Belly dancing in Egypt was once a beautiful and highly esteemed art but has fallen from glory in the last few decades, becoming illicit and not respected. By contrasting the old and new dancers, this documentary looks into the history and the possible future of this art form.

NAT: FADE IN, UNDER: A belly dancing performance with audience applause (9 seconds)

MUSIC: FADE IN, UNDER, FADE OUT: Samir Sorour – “Zaina Zaina” (0.33 seconds from start of song)

RANA YEHIA (RY): “We have a bad history about the…the belly dancers and they always call them in not a good way and they are doing this in a bad way to…to make money and that’s why the belly dancing is more low class for the time being.” (:16)

That was Rana Yehia, a Cairo-based belly dancer who has been performing in the city’s venues for several years. The audience watching her dance seems pleased, applauding each performance. Some of the foreigners are fascinated with the exotic display and others see nothing new or interesting.

MUSIC: FADE IN, UNDER, UP, FADE OUT: Umm Kulthum – “Alf Leila Wa Leila” (1.47 minutes from start of song)

NAT: Sound of dance studio practice session (13 seconds)

After her show, we met at the dance studio she uses to practice. It looks no different from any other dance studio with mirrored walls and wooden flooring, but the dancers wear bright coloured outfits in orange, turquoise and bright pink…

NAT: sound of coin belts (8 seconds)

…with bells and coins sewn on near the hips, to accentuate their movements.

RY: “I’m born to dance. It’s a gift.” (:3)
Over the past few decades a lot has changed in belly dancing, including skill, venue and public opinion. May Ghali, a Lebanese, UK-based dance instructor, sees the decline in today’s society, where it is no longer taken seriously and is seen as something cheap.

**MAY GHALI (MG):** “Dancers from the past performed very differently than now, it was more an art rather now it’s an amusement which performed in, umm, places which not very respectable sometimes.” (:16)

I’m sure you’re wondering how we got here. In the last few decades belly dancing has taken a negative turn - the level of skill used has declined so dancers use vulgar moves to compensate, with most of today’s dancers being overweight and undertrained. The costumes have become increasingly more revealing and the dance is now either performed in cabarets or as humorous entertainment at weddings and parties.

**MG:** “The dancing studios, umm, in Egypt and the Arab world have became less and less, so probably a lot of the dancers, umm, learn in, umm, night clubs and that’s where they perform, where before, a lot of the dancer performed in opera houses, in movies.” (:21)

**RY:** “They are doing it in a bad way to just, umm, to show off their body and they are wearing a bad, very bad, clothes.” (:10)

**MUSIC: FADE IN, UP, UNDER, UP, FADE OUT:** Farouk Salameh – “Disco El Sharq” (0.47 seconds from start of song)

**MAIKKI FONNELOP (MK):** “It’s stigmatized and the reason why it’s stigmatized is because of the mentality in Egyptian society. They don’t really accept the dancers even though it’s really a big part of their culture.” (:12)

Maikki Fonnelop, a Norwegian belly dancer has been performing all over the world and dancing in various styles. In Egypt, she knows that people see belly dancing as something looked down upon but feels they should embrace their culture, as she tells us via Skype call.

**MK:** “There are not so many Egyptians who dance and if we moved to Egypt then I had to accept that I couldn’t dance in public.” (:7)
But it wasn’t always like this; belly dancing was once something people looked at with appreciation. Let’s go back and see it as it was.

*MUSIC: FADE IN, UNDER, FADE OUT: Sami Nossair Orchestra - “Rannet Al Tabla” (1.20 minutes from start of song)*

Belly dancing in its purest form is an improvised dance which uses the body to mirror the improvised and varying beat on a tabla - a small hand-held drum which is the basis all almost all the music. When the drummer slows, so does the dancer, using longer and more fluid movements; when the drummer quickens and uses shorter beats, the dancer will shimmy or use more pronounced styling. She is a visual representation of the music.

*MG: “as a dancer I always felt that I achieved myself, I, umm, came out of my shell; performed an art, umm, you know…it’s just so artistic that you just find, you know, what you need, you let yourself go.” (:18)*

There are also different styles, including uses of large veils that dancers twirl and spin around their bodies, canes or sticks, cymbals…

*Nat: sound of brass cymbals (2 seconds)*

...and sometimes swords for tribal belly dancing.

*NAT: sound of swords clashing (3 seconds)*

*MK: “It’s actually extremely difficult to control your body with these technical movements and then when you know the technique, then you have everything else. You have to know rhythm, structure, song, lyric, etc....and you have to dig much deeper in to the soul of the music.” (:15)*

*MUSIC: FADE IN AND OUT: Mohamed Abdel Wahab – “Masafer” (2.10 minutes from start of song)*

*RY: “The very old, umm, Egyptian dancers, belly dancers like Samia Gamal, Nagwa Fouad, umm, Tahiya Karioka of course. I love them, this is my inspiration actually, in belly dance.” (:16)*
Just like any art, we must look for the root of its creation and the talent that has past to gain a good understanding of it.

*MUSIC: UP (3 seconds) THEN UNDER.*

Belly dancing didn’t just originate in one place; it’s a collection of influences from several countries that was formed when the Middle-East was either being invaded or invading others.

MG: “I think that the belly dancing have... you know, the history of belly dancing came from the Turks, when they invaded the Arab world and that’s where it came, you know, I think.” (:11)

To be more precise, many influences from Spain can also be seen, with most of the arm and hip movements resembling the flamenco’s, as well as the use of brass hand cymbals that are used like Spanish wooden castanets.

*NAT: Sound of castanets (2 seconds)*

The iconic and famous dancers of the past are remembered with fondness, whereas the new editions don’t seem to impress many. Dancers from the 1950s had an elegant and feminine style that contrasts harshly with the garish performances seen now.

MG: “In Egypt we had, umm, for example, the Tahiya Karioka which had brought a beautiful, umm, new style of dancing.” (:10)

*NAT: FADE IN, FADE OUT: Sound from a recording of a live performance of Tahiya Karioka (14 seconds)*

Tahiya Karioka would enchant her audience on a gas-lit stage, in a shimmering, modest outfit and fluid moves, each one perfectly in time and complementary to the music played by a live orchestra and singer.

MG: “Where in the new one we have, for example, Dina, we have as well, umm, Fifi Abdou, and stuff like that.” (:10)
Dina does not perform on a stage, but in between groups of men, wearing a costume several sizes too small. Her steps are harsh and heavy footed.

MG: “You can see the difference when you look at both, umm, dancers really, performing their art.” (:8)

MK: “The old belly dancing was something that was very classic, very elegant, people wanted to have this in their culture. These dancers they were glamorous movie stars.” (:10)

MUSIC: FADE IN, UNDER, UP, FADE OUT: Umm Kulthum – “Enta Omri Instrumental” (1.54 minutes from start of song)

SALMA RIZK: “They’re just really cheesy, cliché, tawdry and it’s not artful and it’s not tasteful.” (:7)

OMAR SAAD: “I mean it’s like they stopped looking for people who practiced it as an art and it’s just, okay, let’s find someone with more silicone than flesh in their body and let’s have them jiggle around for a bit.” (:9)

FARAH ALI: “They don’t know how to dance. They’re ruining the idea of belly dancing itself.” (:4)

That’s just what some of Egypt’s young generation thought about belly dancing as it is seen today - which is a little disheartening to hear.

RY: “It’s getting worse, I feel now that the belly dancers in Egypt, is going to the way of seduction, they are trying to seduce men more than they are dancing, so now, umm, I don’t feel like any one of the dancers for the time being, she deserves to be called a belly dancer.” (:19)

Fortunately, this is not the case in the entire Arab world. In Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and a few other countries, belly dancing is still a valued and esteemed art.

MG: “I can tell you a little bit about Lebanon, it’s probably seen in a higher views from people. We’ve got, for example, Samara, which she only performed in, like, places like
the opera. You go to see an art; you don’t go to see a dancer who [is], umm, just trying to strip.” (:18)

RY: “Now I see the, the foreigners are using the belly dance better than Egyptians and that make me so sad.” (:6)

One of the most noticeable differences is that in other countries belly dancing is performed in classy venues where people go and pay specifically to see the dancing, like one would for ballet or tango.

MK: “In the western society, it’s of course seen as a performance art and there’s also the fascination with the middle-eastern culture and music but then also we see it as more of a competitive style of performing.” (:13)

MUSIC: FADE IN, UP, UNDER, UP, UNDER, FADE OUT: Hassan Abou El Seoud - “Shik Shak Shok” (2.16 minutes starting from 0.10 of the song)

While the current state of things is a bit bleak, there is always hope that belly dancing in Egypt will get better and regain its former glory. With foreigners taking an interest in the exotic and feminine dance, it is getting more attention and the standards worldwide are being raised.

MG: “Now that it’s spreading to outside the Arab world and it’s becoming very famous in the United States, hopefully that will bounce back to the Arab world where they can see it as first a very nice art, second it’s their heritage.” (:16)

The dancers from the past created a legacy for themselves but with Egyptian society undergoing a transformation, maybe today's dancers can begin to change people's attitude towards it. All things new must go through challenges so it is possible that belly dancing will be what is once was and more.

Credits:
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