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COMMENTARY

'Zumanity' heralds a burlesque revival

September 08, 2003 | Toni Bentley | Special to The Times

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The 15 or so actual acts in "Zumanity" constitute a Chinese menu's worth of sexual configurations: androgynous man/androgynous woman; black man/white man; disinterested man/angry woman; sadistic man/submissive woman; exhibitionistic man/sex-hungry women.

Completing this ark of drowning lovers are a few solipsistic characters who, in their independence, perhaps fare better than the warring couples: the frolicsome satyr; the male showgirls complete with pink ostrich feathers and enormous bejeweled codpieces; and the swaggering "Seducer" in shimmering latex and leather. The piece de resistance arrives in the shape of a tall, slim man decked in -- among other, unmentionable accouterments -- black stockings, stilettos, black corset and a live snake.

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Amongst all this lust and ambivalence are a few numbers of transcendent beauty. Two charming, petite and topless contortionists, one Russian and one Mongolian, dance erotically and lovingly with each other both in and out of a large, water-filled martini glass -- a lively update of a classic burlesque routine. Underwater, their graceful movements are magnified, and these martini girls transform into the exotic mermaids of one's dreams.

There also is a penetrating poignancy between the topless trapeze girl who hangs from the heavens on gauzy white chiffon "ropes" as her ardent suitor -- a handsome, muscled male dwarf -- gallantly circles the ground beneath her. Their duet actually soars, not only in an elegiac aerial dance but also in a demonstration of actual desire. They embody the enduring metaphor of the unobtainable female who is forever out of reach of an adoring, though often earthbound, male. Their love affair ends with her descending to Earth, caressing her beloved and leading him away, hand in hand, to a temple of tenderness that few others in "Zumanity's" world are allowed to enter.

"Zumanity," in short, presents a human zoo of outrageous couplings and a fair share of misery. If, however, you wish to see the human body and its poetic complexities take flight, there is, only a few casinos away at the Bellagio, the Cirque du Soleil masterpiece. "O" captures, in its underwater and aerial spectacle, all the magnificence, pathos, wit and magic inherent in human yearning. ("Mystere," the company's third and oldest Vegas show, is at Treasure Island.)

On the other hand, if the unadulterated female body is your old-fashioned idea of erotic -- there is

something for everyone in Sin City -- you can cross the bridge from New York-New York to the glowing green MGM Grand and "La Femme." There you will find a vision of feminine beauty as seen through the eyes of a man who devoted his entire life to exploring, displaying and worshiping the female form.

"La Femme" presents an erotic anomaly and a truly radical image in this day and age: naked women with self-esteem. No man shares the stage with the goddesses of Bernardin's world, and "La Femme" exhibits an impenetrable fortress of female beauty, power and sweetness. A hundred years after her American debut, Salome has lost her last veil in Vegas and no longer performs in the court of biblical king, but she is alive and dancing in a noisy casino on the most famous Strip in the world.

*

Bentley, a former dancer with New York City Ballet, wrote "Sisters of Salome," "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal" and, forthcoming from ReganBooks, "The Surrender," a memoir.

*

'Zumanity'

Where: New York-New York Hotel & Casino, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. South, Las Vegas

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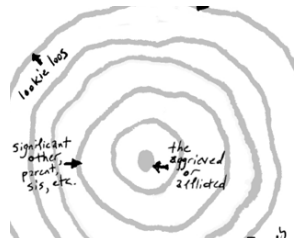
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