

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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USA

**And now for something a little different....**

Dear Peter,

As the searing Cairo night melts into a thick morning fog, a meandering call to prayer is broadcast from the capital's tens of thousands of minarets. But this is the Las Vegas of the Middle East. Clubs are packed with revellers from around the region who heed instead the call to bask in the best entertainment Egypt has to offer - Oriental dancing.

At the pricey Cave du Roi cabaret, Arabs from all corners of the Middle East gather to enjoy a rousing bellydance show, the spectacle for which Cairo is most famous. Kuwaitis and Saudis smile and down 12-year-old Scotch while snapping fingers to the undulating beat. Raucous Egyptian men, taken by the music, laugh and hug and jump from their table to bellydance with their pals. Women frequent the nightclubs as well, and puff Cleopatra cigarettes while alternately cheering on and raptly eyeing the dancer.

The drums commence and all eyes turn front and center as the seductive bellydance show gets underway. This performance is not like the others.

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Katherine Roth is a Fellow of the Institute  
writing about tradition and modernity in the Arab world.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The glittery woman dressed only in sequined bra and skirt who steps onto the smokey stage is no sultry Arab, but buxom 40-year-old Swede Marita Fahlen - alias Samasim - who until recently worked in a Stockholm tanning salon. She's not the only Westerner now demanding a spotlight in the competitive and seedy world of Oriental dance here.

Nelly Gratacap, 33, was a librarian at the French National Statistical Institute until a few years ago. Now she snakes her voluptuous body in suggesting curving movements to *ouds* and *tablas* - traditional lutes and drums - at the Coquillage cabaret and the Safir Dokki hotel. Carolee Kent, from L.A., bellydances nightly at the prestigious Meridien Hotel in the sleek suburb of Heliopolis. Katya, a Moscovite recently arrived here to seek her fortune as a bellydancer, shakes it at an expensive nightclub in the shadow of the pyramids. 37-year-old French dancer Corinne Mahiou, known to fans only as Diana, twists her hips for a mostly *khaliji* - Gulf Arab - audience [Some 60 percent of Egypt's tourism income comes from Arab tourists]. There is also another American and a French woman, a New Zealander and a Spaniard.

"I've got boxes overflowing with applications from girls in the states and Europe who want to be bellydancing stars. They know you have to get the Cairo seal of approval to make it in the business, and they're coming faster than I can handle them," said Munir Nassif, an impresario and agent who helped Kent, Gratacap and Fahlen get established in the demanding dance circuit here.

But as a heap of photos slides off his desk and onto the grimy floor of his sparse downtown Cairo office, Nassif says what really scares him is what the influx of talented Western dancers means to Cairo's long-uncontested role as entertainment capital of the region.

"If this trend continues, there may not be any Egyptian bellydance stars left in ten or twenty years," he said. Rakia Hassan, a widely-respected bellydance teacher and choreographer, agrees.

"Maybe this will wake Egyptians up a little. Maybe they'll see their national treasure being swallowed by foreign talent, and they'll revive it. Until then, better to have foreigners dancing well than Egyptians doing a sloppy job," said Hassan.

The trend toward foreigners taking center stage in the Oriental dancing business runs deeper than the attraction of Western girls in sequins and fluffy hair styles. It reflects a shift in Egyptian society to more conservative values. Islamic revivalism is real in Cairo, and a growing number of women are opting for the *hijab*, or veil, which, among other things, restricts them from dancing in public. Although Egypt is one of the most liberal in the region, its role as "capital of sin", undisputed only a decade ago, is declining. Nightclub managers agree that as soon as Beirut becomes more stable, Cairo's days as an entertainment capital may well be numbered.

"It's simple," said Maher Zeinoh, nightclub manager at the chic Nile Hilton, leaning back in his chair after seeing off Lucy, one of only two fresh young Egyptian bellydance *vedettes* on the Cairo scene. "Western dancers are more socially acceptable. Clients don't yell crude things at a foreigner the way they would at most Egyptian

bellydancers. This is a tough business. There are seven serious nightclubs within 500 meters of here and there aren't enough good Egyptian artists to go around."

Despite the fact that bellydancing is a part of everyday life for most Egyptians, who often start dancing as soon as they can walk, the number of top Egyptian performers has dwindled to less than a handful. Bellydancing is considered a shameful profession, often equated with prostitution. It's an expensive industry to break into, with lessons costing upwards of \$15 an hour and costumes tagged at between \$350 and \$1000 a shot. Hairdressers, hair extensions and photo sessions are posters add to to the high cost of dressing and training. For many poor and inexperienced dancers, these necessities can sometimes only be purchased in bed. The average annual income here is \$300.

"Very few of these women are truly prostitutes. But they will do it when it's for a specific aim. They don't feel they have a choice. That's it," said Zeinhom. But the popular perception remains stronger than ever that all bellydancers are prostitutes.

There are no formal bellydancing schools here, and Oriental dance is not considered on a par with ballet and modern dance. Bookstores and libraries are noticeably void of material on the subject. After scouring Cairo's bookshops, I found only one book on bellydancing - in German. Although Oriental dance is a national form of entertainment, it remains largely taboo.

Foreign dancers, however, are sometimes considered more respectable than in Egyptians . They are not from Muslim societies, so their dancing on stage seems less morally jarring and comes across as far less risqué than that of Egyptians. Until very recently Western bellydancers were a curiosity, and they are still considered slightly more upmarket by nightclubs competing ferociously for a diminishing number of local stars.

Foreigners are also a better bargain. "These foreign girls put on a class act that, frankly, costs a hell of a lot less than if it were performed by an equally talented Egyptian," said Zeinhom. The top foreign dancer is paid a fraction of what her Egyptian counterpart earns.

Fifi Abdou, perhaps the best in the business, rakes in up to \$2,000 per show. The top foreigner earns about a fifth that. Foreigners also pay nearly twice as much in taxes and union dues (yes, there's a bellydancers' union) as do locals, which is good business for an administration struggling to shoulder its economic burdens.

Well-trained European and American bellydancers have never been as plentiful in Cairo. For those who always dreamed of being performers but were slightly overweight or a few years too old to feel comfortable doing ballet or jazz, Oriental dance is a dream come true.

Dressed in black and rhinestones, Parisian Nelly Gratacap, now dancing professionally here explained: "Oriental dancing opened new worlds to me. It made a huge difference in my personality. I used to be considered fat. In France there's a lot of pressure on curved girls. There's a tyranny that says they should always be on a diet. No one could have guessed I might be a dancer. I felt I was doomed to be a brainy

girl and psychologically the door was closed. I learned to love my body and be proud of it through bellydancing. Now I feel authorized to dance and show myself off and I guarantee I'm not the only one," Gratacap puts on one of the torchier dance shows in town. Once frustrated as a librarian in Paris, she now performs throughout the Middle East.

In Germany and other European countries bellydancing is offered as therapy for women with back problems and for those preparing for childbirth. It develops muscles in the lower back and abdomen and is said to make birthing less painful. It is a low-shock exercise that promotes a positive body image while toning the parts of the body women complain about most.

"When I started taking lessons in 1987 there was only one bellydance class in the community school in my town. Now there are four classes," said Wiebke Mechau, 28, from a village near Stuttgart, Germany, and now training in Cairo to become a bellydance instructor. "If you want more than exercise, it's also perfect. Nowadays every big birthday party or office party in Germany features a bellydancer. The pay is excellent. For one evening you can earn 1000 Deutchmarks . But most people do it for their health."

Bellydancing was first introduced to the West by 19th century Orientalists, who glamorized and romanticized the image of sensual and exotic Arab dancers clad in sheer and silky fabrics from the Orient. The art saw a revival in the 1960s and 1970s, when ethnic was in. It remains a regular feature in dance and physical education curricula. It is most frequently regarded for its physical and psychological benefits, which, according to some, is a step toward the origins of the dance - as a symbolic event more than a performance art.

Originally brought to Egypt by the Turks in the 16th century, when Cairo was taken by the Ottomans, bellydancing has long been associated with important ceremonies throughout the Middle East. In an Egyptian wedding procession, the bride is preceded by a bellydancer, who, in earlier times, was usually a prostitute. This symbolizes the duality between virgin and sexual being.

Bellydancing brings together many such paradoxes. It is an essential outlet in an otherwise restrictive society. It is the razor's edge between the acceptable and the forbidden, clean entertainment and seductive temptation: a public celebration of gender in a culture where men and women hardly mix.

It is equally paradoxical in Western terms: a celebration of full female curves at a time when thin seems forever in. A release from dominant social and aesthetic restrictions of age and build. Perhaps, then, it is apt that women like Marita Fahlen and Nelly Gratacap and Carolee Kent are coming into their own by way of bellydancing.

Just as night and day are linked by the fog rolling gently across the Nile, each voluptuous gesture Samasim makes to her rapt audience links forbidden and accepted, male and female. The irresistible link between opposites. It is the window that makes the system work. No wonder more Western dancers than ever before are stepping into the smokey Cairene spotlight.

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**What Saudi and Yemeni Religious Authorities had to say  
about the Yemen war**

Dear Peter,

The statements, *fatwas*<sup>1</sup> and recommendations of the Ulema, or Islamic scholars, in this region hold a great deal of weight. In traditional Muslim societies such as Yemen, where the literacy rate remains low and respect for religious scholars runs high, transmission of documents such as those translated below hold a great deal of sway, both among the largely uneducated masses and in official government circles. Religious statements such as the following are widely distributed among the populations and are often posted at mosques, where the news can be read and recounted to the illiterate. Such oral transmission of religious messages remains characteristic of many Islamic societies.

The statements and edicts also circulate internationally in political-religious circles and may be quoted in the Islamist media abroad. On clandestine Islamist radio in Algeria, for example, broadcasts of citations from international statements such as the following is common.

While journalists concentrated on the political maneuvering behind the war, many local lay persons and decision-makers paid just as much attention to how the Ulema read the changing situation, and many Muslim believers based their actions and reactions at

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<sup>1</sup>A religious decree.

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