

“Dancing Against the Norms” A Profile of Mosbah Baalbaki

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Every Saturday night, at around three o'clock in the morning, Music Hall's long velvet crimson curtains draw open, leaving way to a slim, tall figure that takes position in a bare set up, standing under a single spotlight. As the first percussion beat rips through the silence of anticipating viewers, the figure's hips take a bold swing left, and then another right, setting off a series of sexually-teasing belly dance moves. The now roaring audience is glued to the sight of the dark, dense hair plastered backwards, the toned muscles rippling through tight-fitting jeans, and the heavy gold chains reaching down to the navel swaying over a fluid see-through top. The name of the belly dancer is Mosbah Baalbaki, better known simply as Mosbah, the famous male belly dancer act who combines sophisticated dance moves and a playful charisma, and who in the past few years has come to disrupt a long tradition of exclusively female belly dancing in the country.

In a country dominated by a patriarchal system, where the stereotype masculine figure is characterized by high-gear testosterone-driven personae to the point where the legal system penalizes homosexuality, Mosbah has succeeded, over and above the controversy of his act and image, in dancing his way through the deeply entrenched norms of masculinity. He has imposed himself as a respected public figure on the regional scene: every couple of months at least, he is solicited to perform at private parties for political and financial bigwigs across the globe, from the Sychelles islands, to Milan, Sardinia, Paris, London and Dubai. And when he's in town, he dances before a



full house every week end; even if a few sarcastic boos made by suddenly insecure male voices accompany the cheers, there's no question that a significant number of revelers are ready to wait until that late hour just to see Mosbah's show, which lasts no longer than a mere 10 minutes at the most. Mosbah has also attracted considerable international media attention, including a special CNN report in 1999, and interviews with the BBC and the *New York Times*.

Born some thirty years ago and growing up as an only son in Sidon, Mosbah has come a long way indeed, thanks to this "hobby" as he calls it. Belly dancing has allowed him to fulfill his childhood dream, which is stardom: "Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be a star, a celebrity of my own. I didn't want to be like everyone else. Even when I weighed 120 kilograms and that is until I was 17, I dressed in daring, eccentric colors. I loved music and adored Egyptian movies. I was always telling my mother that I wanted to go to Egypt to become an actor. But she convinced me to get a college degree first. And she was so right, because when you're educated and have self-respect, you can impose people's respect." At 20, Mosbah came to the capital to pursue a degree in communication arts at the Lebanese American University. Upon graduation, he traveled to Dubai for a few months where he worked as an assistant director before returning to Beirut to work as a fashion designer for a magazine. During one of his location hunts for the magazine, he met Michel Elefteriades, who owned at the time Amor Y Libertad, a popular nightclub that had just opened. "Michel invited me there one Saturday night. There were around 700 people," recalls Mosbah. "He came up front to me and asked me if I would mind dancing Arabic. He had seen me dancing at another club. He told me to go up to the bar and dance. My first response was: Are you crazy? I can't do something like that! What would my family, and my friends say? But I loved the idea. So I made my way through the crowd to the bar. When I tried to get on it, the bartender stopped me. Then Michel cleared it out. I danced to one song. It was crazy and I loved it." This



spontaneous episode turned into a weekly gig; two months later, a contract was duly signed with Elefteriades' production company, Elef Records, and Mosbah became officially a male belly dancer, gaining national fame a few months later.

Off the scenes, Mosbah is just as picky with the details of his image as on stage; at the time of the interview with Al-Raida, which took place at a beauty institute owned by a friend of his, he was carrying along a checkered red and white Dior purse to go with his red and white track suite, a white cap and wide-framed red sunglasses. "Just for the 10 minutes of the show, there's a lot of work to do. I have to work out every day to stay in shape; I have to chose the songs, the fabric for my costumes, the set up," he explains. Even the rebellious button of his tight-fitting jeans shirt, which he was clipping back on for the umpteenth time during the interview, seemed to be a deliberate choice serving to expose a perfectly hairless, olive skin chest.

"I'm not trying to provoke anyone. I don't have anything to prove to anyone," he says. But when he first started out, he did suffer from people's reactions: "Of course, I saw the sarcasm, but didn't pay heed to it. Rumors started circulating and they even reached my family. Luckily, my family and I are very close. They know who I am and what I'm worth. They didn't buy into the talk. But I was hurt. I wanted to quit. It wasn't worth it. But then Michel managed to convince me. I held on because I have faith in what I was doing. I have passion for what I do."

When asked whether he believes he contributed to a more homosexual-tolerant society in Lebanon over the past years, he gives a modest shrug, but then refers to the special report published in 2001 in the French magazine *L'Express*, in which he was identified as one of the 100 Lebanese personalities to follow. In a country and region, where deep intolerance of any deviation from the established norms of masculinity runs high, Mosbah has indeed managed to open a breach in these norms by imposing himself as an artist and a cultural icon.