

Before Badia:

The Emergence of Theatrical Performance Space for Belly Dance

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("Nisaa of St. Louis")



Postcard showing dancers and musicians onstage at the sala El Dorado, around the beginning of the 20th century - from author's personal collection

For many students of Egyptian dance, the history of theatrical belly dance, or *raqs sharqi*, begins with Badia Masabni and her famous night clubs. Many believe that *raqs sharqi* was born on the grand stage of Badia's Casino Opera. However, fewer are aware that Badia's clubs were neither the first nor the only establishments of their kind. In reality, clubs like the Casino Opera were the culmination of a trend in Egyptian entertainment venues beginning in the late nineteenth century, and the transformation of *awalem* and *ghawazee* dance into *raqs sharqi* was already underway in the earlier, lesser-known *cafés chantants* or *salat* of Ezbekiyah. This discussion explores how developments in popular entertainment and performance space in Cairo influenced the evolution of belly dance and ultimately gave rise to what we now recognize as *raqs sharqi*.

The story of *raqs sharqi* begins in the district of Cairo known as Ezbekiyah. In the nineteenth century, the area around the Ezbekiyah Gardens was the bustling hub for arts and entertainment in Cairo (Hassan 1998, 1999). The gardens themselves, originally the site of a lake that formed annually during the Nile flood, were established as part of the grand modernization projects of Mohamed Ali and his grandson, Isma'il. Under Mohamed Ali, the lake was drained and gardens were laid out on the site. Isma'il continued the development of the gardens, employing a French landscape architect to create a lush setting styled after the public parks and pleasure gardens of Britain and France. Hotels, theaters, restaurants and *cafés* sprang up in and around the gardens as the area became increasingly

popular as a travel and recreation destination.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, many entertainment venues in Ezbekiyah were offering “variety shows” that included music, singing, dancing, theatrical performances, and more – in the style of European *cafés chantants* and music halls. There seems to have been no unifying Arabic term for these establishments at the time – terms like *kazinu* (“casino”), *masrah* (“theater”), and *sala* (“hall”) were all used. In Western travelers’ accounts and tourist guidebooks, the terms *cafés chantants* or *cafés concerts* were often used. For convenience, the generic term *sala* (plural *salat*) will be used throughout the remainder of this article.

Primary sources reveal a great deal about what was on the bill at some of the more famous *salat*, such as the *sala* El Dorado. El Dorado, originally positioned near Midan al Khazindar at the northeast corner of the Ezbekiyah Gardens, later located on Shari’ Wagh el Birket (today known as Shari’ Naguib el Rihani), is known to many students of Egyptian dance history as one of the venues where Shafiqah el Qibtiyya performed (Ward 2013). The entertainments offered at El Dorado were quite varied and appear to have changed over the course of the venue’s existence. In 1870, when El Dorado was still located near Midan Al Khazindar, the venue featured performances of European music, such as the waltzes of Strauss and the works of Offenbach (Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique 1870: 51). After the move to Shari’ Wagh el Birket, dancers, singers, and acrobats were on the bill, and gambling was also available to patrons (*The Queenslander* 27 February 1886, 336). It is not clear from the *Queenslander* article whether those singers and dancers were European or Egyptian, though it is evident that Egyptian singers and dancers were performing there by the 1890s (Baedeker 1898: 24; Reynolds-Ball, *Cairo To-Day*, 1898: 12). Theatrical performances, probably European operettas, were also on the bill in 1888 (*Al Ahram* 1 December 1888, 2). By 1910, the primary entertainment at El Dorado was Egyptian singing and dancing, though motion pictures were also being shown there (Loewenbach 1908: 220).

By the 1910s, female professional dancers, or *awalem*, could be found performing in *salat* throughout Ezbekiyah (Sladen 1911: 114-115). These venues provided a new place of employment for the *awalem*, who were restricted in where they could perform in the Egyptian capital (Leland 1873: 126-137; Reynolds-Ball, *The City of the Caliphs*, 1898: 191-192; Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 36-37). Prior to the nineteenth century, the term *almeh* (plural *awalem*) had designated a “learned woman” – a skilled female entertainer who wrote and recited poetry, composed and sang songs, and occasionally danced, but only in the *hareem*, or women’s quarters, of an Egyptian home (Lane 1836: 354-355). The *awalem* contrasted markedly with the *ghawazee* (singular *ghaziyyeh*), dancers who performed publicly in provocative clothing (by the standards of the time) and who were thus considered less than respectable (Lane 1836: 372-377). In the early nineteenth century, there was increasing overlap between lower-class *awalem* and *ghawazee* (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 35). In 1834, both the *awalem* and the *ghawazee* were banned from Cairo, and by the time that the ban was formally lifted (under the reign of Abbas Basha, between 1849 and 1854), the distinction between these two classes of female entertainers had been irrevocably blurred. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term *almeh* came to designate a professional singer/dancer, while the term *ghaziyyeh* increasingly referred to dancers in the rural villages outside of Cairo (Rushdy 2010, Van Nieuwkerk 1995) (though Western travelers and tourists still frequently used the terms *almeh* and *ghaziyyeh* interchangeably).



Postcard showing the Eden Palace Hotel in Midan al Khazindar, to the northeast of Ezbekiyah Gardens, around the end of the 19th century - from author's personal collection

Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the primary performance contexts for professional belly dancers were saint's day celebrations (*marwalid*, singular *moulid*), weddings, and the private parties of the elite. After the mid-nineteenth century, the change in the social status of professional dancers, combined with the restrictions placed on where they could perform, meant fewer opportunities for work in these traditional settings. For example, while dancers and other entertainers were omnipresent at Cairo's Moulid An-Nabi (the immense annual festival celebrating the birth of the prophet Mohammad) in the 1880s (Charmes 1883: 179-181), by 1912, they were absent:

The dancing-girl no longer has a place in such festivities, and the buffoons and conjurers had no stage here that I could discover; and I could find no representative of the lower orders of dervishes who used to chew and swallow red-hot coals and crunch and swallow glass with apparent enjoyment. (Leeder 1913: 253)

By contrast, dancers *could* be found in *cafés chantants* in Cairo, such as El Dorado, from at least the 1890s, and probably earlier (see, for example, Baedeker 1898: 24; Reynolds-Ball, *Cairo To-Day*, 1898: 12). Thus, although dancers continued to perform at a variety of private functions for the upper classes, at weddings for the middle and lower classes, and at *marwalid* in rural towns and villages, in Cairo at least, the *sala* had emerged as a significant new performance opportunity for professional dancers.

The move of belly dance from traditional performance settings to the *salat* of Ezbekiyah marked a fundamental change in the nature of the dance. In traditional contexts, professional dancers were hired to perform if there was a special occasion to observe, such as a wedding, a *moulid*, a *sebo'* (party for a seven-day-old baby), or even a dinner party for visitors. By contrast, the *sala* was a formalized performance venue – one which existed specifically for the display of performing arts like music, dance, and theater. The audience was composed entirely of paying customers who attended with the intent of seeing the show, as opposed to a *moulid* or a wedding, where the entertainment was embedded in the



Survey map of Cairo detailing the area around Ezbekiyah Gardens in 1920 -
from the Library of Congress

occasion, rather than the *raison d'être* for the event.

Further, the dance of the *awalem* and *ghawazee* in traditional contexts was not a strictly theatrical dance. By definition, theater dance, or concert dance, is entertainment for a non-participating audience. Moreover, in theater dance, there is generally a clear distinction between the performers and the audience. While the *awalem* and *ghawazee* were certainly performing for others, the boundary between the performers and the audience was not precise. In fact, Western observers were often shocked by the casual association between female entertainers and their clients (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 36-37). Lane writes:

In some parties where little decorum is observed, the guests dally and sport with these dancing-girls in a very licentious manner. I have before mentioned (in a former chapter) that on these occasions they are usually indulged with brandy or some other intoxicating liquor, which most of them drink to excess. It is a common custom for a man to wet with his tongue small gold coins and stick them upon the forehead, cheeks, chin, and lips of a Gházeeeyeh (Lane 1836: 494-495).

Consider also Lady Duff Gordon's description of an experience with a dancer in the Sa'id:

I dined last night with Mustafa, who again had the dancing-girls for some Englishmen to see. Seleem



Midan al Khazindar today - photo by Heather Ward

Efendi got the doctor, who was of the party, to prescribe for him all about his ailments, as coolly as possible. He, as usual, sat by me on the divan, and during the pause in the dancing, called "El Maghribeeyeh," the best dancer, to come and talk to us. She kissed my hand, sat on her heels before us, and at once laid aside the professional *gaillardise* of manner, and talked very nicely in very good Arabic, and with perfect propriety, more like a man than a woman; she seemed very intelligent. What a thing we should think it, for a worshipful magistrate to call up a girl of that character to talk to a lady! (Duff Gordon 1865: 224-225)

The layout of the *sala*, with its clearly defined performance stage for the entertainers, established greater distance between performer and audience.

In essence, the movement of belly dance into the formalized performance setting of the *sala* signified the transformation of belly dance into a fully theatrical dance form by the end of the nineteenth century. Two significant features that differentiate *raqs shargi* from the dance of the *awalem* and *ghawazee* – performance for the sake of performance, and performance for a

primarily non-participating audience – were in place in the 1890s and 1910s – much earlier than the establishment of Badia Masabni's first *sala* in 1926. The key factor in the evolution of the dance was the establishment of the *salat*. These venues were the incubators within which traditional belly dance was transformed. When entertainment venues expanded west from Ezbekiyah into Shari' Emad Ad-Din and neighboring streets in the early twentieth century, the *salat* that opened there, such as Badia Masabni's, followed the already well-established model for variety entertainment. Badia did not set out to create a new dance form; rather, she attempted – quite successfully – to out-do her competitors in an already proven format for variety entertainment that included dance. The stage for *raqs shargi* had already been set within the walls of the *salat* of Ezbekiyah.

FOOTNOTES/ENDNOTES

¹ Although it was apparently frowned upon to engage dancers for "common" occasions, this did occur (Lane 1836: 191, 496; Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 25).

² For example, multiple sources mention the admission charge at El Dorado (Loewenbach 1908: 218; *Star*, Issue 7512, 20 September 1902, 2).

³ However, the practice of *fath* – sitting, socializing, and drinking with customers – kept the performer/audience boundary somewhat blurry. *Fath* was commonplace in the *salat* of the 1920s and 1930s (Van Nieuwkerk 1995: 43-45), but the practice occurred as early as the 1870s (*Timaru Herald*, Volume XXIV, Issue 1417, 13 May 1876, 3).

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