

L'Humanité

Monday, April 14 2003

Leila Haddad who had set up her latest creation, "Zikrayat", at the Trianon Theatre in March, tells us about Oriental dance.

The belly is the sun, arms and legs its rays.

For the Tunisian artist who has recently paid an homage to the Egyptian singer Oum Kalsoum, this discipline is also political. In this year of Algeria, she was quite happy to answer our questions.

According to you, why does belly dance crystallize desire?

Leila Haddad. Are there dances that are sexual and others that are not? Dance is the body. When I see naked dancers in contemporary shows, is it purely intellectual? Dance uses senses. I must admit that the term belly dance annoys me. Not that the word bothers me. All of us have lived a few months in a belly. It is a sacred and vital part. Even in martial arts it is the centre of vital and sexual energies. Scientists say that the belly has a brain. I call it the sun, and arms and legs are its rays. It is here that everything happens. What annoys me in the term "belly dance" is that French people who are extremely cultivated, take the liberty of translating the Arabic term whereas it wouldn't occur to them to translate the word "twist" or the word "rock'n'roll". I am not asking them to call it "Raqs-El-Sharqy" like us, but let us at least give it its real translation that is "Eastern Dance".

The expression "belly dance" has a story. During the famous Egyptian campaign, Napoleon went with his scientists, his spies, his intellectuals but also his legionnaires who came from an extremely puritan Europe. At the end of the 18th century, the fact of showing a naked foot was the height of eroticism. It confused the senses! Let's imagine those poor gentlemen thrown in Cairo streets in the middle of smells, colours and heat – it is 45_C in the shade – and of women who, among other things, were undulating the pelvis as they were dancing. It is important to know that at the same time in the West the Church was forbidding dancing considered as a diabolical activity. The pelvis was considered a shameful part. So those poor guys didn't know how to describe that dance. Furthermore, they used to go to brothels like a tourist visiting Paris nowadays goes to Pigalle to watch a peep-show. He is going to come to the conclusion that this is French culture. Women who used to dance in those Cairo brothels were practising a sort of entertainment. The authentic dance, they didn't really see it. They never visited families. They never watched grandmothers and grand-daughters dance. For them it is obvious that the dance had a torrid erotic nature. One shouldn't forget that in the States when Elvis Presley was singing on television, it was forbidden for years to show him below the waist.

How come this dance appears in the Koranic, Muslim and often strict society?

Furthermore, do fundamentalists accept what I will no more call belly dance?

Leila Haddad. Let's make it clear. There are twenty two Arab countries and two hundred and fifty million people. What fundamentalists maybe want to forbid are cabarets, prostitution and alcohol. But inside homes, especially during wedding parties, people stand up and dance. Whether it is in Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen or Palestine. Dance punctuates every happy event. In the West, in France for example when there is a wedding party, people drink, discuss and eat. They do not dance all together. Each generation stands up for a certain type of music then

goes back sitting. Besides, dance was born much before Islam in the East. They even think that it is older than the age of the Pharaohs in Egypt.

What is the basic physical discipline of Oriental dance? You do not practise barre exercises as in ballet?

Leila Hadad. Every single part of the body is solicited: legs, chest, pelvis, neck . Let's keep in mind that in the Middle Ages, what Europeans called learned music was the Arabic classical music. The dance is the reflection of this music. It is not less sophisticated. A good dancer knows how to interpret sounds. Oriental dance traces them by the note, not to say by the quarter tone. You do not dance the same way to the tones of a flute, the "nay", or a zither "Kanun" even if the musical basis is the same. The flute gives out a round fluid sound calling for soft undulations of the chest and arms. The Kanun demands hip shimmies, strong vibratory movements.

Why this tribute to Oum Kalsoum?

Leila Haddad. The Egyptian diva was a federative element in the Arab-Berber world. She entered every home. Her voice moved and continues to move hundred million people. Oum Kalsoum addressed everybody, the king and the peasant. She reunified countries that didn't want to find an agreement. Everybody weeps while listening to her. She is a political figure in her own way. She always came forward. At my more modest level, she is my diva. I paid her a tribute in my own way. She had a magical, extraordinary voice in the strongest sense of the term. You can reach "Tarab", ecstasy, listening to her. More generally, what I want to suggest is to make mentalities progress. I am fed up to see Arabs being mentioned only in trivial events. I am fed up to see that the image of the Arab woman is that of a poor veiled hidden thing, or that of a prostitute.

Look at me, I am modern, with my contradictions, I am wearing trousers, in the summer time I wear shorts. I tour the world. I travel to the Arab world, in Tunisia, Syria. I am not a young second-generation North African woman, my family does not live in France. One has to integrate well into a society, each one with his material (writing, sculpture, dance).

Muriel Steinmetz