

Tunisian Images

by Habiba (Barbara Siegel)

Since my last Tunisian journey in 1980, I often experienced a nostalgia for the smells, sights and sounds that captured my imagination and remained a permanent part of my consciousness. I yearned for the pleasure of being received into a home, sinking into its simple pleasures and participating in the comfortable society of women. In many ways, I can't communicate all my feelings; my affinity for the country and its people is on a basic, almost nuclear level. All the inconveniences I experienced evaporated from my memory, leaving only a strong desire to return.

Travel is not always pleasant or easy, but it always stretches the traveler's imagination, forcing him to seek new physical and emotional reserves, to meet unexpected challenges. Also, if one sets certain travel goals in this area of the world, but is not part of a tour group, one must use a lot of energy in order to combat the strong anesthetizing sensations of the East. The temptation is to become lackadaisical; once obstacles are encountered, plans and goals are easily changed while one becomes regulated to friends' social structures.

When I planned this, my third, trip, I set very ambitious goals: to view as many wedding ceremonies as possible; to take dance lessons; to renew contacts in the artistic and scholarly communities; to add to my basic Tunisian costume; to interview people about dance and culture; and to perform as much as possible. Soon after formulating these goals, I realized from previous travel experiences in Arab countries that I would be lucky if I accomplished one-tenth of what I had planned. But, as it delightfully happened, I accomplished more than that. However, I still recommend that preparing oneself for failure prevents later disappointment. Generally, though, I was curious to see what changes had occurred within the country and in the family of whom I was so fond, the Ben Slamas.

After a few inquiries, I discovered that my teacher, Habib Trabelsi, and some of the same students I had gotten to know on my previous trip, were still at the Conservatoire, the official school of the Ballet Nationale, and were enthusiastic about my return. I could not pass up an opportunity to renew these contacts because I felt I needed to continue my education in the music and dance of Tunisia and herein lay my real justification for the trip.

The experience of arriving and being whisked off to Dar Chabanne to recuperate from jet lag amid my Tunisian "family" was something I had anticipated for two years. The reality was just as satisfying. While perched in front of the television watching an Egyptian soap opera, I learned my first bit of bad news — all music festivals in Tunisia had been cancelled due to the war in Lebanon. As if this wasn't bad enough, the national troupe, therefore, would not be

performing anywhere in Tunisia. It was in a hiatus, preparing for a Russian tour. Usually there is a special two-week folklife festival during which dance troupes from all over the world come to Carthage for performances. Missing out on this was especially painful, but it also meant that I would not see the troupe in action or be able to take group classes. Private lessons seemed to be the logical answer. My former teacher at the Conservatoire, Habib, knew my arrival date, and an appointment had already been made to meet with him. Later, he agreed to give me private lessons and said that both he and his wife, Zohra, would teach.

Habib and Zohra Trabelsi are both members of the Ballet Nationale, Tunisia's folkloric dance company which makes its official home at the Conservatoire in Tunis and where they also conduct classes. Habib told me that he had been with the troupe almost since its very beginning in 1962. When he as a young student in Kairouan, dancing was an extracurricular activity offered in public schools; there were no formal dance schools at that time. When Habib began dancing, school-children participated in the provincial festivals held annually. In 1962, however — barely four years after Tunisia became an independent nation — the government-sponsored Ballet Nationale was formed. The founders of the troupe picked the best young dancers at the provincial festivals and invited them to come to Tunis to study. Both Habib and Zohra, who hails from Tunis, were selected this way. Habib, however, decided to complete his education before he joined the troupe.

The Conservatoire was the first school of dance in Tunisia. After company members were chosen, six months were spent in intensive training and preparation for performance. Soon after this, they started performing at the same regional festival from which company members were selected. Habib said that in the beginning, company members lacked a definite status, but now roles and functions are more clearly formalized and defined. Today new company members are chosen in the original fashion and undergo the same rigorous training period.

The troupe has expanded its activities greatly in its twenty-year history and has traveled to countries all over the world, including the USA during its Bicentennial. Habib attributes the company's success and longevity to the fact that they remain faithful to traditional choreography. He admits that every time a new Minister of Culture is appointed, the philosophy shifts somewhat, but what keeps the company successful is that the repertoire represents all sections of the country and is very traditional rather than flashy. "Tradition polished," is the way Habib likes to think of it. I should point out, though, that the dancers



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also receive strong ballet training that lends grace and agility to the traditional folk steps.

As to my two chosen dances for study, Habib first told me their proper names and then a bit about their origins and meanings. The "Raks Al-Juzur," the traditional name for the pot dance, comes from the islands of Djerba and Kerkennah on the southeast coast of Tunisia. The name means "dance of the islands" and symbolizes the major industry of the area — pottery. This is an excellent example of a dance evolving from the people's daily activities. Everyone from this area knows how to perform this dance, and weddings and parties provide them the opportunities to display their talents. "Raks Al-Juzur" is performed to a medley of popular songs from the Djerba area.

The scarf dance, or "Raks Al-Maharim," has an even more colorful history. Considered the national dance of Tunisia, it is

not identified with any particular province. It is very old, and its original meaning is lost; but it is known to be a traditional women's dance performed with a scarf in each hand. At the time of French colonization, women started performing it with a red scarf in one hand and a white one in the other — the colors of the then secret Tunisian flag. These two colors were a revolutionary and nationalistic addition to what was probably a femininely flirtatious dance. Dancers have used the red and white scarves ever since, and the dance has assumed a patriotic character. "*Raks Al-Maharim*" is only danced to special music, without vocal accompaniment, in which the principal instruments are *darabukah* (drum) and *mizwid* (bagpipes). (For a complete study of Tunisian musical instruments, see *Arabesque*, May/June '79.)

I arranged to take lessons for two hours daily, feeling that the heat, averaging 110 degrees at midday, would not permit more. Habib and Zohra live in an apartment not far from the Conservatoire with their six-month-old baby boy. The apartment has the typical cool tile floors and shutters that close tightly during the day to keep out the heat, a feature of the native architecture well suited to the climate. I was actually quite lucky because there had been an incredible heatwave during *Ramadan* just before I arrived on August 6. The combination of being unable to drink water during the day, and the high temperatures caused many people to suffer from dehydration. I was just experiencing the normal summer temperatures, and there was only so much their natural system of air conditioning can do.

The lessons I took in Habib and Zohra's living room were very strenuous, with no aimless chatting, partly because of the language barrier and partly because Habib is a strict teacher. Discussion wasn't necessary for corrections since he has a devastating ability to imitate wrong movements. No music was used until the end of the lesson series. Zohra also frequently added her opinions and demonstrated certain steps. I became totally absorbed in executing the movements and didn't care about the absence of music. I felt a great sense of continuity in realizing that this was the way dance has been taught for thousands of years — in a small room, shielded from the sun, with no tape recorders, stereos, air conditioning, mirrors. It was simply the intense relationship of teacher with pupil.

The first thing they asked me to do was to reproduce what I remembered from previous studies at the school two years ago. Every day followed the same pattern: I had to perform the previous day's combinations, and then we would tackle new material. Tradition was never forgone, for in the middle of each session, Zohra brought me mint tea or Coke. Their baby was often present, and my affectionate greeting — "*Antini bousa!*" ("Give me a kiss!") — was always rewarded.



The writer learning the pot dance from her Tunisian dance teacher, Habib.

Tunisian dance is particularly strenuous and features twisting movement as opposed to the dropping of the hip typical in Egyptian dance. "*Raks Al-Maharim*" is a group dance that combines strong hip work with the waving of the two scarves in attractive patterns. We started individual steps with the scarves and simple combinations, many of which I had learned during my previous study at the school. One of the typical steps is the flat-toe-toe step starting on the right foot. The right wrist accents the count of one. Another typical step is executed in a crouched position. On the first beat the right arm waves the scarf up and to the right, and the right leg is simultaneously extended to the right. On the third beat the left arm moves out and to the side and the left leg extends to the left. A little hop reassembles the feet for the change in weight from one side to the other. The scarf dance always ends with a rapid counterclockwise twist of the hip with the left foot pointed.

After concentrating on combinations, we started to review the version performed by the Ballet Nationale for eight women and one soloist and which I saw the troupe rehearse the last time I visited. I learned the complete choreography, taped the drum accompaniment for the dance and obtained a written diagram of the dancers' positions in relation to the group for each step. Each dancer holds a red scarf in the right hand and a white one in the left. They enter in a line with scarves held in front of them, and then come forward in a line waving the red scarf. Moving to the front of the stage, they form pairs, turning towards and away from each other but always moving the scarves in attractive and varied patterns. After a "*do-si-do*" type of pattern in twos, they form a line again and move toward the audience

with the crouching step previously described. Eventually they form groupings of four, circle, join hands and circle with the twist step. After waving the scarves with a backstroke motion, they move back into a line that eventually re-forms into a big circle. Every movement of the scarf reflects a drum beat. At the formation of the big circle, the soloist enters and circles the area. As each dancer is passed in a turn, she falls to her knees and tucks the scarf into her belt. After a short performance, the soloist comes to the front and the others begin the finale. The drumming intensifies and all face the front and begin the fast twisting movements. The dance ends as they turn in place and take the scarves from their belts and raise their arms. The waving of the scarves and the changing floor patterns — from lines to groups of two and four, to circles and back to lines — give the dance a kaleidoscopic effect.

As I was learning the "*Raks Al-Maharim*," we began the "*Raks Al-Juzur*," or pot dance. The typical steps were taught *sans* water jug. I've always been intrigued with the way the water jug emphasized the contrast between the motionless upper body and the strong hip movements of the lower body. I imagined that there was a secret trick that aided in balancing the pot, like a coil of strategically placed fabric. Unfortunately, no such gimmick is involved, only practice.

The pot is the traditional plain water jug with concave base, two handles and rotund shape. The type most often used for dancing is a little smaller than the version used in everyday life and is sometimes decorated. The troupe members have theirs made especially for them in Nabeul. Zohra gave me two of them as well as the traditional white wool dancing belt. The water jugs are crudely made and cost about 95¢. A

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more elaborate one of unglazed natural colored clay is a small miracle; the water inside is kept cool by means of evaporation through the clay, an ancient cooling system.

I saw both men and women dance the "Raks Al-Juzur" in the south on the island of Djerba. The men's version was more acrobatic, with emphasis on balancing rather than dancing. The male performer balanced jug upon jug, supporting up to fifteen jugs at once, about fifteen feet above his head. The women's version was for three dancers and very similar to the one taught by Habib. There is not a great deal of variety in either of the dances I studied, but the movements and the music are so exciting that presentation in simple format is most effective.

It is easier to find music for "Raks Al-Juzur" because it is usually performed to a medley of popular traditional songs as opposed to the music for the scarf dance, which is purely instrumental. The songs are arranged to increase in tempo, with the last song reaching the climax. A typical beginning song is "Sidi Mansour," the most famous Tunisian song. Although it is about a saint, it is so well known that it begins most medleys.

Typical pot steps are the ubiquitous counterclockwise twist step, with the right arm raised and the left outstretched. Also included is the basket step, during which the right arm reaches in and out of a basket formed by the left arm as the left foot kicks out. A typical entrance uses a *ronds de jambe* step which consists of three steps, an *arabesque* on the right leg and then the left rounding to the back. It becomes three steps forward and one back. The right arm extends forward on the *arabesque*, and the left arm follows the left leg back. The continual and graceful movements of the three forward and one back steps are very appealing. Another entrance uses two clockwise twists on the right hip with feet together followed by two steps beginning with the

right foot. Then the step is reversed starting on the left side. It is important to keep the feet together on the twists.

I panicked somewhat when I started to balance the pot, since there was no mirror to help me. Habib gave me one of Zohra's scarves for my head and proceeded to show me how easy it was by placing the pot on his head. I was terrified of breaking it, especially considering their tile floor. I couldn't help wondering why they didn't have plastic "starter" pots for new students. But then here I was with no mirror, no music, excessive temperatures, learning the dance the way people have for generations, and I wanted a plastic pot!

The first thing I decided was that I would refuse to disgrace myself by breaking one. Summoning all my strength of will, I put it toward the back of my head where Habib had indicated. I thought the concave of the base would match that part of my head, but it didn't. It only remained perched there, feeling awkward. Then Habib put some water in it, and the weight made it feel a little more secure. On my first effort, my gaze was no higher than the floor, my body tensed in anticipation, my arms would not budge from the pot and my hands were frozen, waiting to swing into action in case of emergency — far from the ideal form for "Raks Al-Juzur." Zohra demonstrated the lovely posture that should be used in the dance. Of course, the beauty of the dance is that it requires a calm, serene pulled-up upper body on which the pot rests effortlessly while the lower half of the body executes twisting movements.

I was asked to begin walking with the pot on my head. Habib walked behind me saying, "N'as pas peur!" ("Don't be afraid") over and over in a calm voice. He was trying to encourage me to relax and lower my arms. After seeing one of his astute imitations of my hunched walk, I strengthened my resolve. It was like learning to walk all over again. Around and around I went, sweat dripping from my brow because of my intense concentration and the extreme heat. I did not break a pot, and gradually I freed my hands and straightened my back. Little by little came walking, twisting, twisting in a circle and even some of the combinations. Habib and Zohra both coached me and told me I had advanced more in five days than they had in their first three months. I suppose all my sword and cane balancing practice came in handy. As with the "Raks Al-Maharim," I learned the troupe's version which they perform in a tableau for seven men and seven women.

As I neared the end of my stay, I wanted to make sure that the rhythms were correct and thought it a good idea to tape samples of drumming to help me select appropriate music for each dance. When I asked Habib to locate a drummer, he had a difficult time because it was after *Ramadan*, and there were countless weddings. He finally found one who charged five *dinar* (about \$10) an hour.

And so, armed with pots, tapes and new-

found expertise, I said goodbye to my teachers — my mentors, my friends — hoping to surprise and delight them on my next visit to their country with my deepened confidence and technique.

Inshallah; God willing. □