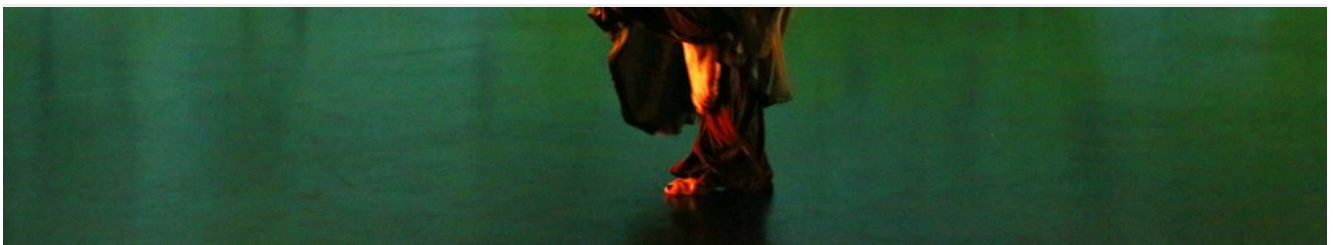




Review: 'Solos' Features Four Women in Works Reflecting the Arab World



Marie Al Fajr performing at New York Live Arts.
ANDREA MOHIN / THE NEW YORK TIMES

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY
MARCH 28, 2016

The very news of a program of four female soloists in various ways linked to, or deriving from, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia was tantalizing. How many here know much about the dance of those countries? How many here have experienced the creativity of the women there?

Congratulations to [New York Live Arts](#) for “Solos,” the program it presented on Friday and Saturday as part of its Live Ideas series. All four women — [Marie Al Fajr, based in Paris and Cairo](#); Mona Gamil, based in Dublin and Cairo; [Leyya Mona Tawil](#), who is a Syrian-Palestinian-American; and [Amira Chebli](#), who is Tunisian — broke any dance stereotypes of the Arab world (sexy belly-dancing for tourists, for example), though two drew from folk traditions.

The opening number, Ms. Fajr’s “[Shagarat Mussafira \(Traveling Trees\)](#),” proved the richest. Not at first, though. Ms. Fajr had hardly entered, dressed in a floor-length gown, when she folded to the ground and remained slumped there a long time, her rich mane of dark hair spilling like a hood. When she rose, her dancing gradually disclosed more and more resources: different meters, different floor geometries, different lines of the body.



Amira Chebli performing at New York Live Arts.
ANDREA MOHIN / THE NEW YORK TIMES

The movement sometimes spiraled slowly, vertically up and down her physique, or horizontally across her arms and torso. Sometimes she maintained her arms in a single position, with tilted torso, while turning, as if invoking the movement of dervishes; but then she would straighten her posture and turn the phrase into something more complex. And her face is extraordinarily theatrical: Mature, scarcely ever changing its impassive expression, it was both passionate and Sphinx-like.

[“In Situ,”](#) Ms. Chebli’s dance, was a series of ideas connected only by her performing them and their sense of restricted space and constricted physicality. Sometimes she drew from the oscillations of belly dancing (without any virtuoso pelvic speed); sometimes she used veils (black, green), wrapping them around her head, across her face, over her hips. Moment by moment, it was entirely attractive. Overall, it left too vague an impression.

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Ms. Gamil’s solo “S.A.P. Safe Art Practice” — not a dance but a satirical lecture, with illustrations on a screen — seemed entirely Western. It was just sophomoric: a trite exercise in cynicism about how to win grants and ingratiate yourself with

followers by performing predictable and unalarming work.

Paradoxically, “Atlas,” Ms. Tawil’s solo, was both tedious and extraordinary. Most of it consisted of Ms. Tawil’s rolling across the stage (she was dressed in a knee-length coat and ankle boots): about 10 rolls to the left, then 10 back — the number varied. Basic though this sounds, there was technique and even beauty in it. The propulsion of the hand and heel was connected to arcs throughout the body. You could liken the rolls to waves and tides of the sea. You could also feel them as helpless searches for a point of rest.

When Ms. Tawil stood and moved on her feet, the same sense of frustrated search continued: She seemed driven. Mike Khoury played successive violin solos, mainly on just one or two notes. I kept running out of patience with Ms. Tawil’s repetitions; then they would rekindle my attention. The plight “Atlas” expressed became larger than that of one individual.

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