

Kuwaitis in Step with Traditional Dance

By Mary Ann Ebner



Traditional Kuwaiti sword dancers perform in Jahra.

Conventional classes in customary cultural dance are practically non-existent in Kuwait while books or videotapes on the age-old disciplines remain scarce. To learn the cultural dancing of this Arabian Gulf community,

students of the performing art don't spend countless hours rehearsing in a studio. They don't scour the shelves of the country's bookstores in search of reference books. Like the social customs of the tightly woven Kuwaiti family, customary

dance is handed over from one generation to the next and the instructions are not finely crafted in a training manual. From father to son, mother to daughter, the ritual of this social custom is passed on through the exertion of dance -



The "Ardha" style of sword dancing has been passed through generations of dancers.

dancing at special ceremonies, family celebrations, Eids, weddings. For generations, the old have schooled the young to move to the beat of Arabian rhythms.

As a young boy growing up in Jahra, Lafi Al-Dhafiri developed an appreciation of Arabian Gulf dance. He became a sword dancer at the age of 9, following in the footsteps of his father. Now retired from public performances, Al-Dhafiri, Deputy Director of Planning in the Human Resources Department at Kuwait Airways, still appreciates the fine art of the sword dance and upholds its place in the traditions of Kuwait. Al-Dhafiri learned to move to the rhythms of live musicians and by observation and coaching from his father, he mastered sword dancing at a young age.

"My dad was a sword dancer of the Ardha style," Al-Dhafiri said. "I observed from the age of five or six

and when I was nine years old, I had my first performance. It's very exciting to see a boy do something like this. My parents were very proud of me and I can remember them encouraging me."

He doesn't boast about his talent and claims that anyone can learn sword dancing.

"It's not difficult to learn," the Jahra native said. "It does take movement and balance but it's the motivation inside you. You're motivated because you talk about your culture through dance."

In today's Kuwaiti circles, sword dancers preserve the tradition by performing at family functions as well as special events.



Lafi Al-Dhafiri grew up dancing among his elders and now appreciates every opportunity to observe cultural dance.