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Dancing Across a Cultural Divide



SPOTLIGHT
PATRICIA WARD
BIEDERMAN

Cal State Northridge will be the scene this weekend of a little dance diplomacy.

An American-Israeli dance troupe and a company that does traditional dances from the Arabic Middle East will share the stage for what they are calling "Debka for Peace."

I'm betting that a group of dancers in Southern California will have virtually no impact on Arab-Israeli turmoil in the Middle East. But if this collaboration has little to do with peace in the global sense, it has a lot to do with another worthwhile aspiration—hope. And the joint program should be a lively, colorful reminder that people coming to this country don't have to bring long-standing cultural enmities with them.

Genie Benson is managing director

of the Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble, the American-Israeli group based in Sherman Oaks. As Benson explained, she and Dawn Elder, manager of the Adam Basma Middle Eastern Dance Company, were working together on another project when the idea of collaborating came to them.

The debka they will be doing is a traditional line dance that is Arabic in origin but has been adopted in Israel as well. Traditionally, it was performed in hopes of increasing the fertility of the earth and to celebrate the harvest. Today, people tend to break into a debka on such happy occasions as a wedding or the birth of a child.

According to Benson, the first thing the troupes learned about each other was how differently they did the

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Dancers in "Debka for Peace" aim to foster a spirit of hope.

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debka.

"They have women in their debka, which surprised us because our debka is a line of men. They wear shoes, we don't wear shoes. And, in theirs, the guy on the end holds his hand out. In ours, the man on the end holds his hand on his waist."

The differences were dramatic enough that the troupes will actually perform three debkas. As part of its half of the program, Keshet Chaim (which is Hebrew for "Rainbow of Life") will do an Israeli-style debka that reflects influences from the many Arab countries from which today's Israelis came.

Their debka will also reflect the fact, as Benson pointed out, that Keshet Chaim is "a contemporary company based on tradition." Under the artistic direction of Eytan Avisar, who is also its choreographer, the troupe borrows from tradition but doesn't worship it. Avisar definitely does not abide by the dictum: "No new steps."

Adam Basma's company will perform a true, traditional Arabic debka.

"All my numbers are authentic," explained Basma, who was born in Beirut. "They take you to a village

in one of the Arab countries."

For the finale, the combined dancers—all 45 of them—will do their debka for peace.

"We do a piece that's movement-based but isn't indigenous to anyone," Benson said. "It's a combination of their moves and our moves."

Keshet Chaim chose Israel's colors for their costumes, while Basma's dancers (he's both artistic director and choreographer) opted for the rainbow.

"All our people will be in blue and white, and they'll be in the costumes of all their different cultures," Benson said.

The media has been far more interested in this program than in most of their shows—obviously because of the notion of Arabs and Jews—some like Avisar, born in Israel—sharing the stage at a time when the Middle East continues to be roiled and divided.

In fact, Benson said, the troupes never talked politics, at least with each other. They talked dance.

A conscious effort was made to keep politics off the program. No Israeli official will speak before the performances, as often happens when Keshet Chaim performs alone. And while this is a collaboration, it doesn't reflect the

elimination of all differences.

The Keshet Chaim dancers didn't want to perform to traditional Arabic debka music, Benson said, so the finale will feature what she describes as world music, a fusion piece that was acceptable to both troupes.

"I'm sure some of the dancers on both sides had feelings—about their artistic superiority, for example—but they didn't say it on stage," she said.

Their joint rehearsals were friendly—and spirited.

"There was definitely a lot of energy in the room," Benson said.

Whatever its origin, traditional dance tends to be marked by spontaneous whoops and cries. At one point, Basma's dancers were rehearsing and every once in a while, one of them would shout something in Arabic.

"Our Moroccan guys who know some Arabic were getting into that," Benson recalled.

"I was surprised," Basma said of the collaboration. "Everybody was nice from both sections. We had fun."

Benson, who has been doing Israeli folk dances since she went to Camp Alonim in Simi Valley as a child, doesn't yet know whether

she will be doing the debka Saturday and Sunday.

A couple of weeks ago, she was performing in Texas and seriously sprained her ankle on stage.

"I came down off a lift and landed on Eytan's foot," she said.

She hopped off stage in agony. Usually, she's the person who speaks at the end of each performance, thanking the appropriate people. Since no one else was prepared, the men in the company carried her back on stage to say the troupe's thank yous.

Benson thinks the collaboration was valuable, even if it doesn't change the world.

"If we hadn't done the piece together, we wouldn't have had that situation where we had to understand each other and come to common ground."

"Debka for Peace" will be performed at the New Performing Arts Center at CSUN on Saturday at 8:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. For tickets, call CSUN at (818) 677-2488, Keshet Chaim at (818) 784-0344 or Adam Basma's troupe at (323) 934-9493.

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