

# TUNISIAN IMAGES: The Ballet Nationale

by Barbara Siegel Barber

---

*In a short time I realized that dance is an international language.*

---

Middle Eastern dance is a dynamic art form whose beauty is one of the most important aspects of my life. That's why I was surprised on my first Tunisian visit not to find folkloric dancing on every street corner. As a matter of fact, if you are not visiting an Arab country with developed tourist centers, folkloric dancing is difficult to come across. Tunisia has its regional festivals and one national one at Carthage, with folklore performers imported from all over the Arabic world. These festivals mix all types of entertainment with even European and American performers. One must be in the right place at the right time in the right season to catch performances of the folkloric dance troupes. On our first trip I saw only a mediocre oriental dancer in a Tunis restaurant, whose lack of quality wasn't disheartening since oriental dance is not native to Tunisia. The other dancers I saw included a man whose act consisted of picking up bicycles and chairs — along with their occupants — by his teeth. I did, however, manage to see some fine male dancers in the southern city of Djerba.

What I was really after was seeing some of the typical Tunisian women's dances. In photos and written descriptions the women are generally depicted dancing with scarves or dancing with pots balanced on their heads. Although every souvenir stand displayed postcards of women dancing with balanced pots, I couldn't find any of these dancers in Tunis or in the South. Our trip, though, wasn't in the high tourist season, and the one Tunis restaurant famed for its shows of folk music and dance was closed for renovation. My Tunisian friend, Hayet, consoled me by suggesting that the next year when I returned, she would arrange for me to take some classes at the school of the Ballet Nationale, Tunisia's national folkloric dance troupe.

The school of the Ballet Nationale is part of *La Conservatoire*, a traditional performing arts college housed in an imposing French colonial building in Tunis. Young people travel here from all over the country to study folkloric dance and traditional music. The ballet draws its company members from this student body, and it performs at regional folk festivals in Tunisia and all over the world. (In 1974 they toured the U. S.)

When Hayet said that she would "arrange" lessons for me, I didn't fathom the word's mysterious and complicated connotations in the Arab world. Apparently, it is difficult to get into the school, and Hayet garnered a connection from her aunt to get into the good graces of the director. She originally attempted to arrange private lessons for me with one of the teachers, but decided that the fee of \$100 per morning session was excessive. Luckily, she did find another teacher at the school who would enroll me in a beginners' class.

Our trip coincided with the July start of the school term. When we arrived in Tunis, Hayet took us to meet Mr. Hamadi, the director of *La Conservatoire*. After some lengthy discussions in Arabic, a final fee was negotiated for my eight a. m. to twelve p. m. classes. (Though it was possible to study eight hours a day, I chose the morning sessions so I could sightsee in the afternoons.) We all shook hands and

Mr. Hamadi took me to meet my teacher, Habib. Everyone was amused when I pointed out that the teacher's name was so similar to my professional dancing name of Habiba. I was scheduled to return for classes the following Monday.

I was excited but anxious about the limitations of my pitiful French as well as the level of the other students. How could I dance in front of these people whose feeling for ethnic arts is inbred, not acquired? Hayet said she would take me to school on the first day. She advised me to bring my leotard but leave my oriental circle skirt at the hotel, since it is not appropriate for folkloric dance classes.

We arrived at the school promptly at eight a. m. and found Habib sitting outside the main dance studio, which was large enough to accommodate the whole troupe during rehearsals. Habib showed me the women's dressing room and gave me a key to one of the lockers. He explained that it was his wife's locker and inside were a short blue gathered skirt (gymsuit material) and a long sash belt made from a skein of natural wool which tied on the right side to form a pouf at the hip. I put this over my leotard and came out relieved that the first basic problem had been mastered.

I was the only student there and thought that perhaps I was getting private lessons after all. Habib pointed me to the ballet barre, and we began without recorded music or drummer. I then remembered a comment I heard some time ago: dancers in Arabic countries do not move to music until they have mastered the basic movements and rhythms. I was really surprised that warm-ups consisted of ballet exercises beginning with the traditional plies and relevés at the barre. A series of stretches and foot extension exercises at the barre followed. In a short time I realized that dance is an international language. After the barre exercises, we came to center floor and did a series of stretches that I still teach in my dance classes at Temple University. Habib did not hesitate to criticize anything considered in bad form.

I was soon extremely impressed with my teacher. It was obvious that the ballet exercises were not just an overlay, but, in fact, the basis of his power and grace already evidenced in his class demonstrations. Up to this point the class was a



A Tunisian dancer from the island of Jerba in a typical pose.

Ron Barber

typical lesson in ballet that could have been taking place anywhere in the world.

After a while a drummer named Mr. Sharif appeared in a white *djebba* (traditional Tunisian caftan) and little by little in drifted the other students. All in all there were generally four others in the class, ranging in age from about sixteen to eighteen. This tardy straggling of people was to be a pattern repeated for the next three days. (I was to be there a total of four days, four hours a day.)

My shyness dissolved quickly on the first day when I was immediately treated with kindness and courtesy and began to feel totally comfortable. Habib counted in French and Arabic alternately. I will never forget his "*wahed, thayn, thlateh, arba'a*" ("one, two, three, four). He paid me a great deal of attention and offered many corrections. I usually understood his French, but if I didn't, he would come over and push me into the correct position. At one point he swivelled my hips sharply and yelled, "*Non Masri!*" ("Not Egyptian!")

Our day would commence with barre exercises and the perfection of individual steps and then proceed to dance combinations. Mr. Sharif's drumming added a lot of excitement. About every hour, we were granted a sorely needed ten-minute break. Tunisian dance is a very strenuous style. Added to this strain was the heat of the July sun which often brought the temperature to 135°F. by noon! (The studio's fans were only used at break time.) Most of the time, however, I found myself so intensely involved that I remained unconscious of any discomfort.

My friendships with the students, whom I got to know at break time, became quite

special. They were very curious about my personal life, asking how long I'd been married, if I had any children, etc. My French skills did manage to permit the bloom of camaraderie. If the girls had any milk or pastries, they always insisted that I share them. After a time, I felt I could have blended in well as a long-term student. During the breaks, the girls would pull me out on the floor to perfect a step or movement. A mixture of levels of proficiency existed, and the more adept dancers quickly offered their help if someone was experiencing any difficulty.

### **The aim of the school's early training is to first produce a sound general dance background to which the specifics of Tunisian dance are added.**

Everyone has an opinion, and the right to express it figures as a quality of Arabic culture. From the first day, I found that the teacher's concept of class discipline differed from the West's. Although Habib maintained strict order, it was not uncommon for dancers from the company — or anyone else with the fancy — to stop in, watch the proceedings and express his/her opinion. I was surprised when the husband of a company member arrived at class to pull his wife out of line and give her corrections. I then asked Habib's permission for my husband, Ron, and my fifteen-year-old stepson, Rick, to observe class the next day. When they arrived, they were quickly amalgamated into the group and soon

made a habit of dropping in every day. I knew Ron was comfortable with this situation when he started giving me corrections! Rick developed friendships with two of the young students, culminating in the presentation of his Grateful Dead T-Shirt to one of them. She boasted to me that she had been chosen Disco/Reggae Queen of Hammamet, a coastal resort. She was also majoring in traditional music at the school and had sung at regional festivals besides being an excellent dancer.

If this democratic air sounds oddly different from the structure of American dance classes, it's not uncomfortably so. Things may seem more participative, but this does not hamper progress. Everyone works extremely hard; most of the socializing takes place during the breaks. Judging from the excellent quality of the dancers I saw from the company, the school's training is quite sound.

The aim of the school's early training is to first produce a sound general dance background to which the specifics of Tunisian dance are added. From the beginning, it seems, the movements are given with an eye to dancing as part of a group, not solo. Generally, the style is strenuous and very earthy. The arm movements are very strong — simple rather than fussy — with the elbow leading a majority of the time. The predominant hip movement is a twist rather than a drop; a clockwise twist with the right hip and foot forward. This twist is accentuated in one of the most basic and oft-used steps — a sharp clockwise twist of the hip on the beat produced by the shifting of weight from the ball of the right foot to the flat left foot. The weight on the right foot shifts to the left



Above left: Members of the Ballet Nationale in a rehearsal of the scarf dance. Above right: The men's dance in imitation of the "Fantasia." Habib, the writer's dance teacher, is dancing on right.

## TUNISIAN IMAGES

at which point the right foot is extended and pointed. The movement is large and the required belt accentuates it. The arms remain in a plain crucifix position, thus framing the movement. The twist was also performed with the weight distributed equally on both feet and combined with a walk pattern — i.e., two twists of the hip on counts one and two and a plain walk stepping right, then left, on counts three and four.

A very definite African influence seems to be present in the use of elbows to lead with a type of swimmer's arm movements. One step used the left arm to form an imaginary basket in front of the body and the right arm would reach in and, as if distributing flowers to the audience, reappear with a flick of the wrist. One step, used in the famous scarf dance, started with a flat toe on the right followed by a three-count prance repeated over and over. The arms remain outstretched in front of the body, and the wrists — in downward movements — keep the beat. This is especially effective if the dancer is holding two long scarves.

We also spent a great deal of time on exciting dance finales. Most Tunisian dance music climaxes with increased speed and rhythms. The spectacular beats of the virtuosic drumming is met by the accent of the dancer's hip movements. In class we practiced the twist step ever faster in a line, and then did a variety of endings that appeared very African in style. One started in a crouched-over position and consisted of a jump landing in plie with the right foot pointed to the side, and then repeating this on the left side. A strong swimming backstroke movement was used to come to an upright position. In a variation of this, we came forward with the same twist step, but used the left hand on the left hip while the right hand gave a circular movement for accentuation. We then jumped, landed in plie and the right hand slapped the thigh and was immediately drawn straight up with a snap of the head as well. A third ending used the twist step turning in place to the four sides of the room. All of these were real killers in the heat. Their mastery also took a great deal of practice, as it required precision to orchestrate the elements to occur simultaneously.

I was invited to a rehearsal of the company, but, unfortunately, there were no local performances scheduled during our stay. I saw about six dances by this troupe of ten men and ten women. Habib, also a prominent member of the company, explained the dances' backgrounds and supplied highlighting information when he wasn't in a number. I didn't need anyone to point out how well-trained these dancers were. The women had an earthiness and energy that was riveting; the men, on the



Female members of the Ballet Nationale in a performance of the "Gazelle Dance."

other hand, seemed to possess a purer classical form and were slim and lithe. Their leaps were truly amazing! The rehearsal also included a full orchestra. I will never forget the exotic image of the mizmar player tipped back in his chair with *djebba*, dark glasses and a small bouquet of jasmine behind his ear.

Every dance, but one with a coquettish theme, was performed either by all men or all women. One of the most spectacular was a men's dance imitating with spectacular male bravura the "Fantasia," an exhibition of trick horseback riding and shooting famous in North Africa. During these games, two men on separate horses link arms and charge down a path while managing to stay together and perform balancing feats. In the dance the men came down an aisle — formed by other dancers — in two's, arms linked together. They then executed various leaping and galloping movements as if on horseback. Another favorite was a stick dance, similar to the Egyptian *tahtib* (see *Arabesque*, May/June '81) but with shorter sticks. The men paired off in couples, clashing their sticks together in perfect rhythm while also executing some difficult steps. Habib called this the *danse bergere* (shepherd's dance) since it began in tableau fashion with the dancers lazing about like shepherds.

One of the women's dances was, of course, the famous scarf dance. Each dancer had a white scarf and a red scarf, one for each hand, which represented the national colors of Tunisia. Hands are linked and upraised as they come in to form a circle. One of the steps used in class and previously described (flat, toe, toe, toe beginning on the right foot) is performed in this dance. At the same time,

---

**Everyone has an opinion, and the right to express it figures as a quality of Arabic culture.**

---

the arms outstretch directly in front of the body and the scarves wave in time to the music. In this dance the effect of the rippling scarves is impressive. At various times during the dance women enter the circle as soloists with dazzling displays of hipwork.

*La Jeunesse* ("Youth") was a dance performed to the *Malouf* style of music, a classical form imported to Tunisia by the Arabs expelled from Spain. The strongest influences on the music and dance come from the Arabic, Berber and African. The African influence, as does the Berber, comes from the south. This region marks the beginning of the Sahara Desert where the traditional musicians are descendants of the black slaves. The Berbers, who still live in the south, are the aboriginal inhabitants of North Africa.

It was difficult to say goodbye to the school and these fine people. I gave each of my classmates one of my publicity pictures and signed them. I promised to send many things: pictures, these articles I would eventually write and, oddly enough, a pair of tap dancing shoes — a rarity in Tunis — for my friend Samira.