Action Signs in Egyptian Folkloric Dance:
How to Walk Like an Egyptian

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Introductory

The phrase "walk like an Egyptian" comes from an American pop song of the same name performed in the 1980s by a pop-music group, the Bangles. Upon hearing the song (or song title), high school students in California in 2002 immediately know what to do: they adopt a stereotypical two-dimensional "profile" position with arms extended, elbows and wrists bent at right angles, one arm up, one down. With alternate knees lifting and bending (also at right angles), they walk while rhythmically jerking their heads forward and back.

Many people assume that this chimerical "Egyptian walking" is somehow correct. It may come from an imagined style of walking pictured on the tomb-walls of ancient Egyptian civilizations. If tomb paintings were the inspiration, however, then there is a regrettable error, as both hands in the tomb scenes are raised in front of the figure's body, palms flat, offering some item to a deity as the focus of the scene. I doubt if anyone is aware of the exact origin of the stereotyped "Egyptian walking" movement performed by high school students, but I suggest that we put its origin into that familiar, but elusive discourse, "pop culture," which has produced many strange and wonderful impressions of other cultures, notable among them

> The fashionable Orientalism of Denishawn [that] was never, for the most part, based on much more than extant popular imagery (St. Denis's initial, revelatory source of dance inspiration was the image of Isis on a poster advertising "Egyptian Deities" cigarettes—"No better Turkish cigarette can be made").[1] Even after Denishawn toured the Orient and North Africa in 1925-1926—the first American company to do so—its dances continued to rely more on conventions of costume and setting than on faithfully adapted movement for their effectiveness (McLean 1997: 134).

Another stereotype of Egypt and other Middle Eastern cultures is that of the belly-dancer.

The image of a voluptuous woman in an erotic pose can be documented to have arisen in the nineteenth century when European men arrived in the "Orient" as tourists. Duff Gordon (1986[1865]), Lane (1890[1835]), Curtis (1852) and others (such as Gustave Flaubert) left records of their encounters with dancing women in Egypt. These accounts were a major part of an European discourse that developed into "Orientalism" (a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper, thus, readers are referred to Said (1978) and Graham-Brown (1988) for a complete treatment of the concept).

Interestingly, stereotypical representations of Egyptian dances and dancing have also arisen around belly-dancing *within* Egypt.[2] These can be observed in many Egyptian films (Franken 2001), where a young girl is forced economi-

cally to support her aged mother, student-brother, sickly child (choose any one) in the only manner she can; by belly-dancing in a nightclub. A worthy young man falls in love with her, but his parents refuse to let them marry because of her low-class, "immoral" occupation. She gets the consolation prize of being the star entertainer at the wedding reception when the young man marries another woman.

Defying the Stereotype

In 1959 a new type of Egyptian dancing arose that challenged the stereotype of "the fallen woman" dancing in a nightclub. It is this kind of Egyptian dancing discussed in this paper. In particular I will describe one choreography (The Licorice Seller) that incorporates an example of Egyptian walking and three commonly used Egyptian gestures that appear in a new, non-stereotypical context. We will examine what some specific action signs have come to mean to Egyptians. This discussion will shed light on a few of the ways in which seemingly minor bodily movements in the context of theatrical performances can take on significance as markers of group identity; in this case a distinct national Egyptian identity.

The background for my discussion is post-revolutionary Egypt, the period of the 1950s when the revolutionary leader President Nasser and the Egyptian people were proud and confident in their new national independence and prosperity. This period is now remembered as one in which the arts flourished. New 20th century media technologies learned from the West, such as radio, recorded music, cinema, and television, were already excellent in both quality and quantity in Egypt. *Theater* art at this time, however, was a very "mixed bag." Since the late 19th century, the Old Opera House in Cairo had been the venue for traveling European productions, but, although foreign ballet companies and folkdance troupes appeared regularly, Egyptian dancers never performed there. The reason for the conspicuous exclusion of indigenous dances from an emerging Egyptian performing arts was a prevailing internal stereotype about the Egyptian dancer as "belly-dancer"—a stereotype that existed then and persists today.

It can be argued that belly-dancing is a product of Western colonial occupation since it arose in the late 19th century largely in response to the presence of Western men in colonial Egypt (Van Neiuwkerk 1995). The many varieties of "belly-dance" are, in fact, best characterized as a category pertaining to venue and scanty costuming, rather than a genre of dancing *per se*. Performances take place at night in nightclubs where alcohol is consumed and where prostitution and other illegal and immoral business is conducted.

The dancer's costume, whose origins and inspiration are much debated (see Stone 1998: 253-55, cited in Zuhur 1998; and Buonaventura 1998: 138 and 152), reveals legs, torso and more or less of the breasts. This attire is considered semi-nude and improper by Egyptian and general Middle Eastern standards. The condemned activities such as gambling and alcohol consumption that were later strongly associated with belly-dancing certainly took place in Cairo prior to the arrival of European men in the 19th century, but they were conducted in private homes. There were no nightclubs, music halls or casinos

in traditional Cairo. Coffee houses were the principal public places for male leisure activities.

Professional female dancers performed outside in the streets surrounding the coffee houses. Dancers could also perform for weddings and other festive occasions in the courtyards of family homes and in the private, secluded women's quarters usually called the "harem" in Western literature. It seems probable that many of the specific movements that constitute this idiom of dancing existed prior to the French and later British occupations of Egypt, based on the earliest descriptions of dancers "quivering," "convulsing," and "jerking" their muscles while dancing (see Buonaventura 1998: 71-76).

Colonial occupation created the context for the development of belly-dancing as a disreputable activity when the first casinos, music halls and nightclubs were built at the turn of the century (van Neiuwkerk 1995: 41-42). Belly-dancing thus presented a negative stereotype of Egyptian dancers and dancing to Egyptians themselves, but this state of affairs was challenged by a new genre of dance event that appeared in Cairo in 1959 that has became known as Egyptian folkloric dance (see Franken 2001).

A New Genre: Egyptian Folkloric Dancing

Although there are now in existence several Egyptian folkloric dance troupes, I concentrate on the Reda Troupe, because it was *the first and only group to be formed and developed solely by Egyptian artists* working independently of government instigation or outside consultation. The Reda Troupe developed a new form of Egyptian folkloric dance in which action signs from everyday Egyptian life were inserted into Westernized performance spaces—namely, concert stages.

Folk dancing is common in the villages and urban streets of Egypt, especially for joyous occasions such as weddings and saints days. The use of this indigenous, non-professional material to create theatrical productions, (denoted by the name "folkloric dance"), became popular in the 1950s, created by the Reda Troupe, named after two brothers who founded the group. The semantically rich performances of the Reda Troupe combined bodily movement with lyrics, costumes and music, to communicate a complex message of nationalism, patriotism, urban sophistication and modernity that reached all levels of Egyptian society. Founder Mahmoud Reda was the choreographer and a dancer, while his brother Ali Reda was director and musical advisor. The Reda brothers married two sisters: Farida and Nadeeda Fahmy. Farida became the principal dancer and popular star of the troupe during a career that lasted 23 years. Nadeeda briefly worked as costume designer until her death in 1960 (Franken 2001: 26). These four young people had participated in various amateur dance and musical programs as children at social occasions in their parent's homes and social clubs. Mahmoud and Ali had some professional dance experience. That is, Ali had worked in Egyptian cinema as a dancer, then choreographer, and finally became a director. Mahmoud had danced with an Argentine folkdance troupe, *Alaria*, for several months before his marriage to Nadeeda. Most of these dance performances were inspired by films, especially Hollywood musicals, so numerous at the time. Latin

American, hula and the dances of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly were all imitated on amateur stages and in Egyptian films. Farida Fahmy's mother made her a "peasant" costume in which she sometimes danced Egyptian folk dance for friends and family at dinner parties.

In 1959, during the aforementioned period of intense artistic creativity and national pride, and in conjunction with the influx of Western media technologies, Mahmoud Reda began to wonder if he could create an Egyptian theatrical dance form. He imagined a "folkloric" form that was completely disassociated from the condemned belly-dance tradition, but one that was authentically Egyptian.

To invent a new Egyptian theatrical dance form that would be suitable for Western performance spaces, Mahmoud had to solve four basic problems. First, how was he to fill up the large proscenium stage with recognizably Egyptian movement? Second, what kinds of subject matter and themes would appeal to Egyptian audiences? Third, what movements should he avoid incorporating into the choreography because of their association with belly-dancers? And fourth, what movements from other Egyptian dances should he incorporate so as to be authentic, but not vulgar. (See Fahmy 1987 for a complete discussion of these problems, especially Appendix 4, p. 82*ff*).

To solve the first problem Mahmoud looked to Western models. He borrowed ideas from the staging of ballets, popular and folk dances to create floor patterns, moving chorus lines, and similar conventions from Western theatrical dance traditions (see Williams 2000: 345-362 for a discussion of this practice). To identify suitable themes and subject matter, however, Mahmoud turned to several Egyptian sources, including myth, popular culture, and urban and rural life. Some of his best loved dances featured ordinary Egyptian people enacting situations from daily life. The titles of dances in the first Reda Troupe performances (1959-1960) illustrate these themes. For example, works entitled, "Love in the Countryside," "Five Acres," and "Desert Brigands" all take place in rural settings. "The Licorice Seller," "Ramadan Lanterns," and "Dolls for Sale" are meant to recall scenes from an urban childhood [see photograph of program in Franken 2001: 31). Egyptian audiences recognized themselves in these scenes and felt that the Reda productions were genuinely and authentically Egyptian in every respect, even though the concert stage form of presentation was new (Franken 2001: 27-29 and Fahmy 1987: 20-22).

The third problem: how to avoid utilizing movements associated with belly-dancing, turned out to be the easiest to solve, since movies showing the classic belly dance movements were readily available by that time. Especially to be avoided were the sustained hip shimmy, and the repetitious undulations of the hips and torso that characterized a professional belly-dance performance.

In order to discuss the kinds of action signs that Mahmoud Reda incorporated into these dances, I will focus on a single choreography; The Licorice Seller. This dance is described by Fahmy (1987: 42) and is available on video, filmed April 26, 1991 by Mahmoud Reda at the Balloon Theater on Zamalek Island in the Nile River in Cairo, Egypt. Amani (no last name) danced the lead female role popularized by Farida Fahmy (Zaina/Dee Birnbaum Productions,

1991). Many still photos of Farida in this role are also available in Franken (2001: 39).

The Licorice Seller

The dance opens with a scene in which a group of young Egyptians are proceeding down a street in Old Cairo. In the production they dance and pause for conversation, which is not typical of Egyptians on public streets. We know they are in Old Cairo because of their clothing, a mix of Western and traditional Egyptian items that would not be seen in middle-class, Westernized areas, nor in villages. A vendor of sweetened licorice juice is working on the street, and the group of young men and women come by. Mahmoud Reda wanted to find a way for the Licorice Seller to dance while carrying a large brass pot and a small stack of little cups—items that were the trademark of his occupation. In order to make the choreographed movement realistic, he strapped on the heavy pot while choreographing the role.

Bayya' al-'Arqasus (The Licorice Seller's Dance) is an example of how the use of paraphernalia during choreography influences the movement process. Mahmoud Reda, portraying the vendor, carried the vendor's paraphernalia which included a large brass pot strapped to his waist and resting on his left hip, at an angle which allowed the spout to face outwards. On his right side was strapped a brass container holding a number of glasses. His left arm was usually occupied with supporting the pot, while the right arm remained free to serve drinks, or play cymbals (two brass disks). The weight of the pot and its angle affected the posture of its wearer, which resulted in a backward tilt of the upper torso, producing a wide-stanced walk. "By carrying these accessories while setting the choreography, Mahmoud was able to get the proper feel of the heavy pot, as well as play the cymbals as he danced. He was able to retain the vendor's distinctive backward tilt and wide stance in the steps and turns that were introduced in the choreography"(Fahmy 1987: 42 and my own field notes).

The result is a series of action signs that are symbolic transformations[3] of a licorice seller's walking and everyday actions. In the dance, the vendor takes low, broad skips, careful not to spill the juice, and he bows to the left and right, using actions similar to those a seller makes while pouring the drink into the cups. The dancer's action signs are thus the result of the choreographer's experience with the occupational situation, and the walking and gestures, although transformed in certain ways to suit the theatrical context, are still recognizable and transparent in meaning to the audience.

The lead role for the female dancer in this dance is a character called *bint al balad* ("girl of the country"). This phrase is as common in Egyptian popular culture as the phrase "the girl next door" is in American English, and it has some of the same connotations, such as "wholesome," "familiar," "salt-of-the-earth," etc. It is used for rural, traditional girls, as in "country girl." It also refers specifically to young ladies of Old Cairo (the medieval city, built by Mamluks from 1260 to about 1798 when French colonialism started to change Cairo and surrounding quarters). She is a stock character in many ways, as in films and popular fiction (see Mafuz (1975:[1957]), because she is felt to be the

essence, boiled down to its tough and courageous core, of Egyptian woman-hood. In this context she represents a member of the lower class of Old Cairo; people who live far from the modern city (built in the 19th and 20th centuries) and uneducated in Western schools and ways. She strolls onto the stage wearing a *millaya laff*, (a body shawl) that is, one large rectangle of slippery black cloth. This is the body portion of the conservative Muslim women's outdoor garment as fashion dictated in the early years of this century. The head portion is in two parts; a hair covering that is triangular shaped and bordered with bright colored yarn bobbles and a black net drape that covers her lower face from nose to neck. The net has very large spaces, so actually conceals nothing, and the *millaya laff* is used in such a way that it becomes more provocative than concealing. *Bint al balad* is sending a double message; that she is a respectable young lady who wears the veil, but also that she is young, pretty and looking for a husband. From a study of the *baladi* people of Old Cairo done in 1978, we have the following description:

> *Bint al balad* will wrap the *millaya laff* in such a way that her midriff and hips are clearly outlined to show the shapeliness of her figure. The overwrap allows part of the body to show, like a bare arm, while the other arm is covered . . . [the] scarf is supposed to cover her hair; however it is usually left loose enough so as to slip continuously half off, necessitating frequent stops to adjust it and the *millaya*. Thus in the middle of the street *bint al balad* can take off the scarf, tie it again around her hair, then re-wrap the *millaya* around her body, all of which allows her to perform a series of alluring gestures by which to attract the attention of passersby (al-Messiri 1978: 60).

Bint al baladi make the most of these garments as they move across the stage.

> Not only does the *millaya* influence the movement behavior of *bint al balad*, it is also an item through which she is able to communicate in a nonverbal manner. In *Bayya' al-Irqsus* the various gestures and motions that *bint al balad* goes through are transformed into dance movements and steps, then merged into the choreography (Fahmy 1987: 42).

The *millaya liff* slips off her shoulder, it droops over her hips, and it whirls around her when she turns. To this flirtatious walk she adds some traditional women's dance steps at intervals, by way of greeting the young men who come to meet her. Closer examination reveals that certain Western elements have been included in her dance such as turns, steps in a backward direction, and floor patterns worked out with the male ensemble. However, also included are action signs from Egyptian folk dances that make the dance "authentic" for performers and audience alike. These include specific forms of hip thrusts, shoulder shimmies, and hip drops.

As discussed above, the choreography includes numerous action signs that, for Egyptian audience members, indicate occupation (the licorice seller's walk), gender (the techniques of wearing a body shawl) and class differences (the combinations of Western and traditional dress that indicate low education and income levels). In addition, this dance portrays a comic scene illustrating how working class people of Old Cairo argue with each other in the streets, another familiar Cairo scene. The *bint al balad* is modest and altogether proper in her demeanor, but she can be fierce when defending her rights. She

removes her shoes, probably in order to use them to batter her opponent if necessary, as described in al-Messiri (1978: 94). She throws off her shawl in order to gesture with her arms as she drives points of her argument home. The gestures she uses in this scene include two that are said to come from an old sign language of Cairo (personal communication: Farida Fahmy, January 1994). This was a system of hand signs used by lower class people when distance or background noise prevented speech. The two gestures from this system that the dancer incorporates can be described as follows:

1) The dancer claps her hands in front of her body, approximately at waist level and immediately flings them open, palms up to the sides, elbows close to the body (see Fig. 1). The general meaning of this gesture is interrogatory, and can be translated as "What are you up to?" or "What do you think you are doing?" Or "What's going on here?"
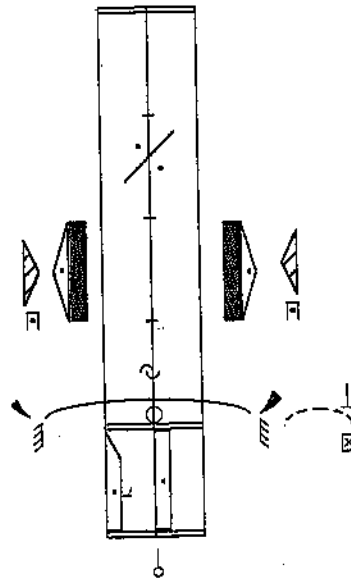

Figure 1.

2) The second gesture appears just as the dancer has walked away from her opponent. She whirls around to face him again and stamps back across the stage to the audience's left and into the argument again. As she begins her return walk to the left, she raises her right hand to the corresponding eyebrow, thumb and first two fingers framing the eye, fourth and fifth fingers curled slightly above and extending away from the face (see Fig. 2).
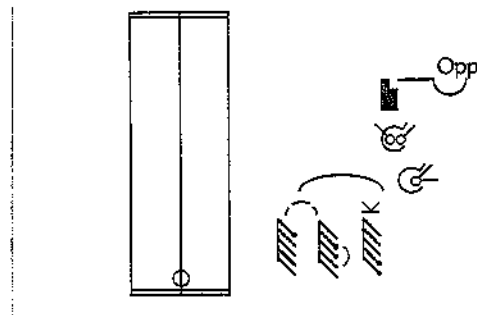

Figure 2

As she frames her eye, she gazes intently down her nose at her opponent. This brief signal ends as she grabs her skirt and flounces back to engage in closer argument. This gesture translates loosely as "Watch out! I see what you are doing. You can't hide from me!"

In the context of the story of this particular dance, these action signs have more specific meanings that Egyptian audiences readily understand. Figure 1 says, "What have you done here? i.e., What have you done to my dress, spilling juice all over it like that?" Figure 2 says, "I know what you're up to—trying to get close enough to touch my dress and feel my leg, spoiling my pure and modest image!"
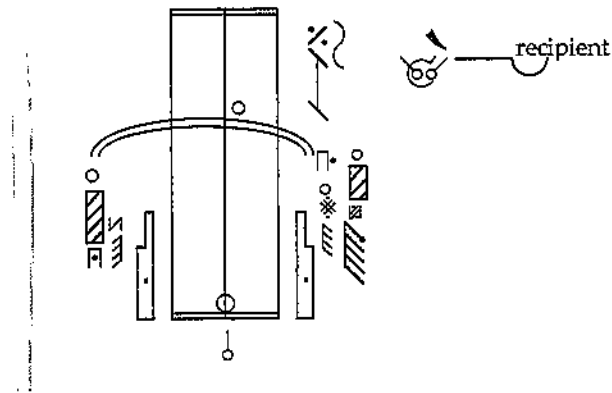

Figure 3

A third gesture was used by Farida Fahmy in the original production of The Licorice Seller Dance. Still photos are available (personal collection of Farida Fahmy) of her posing in this third gesture. Why it is not used in the 1991 video described here is unknown to the author. The third gesture consists of extended arms in front of the body at mid-level, left palm up and held flat, right hand in a fist with thumb up (see Fig. 3). The right fist grinds the surface of the left palm with a circular motion, while the actor gazes intently at the recipient. The translation would be something like, "I'll get you! You'll pay for this!" Farida Fahmy describes these gestures as follows:

> Many of the gestures that were used by Egyptian people in their daily life have been merged into the dances of this mode. Mahmoud Reda, for the first time, introduced into his choreography typical gestures used by *bint al-balad*. These gestures are termed *Radh* (vituperation), and usually accompany verbal exchange during heated arguments, and tongue-lashing repartee. Unlike Hindu dance gestures or *mudras*, in which each gesture denotes a specific literal meaning, these gestures evoke general connotations, the gist of which is readily understood by the Egyptian public. Mahmoud Reda used his discretion when he introduced these gestures, and eliminated those he deemed unsuitable. In *Bayya' al-Irqsus*, [Licorice Seller Dance] such gestures were merged into the dance movements of *bint al-balad*. (Fahmy 1987: 38-40).

The general meanings of the two gestures, "What is this?" and "I'm watching you," thus take on very specific meanings in the dramatic situations presented in the dance. Context is, of course, crucial. The hand gestures require the social context that is being portrayed for their accurate interpretation, but by themselves and outside of this context, the gestures have nothing to do with flirting girls, clumsy vendors, female honor, or male transgressions. Since the dramatic elements of the story portrayed in the dance are perfectly clear without the hand gestures, one is led to ask why the choreographer put these gestures in at all? Since they only take a few seconds of performance time, what could they possibly add?

Before answering that question, let us first consider some features at the choreographic level. As explained earlier, Reda choreography is a careful interweaving of Western theatrical dance conventions and Egyptian traditional dance movements. Beyond recognizing which components belong to which cultural traditions, however, we can enquire into what the whole performance might signify to Egyptian audiences? In the late 1950's, Reda dances made the clear statement that "Egyptian dancing" need not be defined by the belly dance environment of immoral places and activities. Audiences learned that Egyptian dancing could embrace a new context, one that removed it from the stigmatized setting that stereotyped it as a degraded activity. They also learned that it is not the movements themselves that are inherently "sinful" or "immoral," but that such negative associations arise from the social context in which the dancing appears. A different social context could elevate the same action signs to wholesome family entertainment.

We can also ask what the new genre of "Egyptian folkloric dance" signified? Any audience member would see aesthetically pleasing movement and color, and amusing dramatic scenes. Egyptians in the post-independence period, however, saw much more than this. The Reda Troupe achieved extraordinary popularity, deeply devoted fans, and iconic status in Egyptian culture precisely because they did far more than *entertain* their audiences. All the human qualities portrayed on the stage—vibrant youth, education, patriotism, authenticity, sophistication and modernity were reflections of the audiences' highest hopes and dreams for their new life in an independent nation. Layer upon layer of meanings embedded in stage, story, costumes, ensembles, hip thrusts and hand gestures all celebrated and exhibited Egyptian identity. Reda productions said to Egyptian audiences, "This is who we are!"

So why include tiny details of the hand gestures in The Licorice Seller Dance? Because they add more evidence that *this is Egyptian culture looking at itself*. Urciuoli captures the import of this factor in her discussion of Williams's semasiological theory when she says,

> There is no such thing as space or time in a simple sense. Time and space are conceptual, moral, and ethical before they are physical. . . .Williams makes it clear that cosmological space or metaphysical space or dramatic space *all emerge performatively from the enactment of self* (Urciuoli 1995: 194-5 - italics added).

Although all speech acts and action signs become performances in this sense, dances of the kind I have described possess especially powerful meanings:

The visible and the hidden but known flow like the folds of an elegant garment or building, in which the delicacy and purity of what can be seen depend in part on the audience's knowing what cannot be seen. In the process, the performer and audience come together as only co-participants can. . . . The social iconography works insofar as the audience knows how to read the social originals, so that the portrayal evokes and reaffirms everyone's sense of who they really are (Urciuoli 1995: 196-7)

The movements of The Licorice Seller go through a symbolic transformation because they are iconic representations of everyday instrumental actions that undergo a symbolic process to become a part of the dance. In doing so, they point to (i.e. 'index') the seller for the audience.

Farnell discusses the symbolic process in detail when she tells us, for example, that Mrs. Rose Weasel uses action signs from the standard lexicon of Plains Sign Talk, such as "roasting," "cooking meat on a fire," "cutting off a piece," "give," "young man," and "eat." These signs are accompanied by words that translate into English as "When the food was cooked she gave it to him and the young man was eating it." However, although the action signs appear to parallel the meaning of the vocal signs, we discover that the action signs themselves *add semantic content*. That is, we know how the food was cooked (roasted on a fire); what kind of food it was (meat), and that it was served in pieces cut off with a knife and handed out (See Farnell 1995: 41-57 for complete explication).

Farnell says that action signs are too easily dismissed as "merely iconic" *imitations of* practical actions, with the result that in-depth appreciation of the richness of these kinds of action signs is blunted "by the valorization of the Saussurian principle of arbitrariness" at the expense of iconicity and indexicality in language.

Moreover, Jürgen Streeck (1996) has shown that symbolic transformations of embodied lived experience in the everyday world of touching and manipulating objects become *representations of* situated knowledge and instrumental skills. In the case of the licorice seller, having to do with culturally appropriate methods of buying and selling drinks between (flirting) girls, (clumsy) vendors, (female) honor, and (male) transgression in relation to those with whom life is shared through casual meetings on an Egyptian street.

In other words, the action signs described and written in Figures 1, 2 and 3 *presuppose and evoke* a material world that is indexically linked to the drink itself, to the actions of selling it, and the customer's responses to the seller himself. The gestures and action signs mark the indexicalization practices out of which symbols arise. They are endowed with greater referential potential because they have been incorporated in a "system" of visual-kinesthetic signs which is called "a dance." Moreover, this dance is recognized as "authentically Egyptian," even though the stage setting is not a "real street," the seller is not a "real" licorice seller, etc. The action signs themselves *are* the "authenticity" to an Egyptian audience.

24

Endnotes:

[1] From Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988 p. 130, cited in McLean (1997: 134).

[2] Some of the following information is personal communication conveyed to me during several research trips to Egypt, beginning in 1991—most recently in 2001. I interviewed Farida (Melda) Fahmy herself over several periods of days and weeks, and also several former members of the Reda Troupe, as well as other Reda family members and friends. Much of this information is available in a more extended form in published articles, e.g. Franken (1996) and a book (Franken 2001). Another principal source of information is the Master's thesis completed in 1987 at UCLA by Farida Fahmy.

[3] No reference to Suzanne Langer is intended here. See the references to Farnell (1994) and Streek (1996) in the conclusion of the paper (page 22) regarding symbolic transformations of everyday actions.

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