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Raqs Sahara Belly Dancers, Holding Sway

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Washington's belly dancers rival Elvis with their ability to shake a body part to a crowd's delight. Or at least they did Sunday during a performance presented by Sahara Dance that showcased an array of enthralling, sensuous Middle Eastern dance styles.

Raqs Sahara, a dance company housed in Sahara Dance's studios and directed by Rachel Kay Brookmire and Saphira (all dancers but Brookmire listed only stage names), filled much of the show at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Saphira enraptured the audience in "Rannet al Tabla," her arms beckoning the audience to join. Saphira, then Brookmire in "Zay al Asal," put their bodies in conversation with the music.

In "Harramt Ahebak," Raqs Sahara's assistant director, Elysa, presented another set of rhythmic complexity. She shook her hips with vigor, while her fingers flew through other rhythms on castanets.

"Rebirth" featured the story of immigrant Gisele Djosang, who escaped oppression in Cameroon with help from the Tahirih Justice Center, which assists women fleeing gender-based violence. Djosang told her story in voice-over, her shadow projected on a white screen, while Saphira danced, first in pain, then in celebration. The dance became secondary to Djosang's moving story.

The program also included other works by Raqs Sahara and local dancers Latifa, Najwah and Noor Jihan. The Taqasim Ensemble performed traditional and contemporary Arabic music to begin the show and during intermission.

All proceeds from the show benefited the Tahirih Center.

-- Clare Croft

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Members of the Raqs Sahara troupe, which performed Sunday at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. (Roger Wood)

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