

# sunday interview



Michael Schindhelm, the director of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, at his office in Dubai International Financial Centre. Jeffrey E Biteng / The National



# Carrying a torch for culture in Dubai

In an anonymous glass-walled office on the 15th floor of the Dubai International Finance Centre, the city's new cultural supremo was busy with final arrangements for a whistle-stop trip to Europe. Michael Schindhelm would visit eight cities in 14 days, during which time he would try to convince the "great and the good" of the international arts world that there is more to Dubai than real estate.

On Wednesday he will make a presentation at Art Basel, one of the most prestigious art fairs in the world, to showcase Dubai's cultural achievements to date and to outline the emirate's ambitions for the future.

Schindhelm is the director of the newly formed Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, set up in March to create a rich environment for Emirati heritage, visual arts, theatre, music, literature and poetry. The authority is part of the Dubai Strategic Plan 2015 as envisioned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai.

The plan is to turn Dubai into a vibrant Arabian hub for international arts and culture and Schindhelm is wasting no time in spreading the word. He has enlisted the help of Rem Koolhaas, the renowned Dutch architect, and Jack Persekian, the Palestinian curator, in putting together "Dubai Next: Face of 21st Century Culture".

The exhibition will debut at The Fire Station, part of the world famous Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany, a venue originally designed as a functioning fire station by Zaha Hadid, which now houses Vitra's permanent collection of chairs.

"I don't think it's necessary to import culture all the time. We can turn the tables and show the world that Dubai isn't all about real estate. It's also about people. It will be very interesting to showcase Dubai to an international audience," says Schindhelm, 47, settling into a stylish black and chrome Vitra office chair. The office, he explains, is only temporary accommodation. At the rate the authority is growing they will soon need much more space.

For the moment, however, he is more concerned with the delicate task of establishing the new authority's credentials. His own are impeccable. Cultural consultant, writer, dramaturge and theatre expert, he brings to his current position 18 years of experience

The writer, composer and filmmaker Michael Schindhelm has managed some of the most respected theatre companies in Europe. Philippa Kennedy gets a rare audience with the newly appointed director of Dubai's Culture and Arts Authority

managing some of Europe's most respected theatre companies. From 2005 to 2007, he was CEO of the Stiftung Oper in Berlin. Before that he ran Theater Basel for nearly 10 years. During his tenure, the theatre was awarded the Bavarian Theatre Prize twice, and also named theatre of the year for Germany, Austria and Switzerland in 1999.

He has directed several documentary films on music and culture in Asia, and was host of an arts and culture television programme, *Der Salon*, from 2003-2005.

In addition, he has published two novels, two opera librettos, several plays and non-fiction works, numerous essays and articles for the German, Swiss and Austrian press, and translations of Russian plays.

It's an impressive CV, but the clue to his unique qualification to handle the artistic heritage of a multinational melting pot like Dubai lies in his early life as a student in the Soviet Union and his native East Germany's struggle for a cultural identity.

Schindhelm, who speaks German, English, Russian and Italian, was born into a Protestant family in Communist East Berlin, in Eisenach, the birthplace of JS Bach and where Martin Luther translated the Bible. His father was a teacher and Michael grew up surrounded by the rich cultural heritage of Thuringia, where Richard Wagner and Tannhauser also came from.

"All this heritage was created there. This 'Protestant' attitude was something I got from my family and it is very far from Communism. Our background was not very much appreciated in our society. There were more problems than advantages."

He was clever a student who leant towards

the arts, but in the communist regime of that era, culture was all about a doctrine, so he opted for quantum chemistry instead. "If you studied culture or theatre or literature in East Germany you would have to learn the Communist ideology. There was not freedom of expression. I studied natural science because even the Communists had to accept the natural rules. If you were to do some research into who were the thinkers in Communist countries you would find that

**Dubai is still an Emirati city. It's not only a platform for international players. It's a city with heritage, with a local population, with its own culture and understanding of art. Our main objective is to make sure that this culture and heritage doesn't disappear**

Michael Schindhelm  
Dubai Culture and Arts Authority

many of them were natural scientists. You would have more opportunities to think whatever you wanted to think."

Travel abroad was not permitted without government permission, so when the young Schindhelm was offered the chance to study in the Soviet Union he jumped at it and soon found himself in a heady new multicultural environment.

"When I was 18, East Germany was like a cage to me. You could never get out of the country. When the government made me the offer I said 'Yes' immediately. It was 1979, some months before they started the war against Afghanistan. I came to a city called Voronezh where there was an armaments industry, but it also had this international university with students from 60 different countries.

"It was an amazing new experience to dive into a completely cosmopolitan fabric with people coming from Mongolia and Nicaragua and Namibia, from Czechoslovakia and Poland as well ... I made some of my best friends at this time. For them it was just fun to go there and study for a while. I made good friends with Iraqis, Syrians, Palestinians and Omanis. It widened my horizons. To me it was a bit like a little Dubai, a nest of multicultural cosmopolitan exchange."

His natural curiosity and hunger to learn about other cultures, something the East German authorities conspicuously failed to stamp out of him, sowed the seeds of problems in future years when he faced rumours that he had been a spy for the Stasi,

the East German secret police. He can laugh at the accusations today but it was a deeply unpleasant experience. He fought till the perceived stain on his character was expunged.

"It was forbidden to fraternise with foreigners. I was told by the East Germans that I was to stay away from relationships and contacts with people from other countries. I wasn't allowed to be in touch with anyone but Russians. Of course I broke the rule after a couple of days and got into a lot of trouble because of this."

"Later some of my friends came to see me in East Germany, which aroused the suspicions of the Russians, who started targeting me and tracking me. They would meet me at a Metro station or outside my apartment. It wasn't covert, more overt observation. I was frightened. I had to get out of East Germany. I could see that I could never have a normal life like this. They gave me a really hard time."

"I got in touch with many dissidents in Moscow which I visited from time to time, talking with journalists from different countries because it was interesting to me. But I was never a member of the Communist Party."

"The Cold War was quite hot and I was being observed by both the KGB and the East Germans. After five years I graduated and got my Master's degree. I was about to leave the country and they seized me and presented to me big files containing everything I had done over the past few years, the names of my friends and who I had spoken to. They accused me of having contacts with westerners and they claimed I was already in touch with a western secret service."

It wasn't till years later that Schindhelm discovered he had been targeted as a potential spy. Ten years after the reunification of Germany, when the government opened the files of the former Secret Service, he applied to see his.

"I found that there was a short period of time when they tried to recruit me. I wasn't