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'These songs give us intimate clues about what women's lives may have been like'

Ladino groove: Two moms channel 'herstory' through song and dance

In their latest collaboration, Miriam Peretz and Rachel Valfer perform a rich fusion of feminine folk music

BY LISA KLUG | January 15, 2017, 9:58 pm |

SAN FRANCISCO — When dancer Miriam Peretz and musician Rachel Valfer perform “Madre: The Ladino Project” Sunday evening, they will manifest a long held dream. The pair of women, a single mother and a married mother of two, knew each other in childhood. But it wasn’t until their paths crossed as classmates at the Center for Classical Mizrahi Music and Dance in Jerusalem that they began to jointly perform and envision a way to honor the legacy of Jewish women and Sephardic culture.

“We have worked together before, but the time finally jelled for this project, which is about women and mothers from the Diaspora, and of course also is about Jewish women and mothers in Diaspora expressing themselves through art,” Valfer told The Times of Israel.

“The Ladino project has really been in our hearts for a long time now, and Rachel has studied this tradition in depth, and is representing the tradition in the most authentic way possible,” Peretz says. “It is indeed a project dear to both of us at this time, and we sincerely hope to take this project on tour both nationally and internationally.”

Peretz, who has Sephardic ancestry on both her maternal and paternal lines, and Valfer, who has Ladino ancestry on her father’s side, will [take the stage](#) at the Freight and Salvage coffee house in

Berkeley, California together with their band. The ensemble includes Valfer's husband, multi-instrumentalist [Eliyahu Sills](#) on ney, Faisal Zedan on percussion and composer Dan Cantrell. The program features Peretz as a dancer and Valfer on vocals.

"Dan Cantrell is a master of Romani and klezmer and Balkan styles as well as a composer, so it's easy for him to jump right in to this project," Valfer says. "Faisal, originally from Syria, is also incredibly versed in Balkan as well as Arabic rhythms and styles. Turkish ney [an end-blown reed flute] has become one of my husband Eliyahu's favorite areas of expertise. So everyone is musically very on board for these styles."

Their video, which they filmed at Oakland's old train center, reveals their performance of the Ladino song, "Ir me Kero Madre." Its author longs to return to Jerusalem, to walk on its stones and wreath his or her head in the grasses of the city.

The lyrics state: "For there I will recover my lost children. There I will again see my parents. In Jerusalem, I will make my home. In Jerusalem, I will raise myself up".

"This longing for return to homeland is certainly not specific to Jews from the Eastern Diaspora, or even to Jews," Valfer says. "Although it is one of the main themes of the famous 12th and 13th century poets from Spain. However, in this case, the song serves as a metaphor for another 'returning to homeland,' as it were, and as such it is traditionally sung in preparing a body for burial and wrapping on the *kittel* [white ritual robe worn in life and death]."

The pair's collaboration literally spans the globe, from Jerusalem to the San Francisco Bay.

"We often would sit and play music together, as well as perform together at various small events," Peretz says. Then, when they both returned to the Bay Area, they continued to collaborate. Most notably, says Peretz, was "The Miriam's Well Project," which she calls, "a beautiful interfaith collaboration of music, dance and story."

As friends and collaborators, Peretz and Valfer realized although there is "a huge amount of Ladino music out there, not a lot of it sounds authentic — by which I mean conveying any of the original juice of those traditions," Valfer says.

“We also noticed that there isn’t much dance out there, not much visual representation of what the dance could look like. Miriam is a master of many ethnic styles from the Middle East and Central Asia, but here she is creating her own ethno-contemporary fusion style to express these pieces. A lot of flamenco influence, as well as Persian.”

The pair, which performed last summer in Marin County, has another performance scheduled this spring. “And we are very excited to have more in the near future,” Valfer says.

Peretz’s early training consisted of contemporary dance, martial arts and various world dance forms, including Central Asian, Middle Eastern, North African, and Romani (Gypsy) forms of dance and music.

‘I feel that I am creating a new form, however the form is in line and directly informed by the music and cultures from where the tradition arose’

“I traveled throughout the Middle East and studied the cultures from inside out, learning not only the dance traditions, but also the music, rhythms and cultures,” says Peretz.

“Since there really is not a Ladino dance tradition in the same way that there is a specific and passed down musical tradition, I feel that I am in a sense creating a new form. However I feel the form is in line and directly informed by the music and cultures from where the tradition arose.”

Peretz has loved Ladino music since she was a teenager and “always felt in some way that it was the fusion of the many cultures that are part of me.”

In “Madre,” the ensemble presents music from the women’s oral tradition of Ladino or Judezmo songs rather than Romanzas, or ballads, which depict an epic world of knights, adventures and love affairs.

“We will play Cantigas, songs which talk about daily events and life cycle events, and are often sung from a woman’s perspective; from daughter to mother or vice versa, from a mother to her baby, from the community to a bride,” Valfer says. “As we will see, these songs show us the recurring themes that dominated the lives of the women living in these cultures, and give us intimate clues about what their lives may have been like.”

The songs feature lyrics dating back to pre-expulsion Spain and the Biblical Song of Songs. Some songs share beloved recipes, or express a young bride’s frustration with her mother-in-law, the master of her new household.

“Because they are folk songs, there are often many versions of the same song, many alternate verses to pick from, and even melodically, there are variations,” Valfer says.

“One of the wonderful things about folk traditions is the way they are passed around and develop over time as they are appropriated by different folk. And I would argue that this tradition is still alive, even though the culture it emerged from is changing with the times — at least if the number of versions of any given song on Youtube is any indication.”

‘One of the wonderful things about folk traditions is the way they are passed around and develop over time’

The songs are filled with color and revelations about Sephardic cultures.

“An old Arab adage advises that you should never marry a woman who doesn’t know at least 50 ways to cook eggplant,” Valfer says.

“But what is interesting about this song is that it not only records seven recipes for cooking ‘Merendjena.’ It also records the ‘kitchen of origin’ of each recipe. Cousin Elena

cooks it this way. The daughter of the neighbor cooks it that way, while her mother cooks it yet another way,” she says.

The song, says Valfer, is not only promoting the continuity of food traditions, but also records familial relationships.

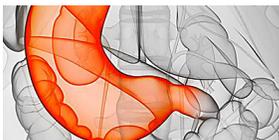
“The chorus repeatedly tells us that Uncle Cerasi, who likes to drink wine with his eggplant, has received many good things in life, due to his drinking predilection!” laughs Valfer.

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