

Libération

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Dance. In Paris, 2 shows from the Tunisian choreographer who fights tirelessly against clichés.

Leila Haddad, the East full-frontal

The colonial exhibition of 1889 was the first to integrate exotic dances. The audience, very excited, rushed to Cairo Street in the Egyptian section, or to the Moorish café of the Algerian wing. In order to frame the excesses of dancers, the West invented a generic term: "belly dance", which was going to create many devastating effects and deny Oriental diversity.

More than a century later the beautiful Fatma, a caricature figure of North African women with persisting fantasies and misunderstandings, is still as much lusted after. Leila Haddad who since the 80s has been reaffirming at each show staged with her own money that her "style" belongs to choreographic art, can relate to that. But clichés stick to her. With much humour and also anger, she fulminates: "Do they serve frankfurters after one of Pina Bausch's show? Why is it that after my shows some programme planners feel obliged to offer mint tea? Why be surprised that I dance with no music whereas hundreds of choreographers do it? I was even asked once if the sound failure didn't bother me! I am faced with a tremendous lack of understanding. Many dancers performed while they were pregnant, but this could not be conceivable in my company, same thing for a male dancer. I always have to explain, give my reasons, justify myself."

Confusion. The fashion of Oriental dance classes "to recover femininity" adds more confusion. Especially when they are given by teachers caring little about educational methods. So Leila Haddad can only continue to give public performances in order to clear up misunderstandings, provided that professionals as well as the public will be willing to take her into consideration and not only to eye up under Salome's veils.

An autodidact, born in Djerba (Tunisia) in 1965, she dances like all little girls without thinking of making a profession out of it. In London, where she is studying, she realizes that it is not only a festive practice. At the same time Leila Haddad discovers politics, she is going to consider Oriental dance in a different way. "I was member of an antiapartheid South African theatre group. This is how I realized my African belonging and the richness of Oriental dance which developed thanks to travellers. The roots are African and Indian. In this respect the Ghawazee, Gipsies from Upper Egypt, played an essential role in passing down the learning before being driven out of Cairo in 1834.

Trance. Through travels, particularly to Burkina and Mali, she is struck by the resemblance between her dance and those of trance and therapy. It is more than a simple question of technique. "I can't stand the word "Magrebin", it is politically

correct but it separates us from the rest of the continent, she says. I am both North-African and Arab, because our first colonisers were the Arabs. Through her activism, she goes against generally accepted ideas, reminding us that many other women understood the power of dances coming from the East, as Isadora Duncan or Ruth Saint-Denis. She also carries on research in Africa and in the Arab countries to find rare dances before they disappear.

The more she progresses, the more she sees that "it is indeed the place of woman's body that disturbs, all the bans on dancing that have been punctuating history are here to prove it". Getting the dance out of its festive family context and out of cabarets, Leila Haddad is trying a third way, the "royal" way, she says mischievously.

The two shows presented in Paris relate the diversity of the repertoire together with her very contemporary approach.

In a solo, accompanied by Gipsy musicians from Upper Egypt, she follows in the Ghawazee's footsteps. She also pays tribute to Oum Koulsum with Zikrayat, a piece for 9 dancers.