

Friday, March 7, 2008

Leila Haddad & The Gypsy Musicians of Upper Egypt

In France, her adopted home, **Leila Haddad** has been dubbed "the Queen of Oriental dance." Born in Tunisia, she's hailed as one of the world's most vibrant exponents of *raqs Sharqi*, the traditional Arab origin of what Americans call belly dance. **World Music Institute's** presentation of ***In the Trail of the Ghawazee: Leila Haddad & the Gypsy Musicians of Upper Egypt*** (including members of **Musicians of the Nile**) marks her New York debut. This playful, colorful show--inspired by the Ghawazee, a tribe of traveling entertainers thought to be related to the Roma--concludes this evening at NYU's **Skirball Center for the Performing Arts**.

Haddad takes to the stage like she owns it and, of course, she does, with her glowing, billowing fabrics of fuschia, salmon, pumpkin, red, black, gold and all the sparkling, jangling trimmings, with her ringing finger cymbals and her billions of fine, gold bracelets, with Cupie doll face and huge, smiling eyes, with her slow swirls and almost demure shimmies and hands that flick or flow across the air like a stream over rocks. She is a master dancer, fully at ease and having the time of her life. It would all be perfect if everyone in her audience realized that it's customary to clap along during a high-spirited performance. In any case, clapping is one thing, but some of us dancer types in the seats really wanted to get with that sweet band and throw down!

Besides Haddad, two joyful, *rababa*-fiddling vocalists--**Mohamed Mourad** and **Youssef Moubarak**--are the giants of this program. Think of a summit meeting with Bono and Sting getting loose and jamming flirtatiously with Grace Slick or Tina Turner. (Feel free to substitute the dazzling trio of your choice.) Then back them up with a band that soars free and gets down in wailing cries and throbbing rhythms that weave connections among peoples of the Arabian peninsula, North Africa, Mediterranean Europe and Eastern Europe. This is my idea of heaven.