

Habiba ...a self portrait



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It's been awhile since I've talked in print about the people and places that formed me as a dancer. When I began to study Middle Eastern dance it was as a women's art form appropriate to the intensely creative atmosphere in New York City in the Seventies, a legacy of the Sixties self-discovery movement. Innocently, I was looking for a fun exercise. Led by a newspaper article, I discovered the belly dance renaissance then sweeping the city. My search led me to Joan Englander, a movement therapist from California. She saw this dance as a tool to facilitate self-discovery and personal expression. Joan had been a pupil of the legendary mother of movement therapy, Mary Whitehouse, who, in turn, was a student of Carl Jung, the psychiatrist. In an era when many dancers took eight lessons and then got a first

job, Joan had a completely different orientation. In her classes, there was no expectation that anyone perform. Movements were examined in connection to the inner being. We also discussed and wrote in diaries about how we felt about the various movements. It was a means of total self-exploration with Oriental Dance being the central means of expression for women, well-suited to the intense experimental stage of the early women's movement and the creative atmosphere of the New York dance community.

My activities extended to Joan's weekend movement workshops, during which group movement and individual experiments were a new and fresh approach. Now these sorts of things sound a little trite, but I can honestly say that Joan Englander set an example of integrity in movement that I cherish today. Although I had always wanted to dance I had never found an emotional and creative outlet that suited me. Because I spent so much time deep-relaxing, rocking from side to side, waiting for the impulse to move, repeating movements over and over until the natural next movement took over, and acting out pretend situations in movement I think I have a more organic style. I am not afraid to allow myself to pause before an audience and wait for the next emotional upswing. A part of myself was unlocked by this experience and only needed direction.

When I moved to Philadelphia from New York, it was to go to Library School. Having majored in Classics my aim was to be a specialist in rare books and medieval manuscripts. After Joan moved back to California I became attracted to Martha Graham Technique. Seeking the best, I ended up at the Martha Graham

School in NYC for Christmas and June intensive courses. During the first year that I went Miss Graham was still teaching ordinary mortals. I can remember being so terrified to walk across the floor in front of her that I held hands with the girl next to me like a third grader, waiting in terror until the time came for our miserable, solitary journeys before that highly critical audience. Never one to spare anyone's feelings Miss Graham once asked a woman, "Have you ever been here before?" When the meek creature replied in the affirmative, she said, "Well, you never would have known it!" Another time, she told someone, "You walk like a belly dancer!" This was not meant as a compliment and I was offended (silently). There was nothing in my experience like this place. An atmosphere of austerity and total dedication prevailed. There was only one way and it was Martha's way. The members of the company jokingly referred to it as the Temple of the Pelvic Truths. More than anything, the ideas of personal power that Miss Graham expressed found fertile ground in me. As an example, there was a girl, an excellent dancer, who had terrible saddlebags on the outside of her thighs. Miss Graham said to her, "Pick those up!" as if she could pull in her thighs just as you could suck in a stomach. She then looked at us in explanation and said, "If you're too fat, get thin and if you're too thin, get fat!" The big lesson was in a directed, focused life. Whining, complaining and indecisiveness were unacceptable behavior. She was one of those people for whom there is a direct line between wanting and doing.

I was unhappy with the level of teaching of Middle Eastern Dance in Philadelphia until I had the opportunity to join a class at Bryn Mawr College where I was working. The departure of the teacher after a few months left me as the most experienced dancer in the group. By popular demand I took over teaching and soon I felt the need to increase my dance vocabulary. An ad for a belly dance seminar in Reading, PA, in 1976, led to my first experience with Ibrahim Farrah. I could tell that there was something different going on here by the energy and enthusiasm of the students. In the succeeding years of many other seminars and teachers' courses in New York with Ibrahim, I finally found a place where all the ideals I'd been seeing in other techniques were being applied to the dance of my choice. Ibrahim preached excellence, respect for yourself and responsible representation of Arabic culture. For anyone that knows him, early classes with him were a constant battle with crippling insecurity for his students.

This is about the time when I began to be serious about performing. For many years I danced at Philadelphia's Middle East Restaurant, often doing seven shows a night. I continued to teach but still felt something was missing.

I reached a point where the study of the authentic dance in its cultural context became my all-encompassing goal. In the late nineteen seventies I decided that I had to travel to the countries of its origin. My interests broadened to include Arabic folkloric dance and women's social life and customs in the traditional societies of the Middle East. The study of a non-Western culture and the realization of the responsibility one must assume when representing it has been extremely rewarding in itself. For me, also becoming literate in a non-Western (Continued on page 6)

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dance tradition has resulted in artistic growth.

In 1979 a chance meeting with a Tunisian woman, Hayet Ben Slama, led to travel opportunities. My Tunisian sister introduced me to a whole new world where the women have a separate society. It allowed me to experience the dance in its cultural context. Between 1979 and 1992 I made six trips to Tunisia to study at the School of the National Troupe and privately with Habib Trabelsi, a principal dancer in the Troupe. I studied folkloric dance and the Andalusian tradition of music and dance as it has evolved in the Maghreb. Thanks to personal contacts, I was able to attend numerous wedding celebrations and to document women's dance style at weddings, traditional women's orchestras, henna parties, and other events of which dance is a part. In each case I was able to record traditional music as well. My frequent visits to Tunisia resulted in several performing engagements at the Tunis Hilton and invitations to perform at weddings and private social events, all of which were very well received. The research material I collected between 1979 and 1994 was used in a series of eleven articles I wrote, entitled "Tunisian Images", which were published in *Arabesque Magazine*.

In 1981 I opened the Habiba Studio in its present location. Between 1985 and 1992 I also undertook four trips to Egypt. Introduced by the then Egyptian Minister of Culture I met and took classes with Mahmoud Reda at the school of the Reda troupe. I was also able to visit and study with the historically

renowned Gypsy dancers, the Benat Moazin. Traveling has allowed me to expand my knowledge as a dancer and offer firsthand dance education to my students. Studying abroad has also allowed me to develop a sophisticated and broad understanding of the subject areas. In addition to running the studio, traveling introduced me to new pursuits, writing, lecturing and the world of ethnomusicology.

At a certain point I realized that in order to keep myself a performing dancer I must actively recruit new audiences. I have spent a great deal of effort in explaining to people why they should be interested in Raks Sharqi. My association with the University of Pennsylvania has been very rewarding. When I worked there as a librarian I had the advantages of contacts with the Middle East Center. Now that I am a full-time dancer I have been named a Fellow of the Middle East Center and continue to be an outreach lecturer for the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology on the subject of Middle Eastern Dance. I do programs for adults and children. I never thought of myself as trained to work with children, but the children's programs came out of my realization that I could share my joy in creative movement with them and that they could appreciate things with a completely unprejudiced eye.

Recently, with all the talk about taking this dance into the next millennium, I realized that they are the audience of the future and showing them how beautiful this dance can be is in all of our interests. My goals have not changed much over the years: to deepen my knowledge of the cultures and traditions that are the foundation of this dance form and to share the beauty of it in performance and teaching. People come to this dance in many different ways, but very rarely do people know up front what an all-encompassing thing it can become in one's life. I am very fortunate to have encountered extraordinary people and places who made all the difference.

