



Ghawazi Revisited: A Party in Luxor

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by Habiba

It doesn't seem like 18 years since I met members of the famous Maazin family of Ghawazi on my first trip to Egypt. In 1985 I was inspired by all the pioneering American dancers that came before me to make my pilgrimage to the people that are at the heart and soul of Oriental dance. The Ghawazi, along with the dancers of Mohammed Ali Street, are the twin nurturers of the modern Egyptian dancer and the heritage of all of us who call ourselves *raqs sharqi* or Oriental bellydancers. I didn't know how lucky I was that I was witnessing a dying tradition, killed by the most unlikely of bedfellows: conservative religious pressure and Western popular culture.

I was in Luxor because I wanted to experience firsthand the continuity of life since ancient times. I'd read a lot about the people in Upper Egypt and how their

daily life takes them into constant contact with the antiquities. On my arrival, I'd seen the men set off to work at 5:30 am, hoes on their shoulders. I'd seen them grazing their goats in the Temple of Luxor, and seen the naive beauty of the Haj paintings that proudly and colorfully adorn their homes. I'd read about the damaging effects on traditional life that the stopping of the Nile flood has had. Other problems have assailed the sugar-cane farmers who have to fight for space on the small-gauge railroad cars in order to harvest their sugar cane. The psychological pressures have been terrible and have created a modern phenomenon among the populace, namely, stress. The amazing continuity of life and the grace of these people was still apparent, regardless of such changes.

What have music and dance to do with

all this? At the time, I thought that people need them more than ever as solace as a way of life vanishes, for as the traditional means of survival are being altered, the only link to their deep-rooted history is in these concentrated celebrations of life.

Little did I know that only a few years later music and dance would virtually disappear as well. By 1990, the careers of the most famous performing family of Ghawazi were over, and music and dance as entertainment was banned in many provinces in Upper Egypt. To make matters worse, young Egyptians found Western popular music to be more exciting than the traditional entertainments.

I went to Egypt with only a few names in my pocket, but with great expectations nonetheless. My contacts were people at the Ministry of Culture who introduced me

to folklore scholars and prominent dancers in Cairo such as Mahmoud Reda. But this doesn't mean anything when you are in Luxor and want to find the legendary dancers known as the Ghawazi (also called "invaders of the heart"). You need to find a way to break out of the tourist bubble into the role of participant rather than observer. The answer is well known to every New Yorker: Ask a cab driver.

So, after a full day at the Valley of the Kings, I said to my friend and fluent-Arabic-speaking co-conspirator, Robin Dougherty, "It would be a shame to be in Luxor and not drop in on the Ghawazi. Why don't we just ask the cab driver if he knows them?" Ever since I'd read Edwina Nearing's and Aisha Ali's articles about Egypt and their experiences among these people, I'd always envisioned

my own meeting with the Benat Maazin. I had no idea which members of the family were still performing or how many there were. Our cab driver, Hejaj, had the air of a real "operator" about him. When asked, he replied, "Oh, yes, I'll take you there now if

you like," and we could hardly believe our ears. I replied that we were tired now, but I hired him for the next day and told him to pick us up at 10 am. He promised to stop off on his way home to tell them we would drop by the next day.

The next morning as the cab turned off

the broad Corniche and into the traditional quarter, I felt a feeling of familiarity that made me all the more aware of why I had come to Luxor. I'd read about it, but now I was here.

We stopped when we came to a garage.

When we entered, we saw two old men sitting on a pair of old couches near the entrance. They greeted us, and invited us to sit down. At the back of the garage were sheep, goats, and a donkey. What a wonderful modular use of sitting space and barn, I thought. One of the men was introduced as Youssef Maazin, the patriarch of the family. He proceeded to complain about the price of farmland. It was as if he were trying to justify the presence of the animals.

By the animated conversation between our cab driver, Hejaj, and Youssef, I found comfort in knowing that these two gentlemen did indeed know each other very well. When their conversation ended, the father asked if we were there to give the girls work. I said we just wanted to talk to them. At that point, this was true. I had no plan but to meet them and see if they would show me a few of their steps and some of their costumes. He explained to us that the girls were sleeping because they had been up until 3 am performing at a wedding. A younger sister, Sanaa, came out to tell us to come

THAT MORNING

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into the house across the narrow street. The house was tiny and bare. We were led down a long hall to a small parlor containing the ubiquitous flowered-chintz sofa. Then, one by one, two sleepy, and I may add, grumpy, Ghawazi came downstairs. They introduced themselves as Samia and Fayza. They were the daughters of Youssef's brother Saad and first cousins to Khairiyya, Suad, and Reja. I found out later that the others were away performing in Europe with a tour put together by Alain Weber. There began a halting conversation in which the subject matter changed rapidly. We exchanged views about being professional dancers, and their immediate candor surprised me. They said that no one respected artists, especially the hotels, which constantly underpaid them. They also complained that the previous night some man had dropped dead in the middle of the wedding at which they were performing, putting a damper on things. (Meaning, of course, that the tips were not that good.) I was curious about the family history and whether the girls had a sense

of themselves as part of a legendary line of women. They said that their father knew about such things. All they knew was that they started their dance training at seven years of age and that their father was their teacher. Apparently concerned about imitators, Samia urged us to "accept no imitations." By way of introduction, I showed them my portfolio of dance photos, credits, and articles. We exchanged photographs. Theirs was a photo of Samia and Fayza in an ad for a local commercial cassette that they had recorded.

I steered the conversation around to costumes, and they brought one down. It was a lovely *baladi* dress, with beads and paillettes. When asked if I would like to buy it, I said that I was more interested in their own style of costume, the so-called Pharaonic costume. Samia was quick to point out that their family had invented this style. I noticed a high degree of family pride when the girls spoke. Sanaa modeled the dress, and it did indeed look beautiful on her. They explained that, for the most

part, when they danced at hotels they wear dresses, and when they dance at a *hafla* or wedding locally they wear their own style of costume. The subject often switched very rapidly, which made it difficult to keep up



Habiba trying on costumes in the Ghawazi bedroom, 1985



Member of Rais Qenawi Band, 1989

with them, especially since Robin had to translate most of it. We had some tea, and suddenly we were invited upstairs. (All of us, that is, except Hejaj, who had taken an animated part in our conversation so far.)

Upstairs we had a virtual Ghawazi pajama party. They opened their closets, and Robin and I had a grand time pulling out costumes and admiring them. My impression of their room was that it was like a teenager's room, all white and gold, with wigs, costumes, and dolls strewn about. They started dressing me in a costume, and I was surprised to see the tie-on bustle (*el azzama*) that goes underneath the Ghawazi skirt and accentuates the buttocks and hips. The thing that struck me as most touching was their

charming use of quite ordinary junk jewelry from the '50s in their crowns (*taj*). It was resourceful and imaginative. The costume they dressed me in was almost new, but it had something of the matador's suit of lights about it. I found another in turquoise and red that I liked much better. I said I wanted to buy it, and we agreed on a price.

An idea had been turning around in my head from the beginning. During tea, I'd asked if the girls were performing anywhere soon. The following week was their next booking, sadly too late for me. I thought that it wouldn't be right to come all this way and not see a performance. I'd asked how much they got for a performance. The price was reasonable, in my estimation, so I decided that I would have my own hafla with the Benat Maazin. The costume issue

settled, we got into a planning session with Hejaj about the performance. It had to be that night because we were leaving the next day. We needed a place to have our party and also a permit to have a Ghawazi performance on the east bank of the Nile. But even before that, our first job was to see if the musicians were free. Their band, under the direction of Rais Qenawi, turned out to be the musicians that gathered in front of our hotel, paid by the management to provide "local color." It was a sad sight to see them strike up as every tour bus and airline van arrived with new guests.

No one gave them a second look, except us. At first I thought they were waiting for a performance—it was inconceivable that these men, some of whom were selected to be in the "Festival of the Nile," spent their days in front of this hotel. It seemed even more of a shame when I discovered the rather charming tradition of sunset on the Nile. Every evening would find people gathered at a small amphitheater overlooking the famed river to watch the sunset while a loudspeaker played classics such as Handel's *Water Music*. How colonial is that? It was extremely pleasant, but I couldn't help thinking that while loudspeakers here were playing Western classical music, the greatest-living Saidi musicians were hanging around idle at the front of the hotel.

This line of thought made me doubly



Habiba trying to play the *rababa* (with the separate women's section of the party behind her)

glad to have this opportunity to hire these men. Luckily, they were free that night. My first idea was to ask our hotel if we could have the performance in one of the tents they use for barbecues. I naively thought that if I invited everyone in the hotel to attend, the hotel would benefit from it anyway. It would be more fun with more than two people. I was quite surprised when the man behind the desk received a no from the inner office. The desk person made the excuse of too many arrivals. It didn't make sense, but I finally understood the real reason when I saw a poster for a typical tourist barbecue and folklore show the next evening. That event cost 20 Egyptian pounds per person, and ours was a free invitation to anyone and everyone. Left without a place for our party,

we were taken by Hejaj to another hotel, the small Egyptian-owned Mena Palace. We sat down with the staff and had sodas while we waited for the *mudir* (hotel manager). This seemed a little more like it.

I was apprehensive that my venture was getting too expensive because I knew that they weren't just going to let me have my party there without compensation. By now everyone was intrigued with my project and got caught up in the excitement. When the *mudir* arrived, he found a very enthusiastic group of people, and he ended up being amenable to the idea. He discussed the arrangement of the room, and the price was quite reasonable by my standards. I still felt the need to increase the guest/performer ratio, even though the real purpose of this was to learn their dance style. In a way it was like a fantasy of being a nineteenth-century English patroness who hires entertainers for a private performance in her salon.

We made signs and put them up in both hotels, inviting people to a free performance of Samia and Fayza. I experienced some pressure from Hejaj that if I did not purchase a certain amount of brandy and beer for the band, they would not play. I drew the line at this because I felt that they should understand that my purpose was not solely to have a party and that I was only one person paying for this extravaganza. The musicians would have to buy their own drinks, and that was that. To settle the issue, I insisted on immediately driving back to the musicians and asking them. This was Hejaj's undoing, as the musicians were quite understanding that this "hostess with the mostest" routine was not completely covered in my travel budget and that I was doing the best I could. (I suspected that Hejaj also had a concession of brandy and beer, or at least was related to someone who did.)

With everything under control, we returned to our hotel. We immediately tried to locate the only people we knew, Annette and Betty, two wonderful ladies from Massachusetts that we'd met the day before. They were wives of businessmen working for large American companies in Egypt. They were intrigued and agreed to come to the show. At 8:30 pm, our faithful Hejaj

picked us up. At the hotel, the staff and the *mudir* waited at the curb and shook our hands. We were shown to the room; it had been decorated with gold, red, and green foil, like Christmas decorations.

We were then escorted to the terrace and given sodas. The *mudir*

was excited that people from our hotel had come. I didn't see any tourist types, so I was very confused. At 9 pm we went into the room to find the musicians already warming up. The room was arranged in oval fashion except for a separate section at the far end that was arranged in rows. There was a head table set up and a place for the band and dancers. It looked like it was just going to be Betty, Annette, Robin, and me despite



Habiba dancing with Fayza (left) and Samia, 1985

what the *mudir* had said, when all of a sudden the entire desk staff from our hotel filed in. They were joined by other men, probably from the hotel staff of the Mena Palace. Then, little by little, the women attached to these men came with their babies to fill the separate section, which

turned out to be the harem. It was obvious that the *mudir* had meant the staff of the hotels, not the guests. So, here I was, hostess to Luxor—the only people who came to my party were Egyptians, who presumably knew a good performance when they heard about it. What amazed me was that the very same men who told me I couldn't have my party at the other hotel attended with great enthusiasm. While waiting for the stars of the evening, the band demonstrated to us how to play the *rababa*. Soon, Fayza and Samia made a dramatic entrance. They were almost completely unrecognizable to the girls I saw that morning. These somewhat arrogant and self-assured creatures made everyone gasp as they swept into the room. Immediately, the excitement level rose. Their persona was completely different from their daytime affect and was probably learned as a family tradition.

That morning they had had the air of sulky children, but that evening they were arrogant, worldly, temperamental, unpredictable, and utterly devastating. They began

their performance, and it seemed familiar to me from having read Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* and the more recent descriptions I'd seen in *Habibi*. The dance form is relatively simple and repetitive, relying on interesting formations of the two or three dancers together and the charm of each individual dancer. Every once in a while, one of them would perform a head slide to the side while giving an outrageously flirty look to some man. Singing is a big part of the performance as well—a high-pitched, girlish voice is the ideal. The side-to-side hip-shimmy step is performed with the dancers parallel, facing back to back, and combined with a shoulder shimmy and a rocking motion. Novelties include having a *rababa* played on their chest, the two dancers sandwiching the musician from front and back, a stick dance, and having the *rababa* played above their heads.

As it turned out, all these people had come not only to see the girls perform but to see me as well. They even expected a costume. I explained that I was there to

honor the Benat Maazin and to learn, not to make myself the center of my own party. With their persistence, I finally attempted an Oriental show to Saidi music, and a hip scarf was found for me. The audience was appreciative. I also got up with Samia and Fayza and tried to follow along.

At a certain point in the evening, in order to stimulate tipping, Samia and Fayza threatened to leave. This resulted in a wonderful *dawshah* (argument) between the girls, Hejaj, and the band leader. When the tipping began in earnest, they were much happier, and they settled down to flirting happily with the audience and repeating the tipping rhymes with the band leader. When a tip is given, there is a certain formula that is used to announce the tip and thank the donor, such as "Mohammed has honored us." At the end of the evening they said, "America has honored us! Barbara! Barbara!" Everyone cheered. And so my party came to an end. Everyone wanted to know if I was satisfied, and the girls wanted to know if I still wanted to purchase the costume. I did, and they had

an argument over who was to relinquish her crown. Samia lost, and, after being reminded by Hejaj to kiss us goodbye, they turned to go, but not before Samia turned back to me and said, "You have taken my crown." Then they were gone.

Epilogue

I returned in 1989 to Luxor and was able to give a copy of the article about our party in *Arabesque* to Fayza, whom I visited at the house, having been brought there by my friend Hejaj.

As it turned out, Fayza was performing at a hotel with one of her cousins. Interestingly enough, they were wearing their tourist costume, the baladi dress (also called a Luxor dress) rather than their Pharaonic costume. That was the last time I saw them. After that came the loss of their livelihood due to the above-mentioned circumstances. Subsequently, they faded from view to all but a handful of people, Edwina Nearing being one of the most loyal and protective, who has issued updates and pleas for help from time to time.

Khairiyya Maazin teaching at the Ahlan Wa Sahlan festival, 2003

You can imagine my amazement and delight when Khairiyya, one of the famous trio of daughters of Youssef Maazin, turned out to be teaching at Raqia Hassan's Ahlan Wa Sahlan Festival 2003, with Edwina Nearing accompanying her. Khairiyya taught two two-hour workshops on Ghawazi dance. She was accompanied by another dancer named Mona, who was not a Maazin girl but was there to help demonstrate the typical two-person performance. At present, Khairiyya is the only holdout. She stubbornly refuses to give up performing the family art. I was mesmerized by her dancing. Edwina provided background information and broke down the steps. In this way, a new generation of dancers had exposure to one of the last exponents of a great folk tradition and a link to our past as dancers. **H**

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