Rhythm in Motion

From North Africa to Chicago's Southside, a dancer seeks the mystical origin of her art

BY ALAN P. MAMMOSER

In an artist's basement below a quiet backstreet of Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood on the city's near southwest side, a private party is underway. In a well-lit room with low ceilings, the audience crowds together on folding chairs. Before them, a young woman stands on a luxuriant carpet. Her black dress falls the length of her shapely figure. Her long, thick, dark brown hair falls before her lowered face. She is utterly still. The hushed crowd awaits her patiently.

Music begins. It is a long wail. Pounding drums beat louder, louder, until they fill the room. The woman sways ever so softly. Suddenly she rolls back, her face upturned, revealed and disturbed. In a moment she returns, shrouded again by her hair. Then the drums descend to a low sonorous pounding that could go on for hours or days. She begins, slowly, the movement, the utterly methodical twisting movement, revolving her trunk in a ceaseless turning motion from the waist. She revolves as if her torso were unhinged. Her bare feet remain calm beneath her.

Shoulders, torso, upper legs become captured in this hurricane motion, which gradually progresses in a slow revolving descent to the floor. Then the motion moves to her hair. It becomes a twirling frenzy, gathering and twirling again and again, caught in a ceaseless circling.

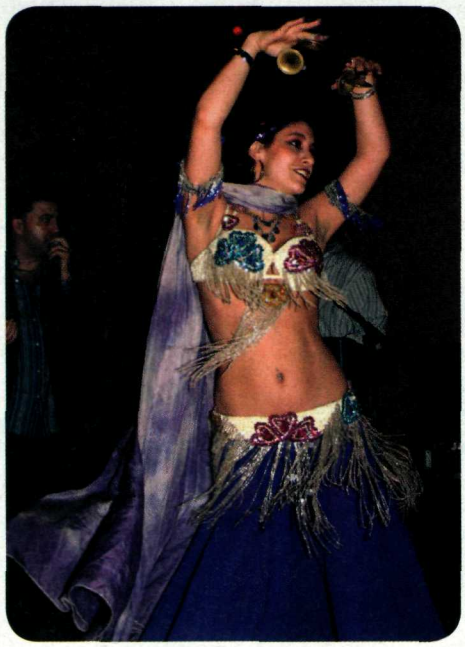
This is the *zaar.* It is a trance. It is a toss of twirling hair. From North Africa, it is ages old, carrying the mystical origin of all dance.

At age four, Khazna Khalil knew she wanted to be a dancer. "I began dancing very young, but I never knew where it came from. Nobody else in my family was a musician or dancer," she recounts. Khazna majored in dance at a community college in her hometown of Lansing, Michigan, studying classical ballet and modern dance. At a local community center, *Raqs Sharqi* — "Dance of the East" — first captured her imagination. The music and the movements resonated deeply with her Lebanese heritage. She studied the dance more, and in 2001 joined a company led by Yasmina Amel, who took her to perform in Detroit nightclubs.

Khalil came to Chicago in 2004, making a living dancing cabaret style in the city's Middle Eastern clubs and restaurants, while continuing to delve into the sources of the dance, searching there for the root of the transformative power she feels each time she performs.

Saturday Night Fever

It's Saturday night and Khalil will go through four dresses. Her journey of dance will take her from city to suburbs, from a mainstream American audience to an ethnic Arabic crowd. She pleases them with the classic cabaret style, which she mixes with folkloric elements and her own subtle flourishes.



Kan Zeman restaurant on Wells Street in Chicago is noisy with diners on a Saturday night. Its two rooms are simple affairs full of tables, joined at a wide passage of rich red hanging drapes, parted and tied back. A little after 9 pm an Arabic chant suddenly rises, high pitched and rhythmical. Khalil appears in a dress of red veils. Her movements are full of energy, her face full of joy. She brushes each table and steps away, coming to her favored place below the drapes between the rooms. She stops, steps, turns, turns again and steps and turns. Her brilliant veils flow to her movements. Her hair comes alive in motion. She sets it twirling, tossing to left and right. For a moment her hair is the show.

The song ends and she retreats, then returns accompanied by driving high-pitched percussion. Her dress is dark, full length, gripping her body. Its polychrome bands tend to dark metallic blue. She holds two strange, colorful, stick canes lengthwise in her straightened arms. Like a sheik twirling swords she deftly incorporates them into her dance in a turning, rhythmical, ritual battle.

She shakes, her hips filled with power. She sways in smooth S-motions, steps short steps and turns in the pulsing rhythm, then crosses the floor, floating.

Fresh music fills the rooms, a pulsing Arabic ballad for the dancer's third appearance. The dark dress is gone. Now she's in a sparkling white two-piece, her skirt hung low upon her hips, her halter aglow with shiny frills and tassels. Between these she is revealed, her long, sumptuous midriff, softly muscled. In back she is slender, a sleek hourglass. Her lovely sides show the crescent curve of a woman's waist and hips.

She steps, turns, steps, gracing each table with her attention. She glides amidst them, stops, filled with music, with its strong rhythm. She shakes — her hips become a frenzy of motion. She releases into a sway, a lovely flowing S-motion through the torso. Her feet are planted. Her bracleted arms extend, giving way to delicate floating hands.

Every part of the room is hers, this turning, revolving and sparkling creature. Gradually she gathers the room to herself; the tables call to her and she goes to them. She arrives, encircling them, a revolving carnival of color. The women, reluctant at first, cannot resist and rise. And Khalil shows them hip shakes and sways, slowly raising the tempo to rapid fire. They dance together laughing, delighted in their flurries of shaking hips.

Raqs Sharqi was always a dance for women. As Khalil says, "In old times women danced together in their homes — men were not watching. They danced in long dresses. They danced to celebrate a new child, a marriage or any joyful occasion."

The cabaret style came much later in nightclubs. It became high art in Cairo a century ago, when Egyptian dancers adapted traditions from many places into a fusion. The colorful cane came from the *Sai'idi* dance of Upper Egypt, originally a ritual combat of men with sticks or swords. Women dancers made it feminine, twirling the cane, balancing it upon their heads in show. And the costumes became flashier, eventually with the middle cut away. Some think the two-piece, bare midriff came from Hollywood, from a filmmakers' dream of an eastern dancing girl, but whatever its origin, the clubs in Cairo adopted it with enthusiasm.

Khalil always returns to the origins. What fascinates her is the link to the source. "Everything dancers do in a nightclub comes out of someone's folklore; Egyptian, Turkish, Nubian, Indian, Persian — all appear in the cabaret."

Act Two

Later that night, she stands in the nightclub Layalenas in north suburban Niles, Illinois. It's a large room, very dark, with big parties of guests filling long table rows. A capacious wooden floor spreads amidst them bathed in warm yellow light. A small stage beyond the floor is lit blue and a crowd of swarthy, smoking men stand in darkness about the bar.

The clock creeps toward midnight and the show begins. The stage band plays Assyrian pop, with a man on organ and another on guitar perched on a stool. They play happy songs until finally the singer announces Khalil. She appears, sharing the floor with him, swaying to his song. She wears a two-piece outfit of purple, like the deep shadow about her painted eyes — her fourth costume of the night.

Khalil stands with the singer, then moves forward. She shakes, her hips filled with power. She sways in smooth S-motions, steps short steps and turns in the pulsing rhythm, then crosses the floor, floating. She glides. She amplifies the music. She makes the floor her own, filling it, floating, appearing in each location.

As she approaches the tables, men fling bills at her. They fill her colorful belt, the straps of her halter with bills. She has pleased them with beauty, with melody and rhythm.

"A dancer knows the rhythm like the back of her hand," Khalil says. She learned to move in the rhythm well, first in classes in the states, then training at the source, with the famed teachers of Egypt. She took workshops with the Reda Troupe in Cairo, with Farida Fahamy, famous for her classic *Raqs Sharqi*, and Mahmoud Reda who preserves folklore traditions. Together, they gave her deep insight into the dance of the village and the dance of the modern stage flowing together in continuity, in a single great tradition.

What she learned in Egypt brought a marvelous release. "For the first time, I felt confident to use the melody, to simply flow in the rhythm,"

PHOTO: LORI GENTRY

The *Ala Nar* dance company (left to right), top row: Yasmin, Anita and Kasha; bottom row: Sahar, Khazna and Zarrineh.

she says. She brings the organic feel of the rural folk dance into the flow and grace of the stage. The heavy, earthy moves, the powerful shaking, the strong accents on the beats, came together with ballet.

She brought it back to the nightclub, and to other students, teaching classes and forming her own company called *Ala Nar* (On Fire!). She and her five dancers have performed at Layalenas and last fall at the Dance Chicago Festival.

Still, she does not love the nightclub. She loves to don the old, traditional full-length dress and dance to the earthy rhythms of the past.

Act Three

At the final party in Pilsen, the zaar dance continues. Khalil winds down, revolving, lower and lower turning. Her feet remain unmoved, all her motion thrown into the toss of her hair. Long minutes go by, the music, pulsing, wailing, does not relent. She descends and descends; finally, her body crouched upon the floor, she can lower no further, she can turn no more. She is finished, still, her head hidden in her hair and the black folds of her dress. The music has died. All is silent. Gradually, the audience realizes that this is all. An uncertain applause begins. Khalil rises slowly, recovering. She walks swiftly away through a curtained hallway into another room. Her search, for a moment, is over.

For more about Khazna's classes and upcoming performances of *Ala Nar* dancers, visit *myspace.com/alanardancers.*

Alan Mammoser is a Chicago-based writer and regional planner.