

Meetings in the Middle East

(Part II)

by Aisha Ali

Cairo at the dawn of the '70's was rapidly increasing its population, yet the native inhabitants maintained a mood of tranquility in spite of the changes taking place. Brushing shoulders in the busy streets and being pressed between Fiats and donkey carts, did not seem disturbing but rather a condition of interesting times.

Women and girls walked through the streets in protective numbers, their black melias pulled over their heads and across their cheeks. Those carrying bundles often secured their wraps between clenched teeth, while others were always shifting and re-arranging them. Should the right person happen to be watching, he might catch a glimpse of a seductive brown arm laden with gold bangles.

I had been in Cairo for a month now, and had seen many oriental dancers with varying degrees of fame and skill. My obsession for finding the remains of the old music and dance traditions had taken me to some of the more exotic sections of town, places where respectable citizens were rarely found and where taxi drivers refused to go unless rewarded with extra money or persuasive smiles.

Most of the people I spoke with suggested that I contact the Reda brothers and see a performance of the famous "Reda Company" dances. Zenouba, a celebrated Egyptian dancer living in Los Angeles, had given me the telephone number of Ali Reda, who had been her choreographer during the early '60's, and it was my intention to call him.

On one occasion, my friend Fadilla introduced me to a Mr. Abdul Tejan Sie, a diplomat from one of the West African embassies. After I told him about my interest in folklore, he said he wanted me to meet his friend, the father-in-law of the Reda brothers. He insisted on taking me to him straight away, and drove me to Zemelak, where Farida Fahmi lives with her husband, Ali Reda, in her father's home. We were received by Farida's mother, an English woman, and her father, Dr. Hassan Fahmi. They invited us to stay for tea, and it was then that I learned part of the romantic history of the Reda Company.

Dr. Fahmi, a former professor at the University of Cairo, told me that his two daughters had met the Reda brothers, Ali and Mahmoud, while they were in school together. They soon be-

came two couples and the brothers and sisters married. "The children," he said, "were in love with the theater and dance, and I saw no reason to discourage them. When the boys came to me and said that they wanted to start a dance company, I did everything to help them, and by their combined talents and enthusiasm, they did very well." It might have been a perfect story of love and success, but it was tragically interrupted when Farida's sister, Mahmoud's first wife, became ill and died while the company was on tour.

That evening I received an invitation for dinner from Mahmoud,

Ali and Farida, and in the weeks that followed, I had the pleasure of spending many interesting hours with them. On those occasions and during my visits in the years to come, I was able to learn more about the background of the Reda Company.

Ali Reda had been active in the company during its formative years and remained as a co-director; however, he had been developing a separate career as a film director and producer and frequently served in that capacity for the troupe.

Farida Fahmi has remained an essential part of the company. She is the leading soloist and has starred in many Egyptian films, sometimes playing the romantic lead opposite her brother-in-law, Mahmoud.

The backbone of the group is Mahmoud Reda, its artistic director and choreographer. He was born in Egypt in 1930. His brown hair and blue eyes are possibly from Albanian ancestors. He is modest and soft spoken with gentlemanly manners. In 1952 he represented Egypt in the Olympics as a gymnast. His speciality was high diving. In 1954 he graduated from the Faculty of Commerce at the

University of Cairo, and for several years worked as an accountant for the Shell Oil Company. He began as a self-taught dancer and spent some time with an Argentinean dance troupe.

The Reda Company was first organized in 1959 when it was composed of sixteen dancers and sixteen musicians. They began as an independent company, but by 1961, when they had proved their popularity, they became a national troupe, subsidized by the Egyptian government. At the beginning their dances were taken solely from local Cairo folklore, but later Mahmoud Reda and some of the others traveled throughout the Egyptian



Farida Fahmi, lead soloist, and members of the Reda Company in a folkloric dance sketch. (Photo: Mahmoud Reda)

countryside to gather folk material for new choreographies that would represent the various cultures within Egypt. "We try to take the traditional dances and costumes and present them in a theatrical way that will be entertaining to everyone," he said. "I believe that if you present a folk dance exactly as it is in the villages, it will not be exciting on a large stage."

The company has a studio in downtown Cairo where rehearsals are held and dance classes are conducted for members of the troupe. They begin training girls from the age of fourteen and the dancers are drawn from the high schools and the institute for ballet.

At the time of this interview in 1971, the troupe was appearing on the average of one hundred and thirty times per year. Having performed throughout the Middle East and Africa, they fulfilled a fifteen day engagement in Paris at the Olympian Palace and toured to seventeen cities in Germany, Greece, Russia, the Far East and London, where they appeared at Albert Hall. A musical drama entitled "Revenge" was being planned for the following season, depicting a family feud among the fellahin living in the cotton belt.

Mahmoud Reda lives in El Gizera with his wife Ruska and their daughter Shireen. Their spacious flat overlooks the Nile and is furnished with a simplicity that reflects European taste. Apart from the dance troupe, Mahmoud has a great interest in photography and his walls are filled with examples of his work. His golden haired daughter, Shireen, is his favorite subject. As a baby, a photo of her appeared on the cover of a popular record album, showing her seated in a wash basin. Ruska is a ballerina from Yugoslavia and teaches ballet at the Reda school.

Farida and Mahmoud encouraged me to attend the classes that they conducted, and they invited me to performances of other government sponsored dance companies, such as the Tanta Troupe and the National Troupe of Iraq.

I was very impressed by the methods they had developed for teaching Egyptian dance. This was no easy task since it was necessary for them to work with large groups in a relatively small space. Firm discipline was maintained in the classes: the dancers cooperated obediently. One by one they moved in a diagonal line across the floor following the example of their instructor. They would lead first with one hip and then turn in the opposite direction and lead with the other. They were drilled in folk dance on one day and ballet on the next, alternating throughout the week. Boys and girls were instructed in separate rooms, but they mixed together freely between classes. The girls that I watched all seemed to possess a natural

grace and self-confidence in spite of their youth. They had a good example in Farida, who combined a knowledge of ballet and modern dance with the relaxed styling of an Egyptian dancer.

Another bright star on the scene at that time was Leila, a vivacious young girl who was later to marry the third Reda brother. You may remember her picture from the cover of *Arabesque*, Vol. II, No. 2. She was as much at home with the *Raks es Sharki* style as she was with the folklore material, and I preferred her oriental dancing to most of what I had seen in the cabarets of Cairo. (It was Leile who taught me the famous lemon and sugar beauty secret which is used by virtually all Egyptian women.)

In those days it was forbidden for foreigners to visit certain places, which made it difficult for me since these were usually the very places I wished to go. I was so intent on seeing some of the famed Ghawazee of Monsura and Sumbat, that I had even made arrangements to travel with a young Egyptian boy, hoping that I would pass as his sister by dressing in a long black *khamisa* with a *tarha* over my head. The problem was how to communicate without opening my mouth. Mahmoud thought that such a venture was unnecessary and he arranged for a famous *ghaziyeh* from Monsura to come to me.

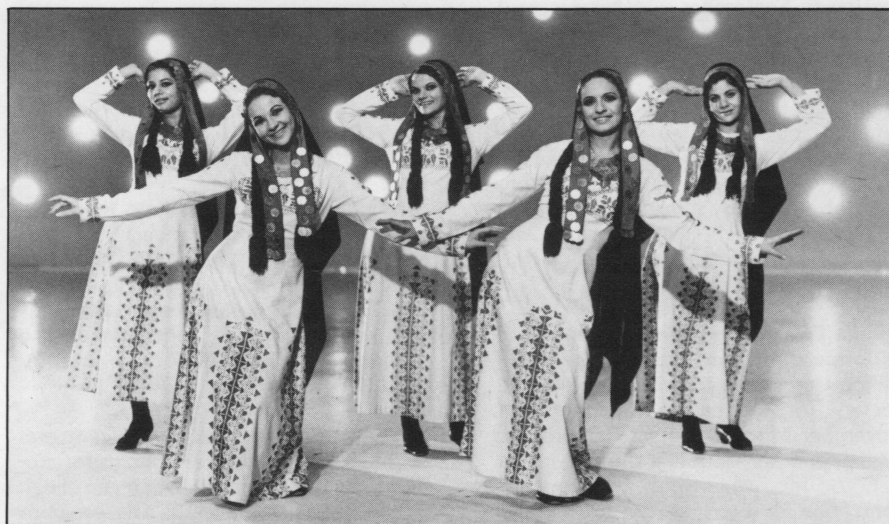
It happened that Leila's friend, who was also one of the dancers in the troupe, had originally studied with the *almee* Nezla El Adel, and she agreed to take us to meet her at her home on Muhammed Ali Street.

Muhammed Ali Street is in the old section of Cairo and is well known for being the home of "ladies of the evening" as well as the center for wedding dancers and musicians of the lower class. On the main part of the street are many shops for musical instruments, in-

cluding *mizmars*, *nais*, and *segat*. We followed along a narrow, crooked side street and up a flight of stairs, pushing past chickens and goats until finally we came to the apartment of Nezla El Adel. The salon where she received us was filled with ornate gilded French furniture and formed a strong contrast to the world outside the door. A young boy from the neighborhood was sent to buy some Pepsi for us, and a local brand of cola for the others. On the walls were pictures of Nezla and many of the girls she had trained who became well known. She was a handsome woman, somewhat older than her pictures on the wall. Her manners were friendly and unpretentious. Since she had just returned from Monsura where she had been visiting her family, she was happy to be back among her friends. They quickly became engaged in an animated exchange of gossip. Before we left, Mezla promised to come to the Reda studio to see me.

Several days later I found Nezla waiting for me at the studio with Farida. She was wearing a flowered print dress and sat demurely in a wooden chair waving a paper fan. When I asked her if she would be willing to dance for me that day, she shook her head as if to say "no" and fluttered her fan more briskly. It was hard for me to conceal my disappointment and before I realized what had happened, she disappeared. "Perhaps she doesn't perform anymore," I thought, "and it really was not polite for me to press her." Then just as suddenly, she reappeared wearing a black and lurex *toube* with a sash around her hips, and a *mandil* tied over her hair. With a laughing squeal she jumped into the air and landed in a split. Farida began to accompany her on the *tabla* and Nezla moved in ways that I had never seen before or since. While in her split position, she lifted her

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Reda Company members in regional costumes for an Egyptian television special. Leila is far left. (Photo: Mahmoud Reda)

mies." The Karadeniz, or Black Sea dances are Bora's special area of interest, and it gave him particular satisfaction to work with this fine performing group. When I first proposed that Bora come to Ann Arbor to teach belly dancers the women's dances of Turkey, he was "scared," by his own account — not to face so many women — but wondering at what relevance they would find for themselves in his teaching. Three such workshops convinced him of our sincerity and our hunger for source material. In seminars where a folk dancer and danse orientale teacher, such as our winter festival with Bora and Phaedra, are juxtaposed, the distinctions between ethnic and cabaret performances are highlighted, but so are the family relationships drawn between the two forms. Upon reflection, Bora recognizes that oriental dancers are not used to the precise footwork, or to holding their bodies

so firmly to execute quick and repetitive steps in a line where several persons become one; but he does appreciate that they are far more flexible in mind and body and have an ease in understanding style and in picking up tempos and rhythm changes. This experience, says Bora, makes him see the relevance of danse orientale in his own Turkish culture, and in the future he hopes to contribute much more to danse orientale workshops.

"Caravan Through Turkey," in early June, 1979, became an adventurous, sometimes experimental, but totally rewarding three week tour through Turkey, planned and led by Bora as a folklore study group. In each region we met with local dance groups, several of which had won recognition in international festivals, and finally, in Istanbul, had lessons in Turkish style danse orientale from Bey Erdal Atesmen, a respected

teacher whose studio is the only such school in Istanbul. On this journey we came across several collections of costumes and crafts that portray Turkey's rich cultural heritage, and a sense of the need to preserve it. In June, 1980, Bora plans to precede a similar two-week study tour with a week-long symposium for dancers at Aband, a resort situated between Ankara and Istanbul. In a fashion characteristic of Turkish folklore groups, with musicians live and pulsing, the teachers will be natives of the province of the dances they teach, the danse orientale teacher, a nomad, experienced in cabaret dance. Alison Snow, who now lives in California and teaches Turkish women's dances, will be there, and with the desired "kismet," so will I. After the symposium Bora will lead the second annual caravan into the heart of Turkey.

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back leg and bent it until her foot reached to her ear. This she did while sliding her head from side to side with the rhythm. Also in the split position, she would create a quivering motion in one of her buttocks, then it would cease and the opposite cheek would tremble, and this phenomenon would repeat itself throughout various sections of her anatomy. With an amused smile she would watch us looking at her as though she were detached from her body. When she came up from her split, she balanced a flaming candelabra on her head and demonstrated a variety of shimmies which she seemed to delight in and gave them a great deal of effortless energy. At one point she began to make a suggestive circular motion with her pelvis, while maintaining a vibrating action. She reached over and playfully slapped me on the rump and motioned for me to follow her example. When she saw me imitating her movement, she again started to squeal with laughter,

and we both laughed until we could dance no more.

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Part III of *Meetings in the Middle East* will appear in *Arabesque's* May/June issue.



Nezla El Adel: "With an amused smile she would watch us look at her as though she were detached from her body." (Photo: Aisha Ali)

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