

## Notes from the Field

### *Mem U Zin: Staging a Legendary Kurdish Love Story in Canada*

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**Figure 1: Ida Meftahi (Zin) and Mateo Galinda Torres (Mem) in a lover's scene**

*Mem U Zin* (Mem and Zin) is a classic Kurdish love story, known throughout all of Kurdistan. It is based on a true story from the 14<sup>th</sup> century from the region known as Alan-Cizre in present-day southeastern Turkey. *Mem U Zin*, as written down by Ahmede Xane in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is widely considered to be one of the first examples of written Kurdish literature. Xane was a philosopher, poet, and Muslim (Sunni) scholar, still revered by Kurds to this day. *Mem U Zin* tells the story of two sets of young lovers. One pair (Tajdin and Site) are able to marry, while the other (Mem and Zin) are kept apart by deceit, jealousy, and family relations. Bekir, an employee of Zin's family, is jealous of Mem and conspires to keep the couple apart. He appeals to Zin's brother, Zeynaddin, the head of the family. Bekir concocts a lie that suggests Mem is disrespectful of Zeynaddin's authority. Insulted by this, Zeynaddin refuses to consent to the marriage of Mem and Zin. Mem is placed

under house arrest because of this alleged offense. Seeing a way to get rid of Mem completely, Bekir poisons him, but not before the two lovers are briefly reunited. Upon discovering Mem's death, Zin is overcome with grief and commits suicide by throwing herself from the mountaintop. Upon her death Bekir's deception is revealed and he is murdered. Mem and Zin are buried together, but as a sign of reconciliation Bekir is buried with them, but symbolically placed at their feet. He is bound to the pair, and will be their servant eternally. This is a folk tale that I have heard since my childhood, and its themes of love, ritual, and family have always intrigued me. Over eight months in 2011, I was able to actualize my long-standing desire, and assembled a cast of dancers and musicians to stage a music and dance version of *Mem U Zin* on October 2, 2011 at Toronto's Isabel Bader Theatre.

A few weeks later, I went the annual open house evening of the International Folk Dance Club (IFDC) at the University of Toronto. I dance with them most Fridays – dances from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Albania, Turkey, Israel, Japan, etc. I often teach little-known traditional Kurdish and Turkish dances to the group. We travel the world through dance every Friday, hand in hand, finger to finger. On this particular Friday we each brought some food to enjoy with our visitors. As I was dipping my pita in hummus, a good friend, accomplished storyteller Marylyn Peringer, asked me, “How did you come up with the idea for *Mem U Zin* and why didn’t you do it before?”. As I explained that I had been familiar with this classic tale since my own childhood, another good friend, Judith Cohen, said, “There you go...that’s where you should start to write about your project for the *CFM* article.” So here it is.

Kurdistan is not a country one can find on a map. It is a homeland to some forty million Kurds and is divided between four countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The people are unified by a common heritage and ethnicity, yet there are four main dialects among the Kurds: Kurmanji, Zazaki, Sorani, and Gorani; and four religions: Islam, Christianity, Ezidism, and Judaism. I grew up speaking Kurmanji, the main dialect of the Kurdish region in Turkey. In my childhood, I was surrounded by storytellers, including a local woman named Hino. I was 7 years old when I first heard the story of *Mem U Zin* from her. She was a folk storyteller, with no formal education but a wealth of stories and knowledge. Hino was from the Urfa region of Kurdistan, but lived in Adana with us. Adana is in the south of Turkey, but I was born in the city of Urfa, in the Kurdish region of Turkey. In the 1970s, the neighbourhood I grew up in had no electricity, television, or radio. Listening to storytellers was our only entertainment. It was also a way to pass down the folklore of our people. In time, I started to investigate the history behind *Mem U Zin*. The more I learned, the more my curiosity grew.

Eventually, my curiosity and research on Kurdish folklore became a danger to me in Turkey, as at the time Kurdish was, for all intents and purposes, banned. However, I discovered that some people were hiding old books, and had a chance to become familiar with some of the works of the revered philosopher and poet Ahmede Xani, the author of *Mem U Zin*. The original text dates to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is written in a poetic, romantic style. The story was entrancing and has many themes that reverberate through the centuries; in some ways it is quite similar to Romeo and Juliet, for it is a tale of star-crossed lovers that ends in tragedy. At some point, I thought about the idea of staging the story as a dance and

music piece that would demonstrate many elements of traditional Kurdish culture. This staging was my long-standing dream, and now I have been able to realize it. It is not at all surprising that this tale had its first production in Canada.

Why in Canada? Because Canada is a multicultural country, most evident in Toronto, one of the world’s most diverse cities. While teaching at The University of Gaziantep State Conservatory Dance Department in Turkey, I was unable to use the term “Kurdish” or even refer to dance, music, or culture as Kurdish. This was forbidden by the Turkish government at that time. In 1999 I used one Kurdish song without lyrics to choreograph one of my dances. This small act, seemingly insignificant, caught the attention of the Dean and Director of the Department. I was punished as if I had committed a criminal act and had my salary frozen. I taught for seven years as a full-time faculty member, but left Turkey in 2001 because of my political views.



**Figure 2: *Mem u Zin* poster, designed by Serpil Odabasi**

Dance is an important part of most cultures. It is a way that traditional cultures and knowledge are passed on through the generations, so much more in a culture that has been as repressed as Kurdish has. Dance has a spirituality behind its movements, gestures, and postures. Most Kurdish folk and traditional dances focus on love, harvest, sadness, weddings, happiness, and war. If people's freedom or access to culture is limited, then people become more attached to their cultures.

I started to write notes about the story and characters of *Mem U Zin*. While I was writing, I also began to contact dancer friends and students who might want to be involved in the project. It was very daunting at first, because I didn't know how and where to start. I developed the choreography and dances and began to assemble the dancers. Meanwhile, I contacted previous students from my earlier work teaching at The Toronto Kurdish Community Center (2001-2004). They were very excited and wanted to be part of the production. I completed the folkdance component of the project but needed ballet and contemporary dancers, as I was aiming to situate the story in the contexts of both the East and the West. The Kurdish story, I felt, should be presented onstage with a western understanding. In a way, I was starting the world's first Kurdish ballet. I contacted two male ballet and contemporary dancers who perform at Toronto Dance Theatre and other companies. Both were originally from Colombia, thus increasing the diversity of my project. I sought out direction from friends from among my fellow Ph.D. candidates at York University and the University of Toronto. I approached professional dancers with different dance styles, such as Iranian choreographer Ida Meftahi; contemporary dancers Junia Mason, originally from Saint Lucia, and Samantha Mehra; Brazilian Capoeira Marcio Mendes; and Odissi dancer Paromita Kar, originally from India. Other dancers came from Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. After connecting with all of these people, I ended up with twenty dancers from eleven distinct backgrounds and dance styles. We began by meeting and rehearsing at Habeeba Dance Studio every Sunday for three hours. As the performance date moved closer, we moved to the Toronto Dance Theatre School to practice twice weekly. As we were working on a small budget, the affordable nature of both rehearsal spaces was appreciated.

The project focused on Kurdish culture in many ways and incorporated traditional and contemporary elements to reflect an east/west approach in such areas as music, dance, costume, and staging. I wanted to show elements of traditional Kurdish culture, but

incorporated Western elements to make it more accessible to the Canadian audience. Elements such as using a guitar as a prominent instrument and the incorporation of modern dance styles contributed to this. The project involved many artists and performers from different backgrounds and cultures, and there was no single dance style featured throughout. Some of the dancers are amateurs, while others are professionally trained in ballet and modern dance. In this production, they all shared the same stage. Our target audience was Canadians; we did not want to focus on having an audience only of Kurds. We wanted to show the audience the Kurdish story of *Mem U Zin* and let them enjoy the vibrancy of Kurdish culture through the representation of rich Kurdish dance and Kurdish music. We used some ancient songs of Kurdistan and introduced them to a Canadian audience. Even when dancing was not happening on the stage, I saw *Mem U Zin* as a piece of theatre that would amply use music. There were entire scenes with no dance per se, but they were carried along by the music and mime.

Costumes became another critical element in this project. The costumes used were both traditional folk costumes and contemporary designs based on traditional elements. The reason for using contemporary costumes is to give free movement to contemporary and ballet dancers. Traditional folk costumes are composed of no fewer than five separate garments and so do not lend themselves to these styles of dance. The richness of the fabrics and colours of the traditional costumes worked with the lighting and visual effects on the stage to create a spectacle, especially when upwards of twenty dancers burst onto the stage.



**Figure 3: Fethi Karakecili as the villain, Bekr Alan**



**Figure 4: Village women gather for the Henna Night**

The music and musicians were another concern. Previously *Mem U Zin* had appeared as a dramatic film in Turkey in 1992. However, the background music was purely instrumental, with no vocals or lyrics. Furthermore, some of the music used was Turkish rather than Kurdish. Now here I was in Toronto, Canada, working on this project and looking for a live music band to perform authentic music with Kurdish lyrics. My choice was to largely use live music, as it could be structured specifically for this performance. I started to try to find musicians who could play traditional Kurdish instruments. I was looking for players of *bağlama* (long-necked flute guitar), *daf* (frame drum), *darbuka* (goblet drums), *kaval* (recorder-like instrument), *kamence* (bowed lyre), and *zurna* (reed woodwind). However, this proved to be difficult, as I was unable to find available *zurna*, *kaval*, and *kamence* players. Instead I reformulated my music ideas to involve some non-traditional instruments that might broaden the appeal of the music. My friend the fine Bulgarian flamenco guitarist Anton Apostolov agreed to be part of the production. I also felt that a violinist would give the proper feel for a love story. I happened to find a

Kurdish violinist, Nawrooz Kafaf, who is originally from Sulemaniye, Iraq. The *bağlama* player was an acquaintance, Ahmet Ihvani, who also performed some of the Kurdish vocals. Through York University I knew a fellow Kurd from Iran, Nima Chaechi, an accomplished *daf* player. He in turn introduced me to a Moroccan-born *zili daf* and *darbuka* player, Daniel Millan. They then introduced me to their master, *daf* player Naghmeh Farahmand, a female *daf* player from Iran. I also had had a long association with Dr. Irene Markoff of the Music Department at York University. Her specialties are Balkan music and Turkish *Dervish-Alevi* music; she not only played *bağlama* and accordion in the production but also took on the challenging work of conducting this ad hoc, unusual ensemble.

I already had the songs and some music in my archive and found several pieces of music on YouTube videos. I needed more improvisation and traditional instruments. We met and practiced weekly for a period of four months. It became a family affair, as some musicians brought their children, spouses, and friends along to watch rehearsals. Sometimes creating the right environment for rehearsals was trying, but

forge on we did. The work was enjoyable and we found new ways to create music, often using YouTube samples as “demos” to practice with. YouTube proved to be an important source of material, as it gave us guides of music performed by such artists as Sivan Perwer, Ayse San, and Mihammed Cizravi. Some of the songs we chose to perform were “*Seri gira bi niske*”, “*Kevokim*”, “*Buke delale*”, “*Gulizer*”, and “*Cume Cizire*”. In a world where Kurdish music is increasingly rare, the many YouTube posts allowed us to get rough demonstrations of what we were aiming to perform. Most of these songs were used during the traditional parts of the story, such as the wedding, engagement, and henna nights. In three instances, we were unable to perform the music live; for these we resorted to using pre-recorded music. Authorization was obtained for the public performance of these songs. As we were rehearsing close to a dozen complex pieces in a short time, it was difficult work. In addition, we were also able to bring in Sena Dersimi, a well-known Kurdish singer living in Germany, to perform vocals and act in the performance. Her availability solved my problem of needing an accomplished singer who could appear on stage and sing Kurdish laments in the funeral scene. I was exceptionally pleased that we were able to perform all of the lyrics in their original Kurdish-language texts. I received media attention as well. A few days before the performance, an old acquaintance of mine, Joe Fiorito, a writer for the newspaper *The Toronto Star*, attended one of our rehearsals at my invitation. On September 28, an article, “Kurdish Romeo and Juliet set for Toronto Stage”, appeared in the paper. Fiorito included some my personal history and spoke of the artistry of the performers, both musicians and dancers. It was a big boost to all of the cast and performers, just days before the debut. I would also be remiss not to mention the generosity of many in the Kurdish community, acting as sponsors. This enabled us to pay the expenses of the performance and grant complimentary tickets to so many interested persons, as well as offer a student price.

Musicians and dancers rehearsed and worked on the production scene by scene for several months. Sometimes I was working with the folk dancers alone, other times I worked with the contemporary dancers on their principal scenes. The musicians practised with me and actually did not work with the dancers until the final weeks of rehearsals. With all of these elements in place, the final week saw numerous rehearsals and refinements of the production, with musicians, dancers, and technicians working together. The culmination of the practice and hard

work of six months’ efforts by a disparate group of performers was the 85-minute performance on October 2, 2011. The response from both the audience and the performers following the performance was universally positive.



**Figure 5: Samantha Mehra (Site), Falciony Patino (Tajdin) after the wedding**

*Mem U Zin* was the first Kurdish dance performance, or ballet dance theatre, in the world, to the best of my knowledge. It is also unique in that it used three different dance styles (folk, contemporary, and ballet) with dancers of different backgrounds and disciplines, and with both recorded music and a live orchestra that included musicians from different parts of the world. In the dancing, one can also see touches of other dance styles, including East Indian, Capoeira, and Sub-Saharan African.

So far, there has been interest from within Canada, and from Europe, the USA, and the Middle East, in *Mem U Zin*. I have been surprised by the range of responses and requests for information, such as several media interviews in Europe, North America, and Turkey, including with ANF, the Kurdish network in Europe. Academics and professional artists have also responded. In the end, I achieved my goal of producing a wholly unique production of a traditional Kurdish folk story which bridged east and west, yet I feel the work with *Mem U Zin* has just begun, as we look to further performances. The multicultural nature of Canada, and Toronto in particular, with its diverse artists, was integral to this production.