

# Farewell to Tahia\*

Edward W. Said

The first and only time I saw her dance on the stage was in 1950 at the summertime Badia's Casino, in Giza just below where the Sheraton stands today. A few days later I saw her at a vegetable stand in Zamalek, as provocative and beautiful as she had been a few nights earlier, except this time she was dressed in a smart lavender colored suit with high heels. She looked at me straight in the eye but my fourteen year-old flustered stare wilted under what seemed to me her brazen scrutiny, and I turned shyly away. I told my older cousin's wife Aida with shamefaced disappointment about my lackluster performance with the great woman; "You should have winked at her," Aida said dismissively, as if such a possibility had been unimaginable for someone as timid as I was. Tahia Carioca was the most stunning and long-lived of the Arab world's Eastern dancers (belly-dancers, as they are called today). Her career lasted for sixty years, from the first phase of her dancing life at Badia's Opera Square Casino in the early thirties, through the reign of King Farouk which ended in 1952, then into the revolutionary period of Gamal Abdel Nasser, followed by the eras of Anwar al Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. All of them except Mubarak, I think, imprisoned her one or more times for various, mostly political offenses. In addition to her dancing, she acted in hundreds of films and dozens of plays, had walked in street demonstrations, was a voluble, not to say aggressive member of the actors' syndicate, and in her last years had become a pious though routinely outspoken Muslim known to all her friends and admirers as "*al-Hagga*." Aged 79, she died of a heart attack in a Cairo hospital on September 20.

About ten years ago I made a special pilgrimage to Cairo to interview and meet her having in the meantime seen dozens of her films and one of her plays, the appallingly bad Yahya l'Wafd, written by her then husband and much younger costar, Fayez Halawa. He was an opportunist, she later told me who robbed her of all her money, pictures, films, and memorabilia. Though she was robed in the black gown and head scarf of a devout Muslim woman she radiated the verve and wit that had always informed her presence as a dancer, actress, public personality. I published an appreciative essay on her in the London Review of Books that tried to render justice to her extraordinary career as a dancer and cultural symbol not just in Egypt, which was where she did all her work really, but throughout the Arab world. Through the cinema and later television Tahia was known to every Arab partly because of her stunning virtuosity as a great dancer — no one ever approached her unrivalled mastery of the genre — and her colorful, thoroughly Egyptian playfulness, i.e. the word-

play, gestures, ironic flirtatiousness synonymous with the country's sparkling and engaging reputation as the Arab world's capital when it comes to such matters as pleasure, the arts of desire and an unparalleled capacity for banter and sociability.

Most Eastern Arabs, I believe, would concede impressionistically that the dour Syrians and Jordanians, the quick-witted Lebanese, the rough-hewn Gulf Arabs, the ever-so-serious Iraqis never have stood a chance next to the entertainers, clowns, singers and dancers that Egypt and its people have provided on so vast a scale for the past several centuries. Even the most damaging political accusations against Egypt's governments by Palestinians or Iraqis are levelled grudgingly, always with a trace of how likeable and charming Egypt — specially its clipped, lilting dialect — as a whole is. And in that glittering panoply of stars and elemental joie de vivre Tahia stood quite alone because, if not altogether despite, her flaws and often puzzling waywardness. A left-wing radical in some things, she was also a time-server and opportunist in others; even her late return to Islam coexisted incongruously with her admitted 14 husbands (there may have been a few more) and her carefully cultivated and implied reputation for debauchery.


So much has already been written on her that I'd like only to mention three things about her that seem to be fittingly recalled now that she has passed from the scene. The first is her essential untranslatability, the fact that despite her enormous fame to and for Arabs she remained largely unknown outside the Arab world. The only other entertainer on her level was Um Kulthum, the great Koranic reciter and romantic singer whose records and videos (she died in 1975) continue to have a world-wide audience today, possibly even greater than she had when she was alive and her Thursday evening broadcasts from a Cairo theater were transmitted everywhere between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. Everyone who enjoys Indian, Caribbean, and "world" music knows and reverently appreciates Um Kulthum. Having been fed a diet of her music at far too young an age, I found her 40-plus minute songs insufferable and never developed the taste for her that my children, who know her only through recordings, have for her. But for those who like and believe in such cultural typing she also stood for something quintessentially Arab and Muslim — the long, languorous, repetitious line, the slow tempo, the strangely dragging rhythms, the ponderous monophony, the eerily lachrymose or devotional lyrics, etc. — which I could sometimes find pleasure in but never quite





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came to terms with. Her secret power has eluded me, but among Arabs I seem to be quite alone in this feeling.

By comparison with her Tahia is scarcely known and, even when an old film is seen, it somehow doesn't catch the non-Western audience's attention (I except from this, other belly-dancers all of whom today seem to be non-Arab — lots of Russians, Americans, Ukrainians, Armenians, and French — appear to regard her as their major inspiration). Bellydancing in many ways is the opposite of ballet, its Western equivalent as an art form. Ballet is all about elevation, lightness, the defiance of the body's weight. Eastern dancing as Tahia practiced it shows the dancer planting herself more and more solidly in the earth, digging into it almost, scarcely moving, certainly never expressing anything like the nimble semblance of weightlessness that a great ballet dancer, male or female, tries to convey. Tahia's dancing vertically suggested a sequence of horizontal pleasures, but also paradoxically conveyed the kind of elusiveness and grace that cannot be pinned down on a flat surface. What she did was obviously performed inside an Arab and Islamic setting but was also quite at odds, even in a constant sort of tension with it. She belonged to the tradition of the *alema*, the learned woman spoken about by great observers of modern Egypt like Flaubert and Edward Lane, that is, a courtesan who was extremely literate as well as lithe and profligate with her bodily charms. One never felt her to be part of an ensemble, say as in *kathak* dancing, but rather as a solitary, somewhat perilous figure moving to attract and at the same time repel — by virtue of the sheer promiscuity she could communicate — men as well as women. You couldn't take Tahia out of a Cairo night-club, stage, or wedding feast (or *zafa*, as it is called). She is entirely local, untranslatable, commercially unviable except in those places, for the short time (twenty to twenty five minutes at most) her performance would normally last. Every culture has its closed off areas, and in spite of her overpowering and well-distributed image, Tahia Carioca inhabited, indeed was, one of them.

The second thing about her that strikes me now that she has died is how untidy and shiftless her life seems to have been. I suppose this is true of performers in general, who really exist before us for the brief time they are on stage and then disappear. Audio-recordings and film have given a kind of permanence to great displays of virtuosity, for instance, but somehow one feels that mechanical reproduction cannot ever have the edge and excitement of what is intended to happen once and then end. Glenn Gould spent the last 16 years of his life trying to disprove this, even to the extent of pretending that a listener or viewer equipped with super-refined VCR or amplifier could "creatively" participate in the recorded artist's performance. Thus the idea of play-back was supposed to mitigate the rarity and perishability of live artistic energy. In Tahia's case all of her films, as a case in point, are probably available in video form, some of them available on street corners throughout the Arab world. But what about her thousands of other performances, the ones that weren't recorded — plays, nightclubs, ceremonies and the like — plus of course her uncountable appearances at soirees, dinners, all-night ses-

sions with fellow-actors and actresses. At times she seemed to be a revolutionary and even a Marxist; at other times, she went the other way, kowtowing to the establishment, as she did in one of her plays in which she made uproarious fun of the Soviet experts in Egypt because of Nasser's policy of taking Egypt into that camp.

Perhaps it is too much to say of her that she was a subversive figure, intransigent by virtue of her imperious way with herself and her surroundings, but I think that her meandering, careless way with her many male relationships, her art, her profligacy as an actress who seemed to have nothing left of her scripts, her contracts (if she had any to begin with), her stills, costumes, and all the rest, suggest how far away she always was from anything that resembled domesticity, or ordinary commercial or bourgeois life, or even comfort of the kind so many of her peers seem to have cared about. I recall the impression that she made on me a decade ago when I spent the afternoon at her non-descript apartment, that she was a great Nana-esque figure who had had and then dismissed her appetites, and could sit back, enjoy a coffee and smoke with a perfect stranger, reminiscing, making up stories, reciting set pieces ("when I danced, I felt I was entering the temple of art," she said to me tendentiously and with a great deal of mock-seriousness), relaxing and being evasive at the same time. What a woman!

Lastly, Tahia's life and death symbolizes the enormous amount of our life in that part of the world which simply goes unrecorded and unpreserved, despite the videos that will undoubtedly proliferate now, the retrospectives of her films, the memorial occasions when she will be eulogized as her great rival Samia Gamal, the public procession planned for whose funeral a few years ago was banned, could not be. There exists no complete record of Tahia's films, no bibliography, no proper biography — and there probably never will be. All the Arab countries that I know don't themselves have proper state archives, public record offices, or official libraries any more than they have a decent control over their monuments, antiquities, the history of their cities, individual works of architectural art like mosques, palaces, schools. This realization doesn't give rise to anything like the moralistic feeling provoked by Shelley's witness to Ozymandias's ruin, but a sense of a sprawling, teeming history off the page, out of sight and hearing, beyond reach, largely irrecoverable. Tahia seems to me to embody that beyond-the-boundary life for Arabs today. Our history is mostly written by foreigners, visiting scholars, intelligence agents while we do the living, relying on personal and disorganized collective memory, gossip almost, plus the embrace of a family or knowable community to carry us forward in time. The great thing about Tahia was that her sensuality or rather the flicker of it that one recalls was so unneurotic, so attuned to an audience whose gaze in all its raw or, in the case of dance connoisseurs, refined lust was as transient and as unthreatening as she was. Enjoyment for now, and then, nothing. I wonder what kind of posthumous life she will have.

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