M’alimma Rowenna de Manning, a Laurel for Middle Eastern dance, and Lady Zulaikha al-Zarqa' accept the Stormmaker Challenge!

M’alimma Rowenna:

We present on video a short performance of the dance style known as Gawahzee as seen performed in the 20th century by the Banat Maazin of Luxor, Egypt, who were entertainers in rural upper Egypt. We viewed several videos of dancers filmed in the 20th and 21st century: the Banat Maazin (daughters of family Maazin), and informed interpretations of their dance style. Teaching happened via some Zoom calls over three weeks.

Dancers seeking to document Middle Eastern dance in the SCA period before 1600 CE are generally facing a challenge to find original source documentation; we find later sources and we try to make an informed extrapolation. We find few written sources specifically describing dance in Egypt in the SCA period, and few depictions. Dance ethnologist Meiver de la Cruz noted in a lecture at the Newberry Library that dance is a social artistic practice in everyday life in Arab culture, in private and community space.

The Maazin family identifies their tribe as Nawar, and the script of the film “The Romany Trail” refers to them as gypsies, and says they have been living in Luxor for centuries. The Nawar people historically have provided musical and dance entertainment at weddings and other celebrations for money.

Carolina Varga Dinicu (Morocco of New York), a dancer and member of the Rom people, travelled to North Africa in the 1960s to research traditional dances and music. At a dance workshop in the 1980s, Ms. Dinicu was asked by attendee Rowenna de Manning how far in the past the sources of belly dance could be traced. She answered that she went to talk to the grannies, who remembered what dance was like before there was a lot of Western influence. Ms. Dinicu took video of the Banat Maazin dancers in Luxor, and the musicians who played for them. She sells a narrated video of her research and has written a number of articles so that US dancers could learn about one of the folkloric sources related to modern belly dance.

American dancer and dance ethnographer Aisha Ali made many research trips to North Africa between 1971 and 1997. Her online biography states that she documented "folkloric materials that were fast disappearing." She took video of dancers including the Banat Maazin, and recorded musicians who played traditional instruments, playing the traditional songs of rural people that were passed from generation to generation. Ali recorded musicians playing a song for the dancers that she named "Banat Maazin dance" and that we decided to use for our music. She made her research and recordings available to US dancers.

Lady Zulaikha:

This project was my first opportunity to really focus on a dance from a single culture. Previously I have struggled with trying to setup documentation for Middle Eastern dance of any sort within the range of our SCA Period, let alone determine whether I was combining moves and methods from Persia, Egypt, and Turkey that would not have been used in the same dance together. This project not only let me learn five moves that I know where they were used, but also allowed me to learn ways to approach documentation for an evolving art form that does not necessarily leave behind physical clues.

In learning the move set chosen for this routine, M’alimma Rowenna also shared tips and tricks for improving and building upon these moves. She also exposed me to several resources, namely the dancer Shining and the music group Musicians of the Nile, that I can seek out as a starting point for further knowledge development, as they have done significant work in trying to determine how the music and dance cultures evolved through time. Working with M’alimma Rowenna allowed me to isolate different components of the dance and music so that in the future I can be more focused in future research.

M’alimma Rowenna was also able to point out some aspects of my posture that needed to be addressed. The biggest such adjustment was how I bear my weight. I naturally keep my weight on the balls of my feet and in order to best perform the moves I needed to keep my weight in my heels. Another adjustment was allowing my whole body to perform the moves. In modern belly dance, isolation of the body parts is emphasized as proper technique. Folkloric Egyptian Dancers allow their movements to flow through their entire body.

This experience was such a joy for me to work with M’alimma Rowenna and be able to discuss our mutual craft. I am looking forward to continuing my studies into Middle Eastern Dance and Music and maintaining my interactions with M’alimma Rowenna.

Sources

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“Middle Eastern Dance at the 1893 World’s Fair” lecture by Meiver de la Cruz and a troupe dance performance at the Newberry Library, 2019. <https://youtu.be/I_psOGAt1Jw>

Carolina Varga Dinicu (Morocco of New York) https://www.casbahdance.org/

Aisha Ali biography - <https://aishaali.com/aisha-ali-biography/>

“A Very Very Brief History of Belly Dance History,” video by Sausan, produced by Sausan Academy of Egyptian Dance. 2020. https://youtu.be/zhpEFYMNRkE

“The Romany Trail” movie, excerpts on the Gawahzee. From the series Beats of the Heart, directed by Jeremy Marre. 1982 <https://youtu.be/jQRanm2iV48>

“19th Century Ghawazee.” Research, choreography, and performance by Shining, 2018. <https://youtu.be/aNiYMc_UuQE>

Excerpts from “Trail of the Gawahzee” produced and performed by Leila Haddad and the Musicians of the Nile. <https://youtu.be/3FsVLrRYdXY>

Carolina Varga Dinicu statement at a dance workshop is from the personal recollection of Rowenna de Manning

Image “An Entertainment in the Harem” (1765?) from Wendy Bonaventura, “Belly Dancing: The Serpent or the Sphinx,” Virago Press, 1983. Image: BBC Hulton Picture Library (images in this library are not made available online).