

Reading Dance

by Lori Ortiz

Dancing with the Madames Bouchra Ouizguen is crossing the line

September 26, 2010

Moroccan choreographer Bouchra Ouizguen met *Aïta* singers performing in the Madame Plaza club in Marrakech. In *Madame Plaza* she dances together with her subjects,

to the popular Moroccan song form. *Madame Plaza* is a kind of safe meeting ground. They performed it at Florence Gould Hall on September 22 and 23 as part of the French Institute's Crossing the Line Festival and Trajal Harrell's Danspace Platform "certain difficulties, certain joy."

Ouizguen uses movement and sound (songs with lyrics unintelligible to most in the audience) to present a drama set in the club. (A brothel?) The movement comes from their traditional, popular dances, inspired by oriental and geisha dances. The performers appear as sculpted forms in pedestrian loungewear, recalling ancient Venus figures in incarnations both high and low.



The four women sit with knees slightly spread, staring out at us. They list and loll a bit, on covered foam daybeds. Ouizguen, in a loose fitting top, blends into the group of fulsome singers who are built for belting out sound. Then, her captivating movement reveals her training in oriental and European dance.

We get familiar with the heavy characters in this floating world.

At first, *Madame Plaza* faces a polite audience of voyeurs. And nagging issues of women's pain and powerlessness in the sex trade persist throughout the seemingly simple and lighthearted dance.

Naïma Sahmoud doubles with the choreographer in sisterly playful moves. They are dressed alike in patterned tops that complement the upholstery. The other two wear big, brightly colored T's. When Fatima El Hanna opens her mouth, her strong, chanting tone compels. She even sings while rolling on the floor with the others, in a fluid mass. According to a program note, the songs invoke Allah, souls, love, or fierce horsemen.

Recorded vocal and stringed instruments intermittently accompany the live song and movement blend. A performer might grunt, wail, smile or grimace. These are clues and help us suspend disbelief. They jump on the beds. (Three are a moveable set, standing on end, or arranged in

different ways.) The women run vigorously together on the diagonal. From opposite corners, they sing to each other across the stage. Mood, speed, and emotions vary in *Madame Plaza*, suggesting a day in *The Life*.

In a repeating motif, a dancer facing upstage shakes her outspread hands while raising curvilinear arms in a kind of benediction. Her expressive arms sometimes flap like wings, suggesting flight and spirituality.

We get familiar with the heavy characters in this floating world. Ouizguen invites us to meet them on their ground. Magically, we are taken in. Their tome of love, futility, sisterhood, corporeality, and spirituality does transcend the language barrier, in movement that ranges from lounging and listing to simulated sex.

We warm to *Madame Plaza* especially when Kabboura Aït Ben Hmad pulls on a man's white suit over her pajamas and courts Hanna. Her gestures and expressions hold subtle, tongue-in-cheek wit. The scene is slightly kinky and surely universal. Meanwhile, Ouizguen and Sahmoud peep over a fence of the upholstered foam, coyly watching the mating couple. Their cavorting is itself endearing, supporting drama.

By the end of the performance, we feel closer. Like at the start, the four sit and stare at us again, but the couches are now downstage. The dancers take their bows in Thalie Lurault's steady, warm lighting. It ends on a hopeful note.

Ouizguen is working on a documentary, in which we will hopefully learn more about the Aïta performers informing this work.

Madame Plaza photo, Naïma Sahmoud © Hibou Photography

Theater | July 14, 2010

Moroccan choreographer breaks boundaries at German theater festival

By Kate Laycock



The founder of Morocco's first contemporary dance group takes a taboo-breaking look at the world of Morocco's wedding dancers. Her work is part of a German festival that aims to cross national boundaries on stage.

The work portrays relationships in a way that is universal.

Four women are on stage. Three of them are Aitas - traditional Moroccan wedding dancers adored by men, but often ostracized by their families and the rest of society. The other is the pioneering founder of Morocco's first and only contemporary dance company, ANANIA.

This is "Madame Plaza," Bouchra Ouizguen's intimate portrait of a feminine world which exists in defiance of family pressure and social prejudice. It is also a tribute to the three women Ouizguen has chosen to work with: Kabboura Ait Ben Hmad, Fatima El Hanna and Naima Sahmoud.

A century ago, Aitas enjoyed a privileged position in Moroccan society. Prized for their beauty and musical accomplishments, they enjoyed respect from men and women, rich and poor alike.

Nowadays, however, Aitas have a very different status. Still a key feature of village ceremonies and festivals, the Aitas find themselves regarded as little better than dancing prostitutes. Men make lewd advances, and women treat them with suspicion.

Bouchra Ouizguen (pictured, right) founded Morocco's first contemporary dance company.



Artistic Sacrifice

Fascinated by the lilting songs of the Aitas since her early childhood, 30-year-old choreographer Bouchra Ouizguen sees them as women who have sacrificed everything for their art.

One of the few practitioners of contemporary dance working in Morocco today, Ouizguen feels a deep comradeship with the Aitas. In a way, she feels, it is the Aitas who have led the way for her own pioneering career path.

"In Morocco," Ouizguen told Deutsche Welle, "the status of 'artist' is not recognized. It was difficult for me to decide to become an artist, but when these women started out 30 years or so ago, it was even harder. I find their choice extremely admirable. In fact, I take my hat off to them!"

Intimate Trespass



"Madame Plaza" does not seek to serve up Aita-like performances to an international audience. Instead, it is a slow, tender recreation of the closeness shared by Ouizguen and her three collaborators during an artistic retreat spent swapping stories in preparation for their work together.

The four participants went on a brainstorming retreat to prepare for the production.

What is perhaps most striking about the piece, is the fact that the four female bodies on stage seem so at ease with each other that it seems almost rude to watch. Whether walking about the stage, demonstrating favorite little dance movements or simply lying on a sofa, the women seem to be performing only for themselves.

"We live inside the project," explained Ouizguen. "In fact, the hardest thing about the project was moving this intimacy that we had established outwards so that we could share it with the audience."

Theater of the world

"Madame Plaza" is one of 32 performances from 25 different countries currently being showcased by Germany's prestigious Theater der Welt (Theater of the World) festival.

Funded by the German branch of the International Theater Institute, Theater der Welt usually takes place once every three years, but in 2010 the festival was moved forward to coincide with Essen's status as European Capital of Culture.

Moroccan wedding dancers do not have a good standing in society.



Each edition of the festival takes place in a different city and under the leadership of a new festival director. Currently at the helm is Belgian theater practitioner and veteran champion of the arts, Frie Leysen.

A renowned supporter of Arabic theater, Frie Leysen takes the global remit of Theater der Welt extremely seriously. "You can make a festival from behind your desk," Leysen told Deutsche Welle, "but I'm not interested in that."

Having spent much of the past two years traveling the globe in search of exciting new projects to include in her program, Leysen has developed two key criteria for judging the suitability of the work she encounters.

An artist, Leysen feels, must be able to "be critical of his own society and use this critical stance to develop a vision for that society." This vision must, however, be able to "transplant." It's not enough for a performance to be pertinent in its original context; it has to be pertinent in a wider context as well, she said.

Universal Resonance

Although rooted in the specific cultural circumstances of the Moroccan Aïtas, "Madame Plaza" is a performance which transcends cultural barriers and speaks to a global audience. The world on stage seems achingly familiar. The trust, tenderness and humor shared between the four women is something which needs no translation.

Whatever the country, whatever the circumstance, the complex mixture of longing, regrets, hopes and frustrations played out on stage speaks to an understanding of friendship and female solidarity which will be immediately recognizable to everyone.

THE VIEW FROM FEZ

Observations from the Medina of Fez in Morocco

Friday, July 16, 2010

Bouchra Ouizguen - Morocco's Contemporary Dance Pioneer

Contemporary dance is hugely popular around the world and yet extremely rare in Morocco. But that may be about to change with an international success that recently hit the stage at a German festival.



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The work is entitled "Madame Plaza, and is one of 32 performances from 25 different countries currently being showcased by Germany's prestigious Theater der Welt (Theatre of the World) festival.

It is a brave piece. Bouchra Ouizguen's intimate portrait of a feminine world which exists in defiance of family pressure and social prejudice. It is also a tribute to the three women Ouizguen has chosen to work with: Kabboura Ait Ben Hmad, Fatima El Hanna and Naima Sahmoud.

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Hats off to Ouizguen as well as she puts Morocco's contemporary dance on the world stage.