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» **Aspendos hosts international opera in Antalya**



The ancient theater of Aspendos in the Mediterranean province of Antalya welcomes opera and ballet artists for the 17th time this year, as the Aspendos International Opera and Ballet Festival opened Tuesday with Verdi's 'Aida.' State Opera and Ballet General Director Rengim Gökmen, however, laments the lack of financial support for the festival

Opening with a performance of Verdi's "Aida," the 17th Aspendos International Opera and Ballet Festival began Tuesday in Antalya. But while many agree that the event's location, the ancient theater of Aspendos, makes for an unforgettable opera, one official lamented the lack of financial support for the festival.

"We ask for only one fourth of the budget given to the film festival. We have the same budget for 17 years, and it is provided from the directorate's own budget," State Opera and Ballet General Director Rengim Gökmen said in reference to the Golden Orange Film Festival and the International Piano Festival, which receive support from the Antalya Metropolitan Municipality.

Gökmen said with the opera festival held in Istanbul this year, Aspendos would no longer be Turkey's only opera and ballet festival, yet added that the venue in Istanbul was not as magical as Aspendos.

"With magnificent acoustics offered by the Aspendos Ancient Theater and Antalya's natural beauties, the Aspendos International Opera and Ballet Festival is the most important cultural event in the city," he said, adding that opera and ballet were the most important symbols of civilization.

"We began this festival, but it does not belong to the State Opera and Ballet General Directorate only. We are proud of this festival and want to organize it with the locals of Antalya," Gökmen said, adding that the festival, a member of the European Festivals' Union, or EFA, was declared one of the world's best 10 festivals in a study conducted by British daily The Independent.

Gökmen said even a penny donated to the festival was as important as trillions for them, but added that despite all the support for the festival, they had been unable to provide it with necessary resources for 17 years.

He said the festival cost was between 1.5 million and 2 million Turkish Liras this year, adding that they only received one-eighth of the funds from the Prime Ministry Promotional Fund.

Local administrations had never given financial support to the festival, but the team always felt their spiritual support, Gökmen said. "If only we could get support for artists' accommodation."

Gökmen said they wanted to prepare a better program for the next year's festival and also include the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in the program. He said the cost of the world's best symphonic music group was 500,000 euros and that they had sought for sponsors to bring the orchestra to the city.

"The live concert record of the orchestra could be presented to the world, and it would make for a very good promotion," he said.

Festival program

Gökmen said eight events, three of which are foreign, would be performed as part of the festival, which ends July 1.

The festival, which opened Tuesday night with Verdi's "Aida," will continue with Alexander Dumas' "The Three Musketeers" on June 11 by the Ankara Opera State and Ballet. The opera was staged for the first time in Ankara in 1998 and played to a full house.

Meanwhile, the Istanbul State Opera and Ballet will perform French composer Georges Bizet's immortal opera, "Carmen," on June 14.

The Tokyo Ballet will also stage three different works at Aspendos, including W.A. Mozart's "Don Juan," M. Theodorakis' "Greek Dances" and M. Ravel's "Bolero." The group will come to Turkey for the first time and take the stage on June 17.

"Carmina Burana," which has been an extremely popular performance since it was first staged in 1937, will be performed by another foreign guest of the festival, the Berlin Radio Choir and Sing Along Turkey Choir, which is comprised of 450 choir artists from around the world.

Opera stars soprano Malin Christensson, tenor Erdem Erdoğan and baritone Mark Stone will join one of the world's leading choir conductors, Simon Halsey, in "Carmina Burana" on June 19.

The third guest group of the festival, the Macedonian Opera and Ballet, will perform Verdi's "Rigoletto" opera on June 23.

German Richard Wagner's three-act "The Flying Dutchman" opera will meet audiences with a production by the İzmir Opera and Ballet in its original language. The work, which has been dedicated to Turkey's first professional female opera artist, Semiha Berksoy, for her 100th birthday, will be on stage June 26.

Barbaros Hayrettin in Aspendos

The closing performance of the festival will be a project by the State Opera and Ballet General Directorate, Barbaros Dance Production. Featuring the life of Cpt. Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa and the Ottoman Navy in the 16th century with a contemporary dance style, the production will be staged by a group including dancers from the Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir and Samsun state ballets.

The world premiere of the work, which is being performed with contributions from the Turkish Naval Forces as part of the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture, will be made on July 1.