

# Belly Dance: The Enduring Embarrassment

by Barbara F. Siegel

The following is the text of a paper given by Ms. Siegel at the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) National Conference on December 8, 1995 in Washington D.C. She was on a panel entitled "Public Culture in Arab Societies I: National Culture and Performance Arts".

At one time or another both secular and religious groups have attempted to suppress the Egyptian female solo interpretative dance known as *raks al sharqi*. Religious groups have voiced disapproval of women performing in public. Secular authority, beginning with Mohammed Ali in the 19th century, have regarded this dance as an embarrassing remnant of backwardness, which mitigates against the image of Egypt as a modern state.<sup>1</sup> The ambivalent feelings of Egyptians themselves concerning this well known dance form came to light only recently in a derogatory remark reported in the *New York Times*. President Mubarak is quoted as saying that the Islamic fundamentalists are a bunch of belly dancers and drummers from the slums.<sup>2</sup> While it is significant for the subject of this paper that this was the biggest slur he could cast, the role of artists in the political life do bear some looking into. The fantasy dancer has also become a symbol of the misconceptions and prejudices affecting East/West relations. In spite of this, the dance has an enduring appeal for men, women, and children of many classes, including those that rail against it. Indeed, a startling duality surrounds the survival of the dance in terms of attitude versus actual practice. Also, although ostensibly a dance of entertainment performed for an audience, there are inherent elements of participation that go way beyond the formal spectator/performer relationship.

The most commonly used term in Arabic for this style of dance is *raks al sharqi*. It means "Eastern dance". It is one of the world's oldest documented dance forms and has had a long and tena-

cious history as a dance done by professional public entertainers and by women and men among themselves in the sex segregated societies of the Middle East. It has had the same movement characteristics all these years as well as the same ambiguity about its meaning and respectability.

It appears to have existed in ancient Egypt and spread out all over the Middle East. It has fascinated every culture that came in contact with it: ancient Rome, Europe, and America. We know it existed in ancient Egypt because the ancient Egyptians covered their tombs with scenes of daily life, including banquet scenes. There has been a theory popular in the West that this dance originated as a birth ritual or mother goddess worship. The archaeological evidence (from about 2200 B.C.) indicates that there were

women's traveling dance troupes who also were expert in women's health matters and functioned as midwives. While there is a connection, there is little evidence that they actually danced to facilitate birth.<sup>3</sup> By about 1500 B.C. in Egypt, the dance is seen as pure entertainment, as in the tomb of Nebamun which depicts female dancers and musicians. While the origins may be an interesting Western preoccupation, it is important to see it as a vital, living part of Egyptian culture.

There are clear references in the Roman writers Horace, Juvenal, and Martial<sup>4</sup> to dancers of this style, both amateur and professional. The Roman poet Horace complained that all the young Roman ladies were taking up the oriental dance then popular in Rome. Juvenal and Martial describe professional dancers in the Roman province of Gades (Cadiz, Spain). The dance gained worldwide attention after the expedition of Napoleon to Egypt in 1798. After this, many painters and writers went to Egypt and were captivated with the dancers called the *Ghawazee*. These Gypsy dancers, famous for their heart-stealing performances were the subject of paintings and writings of the Orientalist school (Delacroix, Gerome, David Roberts,



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Habiba and Philadelphia's famed 30th Street Station!

Flaubert to name just a few). As is true with Arabic music, the sources for descriptions of the dance are chiefly Western. The descriptions given by Edward Lane match those of Juvenal and Martial in their descriptions of the *Gaditanae* of Gades<sup>5</sup>. As is true of Western accounts in general, the information about dance performances is plentiful but must be used critically. Racy says that the *darabukkah* "was strongly associated with female performers and with popular dance entertainment. Such compositions accompanied a prevalent type of female dancing to which 19th century Europeans gave the misnomer, '*danse du ventre*'. Perhaps a domestic version of the *Ghawazi* dance, this art was presented in conjunction with the regular *Awalim* performances. It was also performed more accessibly in public coffee houses in Cairo with male accompanists and male spectators."<sup>6</sup>

Europeans and Americans became acquainted first hand when impresarios brought over actual dancers from the Middle East to perform at the 19th century World's Fairs such as the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 which featured a dancer called Little Egypt.

*Raks al sharqi* has survived in Egypt today as both a popular art performed by professional dancers at street festivals, weddings, and nightclubs, and as a form of personal expression for women and men at family gatherings. The dancer has become a folkloric figure in her own right and is, once removed, presented in her role as part of national troupe performances — the Reda Troupe and the Kowmeyya Troupe being two of the better known national troupes in Egypt.

In the 20th century, instead of disappearing, the dance went through transformations to make it palatable for newer, sophisticated audiences composed of upper class Egyptians and foreign tourists. Despite significant alterations in context, music, costume, and performers themselves, certain features of the performance remain constant and, when examined, remain consistent in spite of the context. Through the efforts of Badia Massabni, the Lebanese casino owner and dancer, it was created anew. Modernism brought a sophisticated new costume, composed music, Western dance elements, the nightclub setting and personal removal from the scene by means of film and television. Although the dance vocabulary widened greatly, there were certain constants that could be quantified in terms of movement up to the present day.

Any question of the dance form must begin with classification and terminology. There are many reasons why an organized analysis of the dance has not been done. It defies classification for many reasons. Magda Saleh supplies four terms for the dance: *Raks Masri* (Egyptian dance), *raks beledi* (native dance), *raks sharqi* (oriental dance), *raks Arabi* (Arabian dance).

Lois al Faruqi has classified as on of the four types found in the Arabic world: Combat dances, solo improvisational dances, chain dances, and dances of religious brotherhoods.<sup>8</sup> She has also brought the form into perspective by defining five qualities that it has in common with the other Islamic arts: Abstraction, improvisation, small intricate detail, serial structure, series of miniclimaxes. This shows the dance to be a natural part of the cultural landscape, although there are those in Egypt that consider it to be rather a blot on the landscape. There has been no comprehensive effort to classify the dance in terms of movement. To this date no common terminology exists for categories of steps and movements in *raks al sharqi* either in Egypt or the West. I have come across only two named steps in Egypt, one named after the famous dancer Nabawia Mustapha because she was famous for it and one called "tweek", a common hip movement named by Mahmoud Reda, founder of the Reda Troupe. There are no set choreographies that are passed down. There are only loose categories of steps that are open to personal interpretation. Of course, when this dance was adapted for stage, film, and/or nightclub use, it was necessary for individual choreographers to compose dances to be repeated



Barbara Siegel/Habiba inside Philadelphia's 30th Street Station.

in shows or to be done in groups.

It is essential that an examination of movement and aesthetic principles take place before an examination of context and affect. This will take the dance out of isolation and place it squarely with the other arts of the Islamic world.

In analyzing any dance form floor design, energy and individual movements are to be considered. The dance is designed for a small space. Movement around the floor as in Western floor design is not central to the character of the dance. Edward Said, in his homage to Tahia Carioca, points out that the less the dancer moves around, the more skilled she is.<sup>10</sup> There is an easy flowing shift of weight between the feet which is sometimes very rapid. This is an important basis that gives the other movements a flowing and breathing quality. There can be a level changes within a step, the feet moving from flat to toe, but there is not the extensive use of vertical space in Western dance. Small foot patterns are typical, with the feet moving forward and back and from side to side.

The extensive use of the pelvic region is the most striking feature of the dance and one of the most unusual. The relationship between the hip and the drum beat is probably the central relationship in this kind of dancing. Ibrahim Farrah says that the distinguishing feature of *raks sharqi* is choosing the rhythm to interpret over the melody.<sup>11</sup>

Isolation movements of the hips and pelvis are not used indiscriminately. In the *sharqi* style of dancing, hip lifts and drops are used. Generally, on the beat, the hip goes to the floor. It is very earth oriented. In Egyptian dance, the hip typically moves in the vertical direction, although there are horizontal movements. There are eight places along the hip band where the hip can move. There are a great many geometrical hip configurations with circles and figure eights. Certain movements have traditionally become appropriate to certain instruments' solos and certain types of music.

The upper body has its own set of geometric isolations that include circles and angular accents that lift or drop the rib cage. Posture is extremely important and is controlled by muscles in the upper back. The posture necessary for flamenco is similar. The upper body remains motionless when the hips are moving. The sternum is forward and open. The whole dance has a relaxed quality. Nothing looks frantic. It requires a great deal of muscle control to remain motionless.

Arms are exceptionally important. They frame the action of the isolation movements and call attention to the part that is moving. It is also the emotional overlay and a nod to the melody. The absolute *sine qua non* of this type of dance is the quality of the energy of the dancer. Unless the dancer understands the issue of energy, the steps cannot be done properly, and it is not *raks sharqi*. To quote Ibrahim Farrah on Tahia Carioca, "It is precisely those elements that Tahia capitalized on — containment, minimal space, internalized emotion, compressed movement, restrained, hidden intensity..."<sup>12</sup>

A knowledgeable dancer will be led by the music. There is an element of ecstatic improvisation similar to the *tarab* experience written about by Racy.<sup>13</sup> There is a similar state in flamenco called *duende* (spirit). For the dancer, the inspiration comes from the music and with the help, or in spite of, the audience.

Once we see this style as a solo interpretative dance found commonly in the Arabic countries but more highly developed in Egypt for a variety of reasons, we can begin to examine the rather broad number of contexts in which it is found. Egypt, unlike some of the surrounding countries has no comparable communal chain dance, like the *debke* of Lebanon or the village music and dance experience called *ahouache* in Morocco.<sup>14</sup> These dances reinforce group solidarity. It appears that Egypt's national dance style is also a solo improvisational dance that takes on a variety of functions in various social contexts.

Egypt's *raks al sharqi* falls into three out of five categories of performance genre defined by Feldman: Individual (private person at wedding); professional (nightclub or wedding); and professional and marginal (*Ghawazee*).<sup>15</sup> This dance is never communal or familial. It has to do with personal expression rather than identification with a group. In lieu of a group dance, it has been made to serve as an emblem of national identity. Dr. Mohammed Geddawi, a founder of the Reda Troupe, says: "Egyptian folklore is very different from other folklore. There is no group dancing. The solo-oriented dance style has been amended for stage. The spontaneous and improvisational style is adapted to formal presentation."<sup>16</sup> The enduring quality of the dance is due to its unique use of three dimensional space that conforms to the geometric aesthetic principles of Islamic art and music and also is an incomparable vehicle for personal expression. Rather than being an isolated embarrassment, it is a grass roots art form that is part and parcel of the people.

Issues that follow from this very fundamental treatment include the

following, which I will only touch on for future discussion:

1. The position of the professional female dancer in society. There are differing levels of respectability between women who dance at middle class weddings, women who perform in nightclubs, and women who are born to the performing trade (the *Ghawazee* who are marginal due to the hereditary nature of their occupation). According to Van Nieuwkerk, there is little overlap between the women who work in nightclubs and those who perform for weddings and religious festivals. A comparison of content in terms of dance would be interesting.

2. Methods of transmission. The family is the first place any Egyptian child learns of this dance. There are still not organized dance schools for *raks al shargi*, but there are professional coaches, both male and female, who have been dancers themselves.

3. When questioned men and women see this dance differently all over the Middle East. Women always bring up the spiritual component. Tahia Carioca told Edward Said that she felt dance was a spiritual experience.

4. The association of dancers with political activity *vis a vis* Mubarak's statement and Edward Said's reference to the leftist "radicalization" of the belly dancers in the 1940s.

5. The dancer's role in enabling personal expression in the audience is also a factor that makes the dance an enduring form of entertainment. The dancer, outside the bounds of respectable society, bears the stigma of the disapproval and "enables" the audience to express themselves through music and dance. This is why in some circles it is the mere presence and not the skill of the dancer that facilitates the release from inhibition and allows the audience to respond to the music. This applies equally to men and women. The effect is most obvious as a necessary part of the wedding celebration but can be seen in many more general situations. The role of the dancer as controlled "*fitna*" (chaos) must be examined.

6. There is a current revival of the dance. Egyptians are consciously removing Western elements and going back to the essence of the dance. Madame Ragia Hassan, choreographer and coach, has expressed herself extensively on the subject. ♦

References: 1) Judith E. Tucker, "Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt." Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985. In 1834, Mohammed Ali outlawed all prostitution and public dancing performed by women in Cairo. The current tax-farmer, a Copt named Anton Tuma, began to register honorable women as prostitutes to increase his revenues. Dancers and prostitutes were lumped in together. Even the serious artists known as *Awalim* were included and banished from Cairo. By 1866, they were allowed to return. 2) Sana Hasan, "My Lost Egypt," New York Times Magazine, October 22, 1995, p. 60. 3) Ann Roth, the Pss-kt, p. 37-38. In the Saqqara tomb chapel of Princess Watetkhethor, wife of the sixth dynasty vizier, Merenuka (2323-2152 B.C.), female dancers perform before the mistress of the tomb. The hieroglyphics read "But see, the secrets of birth. O pull." Roth also points to a fictional account of the birth of the first three kings of the fifth dynasty. In it, three goddesses impersonate a dance troupe in order to attend the birth. 4) Horace, Lib. III, od. vi. Horace laments that "the young ladies had acquired a taste for the oriental style of dance then popular at Rome." Marial, Lib. V. epigr. LXXVIII. "Nec gaudibus improbis puellae vibrabunt sine fine prurientes lascivos docili tremore lumbos." Side to side shimmy described also by Edward Lane. Marital, Lib. III epigr. LXIII. "Cantica qui Nili, qui Gaditana susurrat." Juvenal, Satire, translated by G.G. Ramsau, NY Putnam's 1924. v. IX, line 162. "Sinking down with quivering thighs to the floor." 5) Edward Lane, An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians. London, Garner, 1895. p. 383. 6) Ali Jihad Racy, "Music in Nineteenth Century Egypt: An Historical Sketch." Selected Reports on Ethnomusicology, no. 4, 1983, 157-179, p. 169. 7) Magda Saleh, "A Documentation of the Ethnic Dance Traditions of the Arab Republic of Egypt." Thesis (PhD). New York University, 1979, p. 128. 8) Lois al-Faruqi, "Dances of the Muslim Peoples." Danscope, p. 43-51. 9) Lois al-Faruqi, "Dance as an Expression of Islamic Culture." Dance Research Journal 10/2/Spring/Summer 1978:6-13. 10) Edward Said, "Homage to a Belly Dancer," Arabesque Magazine, v.20, no.1, May-June 1994, p.8. 11) Personal conversation with Ibrahim Farrah, internationally recognized dance instructor, NYC. 12) Ibrahim Farrah, "This and That." Arabesque Magazine, v.20, no.1, May-June 1994, p.6. 13) Ali Jihad Racy, "Creativity and Ambiance: An Ecstatic Feedback Model From Arab Music," The World of Music 33, 3:7-28. 14) Bernard Lortat Jacob, "Music as a Collective Enterprise: The Case of Berber Music and Society," World of Music, XXI-1, (1979) 62-74. 15) Walter Feldman, class lecture, University of PA, 4/95. 16) Nina Costanza, "Mo Geddawi — A Man of Coincidences," Arabesque Magazine, V. 20, no.5, Jan-Feb 1995, p. 10.