

Surprised by Melancholy: Musings on Tribal & Cabaret Belly Dance
by Jenny Binckes Lee



I must begin honestly: I am biased towards beauty, towards joy. In my previous wanderings through YouTube, I had found no sweetness in Tribal Belly Dance. Because of my aversion to its angular movements, oft set against a metallic soundscape, I worried that I would be unable to perceive the dance form's merits or describe a performance with a fair pen. Likewise, in that I have been recently smitten with all that is Turkish, I

felt sure that this review could not help but extol the soft, flirtatious spirit of the Cabaret. I had intended to write of how my own aesthetics embrace the traditional artistry of, for example, Samia Gamal and shy away from the otherworldly creativity of Rachel Brice and her talented ilk; however, you will not read that review today, for I have been surprised. The Christian theologian and novelist C.S. Lewis once wrote a slender memoir entitled *Surprised by Joy*. As for me, I have been surprised by melancholy.

Enter, stage left, Aepril Schaile, self-described "American priestess of the Dark Goddess". She and her Exquisite Corpse Dance Theatre embrace the "darker side of belly dance", perhaps aptly so, in Salem, Massachusetts.



photo by Geraldine V. Photography

Just more than a year ago at Rakkasah Middle Eastern Dance Festival in Somerset, New Jersey, Ms. Schaile opened her troupe's set with a solo entitled, "The Heart Asks Pleasure First," set to Michael Nyman's haunting music for *The Piano* and named for Emily Dickinson's poem 588:

The Heart asks Pleasure - first -
And then - excuse from Pain -
And then - those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering -
And then - to go to sleep -
And then - if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die.

It rains now, as I write these words, and as Ms. Schaile begins her eloquent "dance poem," for it can only be called that, a soft electronic rain hushes the viewer's heart.

In beautiful symmetry to the song's title, which isolates the heart from its host, Ms. Schaile's dance exquisitely isolates hand, face, arm, shoulder, hip, chest and belly, both visually and physically. Dressed and veiled in gossamer black, she begins still, with her back to the audience. Her hidden face turns from side to side, almost questioningly, as we quiet ourselves for what will come. The left palm is the dance's first character, tenderly leading the eye to a subtly sinuous left snake arm, laced in black, as well. Next, we meet a slim fraction of the dancer's white-powdered face as she turns towards us, seemingly unaware of our presence. Her world is the palm she is beholding, bringing to mind William Blake's verse, "To hold infinity in the palm of your hand."



photo by Michael Harkavy

And now, as the music intensifies, the dancer removes her veil, walks toward us, meets our eye. Quietly, she lowers herself to another plane, and herein the right palm joins the left in flight. Already, it is a love story. In smallest geisha steps, she glides across the stage with a quiet expression on her lips, somewhere at the edges of wistfulness. She then turns and turns, the veil her partner. One might not even call this belly dance - that is, not until the dancer throws her veil to the air, literally and figuratively releasing herself from any traditional confinements of the art form. Now, the dance becomes darker in hue, yet strangely, less affected by the pull of gravity. This is now Ms. Schaile's own interpretation of the

Gothic or Tribal. In precise and loving miniature, her arms snake, her shoulders accent, her hips three-quarter, her chest lifts, her belly undulates; soon the music leads her gracefully to the floor. Here, we realize that our dark geisha is built of actual porcelain and fine clockwork. Nevertheless, we are certain that she has a heart, suffers pleasure and pain, risks perishing.

Would not so poignant a performance be expected from a young Turkish woman of Romany origins who, as an infant, slept with small cymbals under her pillow? Part Romany myself, and a student of Turkish culture and language, I felt certain I would be moved by the artistry of the much celebrated Turkish belly dancer, Didem. Although I can appreciate that she is a prodigy, indeed a genius, of the art of movement through space, I feel that her deeper, emotional artistry is still developing. Watching her perform on the Turkish variety show "Ibo", I certainly smiled. Her joy in expressing herself in dance is palpable and infectious. In this particular dance, Didem walks smartly onto the stage in stilettos, red and black silks, coins and smiles. She



has a great freshness about her, and to me, her dance has an improvisational quality. Although her choreography lacks the apparent architecture of a story, her each gesture and movement is perfectly sculpted. Indeed, her dance is the quintessence of joyous precision, which might seem to be an oxymoron; Didem proves it possible. This particular dance is a showcase for Didem's perfectly isolated hip slides, ups, downs, chest circles, shoulder accents, undulations



and mayas. She beautifully layers shimmies upon her movements and makes continuous eye contact with the audience. Although she also starts with her back to us, for the rest of the performance, the lucky audience is Didem's partner.

Strangely, although Didem very much embraces a traditional Cabaret style, her carriage and spirit strike me as utterly 21st century. Perhaps this modern feel is conjured by a certain boldness in her style and gaze, coupled with her own very sleek lines. I am left wondering at the very intentions of the two styles of Belly Dance, for the more "modern" performance of Aepiril Schaile had an almost antique aesthetic and carries a grace that pierces my heart. Does the Cabaret wish to dwell solely in the first line of Dickinson's verse: The Heart asks Pleasure?

Is the Cabaret meant to sweeten? To quicken the pulse? To lift the spirit? To amaze? If so, then Didem succeeds on all counts. And is the Tribal meant to make us ponder? To give us story? To transport us to another realm or time? To break our hearts? Ms. Schaile certainly does all this. In their own ways, should both art forms awaken us? However much my own reactions to these two performances surprised me, I feel that both dancers have generously given us "little Anodynes" to ease our own isolated sufferings.

Works Cited:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHzf1M8eca0>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFY-HDXZM4E>

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