

Dance du Ventre: a Fresh Appraisal (Part I)

by Leona Wood

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Leona Wood is perhaps best known to the dance world today as artistic director of the Aman International Dance Company, and through her writing about dance which appears on record albums, in *Dance Research Journals* and other publications. By the late 1950's Ms. Wood had founded "Friends of Arabic Music," an organization that has sponsored numerous cultural events in Los Angeles including a program for the Federation of the Islamic Associations, the Egyptian folk artists brought to this country by the Smithsonian institute and many others. In 1961 Ms. Wood presented a program of Middle Eastern Music and dance in cooperation with the institute of Ethnomusicology within the lecture series, "The Near East: Islamic Tradition and the Modern World" at the University of California, Los Angeles. This presentation created the beginnings of an academic acceptance of oriental dance that was realized several years later, when Ms. Wood conducted the first of her lecture series, "The Performing Arts in a Moslem Context" at UCLA.



Every few years there is a resurgence of interest in what is widely known as danse du ventre, or less elegantly, belly dancing. More properly called danse orientale, this dance-by whatever name it may be known-has inevitably elicited an exaggerated response from those not accustomed to the social background to which it belongs. In the past a climate of disapproval has hampered any attempt at serious evaluation of this dance; at the present time the situation has reversed to a point where the enthusiasm of its protagonists has become the chief hindrance to any objective assessment. A dance whose enduring charm has managed to survive not only a body of disparaging commentary but the spurious and tawdry aura surrounding so many of its practitioners does seem deserving of a fresh appraisal.

This is perhaps a uniquely appropriate moment for such reassessment, because in this permissive era, when nudity and unabashed sexuality are displayed even in ballet performances, admirers of Oriental Dance need no longer apologize. But years of censure have produced a defensive response in the devotees of this dance which has encouraged its identification with ancient rites and mysteries. These unnecessary fictions hamper serious critique of the dance as severely as its lascivious reputation did in the past.

By reviewing the fashions in Orientalism that reveal various western attitudes toward the East, by tracing the origins and history of voluptuous dancing, and by consideration of the ambivalence toward this dance in Moslem countries, it should be possible to arrive at a more realistic view. But a brief retrospective of the impact of Middle Eastern dance on American sensibilities should precede any examination of more distant perspectives.

From the shores of Tripoli. The image of oriental dancing as a sensational exhibition has long been firmly established in the American imagination. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when American shipping in the Mediterranean was being harassed by North African pirates, the United States dispatched a naval force to put a stop to the depredations. After the American marines returned from "the shores of Tripoli," the seductions of the Barbary Coast soon became legendary.

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"Barbary Coast" had already taken its place in American folklore as a synonym for license by 1851, when American journalist George Curtis visited the Middle East. Curtis' articles in the New York Tribune turned attention to Egypt. He saw the celebrated Ghaziyeh, Safiya, and exploited the opportunity to thrill readers with a florid account of her performance.

The growing appetite for exotica, often expressed in "oriental" style gingerbread houses, was catered to by entrepreneurs like Phineas T. Barnum, who imported a troupe of nautch dancers from India. The growing fascination with the oriental world was expressed in the great expositions, or "world fairs," that began to proliferate in the second half of the century. The Philadelphia 1876 Centennial Exposition featured an Algerian cafe with native entertainers. And in 1889 the great Paris Exposition presented such a panoply of exotic cultures that American organizers, not to be outdone, determined to create ethnological exhibits on an even grander scale for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. (See Arabesque, Vol V, No. II, pp 16-19).

When the fair closed in 1893, the effective publicity and vivid development of the oriental theme had already set in motion various imitations of the oriental dance that, in one form or another are still with us today.

So popular had pseudo-orientalism become by the end of the First World War, that ragtime songwriter Irving Berlin took up the theme in his "Harem Nights," incorporating a familiar little tune that had already spent two decades in burlesque, serving as the vehicle for numerous quasi-obscene verses. Much of the opprobrium attached to belly dancing is directly attributable to the identification of this tune with the sleaziest aspect of the Levant-coupled with the bumps, grinds and snake-acts of the carnival circuit.

The oriental interpretations of serious dancers like Ivy Payne (the almah in the original production of "Kismet") took the form of dramatic pharaonic tableaux- carefully staying as remote as possible from the hootchy-kootchy, as the dance performed by innumerable "Little Egypts" was called.

Then the twenties roared in with Nazimova's "Salome," Theda Bara (Arab spelled backward) and the image of la danseuse egyptienne: that ultimate symbol of sin and sex. The discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb created a sensation that made spangled Egyptian net dresses (or heavily beaded equivalents) de rigueur-the better to do the shimmy, the dance rage of the time.

In the Thirties and Forties Hollywood dominated the scene with Biblical epics, Roman extravaganzas and occasional thrillers set in the Middle East. From time to time one could catch a glimpse of Kanza Omar, a perpetual extra who sometimes was able to add a touch of verisimilitude to some "B" picture with a budget too low for Yvonne de Carlo.

The Fifties brought Samia Gamal to America. Having married wealthy Texan Sheppard King, Samia appeared at Ciro's in Hollywood, and made the film "Valley of the Kings," which has the distinction of being the first American film to include genuine Egyptian folk music and dance.

It was left, however, for Turkish dancer Necla Ates and Egyptian pop singer Mohammed El Bakkar to ignite the immense vogue for Middle Eastern music and dance that began with the Broadway production of "Fanny." By playing to continuously packed houses, "Fanny" created the first mass-market for Arabic music and dance in this country. Since that time Middle Eastern nightclubs have opened in almost every large city in the United States.

Distribution. At the present time the term "belly dance" instantly conjures up the image of a dancer attired in the costume that many Americans and Europeans imagine to have been worn in a sultan's harem. While this image is indeed the embodiment of what danse du ventre means to most people today, it represents only the most familiar aspect of a dance that is both ancient and various.

In antiquity, dancing expressed in movements of the torso was common throughout most of what was then the civilized world. This is documented in literary references from the period of the early

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Roman Empire, and may be inferred from graphic representations dating from Egypt's eighteenth dynasty. The most frequently reproduced is a fresco from the tomb of one Neb-Amon, showing "...dancers whose gestures are those of modern Arab dancing."

The main technical elements that distinguish this kind of dancing are to be found in widely separated places: from Spain to Turkey, Africa to India, and even Oceania. Indigenous cultural development may account for some incidence: southern Nigeria and Tahiti, for example; but in the ancient world Punic distribution probably accounted for its original diffusion throughout the Mediterranean. In more recent times, entertainer-caste tribes wandered from India as far afield as Samarkand and Morocco, Central Europe and Spain. By the time they reached France in the early fifteenth century, they were known by a variety of names, but at least one group called themselves "Egyptians" (hence Gypsy). They may well have passed through Egypt, where *Nawars* and other Gypsies still live. In Egypt, Spain, Hungary, Russia and wherever else they are found, Gypsies have assimilated the local styles of music and dance, and made them their own. In Europe they have brought an orientalizing influence that separates their art from the native folk culture.

Art dances are often a direct outgrowth of the folk dances of an area, refined, amplified and polished. Thus, the basic dance movements of the *motreb* during the Qajar dynasty are still seen in Iran's Gilan and Mazendaran provinces. It is equally true that localized dances may be the legacy of a more sophisticated past and reflect ancient artistic standards and tastes. The Ouled Nail are very likely heirs of such a tradition.

While the cross-cultural influences that produced today's oriental dance have been continuous for over three millennia, the dance remains pre-eminently Egyptian; its essential characteristics are unchanged, and Egypt is where it is still seen to best advantage.

Orientalism. Much has been written about the fascination which the East has exercised on the western imagination. The oriental vogue has been both durable and widespread, not only in literature and painting, but in music and dance as well. But if any real understanding of the relationship between East and West is to be achieved, it must stem from a more informed view than one that dates Orientalism from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries-as if the West had just "discovered " the Orient.

To Romans, "The East " meant Persia, Armenia, Soghdiana and India. Even distant Spain, won from Carthage, had become a Roman Province. North Africa and the Levant were simply extensions of the Italian countryside; even today Roman ruins that dot the landscape are more numerous than in Italy itself.

It was not until the advent of Islam in the seventh century of the present era that the Mediterranean, by that time a Christian lake, was ideologically divided into a Christian north shore and a Moslem south. From that time forth the series of ensuing wars that at their apogee were called Crusades struggled to reverse history. The constant conflict reinforced widening cultural differences, yet maintained contact between Europe and the countries south and east of the Mediterranean.

Even with the advent of the various Turkish peoples into Anatolia, it was not really until Constantinople was taken by the Turks in the middle of the fifteenth century that conflicts with the West, at that time largely competition with Venetian maritime trade, began to expand into Europe itself. The general reciprocity in most areas of the East-West relationship is underscored by such ordinary things as the wearing of turbans-as common in Italy as in Turkey-and interchange of skills: painters of the period, notably Bellini, fulfilled commissions from the Porte as readily as from the Doge.

By sheer political power-reinforced by military might-the Ottoman Empire (not unlike the Soviet Union) presented a solid bulwark against the West. It is from this political confrontation that the East-West dichotomy really stems.

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When England's Queen Elizabeth the First sent an ambassador to the Sultan of Turkey with costly gifts, she hoped to enlist this monotheistic monarch in her quarrel with Catholic Spain. The military power of Turkey is inferred from these overtures, and military might implies the ability to remain aloof and yet dictate the course of events. It is at this point that Europe is supposed to have "discovered" the Orient.

A *modus vivendi* was soon arrived at, and by the eighteenth century English ambassadors to the Porte were even bringing their wives along. Notable among these was Mary Wortly Montagu, whose letters from the Ottoman capital helped to introduce the fashion for dresses *a la Turque* and *a la sultane* of which the painter Jean Etienne Liotard has left us such charming pictures. The mood of the period is perfectly reflected in Mozart's opera "The Abduction from the Seraglio."

Turkey was the visible Orient. From the Barbary states to the Balkans, centuries of Ottoman suzerainty imposed a Turkish façade on a multi-national population. Turkish dress, institutions, and even music had therefore long been available for imitation; English and French translations of the "Arabian Nights" were illustrated with unmistakably costumed Turks, and the saraglio hareem became an indestructible symbol of voluptuous splendor.

The Distorting Mirror. It is generally assumed that stereotypical images are a result of ignorance and that the alleviation of ignorance destroys the stereotype, permitting a more valid picture to emerge. This is an oversimplification, of course, and it seriously underestimates the capacity of ephemeral fashion to produce lasting effects. What people see is what they wish to see, and this is dependent upon the dictates of fashion to a surprising degree.

Painters like David Roberts and Jean León Gérôme worked, and often resided in the Middle East. Their paintings are models of accurate observation and meticulous execution: the East truthfully represented for those who wished to see it. The prevailing style, however, led toward a view of the Orient more acceptably presented by J.A.D. Ingres and Eugene Delacroix. Each of these artists, in his own highly individualistic way, pursued a sensuous and romantic vision that was ultimately to reach extravagant pictorialization in Gustave Moreau's wildly imagined paintings of Salome, dancing implausibly on the very nails of her toes.

The objectivity and candor that marked the writings of earlier travelers in Eastern countries was replaced, as the nineteenth century advanced, by the sensationalism of popularizers and journalists who exploited what they saw, calculating its effect on their readers.

When the dance itself was exported to foreign countries, most notably the Paris International Exhibition of 1889 and 1900, the dancers wore authentic Algerian and other ethnic costumes. This was also the case at both the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition and later, the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, but the exploitation had begun in earnest; and as the Victorian world merged into the Edwardian, the image of a romantic and sensual East changed into that of a wicked and sinful one.

These images were compounded in about equal parts from what was suggested by the Bible, archaeology and the East itself. Paintings and music were nourished on such themes, and a spate of Oriental heroines-Aida, Djamileh, Lakme, Thais-made their appearance in opera houses from Egypt to the United States. Admittedly such music as Alexander Luigini's "Ballet Egyptien" would not sound noticeably Egyptian without the assistance of its title, but to audiences that never wearied of *bayaderes* in tutus or *fin de Siecle* posturing in Egyptianesque draperies, that scarcely mattered.

In the hundred and thirty-two years spanned by Mozart's "Thamos, König in Aegypten" and Debussy's Egyptian ballet, "Khamma," we view a panorama of gradually altered values about to be thrown into further disarray by a series of actresses, courtesans and dancers: Cleo de Merode, Sarah Bernhardt, Maud Allan, and others, who indulged themselves in an oriental charade that set the stage for a notorious and persistent stereotype. Salome, interpreted by Jules

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Massenet as a tragic and even chaste heroine in his opera, "Herodiade," was suddenly transformed by Oscar Wilde into a symbol of decadence and amorality.

This "*Drame en un Acte*" was written for Bernhardt, and she was in the midst of rehearsals when the censor brought the production to a halt. The play first reached the public when it was published in 1893 with 15 drawings by Aubrey Beardsley, one of which bore the caption, "La danse du ventre." How, and perhaps why, the textual "Danse des sept voiles" metamorphosed into Beardsley's "The Stomach Dance" (as it was translated by Lord Alfred Douglas) leads to fascinating speculations.

Richard Strauss' opera based on Wilde's play created a storm, and fanciful versions of the subject abounded. Perhaps none was more novel than Nazimova's, which was preserved in a 1921 film of pretentious absurdity. The vision of Salome, removing her veils one by one, has been durably buoyed up by Strauss' music and is resuscitated periodically with ever new attempts to fuse semi-balletic gestures with neo *danse du ventre*.

Oriental stereotypes in the twentieth century also derive from several other relatively recent sources: the interpretation of Oriental dances created by Ruth St. Denis and the dancers choreographed for innumerable productions of "Kismet" and similarly conceived theatricals. But it was the sumptuous costumes and settings designed by Leon Bakst for the Diaghilef Company's ballet, "Scheherazade," that helped create the special stereotype which is perpetuated not only in revivals of this production, but which, in a less elevated style, has been embalmed in the often preposterous incongruities for which cinematic ventures inspired by biblical or oriental themes are notorious.

While an aura of delightful wickedness has long surrounded actresses and opera dancers, especially those with exotic pretensions, it was the haunting image of Mata Hari that helped create a sinister embodiment of the *danseuse orientale*. A notorious courtesan and dancer, Mata Hari was convicted of espionage during the First World War and shot by a firing squad. Her incarnation of the femme fatale helped give rise to a motion picture genre that has perpetuated the association of venality and amorality with Oriental dancing.

From out of Asia. In a century that saw the extension of Western colonialism and a concurrent reduction of Ottoman domination, Russia occupied a special relationship to both East and West. Its policies were primarily directed at expanding its own national boundaries, rather than the establishment of an overseas empire, and as its frontiers abutted those of the Turks, Tartars and Persians, these peoples were regarded as neighbors-more real and dangerous than romantic and mysterious.

Yet the Russians, too, were attracted by Asiatic themes, and when Russian operas and ballets with Oriental coloration reached European audiences, they revealed a new and surprising ambiance that seemed to bring Asia into sharper focus. But it was a different Orient than the Islamic world bordering the Mediterranean, or the India so familiar to the British, and it produced a unique response in the Russian imagination. Strangely, no matter how much is written about the phenomenon of Orientalism, Russia's contributions are scantied; a possible explanation may lie in the European notion that Russians are themselves Asiatics.

The Dancers of Shamakha. The queen of Shamakha in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, "Le Coq d'Or," embodies Russian fantasies of Asia in a highly romantic way. Yet, the Tartar city of Shamakha was, and is, a real place. A description of what it was like at the end of the nineteenth century appears in the memories of an Armenian dancer, Armen Ohanian, who compares herself to the legendary dancers of that city, calling her memoirs "The Dancer of Shamakha." Her adventures in Persia-where she danced for the young Shah-and in Egypt, give a fascinating picture of the milieu from which she emerged. A chance offer brought Mille Ohanian to Europe, where she eventually wrote her memoirs, through the encouragement, and with the considerable assistance of Antole France, whose gallant letter serves as an introduction to the book. Despite

its considerable shortcomings, this book deserves to be reprinted. A patient perusal will be amply rewarded with a fascinating account of a vanished world.

Unfortunately, Mille. Ohanian felt a need to apologize for her profession, though no blame should be attached to her attempt to give her art some meaning beyond the obvious. She has, nonetheless, led astray generations of students of the dance by calling belly dancing a "poem of the mystery and pain of motherhood." This passage has contributed greatly to current misconceptions about the origins of this dance.

The claim that the dance is intended less as entertainment than as a ritual symbolizing motherhood has a special appeal for feminists; it is therefore not difficult to understand the motivation for such eager acceptance of the following oft-quoted apologia at face value:

Romanticism and Prudery. Archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth century and scholarly works such as Frazer's "Golden Bough" have enriched our perceptions, but have also distracted from factual understanding of the past by interposing enigmatic images that tempt into the realm of myth. At the close of the eighteenth century, when Egyptologists first commenced the serious study of the antiquities of Pharaonic Egypt, they deplored the lively sensuality of these dances which seemed so at variance with the supposed spirit of an earlier epoch. It is understandable that those scholars would try to find some trace of a more sober dance tradition than the uninhibited exhibitions of the Ghawazee. Thus in examining the multitude of carvings and paintings, they were predisposed to document acrobatic exercises and religious processions with more zeal than representation of nude dancers performing at banquets.

Just as it had become the fashion to regard the Moslem and Hindu East as sensual, so it gradually became the vogue to regard the ancient East, particularly Egypt, as mystical and spiritual. The desire to implement this image has caused some rather naive imaginings to find their way into print:

The human line and the mural frieze collectively form a background for the work of a leading dancer, who flits from place and duplicates the poses of such figures as she may choose.

Social History of Voluptuous Dance. More than any other single factor, it is the social status of the performing artist that shapes Oriental dance's history.

The first actual accounts of what can reliably be called belly dancing were of the *Gaditanae*. Public dancing girls from Gades (now Cadiz). There is not the slightest indication that their dancing was any less secular than that of the girls in Neb Amon's fresco, and circumstances in which they performed at Rome, as well as the descriptions of their dancing, bear a striking resemblance to the entertainments that centuries later were provided for shahs and sultans, rajahs and amirs.

The continuous cultural interaction that had been possible during the Roman Empire at its height was now fostered by the Arabs-in both the eastern and western Caliphates-during the Golden Age of Islam. That dancing was taken more seriously at this time than at a later period is testified by a tenth century work, "Muruj Al Dhahah Wa Man 'Adin A! Jawar," which included a passage on dance of both historic and didactic value.

As the Arabic star faded and the Turkish crescent rose, the cultural legacy of this world was not disrupted but perpetuated with only the subtle alterations that time inevitably brings.

Dance could not remain entirely unaffected by the changes that are brought about in matters of language, dress and music. Yet the changes appear to have been minimal. The taste of the audience is reflected by the artist; thus the quality of performance in the past ran the gamut then, as now, from that of the ragged street entertainer to what might have been seen in the palaces of princes who maintained their own private troupes of dancers and musicians. These entertainers,

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organized as companies into large guilds, were supported by the wealthy. The *motreb* of Persia and *nautchnees* of India enjoyed the patronage of the Qajar dynasty and the maharajahs of North India. Similar corporations of dancers and musicians in Turkestan and Ottoman Turkey were supported in the same way.

The social position of these entertainers paralleled that of their counterparts in the Arab countries, Europe and the Far East-they constituted a demi-monde.

PART II