

CAIRO DIARY ©

Habiba

Nothing is perfect. This is the tale of a trip to Egypt, really more of a lightning raid than a trip. Although it had been a few years since I had been there, I kept waiting for the perfect moment. It never came. In May I received an invitation to join two friends who were cat-sitting in Cairo. I only had a week and I was allergic to cats (and there were seven of them.) What could be more perfect? I knew I would have to hit the ground running if I was to accomplish everything I needed to do. As luck would have it, Northwest Airlines had a great fare, the only thing was that you had to change planes in Amsterdam and it was 10 hours between planes. Also, it landed in Cairo at 1:10am. Taking advantage of the layover, I checked into the airport Hilton in Amsterdam, slept for 6 hours and was over jet lag by the time I got to Cairo. My friends Robin Dougherty and her husband, Walter Armbrust were apartment sitting for a professor at the American University in Cairo, having just come from a conference in Damascus. The good thing about being in Cairo with Robin and Walt is that all of our interests mesh very well. Walt is an anthropologist currently teaching at Georgetown University and authority on Egyptian cinema and his wife, Robin, is the University of Pennsylvania Library's Middle East Bibliographer. She is also a dancer and we have had many adventures together. They were interested in seeking out some of the same people I was because of their interest in the image of the dancer in films.

They sent a car for me because of the late hour of arrival. I was enchanted by the drive from the airport. At 1:30 in the morning, Cairo was free from traffic, but it was certainly not asleep. People were out and about. I saw the men hanging out in cafes, and, once again, I asked myself the question, "what's with the all-night fruit stands?" I've noticed this curious phenomenon before. I guess it's in case people develop an insatiable desire for fruit in the middle of the night. Observing the scurry and bustle of the Cairo night during the ride from the airport, I was reminded of something I'd heard years before when I went to the Ahwit it-Tigaara (Mercantile Cafe) to find Ibrahim Akef at 2am. Old timers like Akef and the writer Naguib Mahfouz would come out to cafes only very late at night because it reminded them of the more gracious style of life before Cairo got impossibly overcrowded. I was going to be staying in Garden City, a once

fashionable neighborhood for the expatriate community, and very near the American University of Cairo (AUC.) The apartment was in a 1930's Art Deco building typical of the area. It was large, elegant and slightly down at the heels. The apartment itself was spacious with a 25 foot long enclosed balcony overlooking the street.

The apartment was home to seven cats, each rescued from the streets of Cairo, and each with a very sad story to tell. One was missing an eye, one had her jaw broken and so on. Each of them had, in an act of desperation and an exhibition of keen judgment of an individual human's sense of compassion, thrown themselves in front of the professor and she had taken them in. Now, having won the Cairo cat lottery, they enjoyed being catered to. Their food was home cooked and their substitute people were, fortunately, very experienced cat caretakers. Robin and Walt have in their Philadelphia home two Cairo cats and one Abu Dhabi cat, all of whom were also rescued from the streets. Our days were complicated by the fact that the cats needed to be counted before anyone left the house. Because there were so many of them we had to throw kitty bonbons to them and quickly take a cat inventory to insure that none escaped as we were leaving. The ritual came to be called the Great Bunbunni (Arabic for bonbon) Toss.

In the morning we were up at 8:30 and had our usual Cairo breakfast of beledi bread, peanut butter and yogurt. We talked about what I hoped to accomplish in the short time we had and agreed all of our goals for the trip were basically the same. I felt an urgency to touch the past by experiencing more of the Muhammad Ali St. style while the unique traditions of the "street of the musicians and dancers" still existed. I also wanted to get in touch with current styles of nightclub performance. I wanted to take as many dance classes as I could and my friends wanted to interview as many dancers as they could. I had given Robin Nadia Hamdi's and Raqia Hassan's phone numbers and she had set up a program for me that made the most efficient use of my time: 17 hours of private lessons in 4 days, which didn't leave much time for anything else but getting costumes made.

First up, after a visit to Nomad, a lovely store near the Marriott that features crafts, was a trip to Mahmoud Abdel Ghaffar's Al-Wikalah. His well-known palace of costumes was even more elegant than the last time I saw it. After getting an overview of the ready-made costumes he had on hand, I decided I still wanted to get my

own design made. So, Mahmoud asked costume maker Om Said to meet with us in the afternoon. After showing her my drawing for a very elaborate retro costume, she, being sensitive to my time constraints, said she would look for materials and meet me back there that evening at 9:00pm. I was extremely grateful to Mahmoud and Om Said for diving into the project so I could have it in six days. The rest of the day was spent looking for silver jewelry for Robin, but I also succumbed to a perfectly matched pair of knobby Nubian silver bracelets. On returning to Al-Wikalah Om Said, who bears a striking resemblance to Mme. Abla, (for good reason, she is a niece) gave me some choices in fabric and beads. I was delighted with the materials and colors she had selected.

The next day we adopted a routine that was to be strictly adhered to for the next four days. Two hours in the morning with Raqia Hassan and then a quick lunch at the local Pizza Hut and then rush home to meet Nadia Hamdi for two more hours of lessons. I felt like I was on a treadmill, and so I was, but it was an Egyptian treadmill.

Mme. Raqia Hassan who clearly has had a huge influence on dance in Egypt and in America, has, after a stage career in folkloric



Mme. Raqia Hassan and Habiba

dance, chosen to concentrate on Oriental dance. She has revitalized the dance scene by putting the compressed emotion and the center back into the movements. Her "back to the belly" philosophy has led her to revive old steps and invent new movements. As she explained it, she felt that the source of movement had been watered down or at least misconstrued by some dancers. Although the shell of the movement looked the same, they didn't seem to grasp the heart of the movement. The amazing thing about Raqia's teaching style is that she can easily clarify movement concepts whether coaching a beginning student or long-time professional. Somehow, with her, the old and new become

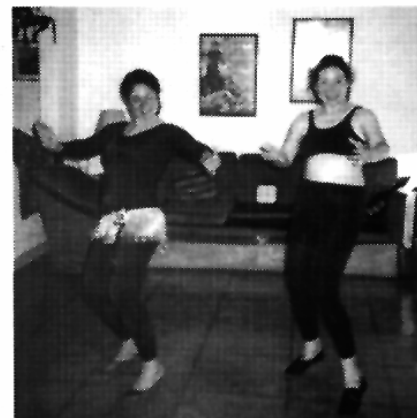
resolved and you come out with a much clearer idea of the essence of the dance. Choreographically, her inspiration is in the interpretation of song lyrics as much as the musical interpretation itself. Her broad humorous gestures, which are well suited to the lyrics, should be transplanted with care. Her use of abdominal movements is a feeling from the gut and not an ostentatious parlour trick. The compressed emotion and internalization of movement is much easier to talk about than feel, but, in some ways, I feel that it places less strain on the lower back. By developing the contraction and control of the midsection, very powerful accents can be done without the back strain involved in pelvic movements. This kind of stabilization of the spine and working from the center protects against back pain. Her shimmy techniques are also different from the ones which are being used by many teachers in the States today. She takes the shimmy back to the knees to enable the dancer to layer movements like undulations with it. It also fits the style of her music, which is often faster than earlier music. I had been working at her technique for several years but spending time with her made it much clearer than the video and the one class I had with her in New York. Raqia taught me a new choreography to a Hakim song, Ma-tbussilish (Don't look down at me) which will be on her next video.

At the Pizza Hut down the block from Mme. Raqia's, I experienced again the earnest employee attitude practiced by people trained for the tourist industry in Egypt. The Pizza Hut teenagers were wonderfully endearing examples. When we had our pizzas in hand, the entire staff of young people would line up at our table and say "...and what about our pizza?" Thankfully Robin

was able to surpress her initial desire to demand, "What ABOUT your pizza?" and we assured them that it was most excellent.

Nadia Hamdi arrived only a few minutes after we had dashed back to the apartment. She teaches only when the student is able to provide a place. Luckily, the apartment we were staying in had a huge living room, so we rolled back the rug and were ready to go. I had been inspired by reading Morocco's beautiful article on her in Habibi. In the course of the next week, Nadia spoke many times of their beautiful friendship spanning 20 years. Nadia truly is the embodiment of sweetness and light and theirs is a wonderful story of friendship and support across the miles. Nadia represents something extremely rare having been born to the true authentic Mohammed Ali St. tradition, which was exactly what I wanted. Many of the steps she taught me had been in her family for years. In addition to having had a long and successful career in Cairo's top nightclubs, Nadia is in a direct line from the first candelabra dancers Zouba El Klobatiyya and Shafiyya al Qibtiyya (who trained her grandmother and great aunt.) She is a tireless teacher, task mistress and cheerleader. By the fourth hour of lessons a day I was beginning to flag a little, but she simply wouldn't allow it. What energy!! Nadia taught me two choreographies, one to the smash hit Kemannana and the other an oriental piece from the tape, Princess of Cairo. Kemannana is an catchy ode to conspicuous consumption from a movie about a young man's rise to stardom from humble beginnings on Muhammad Ali St. Literally everyone on the streets was singing it. Lying in bed, I heard children in neighboring apartments singing it at night. As it turned out I felt that Raqia and Nadia were on the same wavelength. Interestingly both used abdominal

contractions but there was a difference in where the beat was, on the contraction or on the release. Both are fabulously useful.



Nadia Hamdi and Habiba

On Wednesday evening, we were invited to dinner in the Mahdi section of Cairo and we took the new subway, which, although it doesn't go everywhere in Cairo, it is extremely convenient. Our hosts, George and Hela, own the book distributorship used by the University of Pennsylvania as its source for Arabic and Persian books. They are charming elegant people and it was a delight to spend a non-dance oriented evening visiting with a contemporary Egyptian family. George even proudly showed us a citation from King Farouk, which was presented to his father.

The next day Nadia offered to take me to see Mme. Hekmat for a costume and I leaped at the chance. Mme. Hekmat has a small workshop off Mohammed Ali St. She and her partner Toota (Miss Tawhida) were preparing to move to larger quarters downstairs in the same building. She has made costumes for all the greats from Badia Masabny to Lucy. I tried on a partially made costume which I really liked and they said could be ready for me in several days. The price was excellent, her work was gorgeous, and I considered myself very lucky to be able to take it home with me. Because we were all busy with our own projects we were grateful to receive a donation of home cooked food from an old friend of Robin's and Walt's. Their friend, (whose name was also Nadia,) brought pots of chicken and stuffed vegetables traveling all the way on the bus from her neighborhood in downtown Cairo. Nadia was a divorced woman with two daughters whom Walt and Robin befriended many years ago.

Saturday was the last of the dance lessons and I spent three hours with Raqia and two more with Nadia. After the lessons with Nadia, we went to Shawarbi St. to buy tapes



From left to right: Howada, Mme Hekmat, Habiba, Nadia, and Tewhida

and CDs and then they all accompanied me to get my costume at Mme. Hekmat's: Walt, Robin, Nadia. The atelier was bustling and several other clients were hanging out including a dancer from Alexandria, Howayda, who was accompanied by her little girl. Conversation was, of course, about dance and was lively and cheerful although one could sense the underlying dissatisfaction with the assault on their profession by conservative elements. Nadia, of course, had given up her career for the sake of family honor while a mega-star, while, we noted, Ragia avoided that problem altogether by never performing oriental dance onstage. I find it surprising that they haven't all been totally discouraged. After Mme. Hekmat's we said goodbye to Nadia and I felt very sad. As the cab pulled away, we saw her looking in a shop window. The last stop was for gold bracelets. The jeweler said why didn't I buy more, after all, the bracelets were identical to money.

The state of dance seemed very sad, in that there was no one performing at all at the major venues in June except for a single show by Lucy, which was at the Parisiana at 3:30am and then only when they felt like it.



Habiba in Om Said costume

Sunday was our last day, Robin and I had a 4am flight and had to be there two hours before. After last minute costume items, and a trip to the AUC bookstore, we went home and packed. Then on to al-Wikalah where we were to meet Om Said. My costume was a retro dream. My concept started with something similar to a Lucy costume I had seen, but I wanted to play up the retro references in it and make it look like something Tahya Carioca would have worn. It was quite something. I thanked everybody involved. Then, my clever travel

companions had hatched a brilliant plan. An old school friend of theirs, Abdel Rahman, had invited us over to his parent's house for dinner. The parents lived in a new development out by the airport. The plan was to go to Mahmoud's for the costume with our luggage and then go right on to Abdel Rahman's parents for dinner and leave for the airport at 1:30am. Abdel Rahman's two brothers were there also with their wives. They are all in the book business together and are very active in the intellectual life of the city, writing on film and other subjects for magazines. Their English was excellent and made great conversation. Their father had been the physician for the Saudi soccer team. Mom was a brilliant cook who had been cooking for two days to put on the feast. We experienced hospitality the like of which doesn't exist in the States. After feeding us to the max, they put Robin and I to bed for a nap. They woke us in time for another cup of tea and drove us to the airport and Walt back to Cairo. This trip, short as it was, made a huge impact on me. I was preparing for a second run of my one-woman show, "Dancing girls....you either love them or hate them." As a result of this trip the show evolved from a glorified lecture into a real theater piece. The world view of these women suddenly became much clearer to me so I could express it onstage. The dancers I met are more sensitive to "group" responsibilities than we are. They feel that they are good Muslims and good women who support their families with their dancing. As a result, they bring people joy and release their inhibitions. Art, commerce and responsibility to family all co-exist as equal commitments in this society. They love music and dance and they don't see what is wrong with it. They know that dance is considered "low" but they don't agree. The gossip in Mme. Hekmat's was about those "Muslims," although they were all Muslims, too. But, one wonders, how much denigration can someone take. Ragia never took to the nightclub stage for the sake of her family and Nadia retired so her son would not be disgraced. But, as Howaiyda, whose 8 year old daughter also has aspirations, said about dance "What's the harm?"

Photos courtesy of Habiba



The Great Bunbunni Toss

