**Masābnī , Badī’ah (b. day and month of birth unknown, 1894, Damascus, Syria; d. day and month of death unknown, 1975, place of death unknown)**

**Summary**

Badī’ah Masābnī was a professional actress, singer, and dancer from the Levant. She settled in Egypt in the 1920s and eventually opened a highly successful nightclub, Casino Badī’ah. The highlight of the variety shows, which featured both Egyptian and European dances, acts and skits, were performances in which she often starred, especially as a comedienne. She is associated with the modernizing of belly dance from a static nineteenth-century dance to a new dance genre that became known as cabaret belly dance, with hundreds of thousands of devotees and practitioners around the world. The new dance genre, often called *raqs sharqī* (oriental dance), which was included in her nightclub revue and later in Egyptian films, often featured a soloist accompanied by a chorus line, incorporated movements from ballet as well as elements from Hollywood films, and involved a new use of space. Masābnī also revolutionized the costume that is familiar to filmgoers and viewers of belly dance performances by dancing in an elaborately decorated brassiere with a long skirt slit up the sides, and a coin girdle. Her tumultuous life was profiled by the media throughout the Arab world, but in spite of her contributions to belly dance, she remains little known in the West.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Masābnī, a versatile and talented professional actress, singer, and dancer, moved to Cairo from her native Syria at the beginning of the 1920s. A woman of forceful personality and considerable business acumen, she used her earnings as a dancer and actress, and contributions from male admirers to open a nightclub, Casino Badī’ah, in 1926. The form of her nightclub, particular to Cairo, was known as salah or *salat.* The primary attractions of this type of nightclub were the elaborate variety floorshows featuring singing and dancing. Masābnī had the skill and vision to create spectacular productions, often borrowing freely from Hollywood films. She augmented the financial success of her performances by introducing special weekly matinee performances for women-only audiences.

Masābnī was key to the modernization of professional belly dancing, implementing changes that were far-reaching and long-lived, and defining the cabaret belly dance genre familiar to people everywhere today known as *raqs sharqī*: (oriental dance). She trained her own dancers and created choreographies for the floorshows in her salah, and later for the earliest Egyptian films such as *Yasmina*, made by her one-time husband, Najib al-Rihani in the 1920s, that featured belly dancing.

Traditional belly dance, which dates back to at least the mid-nineteenth century, was largely improvised. Masābnī introduced fixed choreography. Traditional belly dance also focused largely on the lower body: “the Egyptian danseuse used to dance only by shimmying the belly and buttocks” (Basila 1960, 297, quoted in Dougherty 2000, 251). In contrast, Masābnī innovated the use of graceful movements of the hands and arms, and adapted ballet movements such as turns for the belly dance genre. She also greatly expanded the dancer’s use of space, rejecting the static quality of the nineteenth-century practice in which the dancer often stood in one spot. Finally, Masābnī’s choreography often featured a solo dancer with a chorus of dancers behind her—an idea that had been previously foreign in traditional Middle Eastern dance.

Influenced by Hollywood’s vision of the East, Masābnī greatly altered the dance costume for belly dance. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century costume that would have been familiar to viewers of the many world fairs and exhibitions in the United States and Europe featured a simple wide skirt, at first reaching the ankles, and later below the knees, or baggy trousers with a chemise and a highly decorated vest. The new costume Masābnī adopted included a brassiere, often covered with coins or jewels, and a floor length skirt that was slit at the sides. These innovations became standard in both cabarets in Egypt and abroad, as well as in Egyptian and foreign films. Judging from a photograph of her company (Graham-Brown 1988, 184), Masābnī also used skits and dance acts taken from Middle Eastern and European sources such as films and nightclub acts, which were appearing in Cairo at the time.

In 1935, Masābnī produced a film *Malikat al-masārih* (*Queen of the Theatres*) in which she starred. Although this film was not a success, Masābnī generously helped to promote dancers and singers who later dominated the Egyptian cinema and recording industry. Two of the most famous dancers she helped were Tahia Carioca and Sāmīah Gamāl. Singers included Farīd al-Atrash, Leila Mourad. She also successfully toured throughout Egypt and the Middle East. She retired in a cinematic escape to Lebanon in 1950, amid a welter of financial difficulties and angry bill collectors.

Masābnī’s legacy is perhaps most evident in the United States and Europe among devotees of cabaret belly dancing. The United States alone has over a million practitioners (Sellers-Young 1992).

**References and Further Reading**

Basila, N. (1960) *Mukhakkirat Badi’a Masabni* [*Memoirs of Badi’a Masabni*]. Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayat. (An autobiography of the famous entertainer and impresaria of Egyptian music hall theatre that is especially interesting for the details of the entertainment world at the turn of the last century.)

Danielson, V. (1997) *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. (This is an important scholarly biography of Egypt’s most famous vocalist, which shows the details of the world of the public entertainer in twentieth-century Cairo.)

Dougherty, R. L. (2000) ‘Badi’a Masabni Artiste and Modernist: The Egyptian Print Media’s Carnival of National Identity’, in Walter Armbrust (ed.), *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 243-268. (An interesting account of Masabni’s life and performance activities, especially showing the difficulties facing women in that environment.)

Graham-Brown, S. (1988) *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press. (One chapter in this book focuses on public entertainers in the Middle East. There is some discussion of Badi’a Masabni.)

Sellers-Young, B. (1992) ‘Raks El Sharki: Transculturation of a Folk Form’, *Journal of Popular Culture* 26 (2): 141-152. (This scholarly article discusses the ways in which over a million American women appropriated belly dancing during second wave feminism.)

Shay, A. and B. Sellers-Young. (2005) ‘Introduction’, in A. Shay and B. Sellers-Young (eds.) *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism and Harem Fantasy,* Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers. (This scholarly article approaches the origins and practices of solo improvised dance in the Middle East, and the difference between its perception and reception in the Middle East and the West.)

**Moving Image Material**

Ibrahim F. (1998) *Personal Glimpses*. (This video features many types of Oriental dance; it is especially interesting for some of the earliest films of belly dancing.)

**Paratextual Material**

There is a good photo of Badi’a Masabni’s theatre published in Graham-Brown, Sarah. *Images of Women*. (NY: Columbia University Press. 1988, 184).

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