

From Cairo to Alexandria – Happenings Along the Way

El Hosseney Dance Company was invited by Mr **Mahmoud Reda**, along with other dance groups from Spain, Italy, France and Switzerland as well as male dancers from Egypt to perform his choreographies in three separate shows at the beginning of July 2007. Our group travelled to Alexandria via Cairo, trained together with the other groups at varying times of the day in varying conditions and represented Finland with flying colours in this highly international company. To be able to participate in an event of this magnitude is always a great honour as well as a magnificent experience but as we all are familiar with the training and performing process I will not describe it any further here. In stead, I will share with you some of the other events of our journey as they always have their own interest and are often quite amusing – at least in hindsight.

Iskandareyya

The groups first came to Cairo, where we were to travel to Alexandria by bus. The ladies had a separate bus from the men but, unfortunately, it had slipped the organisers' minds that performing female artists are travelling with considerably more luggage than the average tourist. The package space of the bus was so minuscule as to be rather ridiculous compared to the number of bags and could only fit about ten of them. There they stood wondering what to do.

In the end, all the rest of the bags were piled at the back of the space we were all actually sitting in – and the pile seemed to teeter dangerously too. At least we Finns kept our fingers crossed so that the driver would not need to try to stop the bus suddenly as, in addition to the poor victim being crushed by the vehicle, a large number of visiting artists would have become considerably reduced in volume as well, as all the loose bags would have been shooting forward...Fortunately, everything went smoothly both on the way to Alex and on the return trip to Cairo and we were all able to breathe easier as we dragged our luggage from the bus to the hotel. Notice the lack of helpful gentlemen: the girls lifted their heavy bags out of the bus quite unassisted.

As an old Cairo-visitor, I had eagerly expected this trip to Alexandria, as I had never visited the city before. I would have been very interested in visiting all the tourist attractions,

including the famous Alexandrian Library that was actually the venue of the shows that took place in the library auditorium. It just so happened, that the efficiently Egyptian schedules were so mobile as to prevent actual tourism. The week in Alex went by quickly as we moved from the air-conditioned hotel to the air-conditioned bus to the air-conditioned theatre and speedily back again.

During our week-long stay, I found out that the wind always seems to blow in Alex, the air (surprise!) is more humid than in Cairo and the Corniche goes on and on. The sea is never quite still and underneath the surface it abounds with remnants of the ancient culture. It is quite an impressive experience to sit on the beach wall staring at the waves and knowing the sun-kissed surface hides the remnants of Cleopatra's palace...

Alexandria showed me a different kind of Egypt from the one I already knew. Our hotel was fine, but still under construction and it was situated directly on the line of the airport flight path. The combination of the sounds of airplanes landing and taking off and the construction noise, which could go on at all hours – well, it should be fairly easy to imagine the consequences. The air-conditioning was functioning extremely well, so well in fact that at times the conditions almost became Arctic and it was really nice to draw the covers to the chin and watch the television.

Our hotel was situated on a fairly well trafficked (and wide) street and across the street from a typically international shopping centre with a 'hyper market'. I admit it was nice to go shopping for fruit and a little sturdier bread to enhance a breakfast of croissants but the experience was sadly lacking in local colour. It was as if you were at home: you could even drink your coffee at Starbucks and eat your pizza at Pizza Hut. How nice is that?

The driving style in Alex differs from that of Cairo: there is really nothing to slow the drivers down and there is also less traffic. This causes the travelling speed of the cars to rise quite a lot and the poor pedestrian will have great difficulties in crossing the street: at times you need to almost run for your life if you wish to cross unharmed. We also met a phenomenon called the traffic lights. I have encountered those in Cairo too, where they mostly seem to go unnoticed. In Alex, our transport actually stood at the lights while the red light was on.

On this trip, I actually saw an interesting sight: I kept wondering what the diminishing numbers on a sign on the left hand side was. After a while the counter reached zero,

changed colour and started from the top again – and the car started to move. I realized this was the ideal traffic light for an impatient driver: you could all the time see how long you still had to wait! I wonder if this design would catch on in Finland?

Al-Qahira

Quite a number of local people never tired of telling us that our visit occurred at an unusually warm period. We did not have a thermometer but, afterwards, we heard that the ambient temperatures had been close to 40°C. No wonder, then, that at times we all felt rather listless. However it may be, I would not exchange the weeks in Cairo for a holiday at a hotel. Even though the air in Cairo was so full of particles that you didn't even need any sun block the experience was exactly as expected. Brisk drives in a microbus, taxi and the metro. Swarming, chaotic traffic. People, people and once again people.

Moving around in Cairo is an art form. The metro is an economical way to travel and you can see all sorts of things while you travel. This time I experienced how a salted herring feels in a barrel*: the metro was so full that not everyone could fit in the cars and you could easily stand upright without any handhold at all – indeed, falling down would have been almost impossible as there was barely room to breathe. Despite the crowd, all the women in the women's car had energy to be merry – or was that because of three pale tourists who couldn't help laughing in the tight squeeze?

This trip also introduced me to the slowest in Cairo – that is the slowest taxi. The car was brand new and perhaps that was the reason to the driver's extreme caution. The normal style of driving includes fierce accelerations into opening gaps (as in race driving), driving without hands and continuous sounding of the horn. But no: this driver holds both hands tightly on the wheel, indicates when he wants to change the lane, only changes the lane when absolutely necessary, lets other cars pass before him, does not dash into a single opening space – and only sounds the horn *once* during the whole trip. If you should meet such a miracle while in Cairo, tell him hello from me and that he is a celebrity in Finland – you cannot make a mistake as there can be only this one! Another driver took me on a trip along a one-way street against the traffic flow but that is another story.

* An old Finnish adage to express a throng of people; also being tightly squeezed between people.

Dancers, the great costume lovers that we are, ought to be interested how a dance costume is born. Our party had the honour to accompany the designer **Eman Zaki** to a prestigious draper's shop where shelves were overflowing with materials one more beautiful than the next. Only one of us was intending to buy material for a dress, but it just so happened that I fell again: I just could not resist a material that clearly was calling my name.

I have in my years as a dancer sown a costume or two but for the first time I had a costume designed directly on me by someone else. And the most fascinating experience on that trip to the draper's was to see how the ideas for the costumes are born and the costumes formed by a true expert. We were looking at various materials and for each material, Eman had a grand idea for a costume – we could almost see some of them becoming true right there before our eyes!

Because of the heat we changed from day people into night creatures. This change followed us back home and I'm writing this at 3 am. I'm missing the local atmosphere and our Cairene friends and there is no other remedy but to start planning for the next trip: one needs new experiences to accompany the one's from this trip – and soon!

Photos

El Hosseney Dance Company in Alexandria: Riitta Hintikka, Sara Hägglund, Mohamed el Hosseney, Tuija Rinne, Laura Huovinen, Anu Toivonen, Ilona Korhonen, Milja Holopainen and Sanna Myllylä; Aino Vesanen is unfortunately not in this picture.

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