

Hahbi’Ru: Tradition, Legend & Folklore

Produced by Hahbi’Ru Inc., 2004,
71 Minutes

Contact: www.hahbiru.com

Rating: Highly recommended

Review by Nina Costanza

This is a wonderful production of a live performance at a Renaissance fair. Directed, choreographed, and produced by John Compton with a company of twelve female dancers, two male dancers, and musicians, *Hahbi’Ru: Tradition, Legend, & Folklore* presents a variety of dances from all over the Levant. The orchestra—percussion, wind instruments (*ney* and *mizmar*), and a *rhababa*—sound authentic and inspirationally improvised. The exact timing and phrasing, though, is too accurate to be other than designed and notated. The dancers and musicians seem to really enjoy each other, which communicates to audience and viewer. Costuming is mostly Bedouin. The production quality is professional, showing optimal angles to view the dancers and differing perspectives—at times the feet, at others the hips; at times individuals, alternating with shots of the entire group.

The dancers are excellent as individuals and as an ensemble. They sing some pieces in Arabic while they dance, as would be done by a professional folkloric troupe from “over there.” It is hard to tell that these artists are not indigenous. They are well rehearsed, in sync with each other, and perform with such perfect timing and feeling that all seem natural. Humor and



great audience connection color all their dances. The dancers are natural actors as well as proficient performers and thus create a genuine atmosphere, inviting the audience to enter their world. The performers remain on stage, for the most part, whether dancing or being part of the background. In the hands of amateurs, this could result in a “corny” replication of an imposed ambiance, but here, as the artists participate with rhythmic embellishment, verbal commentary in Arabic, acting out the scene, or contributing with ululations, they very effectively transport the viewer. They believe, and so, then, do we. There are no weak spots.

Compton’s choreography borrows from the folklore and produces a mixture of originality and authenticity. He utilizes traditional, legendary, and folkloric dances (*fellahin*) from many countries of the Middle East including Morocco, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt. He includes Egyptian *balas* and a *zill* dance, *debke*, a sword dance, Turkish line dance, and other village songs and dances from Egypt and Lebanon. He makes spatial patterns that maintain the traditional and explore the new. He is interviewed by an unseen journalist between various sections, a format that contributes historical background and insight to the rehearsal/creative process. One of the most impressive pieces here is the “Yemeni Coffee Dance” which involves incredibly dexterous and rhythmically complex hand

movements and clapping, akin to a Middle Eastern *Stomp*.

This kind of video reminds one how important it is for per-

COMPTON PROVES

that Americans can present folklore in a way that is fun, new, exciting, musical, and “traditional” without feeling like one is walking silently, passively, through a museum.

formers of *raqs sharqi* to learn the folklore from which it all essentially derives. One experiences a similar exhilaration in watching this production as one feels in watching Nadia Gamal. Compton proves that Americans can present folklore in a way that is fun, new, exciting, musical, and “traditional” without feeling like one is walking silently, passively, through a museum.