

LE MONDE

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With " Zikrayat ", the choreographer pays tribute to the singer Oum Kalsoum

Leila Haddad's dialectical positions

"Programmers must open up the doors to us" notes Leila Haddad who has just filled six days in a row the Trianon theatre on Rochechouart Boulevard.

In Zikrayat (memory), she pays a tribute to the singer Oum Kalsoum. This creation bears the name of a poem written by Ahmed Rami: "This poet wrote more than 200 songs for the one who inspired him so much!" reminds us the choreographer who on stage is surrounded by eight female dancers and one male dancer. Together they tell a story about Oriental dance, wrongly named "belly dance" by Napoleon's legionnaires upon their return from Egypt, taking one part as the whole, a very male way of considering the female body. We shall not be too hard on them...

Especially as the worst attacks against this famous dance came from within Egypt. As a matter of interest: in 1834, Pasha Mehmet Ali exiled 400 dancers to Upper Egypt; in 1955 President Nasser insisted that the belly button be hidden. Little by little, the dance remained in the context of family celebrations, and locked itself away, continually afraid of being put into the same category as prostitution. We know that currently in Egypt, dancers must obtain a licence from the vice squad which comes under the Ministry of the Interior.

"When I see three women wearing the veil in the theatre like on Sunday at the matinée performance, I feel like crying and going right away to Couronnes (a Parisian inner city) wearing a bikini" says Leila Haddad who was born in Djerba, Tunisia. She herself had a hard time persuading her family that by dancing in theatres, and not in cabarets, she was proudly defending her culture and achieving its recognition. She participates in symposiums and is invited all over the world to perform solo dancing.

SHARED VISION

The first part of Zikrayat derives from musicals with brightly coloured costumes, multicoloured veils and bodies clad up to the chin. Leila Haddad reveals her game with distance and humour. Up to the moment where she starts a very long, very beautiful solo in which she shows with an immense pleasure how from the tip of her toes to the top of her head she moves every inch of her body, including each mini-muscle of her belly.

This way of sending rhythm from one place to another to such an extent that one can follow the course without any difficulty, exposes the female body in all its mobile richness. Observing dance inching its way on and under the skin constitutes by itself "world georhythmics, from Asia to Europe" says Bernard RÈmy of the CinÈmathÈque de la Danse (The Dance Film Library).

Leila Haddad knows to what extent her desire to allow culture to live freely is never won. "I know how much I have to wrap up my dance in intellectual speech that legitimizes it in order to get it accepted. I do not always have that time." Yet having followed the dancer's work for almost twenty years and now seeing the Trianon theatre jam-packed with an audience made up of a majority of women, I can only observe that her artistic commitment has not been in vain.

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