**Reda, Mahmoud (b. March 18, 1930, Cairo, Egypt—)**

**Summary**

Mahmoud Reda, a pioneer in the modern staging of traditional and folk dance in the Arab world, began his movement career in gymnastics and other sports. He was a member of the Egyptian gymnastic team in the Helsinki Olympics. He toured Europe with Astaria, an Argentinian dance company before returning to Egypt to found his own company, the Reda Troupe. In the choreophobic atmosphere of Egypt in the 1950s in which dance was equated with prostitution, and with a little funding from friends and family, he managed to give a highly successful concert that attracted critical acclaim and eventual government support. In order to succeed with the Egyptian public of the time, he offered dances that sanitized belly dance, eliminating the overtly sexual sharp vibrations associated with that genre and introducing instead soft undulating movements for the women and highly athletic movements for the men. With this newly invented tradition of Egyptian dance, he added narrative elements in his dances that created a nostalgic world of Egyptian villages in which youths and damsels wore highly stylized costumes that only vaguely resembled actual rural clothing styles.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Mahmoud Reda was born in 1930 in Cairo, Egypt, during the British colonial period, which had a profound effect on the development of his choreographic career because his company, the Reda Troupe (*firqah Reda*), was an expression of the nascent Egyptian nationalism of the period. He became the forerunner of the modern staging of folk dance in the Arab world, and his dance ensemble became the model for companies in other parts of the Arab world at a time when many nations supported large-scale folk dance companies.

Although Reda had no formal dance training as a child, he studied gymnastics. He participated on the Egyptian Olympic gymnastics team in 1952, and one can observe in the two feature films in which he starred that gymnastics inform his movements. He loved dancing, and he and his brother became very proficient in ballroom dancing, though most of his initial exposure to art form was watching Hollywood films. His first professional engagement in dance involved performing with an Argentinian company that toured throughout Europe.

Reda’s choreographic oeuvre must be understood in light of the relationship that Egypt, under Abdel Gamal Nasser, had with the Soviet Union after 1952. Reda was influenced by the emphasis that the Soviet Union and its satellite states placed on staged folk dance. In particular, the spectacular stagings of Igor Moiseyev had a profound effect on the way in which Reda created his own versions of Egyptian folklore (Shay 2002, 147). He created his first choreography for an Egyptian operetta, *Ya ‘ain, ya lail* (1957), which was so popular that the Egyptian government sent the work to the Moscow Youth Festival of 1957.

Reda created an entirely new movement and choreographic vocabulary—an invented tradition that was inspired by the movements of Egyptian folk dance, particularly the two most widespread forms of dance, *tahtīb*, or stick fighting, and solo improvised dance, a domestic form of belly dance that both rural and urban populations performed during celebratory events. Unlike Moiseyev, who came from an environment in which dance was valorized, state supported and lavishly financed, Reda came from a choreophobic environment, in which professional dancers, both male and female, where equated with prostitutes. This meant that in 1959, when he began his company, it was difficult to find middle-class dancers to train, and difficult to secure funding. The Egyptian government did not want to fund dance because it was associated with immoral practices.

To avoid the negative association that many elite Egyptians held regarding belly dancing, Reda modernized and sanitized it for the stage. In Reda’s version, men are excluded from any hint of pelvic movements associated with domestic belly dancing. ‘Men spin, leap, jump, hop, lunge and pose’, often forming a chorus line for the women. (Sellers-Young forthcoming 2013). The women perform very soft torso and hip movements, in opposition to the traditional belly dance movements, while appearing wholesome.

In spite of negative social attitudes, the Reda Troupe, with its nostalgic view of Egyptian folk life, and Reda’s frequent use of narrative, gave its first performance to great public acclaim in 1959, and by 1961, the company became an arm of the Ministry of Culture. Reda soon received awards and honours throughout the Arab world. The company made three films, *Izgia nesfa as-sinna* (1961), *Gharam fi al-Karnak* (1963), *Harami al-Warraqi* (1970) that are still popular.

Perhaps Reda’s most lasting legacy is among the global belly dance community. He has been invited to conduct workshops and create choreographies for belly dance groups throughout Asia, North America, and Europe.

**Anthony Shay**

**References and Further Reading**

Al-Faruqi, L. I. (1987) ‘Dance as an Expression of Islamic Culture’, *Dance Research Journal*. 10 (2): 6-17.

(Al-Faruqi describes and analyzes dances of the Middle East in the context of Islam and Muslim reactions to dance which some clergy condemn.)

Fahmy, F. (1987) ‘Creative Development of Mahmoud Reda, An Egyptian Choreographer’. MA Thesis, UCLA.

(This is an unpublished description of the repertoire and movement vocabulary of Mahmoud Reda. The author is Reda’s sister-in-law, and star of the former Reda Company, and thus has a unique perspective on his artistic career.)

Sellers-Young, B. (forthcoming 2013) ‘Men and the Happiness Dance’ in A. Shay, Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*. NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press. (This article addresses the relationship of men and belly dance, focusing on the career of Ibrahim Farah, a well-known performer, teacher and writer in the field.)

Shay, A. (2002) *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

(This volume focuses on the politics of representation in the repertoires of state-sponsored folk dance ensembles, with close analysis of the folk dance companies of the former USSR, Mexico, Croatia, Greece, Egypt and Turkey.)

**Moving Image Material**

*Homage to Mahmoud Reda: A Life for Dancing*. (2005) Festival Raks Madrid ’05. The Andalusi and Arabic Dance International. (A concert of Reda’s works performed by dance groups from throughout Europe). www.nesma.es

*Izgia nesfa as-sinna* [*Midterm vacation*]. (1961) Gamal elleissi Films. Starring Farida Fahmy and Mahmoud Reda. (A comedy of hijinx on school vacation with the dancers of the Reda Troupe.)

*Gharam fi al-Karnak* [*Love in Karnak*]. (1963) Gamal elleissi Films. Starring Farida Fahmy and Mahmoud Reda. (This is a “let’s do a show” story of the comedic attempts of the Reda Troupe to perform a show in the Temple of Karnak, similar to the films of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in format. One of the dancers has a pet monkey, which steals the show.)

*Harami al-Warraqi* (1970).