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DANCING FOR PEACE



Eric Grigorian/Special to the Daily News
The Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble and Adam Basma Middle Eastern Dance Company will unite in the "Debka for Peace" finale.

Event will unite two cultures

By Robert Monroe
Staff Writer

NORTHRIDGE — Organizers say art, not politics, will take center stage today and Sunday at California State University, Northridge, when Arab and Israeli dance troupes link hands in the "Debka for Peace" dance program.

Or is that the Arabic "dabke?"

Even down to the spelling of the dance that gives the event its name, artistic directors of the Adam Basma Middle Eastern Dance Company and Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble have found some differences are unavoidable.

"Debka for Peace" performances take place today at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. at the CSUN Performing Arts Center. Tickets cost from \$20 to \$75. For information, call Keshet Chaim at (818) 784-0344.

But, said Genie Benson of Keshet Chaim, the tensions, such as they are, have been strictly about dance, not politics.

As producer of the show, Benson made the executive decision and chose to spell "debka" her way.

"It is interesting when you take two groups who traditionally have so much trouble getting along and trying an artistic project," Benson said. "We're trying to keep it very apolitical."

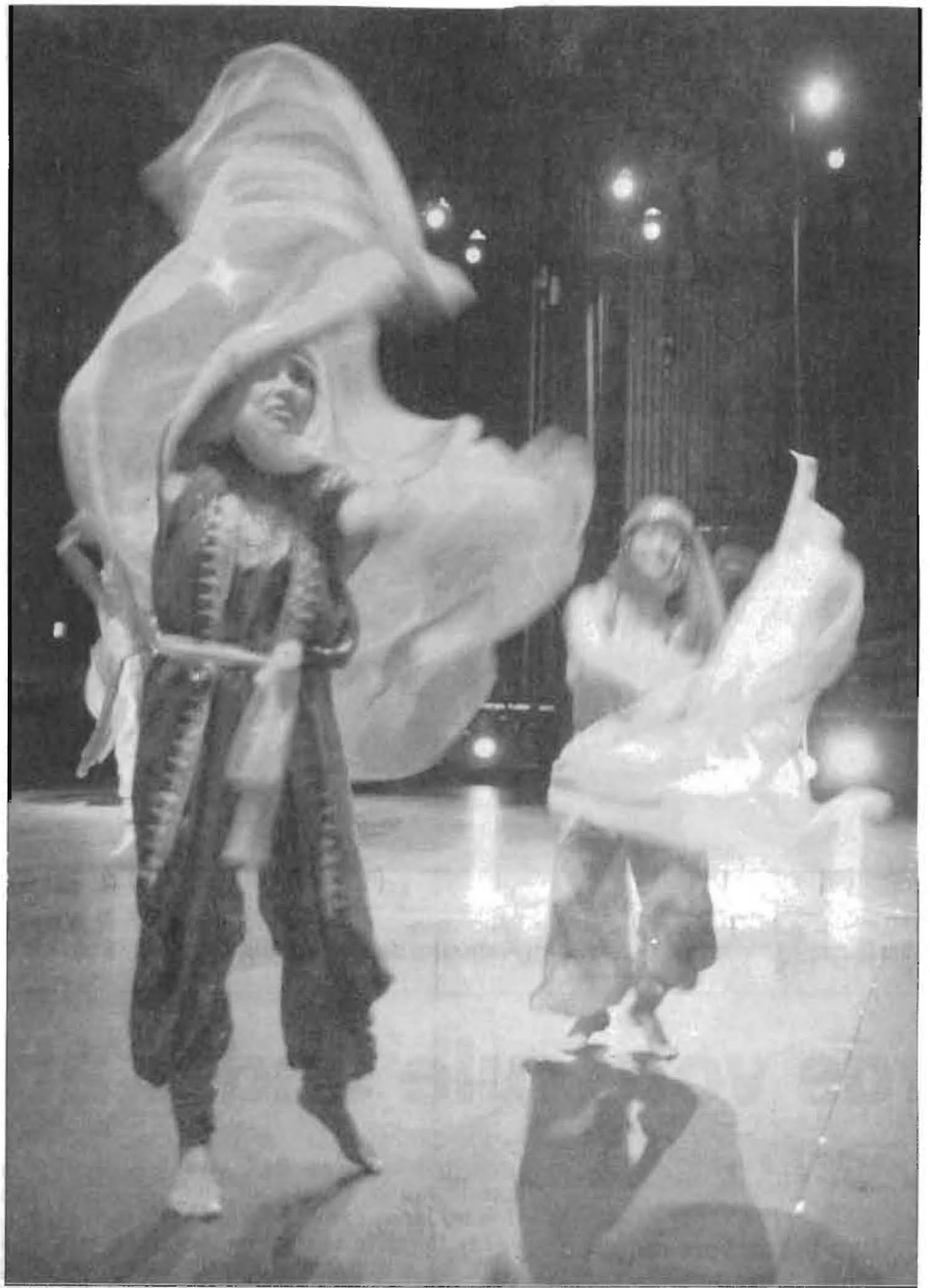
The event, with one performance tonight and two Sunday, is billed as a display of Middle Eastern dance. It is the first collaboration between Arab and Israeli dance companies outside Israel, organizers said.

In the same low-key spirit, no consulates or government agencies have any hand in the production.

Benson said one observer had questioned whether the event, featuring a final piece in which the dancers appear hand-in-hand, could help bring unity between the two cultures.

"We said that's not what we're saying," Benson said. "We're not trying to bring peace to governments, we're trying to bring people together."

Adam Basma, artistic director of his 20-year-old namesake company, said his dancers have been enthusiastic about the union. The only part that makes him nervous is the show's finale, the one in which both companies take the stage at the same time after alternating dances individually. It's not the politics he's worried about, but the potential for miscues, missteps and face plants.



The Adam Basma Middle Eastern Dance Company rehearses for the weekend.

"When that baby delivers, everything else will be easy," Basma said.

Basma and his counterpart with Keshet Chaim, Eytan Avisar, only had about three weeks to work out a dance. It took a while to find music they could agree upon. They differed on whether the finale should be set to a ballad or something more up-tempo, something with lyrics or instrumental.

Dawn Elder, managing director of Adam Basma's company, said she solved the problem with a trip to the record store. She located recordings by an artist who used Jewish and Arabic musicians in previous collaborations.

"Call it neutral zone music but we came up with something they both like," Elder said.

"It's not mine, and it's not (Basma's)," Avisar said with a laugh in reference to the final

music selection. "In our tradition, there is music that has this Arab feeling and sound so it makes no difference."

The debka will feature traditional Arabic dances — which over centuries have commemorated everything from good harvests to the days when neighbors would stomp down a newly poured mud roof. It also will have more contemporary dances from Israel with roots in America, Greece, Spain and other places from which the country has drawn its citizenry.

Leaders from both companies said they hope their enthusiasm for the project rubs off on the audience.

"It's really a very, very inspiring thing to me," Avisar said. "You feel this high energy that's hard to explain."