

## **Oriental Dance**

### **The Effects**

This dance is truly refreshing.

After the summer holidays, a girl from the children's dancing class told me, that during the whole summer holidays she just couldn't wait to dance in her group again because it would make her just happy.

Women of every age love this dance very much and it is an enrichment for all the participants that people from different generations can dance together in the courses and seminars.

Raks sharki in Arabic, dance of the East or the Orient, Oriental Dance invites you to an unaffected and joyful access to your body. This affects your daily life: flexibility, tone and strength increase significantly.

After practising a longer while, a natural grace of movement can arise. And, by learning choreographed dances, - this demanding linking of body and mind - an alert mind can be maintained during the whole lifespan. This has been proven by numerous studies.

In dancing the whole body is used, not just the belly or the pelvis. The single parts of the body are moved in an isolated way, and rediscover themselves in whole compositions of movements. At the beginning, this is surprising, unaccustomed and a bit tricky while practising, but soon it feels very pleasant and this special way of moving turns out to be a wonderful whole-body training. Everything flows better, which can affect other areas of life.

### **Geographic Expansion**

The following regions up to today are known for their rich dancing-culture:

The Maghreb, North-Africa for us, means West in Arabic.

The Machreq or Maschriq, Orient for us, means East in Arabic.

The membership of the countries of the Machreq is not clearly defined. However it includes Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.

The huge Arabian Peninsula, Persia and the Greater Central Asia.

Nowadays Oriental Dance is practised throughout the world.

### **From the Origins up to Today**

Very old pictures of dancing human beings are known from ancient Egypt. Apparently at that time there were dance performances at the most important feasts as each midsummer when the star Sirius became visible again in the sky. At that time came the vital Nile flood and brought fertility to the whole of Egypt. Sirius, by the way, was a goddess for the old Egyptians and is called Sopdet or Sothis.

In the Orient, the women always loved to dance when they gathered. They did this during pregnancy and there are reports which say that women danced together even during births. When this took place, naturally they did movements with belly and pelvis. Just because it's a lot of fun to do these energizing movements, they, among many others, found their way into classical Oriental Dance as we know it today. Does this dance stem from a women's tradition as is often supposed? Did it eventually develop from dances which had been danced in ancient, distant matriarchal societies?

Human beings all over the planet used to dance to celebrate life and the seasons with its cycles and climaxes and to communicate with the mysterious, the numinous.

In other parts of the world, we find dances comparable to those of the oriental region. For example we can clearly see similarities in the movements of African dances and in the Hawaiian hula.

The variety of the transmitted (this means 'known') folkloristic-dances in the Orient is astonishing, not to mention dances which just exist in various regions never seen by strangers. There in villages, the dances are further developed by the natives and are passed on to the next generation as it has always been done. Often men and women celebrated and danced separately. No wonder that in the Orient, training for Folklore-Dance lasts four years!

The way of dancing has always been enriched through hikers for example by nomadic tribes and in Egypt especially by the Ghawazee. There it is said that there are still descendants of them

and that these are Gypsy-families. Their women have been professional dancers since ancient times. The men of the clan are often musicians and accompany the women. They came from Asia, from India.

It is said that at the time of Thutmosis III., in the new realm, around 1500 BC, the capital Theben was the center of the world for the Egyptians and one of the biggest metropolises of the world at that time. Egypt reached its largest expansion then.

Also today, Egypt is reputed to be the cultural center of the Arabic world.

Under the title 'Oriental Dance', many understand the professional Egyptian stage-style. It started in the Badīaa Masabnis theatre in Cairo where so many of the famous dancing-stars began their careers, at the beginning of the 20th century. The time between 1920 and 1960 is said to be the 'golden age' of the Egyptian music-movie. Those movies showed a rich abundance of dances. In her outstanding book 'The story of Oriental Dance in Egypt', the Swiss Barbara Lüscher wrote about that (it contains by the way most extraordinary life-portraits of dancers!) and together with Hossam Ramzy she collected many of those dances on videotape. Many elements of the folklore-dances melted into classical Oriental Dance, together with gracious hand and arm movements of Indian and Persian dance and movements of classical ballet.

Innumerable pieces of music, written specially for dancing have been composed from then until now. They suit dancing very well, often have many variations and are witty.

Until today in many families of the Orient, mostly it's the women who dance at home with their children for their amusement. On festive occasions it is normal that members of the family or professional dancers perform their dances.

Also, even if Oriental Dance looks especially feminine, many men of the Orient, like women, love to dance. There are specific men's dances, for example in Egypt fishermen's dances, stick and sword dances with a fighting touch. Today they are also performed by women in their own way.

It is said that in North-Africa, in the Middle-East and in Asia, professional dance has always been the women's domain.

Today, worldwide, there are more and more men who like to perform and who partially interpret Oriental Dance excellently. For example Horatio Cifuentes and Carlos Carmona, who both grew up in South-America.

For about the last twenty years, it has been difficult for Oriental Dance to survive in its countries of origin, thus for this art form it is very important, that dancers and teachers, men and women, transmit their highly valued knowledge to us.

Fortunately, due to its great fascination, this dance always has (and hopefully always will) build bridges between different cultures.