

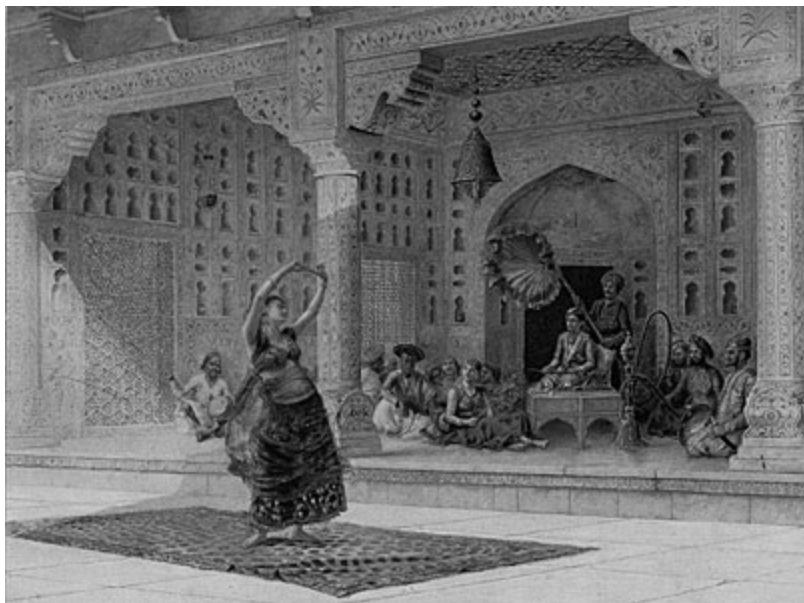
Dance du Ventre: a Fresh Appraisal (Part II)

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.



A Nautch performance during the British Raj. One of a series of Indian scenes by the English Orientalist painter E.L. Weeks.

Ambivalent attitudes toward the performing arts. The ambiguous position of the performing artist in society is neither recent nor confined to the Orient. This faintly disreputable air is magnified when the performer is a dancer, of course, for the emotions elicited are more likely to respond to the physically attractive nature of the performance. But how the dancer is perceived depends upon one consideration above all others: hire. The status of the individual, as in prostitution, is based directly on the question of remuneration. It is sufficiently objectionable to perform in public at all, but to be hired for the purpose adds the final touch of opprobrium.

Danse Sacres et Profanes. Few artists flourish after their patronage has been withdrawn, and when dynasties fall or conquerors retreat, the entertainers, no longer prosperous, either disappear as a group, as did the *motreb* in Persia, or their numbers wither away, as has happened with the Ghawazee in Egypt, and more recently the Ouled Nail in Algeria. A third fate awaited the entertainers attached to the courts of North India. The *nautch* guilds survive more or less intact; in New Delhi, for example, the musicians' association consists of about two hundred dancing girls and over five hundred musicians. But the taste of today's patrons—taxi drivers, shopkeepers and the like—is not as refined, alas, as that of the princes and *zamindars*, and thus the direction of the performers is increasingly away from art and toward prostitution.

Whether voluptuous dances are lascivious or not depends less on anything inherent in the dances themselves than on the individual dancer and the tastes of the audience for whom they are performed. It would be as much a mistake to underrate the sexual attraction of the dancer as it would be to overrate the sexual element in the dance. In general it is probably safe to say that insofar as a hired entertainer is wanting in skill or beauty, there would be a temptation to offer lewdness as a substitute means of holding an audience. It must be remembered, however, that

when performed by professional entertainers, these dances are intentionally seductive in character.

Voluptuous Asiatic dances almost invariably depict amorous episodes; the mood is set by the music and developed in the poetry of the song which is expressed by the dancer. Although the use of mime and the amount of pure dance vary considerably from style to style as well as from artist to artist, it is this histrionic character of the performance as a whole that has caused oriental dancers to be called actresses.

The subjects of these dances are usually drawn from poems about legendary lovers. It is always explained, however, that dances derived from texts dealing with Krishna and Radha or Krishna and the *gopis*, for example, are religious. Similar ambiguities are present in much of Persian and Arabic poetry and remain unresolved because:

The use of the word "love" and other rather mundane if not sensuous terminology to conceal Sufi metaphors was too real not to be taken at face value. He who reads the poems of the famous Persian poet Hafiz finds it difficult to determine from them what is in reference to the divine and what may easily be taken as expressions of worldly love.

In the arts it has never been an easy task to draw a firm line between the sacred and the profane. Christianity and Judaism, as well as Islam, have had their share of difficulty in this area—the doctrine that God is Love has such a multiplicity of interpretations.

In the eye of the beholder. For those who would like to associate voluptuous dancing with ancient mother goddesses, an examination of the Great Goddess cult, where it still prevails, would be rewarding. In Malabar, for example, the ritual dances celebrate the Goddess' invincibility when doing battle with her foes. Voluptuous dancing is most frequently encountered in dances performed at Vaishnavite and other Hindu temples by *devadasis*. The dances that are incorporated into the worship of the Lord Jagannatha in Orissa provide a good example of this highly developed art form as presented for the delectation of a god.

Dancing that is intended to please a male deity probably derives from dancing that is pleasing to mortals, and so in 1592, when the Moghul conquerors appointed the Rajah of Khurda superintendent of the Jahannath Temple, he soon began to employ the *maharis* at the courts of Khurda and Puri. So successful was this venture that he set aside several streets for the various types of temple servants, prominent among whom were the *gotipuas*, boy dancers who dressed and performed in exact imitation of the maharis.

Professional dancing in the Middle East, North Africa, and much of the Indian subcontinent is essentially female dancing, whether done by a male or female, and in none of these voluptuous dances does the style alter to accommodate itself to a male performer. Indeed, this should be made amply clear by the fact that female attire was almost invariably worn by the dancing boys of Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan, India and the Arab countries. It also helps to explain the attitude toward a male performer who does dances in public that are not of an essentially martial or gymnastic character, or do not in some way create a masculine presence.

In North Africa, however, the movements of the torso usually associated with voluptuous dancing are so integral a part of the folk culture that a peasant uses them without self-consciousness. But dance performance is inconsistent with the traditional dignity of the upper classes, whose pleasure in the dance remains that of the balletomane.

In Egypt and much of North Africa, where the techniques of folk dance and theatre dance are closely related, a parallel to popular dance in the United States may be observed. In both social and theatrical dancing in this country at the present time, the predominant popular style is one in which pelvic movements play an important part. Almost anyone can enjoy doing the improvisatory social version or watching a choreographed stage presentation; and some will prefer to see it in a nightclub, performed nude or semi-nude, where it can—and indeed does—have erotic overtones.

What's in a name? Most of the travellers who, over the past few centuries, have described the dances of the Middle East, did so as casual observers, and although they were often struck by what they deemed the lascivious nature of the dances in all of these Eastern countries, their

descriptions and commentaries give what appear to be accurate reports of what they actually witnessed.

In bringing back accounts of the “dance of the Orientals,” as it was most commonly called, these writers also employed terms descriptive of the total effect of the performance, such as *danse lascive* and *danse voluptueux*. Appellations designating the class of person performing the dance—“dance of the alme” or “dance of the Ghawazee,” for example—were replaced, by the end of the nineteenth century, with the anatomically descriptive terms in common use today (gobek atmak is as current in Turkey as belly dance is in the United States). But certain dances take their names from some special accessory used by the dancer, and where mime figures prominently, dances have often been identified by their theme or subject. Famous among these is “*la danse de l’abeille*” a charming “striptease” in which the dancer, with studied artlessness, removes portions of her clothing as she searches for an imaginary bee. The path of the creeping insect can be followed as the tremblings and spasms of the dancers’ muscles are seen now in one part of her body, now in another.

This is also the kind of dance that gave rise to the rather repugnant term, “muscle dance.” While these somewhat specialized skills are of only secondary importance in oriental dancing today, until the Second World War the more traditional of Egypt’s best dancers still incorporated many of them into their dance. Nabouia El Moustafa, despite her lack of star billing in the many films in which she appeared, was in demand for the extravagant private entertainments of the period. Besides the famous shimmy in which she trembled from head to toe, she was skilled in the most minute and individually executed muscular isolations. These traditional techniques are necessary for performing not only the “bee dance,” but several other dances in which some special feat is performed. A typical example is the “*danse de verres*” in which the dancer lies on the floor in a backbend, rhythmically clinking together two glasses balanced upon her breasts.

Dance and Moslem mores. Much of the nonsense that is circulated about oriental dancing is rooted in a profound ignorance of the cultures in which it is both the social and theatre dance, the classical and the folk dance.

The Moslem world has always sought to cordon off its respectable women from those women who have either been born into or chosen an alternative role to that of wife. And until the present time, this segregation has been the custom, albeit not quite so strictly enforced, in both the Far East and Western world.

Dancing and music are enjoyed as much and as frequently in Moslem countries as elsewhere; oft-cited injunctions to the contrary have always been taken more seriously by Westerners than by Moslems themselves. Though neither Christianity nor Islam has been free of puritanical bigotry, neither has been enslaved by it for long. In the matter of dancing, however, there is a very important difference in the attitude that has less to do with dance itself than with the proprieties in general: a woman who dances before men not of her own family is automatically assumed to be advertising herself for sale, and no man wants his wife, sister or daughter to be thought a whore. This objection does not, of course, obtain in the hareem, where women have always counted dancing one of their chief amusements.

One of the best ways to understand the social position of the dancer in the Arab world today is by seeing as many as possible of the film musicals that have been made in Cairo over the past forty years. The most frequently used story is something like the following: Bey’s son meets dancer. Bey discovers son’s attachment with disapproval. Bey attempts seduction of dancer, who refuses him. Bey reluctantly accepts the proposition that this particular girl is virtuous *even if she is a dancer*. Bey’s son weds dancer with parental approval (and big wedding with lots of songs and dancing). The girl is suspect because of her profession, but like the Irish actress in one of Thackeray’s novels, she is the exception who marries the marquis, or, as the case may be, the Bey’s son.

The dancers themselves almost invariably explain that the sexual element in their dance is minimal. Those who have interviewed them for the press often attribute such statements to an attempt to elevate their art. This may well be so, but women enjoy watching a good professional

dancer as much as they enjoy dancing for themselves and for each other. It would be remarkable if any high percentage of them found it erotic. Voluptuous dancing sometimes does include lascivious gestures, but because those who write about the dance tend to respond subjectively, and because individual performances vary so greatly, the question remains ambiguous.

The importance of costume. The costume that is worn by the dancer so greatly affects the attitude with which the dance is received that it is probably valuable to mention something of its provenance. It has been remarked that the present-day belly dancer's costume bears little resemblance to the long-sleeved gown and pantaloons which were worn in the nineteenth century. The reason is to be found in the disruption of tradition that followed the British presence in Egypt and hastened the disintegration of Turkish cultural domination.

For several centuries Ottoman rule extended not only over many Arab states, but Caucasia and a great part of Eastern Europe as well. Constantinople had gradually become the arbiter of fashion for much of the Islamic world, just as Paris came to dictate fashions for most of Europe. That is why so many nearly identical costumes, music and dances are to be encountered from the Balkans to North India and from Turkestan to Morocco.

It is necessary to look elsewhere for the origins of the voluminous skirts, worn on the hips, and the brief spangled upper garment half hidden by gauzy veils. These formed the dress of the *nautchnee*, and this was the costume in which the British were accustomed to seeing voluptuous dancing in India. Variations of this costume were also worn by the Persian motreb, but were less frequently observed by foreigners. And so, by the time the British protectorate was established in Egypt, this style, which had been adopted by such music hall dancers as Hildegard Kaulbach, became the fashion with Egyptian dancers.

The image created by this costume has become the indelible symbol of oriental dance. So strong is the effect of the costume on the sensibilities of the observer that Kaulbach, Mata Hari and others are immediately identified as "belly dancers" just from the costume in which they have been photographed.

In a somewhat futile attempt to reverse this association, the Egyptian government passed an edict that Egyptian dancers be required to cover their torsos. The dancers have complied with this ruling in various ways; the most usual device is the simple addition of a very thin leotard-like garment to their usual costume. The original intention of the directive was less one of prudery than a desire to make certain that Egyptian dancers would not be confused with performers in the Parisian-style semi-nude reviews which the government tolerates.

Dance in Egypt today. Today Egypt has once again become a place of pilgrimage—but the ancient mysteries sought for are now those of the lingering dance traditions in the keeping of a few scattered families of the hereditary entertainer caste. Since 1973, when Aisha Ali's recordings of actual performances by the Luxor Ghawazee were first released, a trip to Egypt has become almost obligatory for serious students of Egyptian dance.

Aisha's stay with the Maazin family in Luxor gave her the opportunity to observe these particular Ghawazee at first hand. As might be expected, they exhibit a fairly unified style, but one that nonetheless allows for much individuality.

Little girls in the hereditary dancing families grow up watching and imitating their elder sisters, of course, but their actual instruction is usually in the hands of female members of the family who no longer perform publicly. As with Gypsies, to whom the Ghawazee have often been compared, music and dance are not compartmentalized, but constitute a way of life. But learning to dance in this traditional learning situation has become less and less common, until at the present time it can hardly be said to continue outside the remaining Ghawazee families.

Since their removal from Cairo well over a century ago, the Ghawazee have remained somewhat isolated in various smaller communities, and the professional dancers of the metropolis are now drawn from other sources. With the emergence of the film industry in the 1930's, the cinema theatre has replaced the environment of the professional family as a learning situation. Any girl who loved dancing and really wanted to learn could go to the films with her family and see her

favorite dancers over and over. Such really fine dancers as Tahia Carioca set standards for more than a generation of Egyptian girls who would not, in the ordinary course of events, have been permitted to see performers of any greater skill than those hired for such weddings as they might have the opportunity to attend.

This would seem to make dancing teachers in Cairo redundant; but such is not, of course, the case. Famous dancers, when they have decided not to perform publicly any longer, will sometimes teach qualified pupils. Such teaching emphasizes refinements of interpretation, and not technique, because it is presumed that any Egyptian girl who wishes to become a dancer will have been learning and practicing since childhood. In fact, many dancers, like Nagwa Fuad, considered by some to be the finest dancer in Egypt today, are self-taught.

There are also a number of teachers who choreograph routines for girls who come to the city in the hope of finding gainful employment as dancers. These girls are serious about their dancing, but they have no illusions—they understand what is expected of them: entertainment.

There is little real improvisation in today's professional nightclub performance. While improvisation is less important to the art than it once was, it is not entirely dispensed with, because the dancer's response to her audience is a legitimate expectation within this dance tradition. The polished routines of today's best known entertainers, however, are less the result of inspiration than careful choreography and long diligent rehearsals with an orchestra. The relationship between the music and the dance cannot be overstressed: if the dancer is a highly paid performer, the music will have been specially arranged for her, often by a well-known composer, and will be played with exactitude.

It is really only at the lower levels of the economic structure that the dancer still performs with complete spontaneity—except at weddings and other private entertainments, where the atmosphere is like that of a party in the home, and everything is improvised. When the old custom of paying the dancer with nuqat is observed, she may continue her improvisations for half an hour or more.

Art, ethnology or entertainment? It is unrealistic to expect a cabaret audience, especially one in the United States, to take this (or any other) dance as serious art. Such an audience expects to be entertained. Indeed, that has been the expectation of audiences since time immemorial. When the purpose of a dancer is directed at putting her best efforts into being a really good entertainer, she will be more successful today—and at the same time more genuinely traditional—than those with some forlorn hope of initiating their audiences into aesthetic mysteries.

For American women who are excited by the vogue for oriental dancing, the best approach is through good technical training not overburdened with exotic trappings. The movement vocabulary can be transmitted by sufficiently competent instructors in a standard dance studio.

The recognition that ethnic dance is incomplete when removed from its native setting has led to transplantations of what is imagined to be the true ambiance of the belly dance. Such attempts usually perpetuate stereotypes or promote a specious and often glaringly inaccurate ethnic background. What is undesirable in a learning situation is magnified in a performance: a costume purporting to be "ethnic" may consist of jewelry, textiles and assemblage techniques from half a dozen Middle Eastern and North African countries. For some of its votaries, apparently, the chief attraction of the vogue may lie less in the dance itself than in the accompanying aura of somewhat unfocused exoticism.

The changing image. How the public views this dance at the present time is evidenced by its expectations in the field of entertainment. Today, at any folk dance festival, mock medieval fair or the like, the first—or nearly the first—question people now ask is, "What time does the belly dancer appear?" It was not so long ago that people looked at the program of events and gasped, "There's going to be a real belly dancer?"

In a recent issue of the *National Geographic Magazine* there appeared a photograph of a handsome young woman in a gold coin costume with scarlet veil and skirt. Beneath the picture is the caption: "Professional dancer and mother of four, wife Leah...entertains in Aspen." That Mrs.

Auster is identified by the generic term “dancer” and not singled out by the specific designation “belly dancer” indicates a revolutionary alteration in attitude.

The academic world and dance criticism are also undergoing change. At the 1978 joint conference of the American Dance Guild in Hawaii, a number of papers were presented, among them one entitled “The Changing Role of Women in the ‘Danse Oriental’: Its impact on Eastern and Western Dance Exchange.” A few years ago the merit of this topic as the subject of a serious study would probably have been challenged.

Given the climate of the performing arts today, even the charge, leveled at oriental dance throughout its history, that its appeal is chiefly the least elevated of emotions no longer precludes serious consideration of its artistic merits. This shift is encouraging to those who would like to see Middle Eastern dance evaluated by standards similar to those applied to such dances as flamenco and kathak.

Several years ago, when the President of Egypt presented Egyptian dancing to entertain an American head of state, it became apparent that there was no further need to make excuses for this dance. The pretense that it is an ancient fecundity ritual, physical therapy, or anything else, is unnecessary—its *raison d’être* is the pleasure of the dance.