

NATURAL HISTORY

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Cultural Diplomacy


A choreographer expresses the contemporary paradox of being a woman, Muslim, North African, Arab, and artist.

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Hind Benali, costumed in her grandmother's traditional Moroccan wedding dress, performs her dance Identity.





Hind Benali stood in her grandmother's traditional Moroccan wedding dress—its black bodice dense with gold beadwork. A glittering headdress framed her face while her hands played with the layers of flaxen chiffon. She clasped two fingers together and brought them to her heart as the musician standing nearby intoned a soulful song.

This was not a rite of passage in a Marrakesh living room. It was choreographer Hind Benali's performance of *Identity*, a collaborative work with two artists of Moroccan descent, hip-hop dancer/flute player Soufiane Karim and composer/musician Mohcine Imrharn. The piece was commissioned for the second season of Center Stage, a new model for cultural diplomacy initiated by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Hind Benali's organization, Fleur d'Orange, was one of seven performing groups from Morocco, Pakistan, and Vietnam chosen for the 2014 Center Stage season to perform in diverse communities across the United States to create goodwill through international cultural exchange.

Cultural diplomacy has been a common practice among nations and societies since ancient times. In his 2005 book, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, former U.S. Cultural Attaché Richard T. Arndt explains that since the Bronze Age, "cultural diplomacy has been a norm for humans intent upon civilization." The giving of gifts was the diplomat's first move—as "a form of sociopolitical currency and a pledge of honor." Before the birth of writing, cultural knowledge and innovation could only be transmitted by individuals. Brides, hostages, and slaves were cultural conveyors—given and taken for political purposes as valuable assets and for the knowledge and skills they carried. As the ancient Greeks came to celebrate the mind, they sent their prized poets and philosophers as foreign ambassadors.

When the thirteen colonies wanted French support for their independence, they sent their finest intellects to Paris. But once the nation was founded, the United States was slow to engage in government-sponsored international cultural outreach. It was only in 1938 that a division of cultural relations was created in the Department of State to counter Nazi Germany's cultural activities in Latin America. The designers of the program had a few ironclad principles: "to avoid any trace of propaganda; to stand clear of intelligence gathering; and to minimize disruption of fragile foreign cultures." Over the following decades, several programs and pieces of legislation guided by those principles were introduced, and provided a permanent place for cultural diplomacy, including the Fulbright Act of 1946 and the International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act of 1956. From the mid-1950s through the late 1970s, the United States deployed jazz ambassadors—Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and many other jazz artists—in cultural diplomacy programs, funding global tours to communicate across social and language barriers. In 1955, the U.S. Department of State sent Martha Graham and her dance company on a performance and lecture tour to Asian nations.

Unfortunately, since the 1970s, cultural diplomacy, as a U.S. government-supported strategy, gave way to public relations, or "public diplomacy." There is a difference. As former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has said, "Cultural diplomacy is about presenting the diversity of your own country and listening to what people are

saying to you. It is not one-way.” Listening is key. Artists are innate diplomats who find creative inspiration in cross-cultural exchange because they are open to new ideas from people whose worldviews differ from their own. Cultural diplomacy is a catalyst for deeper dialogue and public discourse that can lead to mutual respect and understanding. But the diplomatic initiative has to be thoughtfully conceived to produce that result.

At the Center Stage performance, the Moroccan performers demonstrated how cultural exchange promotes active dialogue. Soufiane Karim, a male performer dressed in a black tunic tied with a red sash and black scarf covering his head, welcomed the assembled group with the traditional Arabic greeting, “*Salaam aleikum*.” When no one responded, a smile of realization crossed his face. He repeated the phrase, which translates as “peace be upon you,” and gestured to the audience, leading the expected response, “*Aleikum salaam*.”

Like a seasoned storyteller, Karim invited the audience along as he took up his large wooden flute and alternated short staccato toots with long tones, walking about like a Moroccan Pied Piper. The strains of Imrharn’s soundscape, with insistent bass drums, exotic melodic lines of the oud, sung Arabic verses, spoken conversation, electronic sounds, echoed water drips, and mystical quavering chants, conjured up a distant world that supported and interacted with the danced action.

A pile of yellow chiffon, in the center of the stage, began to elongate and stretch upward. As the multiple gauzy layers of skirt fell away from her head, the hidden dancer, Benali, was revealed. Morocco has a rich tradition of dances that utilize fabric to cover and uncover the female dancer, and Benali expertly employed her cultural legacy. She used an array of fabrics to symbolize aspects of her culture, sometimes finding comfort within the traditions and other times struggling with their restrictive limitations. She joyfully belted out a tune and broke into an ecstatic dance with shoulders shimmying, hips vibrating, and legs kicking to traditional *Aalaoui* dance music. Then she wrestled with the wedding costume, as she struggled with the countless layers of her skirt—tossing them up in the air, concealing her head, and painting the space with stormy strokes of yellow.

Suddenly, she sat up and sang an unaccompanied song her Algerian grandmother used to sing to her—a song about going on pilgrimage to Mecca, with the affirming refrain, “*Allah hu akhbar*.” These words, sung so tenderly by Benali and evoking her grandmother’s nurturing love, are the same words screamed in public squares at beheadings, stonings, suicide bombings, and violent massacres by Islamic extremists. Yet here in this context, the words, melody, and delivery conveyed a very different emotional tone, one of pure-hearted spiritual yearning.

Benali finally threw the skirt off and emerged as a contemporary dancer attired in black dance shorts and tank top with her loosened and abundant golden tresses. Benali’s provocatively modern clothing contrasted with her postures, gestures, facial expressions, and spoken chit-chat that provided a glimpse into her Moroccan roots—both personal and societal. The traditional world of Moroccan women has, for centuries, been mostly separate from the world of men. Born in the town of Oujda, on Morocco’s eastern border with Algeria, Benali was raised by a matriarchy of her mother, sisters, and grandmothers, as her father was usually away working. Benali commented that her grandmothers were strong women—active leaders of big families who respected the traditions and religion, but also believed that women should work hard, earn an income, and be independent. Much of the inspiration for the piece came from



During part of the performance, Benali sits on the stage floor singing a song from her childhood while artistic collaborator Soufiane Karim stands upstage playing the flute. His presence evokes a sense of enduring tradition in the midst of Benali’s contemporary paradox over her identity.



Benali swathes herself in a white sheet, symbolizing the constraining religious attitudes within Moroccan culture.



her memories of these women with whom she grew up.

At one point, Benali lay on her back delivering a monologue in Moroccan to her paternal grandmother in heaven, apologizing for pursuing a career in dance. Her culture, religion, and family do not condone women showing their body or dancing in public with men present, and certainly not as a profession. She explained, “The expectation for women is to be stable, make a family, and be discreet.” Faced with these constraints, Benali had made a decision at age nineteen: “I had to dance and that meant I had to fight.”

Eventually, Benali donned a white muslin fabric and enveloped herself completely in it, concealing all but a single angry eye. She twisted and stretched within the confines of the shroud-like cloak as Karim collected and raised up the discarded wedding skirt, cradling it like a broken or dead body. Benali shuffled around the stage, constrained and utterly covered, as the traditional skirt had been cast off and replaced with a more extreme confinement—driving

home the point that change does not always mean progress.

At last, Benali bared her face with a defiant expression and caressed it with a scarlet, silk sash that she pulled from the interior of her white robe. She receded into the folds of white fabric, then eventually emerged and tied the white cloth around her waist as a giant skirt, revealing her bare arms and tank top, while toying with the red sash. This skirt became another prison as Karim circled her repeatedly, squatting down to the floor every couple of inches and then popping back up, as he organized the bottom of her skirt into a massive enclosure. His rhythm quickened as he continuously arranged her attire with military precision. His circling escalated into somersaults around the skirt’s perimeter. For this section of the piece, Karim drew upon Morocco’s *Gnawa* trance-inducing athletic dance rituals that bear a noticeable resemblance to hip-hop stunts.

Karim’s circling accelerated into a full-throttled run as Benali poked a bare leg out of the opening of the wrap-around garment. Then, in an instant, Benali threw the band of crimson around Karim—capturing him.

Benali pushed the skirt over her head and finally discarded it, concluding the dance sitting on the floor in her black tank and shorts, insistently beating a bangled belly-dance scarf against the floor. Karim had wrapped himself within the discarded white skirt, spinning like a covered dervish, and finally collapsing into a heap.

The piece left the audience spellbound. The three Moroccan artists were anxious to engage with the viewers, and pulled up chairs opposite them for an open discussion. This process of mutual reflection is an essential aspect of the Center Stage concept, explained Deirdre Valente of Lisa Booth Management, Inc. (LBMI), the company that manages the program. The Center Stage initiative evolved as a result of a report made in January 2009 to the Obama administration by the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA)—now the program’s producer—and by fellow regional arts organizations. The report urged the federal government to recommit to international cultural exchange as a means to enrich the education of our children, build greater acceptance of different cultures within our borders, create an environment for more effective diplomacy, and prepare citizens to fully participate in the global economy and society.

This was a new direction in cultural diplomacy. In the past, we sent American artists abroad, exporting our culture and message to international audiences and communities. Center Stage brings international artists from abroad to American audiences at home, to foster meaningful dialogue and personal connections both onstage and off. The tours are widely dispersed geographically and include small communities as well as the usual large cities.

The selection process begins with the U.S. Department of State identifying a handful of countries vital to our strategic interests that are culturally and commercially under-

represented in the United States. NEFA places a worldwide open call for nominations for grantees through social media networks, foreign embassies, and non-government agencies. The program seeks international performers trained in contemporary art forms who are generating “new art” to shake up Americans’ perceptions of these cultures. A panel of readers narrows the list of applicants to include multiple performing groups from a single nation, as Valente explained, “to give a window into the diversity and complexity of the country.” After advance trips to meet with the artists and see their work in its native environment, NEFA and LBMI make recommendations to the State Department and invitations are sent out. It takes two years from the initiation of the open call until the U.S. tour.

At that point, LBMI introduces each group to the touring marketplace and organizes their one-month, paid tour. Coming from Morocco, without a modern dance or contemporary arts infrastructure, Benali wanted exposure to different models of dance venues to experience different organizational set-ups as well as access to and connection with other working artists. The tours include four to six residencies, incorporating performances, workshops, discussions, master classes, and community gatherings. Fleur d’Orange performed in communities large and small throughout the northeast, with residencies at several universities and dance studios. The residencies included not only the usual dance workshops but also conversations about the status of women in Arab countries held in Arabic and French language classes. A Wesleyan faculty member expressed the lasting impact the performance had on her class entitled “Negotiated Gender in the Maghreb” showing students how “Moroccans are actively engaged in negotiating all sorts of local and global influences.” All of the Center Stage tours include performances at the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage, where Fleur d’Orange’s performances also incorporated larger-than-life projections of calligraphy and Moroccan interior spaces by Yacine Fadhil.

Audience members spoke of having been transported to a faraway place. The guest artists expressed their desire to perform the piece back home, but had concerns as to whether it could be received in Morocco’s traditional society, which is slowly starting to change. They spoke about the difficulty of gaining their society’s acceptance of contemporary artistic expression. This struggle is common for

contemporary artists in many developing countries that have strong folkloric traditions. Folk troupes are embraced within the society’s mores and therefore garner the already limited support and funding for the arts.



Artists Mohcine Imrharn (left), Hind Benali (second from right), and Soufiane Karim (right) participated in a post-performance discussion moderated by Janera Solomon (second from left), artistic director of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in Pittsburgh. Such discussions are part of the Center Stage diplomacy model.

Since most Moroccan young people do not have the opportunity to pursue contemporary training abroad as these artists have, Benali has taken the challenge of building a thriving contemporary dance culture in Morocco and providing young people with dance training. In 2008, she initiated “Action Danse,” a ten-day festival for dance students that includes workshops and performances led by international and experimental choreographers. It brings the festival performances to public spaces—historic sites, city parks, and theaters.

Benali, Karim, and Imrharn are consummate creators, performers, and collaborators, working together with seamless sensitivity to support the tone and message of the piece. Their supreme fluency in and use of their rich North African heritage gave the work a distinctive vocabulary layered with meaning and complexity. These artists are a product of their culture and it informs their art. But they are also trained in contemporary techniques and possess a creative fire that impels them to challenge norms and break new ground. Their sophisticated artistry is apparent in their ability to subtly merge the old with the new in an evocative expression.

A few months after the Center Stage tour, Fleur d’Orange was invited to perform *Identity* at the Arab World Institute in Paris for an arts exhibition entitled “Contemporary Morocco.” They performed excerpts of the dance among the exhibited paintings and sculpture installations. The overwhelming response from both French and Moroccan viewers was that they loved what they saw, and it was not what they expected. Fortified with the positive feedback from Moroccans, Benali hopes to take *Identity* home to Oujda.

The recording of one of the Kennedy Center performances of *Identity* can be accessed at: <http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/millennium/archive.html> and enter Fleur d’Orange.



Karen Greenspan, a New York City-based dance writer, researches and observes contemporary and traditional dance forms in the United States and abroad. A former professional dancer, she is a frequent contributor to *Natural History*. Most recently, she wrote “State-sponsored Happiness” [3/2016].