

November 2006 article by R: Kelly
Dance and Afghanistan

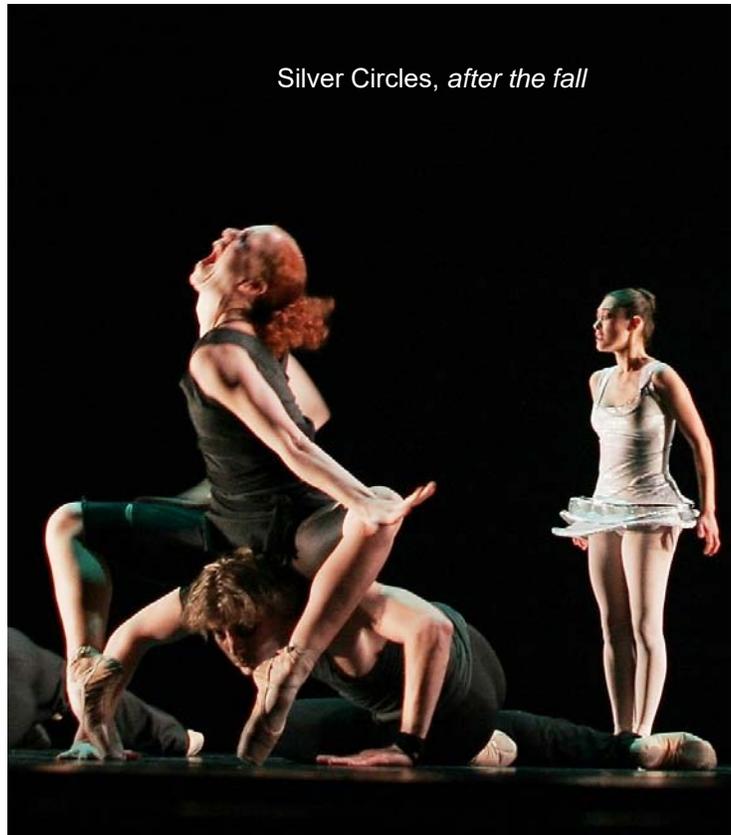
After 9/11, I participated in an organization called Women for Women International, founded by Iraqi born Zainab Salbi, “to provide direct financial and emotional support to women living on the margins of hope.” For three years, with a monthly contribution and the exchange of letters, I participated in the sponsorship of three Afghani women whose lives and families were devastated by war and poverty, and whose hopes were thin broken threads.

Like others, I was compelled to do something to connect to what felt like an international communication breach. WFW encouraged letter-writing to foster a healing sense of intimacy and concern. We were encouraged to share our lives and ask about the lives of our “sisters.” I wrote in turn to Nadia, Asefa, and Mohjan, women whose husbands had been killed, or whose

homes were demolished, or who had little or no means of support, and many children to rear up. Their needs were immediate and acute. Contributions sometimes went toward food, but once the family unit stabilized, the money went toward a skills-based training program to help the women find the way into their futures. Our letters were intended to show that someone noticed and cared, someone followed the progress, someone believed in the possibility of their future and valued their efforts. In general terms, we were told our letters were helpful. Reports informed me Nadia, Asefa and Mohjan moved forward. The dictated translated responses were awkward and brief, as many women in the program are illiterate and were not practiced in sharing or dictating thoughts on paper. My “sisters” expressed brief formal gratitude and only the barest facts of their lives. But I learned over time that one of my “sisters” was able establish income from creating and selling knitted goods. Another became trained in domestic service, and the third learned skills in shawl weaving and received leadership training.

It took me months to be able to mention what I did – I was reluctant to say I was choreographer. How could I say to “my sister” I have been making dances for 30 years, knowing near her part of the world a growing number of conservative university students consider the teaching of musicology and performing arts an attack on Islam, and want it banned from the curriculum? And how would this foster the healing intimacy for which our letters were intended? I recognized that our letter forum could only hint at but not establish intimacy. I didn’t wish to offend, nor contribute to a widening gulf of misunderstanding, in these brief missives. But the omission made me thoughtful.

I consider being an artist both a privilege and a necessity – to me. Over the years, well-meaning and curious Americans open their eyes wide and exclaim about a life in dance, “It must be wonderful. You must love it. It sounds like fun.” People react to the passion and the intensity of artists following their paths, or maybe it is the freedom they imagine we embody. As an artistic director of a ballet company based in New York City, the word “fun” doesn’t really



Silver Circles, after the fall

apply. Maybe fun stood for “fulfill”. When you have been in dance a long time, you are your work, and the work is far too meaningful, too ongoing, and too strenuous.

But the word “fun” is surely rare in these women’s lives. I wanted to be able to say to Nadia, Asefa and Mohjan that it was because of the very fact that I was a dancer and a maker of dances, and someone who has spent many years creating occasions which bring people together, that compelled me to reach out. I wanted to cross the great divides of our cultures, and find common ground or new ground, in the realm of imagination where enrichment comes through sharing and coming to know one another. Oh no, these things I couldn’t express in our letters. I said I was a teacher. And this made me realize just how very wide is that communication breach.

I’ve had to examine my ambivalence in communicating with these women of Afghanistan. 9/11 brought to our conscious attention that we are lucky to be born into a society where we the people have choices: the luckiest ones get to choose the pattern and flavor of their lives. Nobody invites one to be an artist. We select ourselves and we become responsible for that decision. Sometimes we feel lucky to be artists, but there are periods when we do not feel so lucky. At times, Rebecca Kelly Ballet has resembled a mini United Nations, in that the dancers come from all over the map. Several of our dancers are European born, and attended elite and selective schools. They were instilled with great pride and dignity for their art. Their culture taught them to feel special. They felt “chosen.” They do better. Others had to struggle in every way for the privilege of dancing, and fought their way to preserve pride in what they do. They have a different strength, born of conviction. The casual regard in the U.S. for a career in dance always requires an adjustment. But at least here we have the freedom to choose dance. That is our culture – the freedom to choose and the responsibility that comes with freedom.

I continued to reflect upon what have I been doing for all these years in dance that keep me in the field. – It starts always with dancing, but I was quickly drawn into choreography, the making of steps and ballets – for the wonderfulness of it, the beauty, the power and eloquence of sharing thought and imagery, for the curiosity, to see what beautiful dancers could do, to transcend the spoken language, and because I could. The choice was mine. Over the years I grew to see how dance is a celebration of our humanity, bears witness, and fosters community. It is also a forum. In teaching, I witness in students of every age time and again how deeply dance connects us. As an American artist, it is my privilege to live by the products and drive of my imagination. In a political context, dance can be seen as a larger emblem of our society’s freedom. As an artistic director and sole choreographer of a company - society did not restrict my movements.

We live within 1/4 mile of ground zero. Along with thousands of downtown New Yorkers, what we saw that day is tattooed into our retinas, our minds, our hearts. The loss on 9/11 was also the break in our illusions and unthinking trust in going forward. What is dance after that day? The very first ballets I created after 9/11 took a while to come. They were American Suq (means marketplace in Arabic) –the first one inspired by my speechless indignation at the materialistic



“go shopping” advice offered as balm after 9/11. Can’t Sleep came to me during March 2003 thinking about the mothers and children and minefields, and those dangerous yellow packages confused with toys, or bags of chips and peanut butter! These were ballets I safely worked out and tucked away in youth companies while I grappled with what had changed in me. The ballets I made for Rebecca Kelly Ballet however since 2001 included *The Wilderness Suite*, *Jose’s Dream*, *Reves*, *The Soldier’s Tale*, and *Air*; all dances that avoided a direct look into the abyss that was 9/11. It took five years before I was ready to produce *Silver Circles*, after the fall.

Just as *Silver Circles* was completed early in 2006, I came across Chris Hedges’ chilling commentary *WAR is a Force that Gives us Meaning*. He stated what I had been realizing my way towards in the ballet.

"...for war is a drug. It is peddled by mythmakers- historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state -- all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us." from *WAR is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, by Chris Hedges, c 2002

Silver Circles permitted me to examine the validity of our “great American myths.” Our principal dancers Therese Wendler and Duncan Cooper (formerly DTH), in their reflective silvery whiteness, represented America’s naïve sense of itself to the world before 9/11. And the ensemble represented the lurking fears, terror, mistrust, the manipulations generated from within our own culture after 9/11. Having lived abroad between the ages of 2-12, I encountered at times a dislike and distrust of Americans, and noticed how out of balance this reaction was with our own “propagandic” (for lack of a better word) sense of ourselves. As a child of a diplomat growing up in Khartoum, Sudan, I experienced being outside the culture. With the acuteness of a child, I well knew the dreadful sense of isolation and mute loneliness in not having the luxury of language to “communicate” in familiar ways. It forced one to consider how easily misunderstandings arise, how precious friendship is. A difference in customs and culture forced one to consider one’s actions more carefully, and gave meaning to the old adage that “actions speak louder than words.” Little did I know then about dance.

Rebecca Kelly, Artistic Director/ Choreographer
Rebecca Kelly Ballet
New York City, October 2006