



Belly Dance

New England

Habibi, you are my...what?

by Amina Delal*

And now for something completely different. Yes it's true and really rather silly to begin a music blog with a post about a DVD. Yet here I am because this is something you need to know about. It is a valuable teaching video; one you might not notice right away either online or in a vendor's bin. It's unlike most others because you won't find any steps, choreographies, or combinations. There is no performance either. Yet I think it could be hugely helpful to anyone wishing to navigate the cultural confusion we face trying to interpret the Arabic music played for dancers without understanding the language and the customs akin.

Now some might think this superfluous in becoming an accomplished *raqs sharqi* dancer. This is not so. For the lyrics are the soul of Arabic song and how you respond to them can lend serious credibility to the way an ethnic audience perceives you as a dancer. For even though the music for our shows is generally performed instrumentally, all these songs have words and your audience knows them, by heart, likely since they were children. So if you can convey to them an understanding of what the song is about, you'll be better able to fool some of the people more of the time. Myself I prefer such odds.

Habibi You Are My What? is an excellent lesson in this very thing. It is a solidly scholarly video lecture subtitled *Leyla Lanty's Essential Arabic for Dancers, Volume 1* (I do hope there will be more!), and there's a wealth of valuable information therein. In it, highly seasoned dancer and teacher [Leyla Lanty](#) begins to demystify some important language frequently used in Arabic songs as she explains their meaning, cultural context, and, more importantly, offers some totally helpful information about interpreting them in your dance.

Devoid of any sparkle save for her personality (and an occasional glint of some fine gold jewelry), Leyla Lanty attacks the language barrier. In low-tech, straightforward fashion with her poster-size pad and extra wide Sharpie, she covers an impressive amount of cultural ground while going over three very famous songs: *Nour Al-Ain*, *Habibi Ya-Ainee*, and *Zey El Hawa* - all of them commonly played for a sharqi show. In so doing, she also passes along some must-know vocabulary, and several excellent lessons in political correctness with some simple, succinct, pretty, and deeply useful hand gestures and facial expressions. So not only do you get cues for appropriate cuteness, she tells you what is decidedly not. And it's all small stuff we wouldn't see as it doesn't mean such things in our culture.

So whereas it might not be so dazzling visually, it is well worth your attention and scrutiny. And, yes, as with practice in movement and listening skills, maxing out the benefits here will take some study. This is why it is a DVD well worth owning as you won't be able to absorb it all just like that. I certainly couldn't.

You have to be patient and pay attention because she packs a ton of information into her 75-minute talk, which was originally given as a workshop. Before you view it however, I strongly suggest that you go

online and download the notes she handed out to students who attended the discussion. I didn't know they were available until after I watched it the first time and was frustrated throughout from missing them. Later I found a web address for it buried in the "Extras" section. They will make things much easier as you'll refer to them repeatedly while reviewing this DVD. They're also valuable for figuring out the meanings of other Arabic songs, as many of these words are ubiquitous. It's the kind of cheat sheet you can keep a copy of in your gig bag for a quick pre-show review. All the little gestures associated with the words really do help suggest an awareness that comes off infinitely better than that telltale clueless "deer-in-the-headlights" expression.

So listen up to Leyla Lanty. She's doing you a huge favor since this is the kind of truly helpful enlightenment that one generally attains via unpleasant hindsight. Why should this have to happen when you can be informed up front? Here is the sage voice of experience trying to spare you some of the perils of learning this via the School of Hard Knocks. As an alumna myself, I can tell you it's is not an easy education. Her excellent assistance may spare you the kind of incident that can cause offense or perhaps the loss of a job.

You don't want to be one of those dancers whom the aficionados categorize as "pretty, looked nice in the suit but didn't know how to dance". Wouldn't you rather that they came up to you after the show, address you in Arabic, and find themselves baffled that you *don't* speak the language? It is very gratifying experience I can tell you and a major boost to them in deciding you're the real deal. You'll see if you do a little woodshedding and incorporate these simple additions into the act. Plus you can do it sitting down and you know I seldom would recommend any such thing.

Because she was smart enough to pursue the language when she began the dance, Leyla Lanty has a much better education (academic and real world) than most dancers can even get in this day and age. Few teachers, no matter how brilliant their steps, are prepared to give you such a big dose of practical knowledge with such concise clarity. And yes your attention might wane a bit as she's going through the second and third songs. But this is the beauty of studying it at your leisure. Go make some tea and come back. The lecture is thick with worthy information that you'll be glad to have when facing an audience with specific cultural expectations.

Anyone interested in being a proper *raqs sharqi* dancer can benefit from this video no matter how long your experience. And if you teach, this makes for excellent curriculum. By passing this understanding along you will enhance both your students' knowledge and your own. On her website Leyla Lanty says "Hear the music. Be the music." Let the music be your guide to soulful interpretation. It's *all* about the music and your connecting with it. Here's an easy way to a deeper understanding of what is going on. There's a great deal more to it than "Habibi, Habibi". Listen to Leyla Lanty and benefit from her savvy. She's offering you the kind of truly practical information you will use throughout your career.

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