

Zuleikha, in the Dance

by Dan Furst

Kansai Time Out (Kyoto, Japan)

Forget everything you've heard and thought until now about the tame and tentative flavor of October theatre in Kansai. As you know, this month's stage offerings are normally a kind of warm-up for the heavyweight fare of the Culture Month in November.

But not this time, because Kyoto's exquisite Hone-In temple and the Canadian Academy will host public performances in the Japan debut of the most admired and fascinating foreign artist to grace Kansai this autumn, the American dancer Zuleikha. Honen-In, increasingly active since last year as a performance space for artists such as flautist R. Carlos Kanai and dancer Heidi S. Durning, will get double time in the spotlight because it will host a dharma lesson by the famed Buddhist author and teacher Ram Dass on October 11 (see Activities), followed by Zuleikha on October 12. Yet for the Canadian Academy, by far the most culturally active and ambitious international school in Central Japan, Zuleikha's show will add to an already impressive string of guests events by foreign performers.

Few dance artists anywhere are as widely-travelled as Zuleikha, or have built as exotic a resume. After ten years with legendary dance innovator Anna Halprin and the San Francisco Dancer's Workshop, Zuleikha went to Asia for a long, open-ended quest of study and joint concerts with masters of dance and music. She studied Kathak, the ancient story-telling dance form of Northern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, with Chitresh Das at the Ali Akbar College of Music. She danced in Afghanistan with Ustad Hashim Chisti, and toured North American with his musical company. She has also trained and danced in Bali, and at several Native American sacred sites. The list of her acclaimed collaborators includes composers Hamza El Din, Kitaro, Baba Olatunji, Glen Velez and Musa Suzo - and Coleman Barks, translator of the Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi. The result of this very rich brew of spirit and energy is a unique performance style that infuses ancient Persian and

other Oriental movement forms with the freedom of contemporary dance expression.

The keyword is freedom, which "is every soul's duty," according to the last line of a Persian story Zuleikha often tells. Her audiences are usually not so much stunned into silence by her variety of dance styles as they're stirred into motion by the spontaneous feeling that flows beyond form and unites the dancer, her musicians and their audience into one spinning, exhilarated heart chakra.

It's no wonder that she's often called an "ecstatic" dancer. For her, the ascent from technique into trance isn't really a conscious objective; it just happens. "I'm the dancer when I walk into the studio and start practicing," she says. "And if I'm lucky, somewhere ... the dance takes over and it dances me." She appreciates Yeats' famous last line from *Among School Children*, 'O body swayed to music, O brightening glance. How can we know the dancer from the dance?' Zuleikha puts it more directly: "The dancer is in the dance."

Her performances in Japan will be a combination of old and new pieces to recorded music, and live music by percussionist Bob Barraza and Robin Lloyd. While Zuleikha's programs will vary with each venue, she'll dance the following pieces at both Kansai performances:

Ode to the Wanderer is a Kathak piece set to a collage of ethnic, gypsy and Indian music. The dancer wears traditional ankle bells and uses foot rhythms and lyrical expression to "invite the audience into the fire of the heart and...to honor all those who walk the earth."

Gracias, danced to hymns from Bosnia or South American songs, is dedicated to women in countries torn by war and political violence.

Waking in the Morning of the World, set in the backdrop of Bali, weaves stylized movements into an invocation accompanied by jungle and gamelan music.

Sword of Light, danced to live percussion, was inspired by the image of the sword as a spiritual weapon that cuts through darkness and illusion,

and opens a path into light.

Butterfly Tea Ceremony, with music by David Darling, has become Zuleikha's best know signature work. The dance is not based literally on the symbolism and ritual of the Japanese tea ceremony, but is instead a hypnotic, soul-lifting piece based on the flowing movement of Middle Eastern dervish dancing.

The variety of dance that Zuleikha does and the way she does it, are extraordinary enough - but this is only the main facet of her creativity as a musician and teacher who has done a hug assortment of dance, mask and storytelling workshops for performers, children, and people who want to explore freedom of movement, and their own resources of intuition and imagination. She'll lead several public workshops in Kansai.

Among the most intriguing will be dance healing workshops at the Ki to Iruka Center (Ki and Dolphin Healing Center) of Myorenji temple. Zuleikha's mastery of dance healing began when she was so ill she could barely move, and had to heal herself in the way she knew best. She found that "If I gave my weight and the misery of what I couldn't do to the earth, then I was given a way in which I could move."

Much of her art as dancer and healer is rooted not in form or style, but in communicating and transforming heart energy. Impulses of initial contact are important. This is why her premiere at Honen-In will begin with a ceremony of centering and invocation, blessing the forest and the hidden life there, and asking permission to proceed, before the artists lead the audience in a dance procession from the main gate, along the candle-lit stone paths and into the hall to begin the show.

Does all of this sound mystical? There's no getting around the needs of our moment. Fusions of spirituality and art multiply on the planet now as necessary responses to societies as bound by fear, force and metal as the ones we live in. Artists who can lift their audiences into new channels and impulses of love and compassion will draw kindred souls into new tribes linked by intuitive freedom. For those who want to make the flight, Kansai's the place to be in October. Those who fly with

Zuleikha will come back to earth safely, and a little wiser and happier.