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January 2011

Beledi بلدي

Before “modern” belly dance – *raqs sharqi* – appeared in the 1920s, there was *raqs beledi*. “Beledi” (BELL-a-dee) simply means “belonging to my community” and can apply to anything including bread, cheese – and people.

While Badia Masabni’s nightclub dancers were performing *raqs sharqi*, other professional dancers (such as those in Mohammed Ali Street) and men and women at home were still doing *raqs beledi*. Beledi dance is done to beledi music – people’s music – without the elaborate orchestration and Western scales often found in nightclub music. Beledi dance matches the music – arms are simple, layering is minimal, emphasis is on the hips and there is little use of space. The dancer’s purpose is to express the music and connect the audience to the music through his or her body. No tricks. No ego.

After some decades, professional dancers began to meld the raw connectivity of beledi with the posture and training of *sharqi*. Fifi Abdou comes to mind. This led to using the term *sha`bi* to describe ordinary folks dance – especially to raw, sexually or politically explicit music.

Arabic Script - The Letter beh

Arabic script is written right to left. Letters change depending where they are in the word – that is standalone, beginning, middle or end. In normal writing only the long vowels are included.

Standalone: ب eg مغرب MA-ghreeb (meem ghain reh beh)

At the start of a word: بلدي BELL-a-dee (beh lam dal yeh)

Mid-word: شعبي SHA-a-bee (sheen ain beh yeh)

At the end: شعب SHA-b (sheen ain beh)

February & March 2011

Bedleh بدلة

Bedleh (BED-lah) is Arabic for “uniform” and is used by belly dancers to describe a costume of bra, belt, and skirt. Sometimes there will also be a body stocking (especially if the dancer is Egyptian or Egyptian influenced) or harem pants.

For professional costumes the belt is often part of the skirt. Semi-pro and students often have them separate so as look like they have more costumes. Since invented in the 1970s, the wrap around hip scarf (with coins and/or beaded fringe) has proved popular for students but is not usually considered suitable for bedleh.

Bedleh is subject to the whims of fashion. In the 80s skirts tended to be full – 1½ circles of satin or 2½ or more circles of chiffon. They were layered with other skirts or harem pants, boffed to the side and draped with very long fringing. The current fashion is for form fitting lycra sheaths with minimal fringing.

When choosing bedleh, select something that suits your body type – and the style of dance you will be doing. If it is to be used in a class or troupe performance be aware of possible colour and style restrictions before spending money.

Arabic Script - The Letter dal

The letter dal د is one of the Arabic letters that is not connected on the left hand side (remember Arabic is read right to left).

Bedleh is spelt beh ب dal د lam ل teh marbuta ة (count the dots)

May 2011

Shimmies:

*I wish I could I shimmy like my sister Kate;
She shimmies like a jelly on a plate*

Fats Waller, 1923

The **shimmy** is a defining movement in belly dance. A shimmy is a repeated, smooth, relaxed, driven movement in time with the music – usually double time. This is in contrast with a **vibration** (tense), a **freeze** (generated by muscle fatigue/tension), a **reverb**(eration) – a driven movement followed by a loose, gravity generated shake, and a mess – just jiggling around. (Terminology does vary between teachers but I find this breakdown most useful)

Any body part can be shimmied. Most common in belly dance are hips, shoulders and chest but the diaphragm (US) and hand (Khaleegi) are common and I've even seen eyebrows and nostrils!

Just looking at the hips, there are many different shimmies. The pelvis can be rocked up and down, twisted forward and back, tilted front and back, theoretically to the side, and any mix. These can be driven by the legs, abs, QLs or glutes (although usually this produces a vibration or freeze rather than a shimmy) – or a mix.

An interesting variation is the 3/4 shimmy. In this there are three movements and a pause. If combined with walking, and done with an up/down hip, it means the hip is in the same position each time you step. With a slow shimmy it is very obvious whether the emphasis is down or up. Even at full speed you can often distinguish them.

There is no One Right Way (assuming the result is smooth, relaxed, driven and in time with the music). Each variation has its place depending on the music and the look required. Some people will also find one shimmy layers a particular isolation better than another. You need to be able to do a range of different shimmies.

For each new shimmy **start slow**. Perfect the underlying movement. Then make it **smaller and faster**. Once you have it, train for endurance (a minute, two, five, ten minutes); layer it with other movements (slides, circles, eights, walking); have fun with it.

June 2011

What is a Stretch?

The term “stretch” gets bandied around in a very sloppy way. It seems to have at least four quite different meanings – depending on who is using it.

Some people (wrongly) use it to mean a warm-up. A warm-up prepares your body for dance (or exercise) and involves raising your internal body temperature. The muscles get more blood; the joints get more lubrication. The most effective way to warm-up is to move the big muscles of the legs and lift your arms above your heart.

Some people use it to mean a cool-down after exercise. Yes, you should cool-down and stretching is a useful way to do this – but not all cool-downs are stretches.

Some people use it to describe what I'd call “mobilization”. That is, moving your joints through their range of motion by moving gently.

Scientifically, a stretch is a way to elongate your **muscle** fibres. You do this to increase your range of motion – it is not needed to prepare for dance – but is a way of improving what you are capable of doing while dancing. A stretch is done with a warm body and holds a specific (and non-working) muscle (or muscles) at their extreme limit. You release and repeat as required.

Although people may tend to be “tight” or “loose”, it is not uncommon for a person to have some tight bits and some loose bits. To make the most of your stretches you need to target the muscles which are actually tight rather than do general stretches.

July 2011

Orientale?

(On reporting back from Momo Kadous' workshops)

So what, I here you asking, is "Orientale"?

Orientale (orient-ahl) is short for *danse orientale* which is French for *raqs sharqi*. It translates to "Eastern Dance" – but it isn't far eastern. Rather it is **east of Paris**. To most of us – belly dance.

Egyptian professional dancers refer to the **non-folkloric** parts of their show as "Orientale". In this case, "folklore" would be widened to include beledi or shaabi pieces. (And in case you are wondering, I have yet to find an Egyptian that sees the connection between Tribal and any type of "belly dance" – so it wouldn't be in the show)

And, often it can be used as simply as that. Belly dance that isn't folklore (or Tribal) is Orientale. But there is also a finer point. Strictly, belly dancing to pop music isn't "Orientale" either. Why? Because **dance styles are defined by the music**. Orientale music is more complex than pop.

Orientale music is often fully orchestrated; there are many different layers to dance to. Your feet may be following the drum while your torso interprets the legato.

There are invariably multiple rhythm changes within the piece. This is where you'll often come across the 10/8 for instance. But you'll also commonly have maqsum, masmoudi sager, malfuf, sa`iidi and often khaleegi, ayoub, felahi, maybe even çiftetelli. The dancer has to adapt her movement vocabulary and attitude to each change. Following the feel and source culture.

You will also have a range of motifs which repeat; often there is a question and answer structure that is repeated with minor changes in instrumentation, rhythm or "key".

This leads to quite sophisticated dance with layering and subtle changes. It calls for clean technique - with personality and the ability to express a range of emotions. It is nearly always solo.

And, the costume? It's usually danced in bedleh (bra and belt) although a fitted sparkly dress is also appropriate. Basically you don't want to lose any of the movement.

August 2011

Early Western Innovations

The “first generation” dancers in the States – those non-Middle Easterners who learnt their dance from Middle Easterners living in the States in the 1950s and 60s - all learnt by watching people dance. But it wasn't a perfect copy. They applied their own experience to what they saw and tried to recreate. For instance most were already trained dancers – but in ballet, jazz or flamenco. So belly dance started its new life with an accent.

And the culture in the States also changed the dance. For instance, many of the dancers were at Greek clubs – but most danced a mix of Turkish, Lebanese and Armenian belly dance. So the first fusion in the west was between different Middle Eastern styles.

Their dance also reflected the music. There were very few ethnically “pure” bands. Musicians got together with other musicians as there were available and talented and mixed and mingled the music of their home land. The band composition could change night to night (in the early days, dancers performed 6 nights a week). So there was a musical fusion between many cultures.

The first generation dancers also added veil – not that common in the Middle East. And not just veil – truly Orientalist veil. The peek-a-boo kind. The dancer would arrive wrapped and dance for a while then untuck here and retuck there before finally revealing her costume after 5 or 10 minutes. I believe it was Bobby Farrah who introduced more use of flowing fabric á la Isadora Duncan. But you saw both styles until recently.

Around 1963 a new trick was added by a Greek dancer, Helena Vlahos, rolling coins over and folding dollar bills. This trick caught the public imagination and many of the general public think this is what belly dance is all about!

The new dancers unaccustomed to dancing a 45 minute improvisation tried to structure their time in a way that was easier to handle and so the “American Seven Part Routine” was created with a predictable flow from fast to slow songs.

*Excerpt from **Belly Dance – the Last 100 Years** by Judith Varga*

September 2011

Oum Kalthoum

Om Kalthoum – the Voice of Egypt – was born in the village of Tammay Al-Zahayra in 1898. She was a gifted singer initially accompanying her father to sing verses from Koran. For this, her father would dress her as a boy (1914).

Om Kalthoum's family moved to Cairo in 1920s. She sang secular poetry in private parties in on stage. Later her concerts would be broadcast through Egypt and the Arab world via radio on the first Thursday of the month. For years her music was played every day at 5pm on the radio. The hotel I stayed in Cairo in 2003 still played her music 24 hours a day in public spaces.

Her songs explored the concept of *tarab* – losing yourself in the music and generating that feeling in your audience. Some were an hour long and played with only a few lines of text.

In 1964, in collaboration with Mohammad Abd Al-Wahab, she merged classical Arabic and Western music to create a new type of singing.

It is this later music that most belly dancers know. The first dancer to dare to dance to her music was Suheir Zaki. She nervously asked permission and was granted it. (Some say you shouldn't dance to the bits where Om Kalthoum would be singing – even if your version is an instrumental.)

When Om Kalthoum died in 1975 she brought Cairo to a standstill as millions came out into the streets to mourn her passing.

Om Kalthoum not only sang and starred in six movies, but was a nationalist who helped the Egyptian revolution, raised money for arms, brought Arab states together and was loved by the people of Egypt.

"Not through hope will the prize be taken,
The world is taken by struggle"

Om Kalthoum" means "mother of Kalthoum". It is variously spelt "Oum Koltom", "Um Kolsoum", "Umm Kulthum", "Uum Kulthum" depending on how the vowels are transliterated and whether the classical (Kalthoum) or dialectic pronunciation is chosen for the tha.

(For Egyptian background there is also "Umm Kulthum - A Voice Like Egypt" which has been recently released on DVD by Arab Film Distribution.)

November 2011

The Reda Troupe

Folk Dance – dance done by ordinary “folk”. Usually simple, repetitive and often long. Can be used for celebrations, group cohesion, ritual or just entertainment. Specific to time and place.

Folkloric Dance – performance version of the above often by outsiders. Usually with more variation, more difficult technique and shorter. Sometimes blends in other dance genres and theatre.

Reda Style Folkloric – an Egyptian style of folkloric dance developed by the Reda Troupe from the 1960s onwards. Based on folk dances as observed by Reda et al but “modernized”. Characterised by use of tableaux and clean living – dancers portray naïve village girls and boys and men never shimmy! Ironically, most Egyptians today consider this style as “authentic” Egyptian folk dance.

After the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, there was a push for a redefinition of Egyptian art and culture. Mahmoud Reda was urban, well educated and in his twenties. He, together with his brother, Ali, and their wives (Farida Fahmy and Nadeeda) formed the core of the Reda Troupe in 1959 (one of my teacher Dr Mo Geddawi was also involved then)

They did a lot of field work but basically invented traditions (such as the Fellahin dances) which fitted with the new Egypt as the educated elite wanted it to be. Reda was a great fan of western musicals such as *West Side Story* and that, more than “ballet” per se is a strong influence in his choreography. (Although there are also influences from the Moiseyev Dance Company)

Reda deliberately sanitised the dance removing strong movement of the belly and the hips; the tableaux include lots of footwork with low arabesques. To further distance it from “belly dance” they used groups rather than soloists and choreography rather than improvisation (as improvised solos were considered the hallmark of orientale). It was many years before Reda Troupe included any Orientale items.

The other state funded folk company was the Firqa Qawmiyya which was a collaboration with the Moscow Ballet (this was the troupe Denise Enan joined at 13). They produced a similar style of fantasy folkloric.