SIX

Belly Dance: Embodied Orientalism

It has been estimated that at one point in the 1970s over a million women dedicated themselves to learning belly dancing in the United States, a trend that reached its peak during the second wave of feminism. “By 1979, ABC television's news program 20/20 reported that more than one million women in the United States were taking belly dance classes” (Sellers-Young 1992, 143). Thus, over the period this study focuses on (1950s to the present), hundreds of thousands of individuals took up belly dancing as an activity. Like Balkan dancing, belly dancing reached its peak numbers in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s and has slowly faded from those peak figures. Nevertheless, there still remain very large numbers of women who still participate in this dance genre.

Such numbers of individuals certainly place belly dance as one of the most popular genres of exotic dance forms through which Americans seek alternate identities that I analyze in this volume. Unlike most of the other genres of exotic dance, the search for new, exotic identities is heightened by the way in which women select Middle Eastern names, or at least romantic names that sound as if they might be Middle Eastern, in order to heighten their exotic new identity. Such an impulse was not characteristic of the vast majority of those who participated in Balkan dancing or classical Asian dance forms. Belly dance journals appealed to, and continue to appeal to, this exotic and orientalist gesture:

Terms such as “allure,” “mystique,” and “fantasy” abound in advertisements and articles in belly dance publications. Most of the American and European practitioners of Oriental dance take on romantic Arab-esque names: Zoheret, Chandra, Samisha, Chantel, and Mahala are a few appearing in the advertisements in Arabeque (May–June 1986, 31–33), where you are invited to purchase “The Cleopatra Headress for the Egyptian Goddess in You” [Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, 27].

There were several sociological factors that surfaced in American life in the late 1960s and early 1970s that contributed to the popularity of belly dance, or oriental dance and rags sharqi (Arabic for oriental or eastern dance), as many practitioners prefer to call it in order to give the genre more respectability and diminish its overt sexual references and emphasize what they perceive as its artistic and aesthetic aspects.

First, the sexual revolution made it “all right,” even desirable, for women to explore the sensual aspects of their bodies and to proudly display them in public venues. Many writers like Daniella Gioseffi (Earth Dancing: Mother Nature's Oldest Dance, 1980) lectured and wrote widely of the appeal of belly dance for women who wanted to “get in touch” with the sexual side of their personality; it was “natural” for women to enhance their sexuality and get in touch with their “female power” through the vehicle of belly dancing. In short, belly dance was viewed as empowering for women, and in a manner that they viewed as “feminine” (see Osweiler 2001; Sellers-Young 1992).

This attitude, an aspect of the sexual revolution, stood in stark contrast to the beginning of the twentieth century. In the early part of the twentieth century, film studies scholar Gaylyn Studlar noted:

Dance as a “classic” art stood as an ideal symbolic merger between traditional middle-class female gentility and contemporary ideals of feminine freedom from bodily and imaginative restraints. In similar fashion as dance, fan magazines, like other “women’s” magazines, attempted to chart a course between affirming the need to embrace the modern while simultaneously upholding traditional sexual and familial values. It followed that fan magazine’s strategies for depicting actresses rarely made use of costumes and sexually suggestive poses evoking the harem dance girl and her presumed function for the male gaze [1997, 113].

By the latter part of the twentieth century, feminism challenged the male gaze by the use of those very same images. One aspect of belly dance that appealed to many women was the perception that its performance gave them control over the male gaze, rather than the feeling that they were subjected to it, a perception that many belly dance enthusiasts have expressed. For example, this perception of empowerment constituted the manner in which the American Tribal Dance company Fat Chance, as documented by Barbara Sellers-Young, became an outgrowth of cabaret dancing. In her description and analysis of the Fat Chance belly dance group, Sellers-Young notes: “As one might assume, the name of the company, Fat Chance, is Carolena’s [Neroccio] challenge to the male voyeur” (2005, 286).

Second, other writers like Iris Stewart (Sacred Dance, Sacred Woman: Awakening Spirituality Through Dance and Ritual, 2000), linked belly dance to the New Age movement that was a feature of the counterculture of the period through the valorization of belly dance as an ancient and timeless vehicle, a
form of spirituality for women to worship the earth goddesses through dance and ritual. In this manner, the performance of belly dance became almost a sacred and spiritual duty for many feminist women to attune themselves to the divine feminine.

Third, the sudden proliferation of classes in colleges, community centers, churches, YWCA centers, and dance studios advertised belly dance as both healthful and easy to learn, not only in large urban centers but also in small towns and cities throughout America. In many large American cities, the proliferation of ethnic Arab, Armenian, Greek, and Iranian restaurants in the 1960s and 1970s provided venues for experiencing belly dancing, attracting many new dancers, and providing employment for others. Teachers and writers of belly dance also produced a number of popular videos and how-to books that aided in popularizing this dance activity. Today, also contributing to its continuing popularity, YouTube is awash in belly dance performances of all stripes, professional and amateur.

Unlike the Balkans, which constituted an empty space upon which Americans could inscribe new imaginary fantasy identities and visions for themselves, the Middle East formed a geographic, historical, and fantasy space that was over-determined and filled to brimming with orientalist images of harem girls, oversexed sheiks à la Rudolf Valentino, mosques and minarets provided by paintings, novels, Broadway musicals, Hollywood films, advertisements and other genres of popular culture that date back more than a century. These were augmented in the 1950s by new popular domesticated images of Kismet and I Dream of Jeannie, which made the harem girl and her quintessential belly dance safe for the hordes of middle class white women escaping the humdrum life of suburbia who largely filled belly dance classes while seeking exciting exotic experiences and a fun method of physical fitness.

Unlike Balkan dancers, who tend to cluster locally in cities like Boston, Washington, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, belly dancers constituted a close-knit national community through an intensive network of conventions, retreats, and classes, idolized instructors, international and national journals like Habibi and Arabesque, as well as several regional newsletters, and more recently, the Internet, which currently hosts over 300 sites. Large conventions and fairs like Southern California's Cairo Carnivale and the Ahalan wa Sahlan Dance Festival held annually in Cairo, featuring classes, workshops, lavish concerts and a veritable bazaar of vendors of baubles, bangles, and beads, dvds of Arab music, costumes, and other items, convene regularly and attracting both regional and national visitors. Superior dancers are awarded prizes during these events and receive accolades in the oriental dance journals, which report extensively on these events.
American Belly Dance: The New Dance Genre

In this chapter I am going to propose a radical, or at least alternative, argument that the style of belly dancing which attracted millions of Americans, overwhelmingly female, in the 1970s is not an ancient, or even a very old choreographic genre, but rather a modern choreographic development. This idea did not originate with me. Paul Monty (1986) suggested such a link because, in his view, Serena, one of the dancers he profiles in his dissertation, studied with Ruth St. Denis and utilized some of St. Denis’ impressionistic choreographic strategies in her concert work and in teaching classes.

However, I am going to suggest that, while Monty’s link may have some relevance, even more important reasons exist for the widespread acceptance of “modern” belly dancing by hundreds of thousands of Western women in the 1970s, and the rejection of authentic belly dancing at the turn of the century. Those reasons are: (1) The nineteenth-century version of the dance seen in the West had no aesthetic resonance with Western audiences; they preferred instead orientalist adaptations and interpretations by Western dancers like Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allan, and Loïe Fuller; (2) The virulent racism that existed in America categorized Arabs as an unacceptable class of non-whites, and thus their dance was regarded with suspicion as lascivious and, more importantly, as a cultural production of the lower “Other.” (3) Women dancing in public in the early part of the twentieth century was equated with prostitution in the early period, as I detailed in the chapter on the early pioneers of oriental dance. Middle class and elite women rarely appeared on public stages or other performing venues at that time. By the 1950s and later that had changed, mostly through appearances by the early pioneer dancers like Ruth St. Denis and popular culture figures like Irene Castle and Adele Astaire, Fred Astaire’s sister and early dance partner, which created a respectable aura for the professional dancer.

I argue that modern belly dance as we know it today constitutes a parallel tradition with dance practices of the nineteenth century, and perhaps earlier, and constitutes a new dance genre. By parallel tradition, I refer to a practice that references past practices but, in fact, constitutes an almost new genre of dance which retains only a small portion of elements from past dance performances (see Shay 2002, 17–21; 2005, 9–14). A recent example of this phenomenon is the way in which the Broadway blockbuster Riverdance references Irish jigging and step dancing from the past but, in fact, constitutes an almost entirely new dance genre.

Dance scholar Joan L. Erdman was one of the first to note: “‘Oriental dance’ was an occidental invention” (1996, 288). Erdman characterizes the Western oriental dance:

By the 1920s, oriental dance conjured up expectations of exotic movements, glittering costumes, flowing lines, sublime dedication, and minor mode or strangely tuned music. Certain features were perceived as essential: fluid boneless arm and shoulder motion, rhapsodic spirituality, rare and wondrously vibrant jewelry, and hand movements intended to signal more than graceful posturing. Dancing feet were often bare, women’s midriffs were usually uncovered, and men danced bare chested in draped or boused pantaloons [1996, 288].

Erdman’s description certainly captures many of the main features of contemporary belly dancing as seen in both Egypt and the West. However, it is of great interest that her article addresses the origin of the modern movement of reinventing classical dance traditions in India. But those early westernized orientalist visions of “authentic” Indian dance were soon abandoned in favor of seeking and developing native dance traditions that characterized the development of classical dance in India. Erdman notes that “In India, however, oriental dance meant dance from Europe.... These oriental dances were never mistaken by Indians for their own dance forms; rather they were appreciated as attempts by artistes to stage dance with Indian themes and costumes” [1996, 289].

Thus, soon after the exposure to oriental dance à la Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allan, and Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes that occurred in the period 1900–1925, Indians imbued with a search for native-based dance traditions quickly rejected these quaint western-inspired artistic productions: “In India by 1934 Uday Shankar and his Company of Hindu Dancers and Musicians were perceived as presenting oriental dance from Europe, not quite Indian, and certainly not authentic” (Erdman 1996, 295).

I suggest that Erdman’s astute observations actually better and more accurately characterize current belly dance practices, which developed in Egypt around the same period as the development of contemporary bharata natyam. As I mentioned earlier, the orientalist productions of the early pioneer oriental dancers, in the manner of orientalism detailed by Said, consisted of movements and elements from Egypt, Persia, India, Java, Bali, and the Far East, indiscriminately combined in a kind of choreographic pastiche. As Amy Koritz noted of Maud Allan’s performances in 1908, “Her Salome was not Egyptian, Algerian, or Syrian, but ‘Eastern’ in a vague homogenizing sense of the word” (1997, 144). From these elements, which Erdman astutely claims came from Western theater dance, as performed by Ruth St. Denis, Maud Allan, and Loïe Fuller, as well as movements and choreographic strategies from Hollywood films and classical ballet, belly dancers in Egypt adapted many of the elements of movement and costume as their very own for purposes of performing in the new contexts of formal, Western proscenium stages, westernized night clubs, and the burgeoning Egyptian cinema.
As cinema historian Matthew Bernstein notes, “Modern dance — as evidenced in both the Ballet Russes and the performances of the Denishawn troupe — provided Hollywood with a powerful model for visualizing Orientalism (and gave the movies connotations of high-art respectability)” (1997, 6). He adds: “Most decisively of all for the cinema, Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, with its staging of Cléopatre, Thamar, and Schehérazade, which toured in the United States in the teens, contributed decisively to the mise-en-scène of Orientalist cinema” (ibid., 4).

I would argue that these were not performances of “modern” dance but impressionistic imaginings of the Orient; a genre that might be better termed as interpretive dance. These choreographies were not only decisive for the way in which the American film industry depicted oriental dancing, since Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn and the Denishawn company appeared in several of these orientalist productions, but also for the way in which oriental dancers represented themselves in both Egypt beginning in the 1920s and later in America.

Dancers like Badi’a Masabni, Tahia Carioca, and Samia Gamal, among many others, eagerly embraced these westernized creations of a romantic Orient and created what for all intents and purposes became a new genre of dance, based on the torso articulations for which the dance was originally named and other native elements of solo improvised dance that came naturally to these Egyptian artists, but also heavily embellished by Western staging and choreographic techniques, especially the use of new clothing, lighting, and the use of space introduced into the new Egyptian form through Hollywood films and Western theater and ballet performances.

The New Egyptian Belly Dance

I will make a two pronged argument for the modern origins of this dance genre. First, I will address the part that developed through events in Egypt that occurred beginning in the decade after World I and continued until the 1960s. This was no longer the Egypt of the 19th century but an Egypt that had been exposed to Hollywood. For far too long, those interested in the belly dance phenomenon have encountered a barrage of romanticized writings that attempt to equate contemporary belly dance with ancient, prehistoric choreographic practices purported to form a part of ancient worship rituals involving goddesses or childbirth rites undertaken by female social solidarity and continuing in an unbroken historical line to our own times. These orientalist writings have only obscured how very modern and recent contemporary belly dance choreographic practice as found in the United States, and indeed in Egypt, is.6

What I wish to show in this chapter is that the presence of nineteenth-century dancers at world exhibitions, and their dance practices, had almost nothing to do with the contemporary belly dance practiced throughout the United States or currently in Egypt, and that historical developments in Egypt just before and after World War I contributed to the creation of what is essentially a new dance genre.

The second prong of my argument will address the issue of receptivity of Americans of the turn of the nineteenth century to this dance genre. In many ways, this is the more important of the two aspects, because it has been far less written about and analyzed and is crucial to the way in which American women were repelled by the dance as it was performed in 1893 and enchanted by the new belly dance in the 1970s.

In this chapter I will pursue some of the social and aesthetic reasons that the authentic Egyptian form as seen by millions of visitors to the world exhibitions, such as the Columbia Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, did not appeal to those women in that period, for therein lay the reasons why only the modern, twentieth-century version of belly dancing seen in Egyptian films and cabaret performances became popular.

Belly Dance in Egypt

Serious scholars have looked for historical connections with past practices in order to give contemporary belly dancing a historical context. Serious scholars have also, of course, been far more scrupulous and careful in assessing origins and attributing ancient roots than popular writers, but we, too, have looked back to the nineteenth century, during which considerable attention was paid to this activity. Belly dancing was described in careful, sometimes breathless, detail by foreign visitors to Egypt, visitors like Gustave Flaubert and George William Curtis (See Karayanni 2004, 39–44; Monty 1986 Chapter IV) and Edward W. Lane’s famous accounts in the 1830s (1966). In consequence, much of the important development in the cultural production of dance in the first half of the twentieth century has been scanted as modern or unimportant.

I suggest that this lack of attention to the developments of belly dancing in Egypt in the period 1920–1940 has resulted in the widespread and erroneous concept of a dance tradition with an unbroken line with the past. Modern American belly dancers not infrequently indulge in the fantasy that they are embodying Cleopatra, Salome, or some other historical female fatale or participating in some prehistoric ritual to an unnamed mother goddess (see for example Habibi Fall/Winter 2006/2007, volume 21, number 2, 56).
Some of the confusion and attraction of past practices comes from the poorly understood Arabic nomenclature referring to public entertainers. In the nineteenth century, certain female performers were referred to as 'awalim (singular 'alimah), which has been translated all too frequently as “learned” or “scholarly” women. Even Karin van Nieuwkerk, a very fine dance scholar, characterized the 'awalim as “learned women or female scholars” (1996, 26). Most readers of this term, unfamiliar with Middle Eastern societies, envision a highly educated woman who is steeped in literature, philosophy, and other intellectual pursuits which they discussed with learned men in colloquia. In fact, ethnomusicologist Jihad Racy agrees that such a translation is unfortunate, and that a better rendition would be “master of her trade, referring to their ability to perform a large repertoire of music” (personal interview, March 19, 2004). How much they composed their own music and poetry, and how much they memorized from the contemporary and classical repertoire, is unknown. These performers were not educated in the way familiar in the West. The majority of them came from the lowest echelons of society; elite women, the only upper class and privileged women who might have been schooled in private with their brothers, would never have performed publicly.

The ‘awalim were primarily singers, although they frequently danced as well. The most esteemed of them performed only in the women’s quarters, but their performances were audible from the main courtyard so that male listeners could enjoy the performances, too. Occasionally they performed for male audiences, which were seated behind a screen. In this way, they did not appear before male audience members and preserved their reputations. Clearly, in this segregated Islamic context, they did not sit and discuss philosophy and literature with their male audience members in the manner of the hetaera in Ancient Greek symposia. Although all public performers in the Middle East held low social status to some degree, until the twentieth century the ‘awalim escaped the general opprobrium reserved for public entertainers precisely because they did not contravene Islamic custom and law by performing before males who did not stand in proper kinship to them. The reason they became known as “learned” (I adopt the quotation marks from ethnomusicologist Virginia Danielson 1991, 304) is because the finest of these performers memorized copious amounts of poetry, an esteemed practice in the Arab world:

Women were associated with a genre of song called the taqyqa, a strophic piece in colloquial Arabic dealing with coquetry or other amorous themes. By contrast, the classical qasidah was considered to be a male genre. In fact, a number of female singers were credited, however grudgingly, with having mastered the repertory of sophisticated song ordinarily associated with their male counterparts [Danielson 1991, 304].

Thus, even the finest of them never achieved the esteem of the finest male vocalists. Nevertheless, some of the ‘awalim, like their counterparts, the female mostreb (public performers of Iran), attained fame, fortune, and sometimes prosperous marriages through their connections (see Fatemi 2005, 51–55). In Egypt:

The most accomplished singers were in great demand, held in high esteem, and able to profit handsomely from the money given them by audience members. The gifted few attracted the patronage of elite families, including the royal family, who supported a number of ‘awalim, actually taking the women into the household [Danielson 1991, 294].

Dancers, who were more frequently termed as ghawazi (singular ghaziah), did, however, perform unveiled in front of males and consequently held a much
lower social status that was equated with prostitution. Both dancers and singers were affected by the dramatic changes that were occurring in the entertainment world of Cairo at the turn of the century. New public venues such as music halls and Western-style theaters opened. The Egyptian cinema, which opened in the early part of the twentieth century, provided conceptual space for choreographic innovation and invention. Exposure to Hollywood films inspired dancers to create new kinds of choreographies and new costumes.

Whereas nineteenth-century performers learned their trade largely through imitation, performing like their mentors beginning especially in the 1920s with the opening of Badi’a Masabni’s music hall in 1926, performers began searching for the new and novel. “By the beginning of World War I, few old-style ‘awalim remained. Some of the older singers made the transition from one milieu to the other, and newcomers launched themselves immediately into the commercial enterprise” (Danielson 1991, 245).

“Badi’a Masabni’s music hall was a model of its genre. Established in 1926 with cash accumulated from her career as an actress and dancer and with gifts from her male admirers, Salat Badi’a, as it was called, featured a variety program centered on a female singer. Badi’a hired performers, trained her own dancers, and would argue, it was said, with anyone over a single piaster” (Danielson 1997, 48). Monty, following Barbara Sellers-Young, notes that Badi’a Masabni “formed a school, eventually graduating such students as Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal, popular Egyptian dancers in the 1940s and 1950s” (1986, 168). Masabni is also credited by Monty with the creation of the modern costume (ibid).

I suggest that in the 1920s and beyond, dance artists like Badi’a Masabni, Tahia Carioca, and Samia Gamal made a conceptual break with past practices and created the new genre that we today call belly dance, and even more specifically cabaret belly dance, which we associate with its iconic bikini-like costume that was also adopted at this time. This break with past dance and aesthetic practices of cultural production occurred not only in Egypt but also in other areas of the Middle East and Central Asia such as Iran, Turkey, and Uzbekistan as documented by scholars such as Doi (2002), Fatemi (2005), and Shay (2008). Dance scholar Karin van Nieuwkerk notes that “In the first decades of the twentieth century, nightclubs and variety shows sprang up to meet the demands of the colonial rulers and Western tourists. The ‘Oriental’ shows, featuring a danse du ventre, belly dance, contained many show elements imported from the West” (1995, 41).

More importantly, the patronage of the native Egyptian upper classes shifted with changing social practices. Weddings and other social gatherings among the newly westernized elite became mixed events. They wanted entertainment that was “modern” and chic. This required a corresponding change for the professional performers; the ‘awalim no longer performed only for

women in segregated spaces and their songs and dances began to appear dated to the elite. The presence of the "new" belly dancers like Táhia Carioca and Samia Gamal rendered the performances of the traditional 'awalim quaint for the fickle public. The difference between ghawazi and 'awalim became blurred in this period and in the new performing contexts in which they found themselves they were equally held in scorn, except for the top rank of performers:

The heyday of the common 'awalim was at the beginning of this century. They performed on festive occasions, particularly for other women, as they had done in the nineteenth century. In contrast to that period, however, at the turn of the twentieth century they increasingly sang and danced for the lower and middle classes. The Westernized elite mostly invited well-known nightclub entertainers to perform at their weddings [Nieuwkerk 1998, 24].

The mythology of an unbroken line of dance practices dating from pharaonic times, and earlier, remains so strong that even serious scholars have a difficult time breaking its spellbinding hold. A study of nineteenth century dance practices and the contemporary dance practices of the ghawazi dancers of Egypt filmed in the 1970s (Arab records n.d.) and Saleh's filming of a traditional belly dancer in the 1950s demonstrate the movement practices of that period. I suggest that these earlier practices, spatially very restricted, constitute an almost separate genre of dance from contemporary practices. It is difficult for today's dancer and even dance scholars to imagine how different today's cabaret dance form is from the earlier performances. Like their Iranian counterparts, Egyptian public performers included singing, dancing, acting, and acrobatic feats in their repertoire. They were not only dancers, but also singers and acrobats; most of them had specialty virtuosic feats that they performed in order to secure audiences in a highly competitive market.

Further, Egyptian dance historian Magda Saleh details in her study of Egyptian dance how Nazla El Adl, an old style dancer who "is presumed one of the last of her kind," performs in the old style (1979, 119). El Adl had as her specialty the dance with the shemedan (chandelier) in which she actually balanced a fifty pound chandelier on her head, unlike the modern dancers who, according to Saleh, "replaced the heavy chandelier by a sketchy, almost weightless plastic version" (1979, 119). El Adl performs the splits and other virtuosic feats while balancing the chandelier. Saleh documents other highly skilled and athletic specialties of the former public entertainers: balancing hot tea cups, wine glasses, water jugs, and other objects such as a live fowl as they danced (119–123).

The modern belly dancers, beginning with performers like Samia Gamal and Táhia Carioca, were simply dancers, which constitutes a conceptual break with the past in which performers generally sang and performed acrobatic feats, and sometimes exhibited other talents. Dancers like Carioca and Gamal created a new genre to respond to new performing conditions, the growth of an elite and prosperous middle class, and changing aesthetic values and tastes created by the rapid spread of cinema and both Hollywood and Egyptian films impelled them to innovation in their performances. Egyptian cinema historian Viola Shafik underscores the role of music and modern belly dance in the Egyptian film and the ways in which Western elements were deployed in the new modern belly dance:

Most musical films contain at least one dance, most often a belly dance. As early as 1935/36, a film introduced the dancer Badi'a Masbni, who owned a well-known variety theater where several prominent belly dancers were trained. Some of the dancers who subsequently appeared, such as Samya Gamal and Táhia Carioca, borrowed their music from the cabaret or nightclub, and folklore. Samya Gamal developed a sort of expressive dance as an individual characteristic in her performances... Na'ima Alif, on the other hand, presented a colorful mixture of belly dancing, flamenco, and tap dancing... The historical films tried to reconstruct the dance of the djawari (singing girls) of former times, combining elements from the ballet and the oriental dance as in Dananir (1940/41) and Sallama (1945) [1998, 103–104].

The older class of dancers did not disappear at all once, but, as Nieuwkerk documents, they were relegated to performing for the lower classes, and "the older generation claims that presently the women's success is mainly based on fraternizing with customers and wearing scanty costumes, not on their artistry" (1998, 25).

I suggest that the only connection and link between the nineteenth-century dance style and the post-World War I cabaret style consists of the rolling articulations of the abdomen and gyrating movements of the hips. In 1836, Edward Lane remarked, "The Ghawazee perform, unveiled in the public streets, even to amuse the rabble. Their dancing has little of elegance; its chief peculiarity being a very rapid vibrating motion of the hips from side to side" (Lane 1966, 384). It is for this reason that I argue that this element, the "rapid vibrating motion of the hips," like Irish step dancing in relation to Riverdance, constitutes a parallel tradition, because this movement described by Lane is one of the few elements remaining from the nineteenth century version of the dance. Today's cabaret belly dance constitutes a much richer, more sophisticated (from a Western point of view) movement vocabulary and choreography in its professional performances.

**Belly Dance In the United States**

While the first performances of the ghawazi dancers on the Chicago Midway
and other venues in North America and Europe provided Victorian age view-
er with a delightful frisson for viewing the forbidden erotic dance, in fact,
other than the sexual thrill their performances seemed to provide for a por-
tion of the male audiences, their dances were generally received rather coldly
overall. Nieuwkerk notes: “Little Egypt, a Syrian dancer, was the sensation
of the Midway and attracted more visitors than the seventy-ton telescope. The
audience received the dancers in an atmosphere of expectancy, created by
the descriptions and images of travelers and painters. Yet their appearance was
disappointing and their danse du ventre was not appreciated by all on account of
the ‘boldness of its pelvic movements’” (1995, 42). Not all of the contem-
porary observations were as specific in their descriptions of specific movements
that caused the sense of revulsion by many observers. (See Monty 1986, 14–90
for a wide sampling of the contemporary responses to the first appearances of
oriental dance in America.)

Sol Bloom, the entrepreneur who raked in a fortune by displaying the
Egyptian performers, and who coined the term “belly dance,” cashed in on
the reputation of the “hootchy-kootchy,” which was “already well entrenched
in the American vocabulary. Its meaning was a sexy kind of erotic dance, with
implications of being suggestive and indecent” (Monty 1986, 24). Indeed,
Bloom commented, “When the public learned that the literal translation of
danse du ventre was ‘belly dance’ they delightfully concluded that it must be
salacious and immoral.” He adds, “The crowds poured in. I had a gold mine”
(quoted in Monty 1986, 29). And yet belly dance researcher Paul Monty, in
his voluminous collection of responses to these early performances, demon-
strates that the Americans generally found the dances “ugly” and “lascivious”
in a general way rather than in any specific movements. As one author wrote,
“It is not dancing as we understand dancing” (quoted in Monty 1986, 52):

The artist looking only for what is beautiful finds beauty here without any alloy
of that suggestiveness which probably commends the posturing to the Orientalists
themselves, and which certainly pleases men of simply carnal minds, whether
they come from Boston, Oshkosh, or Kalamazoo. Those who visit the theatre in
the Cairo street as merely a part of the ethnotological section of the exhibition
will look upon this posturing in its true aspect and see in it only a difference in
customs of the East and West [Monty 1986, 53].

What is clear from these observations is that the aesthetic elements of the dance
were foreign and alien in an unattractive way to most American audiences,
while they found the interpretive orientalist performances of St. Denis and
Allan exotic in an exciting and attractive way. American audiences wanted
the performances translated and interpreted by Western artists, not from the
authentic sources that later generations of American practitioners avidly
sought. Thus, I posit the westernized performances of “oriental” dance by St.
Denis and Allan, and the later performances of Egyptian dancers like Masabni,
Gamal, and Carioca, were much more influential in the development of the
highly popular form of belly dance that was introduced on a grand scale in
the 1970s than the authentic nineteenth-century form of belly dancing that
was seen at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893.

Viewing the late twentieth-century ghawazi performing in the older
style, one is struck by the static and repetitious nature of the dance (Arab 1977).
This style of dance did not aesthetically appeal to women at the turn of the
century in the United States, who were, through the prevalent taste in orien-
talism, much more attuned to the performances of Ruth St. Denis, Loïe Fuller,
and Isadora Duncan. As Barbara Sellers-Young notes, “The typical woman
of the early part of the century, however often she may have pursued her fan-
tasies via the silver screen (Rudolph Valentine as the Sheik) or stage produc-
tion (Ruth St. Denis), never became an active participant” (1992, 142).

It is significant that many of the first nonnative belly dancers like Jamila
Salimpour, who taught thousands of students, mention that one of the meth-
ods by which they learned to dance was watching old Egyptian films with
dancers like Carioca and Gamal, a method followed by young girls, and even
some boys, in the Middle East (Adra 2005; Saleem, personal interview, June
14, 2007). Thus the earliest exposure to the dance for nonnative American
dancers like Salimpour and Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinici) came from the
Egyptian cinema, and a generation of native dancers who were featured in
the first Arab and Greek nightclubs in New York and San Francisco came from
the milieu of nightclubs in Cairo and Beirut in which the modern version
known as cabaret belly dance was performed.

A colonial and racist subtext also operated in the Americans and the
Europeans viewing these “authentic” performances, in contrast to those of the
“Oriental” dances of St. Denis, Allan, and Fuller. It became an important
strategy for these women to distance themselves from the actual practices of
Middle Eastern and Asian natives: “Eastern dance would have been offensive
to respectable British sensibilities. Particularly belly-dancing, it explained,
Eastern dancing was ‘something lascivious and repulsively ugly.’ If Allan had
been ‘authentic’ she would have been dismissed as vulgar” (Koritz 1997, 140).

It is often difficult in the dawn of the twenty-first century to imagine
the degree of racism that characterized American life until the 1960s. Arabs
were frequently, and often officially, regarded as nonwhite, so dances per-
formed by them would have been regarded with suspicion by the vast major-
ity of white Americans. “It was not until 1914, however, that George Dow
was denied a petition to become a U.S. citizen because, as a ‘Syrian of Asi-
atic birth,’ he was not a free white person within the meaning of the 1790
U.S. statute” (Suleiman 1999, 7). Dance scholar Jane Desmond states:
In the United States, the dominant structuring trope of racialized difference remains white/nonwhite.... In cases where a cultural form migrates from a subordinate to a dominant group, the meanings attached to that adoption (and remodeling) are generated within the parameters of the current and historical relations between the two groups, and their constitution of each as "other" and as different in particular ways. For example, the linkage in North American white culture of blacks with sexuality, sensuality, and an alternately celebrated or denigrated presumably "natural" propensity for physical ability, expressivity, or bodily excess tinged the adoption of black dances. On one level, it allows middle- and upper-class whites to move in what are deemed slightly risqué ways, to perform, in a sense, a measure of "blackness" without paying the social penalty of "being" black [1997, 37].

Desmond's description characterizes belly dance in America. In the early part of the twentieth century, as a result of extreme racism, Arabs were widely perceived as nonwhite (see Shay 2006, 126–131). This perception prevented the crossing of that racial and cultural barrier to learn a nonwhite dance, whereas by the 1970s, with the civil rights movement, that barrier had largely dissolved. American women were able to dance the Middle Eastern dance as an exotic lark without paying the social cost that Arab and Turkish women who perform publicly pay, that is, the loss of reputation that is the lot of professional dancers in the Middle East. Turkish anthropologist Öykü Potuğlu-Cook observes of a professional Turkish belly dancer: "She is unmarriageable because of the 'stain' of her status as a belly dancer" (2006, 633). In America, some belly dancers have earned advanced degrees and hold esteemed positions as well as dancing professionally with no loss of reputation.

A third factor that would have militated against performing the authentic dances from Egypt was the act of performing itself. Women who performed in public, as I remarked in the chapter on the pioneer performers, were considered to be prostitutes. This ofrores repulsive attitude was widespread, so the only women who would undertake this activity, such as the several who performed the hootchy-kootchy on Coney Island and elsewhere under the name "Little Egypt," came from the lowest rungs of American society and needed the money. The studies of Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan, like Kendall (1979) and Koritz (1997) frequently cite this factor of desperately needing money as an important one in the ways in which these women pursued their choreographic strategies, they wanted to earn money and at the same time achieve a respectability that was not possible before they appeared in a way that they claimed was spiritual and artistic, and consequently through their performances and programmatic rhetoric perceived as such by their audiences. I suggest that through their choreographic strategies these early dancers provided the space for later generations of women pursuing belly dance to consider their activity as respectable.

Thus, the only women who pursued the performance of oriental dance at the turn of the century: the hootchy-kootchy, Salome's dance, or acting, as Little Egypt did it, for money. As Sellers-Young notes, "The dance introduced at the turn of the century as part of a cultural exhibit was quickly transformed to a burlesque performance catering to male fantasies" (1992, 148). This stands in stark contrast to the hundreds of thousands of women in the 1970s who pursued this dance form for love, spirituality, seeking a feminist road to sexual and sensual empowerment, losing weight, feeling attractive, and joining other women in an affirming activity. Instead of receiving money, the vast majority eagerly spent money in their new found hobby.

The Spread of Belly Dance in America

Dance and theater scholar Barbara Sellers-Young astutely addresses the reception of belly dance in the 1970s and 1980s:

As it has developed and become popular in the United States, Raks el Sharki has not been a relocation of the form in the Middle East. Instead it has been a combination of two phenomena. The first is a romanticization of the Near East and the second is a general movement of increased awareness and acceptance of the female body. Belly dancing in the United States in the 1980s is a method for primarily women to explore their sensuality and the power that some believe is inherent in being female.... The popularity of the movies Zorba the Greek and Never on Sunday and a large influx of post-war Middle Eastern immigrants with their native restaurants and performers from the Middle East made what had been far away and inaccessible, close and easily accessible [1992, 142–143].

The first native American-born belly dancers, like Morocco (Carolina Varga Diniu) and Jamila Salimpour, now famed and revered teachers and famous throughout the belly dance milieu through appearances at workshops and classes, learned their craft in the 1950s and 1960s through learning on the job. That job was dancing professionally in Middle Eastern nightclubs and restaurants. Morocco (2001) describes the explosion of Greek nightclubs in New York's Greektown, and they needed oriental dancers—desperately:

The 1960s were a special time in New York: 8th Avenue, from 27th to 29th streets, had 10 restaurant/nightclubs with continual live, nightly Middleeastern [sic] music, 3 dancers 6 nights a week, and a 4th on the 3 days they were off. That's 40 dancers needed in a city that had maybe 10, who knew what they were doing.... In proportion to the economy, dancers' pay was much better then than today and there were so many job openings that if Godzilla had a costume she could have gotten a well-paying and steady gig [2001].

Morocco goes on to describe how she learned on the job by watching the few
native dancers from the Middle East who worked in the clubs at that period. In many ways this is how children in the Middle East learn this dance — by watching their elders (Adra 2005).

The other important method of learning was watching old Egyptian films. Jamila Salimpour recounts her learning experiences:

It was only after I went to dance in San Francisco, where dancers were hired from different countries of the Middle East, that I saw a variety of styles. We worked in the same club and imitated each other's specialties, of course not in the same show, and usually only after they'd left town. Turkish Aysha wowed the audience with her full-body vibrations. During her show I would run to the dressing room to analyze her pivots. Soraya from Morocco danced almost always in Belledi dress, balancing a pot on her head. Fatima Akef danced on water glasses with "Laura" her parrot, perched on her shoulder. Nartis did the most incredible belly rolls and her entire finale consisted of continuous choo-choos. Fatima Ali did a 4/4 shimmy on the balls of her feet. I was told by Mohammed El Scali that she was a Ouled Nail. And so it went, show after show, night after night, year after year [Quoted from Sellers-Young 2005, 281].

As had happened in the case of Balkan dance, in the 1970s the demand for belly dance classes became widespread throughout America. "Although the transmission of Oriental dance in this country involves a complex web which includes many individuals, media, and performance events, the studio class has developed since the early 1970s as the primary site for conveying the movement knowledge and technique of this dance form" (Forner 1994, 9). Both Morocco and Jamila Salimpour were sought after as teachers by many of the women who came to see them dance. They both opened classes in the 1960s, and by the 1970s Paul Monty introduced the concept of the large-scale convention workshops:

Credit goes to Dr. Paul Monty for coming up with the wonderful concept in the early '70s — one that I firmly believe set us on the path that brought this Art to its current status and international popularity: he was the first to envision and take the professional and financial risks involved in producing large-scale Mideastern [sic] dance seminars/conventions with evening concerts all over the U.S., presenting and making master teachers of Ibrahim Farrah, Dahlena, Serena, Jamila, myself and several others [2001].

In order to cater to this huge influx of learners, these new instructors had to invent and develop teaching methods different from the watch-and-imitate through the trial-and-error manner that these early performers used to learn the dance. (See Forner 1994; Morocco 2001; Sellers-Young 2005 for descriptions of some of the teaching methods.) These classes, seminars, and retreats became important vehicles for many individuals to immerse themselves in this activity. "One dancer called his [Ibrahim Farrah] week long seminar 'a transformational experience,'" another stressed that taking his classes 'can make a difference in your life'" (Forner 1994, 14).

Belly dance classes became almost a cottage industry in the 1970s and after. Instructors appeared everywhere, and since no type of certification was required, the levels of instruction varied widely. "A few teachers actually taught
specific dances from specific countries, but most tended to teach a step from Egypt followed by another from Morocco, or Turkey, or Iran" (Sellers-Young 1992, 143).

Unlike the classical dances from Asia or flamenco, which require years of devoted and focused learning, generally in a master-guru/student-disciple relationship and a formalized special setting for its mastery, many of the movements of belly dance could be acquired in a relatively short time, sometimes within a few weeks:

When the instructor felt she was ready, the student was encouraged to make a costume and perform before an audience either at a student night in a local restaurant or at a party arranged by the instructor. This teaching method created a situation in which movement styles from different areas of the Middle East were combined into a form that more and more became a medium of its own commonly referred to as belly dancing [Sellers-Young 1992, 143–144].

Thus, if a young woman was relatively attractive and had some type of stage persona, this method of teaching permitted and even encouraged her to take up belly dancing as a profession. Many dancers appearing in Middle Eastern nightclubs began their careers this way.

**Belly Dance as Popular Culture**

Today in the United States many of the practitioners of belly dance negotiate the many tensions that constitute the gaps found in this globalized and transnational practice. The first is that the dance has been linked to sex from its first appearance in the United States in 1893, when it was advertised and displayed to appeal to the male gaze. The many impressionistic American dancers of this form, frequently appearing under the name “Little Egypt” in burlesque reviews, quickly established in the popular mind the link between striptease, the hootchy-kootchy, and belly dance.

A century later, with the fad of the bellygram, the same linkage obtained and the perception continued to highlight sex through the appearance of the scantily clad female body and the male voyeur. Usually the bellygram dancer appears in the context of a male's birthday party or a stag party. “The bellygram's obvious sexism has created a certain amount of ambivalence among dancers who perform them. Although dancers may dislike them, they are clearly the most profitable and consistent employment for a dancer” (Sellers-Young 1992, 145). Thus, in the United States, the bellygram fad continues to place belly dance alongside the striptease in the minds of many Americans. This aspect of the dance as sexual makes it difficult for its many devoted followers to convince either Americans or individuals from the Middle East that belly dance is an art form or a spiritual practice.

Related to the issue of the sexual content of the dance, many dancers know that in the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran professional dancing, and even nonprofessional dancing in public contexts can be disreputable, and the professional dancer constitutes the popular trope of a fallen woman in Middle Eastern societies. But very few American dancers fully understand the differences in the Middle Eastern attitudes and those that they confront in the United States. While some American dancers dismiss these negative attitudes as something that happens only in a supercharged Islamist context, this knowledge of the disreputability of the dance in the Middle East forms a disquieting background for others. This issue can come very much alive when a Middle Eastern man, misconstruing the American context in a Middle Eastern nightclub or private party in an American city, importunes the American-born dancer with a lewd suggestion or an outright sexual proposition.

A second area of tension for many dancers is the struggle to have belly dance recognized as an art form. Clearly, in the Middle East belly dancing is regarded as a form of entertainment and one that is widely regarded as a low and disreputable form of entertainment despite its popularity as an indispensable element of weddings and other celebrations in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world.

A third aspect of tension that is specific to the United States involves the position of belly dance in popular culture. Unlike the other forms of dance that I profile in this study, such as classical Asian dances and Balkan dance, which remain almost hidden and underground from most Americans, belly dance is widely known by the general public through its widespread use in pop culture genres such as film and television as a vaguely sexy, exotic dance. The appearance of popular culture figures like Jeannie of *I Dream of Jeannie* and Lalume in the musical film *Kismet* (Dolores Gray) in the 1950s, which featured domesticated, blonde, sanitized harem girls, added a comic, slightly ridiculous aspect to the character of the sexy harem girl that had not previously existed. This aspect is frequently iterated in the many newspaper stories and features that focus on belly dance that invariably take on a tongue-in-cheek approach to the topic. These journalistic attitudes irritate some dancers who seek to place belly dance in the category of high or ethnic art.

A final element, related to the discourse surrounding belly dance and reflecting the transnational and globalized movement of this phenomenon revolves around (mis)appropriation and authenticity. As Sellers-Young noted, the way in which the dance is taught militates against its authenticity. Further, American created forms, such as American Tribal Dance (ATS), described and analyzed by Sellers-Young (2005), have widened the perception of what
constitutes belly dance and the degree of authenticity that adheres to its variegated performances.

Arab Americans frequently react negatively to the public performance of belly dance as a representation of Arab culture, and they feel that American dancers misrepresent their culture through orientalist images of sexuality. Thus, when American dancers perform the Arab “other” through belly dance, they face possible charges of appropriation:

American dancers are ambivalent about both the Americanization of the style and our relationship to the dance’s ethnic origins. On the one hand, we distance ourselves through appeals to high art notions in which individual creativity is the ultimate demonstration of talent. We assert that we have as much right as people from the Middle East to alter, perform, and speak for the dance. On the other hand, in our costuming, stage names, advertising, and performance venues, we highlight its Middle Eastern origins [Gould 2006/07, 33].

Many of the articles in journals like Habibi address these issues, which have increasingly become an important aspect of the discourse surrounding the performance of belly dance. There is an increasing awareness among many dancers that these tensions and issues exist and must be confronted. As anthropologist Miriam Robinson Gould enquires, “Dance in the West: Striptease, Ethnic Art, or High Art?”:

Even dancers who want to move beyond fantasy, who believe that their dance is an ethnic art form, and who do research on what bellydance [sic] means to its Middle Eastern practitioners often end up seeing attitudes that appear to match the Salome discourse. American dancers training with other American dancers often don’t have the background in either cross-cultural forms of communication or Middle Eastern studies to distinguish the ways in which the Salome discourse of sexuality in the dance differs from the Egyptian discourse of inappropriate performance, which leaves us continuing to dance in Salome’s shadow [1996/07, 36].

Like Balkan dancers, those engaged in the pursuit of belly dance as an art, as a form of fitness, or as a spiritual practice are passionate about the promotion of their chosen form of cultural production. In many ways participation in belly dance constitutes a central and core part of their lives.

Many of the women involved in belly dancing and who identify with Arab, Iranian, and Turkish culture frequently marry Arab, Iranian, and Turkish men as dancers Aisha Ali and Jamila Salimpour have done. When Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu) goes to Egypt, she wears the middle class dress and headscarf associated with what one sees the more traditional women wearing, and she speaks fluent Arabic. She clearly identifies with being an Egyptian when she is there and Egyptians admire her for it. Hundreds of other women make the trek, led by well-known instructors like Morocco, to the Middle East to absorb the culture of their choreographically spiritual home.

On the Internet, in workshops, and in the pages of the journals devoted to oriental dance they struggle to resolve the tensions of sexuality and sensuality, authenticity, appropriation, and orientalism that exist in the transnational interstices of their now largely Americanized dance tradition.