

Naming the Dance

by Amara/L. Osweiler

Part 2

In the Middle East, Ballet took over sixty years to stand on its own merits. Though *Giselle*, the first ballet in Cairo, was staged at The Cairo Opera House in 1882,⁶ there was not a state sponsored school until the mid-twentieth century.⁷ Metin And writes: in Turkey, "In 1947 Dame Ninette de Valois of British Royal Ballet was invited by government to set up school in the State Conservatory of Music and Drama,"⁸ now the Ankara State Ballet. "In the 1965/66 season, the first large-scale ballet (*At the Fountain*) was set to music by a Turkish composer, Ferit Tuzun... was choreographed for the company by de Valois using elements of Turkish folkdance.... In 1968, for the first time, the company performed a ballet (*The Wheel*) by a native choreographer, Sait Sokmen."⁹ Today one can find numerous ballet companies. Modern dance is a very late comer but can also be found all over the Middle East including the RAMAD troupe (founded by Lawand Hajo in 2001, Syria), Modern Dance Turkey (founded by Beyhan Murphy in 1992), and Anat Daniel (founded in 1993, Israel).



Outside of dance for dance's sake or dance for entertainment, there are also a number of Middle Eastern movement events which center around trance and states of ecstasy, such as the Turkish Mevlevi/Whirling Dervishes, the Egyptian Zar, and the Moroccan Guedra.¹⁰ With regards to these events, many Westerners implement an etic viewpoint of: "[j]ust about anything that cannot be classified as 'ordinary' movement can be, and has been called 'dancing.'"¹¹ But from an emic angle, specifically for the Sufis, these rituals are not seen as dance: as explained by Katib Celebi (1609-57) (via Metin And): "The orthodox Ulema have classed those whirlings as 'dancing', and have pronounced it forbidden.... The Sufis begin by saying that the definition of dancing is not applicable.... The cyclic motion is a form of motion...."¹² By not naming it dance, the participants attain an amount of religious acceptance. The same idea can be seen in the recitation of the Koran and the call to prayer. Many musicians outside of the culture call it music, but for those of the religion it certainly is not music. In these circumstances, I replace the word dance with movement for these settings.¹³

Most Americans outside and inside of the American-Middle East dance community call it Belly dance. Currently, there are two versions of how the phrase Belly dance originated in the United States. The one, which holds most validity, is that Sol Bloom coined the term based on the translation of the French term *danse du ventre* - the dance of the stomach. Ibrahim Farrah deduced another theory. He believed Belly dance is "a corruption of the Arabic word, beledi,"¹⁴ an Egyptian term for people living in the villages and/or lower class citizens of the cities. Shira writes that it is only a coincidence that *beledi* and belly sound alike and was in fact coined by Sol Bloom.¹⁵

A main contention with the name Belly dance is its history and growth out of Europe's romanticized, exoticized, and colonial rule of the Middle East. For example, although dancers were from a variety of countries, the dance was placed under one name: *danse du ventre*/belly dance. This term does not take into account the vast styles, genres, and names present throughout the Middle East. The term can also be read as depreciating and dissecting the performers by focusing on a scandalous body part, the stomach. Westerners discounted that Middle Eastern dance, like any dance, uses all parts of the body. And by emphasizing one body part, the performer's body becomes dismantled, further objectifying the dancer by removing any sense of individuality and legitimacy. Through the power of renaming and homogenizing the different styles under one heading, Europeans took control of the dances.

At the turn of the century, *danse du ventre*/belly dance referred to what is today considered folkloric or ethnic dance. Today, it generally stands for the cabaret, solo female club, and restaurant dancer (*Raks al-Sharki*). From the images given to the public by the male gaze and mediated through mass media, the term Belly dance conjures up the image of a voluptuous woman (large breasts and hips with a small waist), wearing a glittery two-piece costume, moving her body in a sensual, if not a sexual manner, to exotic music. It also brings with it connotations of a woman dancing to entice men and has no other value. This power and control created such a strong

stereotype that many people still consider Belly dance to be the only dance form in the Middle East. As contemporary dancers are left with this confusing legacy and legitimacy, some discard the term Belly dance because of its history while others embrace it because of its usage by the general public.

A more contemporary name is Oriental dance or *Danse Orientale*. This term attempts to cover Cabaret (solo style)¹⁶ and Folkloric styles. Its wide spread usage was due mainly to Farrah who in the dance magazine, *Arabesque*, repeatedly called others to abandon the term Belly dance. To show his impact, in a 1977 issue, Farrah writes that since the magazine began in 1975, the frequency of the use of the term Belly dance in advertisements had decreased from 70% to 30%.¹⁷ The name Oriental dance has many problems due to its various meanings. One of them, brought up writer Morroe Berger, is that it is "a label apparently designed to lend modesty by shifting the point of reference from anatomy to geography."¹⁸ Second, the Orient can include the geographical regions of the Middle East/Near East and the Far East. Third, it does not take in account the power of the West naming something in the East and continues to denote "the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century European colonialism."¹⁹ But what Oriental dance does represent is the beginning trend of American-Middle Eastern dancers debating terminology. By this point in time, American styles of Middle Eastern dance were well established and the debates marked the beginning of finding a source of power through self-definition.

To be continued ... watch for Part 3 in the September/October '06 issue of Zaghareet!

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End Notes

6. Saleh 1998, 496.
7. See Saleh 1979b.

8. And 1976, 115.
9. And 1998, 212.
10. The Zar was outlawed in Egypt in 1983, and 1992 in Sudan. The Mevlevi sect was banned September 2, 1925.
11. Williams, 7.
12. And 1976, 34.
13. Kaeppler, 88-90.
14. Farrah 1977b, 3.
15. Shira, n.d.
16. Many Middle Easterners consider cabaret to be a low class term.
17. Farrah 1977b, 3.
18. Berger 1966, 43.
19. Said 1978, 2.

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