

Masrah Dance Company, a Pearl in Madrid

Raks Madrid 2005 – International Festival of Arabian and Andalusian Dance, Tribute to Mahmoud Reda 28 Oct – 1 Nov 2005

Toward the end of the summer 2005, Masrah Association's dance group Masrah Dance Company was invited by **Nesma** to Madrid. The reason for the invitation was to participate in a festival celebrating Mahmoud Reda's 75th anniversary. At the end of October, nine eager dancers and two group leaders got on the road.

This time the group travelled in separate batches, as **Tuija Rinne** who was also one of the teachers at the festival, left for Spain before the others. The rest of us also travelled in separate groups, but all of us – the dancers **Pirjo Akkanen, Riitta Hintikka, Lotta Linnavuori, Sara Hägglund, Heli Paatero, Tarja Suominen, Anu Toivonen** and **Jaana Ähl**, as well as the group leaders **Marja Laukkanen** and **Helena Rintala** – did manage to reach the right place at the right time.

Marja had hit gold in finding us a place to stay: the hotel was ideally located only ten minute's walk from the Royal Palace and – most important of all – right next door to the show venue! All the shops were not very far either...

We got a full range of the weather on the plains around Madrid: rain, overcast and one day a mini heat wave of 22°C! The local people must have been happy about the rain, as Spain had been plagued by a drought. Even the river flowing through Madrid had shrunk to a mere ribbon, as we managed to glimpse through fences around a construction site.

Workshops and photos

The festival offered workshops from the noble art of expression to Andalusian dance. Workshops were given by master teachers **Mahmoud Reda** and **Farida Fahmy** who do not require further introduction. In addition to them, one could receive instruction from Tuija Rinne (Finland), **Shokry Mohamed** (Egypt/Madrid), **Nawal Benabdallah** (Morocco/Paris), **Saad Ismail** (Egypt/Rome), **Eva Chacón** (Madrid) and Nesma, who was the festival organiser.

Our group participated in various workshops and we were mostly satisfied with them. Unfortunately, we did not receive our certificates as we left for home before the closing party. (However, we received them later by post – thank you Nesma!)

On two separate evenings, the festival guests could direct their steps to *Instituto Egipcio* where the film *Gharam fil Karnak (Love in Karnak)* and a documentary film about the *Reda Troupe* made by Mahmoud Reda and Nesma were shown. I hope that some day in the future we'll be able to see the documentary in Finland as well, as it gives a fresh insight into Egyptian dance.

Our Madrid Experience contained a lot besides dance: here are some special bits!

Words and occurrences

“**Paavo**” (A Finnish man's name – for the information of non-Finnish speaking readers). We were on our way to the Prado Museum – in the rain – but succumbed to the lunch advertisement of a restaurant. As the venue was “directly on the way” we decided to have a bit of a lunch. The local lunch is cheaper on the day's menu, so economical ladies as we are, we chose that.

The food was excellent and came in large portions (three courses), so the time passed very nicely and we never got to the museum. For the main dish, I ordered “paavo” (the Spanish word *pabo* nicely resembling the Finnish name) – and what did I get: a huge turkey drumstick compared to which a normal industrial chicken leg will grow green with envy! A little startled, I was sure I could not eat another bite at the welcome dinner later that evening, but... Travelling is hungry work, and at every meal all through the Spanish trip we were eagerly contemplating our next culinary visit!

“**Café largo**”. The first morning cup of coffee for a Finnish lady must be large, so that's what was on the menu on the first morning at the next-door café. We must still have been a little mixed up in our languages as, instead of a *café grande* a *café largo* was ordered – which all those knowledgeable of musical terms would realise means a “slow coffee”. No wonder the coffee took a long time to come, and eventually we were privileged to admire a noticeably fiery inquiry after the drink by a normally very placid Finnish lady.

When the coffee finally arrived, it came in thimble-sized cups! Which explains the absolute ban on the word *largo* during the rest of the trip. And as the Finns absolutely need their morning bucket of coffee, we patronised an international chain coffee shop the next morning (and the next, and the next...). Quality in decent sized cups!

New Spanish constitution? The timing of our trip was excellent as we were privileged to join the Spanish people in expectation of a royal heir: along with the nation we sat by our TV sets as Dona Letizia gave the country a new princess and a potential heir to the throne. None of us actually spoke Spanish, but we gathered that Spain might be facing a constitutional crisis as they decide whether the eldest child in the line of succession will be able to inherit the crown regardless of the gender of the said child. Until now the line of succession has followed the male line.

Halloween. After the show in which we had performed it was once again time for dinner; it was Halloween. We were overflowing with happiness after our performance and consequently not silent as mice. Add to this a strong stage make-up and it is easy to think us “merrier” than the actual truth. A gentleman in a neighbouring table wondered if we were having a “Halloween party”. After a brief conference we agreed this was the case and were satisfied we had given a sufficient explanation to our outward appearance and behaviour.

On the way back to the hotel we actually realised why the gentleman had wondered: we encountered quite a number of vampires and goblins. We might have frightened one or two in passing...

Men in Black. The show schedule on Monday was quite tight as the theatre was hosting other performances later the same evening. The show was hosted by two gentlemen, who seemed to enjoy speaking a lot. Finally Nesma – waving her hands energetically – got a stage assistant to remove the microphone from the stage and the show could begin.

And the to business: dance!

Opening night Gala with local stars

The festival guests were treated to two full shows of Oriental Dance. The venue, Teatro Gran Vía, was elegant with several chandeliers and ample gilding. The seats, however, were rather uncomfortable and we had to crane our necks to see the dancers. Intermission was an unknown concept and both shows were 'one act affairs'.

The Friday night Opening Gala featured group dances performed mostly by the hosting group **Al Andalus Danza** – although two visiting groups, namely those of Nawal Benabdullah (who has visited Finland) and Saad Ismail (residing in Italy) danced a modern piece and a Saidi medley, respectively.

The soloists of the evening were also for the most part ladies who also dance with Al Andalus Danza and as so very often happens, a great number of them had chosen a Classical Oriental solo piece. A noticeable feature in these performances was a wealth of everything; nothing appeared to be too much. The current fashion in every dance (also in balady) seems to include a wide chiffon skirt, ample puffy sleeves and, in most cases, an equally ample hairdo. As the make-up was on the same scale, we Finns feared we might appear rather 'nude' in our customary stage make-up! A single Spanish soloist had been daring enough to choose a folk song – Saidi.

Of the soloists, **Blanca De Arteché**'s flamenco fusion was one of the evening's highlights; skilful and full of expression, the dancer knew exactly what she was doing. Nawal Benabdullah's Moroccan dance was also extremely pleasant to see. Unfortunately we were not privileged to see Nesma's dance that evening.

Finland was grandly represented by the last soloist of the evening, Tuija Rinne, who stood out because of her exquisite dance technique and expressive interpretation of the music. Tuija's red rhinestone costume was elegant and enhanced the dancer's skill – instead of masking or hiding it, and her choreography by **Mohamed el Hosseney** was also different in a positive way.

Also we other Finns in the audience stood out after this performance, as we were of the opinion that we had just seen the top performance and voiced our opinion accordingly.

A Gala full of Mahmoud Reda

The second Festival show was in honour of Mahmoud Reda's 75th anniversary and his life's work in Egyptian dance. Maestro himself, with the legendary Farida Fahmy, was the guest of honour. The show boasted 18 of Mr Reda's choreographies and the audience was also presented with clips from the dance films he has made. Solo dances were performed by **Rebecca Wildi** (Switzerland) and Nawal Benabdallah, a duo by Saad Ismail and **Mariaude Cornuel** (Italy) and group dances by Al Andalus Danza, Group Nawal Benabdallah and – of course – Masrah Dance Company.

The hosting Spanish group had their work cut out for them as they danced eight separate choreographies. The dressing room got very lively as the ladies ran to change their ample and detailed costumes! Despite the rush, the 'costume rumba' went smoothly without any bangs or clashes between dancers or groups.

Al Andalus Danza performed the following dances: *Fellaheen*, *Hagalla*, *El Nuba*, *Ismailia*, *Granada*, two Andalusian dances *Alf Leyla wa Leyla* and *Samai el Erian* as well as the show stopper *El Saidi*. Some of the dances were shortened versions of the one's we usually are presented with. Later, we found out that although in Finland we are used to working through complete Mahmoud Reda choreographies during a single workshop, it is not uncommon elsewhere to learn a shortened version of the same. It appears we have been in a very privileged position!

Nawal Benabdallah and her two co-dancers performed the choreographies *Ya Einab*, *Eiwa ah* and *Halawet Shamsina*, the latter being an exact copy – including costumes and facial expressions - of the same choreography performed by Farida Fahmy in the film *Gharam fil Karnak*. The solos were *Farida* by Rebecca and *Sharqi* danced by Nawal, whereas the duet by Saad Ismail and Mariaude was the Bedouin dance *Rannet al Khulkhal*.

Masrah Dance Company performed the opening piece of the show, *Bafta Hindi* (a dance with a shawl), *El Kobkab* (a dance with clogs) and two Andalusian dances *Harram el Nawma* and *Lebed el Ayyam*.

Meat on the menu

The group costumes were mostly magnificently opulent. In addition to this, one noticed Al Andalus Danza's uniform arm and leg positions; I'm sure that with some of the costumes seeming to be made of quite heavy and stiff materials, the usual Oriental Dance technique (use of centre) would not have been visible.

The bright coloured Masrah costumes, made of lighter and flexible materials enhance the body movement, which is a noticeable difference. Also Tuija Rinne's excellent group adaptations of the choreographies were clearly different and fresh. Mr Reda seemed to agree, as he was seen to wipe his eyes during *Lebed el Ayyam*. One of our group leaders, Mrs Marja Laukkanen noted afterwards that she was proud of the Company's performance and that we had been 'the meat on the evening's menu'.

All in all, the elegantly organised show left us all feeling good and showed that Mr Reda's work is going to be alive and well also in the future.

Once again we were happy to witness the magnificence of dance as an art form: it offers opportunities to see the world, meet interesting people and widen your perspective. And also we proved that we Finns – even though loath to sing our own praises – are able to hold our own among the Oriental dancers in the rest of the world!

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