

Tunisian Images

by Habiba (Barbara Siegel)



The writer (right) with Jamila (left) and her daughter, Hayet.

Before I returned to Tunisia last summer, my Tunisian friend, Hayet, suggested that I pack an oriental dance costume since there might be some performing opportunities. She was working on a client survey at Tunis' Hilton Hotel and mentioned about my oriental dance career to one of the managers. He was amenable to further discussing the possibility of me performing there. And this possibility was truly exciting for me! Here could be the fulfillment of every American oriental dancer's fantasy of being accepted as a performer in an Arabic country. For me, it would represent a confirmation that my dance education was blossoming. In addition to general good dance technique and self expression, it seems that an oriental dancer must evoke a sense of oriental consciousness, a feeling of place and people that is immediately

recognized as oriental and conveyed by nuances of interpretation. Striving for this should be the continual goal of every oriental dancer.

Upon my arrival in Tunis, I made an appointment with Mr. Toukebri of the Hilton Hotel. The hotel occupies a beautiful hillside in the Belvedere Public Park. While waiting in the hotel coffee bar for my appointment, I noticed that the guests were primarily Arabs and Iranians, businessmen as well as families. When I finally spoke with the manager, nothing earthshaking took place. We chatted, and I gave him my press packet. He said he needed to discuss my employment further with his manager, and he would call me. I shouldn't have expected anything to materialize from this meeting since there is no circumventing the organizational hierarchy of the Middle East,

be it in government or in business — a fact I term the "Arabic run-around."

Furthermore, I was not reassured by having my fate hang on a phone call since the phone system is a nightmare. There are few private phones, and my message would come to the school where Hayet taught. The chance of her being there at the right time was nil. This would necessitate my calling back on a dreaded public phone at a phone center. Here one must wait in long lines. Once at a phone, one must wait ten to fifteen minutes to get a dial tone and be prepared for the phone to malfunction at any time. The call is for a specified length of time, but there are no warnings that the allotted time is expired; it cannot be extended with more change. Surprisingly, Tunisians are very stoic about this problem.

In the meantime, I turned my attention to starting my private lessons (see *Arabesque*, Jan./Feb. '83) and my favorite social activity — attending weddings. The first wedding I attended was at the sumptuous Hotel Sidi Bou Said. It is a model of efficient service and sophistication because it is operated as a training hotel for the National Tourism School. My hosts asked me to bring my costume in case I would like to dance.

This was a very modern and elegant wedding, not of the traditional variety to which I was accustomed. Also unlike at other weddings, the people were very sedate and reserved throughout the evening. The women — like all Middle Eastern women when they dress for an important social event — were absolutely stunning. Their dresses utilized modern versions of traditional design patterns found in Berber carpets outlined with sequins on diaphanous fabrics. Also, caftans and Indian saris are popular, and glittering diamonds, emeralds and rubies are very much in evidence. The band, from the Hotel Africa Meridien in Tunis, played oriental music. There was also an Egyptian dancer who was good, but lacked variety in her dancing. At one point, she put on her finger cymbals for a long zill solo which was then repeated with the drummer — an exciting interlude in a long show. After the dancer, a cute, sugary little girl in the mode of Shirley Temple sang a very long song. Since she was one of the relatives of the bridal party, everyone loved her.

Then it was my turn to dance. It couldn't have been anything less than a great pleasure to dance here, considering the high quality of music, the pleasant crowd and the setting under the stars. I did a short, improvised show, and had a good time. One of the relatives, who operated a booking agency, offered me an opportunity to perform at weddings the following summer. He said I could make a hefty sum because the busy wedding season, traditionally after Ramadan, is quite lucrative for dancers;

they are able to work at two or three weddings every night. It was a tempting offer, but my plans for the following summer had not yet been finalized. Later, I had more opportunities to dance informally, in both the traditional Tunisian and oriental styles, at impromptu celebrations that were a part of the full round of social activities.

While in Dar Chabaane for the weekend, I witnessed one of the most spectacular wedding ceremonies I had ever seen! There are many different ceremonies attached to one wedding covering a seven-day span. This one was the bride's ceremony where she displayed her hennaed hands and the jewelry presented by the groom's family; it concluded with her departure to her new husband and home. The setting was typically Tunisian, a hidden courtyard down a narrow winding street. Rickety bleachers hung with fabric were constructed for the occasion. It was already quite crowded when I arrived, and most of the women were seated on the progressively rising planks of wood. They found a ladder for us, and we occupied seats in the highest row. The sight before me was amazing — "shelves" filled with women whose only aim was to have a good time amongst themselves.

At this ceremony, it is a tradition that all recently married women wear their wedding dresses too — thirty variations on the same theme. Stunning as they were, these women, assembled like dolls on display, seemed to be the only ones not having fun; they looked hot and miserable. Their dresses were so heavy that they often needed to be supported while walking. It was hard to maneuver themselves, and they wrapped a sheet around their costumes to protect them while climbing. Then the bride entered, resplendent in gold sequins. Surrounded by the other recently married women, she stood on the highest perch at the short end of the courtyard and held up her jeweled and hennaed hands. Here was woman as object, a lavishly decorated sym-

bol of two families' union. Throughout the activities, the women's band, three toothless cronies, played wonderfully stirring music.

The dancing started down in the courtyard, and those who could not come down danced in their seats. It was so packed with women that there was only an aisle of about two feet by five feet. I danced in my "perch," arm in arm with Hayet's cousin; ladies I recognized from two years ago waved hello. Then money was given to the band by each of the guests, and the ceremony ended. The bride exited, almost carried out due to the weight of her dress, to a waiting car decorated with flashing lights and with a bridal doll atop the roof. The sound of *zaghareets* filled the air as she left for her new home.

When I returned to Tunis, my friends took me to a bridal henna party of over 200 women. The bride's family was from the island of Djerba, and their manner of dress was very different from other Tunisians — a white *melya* with red stripes — and their jewelry is often gold instead of silver. They are famous for their wealth accumulated from owning real estate in valuable tourist areas.

The men waited in front of the house while the women partied. There was an immensely lavish dinner served in shifts at a large table. Again, I must emphasize the women's courtesy in making sure I got enough to eat and that I was able to see everything. After dinner, all the relatives took seats in the open courtyard, and the other guests sat on folding chairs. The bride was brought out and seated in the crowd. The main attraction was a famous singer — imported from Djerba at great expense — who offered renditions of regional songs in a strong, resonant voice. Many of the women also sang as the henna was applied. Afterwards, the bride donned a pair of satin mittens to protect the henna paste while it set.

During this social whirlwind, I had almost given up hearing from the Hilton manager when Hayet received a message at school to call Mr. Toukebri. After agonizing efforts, we finally reached him; we were to meet with him that evening. We were joined by several assistant managers and Mr. Hubert, who was in charge of all entertainment. He began the discussion with disconcerting caution. As an Austrian, he absolutely abhorred oriental dance and music, but as a businessman, he realized that his clientele — Arabic or Western tourists — loved it. He didn't choose the dancers, but relied on the opinions of his assistant managers. A dancer's length of employment depended on the audiences' reactions. He said that they had abandoned a regular program of dance because of the lack of really good performers. It seemed that whatever the Hilton produced was closely watched. Since their dancers were always reviewed by the press, they could not afford to be cavalier in their hiring. They would rather forgo dance performances altogether than produce a mediocre show. He also said that he hated to produce something in a rushed fashion. It was their normal procedure to hire a band for a dancer (both are hired on a contract basis), advertise in the newspaper one week in advance of her appearance, and distribute promotional fliers at the hotel and elsewhere in the city; then the dancer could be reviewed. But there was not time for this process since I was leaving the country in four days. He suggested that we do something on a modest scale, and if it worked out, I could return for an engagement.

Thursday was their weekly *mechoui* party with a fancy buffet by the pool. He showed me the area, and we discussed the realities of having a show. Since he was unable to hire a good oriental band on such short notice, I said I could use a tape. We also discussed the length of the show in relation to the types of people in attendance and

Below left: This shot of the women's henna party for the bride (lower right) demonstrates the Tunisian concept of space. Unlike our Western idea that seems to prescribe certain personal boundaries within air, the Tunisians clump themselves together closely and enjoy it immensely. Below right: This bride, whose family is from the island of Djerba, wears satin mittens to protect the henna paste that is used to form traditional design patterns.

Photos by Habiba



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their attention spans. For someone with no knowledge or interest in oriental dancing, he did know about quality, attention to detail and professionalism. Since a newspaper ad could not be printed on such short notice, my photo was exhibited in the lobby to advertise the *mechoui* party.

I arrived for my performance at seven o'clock and was met by two managers on the steps of the hotel. The doorman opened the cab door, grabbed my luggage, and I was whisked inside. The party was solidly booked, and the management felt that featuring a dancer had helped its success.

I was soon shown to a suite where I left my costume. The next order of business was to visit the performing area and test the sound system. When sufficiently satisfied, I went to put on my makeup, and returned to meet my friends at a table reserved for us. The crowd of about 250 seemed to be a real international one. Around nine-thirty, I was again escorted to my suite; room service was alerted to immediately bring anything I requested while changing. After taking the elevator back down and waiting for my introduction — which I knew would make no mention of my nationality — I was spotted by a group of exquisite children. A beautiful ten-year-old with an impeccable Oxford accent introduced herself and her sisters. She was Saudi Arabian and had previously seen an oriental dancer who had bestowed the girl with a kiss. I didn't refuse. She wished me luck, and they went off to their parents' table.

As for the dancing itself, it was an expression of appreciation for the setting, the stars, the weather, and, most of all, the people. It is not hard to dance well when you are treated like a professional. I performed a very traditional oriental show, in format and costume. The crowd was gracious and appreciative, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

Afterwards, people crowded around and asked to take photos with me. Many tried to speak to me, abandoning Arabic for French. They asked, "*De quel pays et vous?*" ("Which country do you come from?") After

a while, I was rescued by one of my friends and was escorted back to my suite. The management met me there and told me that a contract for next summer was a possibility. Then things would be done right with an orchestra and publicity. However, the final decision depended on whether they would produce a regular program of dance or just spotlight dancers for special events. We finally decided that I would send proposals for various formats of shows. This seemed like an excellent idea since I was unable to commit myself to another trip, and I would be in touch with the manager during the year.

The fact that there should be anything remarkable to communicate in this tale is in itself significant. I wrote this for all the dancers who care about the dance, but must work in clubs and restaurants where they change in the ladies' room, where they are unable to rehearse with the musicians, and where they receive grossly unfair payment. Entertainment is casually thrown at the patrons. My experience in Tunisia — being treated as a professional dancer — is unusual.

We often hear stories about the glorious golden era of oriental dance in America during the '60s. It wasn't only that dancers were treated with respect, but also that, in turn, it was the dancers' job to produce the best possible shows. Both management and artists had a common goal.

The management of Tunis' Hilton Hotel showed attention to detail in every facet of their operations, and this included entertainment. I was respected for showing the same concern. The experience was a revelation. □