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ORIGIN / HEART STREAMING

A concert of music, dance, rhythm, story, poetry & humor

ZULEIKHA, dance, music & story

with Guest Artists

RAHIM ALHAJ, oud musician & composer

ISSA MALLUF, international musician/percussion

NICHOLAS BALLAS, voice

Oct. 23, 2009, The Armory / Santa Fe Performing Arts - by Janet Eigner
Eigner Dance Reviews, New Mexico Dance and Dance Reviews

The tasteful delicacy of performance artist, Zuleikha's concert created a mood of meditative harmony and whimsical humor, though the questions asked through short poems—questions about why the earth is unraveling—were profound, so were the answers offered by Zuleikha's mythic storytelling. Her sumptuous Eastern costumes, sparkling fabrics and bold colors matched the warmth of the archetypal stories she presented. This was a concert for children of all ages.

Long-time local dancer-storyteller Zuleikha melded Eastern and modern movement, in the performance at the Armory on October 23rd. She also wove in Rahim Alhaj's introspective oud, Issa Malluf's spring-clear middle eastern percussion, with a sprinkling of spot-on-poetry from Hafiz, Rilke and Naomi Shihab Nye, convincingly read by actor, Nicholas Ballas.

While the audience filed in, a pastel slide show clicked across the Performing Arts stage's back scrim, images that highlighted recipients of The Storydancer Project (TSP). (TSP), the local artist's local and international artistic health resource, aims at esteem-building through body-work and storytelling. Zuleikha teaches expansive and modest movement with underserved groups in three Asian countries and nine locations, and over 800 students in Santa Fe's public elementary schools. The Asian faces in the slides—women and children in hospitals and orphanages, raising their arms and hands to stretch, floating their arms, like wings—reflected back the same joyful, lighthearted mood as the concert delivered.

Many in the audience wore name tags identifying them as TSP facilitators in the creativity, literacy wellness programs. The program notes, "TSP facilitators read intercultural teaching stories, interspersed with entertaining TSP Core Wellness Exercises...What happens is alive learning."

Much like the flamenco concert tradition that developed from East Indian dance influences, the concert itself reflected the interdependence of the musicians with Zuleikha's complex Indian Kathak rhythmic movement, their eyes fixed on her bare feet, her heels drumming the stage, many rows of ankle bells like a little flock of chirping birds that echoed the oud's repetitive, hypnotic melody and the frame drums's crystalline emphasis. And like flamenco concerts, dancing took its place alongside Alhaj's rippling oud solos and Malluf's exciting and delicate percussive work on the long ceramic drum glazed with a transparent skin, his fingers flying into varied rhythmic patterns.

Zuleikha narrated universal stories while in motion, animating the threads of drama underscored with exaggerated expressions on her delightfully plastic face—huge eyes, a capacity to really drop her jaw, showing a droll or highly amused or "can you believe it!" mood.

In fact, her mime's sensibility, and angular movements often reminded of Persian miniature scenes.

Even her images appeared multicultural: the artist's graceful hands and arms, her modified prances, her exaggerated side glances that had her bent-kneed body posed in one direction while her spine curved backwards and head rubber-necked in the opposite direction, had the two-dimensional sense of hieroglyphics or figures ringed Greek vases.

She could also run and sprint at length without panting through part of one story that emphasized dancing one's way back to life. Even with fast moves, her arms rose and settled slowly, as though rounding out and bringing to conclusion a story's moving thought. Both spare movement and language vocabularies were honed to fully illuminate the stories' gentle prodding to live fully and with optimism, from the heart, with generosity, spirit and kind humor.

The program included an amusing tour de force exploration on an office chair of how varying people look and move while they are kept waiting: she wove in the content by explaining that she's watched people world-wide, waiting.

Concluding the program, Zuleikha, robed in dervish-designed gown, offered up a classic whirling ritual. Though the audience had chuckled its way through the engrossing concert, the whirling left them in a tranquilly blissful mood.