

INTERVIEW

CALLED TO DANCE

A Conversation with Dany Bustros

by Laurie King-Irani and Ghena Ismail

“No art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgment, and mystical interpretation than the art of dancing”

—Suzanne Langer,
American Philosopher (1)

The art of dance is ephemeral, ambiguous and magical. Unlike poetry, which can be recorded and recited again and again, or painting, which is an enduring visual image of an act of creative imagination, the dance exists only in the here and now, shifting, changing, inspiring and dissolving before our very eyes. Although we can preserve dance performances through elaborate notation systems, such as Labanotation, or film them for later study or enjoyment, the resulting captured version of the dance is an impoverished facsimile of the actual experience. In watching a dance performance, we are engaged and responsive. Our attention, applause and reactions influence the dancers, who give back to the audience according to what they receive. The magic of dance can only be experienced at the moment of its realization.

Because the medium of dance is the human body, dance’s status and value depends to a great extent on cultural conceptions and attitudes concerning the body and physicality from one society to another. In cultures which assign negative characteristics to the physical world in general and the human body in particular, the dance can generate intense controversies and passionate reactions. Since dancing bodies may invoke sensual images associated, however tenuously, with sexuality, many societies have developed dance traditions and genres which may only be performed and viewed by members of the same gender (2). Unfortunately for true artists of dance, unsavory connotations and images have become associated with dancing and dancers in many societies. Just forty years ago in the United States, a young woman hoping to pursue a career in ballet or modern dance would probably have been dissuaded by her parents out of a concern for her reputation. In contemporary Lebanon, such negative attitudes towards dance still hold sway. Performing dances in public, especially classical oriental dancing (misnamed “belly-dancing” in the West), is

not considered an appropriate activity for respectable young ladies. Any young woman enchanted by this art form and inspired to perform it will face significant obstacles in Lebanese society.

No one is more familiar with these attitudes and obstacles than Dany Bustros, the premier artist of oriental dance in Lebanon. Her personal journey in dance and life have been as compelling and dramatic as any dance she has performed on stage. Born to the highly respected Greek Orthodox de Bustros family, Bustros realized early on that she had an overwhelming desire to dance. “Even when I was just a small child, I knew instinctively that I would be a dancer. I studied ballet, modern, jazz, tap and ballroom dancing, but it was always oriental dancing that I loved the best. I didn’t study this style of dancing formally, though; I didn’t have to. It was already in my blood. I just absorbed various styles, and from them, I developed my own style. In addition to dancing, I also studied music, painting and sculpture, and showed some talent in those arts, too, but dancing was always my real art.” Bustros also enjoys performing flamenco dance and tango. She has also acted professionally on the stage in Lebanon in Arabic and French language theatrical productions of *Carmen* and *play by Moliere*.

Bustros acknowledged that the characters she most enjoys playing on the stage share a basic trait with the dance styles she loves best: passion. “All my dancing is very passionate, because that is a part of my own character. Although the person I become on the stage, as a dancer or as an actress, is a very different persona from myself, the basic message I am trying to impart is the passion and suffering of a woman, her need to express all of the feelings that are inside of her.” Bustros is equally passionate about her need to dance: “When I am dancing, I am giving a lot of myself from within. I don’t just give the audience a display of dance steps—steps are just steps, all over the world—I give the audience my emotions. It’s more than just entertainment. I am showing them every facet and dimension of my soul through the medium of dance; I play many characters in the course of one performance. For me, feelings are the most important element in the dance. Through subtle gestures, I try to communicate complex sentiments that tell a story about a character or an event. So, as I see it, dance is really a form of theater. When I am dancing on stage, I am not Dany



Dany Bustros in performance

Bustros; I am a character who is feeling joy, anxiety, love, fear, anger or sorrow.”

Commenting on the special chemistry between dancer and audience during performances, Bustros said that one of the greatest joys she experiences as a performer comes when she has totally captivated her audience. “A good performance for me is characterized by the reaction of the audience, more than by my own appraisal of my technique. When I dance, the audience is completely astonished and quiet; they are entirely with me and under my control. There is a sense of having power over the audience, which every good per-

former knows. When I am on stage, I experience a sense of strength, power and control that I rarely feel in my everyday life. Conversely, when the performance isn’t going well, for whatever reason, the dancer knows it; she can feel that the audience is not with her, that she doesn’t have them in her hands.” Bustros distinguished between the experience of performing oriental dance before a small, immediate audience in an intimate setting, such as a night club, and playing a role in a play on a stage in a large theater. “It is an entirely different experience, from my point of view. In a night club there is a lot more pressure on the dancer because the audience is so close and immediate. There is just you, the audience and your movements. If all goes well, it is a great feeling, but if anything goes wrong, there is no escape! On the stage, on the other hand, there is distance between the performer and the public, and the lighting makes it hard to see the faces of the audience; I know they are there and responding through hearing, not through sight. Also, in a theatrical performance, all the pressure and responsibility is distributed among various people; there is a set structure in which I play my part; rarely is there a chance to improvise and take risks.

I am less afraid when performing in a play on the stage, since I am not the only person who bears responsibility for the success of the performance, but I sometimes miss the intimacy and challenge of dancing in the nightclub setting. I have decided not to perform at all in nightclubs any more, however, because the business aspects have become deplorable and too difficult to deal with. My current show is a good compromise: it is a theatrical stage production that involves a variety of styles and genres of dancing.”

Discussing the preparations required for a good performance, Bustros emphasized that she feels it is more important to prepare herself emotionally and spiritually than physically. “Before I go on to dance, I am always very nervous; no matter how many times I perform, or how successfully, I must always conquer my fear before going on stage. I usually lay down and have a few quiet moments to concentrate and pray before performing. I listen to the sounds of the audience, of the orchestra warming up, and then the strains of the national anthem. Then, I pray, ‘Jesus, stay with me!’ I am afraid each time I go on stage not of failure, or of doing the wrong step, but because I feel I have such a responsibility to the audience.”

When asked why many people do not take oriental dance seriously as a form of art, Bustros related that she is always angered and saddened whenever she confronts negative attitudes towards oriental dancing in Lebanese society. There is no question in her mind that

File File File File File

oriental dance is a fine art requiring serious study, technical refinement, and great sensitivity to music and emotion. As for those who view oriental dancing as something vulgar or crass, she emphatically responds: "That is wrong! Maybe people who feel this way about oriental dance have never yet seen a real dancer performing this art form in the proper manner. There are many so-called "artists" dancing today who take the easy way; they learn a few simple steps, buy an alluring costume, and market themselves as "oriental dancers," but they do not know anything. They do not realize how very difficult it is to express a wide variety of sentiments. They don't know the proper way to turn or what to do with their hands, faces, or eyes. All they know how to do is to move their hips and chests in a vulgar way. They can in no way be compared to great dancers like Nadia Gamal or Samia Gamal. These dancers aroused more than physical desires in their audiences; they inspired an admiration for a refined form of femininity, a graceful, restrained sensuality and a sense of joy. Too many of the supposed dancers performing today appeal to the basest instincts of their audiences, who are mostly men. Most of my fans are women. I don't dance for men. Men might admire my dancing, the way they would admire a girl with a nice figure wearing a bathing suit, but that is not what oriental dance is all about. When I am dancing, I want people to see and admire my dance, not my body. Most men go to see oriental dance just to see the way a woman moves her hips. It is a vulgar approach to the art. People who approach oriental dance this way, whether as performers or viewers, do the art a disservice; they don't realize that most of the artistry of oriental dance is in the hands, the arms, and especially the eyes. Feelings are the important thing; body movements are not done for the sake of titillation, but for the purpose of conveying the meanings of the feelings behind the dance. Dancing is not a matter of good physical conditioning and sex appeal as much as it is a matter of being honest about the nature and depth of your feelings, about being willing to experience depths of emotion, and then, in the context of the performance, being able to reconstruct and express these emotions in an artful and compelling way."

Bustros reiterated her philosophy of oriental dance as she recounted the various influences that have shaped her as a performer. "Nadia Gamal had the greatest impact on me. Her technique was excellent and she was a true professional. She continued dancing beautifully until she was in her mid-50s; in fact, her dancing was even deeper and more moving, her eyes more expressive, at 53 than at 23, because she was dancing her life experiences." Bustros, too, dances her own life experiences. Although the lovely, talented and intelligent daughter of a privileged and noble family, life has

not always been easy or pleasant for Bustros. She has been through divorce, rejection of her profession by members of her family, and worst of all, the loss of her son, an only child, who died in a freak drowning accident several years ago at the age of sixteen. Bustros acknowledges that all of these difficult experiences have had an impact on her art. "The way I have lived my life, the events I have suffered through, have of course influenced my dancing. A journalist once told me that when I dance, I have a special 'aura' about me that communicates a sense of sorrow and misery. He said that because of this, my dancing comes across as something deep and profound. I think that if an artist has suffered, it will come across in his or her art. If one goes through an ordeal, he or she has to become more aware of his or her internal reality, and thus, he or she can empathize with others who have suffered. For me, the loss of my son was a real blow. It was such a big shock that it took me a long time to absorb it. After it happened, I couldn't grasp the enormity of the loss, the fact that he was really gone. Then the shock really hit. I stayed along for several months. I took a lot of tranquilizers and stopped dancing. I didn't want to see anybody, and I couldn't bear to see children. Later on, I traveled a lot; I think I was trying to run away from the reality of what had happened. When I returned to Lebanon, a friend, a French film director who was visiting the country, heard about my whole story. He made a special effort to come to see me, and asked me, 'why are you destroying yourself? Do you think you can escape? Go, dance, and begin your career again. Dance through your feelings.' It was good advice. I feel that I am dancing now for my son, George. Once, when I was in the depths of my depression and taking tranquilizers, I fell asleep with a lighted cigarette. It was a couple of months after George had died, but I suddenly had the strongest sensation that he was waking me up. I heard him say 'Be careful with that cigarette, Mom!', and I immediately woke up and said 'Thank you, George!'. I didn't get up; I just lay there and felt my son's spirit so close to me. That was the first time I felt his presence, but there have been others since. I know he is there, and that I can count on him. Now, I want to dance for George; I dance for him because I know that he loves the way I dance."

One of Bustros's greatest struggles as an artist has been reconciling her family background, as well as her family members, with her choice of a career in the performing arts. She relates that her mother has finally accepted her choice, and even attends and enjoys her performances. Her brothers, however, are still quite cool about her prominence as an oriental dancer. "The idea of dancing, of being a dancer, had long been a dream of mine. I was always going to my room, shutting the door, and dancing for hours on end all by

myself. I kept asking myself, 'Why am I, a daughter of a noble family, a dancer!?' If I were anyone else, from any other family or background, it would have been so much easier. Because of social constraints and conventions, I felt I couldn't pursue my dream to the utmost, so I held back. As I grew older, I felt dissatisfied, I didn't want to work in a regular career or a profession, there was something missing in my life, something I couldn't or wouldn't acknowledge. Since I wasn't fulfilling myself, I started destroying myself. I overate and abused my body. But whenever I had a chance to dance, at parties, gatherings, or by myself at home, I did so. Finally, I accepted an offer to dance publicly and professionally for the first time at the Jerash Festival in Jordan in 1987. It changed my life. After that experience, I committed myself to being a professional dancer and pursuing a serious career. I didn't consult my family about this decision, and initially they were not very happy with me. My mother, brothers and even some of my friends wouldn't come to see my shows in the beginning. When I invited them, they would come grudgingly, just to humor me, saying, 'well, we don't approve of oriental dancing, but since it's Dany...' And then, after they actually saw me dance, most of them were astonished. They could clearly see the difference between my dancing and the vulgar dancing done by people who call themselves 'artists'. My mother, who initially refused to come see me dance, is now one of my biggest fans. She finally came to see my show after hearing her friends tell her for years 'your girl is a phenomenal dancer! When she is on stage, her entire being is dancing, even her eyebrows and fingernails!' So, because of her friends' opinions, she came, and saw that it was not vulgar, and she realized that she didn't have to be concerned about what people will say about us or our family because I am dancing on the stage.

"Here in the East, this is always a big concern — the judgment of others. I am living only once, and I want to realize my dreams. It's my fight. If I don't dance, I will be sick, literally and figuratively. I firmly believe that people are called to be what they were meant to be. For me, it was a call to be a dancer. I have to follow this call, no matter what."

Endnotes

(1) Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 174.

(2) Anya Peterson Royce, *The Anthropology of Dance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982).

"The basic message I am trying to impart is the passion and suffering of a woman, her need to express all of the feelings that are inside of her."



"Body movements are not done for the sake of titillation, but for the purpose of conveying the meanings of the feelings behind the dance."