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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

Listening to the Voices of Arab Women

Performances seek to reframe the conversation about women in the Middle East and North Africa



Leyya Mona Tawil rehearses her experimental dance piece, 'Atlas.' PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **LIZZIE SIMON**

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“Intensity.”

That, according to Cairo-based artist and curator Adham Hafez, is what links the four solo works by female performing artists having their U.S. premieres Friday and Saturday at New York Live Arts.

The two evenings of avant-garde movement and comedy at the group’s Chelsea headquarters are part of Live Arts’ ambitious, weeklong Live Ideas festival, which this year spotlights artists and intellectuals from the Middle East and North Africa region.

At a time when Western tensions with the area are roiling and cultural openness and

understanding increasingly overshadowed by terrorism fears, the festival's 25-plus offerings—in the performing and visual arts as well as master classes, lectures, screenings, community dialogues and more—give New York audiences a chance to directly experience a wide range of the region's most prominent and pioneering cultural voices.

“These are vital voices that otherwise are not going to be heard,” said Thomas O. Kriegsmann, Mr. Hafez's co-curator as well as director of programs at New York Live Arts. “There is no better way to get the complexity through than live performance, body to body, community to community, in a room together through physical presence.”

‘Each country, each class, each religious belief system has a separate reality for women and many of them are empowered.’

—Choreographer Leyya Mona Tawil

Mr. Hafez hopes that in the curatorial breadth of the festival New York audiences take stock of how many different kinds of artists and themes are underrepresented in U.S. performance venues. “To see the blind spots,” he said.

At a quick glance, the soloists, apart from gender and intensity, share little in common. The artists range in age from mid-20s to mid-50s and represent an extended Middle East diaspora that encompasses the U.S. and Europe.

Their aesthetic range is also broad.

Marie Al Fajr, a French choreographer who has had a major presence in Egypt for more than 20 years documenting dying dance traditions, will perform “Shagarat Mussafira (Traveling Trees),” a slow, meditative, Egyptian-based contemporary dance.

Egyptian-Irish performer Mona Gamil's comedic piece, wherein she plays an author promoting a guidebook to making “safe” and market-friendly art, is “stylistically more Tony Robbins than Arabian Nights,” she said, referring to the renowned motivational speaker.

Syrian-Palestinian-American choreographer Leyya Mona Tawil's “Atlas,” a collaboration with violinist Mike Khoury, is about submitting to, and pushing against, the burden of

knowledge.

And Tunisian choreographer Amira Chebli's "In Situ" resembles a mix of early modernist dance with belly dance, exploring what it means to be an Arab woman performing internationally today.

"We belong to a common ground," said Ms. Chebli, "yet to very different backgrounds, treating things with different tools and exposing various visions."

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Each solo, according to Mr. Hafez, "proposes politics not expected by Arab female performers." There is no "sitting in the work preaching."

There are no survival tales, designed to engender empathy. This, Mr. Hafez said, sets the program apart from a type of work more typically imported to U.S. performing-arts venues from women in the region. "I want to be careful about my words," he said, before pausing. "There is so much melodramatic work that just satisfies Orientalist expectations. This is not that."

Each of the soloists characterized the evening as an important opportunity to reframe and elevate the conversation about women from the Middle East and North Africa region, who are often seen in the media and in popular culture as disempowered or delusional.

"We're actually quite empowered," said Ms. Tawil. "Each country, each class, each religious belief system has a separate reality for women and many of them are empowered."