

PERFORMANCE

The Confines of Gender in Radhouane El Meddeb's *Au temps où les arabes dansaient*

by [Katie Pelletier](#) • Sep 23, 2015 at 3:20 pm

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COURTESY PICA

Radhouane El Meddeb's *Au temps où les arabes dansaient*

Watching French choreographer Radhouane El Meddeb's *Au temps où les arabes dansaient*, I couldn't help compare this ensemble performance to his solo work performed earlier in the festival, *Je danse et je vous en donne à bouffer*. There are similarities in themes—both explore gender and culture, of course. But I wanted to use the metaphor of the stew El Meddeb cooked in his solo performance to understand what was happening in the long opening progression of *Au temps où les arabes dansaient*. It seemed like a long, low simmer that might build to something interesting. I hoped.

It begins in dim light. Four men in dress shirts and slacks stand in a line, their backs to the audience. The stage is empty but for a line of prayer rugs along the back. No music. At first nothing seems to be happening, but then slowly we notice the men's bottoms moving slightly, then swaying back and forth. Their movements increase: It is all in the hips. After some time they turn to face the audience, still swaying, rolling, and gyrating their hips, forcefully and joylessly. This movement looks almost involuntary, and yet like hard work. A haunting, drone-like chordal music begins, then fades out, leaving only the sound of the men's slacks, their feet against the floor, and their labored breathing. This goes on for a long time. A very long time. Sometimes other things happen. The men advance and retreat, they kneel, as if in prayer. One of the men breaks away from the others. But overall, much is the same. Oppressively so.

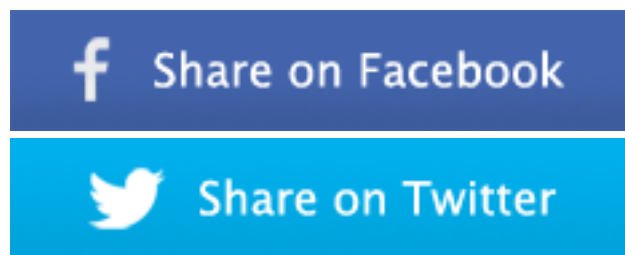
At his artist talk, El Meddeb said that he was inspired by the image of men advancing in line down a main boulevard during the Arab Spring. Being in France at the time, he regretted not having the opportunity to protest. But he was also inspired by belly dancing and the movies of the '40s, '50s, '60s, and '70s, which showed an Arab society much more liberated than today's. His decision to use men to explore a traditionally feminine dance is deliberately provocative. He wanted to underline the hypocrisy in Arab society with regard to gender roles.

As the performance went on, I began to wonder where this homage to mid-century cinema was. I knew something more was coming. Or I hoped so, because I was having a hard time staying with the slow build. I ached for more variation. My hips ached for watching these men roll theirs for so long.

Finally, a man uses his shirt to veil another man who is slowly bellydancing, then covers his face entirely as if hooding a prisoner for execution. And suddenly the plaintive, but more more up-tempo, bel canto song of Syrian chanteuse Asmahan begins, and the men become expressive, smiling, jockeying to be in front of one another as if to catch the attention of this early-20th-century singer. There is a great deal of sexual thrusting and pantomime, even smoking on stage. The screen behind

the dancers lights up with black-and-white movie clips from the '40s and '50s, elegant actresses dancing on sumptuous movie sets. The relief at this freer spectacle is palpable in the audience. The men begin to freely belly-dance, along with the women in the films.

The contrast between the first and second sections of the piece is affecting. El Meddeb says he likes to tell stories with his body, and the story he tells here is of the dangers of a closed society, of the effects of lost liberties. The beginning is admittedly slow, rigid, and difficult to bear for so long. And this is his point. The second half does not entirely shrug off this seriousness. But one dancer, a little rounder than the others, not unlike El Meddeb himself, proves to be a beautiful belly dancer, and truly seems to find some essential self-expression in his undulating movements, his feminine postures and flirtatious hand gestures. You want more of this. And that, too, is El Meddeb's intention.



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Tues, April 12 at 8 pm

Shadowland at Aladdin Theater

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Third Eye Blind, Bad Bad Hats at Roseland

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Sat, April 23 at 9 pm

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