



*Zuleikha in Concert In the Country of the Heart
at the Santa Fe Playhouse-Saturday August 7, 1999*

by Janet B. Eigner

Like a coyote's visit, a surprise happens when least expected. Zuleikha was a more-than-pleasant surprise.

I'd moved to Santa Fe on the last Saturday in July: knowing that I'd review a Paul Taylor concert that night, knowing that I'd write about dance in three current Santa Fe Opera productions, but *not* knowing that the dancer that my local friend Parvati had urged me to see two years ago would be dancing the next week.

The Paul Taylor Company's three frequently-performed classics, *Arden Court*, *Eventide* and *Esplanade*, continued to thrill the large audience at the Greer Garson Auditorium, College of Santa Fe. At the opera, for Bizet's *Carmen*, choreographer Maria Benitez chose a fresh alternative for the second act dance scene in Lillas Pastia's cafe. Instead of the customary cameo by one female flamenco dancer, two males blended flamenco with balletic whirls, but they failed to breathe life into the choreography. Their movement appeared disappointingly wooden (not at all fitting with the otherwise fluid and seamless production). But the second, sold-out and SRO concert of storyteller-mime-dancer Zuleikha charmed her loyal followers. The city playhouse seats 150, and was ideally suited for the intimate mood created by the tall, willowy artist, whose oeuvre wove one brilliant fabric of many and varied threads. With excellent lighting by Dick Hogle, exquisite costumes by Zuleikha, and an effective sound track assembled by the artist, the production values added depth and drama to Zuleikha's cross-cultural tales of love and learning. Each story/dance was quickened with a musical partner: from Bonnie Raitt to David Darling, from the Kronos Quartet to Zakir Hussain. She divided the evening, subtitled "a whirlwind fusion of spirit, rhythm and dance," into a first act, "Love Letters," and a second act, "Learnings."

Think Meredith Monk blended with Marcel Marceau, and any rubber-faced female comedienne - Lucille Ball, Martha Raye, Carol Channing. Think native people's magical realism, and East Indian ankle bells set tinkling by stomping, bare feet, and serpentine, diagonal arm gestures. This dark-haired beauty combined the authority of her clear female voice with the power of lithe, hypnotic movement. Not to be confused with rote repetition, Zuleikha used subtle, repetitive motion of arms and legs like a moving haiku that added to her words and visuals.

"I'm a musician who is a dancer," the artist told me in a post-concert dialogue in her casita. Her goal is to translate the world's spiritual traditions. I'd venture that she is a wise woman, a sacred clown, a bruja, who distills the world's ancient musical cultures with spiritual wisdom, "the world's inner traditions," in her words. One leaves an encounter with the youthful Zuleikha as stricken by her power in conversation as by her concert. You are aware that her every thought and movement has been deeply considered; though pompous she is not. She is soulful, heart-full, and earnest. As a youngster, this northern California daughter had parents passionate about culture. She

studied classical piano, flute and guitar, avant-garde modern dance with Anna Halprin, and north Indian Kathak storytelling-dance forms at the Ali Akbar Khan College of Music. Then began decades of traveling the world to continue mastering the oldest classical music forms - which, because they arise out of sacred beliefs, combine music with dance. Zuleikha has sought masters in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bali, and Japan, and she's performed at the most prestigious venues worldwide.

In concert, each dance was more delicious than the last. Zuleikha told two "in-motion" folktales. To the drumming of Glen Velez, a moose and a fox dialogued, each discontent with its nature, until it walked in the other's body. With witty, deft strokes, the artist raised her long arms to become the racks on the ponderous moose, then pranced and twirled her delicate paws and claws as the fox. Using her own sign language, and accompanied by Terry Riley's music, Zuleikha began the concert with an aboriginal Japanese tale of a village woman who marries a man who transform into a bear and returns to the land of Thunder Beings. The woman believes in the link between the two worlds. To her own haunting folk song voice, the artist then danced the message of an eighth century Persian mystic, Rubia, "eating the bread of the world and doing the work of the world." Her movement here was most like modern dance - slow, writhing gestures, holding her chest. Next the blues lyrics of Bonnie Raitt, and James Brown and The Fabulous Thunderbirds, undergirded a spoof on male power. Zuleikha's dry wit was evident in subtle flourishes of a Gold's Gym bicep, a swagger to a big car, cheeky pooched lips and cave-man blunderbuss.

The second act began with another potent, abstract work to a chanted Russian opera. The dancer wore a silver facemask and long white robe, moving in sinewy, slow gyrations, resembling a variation on an Ernest Trova "falling man" sculpture. Capable of showing a self who can mock the performance artist self, Zuleikha, in starched white Victorian lace, then affected a British accent. Funny and bold, she described a "victima el neurosa ridiculosa," who announced that dance and song carry the themes of culture. Surreal strobe interludes showed the passionate, deadly earnest inner woman underneath the starch, a social-psychic variation on David Parson's strobed virtuoso dance, "Caught." Most noted for her whirling dance, "The Butterfly Tea Ceremony," Zuleikha concluded her concert dressed in layers of white, flowing robes, calmly rotating clockwise, pausing, then spiraling counterclockwise to David Darling's cello and the Passion of Peter Gabriel. Spinning through a Sufi-like meditation, Zuleikha transited through different facial expressions, speeds, and arm movements. Of the concert, and especially this manifestation, she said, "...it's a work of devotion and love and of being in the presence of the present moment."

Dear readers, we can only hope that a venue in St. Louis will present Zuleikha.