

WALKING the SAME ROAD

FRAGMENTS from TWO WOMEN'S TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATION on BELLY DANCE¹

Berna Kurt, Tümay Kılınçel



*Figure 1: Selfie after a rehearsal for Dansöz
(2019, Basel/Swiss)*

¹ All terms including “belly dance” and “Oriental dance” are problematic to us because of their colonialist and sexist history. Therefore, in this reflection, we use the term *raqs* instead of belly dance. *Raq*s is an Arabic term for “dance,” a shortened version of *raqs sharqi*, “dance of the Orient.” The term is today internationally recognized and was also used in the Ottoman literature as *raks*.

Intro: Sharing the Ideas and Ideals ...

A moment at a café ... Meeting for the first time ...

November 2016. Cihangir, Istanbul. We drink coffee and introduce ourselves. Just after the military coup attempt in Turkey. Gossips are going around about massacres, bombs, and other fatalities that might come. We are just strangers to each other ...

Tümay: I'm happy to be in Istanbul, but it's definitely not the best year for Turkey! Even before the coup attempt, people were not in the best mood; all seemed a bit ... depressed. I'm stuck in a blue mood as well; but it's just temporary, I am already planning my life in Germany, which is my home.

Just before leaving Istanbul, I want to meet Berna. Most of the people have no time, but Berna replies to my message. So here we are, at this café! After her workday and commuting in the restless Istanbul traffic, Berna looks tired; she's maybe a little depressed too? The short meeting feels nice and also formal. Towards the end of the talk, I spontaneously ask: "Berna, do you want to join me for an artistic residency?"

Berna: It's such a bad time for me ... After the coup attempt and due to the consequential political ambivalence, I still feel horrified, confused and stressed. I am no more able to plan for something, even dream for ...

Nevertheless, I am excited to meet Tümay at the end! Years ago, we couldn't meet in Berlin when Franz Anton, Tümay's teacher, invited me for a seminar. Here is the opportunity! I feel that we have so many things to share ... Her invitation to a collective residency comes suddenly; I blindly say, "yes!" without a real expectation. Some months later she writes to me that we are accepted. Can we work together? Yes, most probably (!)

1. First Collaboration: Sharing the Work Process ...

A period of working together with other people ... and a moment to remember in the rehearsal studio: developing tactics to end the process positively for all ...

August 2018. Bonn (Rhine River). Flausen+ young artists in residence. We'R'Dansöz. First collaboration in a group of four people. We are both ar-

tists and researchers. We are all working and living together, as this was the format of the residency.

Tümay: I'm the one who invites others. They are coming from Germany, Austria, and Turkey, and don't know each other. I feel extremely responsible to host them. I plan to begin with a nice city tour. We have lunch and drinks together. Here, Berna discovers sparkling wine! During the work process, I organize similar meetings along the Rhine River. We sometimes both work and have picnics along the river. I try my best to please everyone but it's not always easy to work all together! Some difficulties grow towards the end: summer heat, health issues, living conditions, colleagues having different expectations and energies ...

Berna: I live here with big spiders, some other insects, and three (sometimes four) other women in a dusty apartment! I feel so old to tolerate such conditions of sharing the house. At the same time, I am happy to be far away, especially from not having to work at the university in the warmest months of summer! I am Ok with this old and "calm" European city which is "boring" for some. I do something I really like: dancing, reading, watching documentaries and dance videos, discussing with others and taking notes... I especially enjoy working with Tümay and feel that we both have some commitment to work on raqs as an "artistic" and "academic" research.

Tümay & Berna: This is our first research about *raqs* and stereotypes about this suppressed dance genre. How to perceive dancing bodies of women? How to detox it from orientalist projections? Dancing for ourselves? Self-enjoyment? How to support others to find their own ways of self-joy as radical politics? How to defy or ignore or forget about the "male" gaze and its expectations? How to rename it? *Raqs*? Playing with *bedlah*², playing with the gaze ... Fifi Abdou, Tahia Carioca, Edward Said, Prenses Banu ... dancers, critical thinkers, and many other people to learn from in this journey.

2 The mainstream or classical two-piece costume of *raqs*.

2. Sharing Different Dance Contexts ...

A period of research and learning the dance together at Istorder (Istanbul Educational and Cultural Association of Oriental Dancers) ... and a moment to remember at a café, drinking wine, sharing dreams and making plans for the near future ...

April 2019. Istanbul. Tümay stays at Berna's house. We are students at *Istorder*. We dance together. We also watch performances by female raqs dancers (*dansöz* as commonly known in Turkish) and the male ones (*zenne*) at Pinokyo queer bar and Hodja Pasha Cultural Center, a tourist show venue. Last evening, we participate in the *Istorder* Girls' Night event with food and drinks and, of course, raqs that our teachers perform. We also join and dance together.

At the end of the evening Oya, *Istorder's* founder, asks Tümay if she wants to dance at New Year's Eve. A big surprise and an exciting opportunity! This unexpected request opens up new perspectives for our artistic research. Such research that takes place in nonconventional and even degraded dance spaces like neighborhood dance studios, night clubs, bars, restaurants. We enjoy informality and fun in these venues. Shared moments of joy, courage, and unexpectedness take place at the margins of the "dance art" and make us friends beyond collaborators. We look forward to our first production in the coming summer!

3. Sharing and Realizing of Dreams ...

A period of working together for the first choreography and a moment to remember by the Rhine River: wine and cheers, too many dreams to realize together ...

July 2019. Düsseldorf. First work together. *Dansöz* solo choreography. Berna is dramaturg and Tümay is choreographer/performer. It is a very intensive time, so much traveling (Istanbul, Frankfurt a.M., Düsseldorf, Basel), very long working hours in addition to many nice moments with drinks and food: sandwiches and sparkling wine at the Main and Rhine riverside.

We now work on a dance piece that focuses on Tümay's experience on *raqs*. As a person with a family migration history, – a "Turkish, Muslim girl from the Orient" – she thinks that the "oriental" image is "put" on her body. An early life example: in the youth club of the theater, a male white German technician saluted her as "the Ottoman sunshine!" Making a critical femi-

nist and anti-colonialist artistic work is one strategy to deal with her many “identities.” But through the working process she was confronted with many of her fears: She has always been scared to be stereotyped, but also not to be “politically correct” enough. Some contemporary dancer-colleagues did not take the artistic research on *raqs* seriously. Some were even irritated from imagining Tümay performing as a *dansöz* on stage. And some family members were proud that she would put the *raqs* dance on the theatrical stage but also amused and ashamed to imagine her as a *dansöz*. Others rated their artistic work as only “valid” and “valuable” since she would “sell” it on the arts market and benefit from it as a so-called “woman with migration background.” Today she knows that this thinking devalued her work as an artist and justified her creative work only as a “migrant woman” and not as an “artist,” but of course it unsettled her ... There were also people in the artistic field who encouraged her. She always had to rethink this tricky position: benefiting from the so-called “identity politics” framework allocated to “others” in the German arts scene or taking this framework to do something “critical.”

Yes, we are “critical” ... this piece is about resisting the representation of the suppressed and stereotyped female body, resisting the historical white, male, colonialist and the Orientalist – an “authoritarian” – gaze on the body performing the *raqs* ... We develop different feminist strategies to play with the audience’s expectations: not providing them the expected image of the exotic and erotic woman, playing with their gaze, looking at them, moving among them, talking to them and returning the gaze back on them ... playing with showing and hiding Tümay’s body parts, demonstrating the *bedlah* but not her body, or just showing her belly and making it speak in her own terms: repeating “my name is not belly dance” in English, Turkish and German and pronouncing some alternative names in different languages.

At the beginning, the *raqs* material frightened Tümay like a minefield full of clichés, at the same time the act of performing has been a liberation from the stigma. The rehearsal was a process of liberation itself; performing Tümay’s own *raqs* dance at the end of the performance was also an act of empowerment. As well, the music³ was giving her some support and power. Playing the Sezen Aksu song *Rakkas* on a German theater stage became a moment of sharing: some audience members recognized the song, and Tümay

3 “Shaneera” by Fatima Al Quadiri (2017), “Dansöz” track produced for the performance “Dansöz” by Leila Moon (2019), “Rakkas” by Sezen Aksu (1995).

could see from the stage how two people became attentive and straightened up their torso while the song started. But some audience members were still projecting stigma, because of the dance style and probably also the body in connection with the dance style which has been read as “the other body.” On the other hand, they were also getting positively irritated after the performance, and the follow-up artist talks made it clear that the audience was rethinking their image of the “Orient” clichés.

For us, the work process has always been as important as the final work (choreography): we care about each other, express our different ideas very carefully and refrain from creating power relations ... we are highly committed and two hard working feminist women cooperating with joy ... Our shared work process itself becomes a performance of feminist solidarity as we empower each other in both art and life. It makes us dream forward. We are becoming “partners in crime,” in *raqs*. We are becoming (chosen) sisters to each other.

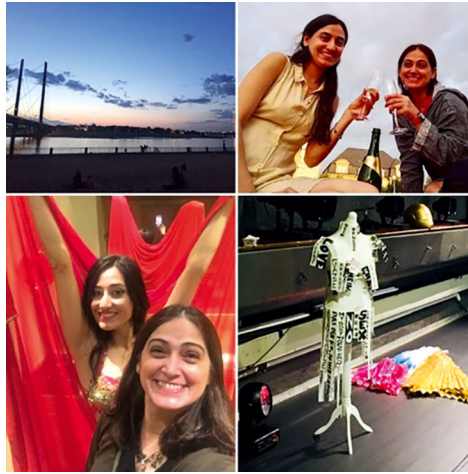


Figure 2: clockwise: Rhine River (Düsseldorf 2019), Cheering riverside (Düsseldorf 2019), New Year's Eve performance (Istanbul 2019), feminist puppet waiting for the audience after the performance (Basel 2019)

4. Sharing So Much in a Day ...

A moment of entering the new year in the metro, when rushing from a restaurant in Eminönü (in the historical peninsula of Istanbul) to a hotel in Taksim; we still enjoy it ...

31.12.2019. Istanbul. New Year's Eve, the *dansöz* show in three venues. Berna is the manager, Tümay is the *dansöz*.

A crazy and very long night: not just observing or participating, but “living” the artistic research! Two weeks before this night, Tümay begins preparing herself to perform in front of the guests of a restaurant and two hotels as a *dansöz* of *Istorder*. She joins *raqs* classes at *Istorder*, uses available costumes, and accompanies dancers at their jobs to see similar locations beforehand.

Berna is at the backstage and supports Tümay at every moment of the night. She feels the stress of the “big” responsibility on her shoulders as she spontaneously performs many roles at one night: manager, transporter, money collector, dresser, observer, researcher ... She is also happy to witness a contemporary dancer's transformation to a *dansöz* in the commercial scene because this performative experience is both funny and challenging for each. She thinks that it is a step forward to realize their common dream of blurring the duality between the “commercial” and “artistic” spaces.⁴

Tümay is nervous but also hyper-excited, feeling the direct exchange between the performance and the audience. She trusts Berna's support because she doesn't know much about the people and culture in Istanbul and its codes: How to communicate in certain situations? Which words can have different meanings? How to make a “business talk” as a *dansöz*? Does a poker face help? But not knowing these cultural codes also makes Tümay's performance freer than it could be otherwise. For Tümay, performing “out of art context” is exciting, she expects that the audience's perception will be different. The nicest thing, she finds, is that the dance is not a one-sided energy exchange, from the performer to the audience! Dancing is actually not “for” but “with” the audience!

When compared to the contemporary dance scene, this “nightlife” context is less intellectual, more socially connected and fun based. It invites a

4 In the second production (*we ♥ 2 raqs*) some dancers who mostly took stage in “commercial” venues performed in HAU as an alternative and pluralist artistic space for contemporary dance.

more communicative energy between dancers and the audience. It is considered more as a “service” to the audience, or better said, to the “clients.” It’s more focused on a show aspect and looking nice and virtuoso. Regardless, this kind of dancing can be empowering since it triggers some new skills for performers and creates another kind of relationship: more social, eye to eye, maybe equal? Or at least more emotional and direct.

In this long night, we experience together the backstage of a “commercial” practice: Berna deals with some very tough managers. She struggles to protect the little wealth in cash from the waiters, who ask for money in return for their “help” to move the dancer in venues. Tümay does her best to meet the expectations of the managers and clients. Berna always keeps eye contact with her, to help her to use time and space. In short, we learn “the rules of the play” together ...

Outro: Sharing the Challenges ...

A moment by the Spree River. Drinking Aperol Spritz and sparkling wine. Ending the first part of the difficult process, overcoming the challenges together.

September 2021. Berlin. we ♥ 2 raqs group choreography: second work together. Berna is the dramaturg, Tümay is the artistic director.

Covid-19 changes everything and challenges everyone. Do we have to make a “digital dramaturgy” or “remote dramaturgy”? Will Berna be able to come to Berlin? Fortunately, yes!

Tümay’s first experience of artistic direction. She invites five Berlin based artists with some raqs background. She takes care of many minds and needs ... It is so difficult to create a common ground. Berna is the dramaturg, but she also supports Tümay in directing and choreographing.

We support each other in the challenging moments: In many rehearsal breaks, we sit speechless and watch the waves, ducks, and swans in the Spree River, then we begin to chat ... We work to create some more social, collective, free and funny ways of raqs ... and to deconstruct its mainstream heteronormative presentations. At the end, various hybrid interpretations appear on stage: in solo choreographies of dancers, raqs meets voguing, dabke⁵, American tribal fusion, contemporary dance, floor work ... Despite pandemic con-

5 A folk dance popular in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

ditions and many other difficulties arising from working together with very different artists, we do good work together. We prove that another *raqs* is possible!

This journey is still going on ... We still walk the same road ... and still have dreams to share and make them happen.

