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# Daughter of Egypt: Farida Fahmy and the Reda Troupe

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social mores concerning sexuality and liberal politics. Some of the Salomes ended up impoverished and rejected by society once the Salome craze ended. One, Mata Hari, was put to death on trumped-up charges of treason—easy accusations to make against a dancer/courtesan.

Liberating the body through dance is a powerful practice for dancers of the past and the present. Like Bentley's Salomes, today's belly dancers appropriate misogynist discourses regarding women's bodies, and, by embodying them, transform them into celebrations of female sensuality.

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### Notes

1. Among the nuggets Carleton uncovers are the possible origins of the term "hootchy cootchy" and the proliferation of the playground ditty "All the girls in France. . ." (you know the rest).

### DAUGHTER OF EGYPT: FARIDA FAHMY AND THE REDA TROUPE

*by Marjorie A. Franken. 2001. Glendale, CA: VassiliansDepot.com dba Armenian Reference Books Company. x + 121 pp., photographs, index. \$25.00 paper.*

Serious, scholarly studies on dance in the Middle East are rare, and Middle Eastern dance traditions constitute one of the least analyzed and investigated aspects of dance scholarship. Perhaps no area of dance ethnography has been so routinely subject to romanticized, exoticized, and orientalist analysis and writing as Middle Eastern dance by admiring Western belly dance hobbyists. So sparse are well-researched, analytical works in this field that frequently the standards imposed on its authors are dramatically less

demanding than in other areas of current dance scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

One of the principal reasons for the dearth of serious scholarly attention resides in the negative attitudes of people throughout the Middle East and Central Asia toward their own dance traditions. Those of us who have devoted our professional lives to the study and performance of Middle Eastern dance are soon confronted with a wealth of empirical evidence that shows that the overwhelming majority of the population in that vast region perceive dance, and in particular professional dancers, with ambivalence and even powerful opprobrium. Dance, and professional dancers, have always been connected with sexual availability; in an Islamic context, female professional dancers are widely regarded as improperly invading male social space, dancing and baring their bodies before men who do not stand in proper kinship to them, thus potentially creating social chaos (*fetnah*). It is within this negative, choreophobic context and social environment that anthropologist Marjorie A. Franken has written this monograph on the life and career of Farida Fahmy (Melda Hassan), the former principal soloist with the state-sponsored Reda Troupe of Egypt.

This slim volume, which contains scores of snapshots and publicity photographs in its 122-page text, the culmination of more than a decade of research conducted by Franken, traces the career of Farida Fahmy, the Reda Troupe, and its choreographer and artistic director, Mahmoud Reda. From 1959 to the present, Mahmoud Reda has choreographed and served as male soloist in dozens of production numbers, based loosely on traditional folk and professional dance forms, using his sister-in-law, Farida Fahmy, as his primary female soloist. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Egypt-

ian government frequently sent the Reda Troupe on tour, and the first company director, Mahmoud's brother Ali Reda (Fahmy's husband), made two popular films, *Mid-Term Holiday* and *Love in Karnak Temple*, which featured the company starring Fahmy and Reda.

*Daughter of Egypt* constitutes an atypical dancer's biography because Farida Fahmy is perhaps the only dancer from a folk dance company in the Middle East who has ever achieved even a modicum of public recognition. Egypt is famous throughout the Middle East and beyond for stellar belly dancers such as Samia Gamal, Tahia Carioca, Sohair Zaki, and Nagwa Fuad, all of whom were high-profile movie stars and performers in upscale, expensive Cairo nightclubs and hotels; to date, none of these women has been the subject of a critical, full-length study in English.

Franken strategically places her subject at the intersection of gender and social class, valorizing Fahmy's social position as a member of the tiny elite class of Cairo. The following passage not only graphically demonstrates this, but also manages to diminish the huge peasant population that the Reda Troupe, and Farida Fahmy, purport to represent through dance:

Finally, this book reflects the views of a particular class within Cairo—the educated, Westernized, urban elite. Although peasants in the hinterlands are familiar with Farida Fahmy through televised films of the Reda Troupe, the complex mix of national ideology, Islamic modernism, feminism and European cultural influence that Farida and her social class grew up with is beyond their experience. To a great extent, Farida was dancing for her own class, which in no way diminishes the national significance

of the Reda innovation or its cultural message, because it was Farida's class who gave birth to the intellectual forces of nationalism, feminism, reform and the quest for Egyptian authenticity that emerged in the wake of colonialism. (3)

In stressing Fahmy's elite social position as the most salient factor that permitted her to negotiate the dangerous shoals of her position as a professional dancer while maintaining an aura of respectability, Franken correctly positions her subject as an exception to the stereotypical image of the professional dancer as fallen woman, a common trope in the Egyptian cinema. Unfortunately, the book adopts an adulatory tone and does not critique, analyze, or compare Fahmy and Reda's professional output and their technical level of performance with other Egyptian artists and dance companies, or other similar companies in the Middle East, such as the Turkish State Folk Dance Ensemble, the Tunisian State Folk Dance Company, or the former Iranian State Folk Ensemble, the Mahalli Dancers. Such an analysis would have provided the reader with a much needed context in which to evaluate Reda and Fahmy's contributions to the art of theatricalized folk and professional dance in the Middle East.

More importantly, Reda's work is not contrasted with the very traditional Egyptian group, the Musicians of the Nile ensemble. Such an analysis would help the reader to understand the position of the Reda Troupe in Egypt. While she correctly observes, very briefly (45–49), that Reda created a new theatrical dance genre, she omits the fact that this new genre relentlessly desexualized belly dancing for the female dancers and totally eliminated it for the male dancers, in order to make it acceptable for the postcolonial elite classes to whom

the company largely appealed. For example, Franken does not mention that Reda's new genre is so distant from dance practices in the field—in costuming, choreography, and movement characteristics—that the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., firmly turned down the Egyptian Government's request to use the Reda Troupe to represent Egypt in the Folklife Festival held on the Mall, choosing instead the Musicians of the Nile, a troupe of traditional musicians and dancers, whose cultural production is largely shunned by the elite classes because of its peasant origins. This avoidance of traditional rural forms is deeply embedded in the postcolonial mentality that sharply divides elite Egyptian attitudes and artistic taste from those of the masses (Armbrust 1996; Mitchell 1988; Saleh 1979; Shay 2002).

While Franken points out that the company was formed and developed under the intense nationalism of the Nasser era, her failure to acknowledge the way in which nearly a century of British colonialism, in a social environment hostile to dance, and the postcolonialist period that followed crucially informed Mahmoud Reda's avoidance of authentic dance and music traditions constitutes a serious omission in any analysis of Reda's work. I found a more serious problem in Franken's attempt to compare, and make equal, Fahmy's position with that of Umm Kulthum, the beloved singing superstar of Egypt and the Arab world. Scholars of Middle Eastern cultural performance practices are very cognizant that the position of singers and dancers is very different (Danielson 1997). When Umm Kulthum died, literally millions of adoring admirers filled the streets of Cairo for the funeral procession. The contrast between Fahmy, who positioned herself as a member of the upper-class elite, and Umm Kulthum, a musical artist who made mil-

lions of dollars during her half-century reign over the airwaves of the Middle East, whose recordings are still played on the radio and in every taxicab in Egypt, and who positioned herself as a *sbeikbab* (a simple, pious country woman) reveals not only the striking difference between the social strategies of the two women, but also the divergent ways in which singing and dancing are viewed by Middle Eastern peoples (Nieuwkerk 1995).

While this book sketches the basic facts of Fahmy's and Reda's lives and careers, it does not advance Middle Eastern dance studies with the much needed theoretical analyses of the negative attitudes toward dance and dancers in Islamic societies in the way that Karin van Nieuwkerk's outstanding study of belly dancers in Cairo accomplishes (Shay 1999). Franken's claims for the continuing popularity of the Reda Troupe because their two films are still occasionally played on Egyptian television are not borne out by the dwindling audiences for their occasional performances and which my interview with Mahmoud Reda in 2000 indicates. The two films in which the company appeared were highly derivative of the lightweight "let's do a show"-themed Judy Garland/Mickey Rooney movies of the 1930s, rather than any original Middle Eastern artistic production.

Ultimately, this brief monograph constitutes a tribute to Fahmy and Reda that fails to sufficiently and critically position their work within an Egyptian or a larger Middle Eastern context of dance performance.

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#### Notes

1. See, for example, Shawna Helland's essay, in which she makes sweeping, unsubstantiated generalizations, relying on Curt Sachs as a primary source, claiming prehis-

toric origins (25,000 B.C.) for belly dancing, and treating the subject in a romanticized manner that would not be tolerated in other areas of dance studies (Helland 2001).

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### JEWISH FOLKLORE AND ETHNOLOGY REVIEW

*Jewish Dance Issue*, edited by Judith Brin Ingber. 2000. Columbus, OH. Issued by the Jewish Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society. Volume 20, Number 1-2. 210 pp. \$20.00 paper (add \$5 for foreign shipping).

What is "Jewish dance"? The "Jewish Dance" issue of the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, edited by Judith Brin Ingber, is an ambitious project that makes significant headway in addressing this complicated question. The project is especially welcome at this moment in the evolution of both Jewish and dance studies. Over the last decade, Jewish cultural historians have begun to pay attention to the connections between embodiment and Jewish identity, but have largely overlooked representations of Jews and Jewish life in dance. Similarly, current dance scholarship has probed how dance constructs identity, but few scholars have made Jewish identity the primary focus of their inquiries (Naomi Jackson [2000] is one notable exception). And although the politics of defining a dance genre in racial or ethnic terms have been a matter of hot debate, particularly surrounding "black dance" (Gerald Myers's [1991, 1993] and Thomas DeFrantz's [2002] edited anthologies are especially relevant), there has been no historiography of "Jewish dance."

This project does not provide a historiography of the term "Jewish dance," but it succeeds in putting Jewish and dance studies in dialogue with each other. And it moves far beyond a 1986 "Jewish Dance" issue, which was quite rudimentary. Indeed, this collection of essays and oral histories includes the writing of a number of established and emerging scholars utilizing a wide array of theories and methodologies, and examining connections between Jewishness and dance in an extraordinarily diverse range of sites. While the contributions are of uneven quality, their heterogeneity challenges stable meanings for "Jewish," "dance," and "Jewish dance."

Ingber begins her introduction by describing images from the Old Testament that feature dance as well as imagined mo-