

# A GHAZIYA IN THE FAMILY

Jo Hiron



A dancer's reputation is a chancy thing  
when story-tellers make their money from selling scandals -  
as these tales from the Arabian Nights make plain!

(originally published in NADA, 2003)

Text © Jo Hiron 2003, this version 2010

# A GHAZIYA IN THE FAMILY

A good friend of mine tells me that there are some things that will always be considered amongst the eternal truths of Egypt – the pyramids will sleep forever in the sands of Giza, the Sphinx will never tell its smiling secret, and Cairo, the first, and mother of all cities, will stand until the end of time. The best stories will always be told in the down town café-bars, and, he adds with a grin, dancers will forever be “*doobious*.”

Now, I know he means no more than to exercise his considerable portion of Cairene wit, but I do wonder at the *doobious*. To such as myself, past the age of inhibitions, and living in the anything-goes West, it means very little, and does no damage, but there’s a long shadow cast by this particular candle. So I wonder: will dancers *really* be eternally dubious? Will there *always* be the implied association with a reputedly far older profession, in a relay that runs the double distance from doubt to damnation, and back again?

There’s a picture on my wall of a painted stone from Ancient Egypt showing a languid dancing girl, beautifully posed in very little more than her own hair and a few strategic bits of jewellery: it reminds me of one of Mata Hari’s more aesthetic photo-studies. Evidence for the long shadow indeed; and for that second shadow between artist and artiste. Does a woman who dances only become a dancer when she’s talked about? Earlier in the year, Cairo acquaintances discussed recent scandals with relish. It seemed as if the entire city had been cast as extras in a soap opera, and they were diligently trying to piece together disjointed scenes into a satisfactorily salacious whole. When I protested that these things were happening to *real* women, one mitigation surfaced with surprising regularity: what did I expect from a city brought up on a diet of old Egyptian movies!

More evidence. All those earnest singing young men with Eddie Munster haircuts pursuing dangerous and elusive dancers to the despair of their respectable elders. All those moments when the lives of Soad Hosni, Samia Gamal, and Tahiya Carioca teeter on the brink of ruin, when their nearest-and-dearest discover that they *dance* for a living.

So, could it possibly be true that I'm making a mistake in drawing an unbroken line in the Egyptian sand between my Deir el-Medina dancing girl, and Dina, looking exquisitely hunted in her pristine *hejab*? Should I really be drawing a *double-helix*, showing the eternally-spiralling relationship between *doobious* dancers, and delight in tales of their scandalous misdeeds? If so, when did the stories start?

One source not always scoured by dance writers are the inter-woven stories of *The Thousand-and-One Nights*, commonly called the *Arabian Nights*. Scholars generally agree that these tales derive from Persian, Indian, and Arabic tales, collected probably between the 13th and 15th centuries, and finally formed into the nightly discussions of murderous Schahriah and devious Scheherezade in Cairo, around 1450. There are several different versions, not all sharing the same stories, and an Apocrypha, of course. The oldest manuscript dates to 1548. This therefore makes any reference to dance considerably older than the accounts of 19th century travellers. However, amongst all those princes, and princesses, flying horses, and fakirs, and genies there are only passing glimpses of dancers: as in recorded history, they remain on the edges, outside the walls; referred to, admired, and revered, but never truly welcome, and never openly admitted as part of the family.

The adventure of the 829th night tells of a certain Sultan and a prisoner who claims that "by looking at a woman veiled...(he) can know her race, her origin, and the profession of her parents." This being a fairy tale, the Sultan's curiosity gets the better of him, and he promises the stranger his freedom if he will put his own queen to the test. Is she *really* the daughter of one of his trusted officials, or is the king about to get a nasty surprise? What do *you* think?

The prisoner examines the queen, and gives his verdict: "O King of Time, my mistress, your noble lady, is in herself all perfect beauty; but her mother was a dancing girl, a free woman of the wandering Ghaziyas, a daughter of prostitution."

The horrified Sultan summons the official, who, despite being threatened with imminent impalement, tells his story: "Dear master, in my youth I lived the free life of the desert, escorting the caravans across the land of my tribe for hire. One day, when we were in camp near the wells of Zubaidah, there passed a troop of women of the wandering Ghaziyas, whose daughters, from the moment they are ripe, prostitute themselves to the men of the desert, wandering from one tribe to another, and from one camp to another, selling their charms and dexterity to the young riders. These women stayed with us for some days and then departed to traffic with our neighbours. When they had left, I saw a little girl of five years old crouching beneath a tree near the wells, where she had either been lost or forgotten by her



mother. The child was as brown as a ripe date and so slight and pretty that I swore to adopt her. Though she was as wild as a hind among trees, I succeeded in taming her; and she grew up with my children. When she reached puberty, she was as desirable as any girl could be, and therefore, because I loved her and would not take her, I married her. For our great pride, Allah gave us a daughter whom my King has deigned to regard as his favourite. I swear by the Prophet that that is the whole truth. But Allah knows all!”

And how does the Sultan react to this news? Well, “his breast was relieved of the torture of uncertainty, for he had at first imagined that his favourite was the daughter of a prostitute, and now he knew that her mother, although belonging to the Ghaziyas, had been a virgin until her marriage.”

The Sultan’s rejoicing is short-lived, however, for, having released his prisoner, his fateful curiosity prompts him to wonder about his own origins. When he finds out, he would doubtless have preferred Ghawazi blood to his own truth, but that, of course, is a story for another night.

And how did the queen’s birth reveal itself? The matter, apparently, is easy. “The women of the Ghaziyas have thick eyebrows which just touch at the root of the nose; also their eyes are the darkest in all Arabia.” So now you know.

And now to the 841st night: a certain impoverished and attractive young man is so forgetful of his good manners that he has gravely insulted a beautiful girl who has had the misfortune to fall in love with him. She decides to exact a perfect revenge by tricking our hero into marriage with the elderly and exceedingly ugly daughter of the Sheikh al-Islam. Our hero dare not divorce his new wife, or even run away – the result would be the same: pursuit and instant execution by her avenging father, who guards his family pride and public reputation with equal zeal. At last the young man apologises, and begs the girl to find some way to release him.

This, says the girl, is quite easy. All he has to do is get the Sheikh to divorce his son-in-law. Fat chance, he replies. The old man’s been waiting for years to find someone mad enough to marry the monstrous creature. Yes, says the girl, but what about his *family pride* and *public reputation*? “Listen carefully,” she says. “And you shall soon be free from that poor woman... Go to the foot of the Citadel and call together all the acrobats, mountebanks, quacks, buffoons, dancers, rope-walkers, ballad singers, ape-leaders, bear-masters, tambourines, clarinets, flageolets, cymbals, and funny men, and say to them...”



Presently our hero is sat in the courtyard, drinking sherbet with the old man, when “suddenly the great door opened to admit the strangest procession. First came four acrobats walking on their heads, next four rope-walkers balancing on their big toes, then four mountebanks leaping along on their hands, and lastly the whole dancing, yelling, tinkling, shouting, clattering, grinning, mimicking crowd of the city’s foolery. Ape-leaders led their apes, bear-masters showed their bears, buffoons twirled their tinsel, quacks cocked their high felt bonnets, singers of lewd songs sang their lewd songs, and players of instruments played their instruments, altogether and out of tune. They collected round us in some sort of order and, at a single bang upon the drum fell into a solemn silence. The chief of the tribe came to the foot of the steps and, in the name of *all my family* there assembled, wished me prosperity in a ringing voice, and swore that none of these noble professions would ever desert me.”



““What is this?” cried the outraged Sheikh al-Islam, as he pointed a trembling finger in my face. “Are you the son of a mountebank? Are these vile gypsies kin to you?””

Of course our hero, lying through his teeth, swears that each and every one of these public entertainers is a sister, aunt, uncle, cousin, and brother. The Sheikh demands his daughter's instant divorce, and the deceitful young man is prevailed upon to set aside his detested bride, and depart with his honour – and his skin – intact. He also takes away a sizeable part of the old Sheikh's fortune – a fair price, it is judged, to avoid the scandal of an alliance with a son of the Ghawazi.

Having paid off his temporary relatives, who are here enjoying one of their frequent banishments, to a camp outside the city walls, our hero rushes home to the waiting arms of the girl he now swears to love and worship for all time. She, however, decides he hasn't quite suffered enough... but that would take another night's telling.

Whether we like it or not, "our" dance remains a close cousin to the low activities of guisers and gaddabouts, and such as these are meat and drink to storytellers. Today's tabloid gossip, old black-and-white movies from the last century, and the tittle-tattle of travellers from the century before can all be stripped down to tales that Scheherezade would have recognised. If you dig down deep enough, some have deeper roots than the pyramids of Giza.

But how far back do the stories go? Where does the dancer end, and the story begin? Why is it so? In every country, in every century, and on every night since stories were first thought of, women have left their dancing footprints in the treacherous sands of fantasy. Families are forgotten. Past and future become meaningless, and even the most tedious, temporary liaison can seem to turn the pages of a great romance or notorious affair.

Dancers use their bodies to interpret the soul of music. They have no need to explain what they do, and this is perhaps why those who can only see the world in terms of words – the gossips, the scandal-mongers, the hacks, the poets, and the storytellers – have so very often betrayed them. Fall in love with a dancer, they say, and open the door to Scheherezade's bed-chamber. Marry a dancer, and become not a respected husband, but a mere bit-part player in an enduring Egyptian scandal. Wake up one morning to discover a Ghaziya in the family, and who knows where the story will end.

It could, perhaps, be a little disconcerting to find oneself a plot device, and a *doobious* one at that. But then, there is *one* comfort to be drawn from the double-helix. Empires rise and fall, everything crumbles away into nothing:

And only the stories remain.

