

DANCE REVIEW

'Gypsy' is a spicy Eastern blend



UCLA

Tunisian-born dancer Leila Haddad made her U.S. premiere at UCLA.

Tunisian dancer Leila Haddad puts her own spin on Egyptian folklore in a stirring display of movement.

By Lewis Segal, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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The folklore of Upper Egypt embraces and sometimes fuses a number of traditions: ancient Pharaonic, those belonging to village cultures of the area, others dating from the Ottoman conquest and more recent pan-Muslim influences. To these, Tunisian dancer Leila Haddad added source material (including costuming) from Rajasthan, India, for her varied 90-minute program titled "In the Trail of the Ghawazee" at UCLA's Royce Hall on Saturday.

In all her dances, Haddad relied on the bedrock authority of seven men billed as the Gypsy Musicians of Upper Egypt, masters of such arcane instruments as the two-string spike fiddle, the drone double clarinet, the open-ended reed flute and drums of all sizes. And her dancing proved most exciting when specifically reflecting the pulse of their accompaniment, whether in rippling arm movements or sharp hip swings.

At one point in her dance with a silver cane -- the most familiar Egyptian folkloric piece on the program -- she briefly draped herself along the large circular drum held by El Kinawy.

At other times, she interacted at length with singer-drummer El Hamy Mohamed and later with singer Youssef Moubarak, who moved behind her and reached forward to bow his fiddle across her chest.

The easy camaraderie and charm of these passages eclipsed Haddad's more insular solos, in which she unfortunately adopted a forced smile that undercut the spontaneity of her performance -- even the complex but free-spirited muscular isolations that linked the skills of the Ghawazee (Gypsy entertainers) with modern dance technique.

Many of the pieces began with slow, atmospheric musicianship (a hoarse flute, for instance, or those insistent fiddles) that soon accelerated and became structured with the addition of rhythmic drumming and perhaps vocals. Haddad's contribution reflected the beat through light, quick footwork and torso accents that ranged from generalized shimmers to convulsive pelvic undulations.

Her technical arsenal also included sensuous lateral swaying, smooth spinning that might end in a spiral down to the floor and weightless glides across the stage. And sometimes she'd shatter the sense of flow that she'd worked so hard to sustain with an outburst of shoulder shakes, frantic lashings of her long dreads or a single gesture that served as a kind of exclamation point.

Moving across a darkened stage in layers of gleaming fabric, she embodied all the glamour and fantasy that traveling performers have brought to rural societies through the ages -- the escape from everyday life that we still seek in nearly every kind of entertainment.

Some people might call Haddad a belly dancer, but the term would not only degrade what she performs by linking it to cheap cabaret exhibitionism but also fail to account for the amazing expansions and contractions of the upper torso and chest that she displayed in one solo or those liquid arms in her opening invocation ritual or her intricate articulations of the neck.

Calling her an Oriental dancer would be equally misleading -- you might expect to find her in a kimono or flower-crown headdress instead of the long, veil-like head cloths over either dresses or pantaloons ensembles that she wore Saturday, apparel accented in metallic gold but dominated by various reds and splashes of orange or black.

Call her instead a woman of the world, one who moved to France in her teens but eventually defined herself as an artist who belongs to many cultures and ages, assimilating their beauties and sharing them with us as our own world darkens and needs all the escape it can get.

Besides the musicians previously mentioned, the ensemble included Abdallah Farah, Mohamed Mourad, Ramadan Atta and Gamal Gomaa.

LEILA HADDAD – Tunisia

Oriental Dancer

Leila Haddad makes the Chinese, Japanese, Americans, Canadians, Singaporeans, and Malaysians discover Oriental dance ... But it is in Paris that she teaches her art, at the Centre de Danse du Marais. We meet her at her favourite café, just before her first class of the day.

A pair of jeans and a leather jacket but also red and black African dreadlocks and piercing eyes hemmed with khol.

Leila is slightly from here, slightly from there, slightly from everywhere in fact. She grows up in Djerba and Tunis and wants to travel. "I was dreaming of the world, she confides, I have always been curious. So I went to London to prepare a graduate degree in comparative literature to become an interpreter". The objective: travelling.

From theatre to dance

In Brixton, Leila discovers the Zulu theatre: "I knew nothing about politics, and all at once I realized what was happening in South Africa. Like all the young people who were there at that moment I flared up for this cause, I was always hanging around the corner. The stage director finally offered me to join the company". As soon as she steps on stage it's a revelation. "I realized that my place was here, and this is what brought me back to dance". For Leila has been dancing since she was a little girl. She dances by observing adults, then actors and actresses. She locks herself in her room and imitates them in front of her mirror for hours. "In fact at that time I never told myself that I would be a dancer because I already felt as such. I am convinced that you are born a dancer ... or you're not. Then of course it is a gift that must be developed". Dance is something so obvious to Leila that she can easily imagine herself being a Gipsy in a former life. You just need to see her in action to be as convinced as she is. Music and dance really run into her veins, this is why she is on earth ...

Rebel

If dance has always been something obvious to Leila, she had to use cunning and had to struggle to manage to earn her living with her art. "Western people have a crude image of Oriental dance. The evidence of this is that it is mainly performed in restaurants and cabarets and not on theatre stages". They don't allow her to dance on stage? Well then she will teach it! So she starts teaching before really performing on stage. Once in Paris, she meets "open minded men and women of culture" who give her the opportunity to create her shows. That time is now far behind! Today Leila has her own company, she performs alone or accompanied by musicians and dancers, her speciality being solos of one hour and a half. And she continues as much to be a militant for Oriental dance. Whatever you do, do not say "belly dance" in front of her! "You call modern dance modern dance, Indian dance Bharata Natyam or Kathakali, I don't see why Oriental dance couldn't be called by its name! The term

"belly dance" is so much simplistic! Obviously everything starts here, the belly is the centre of vital energy, of sexual energy, it is the cradle ...By the way, I call it the telecommunication centre! Well, Oriental dance, Raks El Sharki, is not belly dance!" You can feel the will of restoring to favour this art firmly fixed in Leila's mind and you certainly don't want to try to pick a quarrel with her. Wise decision, you say to yourself when you learn that she always had the need to fight: "If I hadn't been a dancer, I would have been a bad boy!"

Under the Lights of Paris

Leila travels in the whole world but it is in Paris that she has chosen to have her pied-à-terre. City dweller through and through, she likes big cities: "I need pollution and noise!" she says joking. What she likes in the City of Lights? Its extraordinary energy. The confrontation between modernity and tradition, that still resists. She strolls along in the heart of popular and cosmopolitan districts, around Couronnes or Ménilmontant, where she appreciates the blend of cultures, nationalities, smells and savours. But she appreciates as much fashionable districts, the Marais, Saint-Germain ... "What is fantastic in Paris, she explains, is that you can still find in it a neighbourhood life, as in Abbesses, in Montorgueil, in the Sentier. I also like the labyrinthine side of this city, the fact that you can always go from one place to another without taking main roads. And of course there are the terraces, the cafés ...". The Latin side of the capital echoes Leila's personality: "It's a bubbling, energetic city, she says with delight. There is always something going on in it, no matter the time of day or night, despite a slight slow down since the mid-nineties".

Does she intend to stay in this city and continue to teach this dance that she loves so much? "I don't know what tomorrow's world will hold for us. I live from day to day: when you launch yourself into the future too much, you miss the present time. What is certain is that I don't see myself not dancing!".