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Dancing in the Middle:
An Ethnography of Jawaahir Dance Company & The Cassandra School

PREFACE

At one point, I was what one might consider a child athlete. By the age of six, I had delved into soccer, gymnastics, cheerleading, and especially dance. Despite growing up to become an exceptionally unathletic 17-year-old, dancing has always been something that I could shamelessly enjoy. As a musician and avid music lover of ten years, nothing can compare to the happiness that music instills in me. My love for the arts continued to grow with the enthusiasm of myself and those around me, eventually maturing into a lifelong passion and integral part of who I am.

When I started my search for an ethnography topic, I knew that I wanted to observe a dance-related subculture. The thought of dancing in a studio again appealed to me because it had become unfamiliar to my older self. However, growing up in the small-town community of Buffalo, Minnesota, meant that I wasn’t able to find a studio located near me. Although Minneapolis wasn’t a convenient choice for a bit of dancing, I was intrigued enough by the city and its inhabitants to travel there for my observations. After browsing through a local
Community Education magazine, I found the Jawaahir Dance Company & The Cassandra School, a Middle Eastern belly dance school for women.

My knowledge of belly dancing is limited to the Hollywood-based stereotype surrounding it, but that stereotype is also a large part of why this particular subculture interested me. My parents shielded me from the provocative nature of the dance, not wanting me to pursue the exaggerated hip movements or older male following. But now, as I face the reality of observing this subculture, I expect to see and experience something much different.

I know that the classes will be strictly female because the school is gender-specific. The particular class I will be attending is run by Renee, the woman I had first contacted when trying to observe the class. She informed me that the attire will be fairly casual, comfort overriding any sort of Middle Eastern fashion I had envisioned. However, this may only hold true for rehearsals. I expect the students to wear extravagant costumes for performances as a way of sharing a more culturally-authentic experience with the audience.

The outfits I picture in my mind only strengthen my assumptions regarding the sexuality of belly dance. Elegantly bedazzled and low cut, I think that the outfits will reveal enough of the women wearing them to deserve a provocative reputation. I expect to observe middle-aged women because I assume they see belly dancing as I do—an easy way to reestablish someone’s attractiveness, or at the very least, their perception of it. I also assume that these women will be white and unrelated to the Middle East. Although only young, beautiful women are usually portrayed as belly dancers on TV, I don’t think that image holds true in a predominantly unrefined state like Minnesota.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Belly dancing is one of the oldest forms of dance, beginning in various ancient cultures throughout the Middle East. In older, more traditional societies where sex segregation still existed, the female-specific dance was widely practiced in secret. Although it was typically performed in a formal setting, women and children often danced for each other while walking together between their homes. It is still a type of dance most commonly performed by women, although male belly dancers do exist.

The Cassandra School and Jawaahir Dance Company are interchangeable names for the only professional dance company in the Midwest that focuses solely on dance of the Arabic-speaking Middle East (“About Jawaahir”). It was opened in 1978 by a woman named Cassandra Shore. She is now known as the artistic director and master teacher, offering over 15 classes each week between two studios of the same name. In addition to staff members, the company consists of 19 professional dancers and a fluctuating number of students actively enrolled in the classes offered there.

Classes are categorized into five levels, from introductory (1) to advanced (5). A student can join the company at any time, but they must rehearse at each level for about a year until they’ve mastered a variety of different techniques. Ultimately, it’s up to the teacher and the student to decide when it is best to move on; this usually happens after a major performance or showcase. The class I observed was a Level 3 class held on Sunday mornings at the Minneapolis studio.
According to the mission statement on the school’s website, “Jawaahir Dance Company is dedicated to presenting Middle Eastern dance as a living art form at its highest artistic level, to bringing the rich folkloric heritage of the Middle East to the theater stage, and to providing education about the dance in its authentic form for dance students and the general public,” (“Mission Statement”). This makes sense to me because I also view dance as a complex art form, mastered by few but desired by many.

OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

*Weekly rehearsals, 28 February 2016 (10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.); 6 March 2016 (10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.); 13 March 2016 (10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.)*

It was a rather blustery morning, the night time chill still thick in the moving air. People ducked into tall buildings and trudged across crosswalks as clouds shrouded the city in a neutral hue. Those that braved the weather danced awkwardly through the streets, avoiding puddles formed from the sleet. As I sat waiting to turn at the red light, the muffled voice of Google Maps interrupting my thoughts, I couldn’t help but wonder what was in store for me.

I parked my car a few blocks down despite the convenient lot in front of the building, not wanting to take someone’s predetermined spot. Both parking lots were typical of any city property—old enough to need repair, but still years away from getting any. The inlaid entrance, however, was obviously well-maintained. An obnoxious red color coated the wall opposite the street, accented by colorful graffiti and a giant hanging arrow pointing to the red and yellow entrance to its right. Without the budget or means to advertise, attracting the local passersby to the building acted as a major marketing point for the studio.
Often the first to arrive was a cheery woman named Helen, clad in a bright pink workout outfit with frizzy black hair falling past the small of her back. Despite stalling in her car and chatting comfortably with the three other members, she was forced to wait outside because of her earliness. The students were accustomed to the studio’s schedule, expecting that the class would run more smoothly if the teacher, Renee, took time to prepare before she opened the doors. “Renee has the key, but she’s usually about 10 minutes late,” Helen warned. “That’s just how she runs things.”

Helen, now 56-years-old, grew up surrounded by her Greek heritage, attending festivals across the Midwest where traditional music and belly dancing were common. She dabbled in a few community belly dance classes throughout high school, but it wasn’t until she divorced her disapproving husband of 20 years that she felt like dancing again. “It’s such a self-esteem booster,” she said defiantly. “And the dance is so earthy that you can just get carried away with the music.”

The strong perfume of essential oils carried on the wind as Renee poked her head out with a welcoming smile. The cramped hallway and classroom-sized studio were noticeably brighter than outside, lit more with Asian-inspired lanterns than the natural lighting four small windows could afford. Renee dimmed the lights without explanation as soft Middle Eastern music played overhead. She sat silently near the front wall, commanding attention in the room. This was a signal for the students to head for the dance floor, beginning what was to be the ritual of group warm-up.

Renee is a free-spirit type—all smiles and full of life. Blonde dreads were crammed into a messy knot on the top of her head, long strands dangling over her chest. Despite her teaching
position, she was the youngest of the women there at 41-years-old. Back in 1995, she travelled to China where she attended the UN Fourth World Conference on women and discovered her passion for dance. Now having danced for nearly 20 years and teaching for nine, she has found her place in dance more than anywhere else. “It’s a really great outlet for self-expression, and it’s something you can do into old age, where we’re all headed,” she laughed. “I just love the stylization and personality you can infuse into your dancing.”

Chairs lining the entryway were quickly filled with personal belongings. Although it served as an informal changing area, the most well-prepared students came already dressed with the necessary belly dance artifacts in their bags. The hip wrap they brought was especially important. Not only did the shiny beads and colorful fabric draw the eye to the hips, but it also gave each student an expressive and distinguishable style. Despite the routine of bringing these artifacts, hip wraps and finger cymbals were available for the students to borrow from if they forgot their own.

One student in particular, Danna, seemed to struggle with the simple weekly ritual of remembering her belongings. As the students unrolled their yoga mats on the dance floor, Danna ran off to the bathroom to change, and scoured the designated lockbox in search of a hip wrap she liked. Although Danna did not comply with the standard behavior of the subculture, Renee did not expect all of the students to be equally familiar with the pre-class routine. Danna was obviously the most recent addition to the class, which allowed her some leeway while she familiarized herself with the new group. Her misplaced belongings went without consequence, but it was looked down upon as it distracted the students from their warm-up.
Heavy Middle Eastern hand drums suddenly interrupted the faint melody of the music. The women started sweeping the floor with their bodies, keeping a circular pattern to the rhythm. Unlike cardio-based warm-ups typically used in a school or athletic setting, Renee kept the pace fairly neutral for the age-restricted ability of the class. After about 15 minutes of warm-up, the class reluctantly transitioned off of their mats and into their tassel-ridden hip wraps.

For most of these women, the two hour class was the only time throughout the week that they dedicated to exercise. Their tiredness after such a small portion of the class confirmed my assumptions about their age and resulting limitations. Oftentimes the students, especially Helen, would have to rest near the entryway before rejoining their classmates. But women like Helen proved to me that the ability and motivation they possess extends far beyond just a number.

Not long after Helen started belly dancing again, she was diagnosed with cancer, and as a result, lost a part of her leg. She was sent to rehabilitation where the doctors told her she wouldn’t be able to walk again, let alone dance. Depressed and hurting, she fought to find joy in dance again, pushing past the drudgery of therapy she was undergoing.

“You know, it’s just life. You’re feeling bad or hurting or whatever, but you come to class and it’s like everything goes away,” she explains. “I feel so happy when I’m doing it. If I’m depressed, all I have to do is turn on some music and start dancing. I feel happy. I just love it. I’ll never give it up.”

The atmosphere switched when the rhythmic music came on again, silencing the chatter as all eyes focused on Renee once more. The upcoming finger cymbal routine was fairly concrete in structure. Renee would demonstrate a varying pattern of movement for eight counts, walking diagonally across the room. The students would then step in, watching her for guidance as they
mimicked her actions. Renee’s expertise was obvious, but hard to follow for the relatively inexperienced dancers. Her dual role as friend and teacher, however, motivated the students to tirelessly work through a routine, no matter how difficult it seemed.

One student in particular, Kim, acted as the informal cheerleader for the group. If Danna groaned after multiple run-throughs, Kim would say, “Just over and over—that’s the only way we’re going to get it.” When Helen sat down because her leg was bothering her, Kim would sit down with her and joke, “It’s like a minute and fifty second sprint that we’re gonna win.” Kim certainly wasn’t the best dancer of the group, but she didn’t let skill level hold her back from encouraging her fellow classmates to be their best. Renee partnered with Kim to serve as a foundation of support for the others, saying, “When I screw something up, just follow Kim.”

Kim has been dancing for about 16 years ever since starting in Germany. Her hair is dyed a vibrant pink and blue, flowing past her back in straight chunks. From her hair to her clothes to her bright personality, it’s hard to see that she’s actually 58 years old. It’s obvious that Kim is determined to defy expectations of herself and of those she dances with, explaining that “…it’s for every body and every shape and every age.” Perhaps even more importantly, she works to share that positive viewpoint with the other students whenever she can.

By the end of class, the quiet ritual of cool-down was warmly welcomed by the students. For Kim and the rest of the women, the freedom they feel while dancing is apparent to anyone who watches. Even as they stretched out on their mats, the fulfillment of a fun and productive rehearsal lingered on their faces. They’ve seemed to reach an age where conforming to other’s expectations of how to act and who to be are irrelevant. As wives, mothers, daughters, employees, and women, happiness can readily be found in devoting time to what they love.
Although the students were exhausted, the applause they rewarded themselves with at the end of class mirrored that freedom of expression. I couldn’t help but join in.

*End of semester recital, 12 March 2016 (1:30 p.m.-3:00 p.m.)*

The previously empty lots surrounding the studio had filled with people eager to watch the school-wide showing. A line flowed from the brightly-colored entrance as Middle Eastern music sounded through the open door. 30-40 students of all ages stood where the rows of chairs once were, laughing amongst groups of friends and classmates. Some hugged each other for good luck while others greeted friends and family members sitting along the far wall.

The students were dressed casually as if it were a rehearsal and not a showing. Students were not given a rule that defined what they should wear to the informal performance, but it was expected that they coordinate workout outfits within their groups. This coordination was most apparent in the upper-level classes that were present. They were more familiar with the unspoken rules because of their past experiences with showings.

A shrill catcall pierced through the chatter, signaling the students to find a seat while two teachers announced the recital order. Rather than listening for their performance time, the women focused their attention on a man dressed to perform. He was there as a replacement for some of the Level 1 dancers that couldn’t attend, but his presence wasn’t fully welcomed by the women. Students scooted away from him and cut him off with applause, uncomfortable that a man would be dancing among them. The women were so accustomed to the gender-specific environment that they didn’t know how to react to the unexpected rule breaking.
Helen and Kim sat apart from each other, but still talked to some of the women they were sitting next to. With friends and family there to support them, they couldn’t be happier. A big, sincere smile stayed on their faces as they switched between watching and reacting. Children were strewn throughout the audience, watching eagerly as the first group performed a lengthy routine. Belly dance has been less sexualized by the media since my own childhood, allowing parents more freedom and less stress about bringing them to watch strangers dance.

By the end of the first routine, the audience cheered louder than even they themselves expected. The sound of clapping and whistling filled the stale air of the rehearsal space as the students took their bows. Just as they did in rehearsal, the students cheered each other on to create a supportive atmosphere for the next group. The routines went on fairly similarly, each a varied mix of ages and ability levels.

The women were all wearing big smiles in the wake of their performance. Kim, Helen, and Danna all made an effort to match hip scarves and put on makeup despite knowing that it would soon run off with sweat. Renee started clapping to the rhythm with her children, creating a chain effect in the audience until every single person was clapping along. She used her knowledge about prior recitals and the people that attended them to make her group more memorable. Even in the smallest moments, she is leading these students to success.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the few rehearsals I observed, I had begun to fall into the pre-class and post-class routine I so often watched the students repeat. Although I was hesitant to devote my time to a subculture in the cities, I quickly saw the classes become an effortless part of my week.
I saw that in the students as well, returning to dance each week despite their otherwise busy lives.

As I watched some of the audience members at the recital, grandparents and children alike, I started to realize just how wrong my assumptions and preconceived stereotypes were. I could see Kim, Helen, and Danna fulfilling the roles I had come to learn, but none of them matched the Hollywood-based stereotypes I had once expected. These women didn’t want to be objectified; they wanted to feel beautiful. Whether the students joined to make friends, joined to exercise, or joined to heal, they all stayed because of the reward they felt after performing for their loved ones. It’s bringing happiness to themselves and readily sharing it with others that motivates these women to come back every week.

I’m no stranger to this search for happiness. I had walked into the studio with the idea in my head that these women would be unhappy. It was hard not to associate the search for sexuality with unfulfilled women. But as I discovered their real motivations, I realized that I can never be happy tolerant of others if I can’t accept that they find happiness where I don’t. I learned something very valuable from my experience with belly dancing; taking pride in what I do—like spending my Sunday mornings belly dancing with older women—can empower me towards success in every aspect of my life.

Works Cited