



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF FESTIVAL DU MONDE ARABE

Harem, lever les voiles will raise the curtain, so to speak, on the Festival du Monde Arabe de Montréal on Oct. 28.

The 17-day Festival du Monde Arabe will have more than 80 shows of music, dance, literature, film and comedy rooted in Arab culture

Hailing Arab influences

KATHRYN GREENAWAY
THE GAZETTE

When Montreal contemporary choreographer Benjamin Hatcher was approached by Festival du Monde Arabe de Montréal artistic director Joseph Nakhlé about creating a piece that fused the sensuality of Oriental dance with the experimental edge of contemporary dance, he was both flabbergasted and intrigued.

"It didn't know anything about baladi (Oriental dance)," Hatcher said. "But I did my research. I even took classes. I was the only guy with a bunch of girls. It was hilarious."

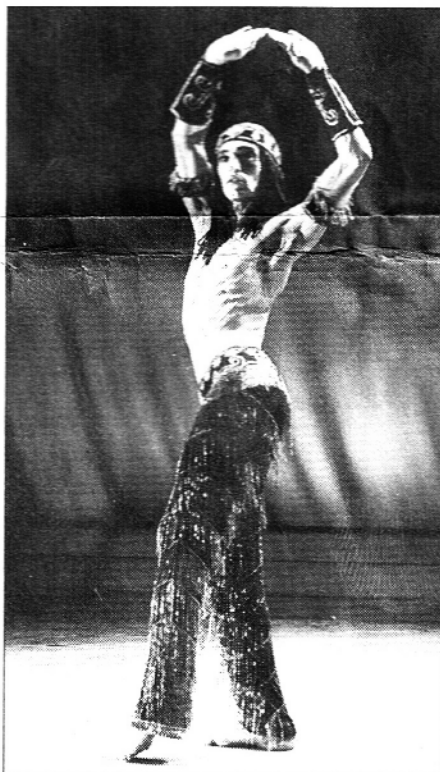
Hatcher's work *Harem, lever les voiles*, inaugurates the Festival du Monde Arabe de Montréal at Théâtre Outremont on Oct. 28. The 17-day festival celebrates music, song, dance, literature, film, stand-up comedy and debate either coming from Arab countries or influenced by Arab culture.

Hatcher's inaugural dance production reflects the festival's theme – *Harem aux frontières de l'interdit* (at the borders of the forbidden).

Not only does he weave different dance influences together; he includes three men in the 10-member cast. Oriental dance – also called baladi, belly dancing, raks baladi and raks sharki – focuses on subtle, sensual hip movements and is performed mostly by women.

Harem, lever les voiles is not a traditional belly dance, Hatcher said. "If you want to see that you go to a restaurant. This festival is about bringing together (occidental and oriental) cultures to make something new."

Hatcher dedicates the work to the



Harem, lever les voiles will include males in its 10-member cast, although baladi dancers are traditionally women.

courage of women who practice the dance form in Middle Eastern countries that tend to be more rigid in terms of what is considered to be appropriate behaviour for women.

"I want the dance to be a celebration," he said.

Hatcher isn't the only one toying with

Oriental-dance conventions. The Turkish company Armelit performs Altan Cakmak's oriental dance choreography *Hurrem Sultan* at Théâtre Maisonneuve, Nov. 11 and 12. Cakmak has cast male dancers in the leading roles.

The far-flung festival program has more than 80 performances to choose from – be it female stand-up comedy by avant-garde humorist Hanane Hajj-Ali at Maison de la culture Frontenac on Nov. 1, or Incidences, an evening of Bulgarian songs performed by a trio of men, at Le Petit Medley on Nov. 8.

The seven-hour musical show *Tarab extrême*, featuring Shadi Jamil, Rima Khcheich and Ismail Fencioğlu, is booked at the Medley on Nov. 12, and Lebanese divas Aida Tomb (Ronza), Fadia Tomb-Elhage, Amal Tomb and Rima Khcheich close the festival at Théâtre Maisonneuve, Nov. 13.

New to the festival this year is a day dedicated to children, at the Espace Jeunes de la Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, Nov. 6 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. The day includes a music workshop, a talk about books and a discussion about what it means to be a Quebecer.

Harem, lever les voiles, launches the Festival du Monde Arabe de Montréal at Théâtre Outremont, 1248 Bernard Ave. W., Oct. 28 and 29 at 8 p.m. Festival tickets range in price from \$15 to \$100, depending on the production, and are available at the venues or through Admission, (514) 790-1245 or www.admission.com. For program and ticket details, go to www.festivalarabe.com.

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