

The Artistic Impact of the Reda Troupe

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Article #4 of 8

Field Work

Mahmoud Reda's Adaptation of Traditional and Indigenous Dance Events for Stage



Traditional and Indigenous Dance Events Researched

I need here to stress that it is not known if the dance events that were researched and documented more than 50 years ago, still take place in their original locations. Social, cultural, and demographic changes have occurred in every region of Egypt. The encroachment of urbanization on the rural scene has brought about a change in the means of subsistence of the inhabitants. The advent of television, video and Satellite, as well as social media, has influenced the way people spend their recreational time.

Egypt embraces various cultural areas. There are the Bedouins of the Western and Eastern deserts, the dwellers of the Nile Delta in the north, the inhabitants of both Northern and Southern Upper Egypt, Nubia and the inhabitants of the Red Sea Coast, Sinai, as well as the dwellers of Al-Wadi Al -Gadid, the oases of Siwah, Dakhla and Kharga. In these areas there are diverse musical and dance traditions. Dance has its place in sacred and secular events, as well as, in private and public festivities. It plays an important role in ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions and other occasions. In some remote areas some movements that can be described as dance takes place in funerals.

The Fieldwork that Served as the Basis for Collecting Dance Material for Mahmoud Reda's Stage Adaptations

Dance is the passion that governs both Mahmoud Reda and myself. In an important stage of his creative development as a choreographer, he organized field trips to various parts of Egypt in pursuit of material for his forthcoming performances. These field trips took place between the years 1965 to 1967. His aim was not to research the indigenous dance traditions and events that he witnessed for any ethnographic purpose. His adaptations were never meant to be literal replicas of the indigenous dances that he witnessed and documented. Collecting material was primarily to find inspiration and to discover the potentials that traditional dance could offer for the stage.



On each of our trips, we took with us different charter members of his group, both men and women. He believed that his dancers should learn the process of documentation. Direct contact with the people, and merging with them was important. Experiencing the movement and taking part in the events whenever possible was valuable, not only to learn the movements, but to capture the spirit and style of each particular dance event. Later in the day, the basic ingredients of these dances were broken down, analyzed then documented.

Sadly, his efforts to teach them how to research, with insight into his working processes were to no avail. Not one member had the desire or the initiative, since then, to follow in his footsteps, especially that there were many areas in Egypt that were not yet researched. These dancers chose to rehash whatever they had picked up from his dances and his teaching method and perform in hotels and tourist resorts or to travel and teach abroad.

Documentation in these field trips, took many forms: written description, still pictures and tape recording and on rare occasions 8mm film. Due to the limited access of advanced photographic devices at the time, the events that took place at night were not photographed. One of the most memorable occasions was Al-Dahiyah in North Sinai. While, this dance event could not be documented with photos, it still is imprinted in my mind in spite of the long years that have passed. Witnessing the dance events in their natural surroundings is an experience that cannot not to be easily forgotten.

Throughout these trips, musical instruments typical to each area were noted and all new and diverse rhythmic patterns were studied. Because of the different dialects found in the various areas of Egypt, songs were recorded and the lyrics were deciphered. These traditional songs were always presented on stage in their original dialect. Every detail of costumes and jewelry was studied and noted. Sometimes we were taught how to wear the different costumes and Accouterments.

In some communities in Egypt, when the researchers found it difficult to observe women dance, I would go to their private quarters, record their songs and learnt how they moved. At other times, children of the community imitated the way their mothers danced and demonstrated how their traditional dress was worn.



Every dance was reworked according to the potentials it offered. Some dances offered a large choice of movement content, while more artistic liberties, in the form of innovative yet consistent additions, were taken in other dances. The typical spatial formations of each dance event were retained and, in some cases, expanded upon. Redundant clapping patterns were limited to some sections of the dance while other significant rhythmic patterns were further developed

Because of Mahmoud Reda's cultural sensibilities, he comprehended the importance of the social codes of each region he visited. His choreographies conformed to local tradition by maintaining the original degree of proximity between males and females and their relation to one another in each indigenous dance event. On some occasions, his introduction of female dancers to male dominated dances remained within the social decorum and was accepted by Egyptian audience at large.

These field trips brought forth a great variety of movement vocabulary. They were then added to the repertoire of the training classes. Mahmoud Reda took more artistic liberties in his choreographies of some traditional dances that offered few variations, while keeping within the framework and aesthetics of the original. Other dances that had distinctive qualities and a rich variety of movement were immediate sources of inspiration.

The text given here is not intended to be an in-depth study of each dance event we adapted for the stage. My purpose here is to give the reader an overview of the research conducted by the Reda troupe, during the period we traveled to different Governorates within Egypt. Many of the dances that were researched took first prize in important international folk festivals.
