals with children of different age levels starting from kindergarten.
53 Children's theatre is a professional theatre. It is not easy to direct a performance
54 for children. The actors for a children's performance need to double their efforts
55 for their acting to be convincing, and the actors should know how to communicate
56 with children and the director should know how to stimulate a child's
57 imagination. All of these factors account for the difficulty of children's theatre
58 since children's theatre needs wide experience. Moreover, children's
59 performances are very costly.

60

61 I will relate an experience with my son who is five years old. He attended the
62 performances *The Monkey is my Friend* and *Saber and the Magician* and he
63 enjoyed both of them and was so happy. But one day one of my colleagues invited
64 me to attend a children's play that he produced, and my son insisted on going with
65 me, so I took him along. However, unfortunately, after he saw the play, my son
66 started to avoid attending theatrical performances. Do you know why? For many
67 reasons. First the performance was boring, the sound was not clear, the seating
68 was uncomfortable, and the theatre design in general was not attractive for
69 children. My son even fell asleep. Now he has the idea in his mind that theatre is
70 boring.

71

72 **Your son's story underlines the effect of theatre on children. The effect can**
73 **be either positive or negative. Also this story proves that children are clever**
74 **and we shouldn't underestimate them, and we should strive to present the**
75 **best for them. From watching a weak performance your child now does not**
76 **like theatre at all.**

77 Exactly. And that's why now I am determined to do my best, and also to know
78 how to get through to the child and communicate with him; I always keep this in
79 mind when writing and producing for children. I also try to tackle all the issues
80 relevant to children. In Oman there are many attempts to present theatrical works
81 for children and one day all of these efforts will form a solid base for the future of
82 children's theatre in Oman.

83

84 Furthermore, in Oman there is a lack of texts written for children, so I write the
85 plays myself, even though I am not a specialised playwright for children's theatre.
86 Since I am the head of the Mazoon Public Theatre group, I know the ability of the
87 actors in the group and I know the sort of roles that suit each actor, so I take this
88 into consideration when writing the text. In addition, I try to write interesting texts
89 that are attractive to children. There are also good playwrights in Oman for
90 children's theatre, but unfortunately they are undiscovered because of a lack of
91 support offered for playwrights and a failure to nurture the talents of young
92 people. Writing for children's theatre is not an easy thing, and this makes
93 playwrights hesitate to write for children.

94

95 **Q6 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15**
96 **years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do**
97 **you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in**
98 **general?**

99 Unfortunately, the idea that theatre should be a part of children's culture does not
100 exist in Oman.

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Q7 Do you disagree with those people who deny the existence of children's theatre in Oman?

Yes I do. Because if I agree with them, that means that we will ignore all the individual efforts that have been made by some independent theatrical groups that try to present works for children's theatre. I am not just talking on behalf of myself and the Mazoon Public Theatre group that I represent, but I am talking about other people's attempts that are valued. Personally, I presented three theatrical performances for children for the Ministry of Education in addition to performances that were presented by the Mazoon Public Theatre group. So people do try to provide theatrical experiences for children, and I also continue to do so in order to establish a developed children's theatre in Oman, and I will never give up. And I will hold a children's theatre festival in Oman.

Q8 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the Sultanate?

And are you satisfied with the current position of children's theatre in Oman?

No, I am not completely satisfied, but it's not too bad. Children's performances that have been presented are good since they tackled important issues. I think they are appropriate for the age group that they were presented to; however, the problem is that the number of performances are very few, and this is because of a lack of theatrical texts that have been written for children.

If I wanted to evaluate the current position of children's theatre in Oman, I must say that there is no institution that supports children's theatre in Oman. For instance, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture responsible for theatre in general does not even recognise the term "children's theatre". They do nothing about it. As head of the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, I received invitations from Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to participate in children's theatre festivals there, and when I approached the ministry for some support, they told me that since there was no department responsible for children's theatre, they had nothing to offer. They don't support children's theatre, but I insisted on participating in these festivals to gain the benefit from other people's experiences in theatre.

Q9 So, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture does not support your group, the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, to participate in external children's theatre festivals?

Yes, the ministry does not offer any support. Whenever we present a proposal to the ministry to participate in external festivals, they send a written reply saying that they agree and support the group's participation, but the group should rely on its own budget and the ministry does not offer any financial support. They will not even pay for travel or accommodation costs or the cost of transporting sets for festivals outside Oman. For example, our group went to Iraq, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and twice to Egypt to participate in children's theatre festivals, and on all these occasions we paid from the group's budget. Basically, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture does not recognise such as entity as children's theatre, neither do they support children's theatre festivals to be held in Oman.

150 **Exactly. This was confirmed by the people in charge in the Ministry who I**
151 **interviewed.**

152 Yes, so in the end I went to the Ministry of Social Development to seek their help
153 because they do have a Department of Child Affairs. I informed them that I would
154 like to participate in an external children's theatre festival in their name. At the
155 beginning they gave me hope, but unfortunately they later rejected my proposal,
156 justifying it by saying there is no budget for such a project. I also suggested that
157 the Mazoon Public Theatre group would hold a children's theatre festival and at
158 the beginning they were positive about the idea, but later they called me and again
159 refused my proposal for the same reason, that there is no budget.

160

161 **Q10 Did the officer in the Ministry of Social Development tell you that they**
162 **are not in charge of children's theatre?**

163 The Ministry official told me that they do have programs for children, but they
164 cannot support theatrical groups financially to participate in external children's
165 theatre festivals, because, as they said, it is not part of their programs and duties.
166 Moreover I suggested to them that they help in setting up a children's theatre
167 festival, and they said they would need time to consider it. This consideration will
168 take many long years, and now at the present time, there is an urgent need for
169 children's theatre because it is the basis for a developed theatre. We should also
170 consider the fact that there is a child in every home.

171

172 **Q11 You have mentioned that your group participated in the Child Assembly**
173 **held by the Ministry of Social Development. Could you tell us more about**
174 **this participation?**

175 Yes, the Child Assembly held by the Ministry of Social Development presented
176 many activities for children for six days, including children's performances, and
177 we presented two performances over three days: *Saber and the Magician* was
178 presented once, and *Galgool and Shamlool* was presented twice. The Mazoon
179 Public Theatre Group was chosen to participate in this event because we have
180 presented many children's works previously.

181

182 **Q12 In general, what support do public theatre groups receive from the**
183 **Ministry of Heritage and Culture?**

184 The Ministry only supervises public theatre groups and does not offer any
185 financial support. The groups depend mainly on their members to finance the
186 activities. The only financial support we receive from the Ministry is for our
187 participation in Omani theatre festivals that are held every two years. The Mazoon
188 Public Theatre Group participated this year [2006] in a festival in Cairo, and we
189 paid for that from our own budget. There were competitions at the festival and we
190 reached the finals, but we didn't win because the competition was very strong.
191 But we were still happy because we participated and reached the finals. We also
192 participated in a children's theatre festival in Iraq and we won two awards – one
193 was for a promising child actor, which was won by one of our child actors. If this
194 child is given support and encouragement, in the future he will be one of the
195 creative people in the field.

196

197 **I can see that your strong belief in the importance of children's theatre is the**
198 **driving force for the Mazoon Public Theatre Group in presenting children's**
199 **performances despite the lack of financial support.**

200 Yes, this is right.

201

202 **Q13 Regarding the child who won the award for Best Talented Child in the**
203 **festival you participated in Iraq – how did you know this child and how did**
204 **you choose him to act in your play?**

205 He was one of my students at school, in the elementary grade. I noticed that he
206 was a talented and creative child. Then I decided to cast him in the play and take
207 him to participate in Iraq. He also worked with me in another TV drama that I
208 produced for children. In Oman we do have many talented children, but they need
209 to be supported to develop their creative abilities. This is the main point. The child
210 is the basis for establishing strong theatre and an aware audience; so we should
211 start educating children so that in the future we will have an aware audience.
212 Audiences who love theatre do exist in Oman, and the proof is the large audiences
213 that attended our performances in all Omani regions. For instance, we presented
214 *The Monkey is My Friend* many times in different Omani regions and it always
215 had very large audiences. From this I discovered that audiences for children's
216 theatre are much larger than audiences for adult theatre.

217

218 **What you say is proof that children's theatre is important. I attended your**
219 **play *The Monkey is My Friend*, presented by your group at the Tabark**
220 **Private School with my nephews, and I noticed there was a large audience of**
221 **children and their parents, and I also noticed the interaction of the children**
222 **and how much they loved the show. Since that day I really understand the**
223 **importance of children's theatre and children's need for it, and I decided to**
224 **focus more on it and to do more research into it.**

225 We are happy to hear you say that, that our group was instrumental in causing you
226 to undertake research in this area. Since you attended the first show, *The Monkey*
227 *is My Friend*, in 2000, we have developed our performances and have presented it
228 again about 50 times, up until 2004. The income from one of these performances
229 we donated to charity, to Palestinian children.

230

231 **This is an interesting point, the contribution of children's theatre in**
232 **supporting charities for children.**

233

234 **Q14 Since you have been engaged in children's theatre for a not insignificant**
235 **period of time, we would like to ask you about the obstacles that you have**
236 **encountered based on your extensive experience. And what is your response**
237 **if we compare and contrast the large number of plays that you produced for**
238 **adult theatre but only three intermittent performances for children?**

239 There are many obstacles facing us as a group, but our group tries to overcome
240 them. For example, in designing our sets, we adjust our requirements by using
241 simpler props and costumes, for example, in order to overcome the lack of
242 financial support. The Mazoon Public Theatre group doesn't seek financial profit.
243 We just aim to present theatre for children that has valuable messages. This is our
244 aim. We also have a sense of patriotism, which is demonstrated as, when we are
245 invited to other countries to participate in children's festivals, we go in the name
246 of Oman, to represent Oman in such cultural activities, even though we are using
247 our own budget to achieve this aim. Sometimes we really face very difficult
248 financial situations in which we are not even able to pay for transporting sets to
249 overseas festivals.

250

251 **Q15 Are there other difficulties facing the group apart from financial**
252 **problems?**

253 Yes. As a group, we try to present performances for children in other Omani
254 regions and districts, and not only focus on Muscat, the capital. However, we face
255 obstacles in regional areas such as lack of proper stage facilities to present a
256 polished performance. For example, in one of our visits to the Alburemi district to
257 present a children's performance in cooperation with their Women's Society, on
258 our arrival we were surprised that there was no equipped stage, and we had to
259 work all night to clear a sandy area full of stones in order to flatten it enough to
260 make a proper stage. On another occasion we were presenting our show outdoors
261 and strong winds started up that blew away all our sets; despite this, we continued
262 with the show and the children loved it! Another obstacle that we face is that
263 people, including parents, believe that theatre is not important for their children
264 and they are unaware of the expenses and efforts involved in presenting a
265 performance. That's why they refuse to pay even a small amount of money for
266 tickets for their children to attend performances. However, on the other side, they
267 pay a lot of money for their children to play electronic games and to go to the
268 cinema. Unfortunately, people in Oman don't have a culture of attending theatre –
269 even many educated people are not interested in theatre.

270

271 The main obstacles public theatre groups face is the lack of financial and moral
272 support. There is no financial support for public theatre groups to encourage them
273 to present children's performances, and neither is there support to encourage them
274 to participate in international children's theatre festivals. Moreover, children's
275 theatre is very expensive and needs a lot of money and much financial support.
276 For example, recording a song for a children's play is very expensive, and the
277 decor, costumes etc. are also very expensive. However, unfortunately the media
278 stays away from children's theatre.

279

280 **You have mentioned a very important point, which is the absence of media**
281 **coverage for theatrical activities in general and children's theatre in**
282 **particular.**

283 Yes, there is a deficiency in the role of the media. Where is the Omani TV
284 recording children's plays?

285

286 **Q16 So there is no television recording of children's plays presented by your**
287 **group?**

288 Unfortunately, no, even though we notify them of the performances many times,
289 and advise them of the times and places, but they don't come. One of our plays,
290 *The Monkey is My Friend*, was presented more than 40 times, and not once did the
291 media cover it!

292

293 **Also, some people want to attend children's plays, but they don't know when**
294 **they're on because advertising of theatrical activities is so poor.**

295 Yes, you are right. But also there are other problems, in that advertising and
296 publicity is very expensive. As a group, if we want to advertise in a newspaper, it
297 will cost us a lot of money. So as a theatre group, we wish that Omani TV and
298 newspapers would cooperate with us and advertise our performances.

299

300 **Q17 Have your plays presented for children been professionally critiqued?**
301 Yes, sometimes. I remember that one of the reporters wrote a positive article
302 about my play *The Monkey is My Friend*, and he commented on the great need to
303 have children's theatre – good children's theatre that educates our children – and
304 how much we need to continue to present children's performances.
305

306 **Q18 What would you like to see with regard to the condition of children's**
307 **theatre and the means of developing it in the Sultanate in the next ten years?**

308 I would like to see the status of children's theatre in Oman change for the better,
309 because it is now neglected and ignored. I also wish that children's theatre wasn't
310 relegated to the last carriage on the train, but instead was the main locomotive that
311 drives the train. I also wish that government parties, such as the Ministry of
312 Heritage and Culture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social
313 Development and Sultan Qaboos University, would cater for children's theatre. I
314 would like to see an annual festival held for children's theatre, and I am really
315 optimistic that this will happen. I wish that a bigger effort could be made to
316 develop children's theatre in Oman, because children's theatre is a base for a
317 developed Omani theatre. For the future, we will only have an audience that is
318 aware of the importance of theatre by starting with the children, by introducing
319 them to theatre at an early age, so that the child grows with an awareness of the
320 theatre and its role. I hope that there will be an official agenda for children's
321 theatre and also an independent government institution in charge of children's
322 theatre and that offers all the support needed. Personally, I always like to present
323 children's performances by cooperating with the Ministry of Education and I like
324 to take school children on weekly excursions to attend the performances presented
325 by our group (Mazoon Public Theatre group), which present morning and evening
326 shows. This is our agenda for children's theatre that we hope to implement with
327 the cooperation of the Ministry of Education. We can also introduce theatre to
328 school students by organising visits to the school by our theatre group members,
329 and presenting our performances on the school's stage.
330

331 We really need to have a developed children's theatre in Oman and I have heard
332 this from one of the mothers who attended a children's performance presented by
333 our group and accompanied her children; she told me how much we need
334 children's theatre to educate our children. However, unfortunately, some people
335 still believe that the child does not need the theatre because of the existence of
336 computer, internet and satellite channels, but I believe that the reverse is correct. I
337 believe that because of the globalization and the existence of the internet and
338 satellite channels, which could have negative impacts on children besides its
339 advantages, the Omani society culture and identity are in real danger. Many of our
340 traditions, values and custom are beginning to disappear and are being replaced by
341 foreign ones. So, I believe that children's theatre can play an important role in this
342 regard, because it can present performances for children that tackle themes
343 inspired from our traditional culture that help to increase the child's awareness
344 and appreciation of his culture.
345

1
2 **Personal Interviews**
3

4 *An interview with Abd Algafour Ahmed Al Blushi dated 27-09-2006, in his*
5 *office at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture.*
6

7 **Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current**
8 **job?**

9 I am the Director of The Department of Theatre, Film and Visual Arts at the
10 Ministry of Heritage and Culture. I am also a director and I have produced many
11 plays for the Omani theatre.
12

13 **Q2 What is your definition of children's theatre? And is there a distinction**
14 **between children's theatre and school theatre?**

15 Children's theatre starts from the beginning of school, at the age of six years.
16 From my point of view, children's theatre is aimed at children from the ages of six
17 to 12 years; I think that children under the age of six years find it difficult to
18 understand plays because they are still in the discovery stage of the world around
19 them. Children's theatre is a private world for children and addresses their
20 educational level at the same time, and we must take into account the suitability of
21 the plays to the mental level of the child. While providing entertainment and fun,
22 children's theatre also sends educational messages through attractive
23 presentations.
24

25 For example, if we give the child information through a song or on the lips of
26 characters that he loves, like favourite animals, then we can involve the child in
27 the theatrical event, so that no child feels bored, because it is difficult for the child
28 to sit on a chair without moving for an hour or two and treat him as a listener
29 only.
30

31 Some people believe that children's theatre is the easiest theatre, and less
32 complicated when compared to adult theatre, but in fact children's theatre is more
33 professional and more difficult, and the people involved must be professionals
34 with extensive experience in the field, and with a knowledge of child psychology.
35 They need to have some knowledge of how to deal with children, they must learn
36 how to deal with the child actor, as well as understanding the culture and the
37 society where the child lives; a child who lives in Britain is different from the
38 child who lives in Oman.
39

40 **Q3 You mentioned that children's theatre starts from the beginning of**
41 **school. From your point of view, what is the difference between children's**
42 **theatre and scholastic theatre?**

43 There is a difference between them, although some people still confuse them.
44 Scholastic theatre presents plays in schools for an audience of different school
45 stages up to high school students. Scholastic theatre presents educational and
46 didactic plays that tackle educational issues and sometimes also tackle social
47 issues. Moreover, the people involved in school theatre are students and teachers.
48 However, children's theatre is more comprehensive and also addresses children of
49 different age groups including schoolchildren.
50

51 **Q4 Since you are one of the founders of Omani theatre, and have experienced**
52 **the early stages of the theatrical movement in the seventies, what do you**
53 **know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?**

54 Unfortunately, as you have mentioned, children's theatre history is not
55 documented, but I believe that there were no children's performances presented.
56 As you know, Omani theatre started from the Al Saidia Schools, and as we know,
57 most of the plays presented at that time were not documented. So, we do not know
58 if there were children's performances presented within scholastic theatre.
59 However, most likely, there were no performances presented for children at
60 schools at that time and the same thing with sports clubs that existed at that time
61 that used to present theatrical performances, but all of its plays were presented and
62 directed for youth. As for Youth Theatre, when we started it in the 1980s, we did
63 present some theatrical works for children but some of them are not documented.
64 One of those that has been documented is *Na'am Aqwia'a (Yes We Are Strong)*
65 which was directed by Mohammed Noor Al Blushi, which was presented in 1986.
66 There may be other attempts, but I do not remember any information. Mohammed
67 Noor Al Blushi has the ability to produce plays for children, not only because of
68 his experience in the theatrical field but also because he loves children's theatre,
69 he wants to present theatrical work for children and he believes in what he has
70 presented.

71
72 **Q5 So, you encourage such attempts?**

73 Absolutely. We should encourage everyone attempting to present something for
74 children's theatre. Attempts at presenting children's theatre up till now have only
75 been at an amateur level, but I still appreciate and value what has been presented,
76 even though it has not reached the level of professional theatre. Such efforts make
77 us happy, because there is someone who is making an attempt, but at the same
78 time we feel sad because there is no recognition of children's theatre from the
79 bodies who are supposed to be in charge. Those people who are attempting to
80 present children's work need support and encouragement to fulfill their
81 requirements. Children's theatre is a very sensitive area, because childhood is a
82 very important stage when children are very impressionable and everything they
83 see becomes imprinted on their memory. We shouldn't allow negative impressions
84 to insinuate themselves into children's minds.

85
86
87 **Q6 Yes, that's why I was going to ask you about the role of the Ministry of**
88 **Heritage and Culture with regard to the censorship of plays and**
89 **performances presented for children?**

90 The responsible bodies should play this role.

91
92
93 **Q7 Who are those responsible bodies? Shouldn't it be the role of the Ministry**
94 **of Heritage and Culture, since that is the government institutional**
95 **responsible for Omani theatre?**

96
97 We, as responsible people at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, only supervise
98 youth theatre and public theatre groups. And we do organise theatrical festivals
99 for these groups and offer them financial and moral support; we also hold many
100 theatrical workshops on different topics, such as lighting, sound, acting and set

101 design to develop their skills. For example, we recently held a theatrical workshop
102 in acting within the activities of the Second Omani Theatre Festival.

103

104 **Q8 OK, but since the public theatre groups are presenting theatrical works**
105 **for children, does the Ministry hold any theatrical workshops for them to**
106 **develop their skills in the field of children's theatre?**

107

108 No, not for children's theatre.

109

110 **Q9 Ok, is there a possibility that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture may**
111 **reconsider their attitude towards children's theatre so that it may be**
112 **included within the Ministry's responsibilities in the future?**

113

114 As the people in charge of the Ministry deem. If they think that children's theatre
115 should be included as part of the Ministry's responsibilities, then there would no
116 problem and we could strive to cater for children's theatre.

117

118 **Q10 Who do you mean by "people in charge"? Do you mean the Minister of**
119 **Heritage and Culture?**

120

121 I mean the responsible bodies in the country, because they are the decision
122 makers.

123

124 **Q11 Yes, but in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, and mainly in the**
125 **Department of Theatre, does the term "children's theatre" officially exist**
126 **and does the department recognise children's theatre as part of its functions?**

127

128 No, because it is not part of our responsibilities.

129

130 **The Ministry of Heritage and Culture held two festivals for Omani theatre,**
131 **but neither of them presented activities for children's theatre.**

132

133 Yes, because, again, we have nothing to do with children's theatre.

134

135 **Q12 You have written and directed many plays for the Youth Theatre. Have**
136 **you presented any theatrical works for children?**

137 Unfortunately, no. I have not written or directed any plays for children.

138

139 **Q13 Why not?**

140 Because children's theatre, as I mentioned before, is difficult and needs special
141 requirements and abilities.

142

143 **Q14 Do you mean that these requirements are not provided?**

144 No, I mean here, my individual abilities. I think I lack these abilities. I should be
145 aware of child psychology and I am not sufficiently in touch with the world of
146 children. I will leave this field to the specialists who have these abilities.

147 Unfortunately, there are some people who think they have the ability to write and
148 present plays for children and so they engage in this field, not because they are
149 sufficiently qualified to do so, but just because they love children's theatre and

150 they want to present something for children. And this is good, and there is no
151 problem in trying; we should encourage such efforts.

152

153 **Q15 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15**
154 **years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do**
155 **you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in**
156 **general?**

157 I am surprised that there is such a high percentage of children in Oman. I believe
158 that it is everyone's duty to take care of this large section of our society. Children
159 have the right to be cared for.

160

161 **Q16 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the**
162 **Sultanate? Some deny that there is any such theatre in Oman. Do you agree**
163 **with this statement?**

164 We cannot say that there is a developed children's theatre in Oman – there are
165 some attempts to present children's performances, but still it does not constitute a
166 culture of professional children's theatre.

167

168 **Q17 What are the obstacles that faces children's theatre in Oman from your**
169 **point of view?**

170 You should ask people specialised in children's theatre who are more able to
171 describe the difficulties because they are the ones presenting the children's
172 performances.

173

174 I have a recommendation to overcome the obstacles facing children's theatre in
175 Oman. Firstly, all bodies or institutions in charge of culture or theatre in Oman
176 should cater for children's theatre. Also it is important to have specialist theatre
177 people in the field of children's theatre. If we do not have such specialists, there is
178 always the option to import specialists from the Gulf States and other Arab
179 countries so we can benefit from their experience in this field. These experts could
180 also hold workshops to train Omani young people. If we train, say, 40 young
181 people and only two of them gain preeminence, then the goal is achieved.

182

183 **Q18 What would you like to see happen to promote children's theatre in**
184 **Oman in the next ten years?**

185 I wish that there would be theatrical workshops run by experts in the field to train
186 people with an interest in children's theatre. The experts should have not only
187 experience in the field, but also high educational qualifications. Do you believe
188 that I saw international theatrical works presented for children and most of those
189 presenting them were highly educated, with qualifications of PhD and above,
190 including the producers, designers, musicians and choreographers!

191

192 **This means that they don't underestimate children, since children's theatre is**
193 **a professional theatre, just like other theatres.**

194 Yes, they really respect the children, and most of the people presenting children's
195 performances are experts in the field and hold high educational qualifications.

196 That's why the performances they present are really successful and the audiences
197 appreciate them. So we really seek to benefit from such experts by bringing them
198 to Oman to train Omani young people through workshops.

199

200 I also wish that all parties would cooperate and work together to support children's
201 theatre, especially the Ministry for Education, which I believe should be the entity
202 with the overall responsibility. Of course, here I don't make any exceptions,
203 because I believe that children's culture is the responsibility of the whole society,
204 including all government institutions. All these parties should work together to
205 activate children's theatre. I don't say the responsibility should rest solely with the
206 Ministries for Education, Heritage and Culture and Social Development. Even the
207 police have a responsibility towards children.

208

209 Moreover, in order to promote children's theatre, there must be very good plays,
210 and these plays should be thoroughly and carefully analysed to ensure their
211 suitability.

212

213 **Q19 Are there any important or additional issues you could think of that I**
214 **have not covered yet in the interview questions?**

215 As I mentioned before – you and I agree on this point – there should be a body in
216 charge of children's theatre, which should perform all the duties associated with it.
217 This body should run theatrical competitions in the field of playwriting for
218 children and setting up theatrical festivals for children supported by the relevant
219 parties. This body should gather all experts and interested people under one
220 umbrella organisation.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Saleh Al Fahdi dated 27-09-2008

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

My name is Saleh Al Fahdi, I am currently employed in the Diwan of Royal Court. I have been head of the Alshwa Public Theatre Group, Oman's first public theatre group, since its inception in 1997. Other information and details are available in my biography that I have attached.

I will summarise here some of the details from your attached CV: you are a playwright of more than forty plays, including children's plays, some of which have won first prizes in many competitions; you have a Masters degree from the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, and are currently undertaking a PhD at the same university in the field of Human Resource Development; you have written and published many books on literature, essays, regular articles published in local newspapers and published five collections of poems; and you have written television works such as *Hikayat Laith (The Tales of Laith)*, which is a children's program, and *Alqanadeel (The Lamps)*.

Q2 What is your definition of children's theatre?

Children's theatre is a theatre that – and I do not want to summarise it by saying that it addresses the child, but I would say that it encompasses the idea and the concept of childhood and weaves the threads of theatrical games around this concept and involves the children in playing them. Children's theatre is based on creative ideas related to important human values that need to be passed through the child's mind in an interesting and attractive way.

Q3 What do you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?

Unfortunately, there is no so-called "Adult's Theatre", so how could Children's Theatre exist so I can say something about it!! Yes, only if there were institutions that cater for theatre, if there were equipped theatres to present children's performances, if there were media institutions that sponsor the idea of children's theatre, if there were specialised playwrights and directors in the field of children's theatre, if we had public awareness and audiences that understand the meaning of children's theatre, if, if and if ...etc. Then, we would have something that could be called "children's theatre"!!

Q4 What is the importance of children's theatre from your point of view, and is it important to have children's theatre in Oman?

We do not need here to give evidence on the importance of children's theatre since theatre is a comprehensive art that includes other arts. Theatre is the art that is direct and interacts with the spectator who then becomes a performer in the play because of his interpretation and analysis of the dialogue. Yes, it is important that we have children's theatre in Oman without any doubt. Theatre is an educational and artistic tool that can raise human awareness and appreciation and educate children to understand life in deeper way.

51 **Q5 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15**
52 **years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do**
53 **you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in**
54 **general?**

55 There are some cultural activities that have been created for children, such as
56 competitions that are organised by the Ministry of Education but because the
57 media does not cover them, the general public are not aware of them. Since
58 theatre is an important part of culture for children, schools do offer some
59 theatrical activities, but outside of that, the interest in children's theatre is almost
60 non-existent, and it exists through the efforts of members of public theatre groups.

61

62 **Q6 What is your contribution as a playwright, director and educated person**
63 **in theatre in the field of children's theatre?**

64 Perhaps I could prove my interest in children's theatre – when I became the head
65 of the Alshawah Public Theatre Group, I said that we should start our theatrical
66 work by presenting a children's play, and thus prove my strong belief in the
67 importance of children's theatre and my belief that children's theatre is the true
68 starting point for theatre. I wanted my journey with this group to start by
69 emphasising this idea. Alshawah Group presented one of my plays, *The Lost*
70 *Treasure*, at the Almadinah Theatre. After this I wrote many children's plays, such
71 as

- 72 • *The Jeweller, Mohamin and the Ring*, sponsored by the Muscat
73 Municipality and the Ministry of Information;
- 74 • *The Gift*, sponsored by the Muscat Municipality and the Ministry of
75 Information;
- 76 • *The Message*: the Ministry of Education sponsored this play to be
77 presented at the Gulf festival at Alsharqah;
- 78 • *Our First Choice*, sponsored by the Ministry of Trade and Industry;
- 79 • *Moad in the Garden*, sponsored by the Ministry of Information;
- 80 • *The Scale*: the Ministry of Education participated by presenting this play
81 in the GCC Student Festival in 2007.

82

83 Apart from all these plays, I wrote seven texts for children sponsored by the
84 Muscat Municipality; only one was presented, *The Chiggers*. In addition, in the
85 second festival of the Alshawah group in the coming year [2009], we will also
86 present a children's performance.

87

88 **Q7 Since you have been engaged in children's theatre for a not insignificant**
89 **period of time, I would like to ask you about the obstacles that you have**
90 **encountered in the field of children's theatre?**

91 From my point of view, there are many obstacles facing children's theatre in
92 Oman, and I will summarise these in the following points:

- 93 • There is a cultural and social deficiency in the understanding and
94 appreciation of the value of children's theatre from government and public
95 institutions and the private sector.
- 96 • There is a lack of theatres that are properly equipped for children's theatre
97 in schools and other institutions.
- 98 • There is very little support from institutions in charge of theatre for public
99 theatre groups in order to present children's performances. On the few

100 occasions that support is offered, it only happens because of personal
101 relations.
102 • Public theatre groups face many difficulties in training and educating
103 children who have an interest in theatre because of a lack of the proper
104 materials and a physical space for training. In addition there are other
105 societal obstacles that prevent children from practising theatre skills.
106 Parents question the time needed for rehearsals and the distance children
107 must travel.

108

109 **Q8 How is it possible to overcome these obstacles that children's theatre**
110 **encounters in Oman?**

111 To overcome the obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman, I make the
112 following suggestions:

- 113 • Omani schools should cater for children's theatre by teaching drama and
114 teaching gifted students and forming theatrical groups, which should be
115 supervised by theatre professionals, and by providing them with the
116 necessary equipment
- 117 • Support should be given to the public theatre groups that cater to children's
118 theatre. These groups should be given all the support they need to enable
119 them to present children's performances.
- 120 • The state, private and public institutions should promote the existence of
121 children's theatre and financially and morally support all interested parties
122 in their attempts to provide theatre activities for children.

123

124 **Q9 What would you like to see with regard to the condition of children's**
125 **theatre and the means of developing it in the Sultanate?**

126 I wish for the cultural institutions in Oman, including the educational institutions,
127 to be revived to appreciate the value of children's theatre. The following are my
128 recommendations for what various parties need to do to enact this revival:

- 129 • Ministry of Education: teaching drama at schools, forming theatrical
130 groups, setting up festivals in a methodical way, not random as exists now,
131 and with a clear strategy in mind.
- 132 • Ministry of Heritage and Culture: their project to establish a cultural centre
133 should include venues specially for children's theatre and to hold a special
134 theatrical festival for children.
- 135 • Ministry of Information: they should support theatrical works presented
136 for children and broadcast them on TV.
- 137 • All ministries that give directives to the public and who allocate an annual
138 budget for the media and for social awareness should make provision for
139 children's theatre within their respective agendas in order to create an
140 aware generation.
- 141 • Public theatre groups: within their theatrical agenda they should make
142 provision for children's theatre by creating a schedule for children's
143 performances, even if they lack the necessary equipment and facilities.
- 144 • The private sector: the private sector should support children's theatre as
145 part of what we would call their "corporate social responsibility".
- 146 • Art production companies: they should support children's theatrical
147 productions within their charter.

- 148 • Within the activities of any festivals, such as the Muscat and Salalah
149 festivals, children's theatre should take pride of place and should be well
150 publicised.

151

152 **Q10 As the head of the Alsehawah Public Theatre Group, can you tell us if**
153 **children's theatre is part of the group's interests or concerns?**

154 Yes, and the performances presented by the group for children prove our interest
155 in children's theatre.

156

157 **Q11 What are the standards and criteria that the group consider when**
158 **choosing texts or performances to be presented for children?**

159 There are many elements that we take into consideration when we choose a play
160 to be presented for children. Firstly, the language that is used in the text: the
161 playwright should be aware that he or she is writing for children and that this is
162 reflected in the style of the writing and the way the author expresses ideas.
163 Moreover the play should take into account values and morals, and also ideas that
164 are consistent with religious principles. The playwright should express these
165 values in an interesting way to attract the child's attention, for instance using
166 songs, fascinating characters and other creative elements.

167

168 **Q12 Do you have any future plans for your group with regard to children's**
169 **theatre?**

170 No, we don't. However, we have decided to present performances for children in
171 every festival held by the group.

172

173 **Q13 From your point of view, who is qualified to write for children?**

174 Not every playwright can write for children. Writing for children needs a real
175 understanding of the child's culture, and to be in harmony with their thoughts.
176 Writing for children's theatre does not depend so much on academic qualifications
177 as on the talent of the writer.

178

179 **Q14 What do you think of what has been presented for children in Oman?**

180 I cannot give you my opinion or judge these performances because they are such a
181 rarity.

182

183 **Q15 What are the challenges facing playwrights that might deter them from**
184 **writing for children's theatre?**

185 The question is not only connected with the writing, because the theatre consists
186 not only of text but also of the performance. And the performance needs many
187 elements to be complete and to succeed, and one of these is the written text. I
188 believe that, if there is a creative atmosphere for theatre, the playwriting will be
189 fresh. If the creative atmosphere isn't there, then all the playwright's energy and
190 talents will remain buried. For example, what really helped me to write for
191 children's theatre and to produce these works is that I am the head of a public
192 theatre group, the Alsehawah Group; that's why my texts see the light of day. Others
193 might not have this opportunity.

194

195 **Q16 What are the main themes and issues that you tackled in the plays you**
196 **wrote for children?**

197 Normally I address high moral values, such as sincerity, honesty, cooperation,
198 optimism, patience, diligence, forgiveness etc.

199

200 **Q17 Have your plays presented for children been professionally critiqued?**

201 No!!

202

203 **Q18 Are there any important or additional issues you could think of that I**
204 **have not covered yet in the interview questions?**

205 There is a cultural problem that is common in Oman in the way they look at
206 theatrical works that are presented for children. For example, many teachers in
207 Omani schools are ashamed to admit that they teach children!! This way of
208 thinking can also be applied to actors who do not really feel encouraged to present
209 theatrical works for children because they think – and this is something wrong
210 with their perception of the arts in general – that participating in such activities
211 will lower their position. By this kind of thinking, they are not looking at the issue
212 from an artistic point of view, because if they did, then they would understand that
213 playing a role in children's performances needs a very high qualification!! So
214 before we can talk about increasing the awareness of the general society to
215 understand the importance of children's theatre, there is a great need to improve
216 actors' culture so they can firstly appreciate art and believe in what they are doing.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Taleb Mohammed Al Blushi dated 11-10-2006, in his office at the Ministry of Information, at 10.30 am.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I'm the head of the Department of Drama at Omani Radio. I am also an actor and director; I have acted for Omani theatre, TV and Radio and I direct radio drama as well.

Q2 Since you were one of the pioneers of Omani theatre in the 1970s, what do you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?

I believe that children's theatre in the past, in the seventies, was more active; there was the Al Ahli Club Theatre that used to have theatrical seasons where they presented a number of performances including children's performances. Furthermore, schools in the past used to present theatrical activities more frequently and of better quality than exists now. There was competition between schools in different Omani regions. Children also used to be involved in adult theatre, but now it is rare to see children acting in adult theatre; this could be because of the appearance of television and radio that attracted children, so they kept away from theatre.

I remember the most famous child actor in the seventies, Qusay Makki, who acted for school theatre and the Al Ahli Club Theatre. As in other Arabic countries, Omani theatre started from the schools. The Al Saidiah Schools that existed in the seventies held celebrations at the end of the academic year and also celebrations of the Omani national day, and there were theatrical performances presented in these celebrations.

Q3 You have mentioned that the Al Ahli Club Theatre presented performances for children in the 1970s; could you specify or name these performances and their dates of presentation?

The Al Ahli Club Theatre was one of the first clubs to present theatrical performances on a regular basis; they had the venue and the equipment needed to present performances. They also used written texts, and when there was a child actor, they just treated him as an adult actor. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the dates of these performances, but I do remember that the Al Ahli Club presented a performance for children named *Alfares Alshoga* and after that the Youth Theatre presented a performance for children entitled *Naa'm Aqweyaa* (*Yes, We Are Strong*) which was produced by Mohammed Noor Al Blushi, but I cannot remember who the writer was .

Q4 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15 years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in general?

I am not satisfied with the position of children's culture in Oman. I believe there is a deficit in this area because the bodies responsible for culture in Oman, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, do not

51 perform their proper functions with regard to children's culture. For example,
52 when we build a school, we make all the physical structures for classrooms and
53 playgrounds, but we do not build a space for theatre with a stage and other
54 associated equipment. Unfortunately, the interest shown by government
55 institutions in theatre for children is very weak.

56

57 **Q5 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the**
58 **Sultanate? Some deny that there is any such theatre in Oman. Do you agree**
59 **with this statement?**

60 I would like to say something, and I will take responsibility for what I say. Oman
61 is lacking a theatrical culture in general. Unfortunately, the general belief in Oman
62 is that culture means a group of poets and writers, and that's enough. By doing so,
63 we reduce the broad definition of culture and we spend a lot of money for these
64 writers and their associated activities, and we neglect other culture and branches
65 of art including children's theatre.

66

67 **Q6 Since you were one of the pioneers of Omani theatre in the 1970s, from**
68 **your point of view, what are the obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman**
69 **that prevent Oman from having a developed children's theatre?**

70 Actually we don't really have a developed Omani theatre in general, so how can
71 we have a developed children's theatre? Unfortunately Omani theatre lacks too
72 many things, such as planning, organisation and leadership from management.
73 There is no such thing as a "cultural map" outlining a schedule of performances.
74 Unfortunately there is also a lack of public confidence about what is presented for
75 children by Omani groups, and thus, regrettably, when there are festivals, foreign
76 and Arabic groups are used instead to present children's performances.

77

78 **Q7 So why is this ignored for children's theatre in your view?**

79 It is not only ignoring that is the major element, but there is also a lack of
80 documentation. I would like to give an example here: through my reading of the
81 Omani Theatre Dictionary, written by Mohammad Al Habsi and Said Al Siyabi, I
82 was surprised to find a long list of theatrical texts and performances that have
83 been presented for children in Oman. However, despite this large number of
84 plays, to my knowledge, there has not been one children's play broadcast by
85 Omani TV in its programming, and there have been no plays recorded on video.
86 Omani TV does broadcast foreign performances, from Gulf States and other Arab
87 States, so why are Omani children's plays neglected?

88

89 **Q8 Yes, Exactly. Why do we bring groups from overseas to present**
90 **performances for children in local festivals while in Oman we have seventeen**
91 **public theatre groups and seven youth groups? You have already mentioned**
92 **that there is a lack of public confidence about what is presented for children**
93 **by Omani groups; do you think there are other reasons as well?**

94 Unfortunately, this is because the organisers of these festivals are still unaware of
95 Omani theatre in general, and this lack of awareness could be because of the
96 limited and intermittent performances, among other reasons. The organisers of
97 local festivals might also look at the fame of some Arab stars, so they seek to
98 invite them and benefit from their fame to attract a larger audience to the festival.
99 However, unfortunately, by bringing in overseas theatre groups and not giving a
100 chance to Omani groups, they will disadvantage Omani theatre in general.

101 Because the overseas groups come to Oman with their star actors and expensive
102 shows, this comparison with the relatively young Omani theatre is unfair. These
103 groups have many advantages that Omani groups lack.

104

105 **Q9 How is it possible to overcome the obstacles that children's theatre**
106 **encounters in Oman?**

107 In order to overcome the obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman, we should
108 start from the beginning in providing equipment and qualifying young Omani
109 people in this field. Teachers who supervise theatrical activities at school are not
110 qualified to supervise the gifted students. The reason for this is that most of them
111 are teachers of Arabic, not theatre specialists. There must also be a competition
112 for children's theatre in Oman. Such competitions would produce gifted writers in
113 the field of children's theatre.

114

115 At the end of the school year there is a long three-month holiday. Unfortunately,
116 though, this holiday is not utilised to supervise and sponsor gifted students.
117 During the holidays we could encourage these students and their parents to attend
118 children's performances, so in the future we could have an audience for children's
119 theatre. Most of the plays that are presented within schools are not taken outside
120 the school boundaries – they are limited only to the school students; even the
121 parents are not invited. So the broader society knows nothing of these
122 performances.

123

124 **Q10 From your point of view, which government body should be in charge of**
125 **children's theatre in Oman?**

126 Most of the ministries consider children's theatre as a supplementary part of their
127 program. So for example, if the Ministry of Social Development or the Ministry
128 of Education or the Muscat or Salalah Municipality are planning an activity, such
129 as a festival, then they will seek out children's performances to complement this
130 event.

131

132 There is no planned or developed children's theatre in Oman. For instance, I ask
133 you, as a lecturer at the Theatre Arts Department in the Sultan Qaboos University,
134 how many graduates do you have from your department? There are very few.
135 How many graduates have been employed by the ministry to activate Omani
136 theatre and children's theatre in particular? Where are those graduates employed
137 in the more than 50 districts of Oman? How many texts and performances were
138 presented for children in one year in Oman? How many people patronise these
139 shows? All these questions need real answers.

140

141 **Q11 Why do you blame the Ministry of Education for the weakness of**
142 **children's theatre in Oman, considering the fact that there is a ministry in**
143 **charge of culture, including theatre, which is the Ministry of Heritage and**
144 **Culture?**

145 I believe that the Ministry of Heritage and Culture is unable to manage their own
146 theatres and unable to supervise seven youth groups as well as seventeen public
147 theatre groups that come under their responsibility. The public theatre groups in
148 Oman present very few performances and these only intermittently. Most of them
149 wait for the Omani theatre festivals that are held every two years to present
150 theatrical performances. The problem of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture is

151 the budget that doesn't change or increase according to the cultural needs of the
152 country. They don't devise a budget that takes account of the importance of
153 theatre and it does not reflect our rapid cultural development. Many neighbouring
154 countries in the Gulf surpass us in the development of both adult and children's
155 theatre. In these countries, many festivals, lectures and workshops are held for
156 children's theatre; unfortunately in Oman we have nothing like that. It is as if the
157 theatre is not an important issue in the cultural map of the country. Unfortunately
158 the Ministry of Heritage and Culture distances itself from leading the
159 development of Omani theatre in general, and it ignores children's theatre
160 completely. And that is why, since there is no formal institution in charge of
161 children's theatre in Oman, this theatre does not really exist within the official
162 framework. What we have in reality are intermittent performances by individual
163 members of public theatre groups and clubs.

164

165 **Q12 So are you trying to say that the Ministry of Education should be in**
166 **charge of children's theatre?**

167 Yes, I think they are responsible, since they control a large sector of the
168 population, that is children enrolled in Omani schools. We cannot rely on the
169 Ministry of Heritage and Culture since they do not even fulfil their duties towards
170 adult theatre.

171

172 **Q13 What would you like to see with regard to the condition of children's**
173 **theatre and the means of developing it in the Sultanate?**

174 First of all, I would like to see the government and institutions support children's
175 theatre and play their role in this regard and not rely on others to perform this
176 function. I think there should also be more interest in all art forms generally,
177 including children's theatre, that should be considered as the foundation of
178 cultural activities for children. I also believe that when budgets are being planned,
179 that all art forms, including theatre generally and children's theatre in particular,
180 should be taken into consideration.

181

182 **Q14 Finally, are there any additional issues you could think of that I have not**
183 **covered in the interview questions?**

184 I would like again to stress the importance of children's theatre and children's
185 culture in general. Even though Oman is a developed country and its cultural
186 revival has only recently begun, more efforts should be made to promote culture
187 in general, including children's culture. However, unfortunately, even though the
188 University Theatre Arts Department was only established in 1991, in the year
189 2000 they ceased accepting new enrolments. Unfortunately there is no plan or
190 clear strategy for children's theatre or for theatre in general. There are no new
191 graduates who can continue the work that was started – a new generation is
192 needed to continue what was started in the '70s. I also would like to stress the
193 importance of the role of the Ministry of Education in the field of children's
194 theatre. In my opinion, they are responsible and I will blame them for any failure.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Dr. Mohamed Al Habsi dated 25-09-2006, in his office at Sultan Qaboos University, at 11 am.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I am an Associate Professor in the Theatre Arts Department in the Sultan Qaboos University. I graduated from the Theatre Arts Department in the Sultan Qaboos University and I did my Masters and PhD in Omani theatre.

Q2 What is your definition of children's theatre?

Children's theatre is another form of theatre and serves the children and their intellect. Since theatre in general is an educational, cultural and social instrument to educate people and enrich their thinking, children's theatre can then be defined as: an educational and cultural instrument intended to improve a child's culture and deal with a child's emotions. Children's theatre has been called through its history "educational theatre" which is part of children's theatre. So, scholastic or educational theatre is one type of children's theatre.

Q3 So, do you consider school theatre as a type of children's theatre's? Do you think there are types of children's theatre?

Yes, children's theatre is a comprehensive term and consists of more than one form. Some of these forms are scholastic theatre, puppet theatre, and also spontaneous unscripted theatre that is connected with the early stages of childhood. So, the special thing or the special characteristic of children's theatre is that it is a comprehensive theatre. It is a professional theatre that depends on a good script and a cast of professional actors, both old and young, and also needs professional directors. Children's theatre is unlike scholastic theatre that is restricted to inside the school walls and undertaken by a group of students and school teachers who are unprofessional, though they are interested in theatre.

Q4 So, you differentiate here between scholastic theatre and children's theatre?

Yes. The audience for scholastic theatre is different and consists of the teachers, students and parents, who sometimes attend. Scholastic theatre is normally restricted to within the school walls, but on some occasions or celebrations organised by the educational institutions, scholastic performances are presented outside the schools, performed by students from different stages, from elementary to high school. Most of the texts used in scholastic theatre are derived from the school curriculum within what is called "curriculum dramatize". However, children's theatre is more comprehensive and more professional and is presented by professional people.

Q5 Since your PhD thesis was a historical study that traces and documents the history of Omani theatre in Oman, what do you know about the history of children's theatre and its beginnings?

If we trace the history of Omani theatre prior to the seventies, there are some indications of trials that were presented by scholastic and club theatres. Since scholastic theatre is a type of children's theatre, we can go back to the history of

51 scholastic theatre before 1970, in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. At that time some
52 theatrical sketches were presented during celebrations held at the end of each
53 academic year at Al Saidiah schools.

54

55 **Q6 So you have described scholastic theatre as a type of children's theatre,**
56 **and at the same time you said that they are different, and here you speak**
57 **about the history of scholastic theatre as if it were also the history of**
58 **children's theatre!!**

59 Yes, exactly. Children's theatre started through the scholastic theatre and it started
60 to develop; and now children's theatre is a separate form of theatre. In Oman,
61 children's theatre, as a separate form of theatre, started through the occasional
62 presentation of plays written by Omani playwrights who also write for adult
63 theatre. The first performance presented for children in Oman was *Alfares*
64 *Alshoga (The Brave Equestrian)*, which was prepared and directed by members of
65 the AlAhli Club. This play was presented as children's theatre and not as a
66 scholastic play because it was far removed from scholastic issues and the school
67 curriculum and did not have any educational content. It was addressed to children
68 and tackles their issues. In its beginning stages, children's theatre presented plays
69 written by unprofessional playwrights; later on children's theatre started to
70 develop through the attempts and trials of youth theatres and public theatre groups
71 as well as other theatres.

72

73 **Q7 Besides the historical study of the Omani theatre that you conducted, you**
74 **also recently published, in April 2006, an Omani dictionary entitled: *The***
75 ***Dictionary of Omani Theatre: Texts and Performances*, edited by you and Said**
76 **Al Siyabi where you documented the Omani texts and performances,**
77 **including some Omani children's plays and performances. This dictionary**
78 **was a useful source of information for me as I am trying to document the**
79 **history of children's theatre as part of my study, but I face a problem in**
80 **distinguishing between what you have considered as a scholastic text or**
81 **performances and children's text and performance.**

82 As I have mentioned previously, scholastic theatre is a type of children's theatre,
83 so documenting scholastic texts and performances is also documenting children's
84 theatre since children's theatre started from scholastic theatre.

85

86 **Q8 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15**
87 **years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do**
88 **you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in**
89 **general?**

90 With regard to the position of children in the cultural life of Oman, there have
91 been some efforts made to develop their involvement, but there still needs to be
92 more work done: for example, we need more lecturers and workshops, and we
93 also need to provide greater involvement of children in cultural activities both
94 within and outside Oman. An example of the kind of involvement was the
95 Creative Child Festival, held in 2006 by the Ministry of Education, where I
96 presented a paper about preparing actors in scholastic theatre.

97

98 **Q9 Did that Creative Child Festival in 2006 include many creative fields for**
99 **children, including theatre?**

100 Yes, it included many activities in the fields of visual arts, theatre, education and
101 trips to exhibitions and museums, among others, all with the aim of enhancing
102 children's cultural experiences. So although some progress has been made, still
103 more needs to be done to promote children's culture utilising many different
104 means that will stimulate children's interest. Each stage of a child's development
105 has its own specific requirements, and we need to cater for children's different
106 stages of development, and theatre has an important role to play here.

107

108

109 **Q10 As Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts in the**
110 **University and as a person educated in theatre, what contribution do you**
111 **make in the field of children's theatre?**

112 Unfortunately, and I consider this as a negative thing, I haven't written or directed
113 any performances for children, despite my interest in this field and despite my
114 awareness of its importance. I am really interested in children's theatre as it is one
115 of the most important instruments to develop a child's culture. Children's theatre
116 can educate and create awareness in children even before they start their
117 schooling. Presenting theatrical works directed to their different age group helps
118 to fulfil their cultural and social needs. Through my position as Associate
119 Professor in the theatre department, I teach children's theatre as a subject. This
120 subject is my way of broadcasting the culture of children's theatre. I have taught
121 this subject for three years, and my aim in teaching it is to introduce children's
122 theatre and its importance to university students. Maybe in the future one of the
123 graduate students can supervise a theatre group at a school. I also hope that in the
124 future I will write and direct performances for children.

125

126 **Q11 Apart from your contribution as Associate Professor, what is the**
127 **Department's contribution to the field in general?**

128 Unfortunately, since the establishment of this department in 1991, the department
129 has not played any role in this regard and has not presented any theatrical works
130 for children. However, there might be some external participation by the teaching
131 staff in presenting lectures and holding workshops at schools, and also
132 participating in judging panels.

133

134 **Q12 Do you think this role is sufficient?**

135 Of course not. The department's role should be greater than this in supporting
136 children's theatre as it plays an important role in supporting adult theatre and
137 Omani theatre in general, considering that the department has all the facilities and
138 academically qualified human resources. I hope in the future that the department
139 will contribute more in this field, such as participating in establishing special
140 theatre groups for children's theatre, and for the group to be supervised and
141 supported by the teaching team of the department. I also hope that the department
142 will focus more on scholastic theatre to help to produce a generation of students
143 who are aware of the importance of theatre.

144

145 **Q13 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the**
146 **Sultanate? Some deny that there is any such theatre in Oman. Do you agree**
147 **with this statement?**

148 We cannot say that children's theatre does not exist in Oman; at the same time,
149 neither can we say that we have a developed a systematic theatre. There are

150 Omani playwrights who write for children, such as Hilal Al Oremi, Saleh Al
151 Fahadi, Mohammad Noor Al Balushi and Imad Al Shanfri, who write and present
152 children's plays from time to time. Such attempts do exist, but we do not have a
153 developed theatre or the proper infrastructure for presenting children's theatre as
154 they have in European countries. Moreover, in European countries, institutions
155 exist to support children's theatre, and they have theatrical groups that just present
156 children's plays. Unfortunately, in Oman there is no specific body that provides
157 financial and moral support for groups that would cater for children's theatre, in
158 spite of the existence of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture that is in charge of
159 Omani theatre in general. I have also noticed that we do not have specialist
160 playwrights and directors for children's theatre; the theatrical works that have
161 been presented for children have been created by general playwrights and
162 directors, not children's specialists. Why don't we have bodies that cater
163 specifically for children's culture, including children's theatre? For example, we
164 do have in Oman the Child's Museum, but this museum caters for the scientific
165 and educational needs of the child, not their artistic side. If we can have such a
166 museum that caters for children, why can we not have theatrical facilities
167 specifically for children?
168

169 **Q14 Through your observations of the performances presented for children,**
170 **how would you evaluate them?**

171 Through my observations of the performances presented for children either within
172 or outside Sultan Qaboos University, even though they are small in number, they
173 were good. Yes, they weren't mature performances, but they showed that there are
174 some theatre people who attempt to present good theatrical works for children.
175 However, we shouldn't have regard for quantity only, but for the quality of what
176 is presented for children. In the performances I saw, there were diverse ideas
177 presented, and the playwrights utilised stories and issues about animals and birds,
178 and there were also fictional stories – I mean there was good diversity in the
179 presented work. However, why don't we have puppet theatre aimed at children in
180 Oman? There is puppet theatre for children in developed countries. So I think
181 there should be diversity in the style and the form of the performances in Oman.
182 The number of performances for children should also be increased. We need to
183 study the needs of the child. I have noticed that in the performances presented for
184 children in local festivals, the performances are mainly presented under the guise
185 of "children's theatre", but in fact they have nothing to do with children's theatre.
186 They are mainly acrobatic show and entertainments. There is a need to
187 differentiate between children's theatre and entertaining shows for children. We
188 should be aware of what is presented for children's theatre. We should take
189 careful notice of what children gain from watching a play or reading a text,
190 because this can influence them positively or negatively.
191

192 **Q15 So, generally you are not happy with the position of children's theatre in**
193 **Oman?**

194 No, I am not happy with the current position. I cannot say that it does not exist,
195 but there is a void in the theatrical field in Oman.
196

197 **Q16 Apart from the disregard of theatre generally including children's**
198 **theatre, what are the other obstacles that faces children's theatre in Oman**
199 **from your point of view?**

200 Children's theatre in Oman faces many obstacles. Firstly we don't have
201 professional or developed children's theatre. Children's theatre only exists in
202 intermittent performances, presented from time to time. It also faces many
203 challenges in that there is no overall body or institution that manages or oversees
204 it. There is also no special building allocated to children's theatre. There is a lack
205 of financial support and equipment. There is no Omani professional cadre
206 specialised in children's theatre, such as playwrights and directors. Moreover,
207 there is no theatre group that exclusively presents performances for children.

208

209 **Q17 How is it possible to overcome these obstacles that children's theatre**
210 **encounters in Oman?**

211 In order to overcome obstacles facing children's theatre in Oman, we should
212 firstly believe in the importance of children's theatre as an education and cultural
213 means of educating the child. Moreover, there should be strategies and programs
214 put in place to develop children's culture. We should do so by setting up future
215 research and design strategies to enable this development – this is the task of the
216 bodies responsible for theatre in general and those responsible for children's
217 culture in particular. We should also encourage playwrights, directors and all
218 theatre people interested in children's theatre by offering them financial and moral
219 support.

220

221 During the local festivals in Oman, usually foreign theatrical groups are imported
222 to present children's performances on a stage that is built precisely for the festival.
223 If it is possible to set up a temporary stage for such a festival, why can't a
224 permanent venue be built that is equipped with all the modern techniques needed
225 for children's theatre?

226

227 **Q18 What would you like to see happen to promote children's theatre in**
228 **Oman in the next ten years?**

229 I would like to see a strategy put in place to promote children's theatre in Oman in
230 the long term. This strategy should be set up by state institutions and individuals
231 who are in charge of children's theatre. We need to develop children's theatre and
232 to use theatre as an important means to educate children. The second point is that
233 there should be encouragement in the form of financial and moral support for all
234 people who are interested in children's theatre, such as playwrights, directors and
235 members of theatre groups. There is also a need to have playwrights specialised in
236 the area of children's theatre who are able to present developed children's texts. In
237 addition, there is a need to have modern venues equipped with all the modern
238 theatrical techniques exclusively for children's theatre. I would also like to see the
239 media promote interest in children's culture and children's theatre in particular. I
240 would like children's theatre to be continuous and not seasonal or intermittent as
241 it is at present. I also wish for a theatrical festival that could be set up especially
242 for children, to be held annually. In this regard, we can benefit from the
243 experience of other countries that have a developed children's theatre.

244

245 **Q19 You mentioned that you would like to see a strategy put forward to**
246 **promote children's theatre set up by state institutions and individuals who**
247 **are in charge of children's theatre: which government body should be in**
248 **charge of children's theatre in Oman from your point of view?**

249 All ministries and bodies in charge of the cultural sector in Oman should cater for
250 children's culture, including children's theatre. Each body should perform its role
251 according to its own specialisation. Promoting children's culture and children's
252 theatre should be the responsibility of every government institution, such as the
253 Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of
254 Heritage and Culture and Sultan Qaboos University.

255

256 **Q20 Are there any important or additional issues you could think of that I**
257 **have not covered yet in the interview questions?**

258 I would like to emphasise the importance of linking children's theatre to Oman's
259 traditional heritage, such as folk stories, folk songs and proverbs, and it is also
260 important to link children's theatre to the history of world, Arabic history and
261 Omani history. I would like playwrights to use these stories and history as a
262 source of inspiration in writing their plays. We could also employ Omani folk
263 songs in children's theatre, especially in musical productions. By doing so, we
264 introduce traditional heritage and history to the children, and we also document it.

265

266 **Q21 Do you mean that children's theatre can contribute to saving Omani**
267 **traditional heritage and identity?**

268 Exactly. I would like there to be folk theatres especially for children. I also wish
269 that we would focus more on children's literature and produce an Omani
270 magazine for children. I would like to see children's books published and
271 distributed to school libraries. I would like to cater more for puppet theatre that is
272 directed for children, since it has a great impression on them. It is also important
273 to make the public aware of the importance of theatre in general and children's
274 theatre in particular through the mass media and through lectures and workshops.
275 Parents should be aware of the importance of theatre for their children, and not as
276 presently many believe that theatre is only play time. However, they should know
277 that it is not a waste of time but serves a very important function in educating
278 children; thus parents should encourage their children to participate in theatrical
279 activities at school. However, the most important thing of all is that people in
280 charge of culture in Oman and in charge of theatre in particular should believe in
281 the importance of children's theatre. Finally, all individuals and private and
282 government institutions should work together to promote Omani children's
283 culture and children's theatre.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Sahiha Mubarak Saeed Al Azri dated 17/10/2006, in her office at the Ministry of Social Development, at 10.00 am.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I work as the Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development.

Q2 As the Director of the Department of Child Affairs in the Ministry of Social Development, could you tell us what is your department's role in general?

Within the Department of Child Affairs, we have three sections: the Department of Activities and Programs, the Department of Foster Care (for disabled children) and the Department of Child Raising. These departments devise an annual plan of new programs for Omani children. Our role is both domestic and also to represent Oman to the outside world. We already carry out many programs for children, such as the first Child Assembly in 2004 and the Arab Child Assembly in 2006, and there were children's performances presented within these two activities.

Q3 Is this Department of Child Affairs within the Ministry in charge of every aspect related to Omani children? And also what is the department's role regarding children's theatre in Oman?

The role of our department is to serve the Omani child in general. We consider theatre as one of the important means to educate children. Thus the department recently participated in supervising and presenting theatrical works for children within the activities held by the ministry. We don't have a special program for children's theatre, but instead theatrical activities are a part of our program in general. We do not have a specialised officer in the field of children's theatre within the department, but we seek help from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and public theatre groups.

Q4 On which occasions did the Ministry present children's performances?

We presented children's performances during different activities and programs. For instance, we will hold a festival in November 2006 called The Child's Culture Festival, during which we will present children's performances.

Q5 As the Director of the Child Affairs Department, do you believe in the importance of children's theatre?

Yes, we do believe that all cultural instruments contribute to benefit the child's culture, whether it is theatre, seminars or other cultural activities. For example, we support heritage activities in which we try to increase the child's appreciation of his culture.

Q6 From your point of view, which government institution should be in charge of children's theatre? Do you think it is your department's responsibility?

49 Honestly, it is not only the Ministry of Social Development that should be in
50 charge of this sector, but other government parties could play a role in this regard,
51 such as the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Information.

52

53 **Q7 Wouldn't it be better if there were only one government institution in**
54 **charge of children's theatre?**

55 As the Department of Child Affairs, it is difficult for us to be the body in charge
56 of children's theatre, because there are government institutions that already have
57 theatrical resources such as actors, directors and technicians, who can play a role
58 in this regard. But our departmental role should be complementary. However, we
59 do support the presentation of theatrical works for children within our programs
60 and activities.

61

62 **Q8 You have mentioned that your department supported children's**
63 **performances. Who presented these performances?**

64 We do invite Omani public theatre groups to present these performances, such as
65 the Mazoon Public Theatre Group, that will also participate in November 2006.
66 We also cooperate with other parties in selecting children's plays to be presented,
67 since, as you know, children's theatre requires special treatment.

68

69 **Q9 Who are these parties that the department works with in evaluating these**
70 **plays?**

71 Some of the public theatre groups and also the Ministry of Heritage and Culture.

72

73 **Q10 Do you have children's theatre specialists within your department?**

74 Unfortunately no, but we will consider this issue in the future, because it is
75 important that we have specialist people in the field of children's theatre, as
76 children's theatre is considered to be one of the main educational tools for
77 children.

78

79 **Q11 Did the Ministry of Social Development hold any specific theatrical**
80 **activities for children, or were children's performances that the Ministry**
81 **supported within its programs only presented as complementary activities?**

82 No, we didn't present a specific children's theatre activity, but all the children's
83 performances were presented as a part of a larger celebration held by the Ministry.
84 We take variety into consideration when presenting activities, so that's why we
85 welcome children's performances. We only select the best performances that can
86 contribute to promoting the child's culture. In this regard, we cooperate with all
87 the parties that present these performances.

88

89 **Q12 What are the criteria that the Ministry follows when choosing children's**
90 **texts and performances to be presented?**

91 We choose texts and performances that match the goals of our program: for
92 example if the topic is child health, then we will choose a play that matches this
93 issue. If we find a play that has already been written that is suited to the goals of
94 our program, then we choose this play. Sometimes we also seek the help of the
95 Ministry of Heritage and Culture to guide us as to who is the best group to be
96 invited to participate.

97

98 **Q13 When the Ministry decides to present theatrical works for children,**
99 **what obstacles does it face?**

100 We don't really face complicated obstacles. Our responsibility is to select the
101 subject matter to be presented for children. If there is more than one play that
102 matches our program, then we weigh up the decision.

103

104 **Q14 Regarding censorship of texts chosen to be presented, is there a party in**
105 **the ministry who undertakes this role?**

106 We don't have a special committee to examine the texts, but as a department in
107 charge of the child, we look at the text and the subject that it tackles, and we also
108 look at the age category that the play is directed to. We do have a list of standards
109 and criteria in choosing the texts and performances presented for children, but we
110 don't really have a specific committee in charge of this.

111

112 **Q15 What would you like to see with regard to the condition of children's**
113 **theatre and the means of developing it in the Sultanate in the next ten years?**

114 Children's theatre in Oman should receive more attention. For example, this year
115 [2006], the Ministry of Social Development is going to set up a national strategy
116 for childhood, and in this strategy we shouldn't neglect children's theatre since it
117 is an important means by which we can pass on educational messages to children.
118 All the parties, both local and international, should work together to promote
119 children's theatre. We also can invite international theatrical groups to present
120 children's performances to enrich the minds of Omani children and to promote
121 cultural exchange between Oman and other countries. I also hope to activate
122 children's theatre so it can play an important role in children's lives and serve
123 children's culture.

124

125 There should also be a clear strategy set up for children's theatre and a schedule
126 set out to plan good quality performances. To achieve all these goals, there must
127 be cooperation between the state and private institutions.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Rahima Al Gabri dated 30/09/2006, in her office at Sultan Qaboos University, at 11 am.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I am the supervisor of the Theatre Group at the Students' Affairs Deanship in the Sultan Qaboos University.

Q2 What is your definition of children's theatre?

It is specialised theatre that relies on specialised people who present theatrical performances directed to an audience of children.

Q3 Is there a distinction between children's theatre and school theatre from your point of view?

Yes. Scholastic theatre is concerned more about the educational side, which means that its main goal is to be educational. It is mostly didactic theatre that directs the child to do this and not do that, therefore it is direct theatre most of the time. On the other hand, children's theatre is indirect theatre and its messages to children are given in an indirect and interesting way. It tackles interesting topics that are attractive to children, and although it does educate the children, it also entertains and amuses them. Children's theatre has more similarities to adult theatre, since they are both professional theatres and are presented by professional people, while scholastic theatre is presented by non-specialised people and aimed at a specific audience, that is, school students. Children's theatre is more developed in general in terms of utilising modern theatre techniques such as lighting and décor, and it is concerned with the cosmetic aspects of theatre. Thus, children's theatre is an attractive theatre and can compete with children's television drama and cinemas in attracting a children's audience.

Q4 What do you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?

To be honest with you, I do not know anything about the history of children's theatre in Oman. However I have information about the plays for children that have been presented by theatre groups and youth groups in different periods of time, but I don't know when children's theatre started in Oman or when the first play took place.

Q5 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the Sultanate?

From my point of view, in general I believe that children in Oman are long for theatre. There is no institution in charge of children's theatre. I also believe that we cannot say that we have a developed theatre for children to educate and amuse them.

Q6 Do you mean that children's theatre does not exist in Oman? Some Omani people deny that there is any such theatre in Oman. Do you agree with this statement?

No, it does exist, but it is intermittent, and is used only for special occasions. There is no permanent and continuous children's theatre, and it does not exist as

51 an independent entity. Moreover, there is no institution that supports children's
52 theatre and that believes in its importance.

53

54 **Q7 How is it possible to overcome these obstacles that children's theatre**
55 **encounters in Oman?**

56 To overcome the obstacles, my first wish would be for an institution to support
57 and cater for children's theatre. In this institution there should be people who are
58 specialised in children's theatre, such as playwrights. Why don't they, for example,
59 sponsor specialists to travel abroad to study theatre? Unfortunately, I can't see this
60 interest in children's culture in Oman since the cultural sector for children is
61 neglected. We cannot have professional actors and directors capable of winning
62 international awards if we don't first start educating the children in theatre. If we
63 educate the children in theatre, then we can have professional playwrights and
64 directors for the future, thereby shortening the distance that would be needed to
65 train adult theatre specialists from scratch. Educating children in theatre could
66 occur through children's programs and the mass media.

67

68 We could also meet this challenge if the official institutions were aware of the
69 importance of children's theatre. There should be a cultural centre made especially
70 for children that not only caters for theatre but also for children's literature such as
71 stories. There should also be a library for children. If we start from this point, then
72 we can say we serve the cultural needs of children. Furthermore, in Oman we
73 don't have special venues to hold children's theatre. During local festivals, stages
74 for children's theatre are set up, but in fact what is presented is not really
75 children's theatre but commercial, money-making ventures.

76

77 **Q8 As a playwright, director and head of the theatre groups at Sultan**
78 **Qaboos University, what is your own contribution as well as the group's**
79 **contribution to the field of children's theatre?**

80 Generally I am really interested in this field, and, as a supervisor of theatre groups
81 at Sultan Qaboos University, I really wanted to present theatrical works for
82 children. And I did, even though I didn't have any past experience in this field,
83 except for some theatrical works that I presented for children at the Women's
84 Society. However, the play I presented for children at the university, *Ard Almisk*
85 (*The Land of the Musk*), was a mature work. It was presented in 1999 and I wrote
86 and produced it. In addition I presented some programs for children at schools. I
87 also presented an educational play for children at Albaraeam School entitled
88 Alice fee Madrasat Albaraaem (Alice in Junior School) and it concerns Alice, the
89 famous children's character from western literature in Alice in Wonderland, who
90 visits junior school and surprises the children in their classroom with her sudden
91 visit. The children are happy to see Alice at their school. She takes them on a trip
92 where she tries to educate them and to correct their bad behaviour. Alice ends her
93 visit to the school and leaves after successfully changing the children's behaviours
94 for the better.

95

96 **Q9 Apart from this play that was presented by the theatre group at the**
97 **university, is there any other contribution that the group has made?**

98 Yes, the group members went to schools to organise workshops for the students to
99 develop their theatre culture, and we also presented a children's performance, *The*
100 *Land of the Musk*, at the Salalah Festival.

101

102 **Q10 Is there a future plan for the group, to develop and support children's**
103 **theatre in Oman?**

104 I hope to organise a children's theatre festival where all the schools of the
105 university can participate by presenting theatrical works for children. At the
106 beginning, I plan to hold this festival every two years, and also plan in the future
107 to expand it by inviting public theatre groups from outside the university. All
108 groups can compete in the festival and, by so doing, we will stimulate new theatre
109 people to work in children's theatre.

110

111 **Q11 Do you plan to invite children to participate in the performances, or will**
112 **it be limited to university students?**

113 Both can participate. It's important to give a chance to children who are gifted in
114 theatre to participate. In the play that I presented, *The Land of Musk*, child actors
115 play an important role. They even inspired me with new ideas that benefitted me,
116 and I tried to give them a chance to express themselves. As this play was the first
117 experience for me in the field of children's theatre, I was hesitant at first and at
118 times even thought of giving up on the idea, but then I decided to carry on,
119 because children deserve it. I really hope that I can present more for children, and
120 really hope that there will be a cultural centre for children and that there will be
121 one body in charge of children's theatre. I hope also that Omani children's theatre
122 will be introduced to the outside world through external participation. However,
123 we need professional people to present professional children's performances.

124

125 **Q12 Through your observations of performances presented for children in**
126 **Oman, what do you think are the common themes and issues that have been**
127 **addressed in the performances?**

128 I think that the educational and didactic themes are the most common themes that
129 have been tackled in Omani children's performances. Even in the performances
130 that are presented by the public theatre groups, didactic and prescriptive issues
131 predominate. I think the playwrights should diversify in the themes and issues
132 they address to children. For instance, they could derive their ideas from Omani
133 traditional heritage, as it is a very rich source. In addition, the writers should
134 tackle issues that are suitable for the child's mentality. Messages and ideas should
135 be presented for children in an interesting way, not in a direct and didactic way.
136 The playwrights should also be careful when depicting their characters in
137 children's plays, especially heroes, because they have a big influence on children
138 as they regard them as models and imitate them.

139

140 **Q13 What would you like children to gain from watching one of your**
141 **performances?**

142 First, I want them to enjoy the performance and to get an understanding of the
143 message of the play. I also like the children in the audience to become part of the
144 performance and interact with it, not just be passive recipients.

145

146 **Q14 As a playwright who has written some plays for children, who can write**
147 **for children from your point of view?**

148 I think people who are close to children would be better at writing for children
149 and communicating with them. Writers for children should be aware of children's

150 way of thinking and all the issues that attract their attention, and they should know
151 how to stimulate them and to speak at their level.

152

153 **Q15 What do you think are the difficulties that playwrights face that might**
154 **deter them from writing for children?**

155 Many theatre people have in mind that it is very difficult to write for children and
156 communicate with them. However, as theatre people, we should overcome this
157 difficulty. I believe that a playwright who has the desire to write for children will
158 overcome this difficulty. However, firstly it is necessary to build skills by reading
159 and exploring the world of the child.

160

161 **Q16 Some people think that children's theatre is easy and shouldn't be**
162 **classed as professional theatre, and so they present theatrical works for**
163 **children without careful consideration. What do you think of this?**

164 We should set down definite standards for playwrights who want to write for
165 children's theatre. Children's theatre needs specialised people, but the question is,
166 where do we obtain these specialists? There are no specialised people in Oman in
167 the field of children's theatre, but we as theatre people should become more
168 interested in the world of children and write for them. On the other hand, we
169 cannot also take the matter of writing for children as an easy task and just write
170 anything for children. Today children are very clever and discerning, because they
171 live in the world of satellites and the internet, so we shouldn't underestimate them.

172

173 **Q17 Where did you draw your ideas from in the children's plays you have**
174 **presented?**

175 It can be an idea that comes into my mind and I think of it as an idea that is
176 suitable for children, so I use it in my plays. There are also other sources that the
177 writer can benefit from, such as our traditional heritage and history. For instance,
178 as my first experience in presenting a children's performance, I wanted to write
179 about the Western character, Alice, that children love and are familiar with.
180 Children love Alice, so I tried to use this character to educate the children and to
181 promote their good behaviour, and the audience for this play consisted mostly of
182 schoolchildren. However, in my other play, *The Land of Musk*, I created new
183 characters.

184

185 **Q18 Have your plays presented for children been professionally critiqued?**

186 Yes, for example in my play *The Land of Musk*, some critics liked it and some
187 didn't, because in this play I depend on the character of the Grandmother as the
188 main protagonist. And some people believe that we live in the age of technology –
189 yes, we do live in this age, but we still long for Grandma stories that teach the
190 children good values and principles. Many children grow up with these stories
191 that expand their imagination. Why don't we use them in theatre? This play was
192 written up in The Oman newspaper by more than one critic. They were interested
193 in this play, because it was the first children's play to draw inspiration from
194 Omani folk stories as a theme. That's why it was different and new. In contrast,
195 most children's performances take inspiration from world stories.

196

197 **Q19 Are there any important or additional issues you could think of that I**
198 **have not covered yet in the interview questions?**

199 I wish that this study that you are doing now would be a starting point for all those
200 interested in children's theatre. I hope that it will introduce the importance of
201 children's theatre to people in state and private institutions so they will cater more
202 for children's theatre.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Gasem Al Batashi dated 16-03-2008.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I am an actor and director. I am also the director of the Muscat Al Hur Public Theatre Group that was established in 1998. I directed many plays including children's plays and I also directed many programs and series for Omani TV including programs and series for children. Also, I am the owner and executive manager of the Alahlam Centre for Artistic Production Company. At present I work as a technician in the Education Techniques Centre at Sultan Qaboos University.

Q2 What do you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?

There were some dramatic phenomena existing in Oman before the existence of theatre. For example, there were folkloric games for children containing some dramatic elements such as the performer or actor who improvises in front of the audience. Then, when the Al Ahli and Oman clubs were established in the 1960s, they tried to present some performances for children somehow but they did not succeed. After that, the Alsaidia Schools that exist in Muscat and Matrah presented some performances for school children, and since then children's theatre in Oman started to develop.

So you are trying to say that children's theatre in Oman started from schools just like adult theatre?

No, its roots go back to children's folkloric games that existed in Oman a long time ago, and then started to develop with the Al Ahli and Oman clubs, but the real start came from school theatre. Unfortunately, there are no documents about the history of Omani theatre including children's theatre.

Q3 What do you know about the first performance of a children's play in Oman? According to the guidebook of the Al Ahli Club, the play *Al Faris Asshuga'a* was the first to be staged in 1972.

I am sure that there were children's performances that were presented before this date but unfortunately, as I said, there are no documents of it.

Q4 The 2003 population census in Oman recorded that children under 15 years old comprise 40.6% of the total population in the Sultanate. How do you evaluate the art and cultural position of the child in the Sultanate in general?

Because children comprise 40.6% of the total population in Oman, it is important that there be a greater focus on children's culture, including children's theatre. Unfortunately, there is no such focus because there is no specific institution that has the responsibility for this matter.

Q5 What is your contribution, as a director, and what is the contribution of the Muscat Al Hur Public Theatre Group, of which you are the head, in the field of children's theatre?

50 I presented many performances for the Sidab Club in the 1980s, among which
51 were children's performances. We presented these performances in the middle of
52 Ramadan in a celebration named "Qaranqashooh" which is, as you know, a
53 religious occasion that Omani children celebrate on the 15th day of the holy
54 month of Ramadan. The children really looked forward to these performances.
55 However, unfortunately, I didn't document them. I also presented many TV
56 programs for children.

57
58 Regarding the Muscat Alhur Group, we presented two performances for children.
59 One was *Shams and the Monster* in 2000, presented within the activities of Al
60 Halam Festival, at Al Seeb, at Al Qurm Park and in the Bushar and Nizwa
61 districts. The second play was *What does the Environment Say?*, which I wrote
62 and produced, and it was presented on the Al Qurm Park stage in 2002. In all
63 these performances presented by our group, we considered the age group of the
64 children and the suitability of each play to the audience. I think this is a very
65 important issue, and we always state the age group in the printed program.
66 Unfortunately, many theatre people don't consider the age group of the audience
67 when putting on a play, but just present a play for children without any age
68 classification. However, my experience is different, since I have presented many
69 TV programs for children and have written many programs for them that I
70 directed and produced. In addition, over the last five years, I have continuously
71 presented many Omani general knowledge quizzes for children on TV during
72 Ramadan.

73
74 **Q6 Do children participate as actors in the performances you have**
75 **presented?**

76 Yes they do.

77
78 **Q7 As a director, how did you deal with them?**

79 I deal with children by trying to understand the way they think and adjust myself
80 to them. I also try to stimulate them as actors to imagine the situation of the play
81 and to live in it and see how they will play their roles and act them out. In the play
82 *Shams and the Monster*, I was the director and acted in it as well. In this play I
83 also involved the audience of children to participate in the performance, and they
84 played main roles. Some of the children got on the stage and helped to guide
85 Shams, the hero of the play, to the place where the monster hid.

86
87 It is hard to act and direct a children's performance, but there are some talented
88 children who make the work easier. The director should choose talented children
89 to perform. I always consider children's mentality and psychology when dealing
90 with them. The theatrical team should work as a family.

91
92 **Q8 Generally, what do you think of what is presented for children in Oman**
93 **in the way of texts and performances?**

94 The presented performances in general are good. I saw more than one
95 performance by different directors or producers and I think they were good. In
96 addition, the playwrights in Oman write good texts for children. Why? Because
97 their plays are well thought out and are written from the heart, not written for
98 commercial and financial reasons.

99

100 **Q9 I have noticed that some Omani playwrights benefit from world cartoon**
101 **characters such as Alice, Cinderella and Mickey Mouse. What do you think**
102 **of this phenomenon?**

103 Yes, you are right. The Omani playwright notices what is presented for children
104 on TV and tries to utilise such famous characters, and this is a good thing, because
105 I think that it is good to benefit from world stories and foreign influences.
106 However, when drawing our themes from foreign sources, we should be careful
107 not to present it in its original form but should adjust it to suit our culture.
108 Playwrights can use such characters to convey messages to children who love
109 these characters. In addition, there are some playwrights who draw inspiration
110 from Omani folk stories and rewrite them and present them for children, and this
111 can contribute to conserving and maintaining Omani folk stories.

112

113 **Q10 Generally, how would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in**
114 **the Sultanate?**

115 Children's theatre in Oman needs support – not only token support, but practical
116 and wide-ranging support. In Oman there are people who have the energy and are
117 ready to create, but unfortunately, as there is no state institution to provide the
118 infrastructure for them, who can administer and direct the personnel necessary to
119 serve the Omani culture in general and Omani children in particular, their efforts
120 will be piecemeal. The situation is that there are groups who present intermittent
121 performances, but there is no umbrella group to organise them into one entity. For
122 example in the group that I'm in charge of, Muscat Al Hur Public Theatre Group,
123 the children's performances we present are intermittent, and the works of other
124 theatrical groups are not documented, so there is no continuity, and all the work
125 will be wasted. Actually there is some confusion about what is understood by
126 "children's theatre". In the Muscat and Salalah festivals, there were acts presented
127 for children such as music, dancing and acrobatic shows, but they had nothing to
128 do really with children's theatre. Foreign groups presented acts with acrobatic and
129 miming elements, but this is not children's theatre.

130

131 **Q11 Yes, I agree with you that there is confusion about "children's theatre"**
132 **and other dramatic shows presented for children in Oman. Regarding the**
133 **foreign groups that are invited to present children's performances in the**
134 **local festival, what do you think of the children's performances presented by**
135 **these groups?**

136 Yes, I have noticed this phenomenon. Unfortunately, these performances are
137 mostly not appropriate for Omani children, because they present an exotic culture
138 that Omani children are not familiar with. Moreover, most of these performances
139 were mainly superficial shows and not proper children's theatre. Even the
140 performances presented by groups from the Gulf States were commercial and
141 lacked depth. I can say that they belittled the child's mentality.

142

143 **Q12 Why aren't Omani public theatre groups encouraged and assisted in**
144 **participating in local festivals in preference to foreign groups which are**
145 **imported for such occasions? And since you are the head of the Muscat Al**
146 **Hur Public Theatre group, what in your view are the obstacles facing Omani**
147 **public theatre groups in presenting children's performances?**

148 Precisely, as a public theatre group, when we approach the Ministry of Heritage
149 and Culture or the Ministry of Social Development for a request for funding to

150 participate in local festivals, our request is rejected because they consider the cost
151 is excessive. However, they then sponsor foreign groups to come into the country
152 and present performances and they end up paying double what it would have cost
153 them to sponsor local performances. For example, in 2004, our group, Muscat Al
154 Hur, submitted a project proposal to the Ministry of Social Development to
155 participate in one of the cultural activities by presenting a performance, with a
156 budget of 5000 Omani Real. This amount included costs of decor, costumes,
157 music and rehearsals, but our project was rejected because the Ministry
158 considered the budget too high. There are also other obstacles facing children's
159 theatre in Oman, such as lack of theatres – for example there are theatres at Al
160 Qurm Park, at the Al Bustan Palace [a five-star hotel in Muscat] and the Ministry
161 of Labour's theatre at the Technical College. Despite all these theatres, public
162 theatre groups cannot find a venue to present their performances, because all the
163 theatres are reserved for other functions. Then the groups must present their
164 performances in unequipped venues such as theatres belonging to women's
165 societies. This leads to a weakness of performances presented for children.
166 Children's theatre should be impressive and thus requires a high standard of
167 staging, for example in costumes, sets and lighting and sound.

168

169 There is a large gap between adult theatre and children's theatre in Oman.
170 Performances for adult theatre are much more numerous than for children's
171 theatre. Also one of the main problems facing children's theatre in Oman is the
172 lack of awareness of the importance of children's theatre and a lack of institutions
173 and bodies that support and manage children's theatre. For example, the Ministry
174 of Social Development has a Department of Women and Children who are the
175 ones, I believe, who should have a greater involvement in children's theatre.

176

177 The local tourism festivals, such as Muscat and Salalah festivals, should support
178 children's theatre by encouraging public theatre groups to participate and should
179 support them financially and provide the proper infrastructure for the
180 performances.

181

182 **Q13 What would you like to see happen to promote children's theatre in**
183 **Oman in the next ten years?**

184 I wish that there would be only one government body in charge of children's
185 theatre in Oman, and this body should cater exclusively to children's theatre. I also
186 wish that there would be a children's theatre festival held for Omani children and
187 sponsored by the government. I wish there would be more support to enable
188 Omani public theatre groups to stage children's performances. Oman audiences
189 have a hunger to see children's performances, and I have noticed this in, for
190 example, the performances our group presented in the Al Qurm Park Theatre
191 where the audience attendance was very large. So this reflects the popularity of
192 children's theatre in Oman, which is an advantage that should be taken into
193 consideration by people in charge of theatre in Oman.

Personal Interviews

An interview with Imad Al Shanfri dated 03-10-2006.

Q1 To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us what is your current job?

I work as a supervisor of marketing in Omantel, a communications company in Oman. I have a Masters in Marketing. I am also a playwright, director and head of the Salalah Public Theatre Group

Q2 What is your definition of children's theatre? And is there a distinction between children's theatre and school theatre?

I think children's theatre is the school where the child can learn and build his personality, and if we provide good children's theatre and take care about what is presented for children, then we can ensure that we will have an aware generation that is well prepared to contribute positively in his society.

There are three categories in the ages of children: the first group is from four to seven years old, the second from seven to eleven years old, and the third from eleven to seventeen years old. In each age category children have their own needs, and the playwright should be aware of the age group he is writing for. However, unfortunately many playwrights do not consider these age groups when writing for children.

Children's theatre differs from school theatre. School theatre is educational in nature, with the aim of building the creative abilities of students, and it focuses on the scientific field to educate children through theatre; children's theatre, on the other hand, is more comprehensive and more professional.

Q3 What do you know about the history of children's theatre in Oman?

Regarding the history of children's theatre in Oman, we can say that it is still a modern history going back just a few years. For example, I remember that in 1976 as a child in elementary school, I participated in a play entitled *Bilal Alhabashi*. The play was presented at the school in Salalah, so it was basically a scholastic play presented for the school student and directed by an Egyptian school teacher.

Q4 What do you know about the first performance of a children's play in Oman? According to the guidebook of the Al Ahli Club, the play *Al Faris Asshuga'a* was the first to be staged in 1972.

Honestly, I know nothing about it, since I was only two years old at that time. I also remember that there was a children's play presented in the mid-nineties but I cannot remember it now.

Q5 How would you evaluate the condition of children's theatre in the Sultanate? Some deny that there is any such theatre in Oman. Do you agree with this statement?

There are some attempts to present children's performances in Oman, but honestly it is not really a well-developed theatre. However, recently, these attempts have increased.

51 **Q6 As the head of the Salalah Public Theatre group, what do you say is the**
52 **group's contribution in the field of children's theatre?**

53 We have significant experience in this area. For the last ten years we have been
54 presenting performances for children in kindergarten. These plays were directed to
55 children from the ages of 4 to 7 where the actors dressed in masks, disguises and
56 costumes of cartoon characters that are appealing to children. We presented these
57 performances for free. We had all the necessary materials – props etc. – for these
58 performances. Our aim of presenting these works for children was to increase
59 children's awareness of theatre and of acting, in addition to educating the children
60 with values and morals.

61

62 **Q7 Did you have written texts for these performances?**

63 Honestly, no. They were unscripted and mainly using improvisation and simple
64 ideas. The improvisation had been planned previously. The performances were
65 short plays, skits, that didn't last longer than 15 minutes. Even though these
66 performances were quite simple, we benefit from these experiences now, as we
67 notice that many children now go to the theatre and are beginning to understand
68 the meaning of theatre, and they can even evaluate performances.

69

70 **Q8 As head of the Salalah Public Theatre group, what in your view are the**
71 **obstacles facing Omani public theatre groups in presenting children's**
72 **performances?**

73 Children's theatre is very expensive to mount and also the income from the box
74 office is low compared to that of adult theatre. Our group doesn't benefit
75 financially from children's theatre. The lack of financial and material support
76 given to theatre groups hinders the groups in presenting children's performances.
77 The limited resources mean that when we are selecting a play to present, we
78 choose one that is less expensive. This limits our creative expression. Even when
79 we are producing children's plays, I will choose, for example, those that need
80 fewer materials, and materials that are available from our immediate environment.
81 If we had financial support, then the performances would be better. For example,
82 if a child sees something magical on stage, such as a butterfly suspended from the
83 ceiling, that would be more attractive to him, rather than seeing a stage empty of
84 imaginative elements.

85

86 **Q9 Are there other obstacles facing your group apart from financial issues?**

87 The main problem facing Omani theatre in general, including children's theatre, is
88 the lack of people's awareness of the importance of theatre. For example, the
89 people responsible for culture do not cater for children's theatre to the same extent
90 that they do for sports clubs. Also, one of the main problems is searching for new
91 ideas and themes to be presented for children. This is very difficult. If we compare
92 what is presented for adult theatre around the world, it is much more than what is
93 available for children's theatre, and in Oman it is the same. In addition there are
94 obstacles such as the nonexistence of public and state institutions in charge of
95 children's theatre and the lack of equipment and financial and moral support,
96 which leads to making children's theatre just a theatre for special occasions. If
97 these occasions are not present, then there are no performances. There is also a
98 lack of specialists in the field of children's theatre. For example, you are the first
99 person who is undertaking a study of Omani children's theatre.

100

101 **Q10 What would you like to see happen to promote children's theatre in**
102 **Oman in the next ten years?**

103 All the efforts that have been made in the field of children's theatre need to be
104 concentrated and consolidated. In the festivals of Muscat and Salalah, they created
105 huge spaces for children's activities including children's theatre. Unfortunately
106 what was presented at these festivals cannot be regarded as real children's theatre,
107 but more like entertainments. I would like to see for the future the development of
108 a genuine children's theatre. In addition, I would like there to be a children's
109 theatre festival as we have for adult theatre. It is also important to stress that most
110 of the children's performances that are presented in Oman are actually didactic
111 and instructive, which does not reflect the real goals of children's theatre, which
112 are both to teach and to amuse. I also note that children's theatre in Oman is
113 seasonal only, as we see by the presentation of only intermittent performances;
114 instead I would like to see full-time theatre with a clear vision. It is also important
115 to increase the awareness of the importance of children's theatre amongst Omani
116 people.

117

118 **Q11 Is there any future plan for your group regarding children's theatre?**

119 Our group and other Omani groups are trying hard to develop Omani theatre in
120 general. There are very many things still needing to be done in this field. For
121 example, we are still trying to increase our general audience base, and children's
122 theatre needs an even greater effort. Theatrical groups still face many obstacles in
123 presenting children's performances. One of our ambitions and future plans as a
124 group is to hold a theatrical festival for children. We also hope to participate in
125 external Arab festivals. For instance, we were invited to participate in a children's
126 festival in Jordan, but unfortunately we weren't able to participate because of a
127 lack of financial support. No parties offered financial support for us to participate.
128 Here I would like to indicate the inadequacy of support from the Omani private
129 sector in supporting theatre and theatre people generally. We have spoken to
130 many officials of companies and banks that deal with children; in the case of the
131 banks, some of them have accounts for children and use cartoon characters in their
132 advertising, and we offered to use these characters in our plays to promote the
133 banks, but they rejected our proposal and didn't offer any financial support. This
134 shows the lack of support from the private sector for cultural activities, including
135 theatre, for children.