



Short Takes

TUNISIAN IMAGES: In Search of Dance

by Barbara Siegel Barber

In our last issue, the writer bid farewell to her classmates at the Ballet Nationale in Tunis. Her Tunisian sojourn was not complete however; she continued her journey to find the native dances of these people.

Djerba, an island in the south off the East Coast, is a true desert island, thought to be the Land of the Lotus Eaters of "The Odyssey." It has, in fact, an amazing combination of influences — Arabic, Berber, oriental, Jewish and African. Most excursions leave Djerba to skirt the Berber villages of the Sahara, such as Matmata, and the oasis of Gabes. Travel is by Land Rover or bus, and even a one-day trip is grueling, but rewarding. The luxurious hotels on Djerba make it a very popular resort for Europeans. I was hoping that since it was the height of the tourist season, there would be more entertainment than the previous year when we were able to watch only some male performers.

On our first trip we ventured to a *mechoui* party, an outdoor barbecue at which tourists carouse and generally act silly. Unfortunately, these bacchanalian settings are some of the only remaining places to view native dancing. During our party there was an oriental dancer, much feasting and a photographer who insisted on taking pictures of people at every table. Finally, the *Gougoues de Zarzis* — a group of elderly black men whose family background includes a long line of entertainers — began their act. They were some of the best dancers I've seen, exuding a delightful stage presence and fine sense of entertaining technique. They performed the traditional stick dance of the south, and even the racing sneakers worn by some couldn't mar their performance. Using short sticks, each alternately struck the stick of the dancer behind him with a perfectly graceful sense of timing. They executed complicated steps while never missing a beat of music. None of these men was under the age of fifty, but even the simple act of walking contained the essence of pure dance. One of them also performed a pot dance — a real balancing feat in which he gradually added pots until at least twenty-five were atop his head while he executed some floor work!

When we checked into our hotel, the fabulously luxurious Dar Djerba, I immediately scoured the bulletin board of the central desk for any upcoming performances. All I noticed in the way of folkloric events was the same *mechoui* party

with the same dancers. Disappointed, I thought I would once again be destined to leave Tunisia without seeing one female "pot" dancer (dancing while balancing a pot atop her head). I contented myself with showing my step-son, Rick, the hotel complex and the famous wild cats of Djerba, who ran around virtually in herds. On our walk we found ourselves in an arcade housing the office for German tours where they displayed a large picture of a female dancer with a pot on her head. The caption underneath read, *Berber Abend* ("Berber Evening"). I grabbed my husband Ron and step-son Rick and breathlessly asked the man at the reception desk if there were any way we could attend. The man, puzzled at my urgency, said we could go, but that otherwise the group was all German. We purchased tickets and were told to be at the bus plaza the next evening at 7:00.

That night the bus stopped at several hotels, and then drove to a beautiful old building on the shore. Inside, the party room had a taverna atmosphere with long tables placed throughout. There was a tour director at the microphone telling jokes in German. A delicious couscous dinner followed, during which the dance troupe performed.

I marched the male musicians playing stirring *mizmar* and drum music, followed by dancers who performed a stick dance. Finally, the three women of the troupe entered; they performed three dances with different costumes for each. The first was a spirited dance performed in the traditional Tunisian wrap-dress in a bright plaid color, fastened with large silver pins that were connected with silver flat link chains. Lace blouses with big full sleeves were worn underneath. Chiffon head veils were tucked back above their ears with wide crowns with sequins and paillettes holding the veils in place.

The second dance was the scarf dance; the three dancers faced each other in a circle and moved the scarves in time to the music. As the music accelerated, their hip movements were coordinated with the waving of the scarves. The costumes were very different from the first ones and looked similar to the modern Tunisian wedding dress with tight bodice and full skirt. However, one dancer's costume revealed a bare midriff. The headpiece resembled a spangled crown over a transparent head veil. The crowns were decorated with ornamental pieces in front, reminiscent of Oulid Nail headdresses.

After this, one of the dancers came out in oriental costume, and someone started a record (one of the "Danses de Nadia Gamal") on a rickety phonograph. When she danced, it was obvious that this style of dance was unnatural to her. Apparently the dancer and/or owner felt that the tourists expected an oriental dance as part of their entertainment in the Middle East. Finally the three dancers entered together again in wrap-dresses, which formed a sort of bustle in the back and worked to accentuate the dancers' sharp hip movements. On their headdresses were coiled pieces of fabric and on top of these, ceramic pots or jugs were balanced. They proceeded to execute the twisting movements climaxing in a fast crescendo, as their hip movements created a constant blur. During all this movement, the pots, the dancers' heads, shoulders and upper torsos were riding elegantly motionless. Each dancer was given a solo spot which included some floorwork, and then the performance was over.

Seeing the dancers and their colorful costumes reinforced some ideas I had already formed at Tunis' Ballet Nationale (see *Arabesque*, Nov./Dec. '81). I began to develop a sharper picture of what was characteristic of Tunisian dance. I also became aware of what Tunisian dance had in common with other folk dance styles — a celebration of the people's daily lives joyously expressed through displays of movement proficiency with common articles of life like the water jug and the shepherd's stick.