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FIRE in her moves

Leila Haddad's dance is political. It is a political weapon to liberate Arab culture from age-old misconceptions. It has been a rigorous fight to gain recognition for her dance. And Leila's struggle continues, for 'prejudice has a strong skin' and she is adamant to pierce it.

Leila is hugely responsible for taking Oriental Dance or *Raqs Sharqi* in Arabic (translated as Dance Of the East) out of its cloistered world, relieving it of the stigma of being 'unbelievably indecent,' and elevating it as a legitimised art form after being disparagingly dismissed as belly dance.

The beginning

Born in Tunisia, to a Tunisian mother and Syrian father, Leila was dancing right from the time she learned to walk. "Dance was there in my family, it was around me, an integral part of Arab culture. We did not dance professionally but it was a must at all our family gatherings. My mother could play the lute and the harpsichord. Learning to play a musical instrument was part of our education. But we never danced before strangers," says Leila, who along with a group of students, was in Kochi as part of a tour of South India.

Leila became aware of the

prejudices, the stigma attached to her dance, when she left home to study in London in the 80s. She did her Comparative Literature (English and Italian) and began working with the Zulu Theatre.

"We were a group of dancers, singers and actors actively fighting against Apartheid. It was here that I first became aware of how the West looked at *Raqs Sharqi*. I realised that my culture, my people were ridiculed. Arab culture in general was misrepresented, misunderstood. As a dancer and choreographer, and as an Arab woman in the West, I thought I

DANCE Leila Haddad raised Arabian dance to a form of art. The veteran dancer tells K. PRADEEP that her dance is political, a tool to present Arab culture in the right perspective

must explain the best of our culture."

Leila decided to dance and to teach. "It was a fight. I love to fight for a principle and I believe that you can make a change if you have the power, conviction, and self-belief. I'm a tiger, you see..." she says, laughing heartily.

From the beginning Leila decided that she would dance only on theatre stages. She worked

Leila's Indian Connect

"I'm amazed by India and Indian dance. London has a large Indian community and I knew many of them who fought with us against Apartheid. I have many Indian students in Paris and in various parts of the world.

- I have seen a lot of Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak. This time in Kerala I watched Kathakali, something I had seen in Paris too. Every time I see it I'm like a child before toys.

- My heart is with the gypsy dancers of Rajasthan. It may not be very chic but the Kalbelia dancers have touched my heart. Maybe it is because they remind me of the Arab dances. The roots must be from Rajasthan. I got a European grant to come to Rajasthan and study. I have come down a few times, followed the gypsies and studied their dance.

- This trip to South India (Tamil Nadu and Kerala) was beautiful. Let me tell you, contrary to the travel advisories, it was absolutely safe for us. We went out in rickshaws after 11 p.m. I feel a lot depends on how one behaves.



'HIGH PRIESTESS' OF ORIENTAL DANCE Leila Haddad PHOTO: K. K. MUSTAFAH

on a script, choreographed it and went to the organisers of a dance festival. "They knew me as a theatre person. The first thing they asked me was whether I was doing classical ballet. I said no. They asked me whether it was contemporary dance and again I said no. When I said it was Arabic dance I saw their faces. 'Not here' they said. Now, did I do something wrong? They were rejecting me even without seeing my dance. This gave me even more reason to fight."

This rejection continued. The theatres found Leila's dance 'bad.' "Some of them called it the dance of a prostitute. The West was not aware, nor did it have any respect for Arab music and dance. My fight was for my

dance and also demanding respect for the Arab world."

Taking dance seriously

By mid 90s Mandela was released from prison, the struggle against Apartheid had ended. The Zulu Theatre slowly broke up with the members parting ways. "I decided to pursue dance seriously. By now I had headquartered in Paris. I had begun teaching too. The turning point was when the media began showing interest in my work. Initially, they looked at me as another belly dancer from the nooks of a dark cabaret hall. In fact, one of the leading television channels even wanted me to dance like one. I refused. I told them

bluntly that as dancer-choreographer I decide what' to do. They were not used to that. Gradually, they began taking an interest in my work."

Leila got her first chance to perform through a friend. That opened the doors. Today, Leila's dance, usually solo, is programmed by theatres in the five continents. Her company tours the world staging performances in some of the most prestigious venues. Another move was to teach only in reputed dance schools. She faced ridicule from various quarters but the fighter persisted. She now teaches at Centre de Dance du Marais and Studio Harmonic, in Paris, where her classes are much sought-after. Inspired by ballet, contemporary dance and also

the various Arab and Rajasthani folk forms, Leila's performances run to packed houses. She tours regularly performing at festivals, lecturing, organising workshops. "The going has been good so far. I see the change in attitude. I have experimented with the traditional form, made it contemporary. You need to do so when you take something out of its original context and adapt it to the stage. I call myself an architect of space and I explore physical geography."

Leila is a pioneer. She is one who put *Raqs Sharqi* on a par with other dance forms. Leila developed the infrastructure, organised classes, created a following. As she says, her dance "has come a full circle, but there is still a long way to go."

passingby