



# The Belly Dancer Magazine

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**Leila Haddad**

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# Dancer to Dancer

## Featuring Leila Haddad \* As Interviewed by Oberon

(Cover & inside Photos by: Pierre Sivisay)



This interview is such a blessing to me! Given our times and some recent directions our dance has wandered into occasionally, here timelessly, from a worldly woman who "walks the walk" and lives the dance within her heritage, are words to consider with care.

Strong and intelligent don't even begin to describe this remarkable woman who has studied world literature, discusses philosophy and psychology comfortably - has worked in the world of dance and music internationally with skills in performance, staging, lighting, teaching, etc.

I however, hope these pages will give you a closer personal view of this woman who never fails to stop us in our tracks with her daring personal style, stunning stage performances and educated talent.

An icon of our dance and the perfect mix of muse and mentor, she has made the phrase "Free The PoPos" a legendary chant among us, her devotees.

Politics, ethics and attitudes, spoken softly and strongly from the heart by the beautiful Leila Haddad.

**(O)** One of my greatest fears - along with just stage fright - is fear of falling and damaging myself on stage. I have watched three "stars of the dance" take a tumble at Rakkasah and one of them was you - yet you were so gracefully able to complete your performance - any wise words.

**(L)** Part of being physically fit is the ability to fall. You must let yourself go. I was truly surprised and I tensed up - I knew I was hurt - I had broken my wrist. I wanted to dance so much I was able to ignore the pain.

**(O)** Any advice for performance anxiety?

**(L)** When Sarah Bernhard, who was a famous French Actress, at the beginning of the 20th century, was in her late 70's, she was entertaining some people in her dressing room. A young actress taunted her - "Oh you have stage fright after all these years? I have been acting for only two years and I have no stage fright." Sarah answered, "Yes Dear - stage fright only comes with talent."

**(O)** And you are truly a talented and a passionate performer and teacher.

**(L)** For me, my dance is political: As an Arab woman, we are most often portrayed as victims or whores - no middle ground - and yet we are complex and multi-faceted in our real lives.

**(O)** Are these the qualities with which you approach the dance, with multi-faceted complexity?

**(L)** Hmmm ...my dance, although I had great passion for the dance and was a natural dancer I never dreamt it would be my life-long career. I have never - hear me, NEVER performed in a restaurant -



I only perform on stage. When I tour, people all over the world pay to see me perform on stage.

**(O)** You are certainly well known for the integrity of your Tunisian and Raks Sharqi performances.

**(L)** You can advertise with the best web site in the world, but I prefer to stake my reputation on my dance itself. I will fight for this dance as a woman and an Arab because I feel today, people forget where this dance comes from.

**(O)** What makes you feel the source is being disregarded?

**(L)** We have to be aware and cultured. Wearing a Galabea for me, is not exotic - it is my clothing. We might have only worn heavy jewelry for instance, in the cool of the evening, but anklets and bracelets, we wear them all the time - it is cultural.

**(O)** Traditions passed forward with serious intent.

**(L)** Yes - take Henna. A doctor once wrote 80 pages on the benefits of Henna - such as

how it balances the temperature of the body when placed on the hands feet and head.

**(O)** How did these traditions begin for you?

**(L)** I am from the Island of Djerba in Tunisia. My mother is from Tunisia and my father is Syrian. We were all natural dancers at home. My mother played the harpsichord and painted on silk. My father played Oud and my Aunts all played instruments. In our struggle with life we all cried and danced together.

**(O)** How were you inspired to bring this experience to the stage?

**(L)** I was Studying world literature. I was in England and visited a friend of mine in the Zulu Theatre. People from over 20 different nations were performing. It was a shock to me, the thought that through theatre you could educate. It opened my eyes because I am curious by nature. I went to the director to ask to watch rehearsal - he agreed I should. Later, he asked if I would participate. I am very shy really, but the music drew me out.

**(O)** So you danced in the theatre.

**(L)** In this play I was singing, dancing and acting. I was to present a message using these mediums - I was 17 years old but this was what I was drawn to do.

**(O)** How did your family feel about this?

**(L)** They were happy because they thought I was studying and "had a hobby"! But the first day I put my foot on the stage, I knew no matter what, I wanted to perform in the theatre. That is why I never dance anywhere else. But in the beginning, my parents couldn't understand my choice because to them, people from universities don't choose to become oriental dancers.

**(O)** How did you evolve?

# Dancer to Dancer with Seila Haddad Continued



(L) I developed a solo without frontiers. I attended a festival to dance, I thought to myself I should prepare a little story - a solo. I had no idea that the program was full of classically trained dancers. The director asked me if I was Grahamian - (trained by Martha Graham). "No", I answered that I danced Oriental. He backed up immediately with his hands splayed out in front of him and emphatically said, "No - not here"!

(O) You were dismayed?

(L) I said in my head - if I teach my dance, I teach 10 students then

they can educate 10 others each to the beauty of this dance.

I had trouble finding a school in which to teach because I wanted the best available. Finally, I found an American in Paris, a top dancer call Sarah Petronia. I told her "Look, I have never taught dance but I learned from my mother and aunts and I am extremely passionate about it. I want to teach."

"Why not", she said. That is what I love about Americans - they give you a chance. If you are not good - then you are out ... but I bless her every day for my chance.

(O) So you began.

(L) And I didn't know how to teach! I was a student of my students for two years. I taught five Algerian sisters - If they didn't come - I had nobody. Whenever they came, I was ready to teach.

My true desire was to dance on stage, but nobody wanted me, so I wanted to teach until I could achieve my desire.

(O) How did you make this happen?

(L) There is a very famous festival - Festival de Lille, France - during November and December. And I heard they were presenting something on Gustav Mahler. So I approached the director who was bringing in famous artists from all over the world. It really took guts. I offered that I could present a solo performance of Salome - and he bought the performance sight unseen! I danced an hour and twenty minutes - and I didn't do the "shampoo dance". HA, HA, HA!

(O) You performed a culturally based dance?

(L) I do understand why the directors of dance events won't think of us as "mainstream". To be on stage you must understand choreography and dramatization - it is a study. If you dance on stage the same way that you dance in clubs - why dance on stage?

(O) Please outline the difference.

(L) It is a large space that you must work with a quality of emotion and expression. You must have an immense range - not just Ha Boom Boom! Try to understand the aim of your performance, it is to be part of the history of the dance - not just to start, but to stay.

(O) What came next for you?

(L) The festival was two months long. I was proud to be the first Arab woman to be presenting my dance in this important festival that still exists today. I was also proud to be furthering the future of this dance in a main-stream venue. "If I have to stay dancing in a ghetto I prefer to stay dancing in my house". I felt other Arab women now had someone to look up to as a hero. Dance critics who go to see well over 300 performers a year were now coming to see me - in this dance. It was very satisfying to me because they knew my quality and you can't cheat their eyes.

(O) Did this change the direction of your dance?

(L) Well, it was wonderful, because artistic directors came around and bought my art and I began to tour.

During this time, I was asked by a national variety show to be a window dressing for a famous singer while he dressed in a roman toga. I should dance around him - I refused! I told him, that a hundred other dancers would pay him for the chance to do it but that I could not. My dance is political and life is important - one mistake and it is over.

(O) When are you inspired by a performance?

(L) Dance is Charisma. One of my inspirations is Isadora Duncan. This "fat little woman" as she was called, screwed them all. She had big charisma.

Presidents should all be dancers and poets because they would carry the light of humanity inside. They would then know that humans just want to bond together and share. Music is a natural balm. The universe, the rivers and trees are singing for all of us.

What really have we invented? Come on - let's be modest. Modest and humble. "I invented this move and that". Come on!

(O) Words to live by.

(L) At this time I was touring all over - America, Tunisia, Lebanon and Europe. I had a student who came to Morocco to take lessons. We went out to a restaurant to eat and by chance we got up to dance. Next thing I know, her web site reports that she has toured all over North Africa. I said nothing. Truly, you are in front of yourself and what you do is more important than what you say.

(O) And along that vein - how do you feel about some of the recent performances and music we are now experiencing under the banner of Middle Eastern Dance?





**(L)** Look - I am not the Ayatollah and the beauty of Middle Eastern Dance is that it belongs to everyone. I enjoy fusion when people understand what they are dancing. However, especially because we already tend to have the reputation as "Hootchy Kootchy" dancers - vulgarity has no place in this dance. In fact for me, if you are vulgar, you are not a dancer.

There are trends in other dance forms to get naked - I am not against that in the appropriate dance and venue, but even there you should have a strong statement to make, something that makes sense to your performance. If you are doing it for the one minute of applause - wrong intention.

As far as sensuality goes, I have seen old women like my Grandmother dance and become beautiful and sensual in an exquisite expression of extreme feminism capable with this dance.

**(O)** What qualities impress you in a performer?

**(L)** Personally, in my solos, I am writing a story. I create it with my musicians - with light and staging. I do have a dance company - the Dance Company of Leila Haddad. Dancers audition. They are not necessarily judged on talent only, but by the light inside of them and the desire to learn. I do have all sizes and ages within my company.

**(O)** This is encouraging to hear in this world of youthful perfection.

**(L)** Great musicians study for 30 years. You must have discipline ... but I choose my dancers in this manner because the light never lies on stage. If a woman is technically good but she is not full in the heart - to be honest, I will turn away. If someone comes to me and says, I can shimmy for 20 minutes - I don't care. You should dance with sensitivity, heart and intelligence.

**(O)** What skills should a dancer absolutely hone?

**(L)** It is important to understand the music. It comes from a country and the country comes from a culture. I teach this. When I travel I have tour assistants who I feel have arrived at the capacity to teach. I rehearse countless hours and read and write endlessly.

**(O)** Dance is truly your way of life.

**(L)** I am truly a baby dancer. One life-time is not enough. I am lucky - I can dance 40 to 60 times a year. I am truly lucky to be sharing this dance all over the world.

**(O)** How did you begin teaching and performing in America?

**(L)** A woman told me that Bert Balladine was teaching in Stuttgart, Germany. Bert said that when he heard that a woman named Haddad was coming to see him - he was expecting an old Lebanese woman. After class, he told me I should teach in America - I couldn't believe there would be students. In 1984, I came to teach in Shukriya's studio. Then, I went to New York, where Morocco opened her home and heart to me, and I taught. Also, I taught in Los Angeles. I was truly impressed by the way Americans embraced my culture.

Then Shukriya asked me back to teach at Rakkasah. This was a woman I respect - and I only work with people I can respect. I

have the strong desire to share the things that are beautiful from my country - I had to fight to do this in France.

**(O)** What impression do you have of American dancers?

**(L)** Quality has nothing to do with nationality. You find superb or low quality dancers wherever you go - stupidity is everywhere too!

**(O)** Who are the dancers you love to watch?

**(L)** I have an extensive video library - a dancer should have a hundred videos and music CD's. I particularly love to watch the movie dancers of the 40's. Tahia Carioca, Naima Akef, Samia Gamal, etc.

**(O)** All Fabulous! ...favorite music?

**(L)** Composer Mohamed Sultan and Mohamed Abdel Wahab (Genius). He was a major composer who died in the 1980's. He created modern, classical Arabic music introducing violins. He also introduced Cha Cha and other influences to Arab music.

**(O)** I love the music of Mohamed Abdel Wahab (composer of Aziza among other).

**(L)** Singer and oud player Farid El Attrache and a very famous Egyptian singer, Abdel Halim Hafez.

Also, music written for Om Kalthoum - not just a singer, she was talented beyond human possibilities - she was a phenomenon! She lived in a time of an incredible gathering of artists of the Arab world. Poets, musicians and singers. Poets wrote songs for her to sing! She had 60 musicians! I have created a story of dance around the life of Om Kalthoum.

**(O)** Your strong advice has become legend among your devotees. "Don't do the hair dance", "Don't look at the Popo" and the most popular "Free the Popos". Please share some deep advice toward the attitude a dancer could possess.

**(L)** Let the dancers work to evolve and see that the dance is deeper than they thought. It is one of the oldest dances of civilization, and not just a fashion. It is a prayer evocation of the elements of nature. It's about the evolution of woman and the sacred architecture of the space we are creating. Ego is not the correct way for this dance - doing

incredible tricks on stage because we want the thunder that lasts for one minute. I desire durability - I touch five people and I am happy!

**(O)** Wow! An awesome lesson.

**(L)** We shouldn't take ourselves seriously, but we should dance and act seriously, so that as a group, we don't miss that historic appointment. I want to be lifted and inspired and to be lifted and inspired you have to be clean inside.

