HORSE STEPS

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Stories of the Dancing Horse and Other Animals in Arabic Dance

(originally submitted to Mosaic in 2005)

HORSE STEPS

Dance is something learned from someone else. From the dawn of time, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and older sisters have taught young girls to dance. Young boys copy admired friends, older brothers, and wayward uncles. As well as the dancing steps, a good deal of folk-history and folk-lore is transmitted along the way until they become utterly inseparable.

When learning a dance from another culture, the student-dancer picks up all sorts of random information to be assimilated into whatever she already knows. You would think, wouldn't you, that although each dancer learns different things at different times and from different people that there would be a consensus of knowledge, that the most widely-believed information would somehow percolate through to form a core understanding that could be relied upon as fact. Alas, folklore is a slippery fish. Just when you think you have caught it, your prize will jink upon the line, turn tail and head off in a completely different direction.

This perverse behaviour is not the fault of the story, but of the story-*teller*. All of a sudden, something happens. The story remains the same, but now the story-teller is uncomfortable with some of its details. All at once the old story won't do, and a new one comes along to take its place.

In many ways dance is no more and no less than the simple act of moving ones body in time to music, but art and entertainment can never exist in a vacuum: they are inextricably linked to the culture which produces them. And if that culture changes the way that it thinks about itself, then its stories change too.

Arabic dance has now been taught and enjoyed in the West for more than 50 years. There are several generations involved in its performance and popularity. The older generations have taught their skills and understandings to the younger so that a quasi-culture has developed which relates specifically to Arabic *dance,* This is separate from, but symbiotically dependant upon the cultures which gave rise to the dance in the first place.

With its current burgeoning popularity and prosperity one might think that belly-dance has triumphed unscathed in spite of troubled attitudes to and from the Middle East, but to this dance-folklorist at least that doesn't ring true: the stories, you see, have changed…

Take, for example, the tale of the dancing horse.

My first pony

When I first started dancing – early 1998 – the dance teachers whose classes and workshops I attended told me that the “posturing” part of the male Saiidi dance, and its female imitation, is derived from dancers mimicking the actions of a performing horse.

This did not seem to be unusual or out of place.

Across the Middle East, a performing horse is, or was, a feature of festivals and other celebrations - the same festivals which traditionally feature impromptu dance displays of male skill and prowess.) The horse may be ridden, or at liberty. At the instruction of its rider or handler, the horse – always a stallion – “dances” by picking up its front legs, performing controlled paces after the manner of the horses from the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. (According to legend, the art of the Spanish Riding School was derived, in part, from the training techniques of the Moors.) The horse arches its forelegs, kicks out, or trots on the spot, missing a beat or changing direction in performing many moves which we would recognise from the riding-school derived sport of dressage, and which do indeed look like the animal is dancing

The performing horse is a symbol of Arabic desert heritage, of wealth, of judgement and discernment, of a prized skill in horsemanship, and, by association, of masculine strength. It is for this reason, so the story ran, that male Saiidi dancers mimic the high, lifted legs of the performing horse, and pose and posture after the manner of proud Arabic stallions. To me, the minuscule halt, or settling, after each dance-step seemed to recall the dressage moment when a horse collects itself, or rebalances and redistributes its weight before making the next move.

Pantomime horses

Performing horses conferred honour and luck upon whoever hosted the festival or party, in the same way that dancers were believed to confer honour and luck. When real skilled horses and their handlers were unavailable or inappropriate, fakes were introduced.

It is not certain when “pantomime” Saiidi horses first appeared. Some accounts I have read seem to suggest that these were always part of village festivities, in much the same way as similar horse costumes appear in English Morris (or Moorish?) dance. This would not seem unreasonable. Others suggested that the fake horses appeared, or at least became more widely known, when folkloric dancing moved indoors – to theatres and hotels, and to the film and television studio. A horse of cloth and cardboard is certainly more manageable than the real thing and doesn’t mind waiting around during interminable delays in filming! Since folkloric dancing has been a feature of Egyptian television since the 1952 revolution, and a part of the film industry even

before that, the images it provides are a large part of what constitutes “living memory”. To many from whom I have collected stories the pantomime horse is almost more real than the living one!

Horses of a different colour

Round about 2000-2001, the dance teachers seemed to have changed their story. Instead of speaking about old folkloric traditions, they were saying that Egyptians would *never* mimic an animal, for to do so was against the teachings of Islam. Instead, they said, Western dance observers and commentators mistakenly interpreted the dance steps as horse-like, or drew analogies between the proud, “macho” Saiidi dancers and the high-crested Arabian horse. Animal mimicry, they said, was entirely the preserve of North Africa, where residual “un-Islamic” Berber influence allowed the retention of animal archetypes in dance forms.

It was also said that the “legend” of the horse steps derived from the 1950s, when the Reda and National Folkloric dance troupes were seeking to justify Egyptian dance in the eyes of a newly “folk conscious” world stage, by creating antecedents and meanings for all moves where none had existed before. (For which the growing appreciation of classical Indian dance, with its ancient codification of steps, hand gestures, and story-telling must take partial blame.)

The dance hadn’t changed, but the stories had.

Studies “in the field” – or should that be “the paddock”?

By the end of 2001 an unexpected illness and its aggressive treatment forced me to retire almost entirely from actively pursuing dance classes; pre-booked workshops became an expensive luxury when I couldn’t guarantee being well enough to attend. I have, however, never been very good when it came to giving up and there were still ways to learn about dancing and dancers. I went to find places where I might find Middle Eastern music, and if anyone got up to dance I asked them for stories.

It was thus inevitable that I should come again to dancing horses and delight in new tales, Berber and otherwise. And so I have Algerian friends who, when they dance sometimes adopt a very upright stance, with a discernible pulse, or ripple at the waist and hips. One mimes firing a rifle, held at the shoulder and pointing slightly down, as if shooting from horseback. He says he is dancing the steps of the proud hunter on his horse, although, being a city boy, he has never ridden anything more than a bicycle. I asked him recently what he thought he was shooting, and he answered: “French”.

Another bounds about the room making shrill cries and mocking a stumble-walk that Dina would be ashamed to own. His laughing friends tell me he is being the foolish horse-colt whose legs are too long for his head-space. His father drives a vegetable truck in Oran and he's supposedly here studying business, although probably engaged in the transport of other grown merchandise…

Horse steps

I also know that in Northern Morocco, certain rhythms are associated with the dancing horses still seen in festivals and processions. The women, when dancing at home, will sometimes copy the intricate patterns made by the horse's hooves, raising one arm high above their heads to mimic the long whip used by the rider. At other times they will mimic the rider sitting tall in the saddle, holding their arms straight out in front of them: they are not holding reins. With their fingers clasped together in a wide cup-shape, they move their arms up and down, mimicking the muzzle of the dancing horse as it nods from side to side in time to the music.

Watching videos of family celebrations in Morocco, I am encouraged to watch for the woman who "does the whip" – holding one arm aloft and miming the action of a swaying whip, striking out to lightly touch her "invisible" horse. Sometimes a drummer sees her arm falling and adds a sharp rim-shot for the cracking leather. She holds herself so proudly…and always, as soon as the "whip" has fallen either she or her closest companion follow on with the same pattern of dancing steps, stepping rapidly from one foot to the other, lifting their heels in an odd syncopation, and pulsing at the waist. "See the horse-steps!" they cry.

Young girls, who are not inclined to bind their hair, may swish it after the manner of a horse shaking its mane. Then there are also the skilled Moroccan shik'hatt dancers who have achieved such mastery over their muscles that they tie a scarf about their hips with the long tasselled ends hanging down behind their legs. This false horse-tail is made to rotate, quiver, lift and jump like that of a flirtatious mare…

The horse steps out

And it is not only in the Maghreb that the horse steps out:

I heard from a young man of Qatar, but of Kuwaiti origin, that horse-steps form part of the men's sword dance. When the dancer crosses his sword over its scabbard and holds both these, shaking and quivering, over his head, his upright posture is that of a proud rider returning home after a successful hunt or victorious battle. He will dance the horse-steps to show the warrior at the gate of his village, the very moment the sight of him gladdens his family.

Only recently I heard - from an Egyptian - that when a dancer taps his feet, or points to them with his long Saiidi dancing-stick, he is mimicking the training and encouragement given to the dancing stallions to encourage them to lift their legs higher, or in a finer arching. This is why the dance slows down, to show the horse struggling to understand what is being desired of it, and then speeds up as the horse delights in pleasing its master.

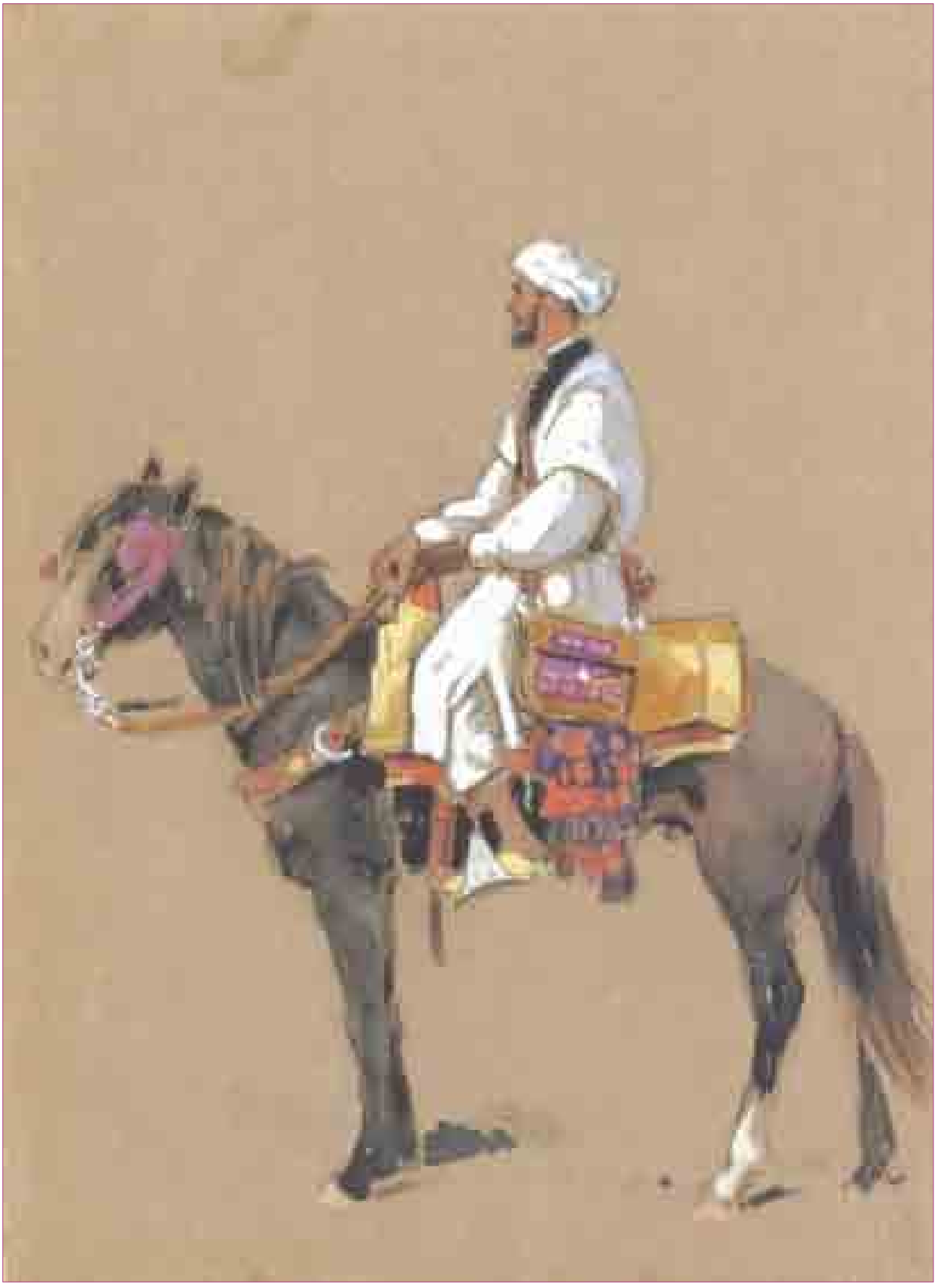
Welcome to the menagerie

Once you start looking for animal stories in Arabic dance they are to be found as frequently and with as much diversity as animal stories in our own sayings and folklore. There is a veritable menagerie of birds and beasts, and yet these stories seem to have escaped every single account of dance-lore as transmitted to the West. Why is this?

In some cases it seems that our own animal stories, ancient and modern, simply get in the way. For example, in Arabic the term for what we would call Egyptian Walk, or Hagallah, or Ghawazee Step, particularly when this involves a side-ways swishing movement, can sometimes translate as “duck-walk”. I am also told that that when this is seen in its slower, more vertical form, where the hip rotations can be seen, the Arabic name translates as “goose-step”. It doesn’t take much lateral thinking to work out why these interpretations were not acceptable when belly-dancing started to be taught in the West in the middle of the last century!

In other cases it seems that opening the doors of the menagerie opens not the crystal Tower of Art, but rather the earthily fecund farm-yard, or delightfully childish playroom:

In Alexandria they dance with “turtle hands”. (Both hands are held out in front of the body, fingers held out flat and together. One hand is placed directly on top of the other, and the thumbs are held out on either side to mimic a turtle’s flukes. The thumbs can then be rotated to mimic swimming.) Turtle hands are considered funny, cheeky, and sexually suggestive. The dancer, usually male, looks away from his hands, as if he can’t quite believe what they’re doing! With the deserts and the Nile, we think of Egypt as a riverine, inward-looking country – we tend to forget it also has several long coastlines, together with all the rich folklore and traditions of fishing communities. The coastal dancer may mimic the sheer pleasure of sea-bathing on a long, hot day to say: “Look here, I’m having fun!” Once his audience has seen and appreciated the swimming motif, up pops a sculling turtle for a guaranteed laugh.



In Cairo, when an enthusiastic audience member gets down on one knee to clap the dancer with that peculiarly flat clapping motion, it would not be unusual for an observer to comment: “Ah, she’s so sweet, he wishes he were a crocodile, so he could eat her all up!” (And crocodiles have been driven out of much of Egypt since the 1930s!)
A particularly extravagant shoulder-shimmy and jump could be a flea-bite or migrant bee. A louche shoulder-linked saunter mid-debke is likened to yoked buffalo going down to the river. A hip-jiggle may be a teasing filly, or fly-swatting tail; a rather more suggestive hitch up-and-down is nothing more than a perfectly innocent *scratch* against a convenient tree

Make way for the dancing horse!
Perhaps, at only half a century or so, the teaching and performing of Arabic dance in the West is still too young and too fragile to entirely take on the robust and irreverent mantle of genuine folk-lore. Or perhaps the West would rather create its own chimaeras. Who knows? Every single one of my “lost” stories came to me from ordinary men and women, first and second generation migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, who play music and enjoy dancing with friends and with family. Through their modern lives the moulid horse still dances, his lifted hooves are still a thing of story.
Stories, though, do not just tell themselves: they reveal their teller. The first tales I heard of the dancing horse and the proud dancers who mimed them told me my teachers loved and admired the people who created “their” dance and actively defended “their” dance from accusations of triviality by enhancing the perceived nobility of the Saiidi dancers. The second series of stories told me my teachers had grown more aware of the religious and political turmoil in the regions which gave birth to “their” dance for now they defended it against accusations of immorality and invalidity. The stories I collected myself told me their tellers were real people and their dancing an expression of real life with all its topsy-turvy contradictions, colourful rag-bag of history, and fistful of half-remembered jokes. Not one of them is wrong. They are just different stories, and belong in different books.

And yet in whatever direction the politicians, war-mongers, map-makers, and zealots would like to push us, the truth of the matter is that the world *is* getting smaller. Whether through media or migration, real people are waking up to find the most surprising neighbours, swapping recipes, and talking over the fence. Whatever the Big Picture, small things happen in every passing minute.

Real lives inevitably create their own folk-lore – and this true for dancers and teachers the world over.
The folklorist looks backwards, collects and catalogues the tales that have made us what we are. Real people make the stories that will take them forward in a changing world.