

Raqs Sharqi – an introduction to the dance



Raqs Sharqi simply means 'oriental dance' but the term has come to be associated solely with the music and folk traditions of Egyptian dance. This dance style has been mainly an oral tradition handed down through the family by women: but men do dance too, including the 'tahtib' or male stick dance (a type of ritualised combat).

The age and ancestry is hard to determine as it was not deemed sufficiently important to record - being both a female tradition and part of everyday life - unlike wars and the deeds of (male) rulers! It's impossible to date accurately or source all the roots of Raqs Sharqi but, some of the movement, musical and costume traditions can be traced to the migration of the Rajasthani gypsies through North Africa as well as to more southern influences from the Nubians (southern Egyptian peoples).

Over the centuries the dance has experienced periods of both excellence and decline and even today there is still some dissonance between social and professional dancers – you hire them for your wedding but you wouldn't want your daughter to become one!

You may have heard the term 'belly dance' used to describe this style of dancing. The phrase is a translation of the term used by Western travellers to Egypt in the 18th century to describe the dance they saw performed. To their eyes, accustomed to the rigid court dances of the West, the performers looked wild and abandoned. They dubbed it 'danse du ventre' or belly dance. Today this term is usually applied to the more glitzy cabaret style seen in clubs and restaurants.

The dance has been restored as a performance art over the past few decades, including by Suraya Hilal who has brought the dance to a wider audience in the west. Her historical research and analyses of the dance and music have transformed its possibilities as a modern theatre art. Suraya's analysis has identified three main forms of Raqs Sharqi: Sha'abi (folk), Baladi (urbanised folk), and Sharqi (classical). Sha'abi has roots deep in the farming communities of the Fellahin, the complex dance and music of Upper Egypt (the Saïd) and from the travelling Ghawazee (gypsies). Sharqi is descended from music and dance traditions refined in the Islamic courts during the Golden Age of Islam (10th-11th centuries), the early Ottoman period, and the early 20th century. Baladi is the 'baby' and emerged in Cairo in the early 20th century and has parallels with the development of the 'blues' in America, sharing the same sense of yearning for the home country (baladi means 'of the country'). Baladi is an exciting fusion of Egyptian folk traditions and western musical instruments such as the accordion, and is more contained than Sha'abi. It has been dubbed 'Egyptian jazz'. The three forms are not totally distinct and there is a degree of overlap between them. Underpinning and uniting this vast range of music are the distinct Egyptian drum rhythms: the heartbeat of the music and dance.

The music is not Islamic - although the classical form has absorbed much of the beauty, intricacy and abstract qualities of Islamic art. Egyptians seem to have a genius for adopting elements of the cultures of invading/travelling strangers, absorbing and integrating them into something quintessentially Egyptian!

Raqs Sharqi is not narrative – it doesn't tell a story like Indian dance – but expresses mood and emotion, interpreting the essence of the piece and the nuances of feeling. In terms of movement, the dance is grounded, centred and abstract. The dancer works with gravity with movements that are softly geometric in form and it is more 'vertical' than 'horizontal'. Whilst the three forms share the same basic dance vocabulary, they have different conventions of music, instrumentation and dress, reflecting their varying origins.

Incidentally, if you're wondering about the coin belts we wear: they were the original money belts. Far safer to wear your savings than leave them around for others to steal!