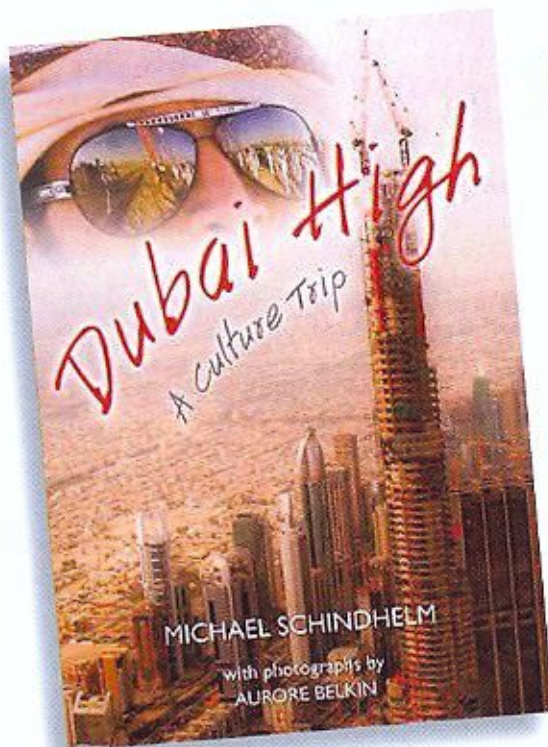


Dubai High, A Culture Trip

By Michael Schindhelm,
translated by Amy Patton.
Photographs by Aurore Belkin

Arabian Publishing, 2011. £21.95

Reviewed by Peter Clark



Michael Schindhelm is one of the leading opera and theatre directors of the world. Between 2007 and 2009 he was appointed as a cultural adviser to the government of Dubai. He stayed there for two years. *Dubai High* is a fictionalised account, based on a diary for the year 2008. It is a credible account of a year of personal disillusionment. In 2007 Dubai's enterprise, prosperity and limitless prospects gave the Ruler a Bob-the-Builder complex. ('Can we fix it? Yes, we can.') Nothing seemed impossible. The Emirate could buy the best, paying the top international rates. Michael Schindhelm turned up, ready to deliver. He had an office in a brand new skyscraper and a staff but no clear job description. The rules of the game seemed to change without notice. He was given a new job title. It was unclear who drove the policy or to whom he was responsible and where his role fitted into the broader picture. It is a not unfamiliar story. The situation was aggravated by the recession that hit Dubai. Building projects were discontinued. Property prices slumped. Cars and possessions were abandoned. Migrant labourers from South India were, of course, worst affected, returning home to debts and disappointment. The streets of Dubai were not for them paved with gold.

Schindhelm gives a convincing picture of the society of Dubai, especially the

kaleidoscopic expatriate community, on fixed contracts, with no permanent commitment to the place and hardly any contact with the people of the Emirates. Everyone was talking but no one was listening. He can be sharply funny: 'The shopping mall is a sadomasochistic funhouse of global consumerism. It far transcends the simple old-fashioned business of exchanging cash for essential goods. It's consumer porn, an interminable transacting of stimulated desire and temporary relief. Lust after the brand and suffer the exquisite whiplash of the price tag...'

What went wrong? Is it to be ever thus? There is certainly a culture clash in Michael Schindhelm's experience. He was in Dubai at a critical time, but other consultants and experts, both resident and on short-term contract, have survived and been able to operate. Schindhelm was cut off from any wise national who could have told him how to bridge the gap between declared aspiration and realistic achievement. Dubai has produced venues and institutions of international excellence, from airlines to golf courses. Dubai and the United Arab Emirates have also registered enormous cultural achievements in the last 10 years. UAE nationals are familiar with what is best in the world. They know more about the rest of the world than most visitors to

the country know about them. The wish to be associated with quality international brands – be it Guggenheim, the Louvre or Booker – is an acknowledgement of a wish to be associated with nothing but the very best. From the book Michael Schindhelm seems to be uncurious about how Dubai's achievements have been secured, or how the system works. We do learn of layers of foggy uncertainty between the ruler's articulated dreams and their implementation. The ruling family and the merchant princes preside over a system of unregulated capitalism. Yet generally things work well. Some foreigners in Dubai and in the rest of the UAE have helped to achieve a great deal in cultural fields. How that happened does not emerge in this book. We are left with sad disillusionment.

Peter Clark is a regular visitor to the UAE and was Cultural Attaché there 20 years ago. He is the translator of Dubai Tales by Muhammad al-Murr