

Helwa! Experiencing Ancient Egypt (chapbook)

by Penn Kemp

London: PigeonBike Press, www.PigeonBike.com, 2011, ISBN 978-0-9869509-1-9, \$6.00.

Helwa! A Sound Opera (part one on the CD *Night Vision*)

by Penn Kemp

London: Pendas Productions, www.mytown.ca/pendas, 2011, ISBN 978-1-897163-16-0, \$15.00.

Reviewed by Katerina Fretwell

After two tourists were killed in 1985 at Giza, Egyptian experts were invited on a “familiarization tour” of the pyramids. Among those selected, world-renowned performance poet Penn Kemp, alone with only a guide, spent the night between the paws of the Sphinx. Tracing a soul’s nocturnal journey, Kemp invites the listener/reader on an unforgettable journey between the worlds, falling into space and encountering ancient Egyptian deities Noot, Hathor, Isis, Osiris and Horus. In this multi-dimensional feast, Penn exhorts: “put your mind/ at rest as the Pharaoh did between the imposing paws/ of the Sphinx ... / Let sound carry you back ... / to Egypt ... whose temples line/ the spine of divine ...” (1)

Helwa! (the Arabic word for “beautiful”), is a sound opera that includes lyrics, vocals, electroacoustic piano, guitar, percussion and belly dancing. It transports us through the synaesthetic mingling of the senses into our own otherworldly sojourn. Kemp revisited her original opera and performance in response to the Egyptian uprising Spring 2011 and dedicates the chapbook *Helwa* “with hope for the people of Egypt.”

Culling from the text, which fleshes out touristic Egypt and ancient deistic history, in performance, Kemp’s sonorous voice heralds the invitation and through harplike sounds and scales, wows us into the netherworld journey. We feel the fall through space with Kemp as the atonal notes crescendo. We feel the unknown, the huge leap of faith, the mystery potent as any oracular ritual. Onomatopoeically, Penn enchants us through sound as well as sense: “Egypt startles the somnolent out of sleep/ Called I walk the processional way down alone.” (4). Singled out among the more knowledgeable Egyptologists, Kemp is led by the guide with “no language but gesture to/hold against interpretation of the other.” (5).

Bill Gilliam’s baritone echoes *Helwa* throughout, lovingly cupping the word in all its nuances, indeed, beautiful in its lingering linguistic mysticism. In tandem, Kemp’s voice scales the stratosphere, sounding out: “Here the ear purveys pure information on/ ... high-pitched chittering // the eye lies in the lay/ of velvet desert.” (5) And we traverse the unfamiliar and unknowable, except through entranced altered consciousness.

The harpsichord-like notes and Penn’s soundscapes siren into our awareness as the soul transformation occurs. “Tell the truth as it is” (6) says the guide as Penn intones: “When I place/ ... [an] incautious finger on his third eye ...” (6) Voice and music dissolving into each other, Penn climaxes: “Though my hand drops back I fall into space” (6) and we too are deranging in this echo chamber. Unbalanced in real space/time, we open to our Higher Self, Core, inner essence, truly awakened.

Along with Kemp, we ask: “Does Noot hold the world together? Imagine/ toes stretched to horizon hands flat on the far/ disc earth reversed to sky as curved/ dome” (7) and suddenly we are embracing the planet from outer space, empowered, purified, envisioned.

Wheeling under sky goddess Noot's arch, we meet Hathor, Isis, Osiris, Horus and "tread that ancient track" as mystic poet Henry Vaughan affirmed in his poem *The Retreat*. Just when, along with Kemp, we've reached our outer limit and can hold fast no longer, "postcard Pyramids dissolve to hieroglyphs/ burnt onto retina Phantasmagorical retinues continue long/ after eyes have closed A procession of eidolon offered only to/ deities till now unknown to my short-circuited western mind" (4).

Calming us down, bringing us back, as in any guided visualization/meditation, Kemp jocularly asserts: "And the tour begins" (9), referring to the prosaic superficial experience offered to the ordinary tourist. However, in Penn's sphere, our parallel journey/performance is done and we are transformed, made new, thanks to the unparalleled genius of Kemp and her ensemble. Among the many strikingly original features are Kemp's visionary presentation and soundscape improvisation which place us in the very centre, the immediate experience, of this classical Egyptian quest. 🌀

Katerina Fretwell's sixth poetry collection, which includes her art, was published by Inanna Publications in 2011; her art and poetry reside in Canada, Denmark, Japan and the United States.