

Encounters in Egyptian Dance

– a Journey in the World of Mahmoud Reda's Dances

By Anu Toivonen

With great interest, I have been reading the series discussing **Mahmoud Reda's** innovative work in the field of Egyptian Folk Dances. In Finland, my generation of Oriental dancers have practically grown up on his work and style and we have been very fortunate to be able to learn both from dedicated Finnish teachers as well as the Master himself. Personally, I have also been honoured to participate in several projects celebrating his work both here in Finland as well as in Spain and Egypt.

In Finland, Masrah Association has done a significant amount of groundwork in training Oriental dancers and dance teachers and a considerable amount of this work has been done through Mahmoud Reda's choreographies. The members of Masrah Association have learned both dance technique and traditions by dancing and watching his work. One of the Masrah highlights was the 2004 *Yalla! International Oriental Dance Festival* in Helsinki, Finland, as Masrah Association had the honour of hosting Mahmoud Reda Troupe and the Maestro himself in a Gala Show of his choreographies – accompanied by a live band, no less! The male dancers came from Egypt and originally, both groups (Egyptian men and Finnish ladies) trained separately at home. A week before the show everyone came to Helsinki to put the show together – and what a show! The whole was meticulously supervised by Mahmoud Reda. (Some highlights of this show can be seen on the Masrah DVD *Yalla! International Oriental Dance Festival in Helsinki 3rd – 6th June 2004.*)

Some of the choreographies we trained for the Yalla! 2004 –show have stayed in the Masrah Dance Company repertoire for a long time and they have been performed also in Madrid and Alexandria. Two of these dances, Bafta Hindi (a dance with a shawl) and El Kobkab (a dance with wooden clogs on the feet) are originally from Mahmoud Reda's production Robabekya.

In Madrid in 2005, **Nesma** hosted a Gala in honour of Mahmoud Reda's 75th anniversary. In a show *Homage to Mahmoud Reda – A Life for Dancing* dancers from Spain, Italy,

Switzerland, France and Finland came together to celebrate the occasion on stage. Spain was represented by Nesma and her group Al Andalus Danza, Italy by **Saad Ismail** and his troupe, Switzerland by **Rebecca Wildi** and her students, France by **Nawal Benabdullah** and Company and Finland by Masrah Dance Company. (This show can be found on DVD *Homage to Mahmoud Reda – A Life for Dancing* produced by Nesma.)

In Alexandria in 2007, the same nations were represented in a series of three shows under the heading of *The World Dances with Mahmoud Reda*. The participants were the same, except for Finland, represented by El Hosseney Dance Company, and Egypt, represented by Mahmoud Reda Troupe men. This time the shows took place in the world-famous Library of Alexandria. Also this feat was preceded by a week of intensive training on site as the visiting ladies from five countries and the Egyptian male dancers worked to fit their steps together. The result was fabulous and very much worth all the hard work put into it during the preceding winter! (The results can be seen on DVD *The World Dances with Mahmoud Reda* produced by the Maestro and Nesma.)

All these projects have meant an enormous amount of hard work for all the dancers involved and for my part I can honestly say that they have been worth every drop of sweat poured into them. In general, the intensive training required takes an individual dancer a step or two further along this long road we are all walking (or should I say dancing) and, personally, I have been very honoured to work with all the dancers involved in them. I also want to express my special gratitude for Mahmoud Reda for his work and dedication that he is so willing to share with all of us.

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