

# Art as a peacemaker, multicultural festival goes on

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Mishline Jammal fears the erosion of tolerance, and hopes daily for the return of sanity. In the meantime, the show will and must go on, says the artistic director of Carnivale, the State's largest multicultural arts festival.

While it was disappointing that the 25th anniversary of the festival had been marred by a recent souring in the racial climate including an anti-Muslim backlash over the issue of illegal refugees and political divisions over ethnic gang violence the festival would act as an important focus of reconciliation, Jammal said.

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States many of the event's 1,000-odd performers, including Arabic-speaking refugees from Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Iraq, had initially expressed fears about performing in public but had this week vowed to carry on.

The four-week program, starting at the end of the month, would have a "quiet, low-key" launch this week after the official launch at Government House last week was cancelled as a mark of respect to the US.

"Speaking to the artists, there have been concerns [about a backlash]," Jammal said. "They are really shocked by what's happened over there and what's happening over here, and there is a real sense of grief ... it goes back all the way to the Gulf War.

"But they're all very determined that the festival should go on [as] they see the process of artmaking as a peaceful act. That's why, more than ever, they say it is important that the event must carry on."

This year's festival program had a strong Arabic focus and would act as the key means of reconciliation, Jammal said. A 3,000-strong Arabic celebration of unity, or dabkeh, would take place on the streets of Bankstown next month as planned, while performances by artists from Arabic backgrounds such as playwright Basim Kahir and hip-hop artist and youth worker **Khaled Sabsabi** were expected to be highlights.

Jewish-Australian artist Michael Roseth, 32, said the festival would help combat the damage caused by the souring of the racial climate in recent months. At a time when the politics of race had taken over the national agenda to a "very scary degree", it was crucial that various communities in Sydney found common ground.