"Arabian Coffee" in the Land of the Sweets

Jennifer Fisher

Instructions to Tchaikovsky from balletmaster Marius Petipa, regarding what was needed for one of the dances in *The Nutcracker:* "Coffee. Arabian, the Kingdom of Yemen. Coffee Mocha. Eastern Dance from 24 to 32 bars of cloying and bewitching music."[1]

Onstage, a nineteenth-century German girl waits for her first encounter with the Middle East, which will come courtesy of Tchaikovsky and the many years of choreographic evolution that have preceded the current version of *The Nutcracker* in which she is performing. The girl's name is Clara (or sometimes Marie), and she has come to a fantasy land, where a lively Spanish dance has been given in her honor. Now, there is softer, slower music with a steady, insistent rhythm and a snaking melody carried by an English horn. Dancers glide onto the stage wearing gauzy harem pants and jeweled headdresses, their faces impassive, their gait deliberate and stately. Who are they? Clara's face seems to ask, and what will they do? Certainly it will be like nothing she has ever seen before because they are dressed like people from far away, a hot climate perhaps, where no one moves quickly and different customs prevail. There is a woman who walks like a princess, with a cool, internal gaze and limbs that stretch out imperially. A consort picks her up and swirls her arched figure around as if she were in need of a breeze. Then they stand side by side, pausing as if transfixed by a greater power, their hands drifting above them with palms facing the sky. When they disappear, Clara stares after them, wondering, no doubt, where they came from and what on earth that was all about.

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Authoritative ballet lines combine with an imagined Middle East to form the hybrid variation that is "Coffee" in many North American Nutcrackers. *Eric Shah and Samantha Mason of the Inland Pacific Ballet. Photograph by E. Y. Yanagi. Courtesy of the Inland Pacific Ballet.*

Well she might ask. This "Arabian" dance, also called "Coffee" in *The Nutcracker*, is the closest brush a huge number of North Americans will have with Middle Eastern dance—which is to say, not a brush at all, given the fact that it is based on a Western choreographer's reinterpretation of things "Arabian."[2] It is not just a brief encounter for a small audience, either; *The Nutcracker*, a nineteenth-century Russian ballet that never had great success in its homeland, has become an annual event in hundreds of North American cities, and, increasingly, in any country where ballet has a presence. It has become, in fact, a Christmas ritual, embraced by millions and customized to suit any number of communities.[3] As a staple variation of this ballet, the "Arabian" dance disseminates its own particular brand of "Arabianism" in one location after another, year after year.

My analysis of "Coffee" is an expanded look at this variation, about which I have already written in the context of the annual *Nutcracker* phenomenon (Fisher 1998; 2003). It relies mainly on close readings of several "Arabians," and a consideration of them in relation to various conceptual schemes, including Laban Movement Analysis, Orientalism, aspects of feminist theory and reception theory, and the concept of "parallel traditions," a term coined by dance scholar Anthony Shay to describe theatricalized versions of folk dance (Shay 1999; 2002). During my fieldwork, I used traditional participant observation methods, especially the interview.[4]

Any discussion of the *Nutcracker* "Arabian" dance inevitably takes place in the shadow of the concept of Orientalism, as Edward Said has defined it in his influential book of the same name (1979). Said outlined ways in which Western colonialists (specifically the British, French, and Americans) produced a version of the Middle East that they could dominate, "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1978, 1). Denizens of the fictional Orient in *The Nutcracker* usually have strong ties to this particular facet of the Orientalist world, which is marked by dichotomies that homogenize and essentialize identities. But how much do individual "Arabian" dances share with the Orientalist goals that Said discusses, ones involved in the preservation of the hegemonic rule of the West by constructing categories such as civilized versus uncivilized, moral versus immoral, proper behavior versus loose behavior?

Many "Arabians" include a kind of "Egyptian Marilyn Monroe on pointe," or sometimes a "sultan and harem" scenario, replete with echoes of pernicious stereotypes—sexually available women; lazy, avaricious men. But in other versions, the "Arabian" dance can have an air of serene, controlled ritual that looks regal or enigmatically cerebral. Either way, the "Arabian" dance tends to utilize a vocabulary of difference, often featuring the angled limbs and supine postures that have been a part of ballet "orientalizing" since the nineteenth-century Romantic era, when fanciful harem fantasies were all the rage.[5] The variation usually has the slowest, most luxuriantly unfolding choreography in *The Nutcracker* (except in Balanchine's version of "Coffee," which is uncharacteristically brisk). Other dances in the second act, such as the "Spanish," "Chinese," and "Dance of the Flutes," are sprightly, energetic, and straightforwardly presentational, while "Arabian," following the leisurely dips and insistent thrumming of its score, tends to be phlegmatic, dreamy, and remote. Does it reinforce historical stereotypes of the generalized Arab "other"?

Today, as in previous times, many North Americans are notoriously unaware of Middle Eastern realities, even in the post-September 11 world of increased sensitivity and educational strategies. More likely, they are familiar with images and stereotypes of the Middle East through all kinds of popular entertainment. In a way, *The Nutcracker* is part of that "popular" spectrum of entertainment, in that the ballet crosses over from opera houses to high school auditoriums and often involves many amateurs. But it also has strong connections to the world of "high" art, which confer upon the "exotic" dancers in "Arabian" a kind of rarefied status. Given the variables, then, the messages a contemporary audience is likely to take away from the *Nutcracker* "Arabian" dance are not easily summed up.

One difficulty in this regard is the fact that no definitive version of "Arabian" exists, although it very often includes familiar hallmarks, as the descriptions above indicate. Since *The Nutcracker* premiered in 1892 at the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, the choreography of each part of the ballet has undergone countless renovations, and audiences, too, have changed. To speak of a generalized "Arabian" dance, then, is problematic, but it is possible to examine specific versions and identify trends in "Nutcracker Arabian-ness," and the ways choreographers sometimes depart from these trends. By

considering a number of "Arab" images circulating over the years in North America, it is also possible to speculate about potential interpretations. Some of the most prominent "Arabians" today are well known through videotapes of *The Nutcracker* by major ballet companies; others I discuss occur in regional ballet productions I have seen.

A whirlwind tour of the *Nutcracker* landscape provides some context and suggests one reason that "Arabia" tends to be very whimsically located in terms of geography. "Coffee" appears in the second act, which is basically a series of dances performed for Clara, the ballet's heroine. Individual *Nutcracker* plots vary, but the first act inevitably starts at an ordinary Christmas party. The action becomes fantastical when Clara's nutcracker doll gift comes to life in her darkened living room after everyone but Clara has gone. She witnesses a battle between mice and tin soldiers, then travels with the Nutcracker Prince through a forest where snowflakes dance, ending Act I. The Land of the Sweets of the next act tends to be explained in two ways: it is a place conjured by Clara in a dream, thus allowing for subconscious connections between her waking and sleeping life; or, in an overlapping interpretation, it is a magical realm that exists for anyone with an active imagination. In this way, it is much like Dorothy's "dream" in *The Wizard of Oz*, when people she knows turn up in altered form "beyond the rainbow." Thus, the so-called "national dances" (there are also ones from Spain, China, and Russia) can be explained as incarnations of Clara's dolls, given life by a young and curious girl who has never traveled. There are also divertissements in which flowers and candy dance.

So much for verisimilitude; Clara can dream anything she wants. It has been suggested that Clara's fantasy realm is in some way like a "carnival of the mind," in that her everyday world is turned upsidedown during a holiday season; that is, her fantasy or dream might be a mild-mannered reminder of the carnival transgressions so vividly detailed by Bahktin and others.[6] Clara's journey, for example, can be seen as a liminal world, in which the meekest mouse carries a sword, snowflakes know geometry, and baked goods get up and polka.[7] This liminality might be an interesting defense for unrealistic ethnic portrayals, given the "anything goes" ethos of carnival, with its lust for reversing and overturning the ordinary. But *The Nutcracker* is part of a much less raucous tradition, that of classical ballet during an age when fairy-tale plots and elegant formal settings prevailed. Traditional *Nutcracker*s in North America have often reflected that heritage, along with its ethnocentric protocols. They have, for example, very often involved homogenous casts and audiences. Many African American and Asian dancers can tell tales of always being cast in the "exotic" *Nutcracker* variations ("Arabian" and "Chinese"). But the annual *Nutcracker* phenomenon has expanded so widely, and the ballet has been embraced by so many disparate communities, that it has also become the site of experimental, inclusive strategies. Even in some very traditional versions there is so-called "color-blind" casting, with people who look unrelated playing families in the party scene. Still, the idea of "difference" becomes highlighted choreographically when it comes to the second-act dances. It seems possible, then, that the "Chinese" and "Arabian" variations reinforce the ballet tradition of excluding "others" by providing simplistic, sometimes negative, portrayals. Do *Nut-*

cracker choreographers, dancers, and audiences participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in this scheme?

After several years of research among what I call "*Nutcracker* participants," I suggest that the answer is both yes and no, depending on the version, casting strategies, and audience constituencies. Just as *The Nutcracker*'s second-act dances vary in choreography, they vary in terms of their potential for producing and reproducing potentially injurious stereotypes. Take the "Spanish" dance (also called "Chocolate"), done to lively, trumpeting music and featuring hands on hips, tossed-back heads, mobile shoulders, fans, and occasional stamping. Most times, it looks not unlike the Spanish traditions of flamenco and *escuela bolera* and is unlikely to spur complaints about negative stereotyping. Likewise, the Russian dance ("Trepak") tends to so much resemble an existing dance genre—theatricalized folk dance from Russia or Ukraine—that a few traditional *Nutcrackers* have imported performers from folk companies who bring down the house with athletic kicks, jumps, and spins.[8]

On the other hand, the "Chinese" and "Arabian" dances can be problematic. A certain fawning silliness is sometimes built into "Chinese," with much head wagging, obsequious bowing, and vacuous popping out of boxes. In one of the least appealing versions I have seen, on a 1985 Royal Ballet videotape (choreographers listed as "Lev Ivanov and Peter Wright"), four dancers carry umbrellas or fans and flop forward or from side to side like rag dolls. Their exaggerated bowing and deep knee-bends are clownlike. But in other versions, which are equally unethnographic, there is an emphasis on sharply executed multiple turns and impressive jumps done with an exacting, light energy not antithetical to movement aesthetics found in various kinds of Chinese dance. Female dancers hopping lightly on pointe and taking small, skimming steps might evoke the delicacy of female style in both Chinese classical dance and theatricalized folk dancing. Male "Tea" dancers (and sometimes women) often combine dexterous beats with high leaps and acrobatics in a way that is like the character of the Monkey King in Chinese Opera. And many versions of the *Nutcracker* "Chinese" suggest the grace and smoothness of classical Chinese dance or the jaunty side-to-side movement of Chinese folk dance. On the other hand, the gesture most associated with the *Nutcracker* "Chinese," the one, upright index finger extended to each side, does not appear in any of the kinds of dance done in China. It owes more to porcelain sculptures popular during the eighteenth-century chinoiserie period in Europe, and might have been originally inspired by a Mongolian chopstick dance.[9]

Like "Chinese" dances, "Arabians" vary in terms of the way they tap into negative discourses surrounding ethnicity. Undoubtedly, this was not a concern when *The Nutcracker* premiered at the end of the nineteenth century in imperial Russia. To create the "cloying and bewitching" music Petipa requested for "Arabian," Tchaikovsky started with an old Georgian lullaby and added a soft, insistent rhythmic pattern. The result suggests an atmosphere that musicologists refer to, in a seemingly unproblematic fashion, as "Eastern languor."[10] The 1892 choreography at St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theater was provided by Petipa's long-time assistant, Lev Ivanov, who took over when the veteran balletmaster became ill. Many of today's versions have something in common

with the first "Arabian," if we can believe the choreographic notation of the Maryinsky production, done some years after the premiere. For example, in that document, holding a pose was important, whether standing still or turning in place. The female soloist moved simply from one arabesque to another, stirring little air until a series of turns brought her downstage at the end. Also appearing were a consort and supporting dancers who performed simple gestures (bowing, kneeling, or exchanging places) and made picturesque groupings.[11] Costumes of the imperial Russian era would not have exposed as much flesh as many do today; in that way, they had something in common with dance garments in the Middle East, where exposed flesh has rarely been deemed appropriate for dancers in public.[12]

Although some of today's "Arabians" have been radically reworked by individual choreographers, the traditional variety typically includes characteristic movements that have been handed down from *Nutcracker* to *Nutcracker*, especially the angled "Egyptian" arms, which might have been inspired by the figures painted on ancient Egyptian vases; and a slow, dipping or bobbing walk, which might reflect the influence of bharata natyam, or possibly was invented to evoke a processional, ritual-like atmosphere. The "prayer" gesture of palms meeting at the sternum or intertwined overhead, on the other hand, seems to reflect Indian, not Arab, dance forms, just one indication of the way the word "Arabian" is used imprecisely in Clara's dream world (and, of course, often in the Western world). And while these details are borrowed and adapted from other dance traditions, the classical ballet vocabulary tends to dominate.

The most pernicious kind of "Arabian" is epitomized in a version made by Rudolf Nureyev. His *Nutcracker* was first created for the Royal Swedish Ballet in 1967 and appears on a 1968 videotape of the Royal Ballet. Nureyev's "Arabian" belongs to a category I call the "comic harem narrative," full of broad mime and crude behavior. It starts with a pasha character in a turban gathering around him scantily clad harem girls and two court dancers in order to dole out some kind of treat from a large silver bowl. The group does a rapid few "salaams" in a circle, movements that seem to parody Muslim prayer by confusing it with exaggerated kow-towing. Then, the pasha plays favorites by dropping food into the mouths of some, while slapping the hands of others. The two court dancers, who go unfed, finally get up to dance, their resentment building. They circle the group with a combination of ballet steps and "Arabian" staples, such as tilts from the pelvis, swooning backbends, and unfolding arm gestures that break at the wrist. As the pasha is leaving, the female dancer distracts him with an exaggerated kiss, while her partner exacts revenge by stealing a pouch of money from his pocket. Alone, they gloat and shoot a delicate but definitive flipping-off gesture in the direction of the pasha.

At work in such a portrayal are Middle Eastern stereotypes that have circulated in European and American culture for the last few centuries, starting with traveler's narratives and scenes in literature and painting, inspiring such artists as Anna Pavlova and Ruth St. Denis in the twentieth century, and showing up in popular entertainments as well, such as world's fairs, sideshows, cabarets, burlesque, and, eventually, Hollywood movies full of wildly dramatic sheiks and maidens. The image of the "low Arab other"

was forged by depictions of moral laxity and excessive indulgence in sensual pursuits: Arab women were portrayed as sexual slaves, dancing for depraved masters or reclining passively on the floor; Arab men moved with stealth and cunning, or were seen sitting or squatting on the floor.[13]

An image of the male "Arab" as bully and callous exploiter of women is at the root of another comic harem narrative "Arabian," which I saw for many years onstage in the Louisville Ballet's *Nutcracker*. It featured a turbaned man in harem pants and glittered vest, followed by a woman who could have been his wife, but who danced the role of his servant. He drank coffee in a grand manner, while she followed him, filling his cup, when needed, and performing acrobatic tricks so that he could balance his cup on her extended foot as she lay on the floor or on her bare stomach as a backbend turned her into a table. The punchline came when he finally let her have the coffee cup, and she turned it over to show it was empty. She then shrugged and followed him offstage.

"Arabian" dances that are more abstract do not tend to hit one over the head with cartoon "Arab" images, although they are not free of Orientalist overtones. I call them "classically exotic" because they combine vague notions of sensuousness, ritual, and beauty, with the severe postures and lines of classical ballet. These versions can be seen as part of the historical attempt to expand the horizons of classical ballet in a way that historian John M. MacKenzie defends in his reevaluation of Orientalism in the arts (1995). Artists who looked to the East for inspiration (Anna Pavlova and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes are mentioned, among many others), MacKenzie suggests, did not do so as part of a conspiracy "to reinforce colonial power or superiority, but to enable artistic innovation" (1995, 211). He does not deny the existence of pernicious stereotypes, but points out that there was often a genuine admiration for the borrowed cultures, and that there is a certain amount of intercultural exchange at work in creative endeavors of all kinds.

The "classically exotic Arabian" on a videotape of the Kiev Ballet *Nutcracker* is typical of many, especially those in scores of regional ballet companies. It is an adagio pas de deux, with the female in a jeweled bra and chiffon harem pants (with slits and banding that foreground the legs), and the male in a turban with feather and a unitard with gauzy full sleeves. Cool, impassive faces and an evenly paced flow of extended movements create a languorous, dreamlike atmosphere. The female's steely, controlled unfolding of limbs is balanced by pliant backbends, which her partner supports when he is not moving in unison with her. Much of the technique is otherwise the same as that in any classical ballet duet, requiring meticulous line, finesse, and balance in order to present impressive poses and make smooth transitions. The added "Egyptian" arms turn the classical curve into a kind of "tray carrying" position (by sharp bends in wrists and elbows), which is turned upsidedown for variety. On the 1985 Royal Ballet video (not Nureyev's version but one that has stronger connections to imperial Russia),[14] "Arabian" contains many of the same kinds of high extensions and dramatic, tilted poses but is costumed more modestly, in roomier, buff-colored draperies with no exposed flesh. In addition, the Royal soloist creates drama by occasional contrasts in rhythm—spinning quickly and stopping on a dime, for example—bringing to mind

one of the aesthetic values of kathak. But, unlike any classical Indian or Egyptian dancer, this female soloist is supported by and passed among four courtier types, who carry her on and off in a kind of procession. She looks like a haughty princess who is in captivity—a proud bauble or ornament of the court.

A search for the ancestresses of these balletic "Arabian" dancers inevitably leads to several key sources that go beyond the inherited tradition of nineteenth-century Orientalist ballet. In North America they include the character of Salome, as it was dramatized at the turn of the twentieth-century; belly dancing, as it developed in cabarets; and the figure of the "harem maiden" as she was imperiled and glamorized by Hollywood movies.[15] Because *The Nutcracker* has been adopted and adapted in so many North American locations, many influences from these sources may have found their way into various productions, especially because the boom in annual *Nutcracker*s took place mainly in the second half of the twentieth century, when movies and television were disseminating stereotyped images of the Middle East. In 1954, when Balanchine choreographed a hookah-smoking-rajah "Arabian" for the premiere of his *Nutcracker*, it was a scene that seemed a little like Russian-ballet Orientalism, specifically the "Shades" prelude in *La Bayadère*, when Solor smokes and falls into a dream. But this first Balanchine "Arabian" (danced by Arthur Mitchell on a 1958 television broadcast) had a jaunty, almost tongue-in-cheek flippancy, which also might have been inspired by watching a swashbuckling Hollywood epic full of romantic "sheiks" and midnights at the oasis.[16] When Balanchine changed the dance to a female solo in 1964, the costume (shimmering gold bra, angled chiffon skirt, and flowing scarf headpiece) seemed to echo the same Hollywood harem movies that influenced Egyptian dancers in the 1920s, after they adopted the two-piece harem pants and spangled bra. Bare midriffs did not originate in the Middle East, Karin van Nieuwkerk points out in her book on female Egyptian singers and dancers, and they have had a checkered history there, having been disparaged and banned. (Nieuwkerk 1995, 42–59).

In several regional ballet "Arabians," I have seen remnants of seductive Salome as well as the traditional belly dancer, when a female soloist draws herself up on pointe with a wiggle of the hips or punctuates her bourrées with shoulder shimmies. But the ballet versions tend to smooth over some of the movement hallmarks of belly dance; there are no sharp articulations of shoulders and hips, or shimmers of delicately shaking flesh. The fact is, the ballet "Arabian" is only superficially related to belly dance, old or new. Classical ballet technique controls most *Nutcracker* "Arabians," which probably puts them into the same category as other parts of the ballet for most audiences today. Although Balanchine joked that his soloist would "give the fathers something to look at" during his family-oriented *Nutcracker*, it is hard to believe that a spectator today "reads" a haughty, iron-muscled ballet dancer as a "sexually available low other," a category that surfaces often in the Orientalist world.

Balanchine's "Coffee" is on the one hand a solo for a sexy maiden dressed in balletic Arabian gear, strutting and prancing in an ostensibly flirtatious manner, but her businesslike pace and almost kitsch flippancy is hardly conducive to femme fatale fantasies. In fact, any number of ballet soloists who exhibit steely control and virtuosic feats seem

capable of disrupting scopophilic pleasure, a concept that often arises in theoretical schemes in which women are thought to be devoured by one kind of gaze or another. In slow-moving "Arabians," when the female soloist drops into the splits like a showgirl or ends up with her heel at her ear or draped bodaciously over the shoulder of her porteur partner, she still escapes, to some degree, her "sexual plaything" overtones by looking more like a harem maiden who rules. I put forward this arguable hypothesis in the spirit of rhetorical hermeneutics, which places great emphasis on the way people argue for meanings in specific contexts.[17] In other words, the experiences and temperament of individual audience members or dancers affects the way they interpret a dance, although, inevitably, certain cultural and societal norms also play a role.

The interpretations I heard most often in the field reflected the viewers' knowledge of ballet as a skilled and respected art form. For example, I saw teenage boys who had volunteered to be in the *Nutcracker* party scene of a regional production silenced, often standing in awe in front of their female peers who had mastered an art form the boys knew little about. Audience members I polled often remarked on the impressive "trick" of balancing on the tip of the toes or holding a pose while being hoisted high in the air. (A popular movie such as *Dirty Dancing*, with its endless takes of Jennifer Grey *not* being able to hold her position in the air, imprinted on peoples' minds the perils of such a task.)

The soloist in the "classically exotic Arabian" also has bold movements that take up space in a way that relates to the work of feminist scholar Mary Russo in her book, *The Female Grotesque*. The *Nutcracker* "Arabian" soloist is not similar in all ways to the performers Russo discusses, but she has in common her descent from female performers who were both contained within societal norms and in the process of exceeding them. For example, Russo discusses the way that actresses who embodied the histrionic acting style of the nineteenth-century offered audiences the "spectacle" of a woman taking up more space than she was permitted in most social situations of the time (1994, 68). These actresses may have been appearing in performances directed by men for men (as were ballerinas of the time), but Russo says that "they used their bodies in public in extravagant ways that could only have provoked wonder and ambivalence in the female viewer, as such latitude of movement and attitude was not permitted most women without negative consequences" (1994, 68). Likewise, Russo describes female circus fliers and acrobats as figures who physically challenged normative female movement style: "The representation of femininity as an effortless mobility implies enormous control, changeability and strength" (1994, 44). I suggest that today the ballerina's movements may still have something of the "extravagant" about them for most audience members—and for the dancers themselves.[18]

What may be foregrounded for contemporary *Nutcracker* audience members, then, is the "Arabian" soloist's physical expertise and polished performance, not her potential as a "harem maiden" plaything. They are not meeting the image of the schooled ballerina for the first time—not with all the dance documentaries and tales of physical hardship that abound today—so they understand the skill level required. Nor are they likely to be confused by the "Arabian" dancer's belly-dance costume; no one guesses that she is

fresh from Cairo or Dubai or that she would show up as a belly dancer in a restaurant or concert. She is a hybrid who has a home in the ballet. The *Nutcracker*'s already fantastical dream-world premise and cartoonish characters—some of whom are routinely played by both sexes no matter what their fairy-tale gender—have set up the audience for portrayals that are so far outside the realm of ethnographic realism as to constitute their own genre.

A potentially useful way to think about the "Arabian" dance is that it has become a "parallel tradition," a theatricalized form of dance that has grown away from its original sources but still has elements in common with them (Shay 1999; 2002). The category is useful in making distinctions between dance "in the field" (spontaneous, participatory, celebratory, and/or religious) and the versions of that dance that are chosen, shortened, dressed up, and in general spectacularized in order to represent a particular ethnic group or nation-state.[19] The agendas of ballet companies often diverge from those of state-sponsored folk dance companies, where parallel traditions came into their own, but they are related in a few key ways. First, they share a framing device, in that both performances appear on proscenium stages and in a theatrical dance context, as opposed to being part of communal festivities or ceremonies. Next, many national dance companies use ballet, such as Moiseyev-style folk troupes, and, to some degree, the Mexican ballet folklórico troupes. When it comes to representing a particular region or ethnicity, both the national folk dance company and the ballet company have complicated relationships to issues of authenticity, preferring to present, at least much of the time, a colorful, entertaining "essence" of that region or people. The "Arabian" dance in *Nutcracker* is definitely a suspect hybrid on some occasions, but not all of the fanciful imaginings of the mysterious Middle East are of a destructive nature.

A third category of "Arabian," which I call "ethno-fantasies," seems to fall on the side of the fairly benign homage. In the Kirov Ballet's version, recorded for a 1984 videotape (choreography by Vasily Vainonen), there are maidens wearing heeled shoes, long braids, and silvery long jackets over harem pants, looking like they could have come directly from the Azerbaijani National Folk Company. They do a few small pirouettes and balletic extensions, but most of the steps are well within the theatricalized folk tradition from that part of the world.[20] Moving in lines to form various patterns, the women hold a scarf in each hand and perform rhythmic stepping with a tiptoelike quality, extending their arms in a willowy, swanlike way and performing soft hand claps. The 1978 Bolshoi *Nutcracker* videotaped version (choreography by Yuri Grigorovich) also reaches beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, but this time adapts Indian and Indonesian dance movements in a pas de deux full of severe angles, intertwining arms, and stiff, warriorlike poses. Wearing glittery leggings, crowns, and short, stiff overskirts, the couple move in a deliberate, stately fashion, sometimes looking like statues of gods, other times like temple dancers reenacting a myth. The other "national" dances in this particular Land of the Sweets, it should be noted, also have a certain exaggerated clarity and feature slightly stiff limbs, presumably because the characters represent Clara's dolls come to life, dancing under a giant Christmas tree. Compared to the very balletic, classically exotic Arabians, this one stands out for seeming

to draw its flexed feet and tilted warrior poses from Javanese or Thai court dance, and the heel-toe walk and deep second-position pliés from bharata natyam.

These ethno-fantasies and many "classically exotic Arabians" seem to be respectable parallel traditions forged of a desire to suggest another world, where people dance about other things, in other ways. Still, I have often wondered why there are not more experiments with both "Arabian" and "Chinese," given the widely expanded range of dance forms encountered on world stages in the last several decades. Some companies have tried interesting variations: a belly dancer doing a traditional Egyptian wedding dance appeared in the San Diego Ballet's *Nutcracker* one year; and for "Chinese," in a radically re-worked version on an Australian Ballet video (choreography by Graeme Murphy), the corps glides through t'ai chi-like movements, while a European ballerina character (Clara, who is emigrating in this retelling) embodies the perky Tchaikovsky music as she encounters the new aesthetic with interest.

Experimental strategies such as these are unlikely to catch on in ballet companies, but when the version of *Nutcracker* is satirical or transgressive in any way, some instructive batting at the notion of "Hollywoodized Arabs" does go on. In Mark Morris's *The Hard Nut*, which sets the *Nutcracker* story in the 1960s world of op art and pop images, the "Arabian" variation (seen onstage but not in the video) features Morris in a drag fantasy worthy of a B-movie—a sort of "Morris of Arabia," in which he swans around, veiled in chiffon, and makes "Bette Davis eyes" at everyone. And lest the viewer think that only non-European clichés are ripe for lampooning, Morris includes in his second act a "French" dance (using the "Dance of the Flutes" music), that hits you over the head with the way Americans have traditionally stereotyped the French. Snooty and stylish, one character carries a hatbox, one a baguette, and one a whip. Morris brings surface-level, snap-ethnic judgments out of the closet and parades them in a comical corrective to years of unsophisticated *Nutcracker* ethnocentrism. In Donald Byrd's short-lived *Harlem Nutcracker*, the objectification of the female body as a one-note "sensual Middle East" was tweaked by making "Arabian" an overblown body-building fantasy starring a nearly nude male body-builder who comically kisses his own biceps and cannot get his coterie of female attendants to do his bidding.

Another creative "Arabian" escapes the whole ethno-appropriating dilemma by turning to the peacock as a source of mystic exoticism. In the Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Nutcracker* (choreography by Kent Stowell), the cries of junglebirds waft over the original music as a female soloist arrives onstage in a gilded cage. Her unitard is embellished with an elaborate multicolored tail that drapes to the floor once she is released, and her luxuriant stretching and intense stares are punctuated with hops, leaps and gestural fluttering that rides on the back of Tchaikovsky's musical meandering. Also departing from precedents, James Kudelka created a "Coffee" pas de quatre for the National Ballet of Canada that abandons previous slinking and swooning in favor of geometric clarity and austere positions. The costumes for the two couples bear traces of the imagined Middle East (sheer harem pants and braided gold headdresses, with women fairly well covered and men with bare chests), but their enigmatic positions suggest an abstract kind of ritual. In one instance the women link hands with stiff, extended arms as they

are being held sideways in identical positions, their legs making a "V," their partners holding them portentously, as if they might be magic wands. The effect of the cool, formal, unfamiliar patterns, one backstage worker told me, almost put him in a trance because the choreography is "smooth and conditioned, almost intellectual."

What, then, is the progressive way for the *Nutcracker*'s "Arabian" (and its other "national" dances) to follow? When they fall into pernicious clichés, they clearly become undesirable, but I suggest that when they emerge as imaginative landscapes, playing with embodied elements of different cultures while avoiding the ethnocentric traditions of nineteenth-century ballet, they can become a place where new, heterogeneous identities are negotiated. How to preserve what might be valuable and what insulting in classical Orientalist warhorses such as *La Bayadère* and the cheesiest of all, *Le Corsaire*, is a complex matter for another day. But *The Nutcracker* is different, ostensibly a poor cousin of the nineteenth-century classical ballets and, perhaps because of its position in the shadows, full of possibilities. It has been a virtual immigrant to this country, undergoing countless adaptations to various communities and surviving with a healthy (financially lucrative), multidimensional identity intact. Hawaiians add hula, Scottish descendants add kilts, African Americans have a Brown Sugar Fairy, Mexican Americans make Mother Ginger into Mama Piñata. The second act series of divertissements begs for innovative dances, as long as they amuse Clara and the audience without insulting anyone. Ballet companies, many of which are now desperately looking for new audiences, could bring in unofficial advisory panels that help them to update attitudes; they could collaborate with choreographers with different dance backgrounds; or stick with the title "Coffee" and vary the theme by switching to Brazil for a change.

Curiously, one of the most interesting alternatives to a simplistic, Orientalizing "Arabian" was created in 1940—not by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, whose influential *Nutcracker* came about that same year, but by Disney in the *Nutcracker* segment of their feature-length animated film *Fantasia*. Like the PNB "Arabian," it eliminates geographic specificity, and like Kudelka's version, its mystery depends largely on elements of design. Disney's "Coffee" takes place in an underwater locale, where fish glide this way and that in time to the smoky melody, their wispy long tails curving in sweeping ribbons behind them as bubbles rise and quick ripples of disturbed water sharply enhance the wavering trills of violins and clarinets. At one point the heads of four fish come together and they are seen from above, à la Busby Berkeley, their tails making an abstract pattern of curves and angles.

As a prototype for the way *The Nutcracker* might stay true to its principles when it comes to "Arabian," *Fantasia* isn't bad: its soloist is sensual without being vulgar (she is a long-lashed, flirtatiously blinking fish); the underwater colors are eye-catching; the design elements are impressive; and the "choreography" enhances each beat and swerve of the music. The characters and locale are distinctively "other," but not in a way that conjures colonial rule and subaltern silencing. There is a sense of community in the animated underwater world—all that swimming, organized into one harmonious dance. Most of all, there is a fairy-tale transformation of the ordinary into the fantastical, just as Clara might dream it—without letting any regrettable snap-judgments about "others" surface.

It seems nothing but salutary for *The Nutcracker* "Arabian" to get away from blatantly negative portrayals of the Middle East, and from the evidence, it seems hard for many ballet companies to understand the issues. Should the word "Arabian" be abandoned altogether, or should ballet companies seek images of the Middle East that are more "authentic"? They could invite a group of belly dancers or representatives of folk dance or national dance companies to perform with them. But this endeavor would come with its own set of thorny dilemmas. Which belly dancers? Which countries? And would the clash in aesthetics end up emphasizing the dichotomous distinction of "the West and the rest" in yet another way? In any event, the "West" is no longer an easily defined geographical or cultural entity, as anthropologist James Clifford has pointed out in his critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Clifford 1988, 255–276). In the dance world, companies around the world have borrowed and adapted ballet, but we do not accuse them of "Occidentalism." In this era of "global relationality," suggests Clifford, Said's employment of "imperially useful oppositions" is limited. He points out that Said, on one hand, adheres to the concept of humanist commonalities, yet fails to develop "a theory of culture as a differentiating and expressive ensemble rather than as simply hegemonic and disciplinary" (1998, 263). This is not to dismiss the general relevance of an analysis like Said's, which foregounds moments when people in the so-called "Orient" have not had a voice in terms of their own representation. But Clifford suggests that "we should attempt to think of cultures not as organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes" (1998, 273).

It is this view of cultures and cultural identity that can shed light on what the *Nutcracker* "Arabian" has been doing all these decades since it first arrived on the ballet stage. I suggest that, through no grand design, the variation has evolved into a performative site where the whole idea of what is "exotic," "fantastic," and "other" is interrogated in a hybrid fashion—sometimes more intelligently than others. Ballet, in its way, has been struggling to find its own version of "another land," often making the "East" stand in for some kind of mystery, in that it seems inevitably new and strange to outsiders. Yet in the ballet world, imaginary foreign lands also turn out to be places where common bonds can be found. In the classically oriented "Arabian" dances, potential differences and commonalities are visually and choreographically inscribed; the characters wear chiffon that is not cut the same as European tutus and their limbs sometimes follow different paths—and this represents difference—but they share with ballet dancers their exalted composure and balletically molded movement. The respectful ethno-fantasies can also be viewed as earnest border crossings, attempts to embody a classical form of an "other," using ballet skills.

In other words, far from being a dismissible, outmoded ethnocentric mistake—as many sensitive ballet observers fear—the "Arabian" dance can be seen as an evolving attempt to imagine, recognize, and embody difference in an idiosyncratic way. In its best incarnations, it keeps evolving and reflecting a specific kind of encounter (a decidedly balletic one) between different people, danced out in creative, searching ways. At its worst—when sideshow hip-wriggling and cartoon Arabs take over—the variation merely perpetuates the culturally narrow practices that made dance scholar Brenda

Dixon Gottschild call ballet "the last bastion of white supremacy in concert dance" (Dixon-Stowell 1990).[21] To avoid such accusations (and realities) in the future, it seems possible for even the most classical of ballet companies to take a closer look at their current "Arabian" variation and start asking questions. When it comes to the deceptively innocuous *Nutcracker*, one of them might be: Is it time to wake up and sniff out the best kind of "Coffee"?

Notes

1. This translation of Petipa's instructions to Tchaikovsky comes from Wiley (1985, 375, item 10). Wiley's seminal research on the original *Nutcracker* (see also Wiley 1997) has been invaluable to me as I have explored the evolution of the ballet in North America.

2. Dance scholar Lori Ann Salem puts the word "Arab" in quotation marks, as I do with the *Nutcracker* "Arabian" dance, to suggest the fact that Europeans and North Americans have used the word somewhat carelessly. Arab technically means someone who speaks Arabic, Salem explains, but in the nineteenth century, Arabs were also called Turks and Orientals, Muslims, Musselmen, or Mohammedans (Salem 1995, 30–32). In the wake of the Egyptian "dancing girl" phenomenon spawned by circus sideshows and variety shows at the end of the nineteenth century, Arabs and Indians were often lumped together as "the East" (45–51), a phenomenon reflected in many *Nutcracker* "Arabian" dances, when movement influences of India as well as Indonesia and Thailand can be seen. Dance scholar and Middle East expert Anthony Shay defines Arab as one who speaks Arabic as a native language and also self-identifies as Arab (Shay 2002). The word "Arabian," he points out, as used in late-nineteenth-century ballets such as *The Nutcracker*, most probably arises from a general grouping together of nations and people living in the Arabian peninsula, which was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire until 1918. After World War II, the term "Middle Eastern" became common in diplomatic circles and today encompasses Turkey, Iran, the Arab world, perhaps Afghanistan and occasionally Pakistan (Shay conversation with author, August 2003).

3. My doctoral dissertation (Fisher 1998) and the resulting book (Fisher 2003) discuss the cultural adaptations of *The Nutcracker* in some detail. My focus in both works was the way the ballet has evolved in North America, and although I acknowledge all the versions that exist (satires, ice shows, animated features), I mainly deal with a category I call the traditional *Nutcracker*, which uses the Tchaikovsky score, ballet vocabulary and protocols, and a variation of the original 1892 libretto (sometimes with influences from the E. T. A. Hoffmann story that inspired it).

4. My fieldwork is explained and explored in more depth in my dissertation (Fisher 1998). It focused on what I call "*Nutcracker* communities" in two major research locations (Leesburg, Virginia, around the regional ballet, Loudoun Ballet; and in Toronto, Ontario, around the National Ballet of Canada in Toronto) as well as scattered locations around Southern California and a few others that were less investigated. Major research took place from 1995 to 1998, although I continued to keep in touch after that. My definition of

"*Nutcracker* participants" included performers and audience members as well as anyone else involved in the production of a *Nutcracker*. They ranged from those who were very familiar with the ballet to those seeing it for the first time. Participant observation included talking to and recording people in conventional and unconventional venues such as sit-down interviews and casual audience-polling; watching rehearsals, backstage life, and classes; occasionally helping out; and learning about the organizations and locations through a variety of historical and observational means. One unusual method I tested during this time, which I called "introspective interviewing," involved sending respondents home with a tape recorder and some "guiding questions" from me. This monologue method proved fruitful in gathering reflections on *Nutcracker* experiences (Fisher 1998, 67–70).

5. A discussion of various early Orientalist ballets can be found in Jowitt (1988). In her chapter called "Heroism in the Harem" (49–65), Jowitt emphasizes the non-ethnographic nature of these ballets, which were often influenced by the "fictional East" found in poetry by Victor Hugo and Byron. The exotic adventures of Romantic ballerinas in the resulting ballets, Jowitt points out, made for a style that was bolder than the "decorative Orientalism" of ballets in the eighteenth century (49). Although it is impossible to know exactly what kind of choreography was used in early nineteenth-century Oriental ballets, Jowitt suggests it would not stray far from traditional ballet steps. The movement conventions that still show up in ballets like *La Bayadère*, *Le Corsaire*, and *The Nutcracker* likely came from the imperial golden age at the end of the nineteenth century in Russia. For an excellent discussion of the history and meaning of character dance in ballet of the nineteenth century, which places the Orientalist ballets in a wider context, see Arkin and Smith (1997).

6. See, for example, Bakhtin (1984), and, in relation to *The Nutcracker*, Nissenbaum (1996). Nissenbaum does not discuss the ballet but refers to Clara's character in the E. T. A. Hoffmann story that inspired the ballet as "a proper young girl" who has "an extended fantasy of misrule in which her world turns crazily upside down." He suggests that the story offers readers "a secure yet exhilarating Christmas treat—a carnival of the mind" (131).

7. For a comprehensive discussion of the concept of liminality in relation to genres of theater, see Turner (1977). Turner places ballet in a category along with other works of art (such as theater, film, the novel, music, and visual art), which he calls "genres of industrial leisure" (43). He then suggests the ways that various elements of religious ritual in small-scale societies have survived in genres of industrial leisure. Turner borrows the concept of liminality from folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (36), who outlined the structure of rites of passage in small-scale societies in his *Rites of Passage*, first published in 1908. *Limen* is Latin for threshold, and, as Turner explains, liminality has come to mean the threshold experience of tribal members in transition. It is a "betwixt and between" phase that one experiences after leaving one status and before reaching the next, usually characterized by status-reversals and ordeals (37–39). Turner calls genres of industrial leisure "liminoid," or "liminal-like," because they are usually secular and are different in other crucial ways. For a discussion of the way I link *The Nutcracker* to Turner's concepts of liminal and liminoid, see Fisher (1998, 256–262).

8. Petipa's written instructions to Tchaikovsky for this dance were: "Trepak, for the end of the dance, turning on the floor," referring to the athletic feats of

Russian character dance. But evidently Ivanov did not like the trepak he came up with in rehearsal, and when someone suggested a hoop dance instead, the dancer Alexander Shiryaev choreographed his own solo (Shiryaev's story is reported in Wiley 1997, 138). Today, "Trepak" usually follows one of these two traditions; it is either an athletic Slavic character dance, featuring one or more males dressed in peasant shirt, ballooning pants, and boots, or a Candy Cane dance with hoops, a tradition carried on in Balanchine's version.

9. Yuri Slonimsky discusses the "Chinese" dance very briefly (1959, 19). The idea that the one-finger salute gesture mimics chopsticks is one I have heard dancers repeat. From my own viewing of, and asking questions about all kinds of Chinese dance, the only posture and gesture combination that seems to serve as a model is the Mongolian chopstick dance.

10. In describing the "contrapuntal principle" employed in the choreography, Wiley says that "Arabian" creates "the basic effect of stylized Eastern languor" (1985, 215). Musicologist David Brown says that the "Arabian" variation music evoked "oriental languor" (1991, 350).

11. I rely on Wiley's description of "Coffee," based on the choreographic notation, for my impression of this dance (1985, 215).

12. My knowledge of dance as it has been practiced in the Middle East has been greatly expanded by dance scholar Anthony Shay, who has generously shared his firsthand experience as well as his many salient resources with me.

13. For expansive discussion of a cornucopia of Arab images and stereotypes as they have circulated in North America over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Salem (1995). A more popularly written account of movie images in particular can be found in Shaheen (2001), which is a movie catalogue of sorts, with credits, plot summaries, and descriptions that highlight the representation of Arabs in Hollywood.

14. This 1985 Royal Ballet *Nutcracker* lists choreography by Lev Ivanov and Peter Wright. Roland John Wiley served as an adviser to the choreographer and put into action some of his ideas about the plot, making Drosselmeier a more prominent character. Wiley's opinion of the original *Nutcracker* libretto and his suggested potential remedies can be found in Wiley (1984).

15. My understanding of the Arab stereotypes that appear in North American popular culture was increased significantly by the work of Salem and, to a lesser degree, by Shaheen.

16. I thank Lynn Garafola for calling my attention to the 1958 CBS broadcast of the New York City Ballet, in which Arthur Mitchell dances with his child attendants.

17. Literary theorist Stephen Mailloux explains "rhetorical hermeneutics" by stating that it focuses on "how specific interpretive practices function within sociopolitical contexts of persuasion" (1990, 52). My avoidance of psychoanalytic theory is deliberate; I choose to give the individuals and groups who participate in *The Nutcracker* the space to argue for what their particular experience with the ballet means to them. I do not cast them as subjects who operate within a closed theoretical system, agreeing with literary scholar Wolfgang Iser, who said that a psychoanalytic approach to textual interpretation is "restricted to illustration of predetermined ideas concerning the unconscious" (1974, 276).

18. Russo's argument, carried on throughout her book, is far more complex than can be discussed here. Her concern with the grotesque and uncanny aspects of female performance is not one that the ballerina fits into in an obvious way; the ballerina is generally viewed as a symbol of stereotypical femininity, well within the bounds of societal expectations for women.

However, I am suggesting that the ballerina has transgressive potential because she actually exceeds the boundaries of normative behavior: by building muscles of steel, stretching into extravagant postures, and, for many women, by offering a career or (in the case of many *Nutcracker*s) a volunteer activity that provides a certain amount of choice, independence, and accomplishment.

19. In general, Anthony Shay expands upon the ways in which parallel traditions are created and perpetuated (2002). His many references to ballet and the ways in which national folk dance companies make decisions in order to convey specific desired images reveal a process that makes the imaginary Middle East of *The Nutcracker* a little less perplexing. That is, someone always chooses the elements that will represent an ethnic group or nation, and sometimes, these elements stray significantly from "original" or "authentic" performances.

20. I thank Anthony Shay for viewing a few *Nutcracker* "Arabians" and lending his expertise in identifying various influences from around the world in terms of costuming and choreography.

21. Brenda Dixon-Gottschild was Brenda Dixon-Stowell when she presented the conference paper, "Up From Under: the Afrocentric Tradition in American Concert Dance."

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