

SPOTLIGHT

Richmond modern dancer fuses styles of East and West

By Jennifer Modenessi
TIMES STAFF WRITER

For Shahrzad Khorsandi, dance isn't just a way to bridge cultures — it's also a way to connect to the past.

Movement, gesture, rhythm, space — for Khorsandi, the language of dance is universal. It's what's given the Richmond resident a better understanding and appreciation for the country she left in her youth. It's also her life pursuit.

Khorsandi and Shahrzad Dance Company, the troupe she founded a decade ago (she also has a dance academy), specialize in classical and folkloric Persian dance. But the Western-trained modern dancer isn't content to merely honor traditional dance forms. She fuses East with West through the use of modern techniques. The resulting hybrid dance form not only preserves an art form endangered in its own country of origin, but also propels it toward the future.

And Khorsandi isn't stopping there. The Shahrzad Dance Company has paired with Berkeley's Ruth Botchan Dance Company for "Bridges," a concert that aims to bridge Jewish and Persian cultures through dance and music. Khorsandi forecasts more collaborations in the future, and perhaps a trip to Pakistan. For her, dance knows no boundaries.

Q: How did the idea for "Bridges" originate?

A: I've been dancing with Ruth



JOANNA JHANDA/TIMES

SHAHZRAD KHORSANDI combines Persian dance with the modern dance she studied when she moved to America.

do a Persian and Jewish collaboration, hoping to bridge some gaps and do something that brings people and cultures together.

Q: How do you think dance brings cultures together? How does what you've choreographed aim to achieve that?

A: Things like dance and music are so much a part of every culture. They're abstract and universal ... they're things that everybody enjoys, and they give people a whole other more humanistic perspective that's not convoluted with people's political agendas. When you're watching something traditional — a tradi-

Folk dances are regional dances. They differ a lot based on the geography of the country. If you go towards the north, near the Russian border, the dances look very much like Russian-style dances. If you go towards the south, there's a lot of African and Arabian influences in the music and in the dance and in the way people dress. It just depends on where you go. Some of the dances are done with scarves, some of them are done with sticks. Some of them have a lot of hopping, a lot of them are done in circles.

Classical dance tends to — in a more abstract way, not the narrative way — take the aesthetics that are embedded in the culture that you see in the calligraphy, in the composition of paintings, and you hear in the composition of music. One thing I've noticed about Persian dances is that one movement flows into another. There are a lot of curved lines that you see in the compositions of the paintings as well. Spiral, circles, curved arms ... the upper body curving up and over like a parenthesis ... I think the aesthetics are beautiful, and there are a lot of people who aren't Persian that see that, and there's something universal about it. The flow of it is very natural.

Q: What about your style of Persian dance?

A: One thing that we're doing that is very different and new and contemporary in the Persian community is that we are doing things that are conceptual with Persian



JOANNA JHANDA/TIMES

KHORSANDI, left, rehearses with dancers Stephanie Linakis and Toni Silver. Shahrzad Dance Company and Ruth Botchan Dance Company are performing in "Bridges," through today.

Persian dance movements.

Q: Why do you think you're driven to meld Persian and Western dance?

A: I think like any artist, that's just my own identity, that I am an Iranian-American and my training is both in Persian and modern dance, and so that's how I express myself. It's not fulfilling for me to just do traditional folk dances that preserve the culture, and it's not really satisfying in terms of my own identity to do strictly modern dances that I learned at a later age. So I'm just expressing exactly who I am — which is really a mixture of the two.

Q: Were you studying dance in Iran before you emigrated to the United States?

growing up, which was before the Islamic revolution, the only dance classes we heard about were a couple of Western ballet classes that were in uptown Tehran that only the people that were well-off could afford to go to, and they were taught by either Armenians or British teachers. So growing up, I never knew that there were Persian dance classes. But I did grow up doing Persian dances — dances that were passed on from generation to generation.

Q: What led you to start your own school and company?

A: When I came here, for a long time, I didn't know any Persians and, like most Iranian immigrants of that age, I think wanting to belong and the way that we

political situation was really bad. So for a long time, I basically denied my Persian heritage altogether.

It wasn't really until I had the opportunity to go back, which I thought would never happen because of the revolution, that everything really turned inside out for me. I realized that I had opened the door that had just been closed for 13 years, and it really made me want to reach out and get in touch with my own deeper identity. It was along the same time I had studied all the formal dancing and got my degrees and was beginning to develop and establish my own style of dance and choreography. And so the Persian heritage, my identity and my choreographic style all came together as one.

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And Khorsandi isn't stopping there. The Shahrzad Dance Company has paired with Berkeley's Ruth Botchan Dance Company for "Bridges," a concert that aims to bridge Jewish and Persian cultures through dance and music. Khorsandi forecasts more collaborations in the future, and perhaps a trip to Pakistan. For her, dance knows no boundaries.

Q: How did the idea for "Bridges" originate?

A: I've been dancing with Ruth Botchan for the last couple of years. We had this mutual idea of collaborating because she knew that I've been doing all this Persian dancing and putting on a lot of performances. She decided to bring back an old choreography from 12 years ago called "Mothersongs," which is Yiddish songs. We both thought it would be a good idea to

do a Persian and Jewish collaboration, hoping to bridge some gaps and do something that brings people and cultures together.

Q: How do you think dance brings cultures together? How does what you've choreographed aim to achieve that?

A: Things like dance and music are so much a part of every culture. They're abstract and universal ... they're things that everybody enjoys, and they give people a whole other more humanistic perspective that's not convoluted with people's political agendas. When you're watching something traditional — a traditional dance or classical dance or music, it just goes back further and deeper into people's hearts. You get to see the similarities between the cultures and not focus so much on the differences.

Q: Can you describe Persian dance for us?

A: You can categorize it as either folk dance or classical dance.

Persian dances is that one movement flows into another. There are a lot of curved lines that you see in the compositions of the paintings as well. Spiral, circles, curved arms ... the upper body curving up and over like a parenthesis ... I think the aesthetics are beautiful, and there are a lot of people who aren't Persian that see that, and there's something universal about it. The flow of it is very natural.

Q: What about your style of Persian dance?

A: One thing that we're doing that is very different and new and contemporary in the Persian community is that we are doing things that are conceptual with Persian dance. We're expressing ideas and emotions through dance that go beyond ornamental movement set to music. Usually, I think in the past, Persian dance has been looked at as something that's festive and celebratory and ornamental and pretty. What we're doing is extracting different kinds of emotions and concepts through

driven to meld Persian and Western dance?

A: I think like any artist, that's just my own identity, that I am an Iranian-American and my training is both in Persian and modern dance, and so that's how I express myself. It's not fulfilling for me to just do traditional folk dances that preserve the culture, and it's not really satisfying in terms of my own identity to do strictly modern dances that I learned at a later age. So I'm just expressing exactly who I am — which is really a mixture of the two.

Q: Were you studying dance in Iran before you emigrated to the United States?

A: No. I left Iran when I was about 11. Studying dance was really not much of an option growing up. Unfortunately, dancing, for a long time I guess, has not had the respect it should have had in Persian culture — and it still doesn't. Right now it's pretty much forbidden anyway under the new government. But even when I was

classes we heard about were a couple of Western ballet classes that were in uptown Tehran that only the people that were well-off could afford to go to, and they were taught by either Armenians or British teachers. So growing up, I never knew that there were Persian dance classes. But I did grow up doing Persian dances — dances that were passed on from generation to generation.

Q: What led you to start your own school and company?

A: When I came here, for a long time, I didn't know any Persians and, like most Iranian immigrants of that age, I think wanting to belong and the way that we left, the whole cultural and generation gaps between the kids and the parents, it makes you want to sort of push away your own culture and try to assimilate. Plus, we came right in the middle of the revolution, in the middle of the hostage crisis, so I didn't really take pleasure in telling people that I was from Iran because the po-

my Persian heritage altogether.

It wasn't really until I had the opportunity to go back, which I thought would never happen because of the revolution, that everything really turned inside out for me. I realized that I had opened the door that had just been closed for 13 years, and it really made me want to reach out and get in touch with my own deeper identity. It was along the same time I had studied all the formal dancing and got my degrees and was beginning to develop and establish my own style of dance and choreography. And so the Persian heritage, my identity and my choreographic style all came together as one.

The Ruth Botchan Dance Company and Shahrzad Dance Company perform "Bridges," 2 p.m. today at Western Sky Studio, 2525 Eighth St., Berkeley. \$15-\$18. 510-848-4878.

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