

Algerian National Ballet tours US for 1st time

Combined proceeds from 4-city tour will benefit earthquake survivors back at home

Anuj Desai
Special to The Daily Star

Judging by the mix of fashions for the New York debut of the Algerian National Ballet, the event was less about dressing up and more about participating in a gathering aimed at re-energizing a community that had been expressing itself more timidly than it wished in recent years.

For their first tour of the United States, the 34-year-old National Ballet played the part of cultural heritage ambassadors instead of modern mavericks. They opted to present a traditional folk repertoire that could have doubled as an introductory history seminar.

The company – which produced the first Algerian ballet, *Three Revolutions*, in 1971, and is directed by Houria Zoghbi – has performed in both ancient and modern styles over 2,000 times in 50-plus countries. Their program last Sunday afternoon at Tribeca Performing Arts Center's 913-seat theater consisted of the Algerine, Kabyle, Zendali, Shawi, Alawi, Tlemcen, Qarqabu, Burnous, Tuareg, Regibet and Solo and Uled Nail Wedding dances. They also brought along Andalusian musicians from the Algerian Symphony Orchestra to accompany them.

The combined proceeds from the artists' four-city tour, around the US will benefit victims of the May 21, 2003, earthquake that struck northern Algeria with a magnitude of 6.8 on the Richter scale, causing over 2,000 deaths, 10,000 injuries and \$5 billion in damage.

Speaking to a theater at approximately three-quarters capacity, the Algerian ambassador to the US, Idriss Jazairy, hoped that the embassy's first-time involvement in a cultural event of this size would help improve understanding between the people of both countries. The ballet's arrival, he said, "was an invitation for dialogue in a universal and inclusive language," because "the language of art and the language of music comes without the exclusivity of syntax."

The following day, in the lobby of Millennium Hotel at United Nations Plaza, Ambassador Jazairy recalled the "striking



The company will perform its traditional folk repertoire in four cities across the US

devastation" he saw when he visited the towns near the epicenter of the quake. The unexpected response of support from the private sector in the US convinced Jazairy that he needed to orchestrate a follow-up event that furthered what he likes to call the "people-to-people" dialogue between two countries.

And so the stage was set with American and Algerian flags, the audience abuzz in pre-show chatter in three different languages, and the show – finally – was on the road in the US.

The crowd began clapping as soon as the curtain went up, but it was the interlude of Andalusian music after the first dance that provoked the raucous cheering that accompanied the rest of the evening.

The band – which consisted of a tambourine player, a *tballi* drum player, a lead *oud* player, and the vocalist and oud player Lamia Maadini – began in a familiar tradition: Lyrics were sung slowly, repeated and drawn out

for several minutes, until finally the drums came crashing in. At this point, the crowd erupted in a manner foreign to most music fans: The Algerian women commenced with ululations that drowned out the performers. The percussive and high-pitched *yoyous* echoed throughout the hall as a sound technician scrambled to augment the musician's microphones. Clearly, this was something they hadn't rehearsed at the sound check.

The female dancers came back on stage for their Berber Kabyle recital and gave the audience even more reason to let loose. Undulating hips, which are meant to signify thanks for a bountiful olive harvest, were paired with statuesque, grinning faces. The dancers' low-slung, red cloth belts, which were wrapped around orange dresses, were the key to the successful display of their hip shimmies.

The National Ballet's selection of a co-ed, group dance for an Uled Nail wedding served as a subtle reprimand to all the Orientalists who have written at length about the belly dancers from this region in the Atlas Mountains. By showing an Uled Nail style of dance that differed significantly from the one that inspired Alexandre Dumas, Guy de Maupassant and Hendrik de Leeuw, the company made use of their stage to help erase stereotypes about Arabic dance that have persevered to this day.

As Jazairy said, "belly dancers, harems and multiple wives – these are the kinds of stereotypes that damage what is a millennial culture."

While the Uled Nail dance made the strongest statement, the Regibet dance offered the most stunning performance. The dancers' movements – which were short and sharp, slightly increasing in pace as time passed – were arguably the most impressive of the night from a choreographer's point of view. The degree of difficulty was very high for this dance, since the syn-

chronized swaying wasn't just reserved for the hips, the wrists or the arms, but instead involved a subtle swing from head to toe. In the context of the program, the Regibet, which has pre-Islamic origins, was unique not only because it felt like it was from another place, but also from another time.

Unfortunately, the follow-up to this performance high was a recital low. The Tuareg dance, from southernmost Algeria, relies on a device that's familiar to audiences all over the world: storytelling through choreography. Men with swords and shields battle each other in groups of different sizes. Two women figure into the dance by pleading with the leaders of both sides for peace. Eventually, the females' voice of reason prevails. Though the dance was met with audience applause, the piece suffered from choreography that sacrificed interesting movement for gestures that conveyed the story clearly and literally.

youous, they were also chanting "Viva Algerie!" There was only one more thing left for the crowd to do at this theater-turned-football stadium: storm the pitch. Audience members joined the dancers onstage without prompting. When the stage lights were turned off, nothing changed. The performance was over, but the dancing wasn't going to end any time soon.

Reflecting on the dance company's successes the following day, Jazairy explained that for some time now he'd felt that his office had "done our job at the summit level, but hadn't done enough on the cultural side" to promote an understanding between the people of Algeria and the United States.

After participating in the organization of the National Ballet's tour and also securing sponsorship from both US and Algerian companies, it is Jazairy's belief that a cultural event can make a diplomatic difference. The diversity of the program helped show that "we're not trying to suppress a (regional) culture." The tendency of governments, especially young ones, he said, "is to suppress local idiosyncrasy to preserve unity."

Jazairy's remarks bring to mind a moment early on during the performance at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center. When someone removed the US flag that had been resting on the stage, scattered applause ensued. Whether this move was being cheered as a tiny victory for the embassy organizers or as a small political gain during an evening dedicated to bridging cultural divides, was unclear.

But judging by the audience fanfare that erupted onstage after the show, it was a good thing the flag had been removed. For one afternoon, at least, that flag needed to make room so that the Algerians could dance.

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Oscar-winning actress Fonda to play in Jordan

BOMBAY: Oscar-winning actress Jane Fonda and US playwright Eve Ensler, author of the smash-hit *The Vagina Monologues*, plan to team up in a performance of a new Ensler work in Jordan later this year.

The pair will take part in *Necessary Targets* with a Jordanian, Iraqi and possibly Palestinian cast, the New York-based playwright said after a reading of her latest work with Fonda and Indian and Pakistani actresses in Bombay late Wednesday.

The new play, Ensler's first since *The Vagina Monologues*, tells the tale of two American women, a psychologist and a human rights worker, who go to Bosnia to help women refugees confront their memories of war.

She said no date had been set for the Jordanian performance of *Necessary Targets*, which has been staged in New York by Meryl Streep and Anjelica Huston.

Ensler's *Obie*-Award-winning *The Vagina Monologues*, which explores female sexuality and strength through a series of alternately sad, funny or horrifying vignettes, has been performed around the world.

The reading of *Necessary Targets* Wednesday had Fonda and Ensler as the Americans. Pakistani actresses Nighat Rizvi and Ayesha Alam played refugees with Indian actresses Avanti Akker and Jayati Bhatia.

The participation of the Indian and Pakistani actresses was a "gesture of friendship," Ensler said, reflecting easing tensions between long-time foes India and Pakistan.

Fonda, who spent Thursday privately in Bombay, and Ensler earlier performed two shows of *The Vagina Monologues* in Bombay, India's entertainment and financial capital.

Fonda, who is expected to leave for home Friday, had said she hoped her involvement in the play, the performance of which coincided with International Women's Day Monday, would drive home a message against female exploitation.

The actress, whose three ex-husbands include media mogul Ted Turner, said her marriages had prevented her from becoming a "complete woman" but she had been enriched by her involvement in *The Vagina Monologues*. – AFP

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A CONVERSATION WITH ...

Ahmed Abodehman: 'I conjure a happy Arabia'

Saudi writer's fictionalized autobiography, *The Belt*, recounts early village life

Olivia Snaice
Special to The Daily Star

PARIS: French, like English, is a language used by many novelists who are not writing in their mother tongue. One of the more interesting of these authors today is Ahmed Abodehman, who says he is the first Saudi to write in French.

His fictionalized autobiography, *La Ceinture* (*The Belt*), published by the French firm Gallimard, is in its 9th edition and recently came out in paperback with Gallimard's Folio. It has since been translated into English, German, Dutch and Spanish, and rewritten by the author in Arabic.

Abodehman and his writings are unusual for two reasons. As a poet, weekly columnist and Paris bureau chief since 1982 of the Saudi newspaper *Al-Riyadh*, he had always expressed himself in Arabic. He wrote *The Belt* to be able to tell his French wife and daughter about the village he grew up in.

"My daughter was 8 or 10 at the time, and I would pick her up at school every day at 4pm. I had already written 10 pages and on the way home I would tell her what I had written. Later I would read it to her. Then my wife would get home and I would read it again. So it's really a family text, an intimate text," says Abodehman.

He quickly realized that writing in French corresponded perfectly with the language of his childhood: "My mother tongue is my village dialect. I learned classical Arabic later at school. I began to write in a very simple French with a vocabulary equivalent to my mother tongue."

Even more surprising than his ability to recount his childhood better in French than Arabic is his introduction to the reader of a Saudi Arabia that is completely unfamiliar. Abodehman's Saudi Arabia is a tribal mountain village that follows many pre-Islamic rituals. The desert and holy cities of Mecca and Medina are mere shadows in the distance.

"To my knowledge, ours is the only tribe that was engendered by the sky," he writes. "The place where we live is mountainous, and the sky is part of these

mountains. Rain, here, does not fall. It ascends."

This is how the young Abodehman describes his village in the Assir Mountains, close to the Yemeni border. The region is reputedly a landscape with a sweeping natural beauty so stunning its inhabitants seem to live a symbiotic relationship with the elements. Abodehman was born in this area 55 years ago in the village of Al-Khalaf, 3,000 meters above sea level.

The salt and pepper haired Abodehman speaks fluent French and has lived in France since 1979. Granted a scholarship from the Saudi government, Abodehman chose France "for its poetry."

He is well aware of the vast distance between his two lives. In *The Belt*'s prologue he describes going to a French podi-

'Every activity had its special song. No one did anything without singing'

atrish who spends hours removing a callus in which small pieces of thorn from his barefoot childhood are embedded.

"But here," he writes, "I am among all of you, in Paris – you probably haven't noticed me because I make an effort to be like you, when in fact I carry the inexhaustible fire of my village inside me."

Abodehman's village memories are almost anthropological in that Al-Khalaf, along with the rest of Saudi Arabia, has undergone tremendous change over the past 50 years. In a country in which the founder of Wahhabism abhorred music, singing and poetry were an essential part of life in Al-Khalaf and then Abha, where Abodehman went to secondary school.

"In the village," he writes, "every activity had its special song. No one ever did anything without singing. We sang for everything – as if nothing could live or grow or be completed without poetry. We sang so life would dance, and often it did."

The *Belt* recounts the tremendous changes seen by Abodehman. In 1960 the village

gets not only a clinic and school, but also an imam to ensure the tribe follows the strict Wahhabi rulers' Islam. Separation of the sexes and the veil hadn't been present in the village before.

The storytelling and rituals that fill the lives of the villagers are clearly memories Abodehman fiercely treasures. He recounts the tribes' animistic beliefs, describing in great detail the boy watching a strange sort of ceremony his mother performs for a bat that lands in her home one night.

"I've always suspected my mother of secretly holding on to beliefs that had nothing to do with Islam," he writes.

It was in France during his studies that he discovered "historical references I never found in Saudi Arabia. Arabia was Jewish, Christian then Muslim. I'm proud of this plurality."

He is seemingly not politicized and yet careful to abide by the Saudi Arabian government's rules – he asked permission from the government when marrying his wife, a foreigner. And when he was told in no uncertain terms by King Saud University to drop his thesis project – a study of language in war novels in Arab and Israeli literature between 1967 and 1973 – he complied.

But when explaining why his book is banned in Saudi Arabia, he is more forthcoming.

"I think it's because I conjure up a happy and tolerant Arabia, where women have their place

and can sing and dance. Writing *The Belt* was a way of bringing to life this historical reality. It's a text of resistance against the death and destruction of memory, of this Arabia that one has tried to camouflage and demolish," he says.

Abodehman's intense memories are enough to fuel his creativity endlessly. His short story, *Le Printemps du Desert* (*Desert Spring*) that originally appeared in a special collection of stories on the theme of the comic character Tintin, will be published in September by Belgium's Editions Moulinsart. It recounts the happy discovery of the Tintin book *Land of Black Gold* by a Bedouin woman.

This fall, Gallimard Jeunesse will publish a children's book of Abodehman's short stories about a village in Arabia. He had originally invented the stories for his daughter.

Abodehman narrowly missed staying in his village as a schoolteacher. After his first three years of university study in Riyadh, "I went back to the village and taught for three terrible years. All I wanted was to return to Riyadh and study more. My father, whose feet were torn from working the fields, encouraged me to go. He saw that my future was somewhere else."

In *The Belt*'s prologue he writes, "I became a man in my own right, which is the true meaning of modernity. Whereas my tribe, even today, sees me as nothing more than a small cell in its great body."

Abodehman: "I've always suspected my mother of secretly holding onto beliefs that had nothing to do with Islam"

