

# SPOTLIGHT

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## Thinking outside the box for Pandora premiere

Curiosity has motivated many great human achievements. Yet as the ancients sagely warned, curiosity also leads to unwelcome discoveries.

For its latest premiere, the Mosaic Dance Theater Company, a Near Eastern dance troupe based in Glen Ridge, has dramatized the Greek myth of Pandora's box, which blames a little girl's need to know for all the troubles in the world.

Poor Pandora! She doesn't mean any harm. Yet no sooner does she lift the lid — believing the richly decorated coffer contains a treasure — than grief and misery fly out and sting her.

Nosy children are the target audience for Mosaic's dramatization of this fable, called "The Paradise of Children," which includes a plush, stuffed tortoise who spouts advice. The text is culled from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wonder Book for Boys and Girls." Yet adults also are cautioned to mind their own business.

Making its debut as part of "Folklore and Fantasy," a dance program that opened the Luna Stage season Sunday in West Orange, "The Paradise of Children" features the company's producing artistic director, Morgiana Celeste Varricchio, as the brash, immortal Quicksilver (Hermes). When the tortoise speaks, warning Pandora not to look inside the box, it's Quicksilver who really does the talking. Yet Quicksilver also designed this amusing experiment in human frailty and, foreseeing the outcome, the wise tortoise decides he'd better skedaddle, giving himself an early start.

"Samara," Mosaic's artistic director, has choreographed the simple but expressive routines that parallel Quicksilver's narration. Maidens with flowers in their hair surround Pandora (Syrena Nikole Hanna) when engraved figures on the box come alive to caress her and whisper enticements. After Pandora's fateful indiscretion, the Troubles appear



GARY HELLER

"The Paradise of Children," which dramatizes the Pandora's box myth, premiered on Sunday at Luna Stage in West Orange.

ON DANCE  
**Robert Johnson**



in windblown, purple robes. Hands bound behind their backs, they tremble with fevers and wrath. Samara saves a plum role for herself. She swoops in to redeem Pandora, wafting across the stage in sunny veils as the benevolent fairy of Hope.

During the suite of Near Eastern dances that makes up the balance of the program, Samara portrays quite different types, however. Dragging on a cigarette, she's a tough, street-wise beauty in "Shikhatt," a dance of feminine rivalry in which Samara supplements the live musical accompaniment by playing metal crotales called *qarqaba*. Then there's the startling, jeweled bustier she wears while undulating in the "Fantaisie Orientale." If the children ask questions, remind them what happened to Pandora.

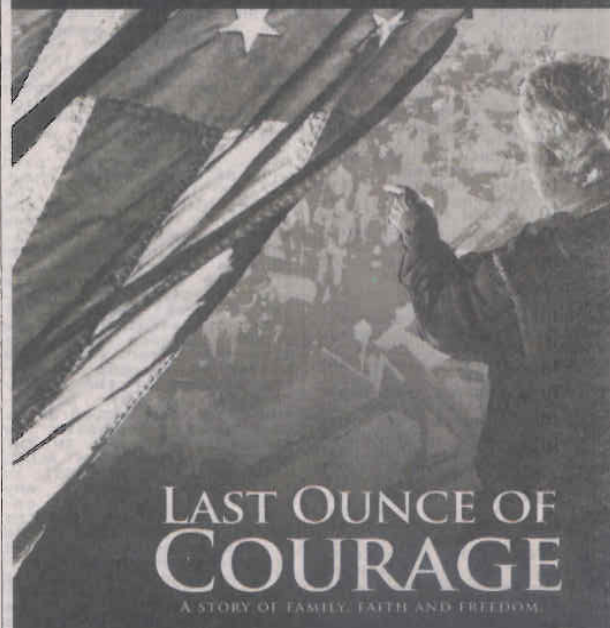
Mosaic's "Fantaisie Orientale" is just for fun. Yet the presence of the *qarqaba*, a Gnawa instrument associated with trance possession, hints at Samara's serious study of Near Eastern dance, beginning as a disciple of the late Ibrahim Farrah.

In "Karsilama," Varricchio and Nina Brewton are a pair of Turkish gypsies, swishing the shawls tied around their hips and tossing their heads with abandon. "Taal El Eid," an ensemble dance from Lebanon, is playful but more formal. Placing one foot forward and leaning back, the women create a sharp, diagonal silhouette. Then, they stretch their arms in front and clap their hands. In the virtuosic "Dance of the Awalim," from Egypt, the shimmying dancers descend to the floor while bronze trays with full coffee services balance on their heads.

These dances are all different, yet they share a spirit of generosity. As the women of Mosaic toss and shake their hips, they seem to scatter favors all around.

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