Fall 2017

Ballet Review

0 74470 80914 2 03

A Mosaic in the Making

Karen Greenspan

Belgian-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui has been in New York City creating a new piece for the Martha Graham Dance Company. As I walk into the company's suite of offices, I can't help but notice the commanding bronze bust of Louis Horst (Graham's confidant, coach, musical director) claiming the entrance way. The company is now headquartered in Westbeth, a residential/commercial development on the westernmost edge of Greenwich Village, conceived in the late 1960s to create affordable housing and work space for artists. For more than forty years (1971-2012), these studios had been the home of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The weight of history permeates these quarters.

Inside the spacious dance studio, nine Graham dancers are working through a new section of choreography full of deep traveling pliés with sweeping arms that gobble up the air. They transition to the floor, moving into all manner of slithering contortions. Larbi (as he is called), in his brick-colored sweatpants, practically melts into the floor to demonstrate the quality he wants for this descent.

According to Larbi's rehearsal assistant, Jason Kittelburger, the actual rehearsal time with the dancers will add up to six weeks occurring in one- or two-week increments that began during the summer of 2016 and will continue until one week before the Joyce opening in February 2017.

Next, Larbi gives the dancers an intricate gesture sequence to rehearse. Obviously, this is not something the Graham technique has trained them for. Everyone has a good laugh as Larbi shares that many ballet companies have struggled over his gesture choreography as well. Later I ask where he derives this vocabulary from. Larbi replies, "Indian mudras from bharatanatyam, kuchipudi, kathak, and people I have met throughout my career that have had an impact on me." (He has collaborated on choreographic projects with kathak/contemporary artist Akram Khan and kuchipudi dancer Shantala Shivalingappa.) "But gestures were always very natural to me. They come from a very personal place. My hands have always been part of my expression. Even my first piece, *Rien de Rien*, was based on gestures that people use when they speak." Indeed, gestures are often his point of departure and a signature element in his choreography.

The dancers begin work on a quartet section to a haunting Middle Eastern melody played on oud with vocals. Larbi shares that it is a Sephardic (Jewish tradition from Spain and North Africa) song from one of his favorite recordings – calling it "Jewish music that has traveled a lot." He will also be integrating Christian Lebanese music sung by the Lebanese singer Fadia el-Hage. Larbi clarifies, "It is Arabic singing that is Catholic, not Islamic – though your prejudice assumes it is Islamic." These details are significant to Larbi because they illustrate how "things are not necessarily what they seem. I think we are all everything and we are all connected – deeply connected. All these distinctions don't mean anything." He continues, "I have an obsession with redefining the idea of the Middle East. I would like for people to appreciate the intrinsic cultural value of the place – not just view it as a war zone."

The quartet's movements evoke geometric, kaleidoscopic designs characteristic of much Islamic art, which has traditionally focused on the representation of patterns. Larbi tells a dancer, "Don't go slow, but instead, use suspension. Suspension will give the movement space and time." The dancer's body stretches like taffy as she lowers herself to the floor and sweeps her arms in a full arc ending with her hands coming together to form a sensual lotus mudra.

The sound of chiming bells accompanies a group of dancers performing a sequence of an-

Anne Souder in *Mosaic*. (Photo: Brigid Pierce, Martha Graham Dance Company)

gular gestures. Each disconnected move with flexed wrists, elbows, and ankles corresponds to a single chime – like the distinct, irregular pieces of a mosaic. The introduction of vocals instantly transforms the hand and arm movements into fluid curlicues drawn in space like the floral designs and energy that also typify Islamic art and calligraphy.

Now the dancers' hips swivel in cursive scribbles that are full of sensuality as the movement expands into circular floor patterns. Larbi capitalizes on the Graham Company's ownership of floor work as they launch into a section where a group of women and a separate group of men engage in a "call and response" dance. This structure is pervasive in much of Moroccan folk music. With all of these images and sounds, the dance feels like a trip through Morocco. Indeed, Larbi absorbed the culture and aesthetic of his father's native land during annual family pilgrimages to Morocco.

I ask Larbi, "What is the title of the piece?" He replies, "It was going to be *Middle East*, but right now, I would love to call it *Mosaic*. I am thinking of it like a composition of different little pieces of stones arranged together as you would see in the Alhambra in Spain where you have all these beautiful motifs. I want to go in that direction with the dancers." He talks about how the individual pieces of a mosaic, when connected into the larger pattern, yield a totality that is greater than the sum of the parts.

"I am still discussing whether I can have seven or nine dancers. I would like to be able to use nine – like in the Sufi Dervish ritual. For Dervish turning, they usually require nine people."

"Do you see the dance as a ritual?" I ask.

"Always," he responds. "It could be a dance around a fire."

I continue, "With the Jewish, Islamic, and Christian influences, would you say *Mosaic* is a meeting ground?"

"Absolutely!" he confirms.

I probe further, "A peace table?"

"Let's call it a ceasefire," he counters.

His very being is a meeting ground of cultures and influences. Born in Antwerp to a Flemish mother and an immigrant Moroccan father, Larbi was raised with foundations in both the Catholic and Muslim faiths. His skin, speech, and appearance are very white, but his name itself refers to many aspects of his Arab lineage. "Sidi" is a title like "Sir," used to designate those (males) who are descendants of the Prophet. All of the men in his family have this prefix to their name. "Larbi" actually means "the Arab." When I ask about "Cherkaoui," he tells me it means "from where the sun comes."

From the meaning of "Cherkaoui" he sourced the name for his own company – Eastman. Founded in 2010 and funded by the Flemish government, it has a permanent home in Antwerp. In 2015, Cherkaoui was appointed artistic director of the Royal Flemish Ballet. He collaborates on creative projects with other renowned choreographers and also receives commissions from high profile organizations – Cirque du Soleil, popular music icons, numerous ballet companies, solo dancers, and now the Martha Graham Dance Company.

And yet, because of his Arabic name, upon entering the United States, he is subjected to

Xin Ying and Abdiel Jacobsen in *Mosaic*. (Photo: Brigid Pierce, MGDC)

a special variety of airport security questioning: "Do you know how to handle a weapon? Have you visited anywhere in the Middle East?" He shrugs it off saying, "There is this weird distrust of your background. It got a little bit better since the digital age because they started keeping files about me. Now they just go, 'Oh that's that harmless choreographer.' So it's okay. But it can be very intimidating."

The current project with the Graham Company was initiated by Executive Director Larue Allen, who reached out to him about three years ago. Janet Eilber, the company's Artistic Director, explained that over the last few years their direction has focused on stimulating new interest and access to the Graham legacy through initiatives that include contextual and thematic programming, use of new media, commissions, and creative events. The Cherkaoui commission fits with the thematic choice for this season, which is "Sacred/Profane," and was sought out because much of Larbi's oeuvre revolves around ritual.

Larbi's *Mosaic* will fulfill the "sacred" aspect of the programming while another commission, choreographed by Annie-B Parson, riffing on Graham's 1941 comedic work, *Punch and the Judy* (about a cruel, dysfunctional family dynamic), will speak to the "profane." In addition to these commissions, Graham's *Primitive Mysteries* and *Dark Meadow Suite* will be revived as thematic examples of "the sacred," and her *Maple Leaf Rag* and *Diversion of Angels* will exemplify "the profane." Eilber emphasizes, "Outside commissions have become more important in that new work brings fresh eyes to the [Graham] classics." She points out that supporting the creation of new work has always been part of the company's ethos, saying, "When Martha was alive we supported the creation of new work by Martha – it was 'goddess-centric.' It is just a side step that we are now supporting new work that is audience-centric."

I ask Larbi if he will have the Graham Company sing or speak (which he typically does). He laughs at the idea and responds, "Right now I'm more interested in staying within their form and contaminating it with the energies that are important to me. So I ask myself, what would Martha do? I try to channel that energy. I love to move it away from my own identity and focus more on the company and the dancers' energy and talents. This is very important to me. I have always tried to do that. I am at a point in life where I feel it is so interesting to learn from them and to see how they translate my ideas and take them in directions that are even new for me. I'm a bit of a homeopathic choreographer. I'm not a dictator."

*

It is now two weeks before the premiere. In the waiting room, Anne Souder, who is dancing her second season with the Graham Company, remarks on how unusual it is to work with an artist whose intellect and humility equals his or her choreographic talent. She also recounts how Larbi observed the dancers so discerningly and nurtured their potential in a manner that highlights their strong points.

In the studio the dancers are trying on the costumes that designer Karen Young has abstracted from tribal costumes and their colors. The women's long pleated skirts in earthy tones respond well to the dance movements. Underneath the skirts and matching folksy tops, the dancers wear skin-tone body stockings printed with elaborate henna tattoos that will be revealed mid-choreography. The costumes work well and the dancers are clearly pleased. Young is now preparing to research tribal face-paint designs to include in the dancers' makeup.

Rehearsal director Denise Vale has been responsible for rehearsing the company and maintaining the choreographic material between Larbi's visits. She signals that Larbi is still working creatively right up to the end. He walks in, meets with the dancers, and hands out *scripts*. The dancers disperse about the studio, sitting or lying in passive stretches, as they familiarize themselves with their lines. I assume the dancers and Larbi have estab-

lished a new level of trust and comfort with each other so that he has asked them to speak out loud after all.

They come together with Larbi and tackle the new challenge of integrating spoken lines with the movement and the soundtrack, which includes a collage of what sounds like news broadcasts reporting on devastating events from conflicts in the Middle East. This along with the music selections have been seamlessly mixed by Felix Buxton from the London sound design group, Basement Jaxx.

It's finally time to run the piece. The dancers, partially costumed, take their places for the opening. They form a two-dimensional, interlocking design – a mosaic! The dancers' interconnected fingers undulate like underwater seaweed. A clap of thunder seems to thrust one dancer apart from the group. Her generous and sensual movements invite the rest of the group to release from the opening formation and move as individual fragments. The action builds into effusive spiraling and full-bodied dancing as a group, in duets, quartets, and solos. From time to time they return to the mosaic motif. A sustained, high-energy jumping section changes the dynamic. The dancers' spoken lines, in concert with the recorded voices, overlay a political tone onto the work. By the end, the dancers return to form the interconnecting pieces of *Mosaic*.

After the run, I catch up on what Larbi has been working on elsewhere during the interim. *Icon*, a work about how we create, empower, and break icons, just premiered in November 2016 as a collaboration between Eastman and Sweden's GöteborgsOperans Danskompani. The photos of the dancers interacting with Antony Gormley's set design using 3.5 tons of clay are viscerally evocative. This weekend Larbi is flying off to Los Angeles to meet with Beyoncé and her choreographers in order to consult on the dance concept for the Grammy's. He also describes a recent project in Japan – a play (in Japanese) called *Pluto*, based on a manga – that he directed. As I take in the enormity of his range and interests, he explains himself, "I love to explore the world of art in the broadest way possible. To navigate between the different forms makes me feel alive."

*

Mosaic premieres at the Joyce. The piece has changed significantly from just a week ago in the studio. When the dancers break from the initial mosaic structure, they confidently fill the movement with luscious sensuality. Their spinning bodies and explosive energy equal the infectious, exotic music. The face paint infuses the scene with a tribal hint. But now, when the mosaic motif is recreated, the interconnecting fingers display a different quality indicating a distinct, changed emotional tone. This time the hands shake and tremble. The group breaks apart to perform the disconnected angular movements to the chimes that had caught my attention the first time I observed a rehearsal. However, now with the overlaid narration of conflict atrocities (the dancers are no longer speaking these lines) and cool, dark-green lighting, the sequence reads quite differently. It feels disturbing and ominous.

New energy erupts with the aerobic jumping section, which is heightened now with drumming and strobe lighting. The dancers strip down to their hennaed body stockings and perform a partnering passage that is eventually reduced to a single couple. All the dancers spin onstage to form a concluding mosaic configuration.

It is clear to me now that the mosaic is a metaphor for the Golden Age of Islam – or any golden age, for that matter – during which the free and open flow of ideas and intercultural cooperation flourishes. Larbi's final mosaic shakes violently and is shattered into pieces. In the end, one splintered fragment remains; she is twitching in a convulsive fit desperately clinging to her place in a mosaic that is no more.