

artist's blend of the folksy and the profound. Heard here, Cash takes on an iconic glow like Edith Piaf, a "voix humaine" that reaches universal sentiments in a most particular and stylish way. Four dancers, three women and a man, all in cowboy boots, for the most part never stopped being physically connected throughout the piece. Occasionally a dancer would orbit out to express some eccentric expression and join back into the continually stepping, marching, dancing, bobbing foursome.

In constant motion like a Pilobolus creation, the piece was theatrical and charming, at the same time abstract and complex as a minimalist exercise moving around the stage. I was reminded of British choreographer Jonathan Burrows' mathematical dances and their inescapable emotion. Sensing the simple, the dances, here akin to Cash's voice, pointed out profundity in the mundane. Music producer Mark Ronson, known for producing Amy Winehouse and more recently Bruno Mars, is responsible for several of the song selections. He brings his stripped-down essentialism to the music of Johnny Cash and it serves the deceptive simplicity of the dance.

The evening closed with *Tulle*, a new work by ballet's creative polymath, the Swede Alexander Ekman. With finesse, he choreographs the world's plethora of concert dance styles, at the same time delighting in set designs, costume designs, filmmaking, art installations, and directing. The multitalent is evident in the coherence Ekman brings to this very funny salute to the study of ballet over the centuries. It looks at what is left behind with good humor and at the allure of contemporary energies. Parts of it look like a deconstructed *Suite en Blanc*.

Much of the music, scored by Mikael Karlsson, had a layer of conversation atop it: how to perform a step correctly, the philosophical and the practical intersecting. Brutal panels of light in the back and right of the stage transformed into a variety of projected and displayed images. History leapt and spun by, across a chic, energetic set.

Tulle is in fact a work for the corps, even as they tromped across a miked stage in toe shoes, each footstep a loud reminder of the hardness of the shoe. Here the Joffrey corps looked wonderful, enjoying the work as much as the audience did. What is clear is the durability of the swan, and the beauty of ballet that captivates anew.

Chicago has been fortunate to see a number of premieres by Scandinavian choreographers in recent years, and let's hope the trend continues.

New York

Karen Greenspan

At the Gibney Studios, Moroccan choreographer Hind Benali presented an intimate showing of *Identity*, her dance work commissioned by Center Stage, an initiative of the U. S. Department of State, produced by the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), and intended to create goodwill through cultural exchange.

In a corner of the studio, behind the scant two rows of folding chairs that comprised the audience area, stood a veiled woman dressed in a yellow chiffon, traditional Moroccan wedding dress. She was perfectly still, as if frozen in time, at the open window above the traffic and noise of lower Broadway. Meanwhile, in the center, a male performer, Soufiane Karim, performed warm-up stretches and a meditative preparation. He was dressed in a black tunic, tied with a red sash, over black pants; a tied black scarf covered his head. Finally, he opened his eyes and welcomed the assembled group, saying, "*Salaam aleikum.*" When no one responded, a smile of realization crossed his face. He repeated his greeting and gestured to the audience, leading us in the expected response, "*Aleikum salaam.*" And so began the journey into *Identity*, made in collaboration with hip-hop dancer/flute player Karim and composer/musician Mohcine Imrharn (all from Morocco), to express Benali's contemporary paradox of being an Arab, Muslim, woman, and artist.

Like a seasoned storyteller, Karim invited the audience on the journey as he took up his beautiful, large, wooden flute and alternated staccato toots with long tones, walking about and bending his knees, like a Moroccan Pied Piper. Imrharn's sound mix introduced dramatic, echoing, deep drumbeats during which Karim stood his flute upright, to use as a prop, while he gathered the air like grains of sand from a different time and space that he sprinkled about with eloquent hand and finger gestures. He placed his flute across his back (literally wearing his instrument) as he squatted, seemingly under the weight of the flute. Balancing it on the back of his neck, he extended his arms outward and sensuously fluttered them like a graceful giant bird.

Throughout the piece and with an aura of calm clarity, Karim moved through a range of choreography, both delicate and detailed as well as highly physical and acrobatic, expressing an unwavering constant. This contrasted with Benali's dance of inner conflict. All of the strains of Imrharn's soundscape – insistent bass drums and exotic melodic lines of the oud, sung Arabic verses, spoken conversation, electronic sounds, echoed water drips, and mystical quavering chants – served to conjure a distant world that supported and exquisitely interacted with the danced action.

Meanwhile, Karim's bird alighted next to a mound of yellow fabric. In an elegantly orchestrated transition, Karim stood holding his flute upright. He moved upstage and squatted to the floor, receding into the background. Simultaneously, Imrharn walked onstage, sat down in a chair next to the yellow mound, and began playing the oud. From the pile of chiffon came a screeching noise, as it elongated and stretched upward, reminding me of a chick breaking out of its shell. As the multiple gauzy layers of skirt fell away from her head, the hidden dancer was revealed.

Benali stood in her grandmother's wedding dress – its black bodice densely decorated with gold beadwork. A glittering headdress, fringed with quivering gold beads, framed her face. She resembled a dancing flame as her

hands played with the layers of flaxen chiffon. Finally, she seemed to clasp something between two fingers that she brought to her heart as Imrharn intoned a soulful song.

Echoing Benali's movements, Karim re-joined the action until he received the oud from Imrharn. He turned the instrument around and held it lovingly against his body, beating a rhythm on its back while Benali repeatedly beat her chest. Under the multitudinous layers of chiffon, which she carefully tucked one by one into her waistband, Benali's hips began to vibrate. Karim's beating rhythm awakened her shimmying shoulders. She belted out a traditional tune that sent her dancing across the stage – the filmy fabric of her skirt swirling around her. As the sound swelled into up-tempo, reedy, heart-thumping, traditional aalaoui dance music, Benali broke into an ecstatic dance with shoulders shimmying and legs kicking – until she came to a sudden halt.

Morocco has a rich tradition of dances that utilize fabric to cover and uncover the female dancer. Benali expertly employed her cultural legacy (and wrestled with it) as she struggled with the countless layers of her skirt – tossing them up in the air, concealing her head, and painting the space with stormy strokes of yellow until she was once again a heap on the floor. Suddenly, she sat up and sang an unaccompanied song that her Algerian grandmother used to sing to her – a song about going on pilgrimage to Mecca, with the reaffirming refrain, “*Allah hu akhbar*.” Then she disappeared beneath the waistband of the skirt floating around the space like a shimmering, faceless sea creature.

Throwing off the skirt, Benali finally emerged from this metamorphosis as a contemporary dancer attired in black dance shorts and tank top and with her loosened and abundant golden tresses. The “modern dance” sections of the piece tended to be overdrawn, as the message was clearly delivered by the intensity of Benali's performance presence and the costuming itself. Karim accompanied the process by walking about, caressing and drumming the back of the oud. He then em-

bodied the transformation in an expressive, mimed solo that sent him spinning across the stage to reconnect with his flute.

As Karim played the flute, Benali descended into a primal squat and fingered a piece of black fabric that she tied around her head as a traditional, female, workaday head covering. This, along with her postures, gestures, facial expressions, and spoken chitchat, provided a glimpse into her Moroccan roots – both personal and societal. After an intense struggle to pull herself upright and even reach skyward, she reverted to a crouch.

The traditional world of Moroccan women has, for centuries, been mostly separate from the world of men. Born in the town of Oujda, on Morocco's eastern border with Algeria, Benali was raised by a matriarchy of her mother, sisters, and grandmothers – as her father was always far away working. Much of the inspiration for the piece came from her memories of these women who surrounded her while she grew up.

Karim sat down on the floor busily preparing yet another piece of fabric. He pounded and thumped the cloth with unhurried kneading gestures – listening with interest to Benali as she lay on her back delivering a monologue, in Moroccan, to her paternal grandmother in heaven, apologizing for continuing to pursue a dance career even though it is not permitted within their religion. The piece built in intensity as Benali sat singing and drumming on the floor while Karim, drawing on his hip-hop prowess without being defined or confined by it, performed athletic handstand turns, flips, and rolls. Meanwhile, Benali donned the enveloping white muslin fabric Karim had so carefully prepared for her.

Using hip-hop illusionary techniques like isolation and mime, Karim executed a riveting solo while Benali wrapped herself completely in the fabric, concealing all but a single angry eye. She twisted and stretched within the confines of the shroud-like cloak as Karim carefully collected and raised up the discarded wedding skirt, cradling it like a bro-

ken or dead body. Benali shuffled around the stage – constrained and utterly covered, the traditional skirt having been replaced with a more extreme confinement. Karim and Benali then danced a solace-filled duet in which he comforted and shouldered her severely concealed body.

Benali finally bared her face with a defiant expression and caressed it with a scarlet, silk sash that she pulled from the interior of her white robe. She then receded into the folds of white fabric, which twisted and contorted into strange shapes that eventually ejected Karim and Benali separately. Benali tied the white cloth around her waist as a giant skirt, revealing her bare arms and tank top, while toying with the red sash.

Karim circled Benali repeatedly, squatting down to the floor every couple of inches and then popping back up, as he arranged the bottom of her skirt into a massive enclosure. His rhythm quickened as, with military precision, he continuously attended to arranging her attire. His circling sped into somersaults around the skirt's perimeter.

Karim informed me that he drew upon Morocco's gnawa trance-inducing dance rituals for this section of the piece. Indeed, the gnawa male dancers jump athletically up and down to a deep squat – with incessant rebounds and layouts. I couldn't help but notice a resemblance to hip-hop stunts. Karim agreed, and pointed out that the similarity extends beyond the movement to the circular formation, group composition, and musical rhythms.

Benali resisted as she poked a bare leg out of the opening of the wraparound garment – all the while massaging her shoulders with the red sash. Karim's circling accelerated into a full throttled run until, in an instant, Benali threw the band of crimson around Karim – capturing him.

Benali pushed the skirt over her head and grabbed onto a chair; Karim rolled across the stage and picked up his flute that he played with the long red ribbon attached to its end. The splash of scarlet painted the air as Karim

danced and played his flute like a snake charmer, his instrument wielding power over Benali.

Finally, discarding the white fabric, Benali sustained a headstand while Karim used his flute like an implement – scribbling across the space and over the fabric that Benali had flung off. *Identity* concluded with Benali sitting on the floor in her black tank and shorts, beating a bangled, belly-dance scarf against the floor. Karim had wrapped himself within the discarded white material – spinning like



Hind Benali in *Identity*.

a covered dervish, finally descending into a heap.

The piece left the audience speechless. However, we all found our voices when invited to participate in a Q and A with the performers. The three Moroccan artists pulled up some chairs a couple of feet away from the viewers for a close and personal encounter.

Later, when I spoke with Deirdre Valente of Lisa Booth Management, Inc. (LBMI), I learned that this exchange is an essential aspect of Center Stage. She explained that the initiative evolved as a result of a report made to the Obama administration by the NEFA, now the program's producer, and other regional arts organizations in January 2009. The report urged the United States to recommit to international cultural exchange as a means to enrich the education of our children, build greater ac-

ceptance of different cultures within our borders, create an environment for more effective diplomacy, and prepare citizens to fully participate in the global economy and society.

The program is similar to the model of Dance Motion USA, which sends American dance companies abroad to connect with foreign audiences and communities. However, Center Stage takes the opposite approach, bringing international artists from abroad to American audiences at home, to foster meaningful dialogue and personal connections both on-stage and off.

Valente described the selection process that begins with our State Department identifying a handful of countries of strategic importance that, for various reasons, are underrepresented in the United States. Through social media networks, foreign embassies, and NGOs, NEFA places a worldwide open call for nominations for grantees. Nominees complete an online application providing links to work samples and press kits (if available).

Center Stage is specifically interested in international performers, trained in contemporary art forms, who are generating "new art" – the goal being "to shake up Americans' perceptions of these cultures." A panel of about thirty readers and advisors narrows the list to have multiple performing groups from a single country, as Valente further explained, "to give a window into the diversity and complexity of the country." After several advance trips to meet with the artists and see their work on the ground, in the native environment, NEFA and LBMI make recommendations to the State Department and invitations are sent out. It takes two years from the initiation of the open call until the U.S. tour.

At that point, taking into consideration the needs and goals of the individual grantees, LBMI introduces each group to the touring marketplace and organizes their one-month, paid tour. The tours include four to six residencies of one-half to a full week in length – incorporating performances, workshops, discussions, master classes, and community

gatherings. Benali's organization, which she calls Fleur d'Orange, was one of seven music and dance groups from Morocco, Pakistan, and Viet Nam chosen for the 2014 season.

Benali's troupe performed in Washington, D.C.; Pittsburgh; Boston; New York City; and Middletown, Connecticut, with residencies at several universities and dance studios within these stops. The cultural exchange took various forms: at Wesleyan University, conversations about the status of women in Arab countries were held in Arabic and French language classes. At Endicott College near Boston and the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn, Fleur d'Orange led dance workshops.

Benali began working on *Identity* as a solo during a residency in Toronto in 2013. She learned of the Center Stage program from friends at the American Embassy and applied specifically to develop the new work. She connected with Mohcine Imrharn while searching for a musician for the final audition and was impressed with his talent at improvisation and his willingness and commitment to experiment artistically. She invited Soufiane Karim to join the collaboration after seeing a solo he performed at her Action Danse Festival in September 2013. Once Benali learned about Karim's parallel search for his cultural roots, she decided "to mix our two stories and challenge myself by adding a male."

All of the Center Stage tours include performances at the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage, where Fleur d'Orange's performances also incorporated Yacine Fadhil's larger-than-life projections of calligraphy and Moroccan interior spaces. A video of one of the Kennedy Center performances of *Identity* can be accessed at: www.kennedy-center.org/programs/millennium/archive.html, and search for "Fleur d'Orange" to see how these projections provided texture and depth to this intensely felt work.

We, in the audience, had certainly been transported to a faraway place. The guest artists expressed their desire to perform the piece back home, but had concerns as to whether it could be received in Morocco's tra-

ditional society that is just starting to open. They spoke about the difficulty of transitioning from folkloric performance to contemporary expression and their society's acceptance of the former but not the latter.

I was curious about where they each had gotten their contemporary training and learned that they all had been privileged to study abroad. Benali has taken up the challenge of building a thriving contemporary dance culture in Morocco and providing young people with dance training opportunities in her homeland. In 2008 she initiated Action Danse, a ten-day festival for young dance students, that includes workshops and performances led by international and experimental choreographers. It brings the festival performances to public spaces – historic sites, city parks, and theaters. (Perhaps that explains their creative adaptation for the opening set-up for *Identity* at the Gibney Studio showing.)

Benali also teaches ballet, belly dance, and modern dance classes in Marrakesh, where she lives. She described her contemporary classes as "based on exercises that build awareness of the body, its sensations, and emotions using the voice, props, and space to create one's own dance." She certainly walks her talk in her own work – as seen in *Identity*.

The three artists are consummate creators, performers, and collaborators – working together with seamless sensitivity to support the tone and message of the piece. Benali commented, "The communication between the three of us was perfect." She appreciated the efficient flow of ideas and was surprised at how quickly they agreed upon decisions.

Their supreme fluency in and use of their rich North African heritage gave the work a distinctive vocabulary layered with meaning and complexity. Whether drawing on a cultural memory of the fabric-covered guedra dancers from the nomadic Berber tribes, the shimmying shoulders of the aalaoui dances of celebration, the male gnawa dancers who perform acrobatic feats as they induce states of trance and ecstasy, or the male performers

who dance while playing musical accompaniment and become one with their instrument, these artists are a product of their culture. It informs their art. But, they are also trained in contemporary techniques, and their sophisticated artistry is apparent in their ability to subtly merge the old with the new in an evocative expression.

After the rap session concluded, Benali approached, having seen me jotting down notes during the discussion. She asked if I had time to join her for a cup of tea. And I, quite eager to continue the ride on this magic carpet, replied, “Yes!”

London

Leigh Witchel

They never saw it, yet the audience couldn't help but sense that behind the scenes of The Royal Ballet's new production of *The Winter's Tale*, the whole company was sweating. Dress rehearsal, usually open to the public, was closed; the second cast's debut was pushed into the following week. And yet the ballet came off to a warm reception, and at his opening night curtain call, Christopher Wheeldon bounced up and down with glee – and relief.

Leading the team creating the ballet was another huge undertaking for Wheeldon, who has now created several of these narrative blockbusters. The Royal previously coproduced his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the National Ballet of Canada. This new work involved some of the same production team, a large cast, complex designs, a commissioned score again from Jody Talbot – but different and most daunting of all, William Shakespeare's complicated saga of jealousy and penance.

A dance maker as experienced as Wheeldon can recognize the obvious dangers of adapting the work of a towering wordsmith into dance, and he stated them succinctly in a preview video: “The biggest challenge for any choreographer tackling Shakespeare is to somehow infuse the poetry into the movement and not rely on the plotline.”

And like a man who so determinedly tries

to avoid a hole that he might fall right into, Wheeldon did exactly that.

Though he shaved down the narrative and cut characters, like an icebreaker in the Northwest Passage, Wheeldon spent vast amounts of time trying to plow through the plot. Leontes and Polixenes, the kings of Sicilia and Bohemia, had been friends since childhood, but in an irrational fit of jealousy Leontes became convinced his wife Hermione is having an affair with his friend. His paranoia leads to the death of his young son and the abandonment of his newborn daughter, and it appears that his wife dies as well.

Fast-forward sixteen years. Perdita, Leontes' daughter, has been raised by shepherds and Polixenes' son Florizel is in love with her. After a great deal of dancing, Polixenes arrives, enraged that his son is in love with a common shepherdess. The young lovers flee along with her foster family, and a chase ensues. Back in Bohemia, Leontes, watched over by Paulina, the mistress of Hermione's household, had been repenting his behavior for all those years. The fleeing couple arrives, which causes reconciliation, recognition, and a homecoming of nearly supernatural proportions.

A “problem play” with such an unruly narrative might have worked better as a masque than a ballet. Wheeldon started off efficiently, providing a dumb show of the deaths of the two elder kings and the coronation of the boy kings. They were quickly replaced by their grown-up versions, continuing into friendship, marriages, and the births of their own children. Wheeldon adapted to his medium by opening out the narrative of the play, where much of the action happens offstage.

While busy recounting the story, Wheeldon laid almost the entire burden for carrying the emotional weight of the ballet on the shoulders of Edward Watson as Leontes and Zenaida Yanowsky as Paulina. He gave them the most gripping – and derivative – moments, using them capily and stereotypically to fill the gaps in the characterization.

Watson occupies a strange, unique position in ballet. Lunatics and freaks are his special-