

## **Caught Up in Whirlwind Fusion of Spirit**

By Joseph Portal

To describe Zuleikha as only a dancer would be like describing the Grand Canyon as only an arroyo. Zuleikha combines music, philosophy, anthropology and storytelling in a rich theatrical experience.

The performer has been on an extensive journey both within and without. Her physical body in its exquisite bearing and beauty carries that adventure. She glows.

Zuleikha's gifts and talents and, more importantly, what she does with them, will be on display in the program *In the Country of the Heart*, a whirlwind fusion of spirit, rhythm and dance, today and Saturday, Aug. 6 and 7, at Santa Fe Playhouse.

"My background is very much in classical dance styles from around the world," Zuleikha explained in a recent interview. "Especially from northern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan."

Zuleikha grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Marin County to be exact.

"My family are all classical musicians and my mother is an educator," Zuleikha said. "I came from a big family where I was exposed to everything. I was very fortunate in that respect. There's always more."

Zuleikha's life altered dramatically when she first heard Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan in the '70s. she had been studying the silver flute and piano. she switched to an Indian flute but when she saw her first faculty concert, she changed to dance.

"It blew me away," she said of the dance.

"In the Eastern tradition, music is regarded as a science that has three parts: singing, which comes when a child is born; instrumentation; and the rhythmic art of ecstasy, which we call dance.

In most other places in the world, you have to learn worship of nature. Luckily I grew up that way in the West, so when I came to the Eastern way of doing things, I already had this background."

For Zuleikha, dance is about using the true nature of rhythm to tell stories.

"To put all the things we see in people we know and love and in people we don't love, to bring all that into ourselves and to use it in storytelling" is how she described it. "Storytelling becomes a very high art."

The performer's training is impressive. she studied with dance innovator Anna Halprin for 10 years, trained in classical kathak storytelling-dance with Indian master Chitres Das, performed in Afghanistan with Hashim Chisti and studied with masters in Bali.

In the learning process, Zuleikha had an "aha!" She wanted to tell stories from all over the world.

"I have gone into the trenches of many countries," she said. "I've worked with children and in schools for a long, long time, as an artist in residence. I've worked with abused women, all kinds of people.

"I go into places where you wouldn't think of dance and turn people on to the fact that we're living in bodies. In our lifetimes, people are ashamed of their bodies.

"I'm fascinated by cultures, but how people do things," Zuleikha said. "I'm fascinated by how to make a tortilla in one place and a chapati in another.

"native traditional talk about 'culture carriers,' an honorable title. Humans physically transfer the art of a culture and that keeps the memories of the people alive.

"Now I am coming back into my own work. World music is happening in a time zone that people can understand.

"The ethics police are watching. Manners are important. You can't just take something; you have to have permission. I do have permission for all the things with which I work."

*In the Country of the Heart* represents the first one-woman show Zuleikha has performed in Santa Fe in a long time. Many will recall her work with Coleman Barks, the respected translator of Rumi's poetry, as well as concerts with Jai Uttal, Glen Velez and David Darling.

This weekend's performances will contain music from all over the world as well as spoken text and movement.

Costumes are by Zuleikha and Caroline Lippencott, and lighting design is by David Hogle. The music for *Country of the Heart* is prerecorded so she can tour without an ensemble.

"I prefer live people," she said. "Some of it will be funny and some it won't. Like life."

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