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The Spectator

Debka for Peace

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Members of Keshet Chaim and Adam Basma Middle Eastern Dance Company

At first glance, the some 40 dancers warming up at the University of Judaism looked identical to each other. All were limber, wiry, dressed in leotards or sweats. But the murmured voices in the studio — in Hebrew and Arabic, as well as English — told a different story.

The rehearsal that lasted late last Sunday night was part of a historic collaboration between two international dance companies based in Los Angeles; one Arabic, one Jewish-Israeli. In the joint production of the Adam Basma Middle Eastern Dance Company and the Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble, Feb. 26 and 27 at Cal State Northridge, the troupes will perform their signature pieces and come together in a finale that incorporates elements of the *debka*, the line dance that both cultures share.

The turbulent politics of the Middle East is not part of the program, "Debka for Peace." "[Our finale] will be a lot of clapping, a lot of holding hands," says Basma, who was born in Beirut and specializes in traditional folk and native dances from Egypt to Iraq. "It will be something very simple to show the audience that we can all come together as human beings."

The collaboration began when Genie Benson, Keshet Chaim's managing director, met Dawn Elder, whose management firm represents the Basma troupe, while both were working on the same world music concert at Universal Amphitheater last summer. Benson, an Ashkenazi Jew, had been hired to promote the concert within the Jewish community, while Elder, a Lebanese/Palestinian-American, was helping to reach out to Arab-Americans. Before long, the two were talking about their respective dance ensembles and envisioning a "Riverdance"-like show of Middle Eastern music in Los Angeles.

They played "matchmaker" between their two artistic directors, Basma and Keshet Chaim's Eytan Avisar; by late last year, the choreographers were meeting over Middle Eastern pistachio cookies at Basma's house in Los Angeles or Avisar's home in Sherman Oaks. The talk was of dance, not politics.

Nevertheless, Avisar recalls, "Some people raised eyebrows when they learned about our effort. They asked,

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