

# YALLAH

MAGAZINE

## MAHMOUD REDA: THE FATHER OF ORIENTAL DANCE

**BECOMING ONE  
WITH THE SERPENT**

**ELEMENTS OF  
CHOREOGRAPHY**

**REBORN THROUGH  
CONTACT WITH  
OTHER CULTURES**

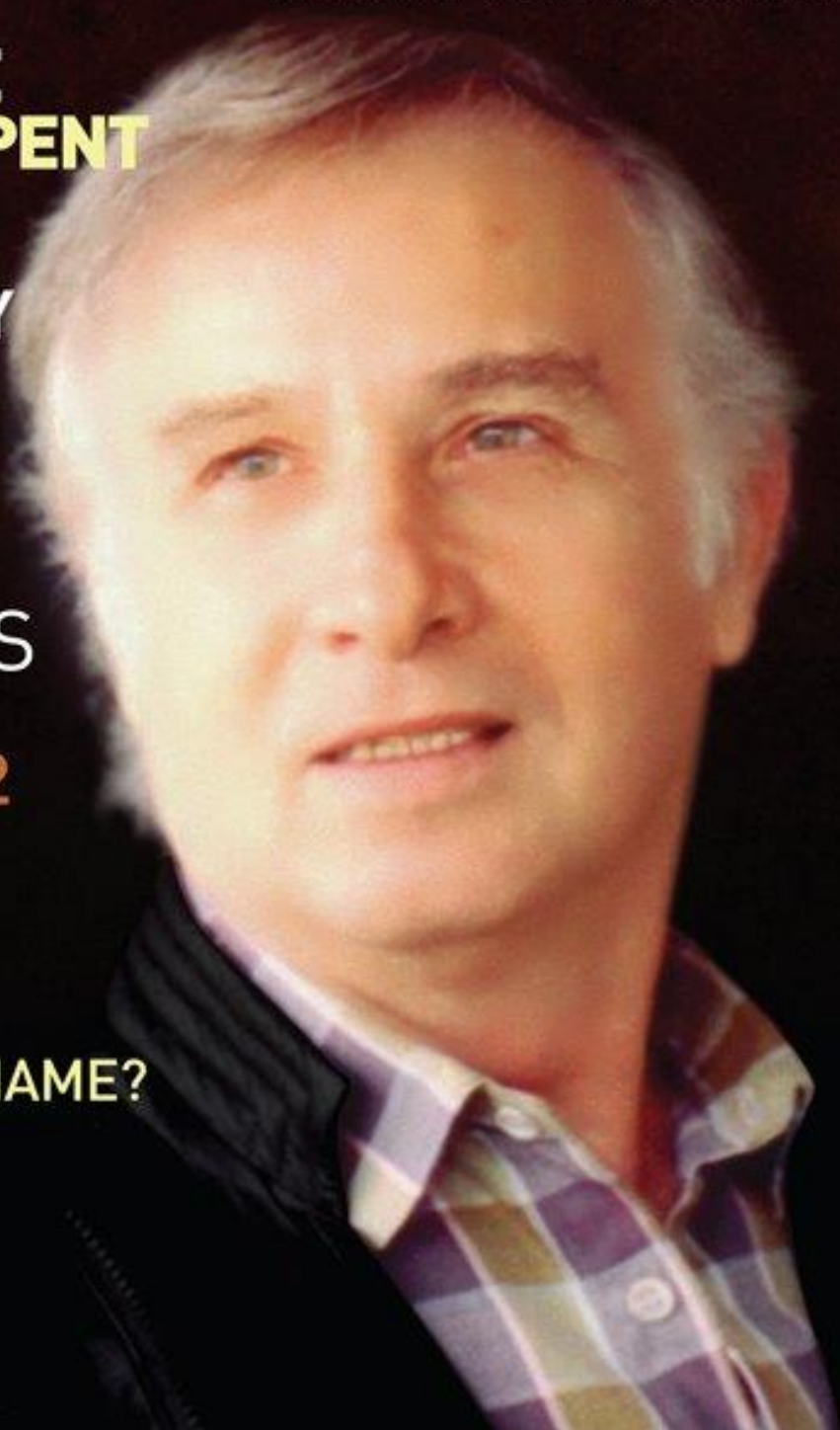
**EGYPT COMES  
TO MIAMI  
EGYPTIA 2012**

KHALED MAHMOUD  
ZAZA HASSAN  
ALADIN EL KHOLY

**WHAT'S BEHIND A  
BELLY DANCER'S NAME?**

**MÉSMERA**

SPRING 2012  
U.S. \$7.00  
Volume 4 Issue 3



# Mahmoud Reda

## THE FATHER OF ORIENTAL DANCE

Interview and article by: Danna Yasbet

Photographs courtesy of Mahmoud Reda

**When we think of the hundreds of leaders** and role models in the world of Middle Eastern dance, there is one name that should shine at the top of the list: Mahmoud Reda. Greatly admired throughout the world for his exceptional contributions as a dancer, choreographer and director of hundreds of productions, Mahmoud Reda has toured in more than 60 countries, performing on the world's most prestigious stages. This 82-year-old Egyptian legend is the founder of the Reda Troupe and a pioneer of theatrical dance in the Arab world, universally acclaimed with the strength and appeal of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

Warm, enthusiastic and incredibly modest about his achievements, Mr. Reda has shaped and influenced what is known today as Raks Sharqi (Oriental dance). He has been largely responsible for bringing the dance to the international scene and introducing it to the world. Artists from all over the world admire his work and truly appreciate what he has done for the art form. Many even say he is the man that made Egypt proud of their dance and heritage.

While most articles about this

father of Oriental dance describe his career and background, this addition to his archives will dig even deeper. In the next few minutes, you will be immersed in the heart of Mahmoud Reda, gaining access to his decades of knowledge and experience. What better guidance for the dancers of today than from one of Egypt's greatest legends?

### **A LOOK AT MAHMOUD REDA'S EARLY CAREER**

The magic began when Mahmoud Reda fell in love with the performance of an Argentinean dance group. Their talent and technique captivated him and even led him to fill a dancer's spot in the group. His tryout included just a few moves from his idol Fred Astaire, a step he learned from his older brother, Ali Reda, and a jump gleaned from his gymnastics background. In the troupe, he performed in many places including Cairo, Alexandria, Rome and Paris. Finally, he thought, "I'm dancing Argentinean folklore, why not Egyptian folklore?"

When he returned to Cairo, he began to consider the idea of starting his own folkloric troupe. Along with a few cofounders, Mr. Reda pooled some

funds and ultimately unveiled the Reda Troupe's first performance in 1959.

The Reda Troupe was comprised, at the time, of six female dancers, six male dancers and 12 musicians. In 1961, the troupe was placed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. By the mid-1970s, it had 150 members, including dancers, musicians, and costume and stage technicians. The repertoire of the troupe included hundreds of dances that ranged from duets to three-act dance dramas with more than 30 dancers on stage at one time, the troupe was swiftly gaining renown in Egypt.

Mahmoud Reda was lead dancer of the troupe until 1972. He taught the dancers, and choreographed and directed all stage performances. With his groundbreaking choreographies, he created a genre of dance that embraced many styles.

Farida Fahmy was another lead dancer for 25 years. She was a role model for the recruited dancers, and her grace and elegance instantly captured the hearts of the Egyptians.

Other former troupe members include master teachers like Raqia Hassan, Momo Kadous and Mo Geddawi.





## MAHMOUD REDA

### HIS IMPRINT ON RAKS SHARQI

Before the Reda Troupe, all Egyptians knew was belly dance. The ongoing love/hate relationship with the dance was prominent, as people loved to watch it but refused to allow a daughter or sister to dance. Coming from a conservative country, showing certain parts of the body was a problem; where the dance was performed was another. Years ago, the dancers were not viewed as educated. Belly dancing was simply comprised of movements and did not seem to tell a story or an idea. Also, there were only women dancing solos, no male dancers or groups.

Mahmoud Reda decided to immerse himself in the study of Egyptian folk dances. He divided Egypt into many areas, starting from Aswan, and took a group of his dancers to research the folklore.

"We took cameras, recorders, even somebody to write down our conversations while expanding on ideas and creating stories and songs," he said.

They studied everything from costumes to instruments and then returned to Cairo with their findings.

"The wonderful thing about Egyptian folklore was that it felt like a treasure that nobody discovered," he explained. "But the bad thing was the incessant repetition in the steps and melodies, so the material was little."

Knowing he could not choreograph a five-minute dance based on a single step, he crafted his own genre, drawing from the techniques of jazz, ballet, Hindu dance and Russian folkloric dance, to create something an audience would be happy to pay to watch in a theater.

"So what I do is not folklore; it is inspired by folklore," he added.

### THE NEED FOR ART

If you've ever asked yourself why you dance, according to Mahmoud Reda, there is no precise answer.

"There is no reason for anybody to dance, or do art," he says. "When you're a child and enjoy drawing, you draw. You do not think about it and do not expect to become an artist. You simply do what you enjoy. Art is the only thing that humans don't need to do, but do anyway."

But when art goes from hobby to professional, what elements truly shine through and capture the heart of this artist?

"When I see something nice, I cry," he says. "Tears just flow. I do not control them," he explained. "Someone singing, dancing nicely, smiling. I think a smile is the nicest thing in the world. Beautiful things make me cry."

However, when people dance and do not get their message across, it is like someone talking but not really saying anything. Mahmoud Reda

believes that dancing should be like a sentence conveying a story — not in words but rather in movement and emotion.

"Feeling cannot be taught," he said. "It is a gift. Either you have it or you don't."

According to Mr. Reda, each part of an artistic career complements the rest. Choreography cannot exist without teaching. Choreographies are created to display inspirations, and for this you might need a dance troupe. In essence, art has many stages — it starts with a creator, which includes the artist, the composer and the musician; it is followed by a canvas, which in this case is the group of dancers; finally, it cannot be art without an audience. Also, there is a certain cycle for each artist that goes from dancer, to teacher, to choreographer, to stage director, and finally even movie director. Mr. Reda himself fell into teaching when just a dancer. Not all members of the Reda Troupe were ready-made dancers and there was no other troupe to learn from, so he had to teach them from zero. As a choreographer, it was he who had to teach the numbers as well.

"And I had to be a good teacher because if I were bad, it would reflect on stage," he says.

### GUIDANCE FOR CHOREOGRAPHERS

Mahmoud Reda has generally been



inspired by folklore, and also taken numerous ideas from Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Turning to your surroundings is essential to feed your creativity and amplify your dancing. Ideas can be useful in many instances, like coming up with yet another way to start and finish choreography.

"You can open the curtains and the dancers could already be moving on stage, or open the curtain with no one on stage and then they come in from both sides," he said. "You can finish the dance with the first step from the last dance and then the next one begins. You get these ideas from watching other choreographers."

Mahmoud Reda says he is inspired by all dancers. Traveling around the world with the Reda Troupe, he has witnessed a number of performances from which he has learned.

"It is important to learn from everybody, even what not to do."

Another thing to keep in mind when choreographing is the way the dance is put together.

"I always thought if I have a joke and I don't know how to say it, I cannot tell the joke. A joke is a kind of story you tell, and you can spoil it by giving away the ending at the beginning or, of course, by telling a joke that everybody knows."

Interesting how something so simple can explain many things. Mr. Reda believes it is best to choreograph

## "ABOVE ALL, I am inspired to continue because dancing is my life."

a dance quickly so you do it in one mood, because you never know what mood you'll be in the next day and it is nice to keep the same mood within one dance. He also suggests letting the choreography flow and finish it, then make corrections and add polishing touches later. New ideas, stories and steps should flow naturally among each creation.

"Inspiration is a funny thing," he says. "As we've all experienced, it sometimes comes out of thin air. Often, when we hear the orchestration, ideas begin to flow. The violins are saying one thing and the drums are saying another. I do what I feel, and analyze it later."

According to Mahmoud Reda, you cannot stop creators. There is no rule that says something is correct or incorrect; if it is good, it will last. Much like the evolution of music, you cannot stop change. And there is good and bad in every style of dance.

"There is good tribal dance and bad," he said. "If it is good, I like it. You cannot stop a whole kind of dance because you didn't like one of them."

### ADVICE TO THE DANCERS OF TODAY

We can all agree that dancing is a difficult passion to pursue, and there are many aspects that must go into it in order to be successful at it.

Mahmoud Reda believes the first thing this art form needs is love. You have to love what you are doing in order to do it right. The second thing it needs is proper instruments, starting with the right body and muscles. Of course, if you are dancing for fun, it doesn't matter if you're fat, thin, black or white. Unfortunately, as a professional artist, you must take into account the audience that is paying money to

watch, along with their expectations.

Next, you must have dedication. As a singer, you cannot say "Tonight I am going to sing badly because I have a sore throat." If you can't do it, don't do it. Being an artist is a very demanding job and needs to be done properly.

Next, you need discipline. Whether you like it or not, dancers really must practice every day, whether they are tired or sick.

"I remember in one of our troupe rehearsals, a dancer had just lost his dad," Mahmoud Reda recalled. "He had buried him and came to rehearsals that same day."

When his wife at the time, Nadida Fahmy (Farida Fahmy's sister), died, Mr. Reda was in-between performances.

"We cried and cried behind the curtains and when they opened we smiled because we are artists," he said. "The curtains closed and we cried again. You cannot stop dancing."

If all these ingredients to be a successful dancer were easy to achieve, then anyone can be a dancer.

"One time, we were performing in the desert to entertain Egyptian army soldiers," Mr. Reda recollects.

They prepared the floor with a canvas over the sand, and the canvas happened to be very hot. Since the first dance was slippery, Farida Fahmy took off her shoes.

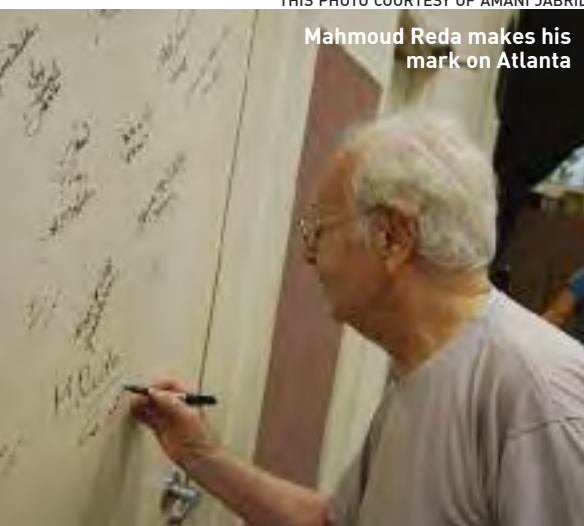
"I saw changes in the choreography, like jumping where turns should have been," he said.

Farida was rushed to the hospital after her feet became burnt and swollen from the scorching floor.

"I asked her why she kept dancing, if her feet were burning," he said. "Her answer was, 'What about these people, thousands that came to watch.'"

THIS PHOTO COURTESY OF AMANI JABRIL

Mahmoud Reda makes his mark on Atlanta





## MAHMOUD REDA

Usually dancers are the lowest-paid artists, which reminds us that most are not in it for the money. Also, you cannot dance all your life, considering prima ballerinas are forced to retire at age 35. All in all, those who understand these conditions and see the level of difficulty from the start, yet choose to continue with the dance must have nothing but love for this vocation.

"So my advice is, if you don't accept all these situations: do not start," Mr. Reda advises. "Take it just as a hobby."

### FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

Those who have ever regarded their ethnicity as a possible hindrance to Middle Eastern dance need not to worry.

"I've seen many dancers who are not Egyptian be better than Egyptians," Mahmoud Reda said. "People born to this music usually do not take classes and do not pay money to learn. They either imitate their mothers or videos growing up, or are happy knowing a few simple steps." True quality in this dance comes from your heart, from your ear, and from the ability to understand the music. "I've met dancers in Europe that know more about Oum Kalthoum than I do!"

To say that this is a dance mainly enjoyed in the Middle East is a misconception. From Siberia and China to Hawaii and the Americas, Mahmoud Reda has seen this dance

provide countless people with bountiful pleasure.

"What makes cultures with their own beautiful dances want to study Egyptian dance?" he asks. "There must be something good about it. I also feel proud when people spend their time and money to study, when they're not even aspiring to take the dance as a profession and make money out of it. I admire dancers that travel to study, and take their passion to the next level."

"My final advice to dancers: You can learn technique as much as you want, that's what I teach. It's like learning to read and write. But when you write a letter, you don't write all that you have learned in this letter. Consequently, when you choreograph a dance, you don't put everything you've learned in this dance."

Listen to the music, whether you choose it or it chooses you — live in it. That's Mahmoud Reda's message. Select a few steps that suit the mood of the music.

"If you put everything you've learned in this one dance, what will you do for the next one?" ☆

---

Danna is a freelance writer and public relations specialist based in Miami, Fla. She is a member and instructor of Samay Mideast Performing Arts Company, and can be reached at [danna.samay@gmail.com](mailto:danna.samay@gmail.com).



NEW! BHUZ EVENT ALERTS! NEW! BHUZ EVENT ALERTS!

**BHUZ**  
*Belly Dance Central*

Sign up **FREE** for customized belly dance event alerts  
in locations of your choice!  
Sort by event type, your favorite dancers, and more.  
Event sponsors, be sure to add your events — it's **FREE!**

[WWW.BHUZ.COM](http://WWW.BHUZ.COM)