

# Leïla Haddad, dancer-choreographer and Oriental dance teacher

INTERVIEW WITH TILDA MOUBAYED

**H**er name is Leïla Haddad. She was born in Tunisia. At the age of eighteen she comes to France then continues her university studies in London. She prepares a master's degree in English but stops before completing PhD, attracted mainly by theatre. Then haunted by a passion, Oriental dance, she fully devotes herself to it, first in rebellion, then out of challenge. Her challenge held by an implacable technique and tenacious will got through all resistance. This dance inhabiting her like a secret and wonderful flower is but a song of a subtle beauty lying in the principle of unusual things and melting into the body.

*T.M. : How do you define this dance?*

L.H. : For me it consists in the simultaneous possession of the multiple forms of emotion.

*T.M. : Why this transition from theatre to Oriental dance?*

L.H. : In England, I had the opportunity to watch plays of committed theatre companies; one of them was called the Zulu Theatre. What I immediately liked in this company is that there were people of all social conditions, all colours and of different countries, but motivated by the same love of justice. The director who would see me everyday come and watch rehearsals offered me to act in their play. I said "yes". I started that way late in life and I learned with those actors to exercise voice, text, breathing, and movements...

The more I was progressing in theatre, the more I realized that it was this and nothing else that I wanted to do despite the opposition of my family and family circle. But I could not make a living from theatre so this is how I had the idea of giving Oriental dance lessons. But I didn't know how to teach, because I had learned imitating my mother, my aunts, and my neighbours.

*T.M. : And here you say : "It was a shock", a shock with a double meaning, one is the result of confusion, the other of prejudice.*

L.H. : It was in the early 80s. I called dance schools, at random, offering to teach Oriental dance and immediately there was this confusion with "Far-East

dances". I would then explain that it was more precisely the dance of Middle-Eastern countries and North Africa, and they would answer: "Oh yes, belly dance".

*T.M. : It was therefore rebellion, challenge that carried your will to bring back to favour this dance?*

L.H. : I didn't know the term "belly dance". I didn't understand the image they were sending back to me. Yes, it revolted me. But chance helped me. I had heard about a very famous American woman, Sara Petronio, a tap dance teacher. I told her "I have never taught Oriental dance and I have no students, but I love it". Her answer was: "yes, why not, let's try". This is how I started!

*T.M. : So you embarked on a new adventure: Oriental dance teaching. Therefore you had to improvise a technique requiring an analytical approach of this movement usually acquired through mimetism?*

L.H. : I got involved in dancing as I had done before in theatre. But here, I became my own teacher. I learned how to teach by teaching. I was the student of my students. I learned how to teach thanks to them and I taught them dancing. It is a communication vessels system.

And here I would like to try and justify teaching that is the beginning and not the end of a career: because in the West generally, teaching is perceived as a career end. The dynamic of teaching is creativity, it is the transmission of a message.

*T.M. : Oriental dance has no history, in the sense of a change in themes, a modification of technique, an elaboration of various choreographies. Oriental dance never was the subject matter of institutions. It never was managed by rules (except implicit). It never created its school. It persists as it was through centuries. Reconstituting a speech on Oriental dance in order to bring it back would rather seem like an obstacle course...*

L.H. : Yes, this is true. Oriental dance is still in the days of speech and here everything remains to be done. But that doesn't mean that artistically everything must be done all over again: all my elders have done a wonderful job. My struggle concerns people's approach to this dance and it seems to me more than necessary to do this job and carry on with it.

*T.M. : How would you explain the vacancy of a written speech on this type of dance that goes back thousand years nevertheless?*

L.H. : If for Oriental dance no school has been created and no speech has been written, it is because it is very present in the daily life of Oriental people. Oriental dance has remained "esoteric", unlike ballet that has always been staged, hence the emergence of schools that have helped its artistic expression.

*T.M. : Through your remark, Oriental societies appear like naturally "dancing" societies, unlike Western societies who establish a de facto dichotomy between the "body with a social function", polite, stiff, reserved, and the "dancing body" that obeys to an extra-customary practice?*

L.H. : Absolutely, but it doesn't mean that Oriental dance is an easy, restrictive dance. Oriental dance is a sophisticated dance that moves the body on a music recognized as learned. Oriental music having the sophistication that we know, the dance made in the image of this music transforms the body into a musical instrument as rich and as complex, escaping ingeniously to the academic rhythmic learning that is 1, 2, 3...

*T.M. : Besides, it would seem that the music itself meets another type of understanding in the Arab "continent"; which implicitly makes it recognized by all. Whereas a more direct relation seems to exist in Europe, between a country and its own music.*

L.H.: The East and the West have two different conceptions of dance and music. When I came to France, I realized that there were two types of music: classic music that was the lot of intellectuals and popular music. It especially struck me as in the East everybody listens to Arabic classic music, from the fellah (peasant) who doesn't know how to read or write, to people who have access to culture. I couldn't understand this dichotomy. On the other hand in the West, there are dances and music for each generation and they certainly do not mix..

*T.M. : How can one explain the accessibility of Oriental music to all social categories, all ages, and all sexes and to all very diverse cultural levels? Would it be then rich of so many psychological parameters constituent of its universality (infinite subtleties of the emotional state)? Or on the contrary, would it be terribly poor to the extent of being able to maintain such unanimity?*

L.H. : It was said that what gather the Arab world are music and dance, even if language and dialects differ. All Oriental people thrill to the sound of the same music. Indeed, what is interesting is this notion of almost universality. Moreover, as soon as Western people start to understand Oriental sensitivity, they are completely conquered and can no more renounce it.

But to come back to Oriental music, it is extremely sophisticated. Among other instruments, we have one called Kanoun or "law". This instrument rules in an orchestra. Not less than fifteen years are necessary to be able to play properly and master just a little bit the richness of this instrument. Therefore a dancing body cannot but answer in a rich and sophisticated way to this music.

*T.M. : Nevertheless, if we know how this dance is transmitted, we still need to know where it comes from. We know it belongs to the East, but which East? All Arab countries share it, recognize themselves in it, but none of them claim it as belonging to its cultural patrimony. It has a near universality.*

L.H. : Here we can only refer to tradition, because there is no precise and accurate historical proof on its origins. However, one thing remains undeniable, it is its sacred essence; because human being always had above his head the same sky, the same stars, the same apprehensions and the same joys ... and, in order to better tame heaven's power, storms ... He used imitation. He has imitated the rotation of stars, the moon, and the sun and has transformed into divinities what he feared the most and was dependent on.

The dance started with feminine divinities because woman was perceived as a mystery as she had the power to give birth. They figured out she possessed a divine power. They started then adoring feminine divinities always represented with prominent bellies. Those beliefs existed up to the advent of the first monotheist religions. But this doesn't mean that beliefs in feminine divinities disappeared all of a sudden: we know that the last temple where they used to pray to feminine divinities was shut in the East in the 4th century AD, in Dendera, nearly 120 km from Luxor in Egypt. And it is not because they shut a place of worship that people stopped believing and praying to those divinities. This doesn't take us away from the dance.

*T.M. : Islam, women and Oriental dance?*

L.H. : In a country where Islam is extremely present, women whether we want it or not are powerful: differently than in the West because it is not the same understanding. In our countries dance is here more present than ever. The West that obeys to a Jewish-Christian tradition has

"abolished" the notion of physical pleasure, of sensual pleasure. In the East, it is the celebration of the body, sounds, colours, it is the celebration of senses permanently on the alert, if not only by the smells of incense, spices ... What has Islam forbidden? It has forbidden to show, which means to put all this on a public place.

*T.M. : Much "prejudice" presses down on Oriental dance, is it possible to define the reasons?*

L.H. : I would like to answer by another question: Western men who would watch these dances and who brought back many written works with a strong pejorative connotation, which society were they coming from? Those travelling to the East came from an extremely puritan Europe where showing one's foot was considered as aphrodisiac, it was the height of lust, vulgarity and eroticism. So those Western people who turn up in the East, and who discover those women going from house to house to earn their living, discover everything at the same time: The East, its scents, its incenses, its colours and habits obviously different from their own, and dances using tremendously the pelvis, the chest, the shoulders ... Those signs were considered as leading to debauchery, because the West perceived those parts of the body as sexual symbols, reprehensible by religion. "Moving the pelvis" meant to them moving a part of the body considered "shameful". There was no need then to exaggerate or not, the simple fact of practising that dance was considered as an appeal for sexuality.

I would like to illustrate this point of view by an anecdote demonstrating that one is always exotic in relation to what other people think. A French woman writer welcomes one day an Egyptian woman that she invites to the Opera House. This Oriental woman was deeply shocked to see the nakedness of the dancers bodies wearing leotards that would make out sex contours and that would make splits with their legs in all directions. And yet, this woman practised Oriental dance in all its famous sensuality. They say that this woman almost left...

It would therefore be interesting in order to re-establish the order of things to bring Eastern people to the West with the purpose of studying cultural habits, the same way the West sends its ethnologists to study our societies and our various ways of sitting and eating. It would be, in my point of view, totally instructive, but also very funny!

The belly therefore never was a shame in our countries. My grandmother used to wear baggy trousers, this very large pair of trousers, with a "blousa", it was an Indian or Turkish style small top, so between the waist and below the bosom, that part of the body was naked. And if sometimes a sort of scarf would cover this nakedness, it was with an aim of purely decorative elegance. Sensual eroticism is not the same for all countries. And isn't it the upper part of the body that is considered erotic for American people? Whereas in our countries, it is the lower part of the body that should never be uncovered. The upper part is more dietary; women breast-feed their children and nobody pays attention!

*T.M. : However, the Oriental dancer's costume, through a lateral slot, doesn't it uncover the legs up to hip level?*

L.H. : Uncovering the lower part of the body in the East is totally contrary to the history of our sensuality. The first cabarets were created on the initiative of this great Lebanese dancer called Badiaa Masabni, both dancer and actress who in the twenties, in Cairo, answered to the longing of a clientele belonging to the rich local and European bourgeoisie. She drew her inspiration from the rustling costumes of Parisian shows and she opened the costume at leg level. Which was revolutionary at that time!

*T.M. : In other words, Western "exoticism", even when it shocks Oriental people, is often imitated.*

L.H.: Everything happens in a balance of power or domination encouraging such behaviour. I am going to give an example within the scope of dance still. American culture is so dominant in France that no one ever took the liberty to translate the terms: rock and roll, mambo, salsa, and twist in equivalent French terms. It is not the case for Oriental dance that they allowed themselves not only to translate but also to "misrepresent" by a bad translation: belly dance for American people and "danse du ventre" for French people. I have nothing against the name of "danse du ventre" but it is not its name.

*T.M. : Can this wrong name induce a wrong perception?*

L.H.: The terms have with no doubt a very pejorative implication, or not totally status enhancing, as this same Oriental music that I could call again "learned music" and that will draw differently looks, minds and attentions...

If the first impulse of this dance comes

from the belly, it also concerns all the median part of the body because the work that is done at spine and respiratory tract level is quite significant. Oriental dance reconsiders in fact this central part of the body that remained for a long time tense and stiff in the West: hence in my opinion this increasing attraction of Western women to this form of dance. Oriental dance renews again the lower part and the upper part of the body by activating what is called "Large Breathing". This full distribution of energy to all physical zones gives back to the body its true harmony. In this dance, the deeper body regains all its fullness, in all its dimensions, both lateral and vertical.

*T.M. : Would Oriental dance have therapeutic effects?*

L.H. : One of my students is an osteopath who has noticed that my work on the body through the technique of Oriental dance rebuilds the harmony of the whole body. In our body, as she explained to me, there are small energy centres that Far-East people call shakras. They are extremely important energy centres and junction points. This junction network follows exactly the shape of an 8. Oriental dance that systematically traces its movement within this famous 8 which symbolises infinity, is capable of naturally regenerating junction networks suffering from any pathology and of rebuilding the initial harmony of the human body.

*T.M. : To go back to the costume, we know that the scarf attached around the belly is a dress accessory inextricably linked to this type of dance. Is it a sign or a technical process?*

L.H. : The scarf surrounding the hips is a sign, an allegiance to the female divinity Ishtar. But also, when we look at rock paintings all the statuettes of naked women or men bear a sort of string or amulet around the pelvis; so we could simply think that they are remains of gestures from ancient civilizations that we have lost.

It is nevertheless obvious that the symbolic impact of this scarf that we put around the pelvis, two or three centimetres below the navel, comes essentially from this part of the body called "belly" that is the starting point of the whole vital and sexual energy. Besides, don't they say in Eastern of Far-Eastern believes that the lower part of the body corresponds to the earth, symbol of the mother, that the upper part of the body

corresponds to heavens, symbol of the father, and that the centre of the body refers to this junction between heavens and the earth for a better union or harmony?

Isn't the belly the cradle of humanity as well? And isn't it the sacred centre of the body for Japanese people who call it Hara, an extremely important point for martial arts? And in Oriental dance, is it still necessary to underline the capital role of the belly in the expression of this art? Therefore if in our dance a scarf underlines with evidence this part of our body, I would find it much difficult to think that it would just be for an ornamental purpose!

*T.M. : Have you added any modification to Oriental dance movement?*

L.H.: No, I have worked it through to the end. But since I dance at least three hours a day, I tend to dramatize it.

*T.M. : Is there still one part of your body that resists?*

L.H. : Of course, You never finish. Our body is the history of our life since childhood, so even if I dance, everyday life stress, my anguishes and fears, make a print in my body. I have therefore not been, that for sure, to the end of my resistances.

*T.M. : Oriental dance movement has a strong feminine connotation. But when you dance aren't there "moments" when you have the feeling to go beyond this frontier between masculine and feminine?*

L.H. : As far as I am concerned, when I watch somebody dancing and dancing well, I see nothing but the infinite grace of the movement of that body. The movement goes usually further than man-woman duality; and that's what makes the magic of dance!

*T.M. : Is there an age limit for Oriental dance?*

L.H. : The East, unlike what people think, is an extremely feminine society and this against Western collective consciousness for which age requirements are very present and often a handicap. There is no age limit for an Oriental dancer!

*T.M. : The concept of "interiority" is present in Oriental customs and habits; how does Oriental dance converse with this concept?*

L.H. : In the West, the body is enhanced and showed in and for exteriority. In the East, it is first and foremost within a family interiority that woman's body tries to please: parents,

husband, children. Moreover it is for this reason that we put on our most beautiful clothes at home, for us and for our close family circle. This relation to interiority remains very present in Oriental dance whose real and authentic expression takes place in people's homes. For this reason I keep repeating that whoever wants to understand the meaning and genuine expression of this dance should watch it inside homes.

*T.M. : Is this interiority concept in you when you dance?*

LH. : This dance is not a purely physical and sexual dance. It is indeed sensual, but its sensuality integrates many emotions coming from the body, the heart and the soul; it is trinity to make only one and this is a very important notion. If you dance with your body only, there isn't much to it.

*T.M. : Oriental dance remains still a powerful seduction weapon...*

LH. : Oriental dance is a seduction dance, the same way each human relationship is a seduction relationship. If the university professor who has to speak for three hours about the Weng Cheng Cheng dynasty at 8.00 a.m. in front of two hundred students doesn't try to charm his students, after one hour the entire audience is sleeping.

*T.M. : Is seduction more powerful if it doesn't make up with truth elements?*

LH. : Oriental dance is an art and each art is truth. But as points it out Tahia Carioca, this great Oriental dance lady in a recent interview: "What some dancers practice nowadays is not Oriental dance but a vulgar appeal to sexual excitement."

*T.M. : What part did France play in your career?*

LH. : France gave me the chance to be not only a "dancing body" but also a "thinking body". I was able to impose my culture as it is, without misrepresenting it or making it up. I was able to establish views where there were only prejudices: people listened to my views and felt encouraged to give a thought to my dance. France gave me much chance!

*T.M. : Who are the greatest dancers in your opinion?*

LH. : I was breathless with admiration watching Tahia Carioca, Samia Gamal, Naimat Akef and many others ... They are my initiators. But I have also watched girls and women dancing in a way I had never seen before in my life, with an

emotion of an extraordinary novelty that I wouldn't be able to pass on myself with a hundred years of experience and my six hours of daily training. I would like to pay a tribute to those women, those strangers, those mothers and aunts, from whom emanates so much feminine beauty and an endless grace beyond the palpable body.

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