

A Party in Luxor

by Habiba (Barbara Siegel)

I went to Egypt with only a few names in my pocket, but nonetheless with great expectations. The contacts I had were people at the Ministry of Culture. Through their warm-hearted cooperation, I was privileged to meet some of the most prominent folklore scholars in the country. But, what do you do when you want to find a way to step from the rank of scholar and tourist, into the role of participant rather than observer? The answer is well known to every New Yorker: just ask a cab driver!

I was in Luxor because I wanted to experience firsthand the continuity of life since ancient times. I'd read a lot about the people in the South and how their daily life takes them into constant contact with antiquities. I'd seen the men off to work, hoes on their shoulders at 5:30 a.m. I'd seen them grazing their goats in the temple of Luxor, and seen the primitive beauty of the *Haj* paintings that proudly and colorfully adorn their homes. I'd read about the damaging effects on traditional life that the stopping of the Nile flood has had, and saw the tracks of the small gauge railroad on which they now had to fight for space in order to harvest their sugar cane. The psychological pressures have been terrible, and have created a modern phenomenon among the populace, namely, stress. The amazing continuity of life and the grace of these people was still apparent, regardless of such changes.

What have music and dance to do with all this? People need them more than ever as solace, as a way of life vanishes, for as the traditional means of survival are being altered, its only link to the deep rooted history is in these concentrated celebrations of life. These problems, as one can surmise, parallel those to be found in the lives of professional dancers. Meeting other performers and having a sense of their lives and seeing them as a part of their world has always been important to me.

With all of these thoughts and a full day at the Valley of the Kings behind me, I said to my exhausted Egyptologist friend, Robin Dougherty, "It would be a shame to be in Luxor and not drop in on the *Ghawazee*." Why don't we just ask the cab driver if he knows them?" Ever since Aisha Ali's articles about Egypt and her experiences among these people I'd always envisioned my own meeting with the *Benat Maazin*. I had no idea what members of the family were still performing or how many there were. Our cab driver, Hejjaj, had the air of a real "operator" about him. When asked, he replied, "Oh, yes, I'll take you there now if you like," and we could hardly believe our ears. I replied that we were tired now, but I hired him for the



Photo by Habiba

Sanaa sans maquillage models the fringe beledi dress in her home.

next day and told him to pick us up at 10 A.M. He promised to stop off on his way home to tell them we would be there the next morning.

After a poor night's sleep, in anticipation of having a dream fulfilled, I was delighted to leave our luxury hotel. As the cab turned off the broad Corniche and into the traditional quarter, the sight of the narrow dirt streets, tiny houses and poor people produced in me a feeling of comfortable familiarity, and made me all the more aware of why I had come to Luxor.

We stopped when we came to a garage. When we entered, we saw two old men sitting on a pair of old couches near the entrance. They greeted us, and invited us to sit down. At the back of the garage were sheep, goats and a donkey. What a wonderful modular use of space — sitting room and barn. One of the men was identified as the father of the *Benat Maazin* and he proceeded to complain about the price of farmland. It was as if he tried to justify the presence of the animals.

By the animated conversation between our cab driver Hejjaj and the head of the household, I found comfort in knowing that these two gentlemen did indeed know each other very well. When their conversation ended, the father asked if we were there to give his daughters work. I said we just wanted to talk to them. At that point, this was true. I had no plan but to meet them and see if they would show me a few of their steps and some of their costumes. He explained to us that the girls were sleeping because they had been up 'till 3:00 AM performing at a wedding. The youngest sister, Sanaa, came out to tell us to come into the house across the narrow street. The house was tiny and bare. We were led down a long hall to a small parlor containing the ubiquitous flowered chintz sofa. Then, one by one, two sleepy, and I may add "grumpy" *Ghawazee* came downstairs. They introduced themselves as Samia and Fayza Maazin. There began a halting conversation in which the subject changed rapidly. We exchanged views about being professional dancers, and their immediate candor surprised me. They said no one respected artists, especially the hotels which consistently underpaid them. They also complained that the previous night some man had dropped dead in the middle of the wedding at which they were performing, and put a damper on things. (Meaning, of course, that the tips were not that good.) I was curious about the family history and whether the girls had a sense of themselves as part of a legendary line of women. They said that their father knew about such things. All they know was that they started their dance training at seven years of age and that their father was their teacher. Apparently concerned about imitators Samia said, "accept no imitations." By way of introduction I showed them my portfolio of dance photos, credits and articles. We exchanged photographs. There was a photo of Samia and Fayza in an ad for a cassette that they had made.

I wanted to bring the subject around to costumes, and they brought one down. It was



Authoress Barbara Siegel (Habiba) being outfitted in a Ghawazee costume.

a lovely *beledi* dress, with beads and paillettes. When asked if I would like to buy it, I said that I was more interested in their own style of costume. Samia was quick to point out that their family had invented this style. I did notice a high degree of family pride when the girls spoke. Sanaa modeled the dress and it indeed looked beautiful on her. They explained that for the most part, when they dance at hotels they wear dresses, and when they dance at a *haffla* locally they wear their own style of costume. The subject often switched very rapidly which made it difficult to keep up with them, especially since Robin had to translate most of it. (My one year of intensive Arabic had concentrated on reading and writing, not colloquial Egyptian.) When the conversation did proceed, I found it interesting that they dance to a *mizmar* orchestra when wearing the dress and to a *rebab* orchestra when they are in their own style of costume. We had some tea and sud-

denly we were invited upstairs. (All of us, that is, except Hejjaj, who had taken an animated part in our conversations so far.)

Upstairs we had a virtual *Ghawazee* pajama party — they opened their closets, and we had a grand time pulling out costumes and admiring them. My impression of their room was that it was a real “teenager’s” room, all white and gold, with wigs, costumes and dolls strewn about. They started dressing me in a costume, and I was surprised to see the tie-on bustle that goes underneath the *Ghawazee* skirt and accentuates the buttocks and hips. The thing that struck me as most touching was their charming use of quite ordinary junk jewelry from the ‘50’s in their crowns. It was resourceful and quite imaginative. The costume they dressed me in was almost new, but it had something of the matador’s suit of tights about it. I found another in turquoise that I wanted to buy and we agreed on a price.

An idea had been turning around in my head from the beginning. During tea I’d asked if the girls were performing anywhere soon. The following week was their next booking, sadly too late for me. I thought that it wouldn’t be right to come all this way and not see a performance. I’d asked how much they got for a performance. The price was reasonable, in my estimation, so, I decided that I would have my own *haffla* with the *Benat Maazin*. The costume party complete, we got into a planning session with Hejjaj about the performance. It had to be that night; we needed a place to have it and also a permit to hold it.

Actually, our first job was to see if the musicians were free. Their band turned out to be the musicians that gathered in front of our hotel, paid by the management to provide “local color.” It was a sad sight to see them strike up as every tour bus and airline van arrived with new guests. No one gave them a second look, except us. At first I thought they were waiting for a performance — it was inconceivable that these men, some of whom were actually selected by Magda Saleh to be in the “Festival of the Nile,” spent their days in front of this hotel. It seemed even more of a shame when I discovered the rather charming tradition of “Sunset on the Nile.” Every evening would find people gathering at a small amphitheater overlooking the famed river, and watch the sunset while a loudspeaker played such classics as Handel’s “Water Music.” It was extremely nice, but I couldn’t help thinking that here loudspeakers were playing western classical music when the greatest living *Saidi* musicians were hanging around, idle, at the front of the hotel.

This line of thought made me doubly glad to have the opportunity to hire these men. Luckily they were free that night. My first idea was to ask our hotel if we could have the performance in one of the tents they use for barbecues. I naively thought that if I invited everyone in the hotel to attend free that the hotel would benefit from it anyway. It would be more fun if more people were there than just two. I was quite surprised when the man behind the desk received a “no” from the inner office. The desk person made the excuse of too many arrivals. It didn’t make sense, but I finally understood the real reason when I saw a poster for a typical tourist barbecue and folklore show the next evening. That event cost 20 Egyptian pounds per person, and ours was a free invitation to anyone and everyone. Left without a place for our party, we were taken by Hejjaj to another hotel, the small Arab-owned Mena Palace. We sat down with the staff and had sodas while we waited for the *mudir* (director). This seemed a little more

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like it. I was apprehensive that my venture was getting too expensive, as I thought, obviously, they weren't just going to let me have my party there without compensation. By now everyone was intrigued with my project and got caught up in the excitement. When the *mudir* arrived he found a very enthusiastic group of people and he ended up being amenable to the idea. He discussed the arrangement of the room. The price for the room was quite reasonable by my standards. I still felt the need to increase the guest/performer ratio even though the real purpose of this was to learn their dance style. In a way, it was like a fantasy of being a 19th century patroness who hires people for a private performance in her salon. We made signs and put them up at both hotels, inviting people to a free performance of the *Benat Maazin*. I experienced some pressure from Hejjaj to the effect that if I did not purchase a certain amount of brandy and beer for the band they would not play. I drew the line at this because I felt that they should understand that my purpose was not solely to have a party and that I was only one person paying for this extravaganza. The musicians would have to buy their own drinks and that was that. To test out the waters, I insisted on immediately driving back to the musicians and asking them. This was Hejjaj's undoing because the musicians were quite understanding about the fact that this "hostess-with-the-mostes" routine was not completely covered in my travel budget and that I was doing the best I could. And, as for honoring these fine performers — that was the reason I was there. (I suspected that Hejjaj also had a concession of brandy and beer, or at least was related to someone who did.)

With everything under control, we returned to our hotel. We immediately tried to locate the only people we knew, Annette and



Samia and Fayza performing at "A Party in Luxor" hosted by the author.



Fayza in performance playing sagat (finger cymbals); the rebab orchestra is seen in the background.

Betty, two wonderful ladies from Massachusetts that we'd met the day before. They were intrigued and agreed to come. At 8:30 our faithful Hejjaj picked us up. At the hotel, the staff and the *mudir* waited at the curb and shook our hands. We were shown the room; it had been decorated with gold, red and green foil, not unlike Christmas decorations. We were then escorted to the terrace and given a soda. The *mudir* was excited that people from our hotel had come. I didn't see any tourist types, so I was very confused. At 9:00 we went into the room to find the musicians already warming up. The room was arranged in oval fashion except for a separate section at the far end that was arranged in rows. There was a head table set up and a place for the band and dancers. It looked like it was going to be Betty, Annette, Robin and me despite what the director said about other people coming, when all of a sudden in filed the entire desk staff from our hotel. They were joined by other men, probably from the hotel staff of the Mena Palace. Then, little by little, the women attached to these men came with their babies to fill the separate section that turned out to be the harem. It was obvious that the *mudir* meant the staffs of these hotels, and not the guests. So, here I was hostess to Luxor — the only people who came to my party were Egyptians, who presumably knew a good performance when they heard about it. What amazed me was that the very same men that told me I couldn't have my party at the other hotel attended with great enthusiasm. While waiting for the stars of the evening, the band demonstrated to us how to play the *rebab*. Soon, Fayza and Samia made a dramatic entrance. They were almost completely unrec-

ognizable as the girls I saw that morning. These somewhat arrogant and self-assured creatures made everyone gasp as they swept into the room. Immediately the excitement level rose. Their persona was totally different and was probably learned as a family tradition. That morning they had the air of sulky children and that evening were arrogant, wordly, temperamental, unpredictable, and utterly devastating. They began their performance and it appeared familiar to me from having read Lane's "Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians," from many articles, and I may also add from seeing Aisha Ali's demonstrations. The dance form is relatively simple and repetitive, relying on interesting formations of the two or three dancers together and also the charm of the individual dancer. Every once in a while one of them would perform a head slide to the side while giving an outrageously flirty look to some man. Singing is a big part of the performance also — a high pitched girlish voice is the ideal. There is not a whole lot of energy in this kind of performance. The side-to-side hip shimmy step is performed with the dancers parallel, facing, back-to-back, with opposite hips into center and combined with a shoulder shimmy and rocking motion. Novelties include: having a *rebab* played on their chest, the other dancer sandwiching the musician from the back, a short cane dance, and having the *rebab* played above their heads.

As it turned out all these people had come not only to see the *Benat Maazin* perform, but me as well. (They even expected a costume!) I explained that I was there to honor the *Benat Maazin* and learn, not make myself the center of my own party. Besides, I

had not brought a costume to the south. With their persistence, I finally attempted an oriental show to *Saidi* music and a hip scarf was found for me. The people were appreciative. I also got up with Samia and Fayza and did their dance with them.

At a certain point in the evening, in order to stimulate tipping, Samia and Fayza threatened to leave. This resulted in a wonderful *dawshah* (argument) between Hejjaj, the girls, and the band leader. When the tipping began in earnest, they were much happier and they settled down to flirting happily with the audience and repeating the tipping rhymes with the band leader. When a tip is given there is a certain formula that is used to announce the tip and thank the donor. The dancer and the band leader say one word at a time, the one repeating it right after the other such as: dancer: "Mohammed," band leader: "Mohammed," dancer: "Sharifetna," band leader: "Sharifetna" (or in English, "Mohammed," "Mohammed," "has honored us," "has honored us"). At the end of the evening they said, "America has honored us, Barbara, Barbara!" Everyone cheered. And so my party came to an end. Absolutely everyone wanted to know if I was satisfied and the girls wanted to know if I still wanted to buy the costume. I did and the girls had an argument over who was to relinquish her crown. Samia lost, and after being reminded by Hejjaj to kiss us goodbye, they turned to go, but not before Samia turned back to me and said, "You have taken my crown" . . . and then they were gone . . . □



Fayza dancing while the rebab is being played over her chest.