

Women in the Performing Arts

Mona Knio

Performance is a process-oriented tool which improves our sensuous, intellectual, social, and aesthetic appreciation of life and the world we live in. A performer is a doer whose action is carried out in a space shared with a public. The visible image of a performer contradicts the stereotypical image of the passive female in Arab societies. What is more inconsistent is the presence of the female performer as an economic player in contemporary Arab societies. She does not live on the margin of society but is a professional, an evident contributor to the cultural scene, and above all has been instigating change in her community by expanding the horizons of her gender and certainly exercising power. Scheherazade's bedtime stories proved to be a stratagem to change her fate and that of her sisters.

It is seldom that one thinks of a female performer as a career woman, one who carries out an action, or displays certain skills in front of her clientele, better known as audience. Her expressions, actions, or skills are perceived as a commodity for artistic, or cultural consumption. Some performers are rebels or activists who dare social, intellectual, artistic, and cultural norms in the process of exploring and expanding the margins of their individual humanity alongside that of humanity at large. A prime example is Rabi'a al-Adawiya, a female slave singer who preached and sang in 8th century Baghdad the doctrine of Divine Love. The first Sufi woman was given a brand name: *shahidat al-hub al-ilahi* (i.e. martyr of divine love).

Characteristically, an Arab female performer has to transgress the traditional boundaries of her society, family, and gender which are usually determined by a patriarchal perception of feminine sexuality. She also has to transgress the private boundaries of her intimate world and occasionally has to share it unrestrictedly live or on a screen. For in the context of performance, the organic actuality of the feminine body is vigorously the center of attention given that it is the medium or instrument through which expressions crystallize. In performance, many traits of a talented and liberated female identity are played out. Audiences are often preoccupied by the female performers' sexuality as long as some female performers flaunt their physical attractiveness and exploit their sex appeal. Predictably, female performers often exploit the power of seduction in order to increase their visibility and consequently their economic independence and empowerment.

In Beirut, during the fifties, sixties, and seventies a female performer was referred to as "artiste", which was written in Arabic letters on billboards in front of the names of female performers. Singers, dancers, and actresses were

all referred to as “artistes”. However, “artiste” is not always used in the positive sense of the word. Often it reveals total disrespect to the designated female performer; the reference is made to the sexual activity some female artists perform in order to secure more income and/or to manipulate men. Nevertheless, female performers were not always considered outcasts in the Arab world. In Egypt, for example, ‘*awalem* (singular ‘*alima*, i.e. a learned woman) composed poetry and music and were welcome in the best households. ‘*Awalem* performed to female audiences during weddings and other celebrations. Ironically, Moroccan *shaykhat* (singular *shaykha*, i.e. an elderly dignified woman) were regarded as loose women for publicly asserting their sexual liberty through song and dance, while entertaining male and female audiences at family festivities. Moreover, like the *shaykhat*, the Egyptian *ghawazi* (singular *ghaziya*, literally meaning someone who invades) danced unveiled in public places. Throughout history, Arab female performers earned a respectable name and status when they took notice of the social boundaries which set the articulation of intimate artistic expressions in private spaces, and were treated as outsiders when their performances were made public for male or mixed audiences.

Early during the 20th century female professional singers, actresses, and dancers became visible in the public space. The Lebanese Samiha al-Qurashi and Zakiya Hamdan sang in *Qahwat Le’jez* coffee house. Naima al-Masriyah danced in a cabaret near al-Farouk theater in the Burj area in Beirut. On the other hand, *sultana* Munira al-Mahdiyya, Fatimah Rushdi, Naimah Akef, Badia Masabni, Tahiya Karioka, and Samia Jamal in Cairo, transgressed the cultural boundaries imposed on the ‘*awalem* and introduced the culture of body performance in public *salas* (i.e. music halls), cafés, theaters, and casinos often owned by them. Overcoming the obstacles facing women artists by performing in public spaces without being regarded as *ghawazi* was a great achievement then.

Umm Kulthum is a significant example of a performer encouraged by her father to join the family troupe disguised as a male singer. The family support in this context helped Umm Kulthum carve out a female space and even advance female power as a singer, musician, manager, president of the musician’s union, and an activist, while maintaining control over her reputation and representation in a male-dominated field. Umm Kulthum’s artistic project is amongst the rare grounded in the Arab nation. *As-Sayeda* or *as-Sit* (i.e. the lady) often raised funds for social projects in her home village. However, after the 1967 war, her fundraising for the Egyptian army increased her visibility in society and politics. Moreover, it underlined the economic dimension and power of the consummate performer Umm Kulthum. It is this role model of a well rounded, self-empowered female artist who also upheld traditions which appealed to the Arab *umma* (i.e. nation) and continues to capture the Arab conscience.

Various female performers have accomplished wonders regarding cultural transmission and artistic unity; they have also left a legacy for the subsequent generations to build on. It is thanks to them that the field of performing arts as an entertainment enterprise has developed in scale and scope to the extent of being a substantial industry, probably amongst the few thriving in the region. Consequently, more and more females set out to perform to mixed audiences in male-dominated public spaces. All these females experience crossing the borders of the private self to the public performer. Some succeed in breaking away from old stereotypes while others frame themselves in a box of their

own making. The generations of the early and mid-twentieth century performers proved capable of challenging obstacles starting with the restrictions imposed by patriarchal societies, religious taboos, segregation of sexes, lack of public professional training, etc. With a more liberated environment in today's consumerist society, and the numerous possibilities for professional training for youth in the performing arts, the nature of the challenge is sadly narrowed down to marketing the artistic or cultural products rather than cultivating unique cultural expressions.

Until recently, it was not possible for women to lead even in the art sector; often a male agent or *impresario* negotiated and made decisions on behalf of the female performer. Today, several Arab females are leading in the performing arts field not only as performers but also as administrators, artisans, and artists. For instance, Moroccan actress Thuraya Jubran is today a minister of culture. It is evident that more women are promptly and courageously joining the performing arts industry and constituting a considerable proportion of its work force. In the age of mass media, stars are being promoted as any other product on the shelves; the process includes branding, packaging, marketing, presentation, etc. More female workers are joining and contributing to the different production stages and eventually will learn to exercise more power in shaping their self-image into a quality product.

The entertainment industry is generally exploitive of women especially since the dominance of youth and beauty rather than talent and skills constrain the activities of older performers. While some performers are very rich, several suffer poverty and loneliness behind closed doors. In Lebanon, health and social security systems are not available to support performers as they are struck by misfortunes of illness and hardship, especially later on in their career. Some of these women are the breadwinners of their families; others are marginalized by their community for having chosen this career. Female performers deserve recognition and support throughout their career and beyond; their work should be documented, archived, and eventually studied. In addition, their well-being in old age should be the concern of both the society at large and the government. As I write many performers who are suffering neglect and ill health come to mind, in addition to those who left us without having had the chance to be recognized as individuals who made a difference in this rich, intricate, and inexhaustible field of expression.

The articles in this issue of *al-Raida* cover a fairly wide territory as they address different attributes of contemporary Arab women performers working all over the world. The contributors come from diverse academic and professional backgrounds. They are researchers, producers, fans, and performers writing about their own experience in performance and/or their experience of other female performers in action. Our main concern is to look at how female performers play a major role in the process of reshaping the female image and enhancing the status of women in contemporary Arab societies. We open with two academic articles, the first depicting pioneer performers, the Egyptian Munira al-Mahdiya and the Iranian Qamar al-Molouk; and the second describing current forces in Morocco contributing to the transformation of the cultural life in Moroccan society. They are followed by two pieces; the first one looking at how gender is reconstructed in the Lebanese theater work place today, while the second studies the warped image of the female ideal as projected on the screen by prominent Egyptian

actresses Faten Hamama and Hind Rostum. The next section focuses on a range of distinct Arab singers; Umm Kulthum, Fairouz, Sabah, Haifa, and Camilia, who are role models for many generations to come. Unusual performing art examples are also included in this issue. Visual artists share their experiences: Marya Kazoun performs in her installations and Lina Issa imagines home through a replacement performer. Storytelling, a female expression par excellence, is revived by two female Arab performers in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Mai Ghossoub, the theater maker, is remembered by one of her actresses. Freedom of expression remains a vital issue for all artists; it is discussed in reference to music and it is also a concern to the Lebanese female performers who participated in the roundtable discussion which took place at LAU in April 2007 in preparation for the present issue.

Women performers' work patterns may have been affected by their own sense of assertiveness and independence. Indeed, it is very rare that male family members support the choice of a sister, mother, wife, or mistress taking up performance as a career unless they are dependent on her financially, are extremely progressive, or the performer is educated enough to stand up and persuade her community of her career choice. Female presence is definitely stronger when education plays a supportive role to talent and hard work.

Here, it is important to note that LAU's Communication Arts program, the oldest in the region, has been contributing to breaking the barriers for some Arab women who want to join the performing arts field. Moreover, it has succeeded in forming perceptive audience members with a supportive attitude towards female performers. Thanks is due to educators like Dr. Irene Faffler who started a family theater tradition at the American Junior College for Women (AJCW currently LAU) in the late fifties, then in the early seventies pushed forward the Communication Arts program which has been preparing generations of young people to work in the performing arts field.

Mona Knio is associate professor of Theater in the Arts and Communications Department at the Lebanese American University.
Email: mknio@lau.edu.lb