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"IFRITA HELWA!" CONJURES VINTAGE IMAGERY, TIMELY THEMES

Al-Bahira Dance Theater premieres of a new dance-romantic-comedy about a poor man and a mythical djinni at The Southern June 21-24.

MINNEAPOLIS, MN, 31 MAY 2012 — Al-Bahira Dance Theater debuts its original dance-comedy "Ifrita Helwa!" June 21-24, 2012 at The Southern Theater in Minneapolis.

"Ifrita Helwa!" ("Sweet Devil!") features contemporary and theatrical works derived from Egyptian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Persian (Iranian) dance and music traditions, presented in the context a charming story that draws on classic stories and themes from Middle Eastern and Western lore. Authored, directed, and choreographed by Mirah Ammal, "Ifrita Helwa!" stars Derek Phillips (Katha Dance Theater) with the Al-Bahira dancers and Twin Cities dance icon John Munger in the role of Samir the Narrator. It also features a choreography by the internationally renowned Persian dance expert Laurel Victoria Gray.

Performances will be at The Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Avenue South in Minneapolis. Showings are Thursday June 21 at 7 p.m., Friday June 22 at 8 p.m., Saturday June 23 at 8 p.m., and Sunday June 24 at 4:00 p.m. Tickets are \$15-20 for adults (discounts for seniors, students and groups), \$7 for children 3-13, and there are discounts for students and seniors. A post-show discussion follows the Thursday evening performance, and a family-oriented post-show discussion follows the Sunday performance. In addition, there will be ASL translation at one of the performances. Tickets are available through www.albahira.org/show.htm or by calling Brown Paper Tickets at 1-800-838-3006.

Conjuring the Ifrita

"Ifrita Helwa!" is the story Wahid, a kind, passionate, but poor theater operator in Cairo. Shaken by financial problems and the loss of his star performer (and unrequited love) Amira, Wahid encounters the Ifrita, a mischievous but well-intentioned djinni who helps him realize that, often, what we think we want and what we really need may not necessarily be the same.

The 1949 Egyptian film "Afrita Hanem", on which the story is loosely based, comes from the "Golden Age" of Egyptian cinema, and starred Farid El-Atrache (sometimes called the Gene Kelly of Egyptian film) and Samia Gamal, one of the great stars of her age. This period of the 1930s and 40s represented a time of profound creative work, new media development, and strong political undercurrents in Egypt in the years leading up to the 1952 revolution.

For Al-Bahira Dance Theater artistic director Mirah Ammal, this production is the culmination of a five-year dream. “We began seminal work on one of the dances in 2007,” says Ammal. “We have been awaiting the right moment to bring this story to the stage. Now, the time is right.”

Ammal hopes that the “Ifrita Helwa!” storyline and production aesthetic will help encourage families and people who don’t necessarily consider themselves fans of Middle Eastern dance to give Al-Bahira a try.

“This fable rings familiar within American culture as well as in Arab cultures,” she says. “The beautiful, theatrical tableaux and quirky humor are reminiscent of musical film, and are accessible to audiences across ages and cultures.”

Also important to Al-Bahira was to make the show physically and financially accessible to a broader audience. In addition to selecting a wheel chair accessible theater, the company will have ASL interpretation at one of the performances and will provide large-print programs on request. To help encourage families and others, there is a special ticket price for children, discounts for seniors, students and groups, and Al-Bahira will also make a block of “pay as you are able” tickets available for a special showing.

To help produce “Ifrita Helwa!,” Al-Bahira Dance Theater received an Arts Activities Grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, made possible in part by an appropriation from the Minnesota State Legislature and the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

A Fresh Voice in an Ancient Form

Al-Bahira Dance Theater infuses authentic, traditional dance of the Middle Eastern and surrounding regions with contemporary, cross-cultural and theatrical elements to create exciting dance works that are creative, inviting and deeply respectful of the rich traditions and cultural context of the original forms.

For nearly two decades, Mirah Ammal has been fascinated with the central role dance, music and storytelling occupy in the histories, cultures and day-to-day lives of peoples of the Middle East and surrounding regions. She carries this interest through her work as a dancer and teacher.

“This is an ever-evolving art form,” says Ammal. “The music, the poetry and the dance—like the people and the cultures—are creative, alive and changing all the time, but the roots are very, very deep. It’s important to me that Al-Bahira respect and help preserve the traditional forms, but also explore the ways in which we can extend these ideas creatively, and use dance and music to touch new audiences, make new connections between groups.”

Ammal has been a part of the Minnesota arts scene for more than a decade, previously producing theatrical dance shows, Fringe Festival shows and community dance productions with Al-Bahira and other groups. She has also operated a dance school in the area since 2003 (Aalim School of Dance.)

Under Ammal’s direction, Al-Bahira Dance Theater is a fiscally sponsored project of Springboard for the Arts. Al-Bahira’s mission is to:

- Present and preserve the art through high-quality artistic works rooted in the authentic dance, music, and storytelling arts of the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey, Greece, Iran and surrounding regions.
- Provide education about Middle Eastern dance, music and cultures for students and the general public, to foster respect, understanding and appreciation of the cultures of origin.

- Create fully accessible works that present the form as a relevant, living, and ever-evolving art, and a part of the daily lives and cultural stories of the people.
- Use the dance to empower women and girls of all ages, body types, abilities, socio-economic statuses and cultural backgrounds, fostering cross-cultural community and appreciation of female strength, art and form.

For more information on "*ifrita Helwa!*" or Al-Bahira Dance Theater, please visit <http://www.albahira.org/show.htm>.

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