

The Founding of the Reda Troupe: An Historical Overview

Article by Farida Fahmy

To talk about dance in Egypt in the last fifty years, one must consider the Reda Troupe and the powerful impact it has had on Egypt from artistic, social, and cultural points of view. Note: this article is written in the third person, as an historical reference that may be quoted.



The Reda Troupe began as a family affair. The Reda's and the Fahmy's were brought together through marriage and their joint interest in dance and Egyptian tradition and culture. The marriage of Mahmoud Reda to Nadeeda, Farida Fahmy's sister, and the marriage of Ali Reda, Mahmoud Reda's elder brother, three years later to Farida further strengthened these ties. Mahmoud Reda's ambition to present a new genre of dance, and Farida Fahmy's strong desire to dance, were the catalyst for a successful and fulfilling artistic enterprise. Mahmoud Reda was lead dancer until 1972. He taught the dancers, and choreographed and directed all stage performances. With his ground

breaking choreographies he created a genre of dance that embraced many styles. Farida Fahmy was lead dancer for twenty five years. She was a role model for the recruited dancers, and her grace and elegance instantly captured the hearts of the Egyptians.

The Reda Brothers

Mahmoud Reda was born in 1930 in Cairo, into a large middle-class family. His father was an author and chief librarian of Cairo University who, with his wife, raised a family that was immersed in their cultural heritage and in step with the modernism that was sweeping Egypt at the time. They were a family that pursued athletics and were musically inclined. The environment in which Mahmoud Reda was raised was instrumental in fostering his artistic tendencies; and his physical attributes (being a member of the gymnastic team representing Egypt in 1952 Helsinki Olympics) helped further his abilities as a dancer.

The late Ali Reda was already an experienced man in the world of show business. At the age of 16, he was winning prizes in ballroom dance events and competitions that were popular at the time, excelling in such dances as the swing and jitterbug. He later turned his career towards filmmaking. In the formative years of the Reda Troupe, he functioned as artistic advisor and attended to all administrative and managerial problems. He directed two feature films in the genre of musical comedy for the Reda Troupe. These films are now regarded as corner stones in the history of Egyptian cinema, and are shown on television to this day.

Ali Reda's earlier experience in show business and his strong personality became important factors in regard to the successful development of the Troupe. One key decision that he made was introducing the innovative and extremely appealing music of the late Maestro Ali Ismail to the Reda Troupe. Ali Ismail blended western instruments with traditional Egyptian instruments, and presented traditional music with a new and fresh approach. He was an important asset to the Troupe and soon became a renowned composer in Egypt. His compositions have inspired many generations of Egyptian musicians to follow in his footsteps.

The Fahmy Family

Hassan Fahmy, Farida's father, was a Professor of industrial engineering at Cairo University. He was an uncommonly broad-minded man who, together with his wife, believed in nurturing the artistic tendencies and sporting activities of his daughters. He withstood the raised eyebrows of the academic circles and the outright criticism of Family elders when he allowed his daughter to become a professional dancer. Thus, he played an important role in legitimizing the status of professional dancing at a time when it was deemed a disreputable profession. The moral encouragement of his daughter's dancing legitimized her dancing career in the eyes of the Egyptians and remains, to this day, an extraordinary accomplishment. Undoubtedly, his charismatic personality, his social standing, as well as his tolerant views exerted a profound influence on the public's perception of this endeavor.



The late Nadeeda Fahmy was of delicate health since childhood and had turned to painting for artistic expression. She inspired and encouraged Mahmoud Reda to pursue his artistic ambitions, and designed the costumes for the troupe's earlier shows, which were so innovative that they are still copied by others to this day. After her death, renowned Egyptian artists were commissioned to design costumes for the Reda Troupe. By the mid 1970s, Farida Fahmy began to design costumes for a number of new productions. Khadiga Fahmy, the mother of Farida, supervised the execution of the costumes, later managed the growing costume and prop department, and acted as chaperone to the female dancers.



The co-founders of the Reda Troupe pooled their funds, and with a small budget, presented the first performance in 1959. It was comprised, at the time, of six female dancers, six male dancers, and twelve musicians. In 1961 the troupe was placed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. By the mid 1970s it included one hundred and fifty members including dancers, musicians and costume and stage technicians. The repertoire of the Troupe included more than one hundred and fifty dances that ranged from duets to three act dance dramas with more than thirty dancers on stage at one time. The Reda Troupe gained renown in Egypt and visited more than fifty countries. It presented command performances in Egypt, and performed in prestigious theaters abroad

such as The Royal Albert Hall in London, Carnegie Hall in New York, Congress Hall in Berlin, Olympia Theater in Paris, Stanislavsky Theater in Moscow, Teatro De La Zarzula in Madrid and others. The troupe also won numerous prizes in folk festivals in countries such as Austria, Russia, England, Turkey, and Belgium, amongst others. The principal artists, Farida Fahmy, Mahmoud Reda, Ali Reda and Ali Ismail were decorated by King Hussein of Jordan in 1965, President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1967 for services rendered to the state through art and President Bourguiba of Tunis in 1973.

Government bureaucracy and its effects on the Troupe

The Reda Troupe was the pioneer dance troupe. It set in motion the creation of folkdance groups in the provinces, universities and schools all over Egypt. Sadly, today the Reda Troupe exists in name only. Farida ended her dance career in 1983 and continued her academic studies, receiving her M.A. On the other hand - unbelievably - the government bureaucracy and red tape that had already created many obstacles to thwart further artistic developments put Mahmoud Reda on pension in 1990. The Reda Troupe was subsequently left in the hands of members of the Troupe that possessed no drive, talent or artistic tendencies.

All the teachers and choreographers that have emerged from the Reda Troupe, as well as, other dance groups, have not produced any remarkable innovations to date; their works only continue to perpetuate the Reda style, technique and teaching methods.

The talent and artistic creativity of the principal artists of the Reda Troupe brought forth a theatrical dance heritage that remains a rich source to all teachers and choreographers. Today, Farida Fahmy and Mahmoud Reda remain in the collective memory of the Egyptians. A memory filled with nostalgia, admiration and pride.

Written by Farida Fahmy 2008 (c)



2015 Post Script by Farida Fahmy

I am writing this postscript not with anger but with a heart that is filled with disappointment and sorrow. The glorious years spent in hard and passionate work by Mahmoud Reda and his co-founders pioneering the first and most popular theater dance group in Egypt and the Arab World have now disappeared.

Those were the years when the Reda troupe enjoyed a innovative and prosperous time, filled with creativity and artistic virtue. The troupe's fame and popularity grew as the number of well-trained and talented dancers and musicians increased during the mid 60's and 70's. Dance presentations became more sophisticated as the number of dancers increased in both size and performance quality, leading to their renowned status worldwide. Performances in Egypt would showcase up to 120 artists, including a full-fledged orchestra. When traveling on multiple cultural exchanges, touring the world, the size of the troupe would reach 50-60 talented members. Even when dancers left the group, others entered and fell into the established system to enable the continuum of professionalism.

During my 25 years as the troupe's principal dancer, from 1959 to 1983, the Reda troupe and I enjoyed our greatest success and continuous innovation. In 1990 when government bureaucracy retired the reluctant Mahmoud Reda to a pension, the remaining troupe initially carried on with the momentum that preceded them. Over time, those in charge became less and less capable of running what was once a well established theatre dance group. This heralded the deterioration of the Reda troupe.

Originally, each element of the co-founder's forte and how it was integrated was revolutionary for the times, and ushered in a new professional theatre genre. However, since 1990 the Reda Troupe has been left mostly in the hands of incompetent, undiscerning supervisors, with no sense of creativity or artistic discipline or integrity. They also lacked the original troupe's managerial skills. The new supervisors could not proficiently manage a theatre or dance group, and as the years passed everyone in charge became more departed from Mahmoud and the co-founder's competency of theatre troupe management and structure.

During my years, when I started to teach abroad, I found that many unidentified young men claimed that they were from the Reda troupe. Associating their credibility with the name of the Reda troupe somehow became a way of legitimizing their status (outside of Egypt), as either a musician or dancer.

Today, a grey area exists between the Original Reda troupe and other performing troupes. Whether it is the legitimate government Reda troupe or not, performances have become an embarrassment to me, and this has been noticed by foreign dance aficionados, as well as our own nostalgic Egyptian public.

Sincere artists who have created a new legacy become disheartened when they see their life's work dwindle and deteriorate rather than flourish and grow. Sadly, the art of Egyptian theatre dance has declined. I have to face the reality that an era has ended.

Farida Fahmy, Cairo, 2015