

Criss-cross dressing the orient

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by Paula Abood

At the cusp where the world prepared to enter into
the nineties...
culture shock
disoriented modernity
to interlooming resistance...

“Criss-cross dressing the orient” addresses the
performance piece the politics of belly dancing:
a choreopoem produced and presented by the
Sydney Arab Feminist Alliance (SAFA) in
Sydney and Canberra in 1994.(1)

Challenging the readings of images and the
representations of 'other' cultures, the politics of
belly dancing provoked mostly incredulity in
the form of the question, ‘what politics?!’ This
performative work, subtitled a choreopoem (2) ,
was born out of global activisms and living room
discussion around notions of culture, identities,
and the appropriation of cultural forms.

from the desert oasis to the desert storm
they besieged and occupied
bulldozed and borderised

If nothing else, the nineties set the scene for
addressing the western world’s imperial cartel,
led by the US and an ever expanding
brotherhood of allies, in its desire in this
instance to exert power in the Middle East,
backed up by orientalist imagery and the high
moral ground of defending oil and ‘democracy’.

twas a well versed genre
representing the orient
landscapes laced
with spice and other fire
written of desire

As CNN, the North American cable network,
led a full frontal assault on identities, peoples
and cultures, the image makers were intent on
giving credence to a brave old racism. In other
words, the west had once again discovered the
near middle or thereabouts east not to be
immutable. This war was a violent assertion of
the west’s moral duty to civilise the 'savage', to
make an example of the renegade Arab. The
combined effects of television and centuries of
disbelief, real life exploded in our faces as
identities were called into question and loyalties
were demanded of Arab Australians.

as the sun sets in the west
there sets up a scene of an orientalist dream

The ever popular conflation of Arab and
conflict, the fundamental terrorist, the use of
canonised language of the international
journalist, of *jihad* and *hamas*, and today we
hear of *hizbollah* (but how much do they really
understand the language of resistance?), scenes
of desert mobilisation sent media copy into
panic frenzy. As Said argued at the time,
"western ignorance of Arab and Islamic culture
became a useful mode of warfare: the enemy is
easily dehumanised and readied for the final
blow" (Said 1991).

the very difficulty of an intrigue
makes it all the more
a ravishing pastime
with the passionate arab

Textual images depicting Arabs in the ever
unchanging environment of war, conflict and
disorder have informed western constructs,
locating the Arab in notions of primitivism - a
failed civilisation, in short, has legitimised
continued western intervention in the region.
The Arab has improved little in the eyes of the
west since the days of the crusade, *that ever*
endless european cavalcade. The Persian Gulf

War, that *fin de siecle* foray

into the realm of the other gave birth to the new world order, and unsurprisingly, provided for another western melee of crude oil, torn headscarves and bloody turmoil.

such is the archetype
described and derived
arranged in the passive
all captive in narrative
a western style explanative

Transcending the absurdist realities of that intense period, Sydney Arab women acted up on the streets in protest and in performance, coming from experiences of being compelled to speak directly to this so-called difference, to detonate political mis/understandings, to textualise concerns, and to explore the historical and temporal realities imposed on identities.

gone is the mirage
disappeared with the land
the colours all faded
the scapes lay benign
boundaries shift identities
frontiers changed faces
cousins became accursed
maps lost places

Writing off the war was the context for textualising dissent, for acting out political realities on the cultural front when the gulf came to Australia. This war, so much the modern crusade, set the scene for an imminent decade of new world dis/order. Arabs were compelled to enter the dialogue, only too aware of the historical realities imposed as T. E. Lawrence's lingering breath of arabia deserta continues to lace the western imagination with fear and loathing.

Where do we start and how do we intervene as Arab Australian women? Theories in translation informed theatrical practices and underlined performative works such as the politics of belly dancing. Edward Said in the landmark work Orientalism elucidated how the East is painted "primitive, childlike, and backward; it is

eccentric, irrational, chaotic, and mysterious; it is sensual, sexual, fecund and despotic. Most important the orient is deemed incapable of speaking for itself" (Said 1978).

but for shaharazad
posturing with a tale to tell
a mistress narrator
but who translated her?

The influences and practices of orientalism still speak volumes ad nauseam on behalf of the other. In 1995, Geraldine Brooks' pop journalistic account *nine parts of desire* dominated the media and the academy as yet another outsider spokesperson writing hard copy on the troubled Middle East, publishing thoughts on understanding the Arab/Muslim, a guide for westerners, if not to discover the hidden world of muslim women in just nine parts of desire.

trafficking in culture
the trick of this trade
curator of the orient
exploring intrigue
such
is the art of the orientalist
to excite the curiosity
to puzzle bedazzle
to discover, otherwise
arrest qualities
to beguile
by appeal to fancy
to plot craftily
to discern what is authentic
source of divine belief

Addressing the impact of this globalised conflict of identities on Arab communities during the pre and post periods of the gulf war, activisms required radical difference to ensure that a diversity of voices had currency to counter the smart bomb talk of the war correspondent in the flak jacket and the suited up Middle East experts conversing in language of scud and collateral damage, to challenge the monosyllabic commentary of the virtual war. This brave new language spoke in age old image as veiled women beat their chests, dark unveiled men

continued to represent a global threat in the eyes of the west and the precision bombs continue to miss. Or do they?

Where do we start and how do we intervene as Arab Australian women? Developing strategies to challenge representations in the media, the visual arts, literature and in collective folk memory, we pushed through to the thin ice space of articulating issues of who is speaking and who is listening. Creating works to address issues affecting Arab Australians was never flavour of the month despite the relative public attention allowed to the politics of belly dancing. Though, the title itself had much to do with that. Working through the layers, political objectives were clear enough to speak to the issues rather than being co-opted into representing Arab Australia as we were so frequently invited to do. Street and performative activism required a critical approach because, in short, no one was listening.

kohl rimmed and costumed to kill
teetering a cultural tightrope
to reclaim her imagined existence
bring on the dancing girl

Choosing to site a dialogue around the populist translation of exotica, the dance form provided the structural relief to explore cultural forms and images, as well as to critically analyse issues around representation and appropriation.

in sensual form
to cavort with the arabs
who adorns
under a sheltering sky
to perform in masquerade
the dreams of men awake

Theoretical tools of criticism were applied to examine how the expressionisms of middle eastern dance in the western multicultural context had resonances for the displaced Arab, where the dance in the mainstream is located in the heat of the cabaret and on the restaurant floor, where a lone dancer might play around with a sword or fall into a stylised display of the cairo drop or the beirut bop. The dance in this

sense has been used to exclude as it ultimately represents the fetishised orientalist image of the other in the perpetual state of performance, where the figure of the usually non-Arab female perfumes exotica into erotica.

sequined and smiling
veiled and reclining
ishtar cum rising
a take away desire
scarletted woman
a charlatan of the dance floor

Breaking down the cultural mis/representations of non-Arab women imaging club mid east was fraught with difficulty as the world of belly dancing enthusiasts in the main failed to understand the politics of locating the dance in a creative theatrical space rather than doing it hard on the cabaret floor. Though in local multiculturalismo circles, there is always much space made for the 'ethnic' go go dancer and her desert caravanserai of turkish delights.

high priestess of trance
demi goddess of performance
a devi of the dance cult
she acts out the fitna
in flagrant danse arabica
aswirl for all to see her

Moving into the site of performance, the commodification of Middle Eastern dance forms, known reductively in the west as belly dance, enjoys a popular following and commercial growth both nationally and internationally. In belly dance circles, the harem scene takes on soft core feminist talk of sexual liberation and ultimate female fulfilment. A belly dancing course like the one offered through the Ishtar School of Classical Egyptian Dance in Sydney can offer the western woman a chance "to stay healthy and fit, a way to relieve boredom, but we should appreciate belly dancing not for these aspects alone, but also for the insights it gives us into Middle Eastern culture; the food, art, costumes, music and attitudes to religion, life and love..." (3)

dance me a scene

of the bath house portrait
I dream
seduction at midnight
in sacrosanct places
a city of women
dance out captivity

to fetishise
scrutinise
dehumanise
woman of guile
she... our cultural icon
of a near enough east

The sexual identification of the other, this strange smell otherness so manifested through exotification, the portrayal of other sexualities as insatiable, untamed and desirable yet loathsome have coloured the histories and political realities of women, children and men of colour, marking exotification as one of the insidious isms where the sex tourism, pornography and serial sponsorship industries have legitimacy in Australia and elsewhere, regardless of political pressure by activists.

the sexual geography of travellers
drew up the picture
and told the tale of the other
into a woman's belly of desires

Jane Desmond in her essay "Dancing Out The Difference", locates the female body as "the nodal point that interpolates racial and cultural difference". In the politics of belly dancing, this is the critical point where dialogues of western feminist obsessions with veiling, female genital mutilation and the harem are sited by Arab women and where issues around race and representation take centre stage.

hither to this woman
with undulating belly
unholy lands/caped in undress
flesh striking movement
mesmerising eyes
sexualising desires
up to the devil's teat
the postmodern might wonder
was she all cut up asunder
there she is
to gaze unto
she has that ephemeral quality
a certain to-be-looked-at-ness
she is there
to idolise
fantasise

Challenging the meanings which map out the gendered othered body as they translate into performance, "exploring the construction and reception of the appropriated form through display of the body - a body that is at once real and representational as it exists in performance" was critical to this work (Desmond 1993).

to take on the dance of the other
wild allure
want to escape to play orientale
slinking femme fatale
criss-cross dressing the orient

We, and by this I mean the women who have worked on this project, have entered the dialogue as interventionists. While aware of the degrees of freedom as we explore particularities of meanings as they are played out in the public space, the differences in cultural understandings mark all too clearly the chasms we are attempting to negotiate.

more than a thousand and one nights
had hardly arrived up to this
...monologue...
and still the stories
fetishise the landscapes
with sexuality
and violence...

How is it possible to speak to the compounded indifference out there. How can a performance practice relate to and address the complexities of understanding and of not understanding. We are informed by theories and realities and as practitioners are painfully cognisant of the political nature of representation where "meanings and images depend so much so on the relationship between a single image and its total cultural and historical context, that is, the baggage of knowledges and assumptions" about the 'other'.

the body politic
disarmed
with a message
in complex language
of unspoken verbal
she dances the seven veils
as metaphors slip away
mysteries lay revealed
from vagina dentata
to blood of the martyrs
more than just
a trivial entertainer
to please

the politics of belly dancing critically examined meanings and images used to mis/represent the other in the performative arenas of populist multi/culture. By d/exotifying or detoxifying constructed representations, we have created a lexicon articulating cultural dissent, shaping works to reflect other political and social realities.

did you hear the sultan pardoned the sultana
and she danced the night away
did you hear they raped and occupied the land
and she danced the night away
did you hear they shot the belly of the woman
who threw the seven stones
and she danced the night away

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1. The politics of belly dancing was first presented as a playreading at the NSW Writers' Centre for the Third Multicultural Theatre Festival in 1993. A grant from the Performing Arts Board of the Australia Council provided the Sydney Arab Feminist Alliance (SAFA) with the resources to develop and produce the choreopoem in 1994.

2. The word "choreopoem" is from Ntozake Shange's work for coloured girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf. a choreopoem (New York: MacMillan 1977).

3. From the brochure Skills and Leisure classes, Second Semester 1994, University of Sydney Union and Sydney University Sports Union.

References

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Notes