## Modern Belly Dance

## Summary

References to dances of the East have appeared in Western sources at least since the beginning of the Christian era, yet what has become known and established as ‘belly dance’ seems most closely connected to the World Expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 was an event that formally introduced the *danse du ventre* or belly dance to American audiences causing a stir in public morals, reformed concepts of the exotic, and revolutionized ideas about the relationship between movement and aesthetics (kinaesthesia). Even though renditions of the dance have varied greatly, there are choreographic elements that make belly dance immediately recognizable and even objectionable to some audiences: elaborate hip articulations, isolations that often layer the choreography and express the texture of the music, and movement on the vertical and horizontal axis without covering a large performance area. In terms of culture, the space it has occupied both in its ‘native’ lands (predominantly but not exclusively, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon) and in the West continues to be contested in choreographic, social, cultural, even national politics of the twentieth century and beyond. Like many dance forms, belly dance has had an uneasy and anxious passage through modernity. In fact, to some degree it continues its struggle to transform from disreputable to respectable, hence the profound ambivalence that marks its performance and reception. In performances on the world’s stages it has been adored and exalted by individuals who discovered inspiration, promise, and empowerment in this dance. Yet, it has also been derided and abused by audience members who question its artistic merit and moral parameters. Paradoxically, even performers themselves have denigrated it by rendering it ostentatiously, luridly, and with little attention to the music. Its identity remains contested, and the site of debates are fuelled, predictably, by orientalism as well as gender, race, class, and sexuality.

## The Politics of Origins

The question of origins has formed a persistent frame of reference for belly dance in the West. In typical orientalist fashion that wants the Orient to remain unchangeable through eternity and capable of oracular utterance, the dance in the West has been connected to a mythical past in Egypt and primitive fertility rituals of Mesopotamia and Babylonia. Such has been the keenness of some devotees to connect it with mystery, fertility, and vaguely defined arcane truths that the question of origins often frames the transformations the dance continues to undergo in the Western imaginary. Indeed, the lasting appeal of belly dance in the West has profited largely from a ritualistic dimension where the performing body is believed to be sacralised through movement, gaining an intimation of goddess spirituality.

Even though the concept of belly dance as modern manifestation of sacred ritual has been particularly popular in the latter half of the twentieth century, it seems inherited from the larger modernist dance project. Isadora Duncan’s conviction that there are essential dance qualities that derive from the natural world and remain unchanged through time has had a profound impact on how belly dance has been reconstructed in the imagination of Western audiences. However, since the early feminist movements of the sixties, belly dance has also been criticized by women who felt discomfort with what they saw as the objectification of the female body during performance. In contrast, it has been embraced by others on a quest for spiritual awakening in a society deemed to be repressive, somewhat disabling, and perpetuating a vexed relationship with the body and its expression.

## Modern and Postmodern Developments

In the culturally and economically prosperous Egypt of the 1920s, prominent artistic directors such as Badia Masabni lifted dance moves of traditional folkloric public dances and adapted them for the stage. This gave birth to the early cabaret shows where belly dancers, formally trained and now organised in unions, gave a new form and a new costume to a dance that began to find the style that would become recognizable throughout the twentieth century. It is telling that on a poster, dating from possibly the 1930s, advertising Mary Mansoor’s club El Sala el Masriya in Cairo, the featured dancer is said to perform ‘Modern Belly Dance’ (‘Raqs Sharqi Hadith’ (<http://www.shira.net/about/flyer-mary-mansour.htm>). The dance’s rare capacity for performing associations that are simultaneously modern and traditional, avant-garde and primitive, sepia and lurid led to some unique reinventions on stage often with the Biblical Salome as a favourite protagonist. However, it was on the Hollywood silver screen, both before and after the Second World War, where belly dance persisted as a manifestation of an alluring ‘East’ and an intractable and foreboding femininity. With this treatment embedded in their legacy, the generations of the sixties and the seventies ‘rediscovered’ the mystic and mythical appeal of belly dance as a manifestation of the exotic that was fascinating, liberating, and full of artistic potential.

With the Bellydance Superstars in the early 2000s, this art form moved into an unforeseen but exciting dimension. The Superstars marked a historical turning point that blended Hollywood style showbiz, mythology, modern fashion stereotypes, and a variety of belly dance forms. Perhaps the most significant development that owes itself to the Bellydance Superstars was further legitimization of the dance and the proliferation of styles. Tribal belly dance, for example, is a daring variant that is decidedly postmodern. While informed by American orientalist concepts, tribal has broken new ground by framing and contextualizing the dancing subject in a kinaesthetic manner that references the subject’s political agency and delineates the contours of its cultural intervention. Put differently, the ‘tribal’ interpretation seems to perform eroticism, exoticism, and ethnic associations through the fashion styles and choreographies, whose artifice and invention are claimed as organic and inherent.

Moving into the twenty-first century, artists ventured even further in exploring hitherto unknown potential for artistic expression and fulfilled embodiment. Choreographers and performers such as Yasmina Ramzy and April Rose, indulged in the dance’s expressive and choreographic possibilities in informed and sophisticated ways, delving into the dance’s hybridity and offering a wealth of unexpected combinations. Along with gifted male performers such as the Egyptian Tito, such artists have defied or revised expected and ‘acceptable’ forms of femininity and masculinity, belly dance costume, even choice of music for the choreographies, thus opening up new possibilities away from traditional orientalist conceptions. With such inspired performers belly dance continues to offer that space where transformation is possible through the complex and powerful process of perilous deviation and gestural negotiation of the body’s politics.

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## References and further reading

Carlton, D. (1994) *Looking for Little Egypt*. Bloomington: IDD. (While examining in detail the mystery of the identity of “Little Egypt” Carlton offers valuable information on the history of belly dance in the United States and looks closely at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893.)

Buonaventura, W. (1989) *The Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World*. London: Saqi. (Although widely read and much cited, this is a romantic and orientalist reading of the dance. Buonaventura’s book is now dated but may serve as introduction to the politics that shaped the dance’s western course.)

Fisher, J. and A. Shay, eds (2009) *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*. Oxford: Oxford UP. (This text includes useful articles on male belly dancers who continue to generate a great deal of controversy.)

Karayanni, S. (2004) *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP. (This book reads belly dance through postcolonial and queer theory and contributes to the debates on the sexual and gender politics of the dance.)

Nieuwkerk, K. (1995) *“A Trade Like Any Other:” Dancers and Courtesans in Egypt*. Austin: U of Texas P. (Nieuwkerk provides an anthropological study of the dancer’s profession in Egypt that offers valuable insights into the indigenous culture of public performers.)

Shay, A. and B. Sellers-Young, eds (2005) *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Costa Mesa: Mazda. (This is an exciting and informed collection of essays by practitioners and dance scholars who cover many important aspects of modern belly dance.)

**Paratextual material**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX6ngnAYlSc&feature=related> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=821zH3cwqS4>.]