

## Kuwaiti arts producer collaborates with San Francisco's Kunst-Stoff Company on new dance-theater production

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Kunst-Stoff dancer Marina Fukushima. [Photo credit: Keira Heu-Jwyn Chang]

Talal Al-Muhanna, a Kuwaiti arts producer and filmmaker, recently completed a creative collaboration with San Francisco-based choreographer Yannis Adoniou on a new dance-theater production entitled “Raqs Al Moza”.

The piece – whose tongue-in-cheek title translates from Arabic to English as “Banana Dance” – was produced by the San Francisco-based company Kunst-Stoff (a name which translates from German to English as ‘Art-Things’).

Over the last ten years, Kunst-Stoff has developed a strong reputation for creative experimentation in the San Francisco Bay Area - excelling at presenting cutting-edge performances that combine dance, music, theater, visual art, design, film and video. For this particular production, Al-Muhanna acted as the project’s “dramaturge” (creative consultant) – at times guiding Adoniou and the performers towards exploring new, uncharted choreographic territory with one another. Musically, the production features the sounds of Tom Waits and Radiohead.

Regarding his role on “Raqs Al Moza”, Al-Muhanna says: “One of the ways in which a dramaturge works with artists is to provide them with intellectual frameworks within which to try out new approaches to creating work. Challenging their preconceptions and providing informed feedback throughout the process is key.” For Adoniou this seemed to be both essential and invaluable. “For artists to be creative and discover new things they must remain open to the unknown, so Talal was hugely helpful during

the creative process – both for me and my performers. He gave us a lot of confidence to keep developing the work thoughtfully when things got tough and encouraged lateral thinking so we could break away from our habitual actions and behaviors.”

The freshly minted show received its U.S. premiere at San Francisco’s chic **Yerba Buena Arts Center** in June before making its way across the Atlantic, to Germany, for its July 16 European premiere at Berlin’s trendy performance venue **Dock 11**. The 4-night run of performances which ended on July 19 capped a successful coming-together of two artists who have had, coincidentally, strong creative ties to the German cultural scene over the course of many years.

Al-Muhanna – who has worked as a creative consultant, filmmaker and arts producer in Germany since 1999 - has spent time living and working in diverse German locales including Berlin, Stuttgart, Mannheim, Cologne, Essen, Duesseldorf and Freiburg. Adoniou, the choreographer for this production, studied in Hamburg prior to working in Bonn. Together the two have worked on film and stage projects in Frankfurt and Heidelberg including with the world-renowned **Ballett Frankfurt** (on the making of a dance film) and as performers with the physical theater performance group **UnterwegsTheater**. Al-Muhanna, like Adoniou, still maintains strong creative ties and business links to German artists and filmmakers so Berlin seemed like the natural choice for their recent German premiere. “It also helps if you have lots of friends and contacts in a foreign city when opening a new show – it helps fill seats!” Adoniou joked.

While lightly playing on various signifiers from American and Arab culture, “Raqs Al Moza” was really designed by Al-Muhanna and Adoniou to have a universal appeal to audiences everywhere.

“Simply put, it’s a piece about a boy and girl who fall in love during times of war,” says Adoniou, “a reality not lost on many – whether in the Middle East or from the United States or elsewhere.” With this in mind, the show’s creators hope the production could eventually make its way towards the Middle East – perhaps by invitation of a regional arts festival or theatrical venue in Dubai, Abu Dhabi or maybe Beirut.

Conceptually, the work is staged as a dance-theater duet for a young couple. Layered into the intricate choreography there are moments of surprise, moments of humor, moments of fear. The structuring and pacing of the work were two of the dynamics that Al-Muhanna and Adoniou collaborated on closely in addition to narrative issues.

“During a break in rehearsals one day, one of the dancers was eating a banana and eventually we ended up doing a short skit where he used the banana as a weapon, as a gun. After that, it occurred to us that the young man could be a newly recruited soldier sent off to fight a battle in a distant land and the young woman his girlfriend or fiancée back home. The piece then evolved from there.”



Performer Spencer Dickhaus in rehearsal for “Raqs Al Moza” with choreography by Yannis Adoniou and dramaturgy by Talal Al-Muhanna. [Photo credit: Osama Dawood]

Adoniou and Al-Muhanna initially developed the work as part of an artist residency at **Florida State University** in the spring of 2008. They then briefly worked on the production further in San Francisco in January 2009 before Al-Muhanna had to return to Germany to complete work on other projects. Since the last time they met in January, though, there have been changes in the casting and new elements have been re-designed or added, including new costumes and music.

Says Al-Muhanna: “It has not always been easy to be fully involved in a production when there are great distances between the collaborators, but artists - and especially filmmakers – are used to working like this.”

Recently, between rehearsals and performances in Berlin, choreographer Adoniou reiterated: “Although it claims to be a piece about war, it is still in fact a work about humor - which is what we originally intended. It’s about breaking away from our habits - not only in choreography i.e. how we organize our movements but also breaking habits in society in general. We tend to take ourselves so seriously nowadays that we restrict our natural impulse towards laughter. So every once in a while it’s good to put things in perspective in the broad scope of our lives and stop taking everything so seriously...”

After the first two shows in Berlin, however, the choreographer was faced with a not-so-funny challenge: “One of the lead performers had an injury so I had to step into the show in his place at the last minute.” Adoniou recounts.

“I guess that proves the point of the work,” Al-Muhanna commented after learning of the sudden change in casting: “Yannis took a decidedly light-hearted approach to having to fill the shoes of his injured cast member. So, instead of becoming anxious about whether or not he would succeed in getting all the steps right for the appreciation of the Berlin dance crowd, he took it all in stride.”



Choreographer Yannis Adoniou takes to the stage in Berlin for the dance-theater production Raqs Al Moza. [Photo credit: Osama Dawood]

For more information about the production Raqs Al Moza please contact the artists involved:

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