The Reda Muwashahat

By Farida Fahmy

In 1979 Ali Reda was invited to spend a musical evening in the home of Hammada Madkour, a gentleman who was a non professional ' Ud player but, never the less one of the best in Egypt. There, he heard for the first time the talented Fouad Abdel Magid another non professional composer who wrote the lyrics, composed and sang Muwashahat simply for the love and joy of it. (There were many delightful evenings, filled with music and song held in the years that followed in our little house). Ali Reda was so impressed and quickly decided to collaborate with Fouad Abdel Magid to mount a production in which the Reda Troupe would perform to his music.

The Music of Foad Abdel Magid

Fouad Abdel Magid adhered to the form and structure and the lyrical style of the Andalusian tradition. His lyrics, while in classical Arabic were simple elegant and expressive. His music was alluring and the rhythms he used were less complex than the contemporary classical Muwashahat tradition of the Maghreb and the Levant. His repertoire included a large number of varied musical pieces. After choosing eight muwashahat, Ali Reda commissioned Abdel Haleem Nouira, a renowned and accomplished composer and conductor, to arrange the pieces for a full orchestra. In his orchestration, Nouira blended both Western and Egyptian instruments, rendering a modern and elegant version that retained the essence and inherent characteristics of the Abdel Magdid pieces. During the process of the musical arrangement both Mahmoud Reda and myself were given working tapes of the music to listen to and which certainly was inspirational and a motivational.

Mahmoud Reda's Choreography

Unlike the musical composer and arranger, Mahmoud Reda had no point of reference from which to choreograph. While it has been documented that there were many female poets, musicians and dancers absolutely no reference is available as how they danced. It was the first time that the Muwashshah was ever presented as a dance spectacle. In these dances he was not restricted to any specific temporal reference or dance tradition. This gave him a wider range of movement and choreographic possibilities. In his choreographies, Mahmoud Reda relied on his artistic imagination and how the music inspired him, as well as his expertise and rich repertoire of movement vocabulary that he had accumulated for many years. The musical form of this genre with its varied rhythmic patterns and strophic quality of the accompanying lyrics influenced his choice of movement combinations and spatial designs. It gave him a new basis from which to express himself as a choreographer.

He visualzed how the dancers would best express the music they danced to. In all his works, Mahmoud Reda, as an artist and a prime mover in Egyptian dance, always adhered to the aesthetics, temperament and cultural norms of the people of the Middle East and Egyptians in particular. He, yet again, invented a new genre of dance that encompassed tasteful, elegance and flowing movements that were a new and innovative addition to his large repertoire of genres and styles.

Designing Costumes for the Muwashshahat

The costume designs for these dances were innovative, in that their cut and designs were never seen before. I had a vague inkling of how the costumes should look. The Muwashahat is a timeless musical heritage, Thus, not conforming to a certain era or specific region, allowed for a greater freedom in the designing process. Listening to the music while sketching was very inspiring. Another important factor was that the dance rehearsals were taking place concurrently with the designing process. Practicing the movements and steps while the choreographs were evolving, helped me to envision what design would best suit the mood of each muwashah. The cut and outline of each design further enhanced the movements. The designs included sarawil singular sirwal (voluminous trousers), waistcoats, 'abayat singular 'abayah (floor length flowing robes) and various head pieces and hip bands. Colors were either in contrast or set in harmonious shades. Pastel colors were chosen in some designs and vivid colors in others, depending on the mood the music and dance evoked. An eye on the total balance was always important.

The combination of music costumes and choreography brought about yet a new and fresh presentation. Its broadcast on Egyptian television was met with great success by the public in Egypt and the Arab World and was repeatedly broadcasted for many years. Some of the dance pieces were later presented on stage and became part of the ever-growing repertoire.

References

al-Faruqi, Lois Ibsen 1983 "The Andalusian Tradition" in The Genius of Arab Civilization: Sources of the Renaissance. (Cambridge, MA:MIT press)

Racy, Ali Jihad 1983 "Music," in The Genious of Arab Civilization: Sources of the Renaissance. (Cambridge, MA: MIT press) Al-Helou, Selim 1965 " Al -Muwashahat Al-Andaluussia:Origin&Evoltion (Librarie Al-hayat Beyrouth)