

Don't call it bellydancing



How did a wasp on a woman's naked body inspired Lebanon's finest choreographer? Ismene Brown went to Beirut to find out

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A STONE'S throw from the astounding Roman temples of Baalbek, Lebanon, we sit in the shade-dappled garden of a villa, drinking mint tea. Six very old men with very large moustaches study me gravely from under their white head cloths, and brush dust from their blue galabiyehs as they get up to dance. They link arms, and start a lurching step and a seasick sway that imitates the camel's gait but with a sudden little hiccup in the middle. The man on the end, however, 40 years younger, can't time the hiccup right.

"The donkey, the donkey!" My host, the director of the Arab world's only contemporary dance company, Abdel-Halim Caracalla, is almost beside himself with pleasure as he points at the embarrassed man stuck in the position known as "riding the donkey".

"He needs five more years to learn! My dancers could *never* do this, they don't understand the rhythms in their bodies. When they say to me, 'Folklore is less good', I say, 'shut up!' because they are outsiders and they could never do this. You have to be Baalbekese."

It is great fun to be in a country so unlike Europe, where dancing is what a man routinely does to assert his virility and authority. This is what these old dancers have been doing for 60-odd years, at weddings, house-buildings and harvests, ever since as youths they were permitted to ride the donkey. They are now veterans teaching younger ones, who aspire to win their way to the top end, where they can show off in swirling jumps and tricky footwork, and attract a girl.

Beirut may be the great city, the old men say disdainfully, but there the men dance like women. Actually, they amplify, there the woman rides the man; but here in Baalbek the man rides the woman.

For Caracalla, this display of his roots is "my inspiration". He is a man of infectious

enthusiasm, who has travelled from Morocco to Iran to gather thousands of recordings of songs and notes of dances from the myriad Arab traditions. He has annotated 124 Sufic methods alone, the most private of all. His archive is a subject of its own, and makes the fascinating underside to one of the oddest dance stories of our time. It is impossible not to be moved by what he has done in his country.

He is a one-man band for dance old and new, a unique archivist but also the pioneer of a unique London-Arabian contemporary dance fusion through his Caracalla Dance Theatre. From 1975 to 1992 Lebanon was a byword for civil war, yet throughout it Caracalla's dance company crossed every demarcation line to entertain every faction of the bombarded public. When the great Baalbek international arts festival reopened after the war, the by-now-legendary Caracalla company were naturally asked to do the honours alongside the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

THIS back-story alone makes one curious. So does his style, an unlikely-sounding mixture of the modern technique of Martha Graham, his folkloric roots and the colourful ebullience of Arabian court culture.

He learned Graham's sinuous style at the London Contemporary Dance School in 1965, making up for his late start at 25 with his unquenchable sense of inquiry. "I was the champion pole-vaulter of the Arab world, when I saw in the Bejart company a man doing a double tour en l'air. I asked myself, how does a man go up into the air, turn twice and come down perfectly? I tried it, I couldn't do it. I asked other sportsmen and they couldn't do it. So I realised dance was another education."

In London next week the Caracalla Dance Theatre will perform *2001 Nights*, a telling of the Arabian Nights story familiar to us via the exotic Russian ballet of Fokine and Rimsky-Korsakov, *Shéhérazade*. "It's lovely but it lacks imagination and it's not really oriental," is Caracalla's verdict. "My company have the genes."

Magnificent costumes are his trademark, designed by him after journeying to bazaars from Aleppo to Tehran, and this production fields 65 dancers in constantly changing outfits. In its Beirut theatre *2001 Nights* has monumental scenery, ornamental walls, vast portals, and a vast wall-painting of a princess batting her eyelids while birds and handmaidens undulate. At London's Peacock Theatre, these aids to fantasising will be absent - too big to fit in - and so a lot will rest on the glimmering fabrics, the deep velvets and glistening gold, to usher us into King Shahriyar's realm.

There is undulating aplenty. "Martha Graham, she took the hips, the ribs, the head, of the middle-east. And then we add more hips, more ribs, more hands," as Caracalla accurately describes it.

But do not expect "belly-dancing", which is considered a coarse cabaret abomination on a par with lap-dancing.

"It's very rare than a woman can't dance in the orient," Caracalla says (something I see for myself in Beirut's nightclubs, even when it's Shaggy on the turntable). "Dancing is a great expression of her body and sensuality, and I take this into the theatre, using accents from Martha, who is my god and a miracle for the world."

Graham gravely called her style "the house of pelvic truth", but even so my eyes pop slightly at Caracalla's explanation of how the serpentine movement of Arabian women came about. "It started in the pharaohs' time - they called it the *danse de la guêpe*, the dance of the wasp. They put soft clothes on the woman's nude body and they put a wasp inside. And if she didn't allow the wasp to settle on her body [he wriggles], she won a prize from the pharaoh." One can imagine.

A few wasps inside tights may be what modern Lebanon needs. A choreographer's

best resource is not so much his friends (even if they do include Franco Zeffirelli, José Cura, the tenor, and all the Arab presidents) but the quality of his dancers. The lack of professional training causes Caracalla constant frustration - "when I call an audition I can get 1,000 candidates but only two will be worth trying to train," he says.

WHY this should be is explained by his daughter, Alissar, his co-choreographer and star of *2001 Nights*. At 28 she has grown up almost entirely in London - during the war - or Los Angeles, and is acutely aware of the differences of expectations in her homeland.

"Unfortunately, people here think that if you do a year of training you will be a dancer," she says. "In our culture we don't have the discipline that you find outside. This is a small society and things are easily obtained - she knows him and he knows her. People socialise all the time and won't get up in the morning to do class."

The other constraint is that apart from Caracalla there is no dance to see in Beirut and open eyes. The Baalbek festival has hosted Fonteyn and Nureyev, Paris Opera Ballet and Merce Cunningham over the years - last year it was Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* - but it is two hours' drive away and top-dollar.

Dubai, a good friend to Caracalla, occasionally attracts visiting companies, but the Arab public is inexperienced and considers *2001 Nights* very modern. It is a sexier subject than normal, and Caracalla's use of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Shéhérazade* and Ravel's *Bolero* has disconcerted them, even though the pieces have been delightfully orientalisised by Iranian musicians.

To step from East to West is the hardest of acts to pull off, but the old dancers of Baalbek are all for it, they tell me. "They are very proud of me," Caracalla translates happily, "because what I use in my songs and steps they recognise. And they are very proud that from their culture has come an institution like this."

2001 Nights is at the Peacock Theatre, London WC2 (020 7863 8222), from Wed (Feb 12)-next Sat