

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON DANCE EDUCATION IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN FROM 2010 TO 2020

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### **Abstract**

*This paper critically examines the shifts, developments and changes in dance education across the region of the Southern Mediterranean (encompassing the locations of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Occupied Palestine, Lebanon and Syria). Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Southern Mediterranean documenting and analysing the narratives of over 50 dance educators, key issues are distilled and investigated in relation to the social, political and economic fabric of the region. Major points of discussion that are focused on include: the internationalization of dance teaching and learning in the region; working within contexts of conflict, occupation, trauma and restrictive political and religious ideologies; and creating new pedagogies, practices and processes for dance education that are relevant to the time and place that educators find themselves within. Through an examination of the past decade there is the potential to explore avenues and directions for the future of dance education in the region.*

### **Keywords**

*Short Vignettes, Contextual Considerations, Ethnography, Dance Education, Cultural Landscapes.*

## **Introduction**

From the four short vignettes above, diverse experiences of dance teaching and learning are shared. Amer, Fatima, Alaa and Kholoud are four of hundreds of dance practitioners I have met and spoken to over the past decade about the practices, histories, challenges, joys, concerns, and changes of dance education in the locations they live in. Their stories reveal not only their encounters of teaching, learning, making and performing dance, but also how their dance experiences intersect and overlap with social, cultural, political, religious, historical, and gendered concerns.

This paper examines the shifts, developments and changes in dance education across the region of the Southern Mediterranean (encompassing the locations of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Occupied Palestine, Lebanon and Syria). Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Southern Mediterranean documenting and analysing the narratives of hundreds of dance educators and those receiving dance education, key issues are distilled and investigated in relation to the social, political and economic fabric of the region. Major points of discussion include: the internationalization of dance teaching and learning in the region; and working within contexts of conflict, occupation, trauma and restrictive political and religious ideologies. Through an examination of the past decade there is the potential to explore avenues

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for the future of dance education in the region, while also revealing critical areas that can be considered in research and practice.

**Terminology, methodology, and contextual considerations:**

Within this paper there are key terms, methods and contextual considerations to outline to offer a clear and fluid reading of the text. I use the term ‘southern Mediterranean’ in part to provide parameters for the research. It has also been chosen as there is limited documented research investigating contemporary practices of dance in this region of the world, and few accounts of personal stories and narratives from those dancing within this particular geographical location. While this area of the world incorporates vast diversity and in no way can be considered homogenous, it has also been selected for the somewhat common cultural, linguistic and historical understandings. I have chosen to use the term ‘Southern Mediterranean’ to identify this part of the globe, rather than terms such as the ‘Middle East’, ‘Arab world’, ‘Middle east and North Africa’ or ‘Levant’. I have sidestepped these more established terms partly to avoid perpetuating colonial markers, and also to shift thinking of geographical space to be shaped around water – a medium that is fluid and shifting – rather than land, where borders, nation states, and nationalistic identity markers can confine and reduce the complexity that exists in a certain time and place.

My research over the past decade has focused on individual dancers’ narratives. Through focusing on individuals lived experiences I hope that a contribution can be made to more nuanced understandings of dance within the southern Mediterranean. Representations of dance in the southern Mediterranean have been subjected to much misinterpretation within literature, and neglect by dance scholars, often succumbing to distorted, romanticized, exoticized perceptions, understandings and images when being investigated or presented (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Some accounts of dance in the southern Mediterranean region tend to reiterate Orientalistic stereotypes of both the dance practices occurring and also the generalizations about those doing the dancing in the region. Within this scholarly dialogue about dance teaching and learning has been limited, with just a handful of scholars engaging in critical and constructive debate about the practices in the region. It is to be mentioned that the work by Associate Professor Nicholas Rowe (2010, 2011), Dr Nadra Assaf (2013a, 2013b), and Dr Krystel Khoury (2014, 2017) have paved the way for future studies to leverage off and offer important insights particularly in the contexts of Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine.

**Methodological meanderings, processes and meaning making:**

For the past ten years I have travelled throughout the southern Mediterranean region, living in Amman, Beirut and Ramallah, and teaching in Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Jbeil,

Alexandria, and Ramallah. My initial research in this part of the world was for my doctoral thesis (Martin, 2012) – which focused on the international education experiences of female contemporary dancers in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Morocco – and was prompted by my doctoral supervisor, Associate Professor Nicholas Rowe, who introduced me to ideas pertaining to dance in this part of the world. At the same time as doing my doctoral research, I engaged in the fieldwork for the book *Talking dance: Contemporary histories from the southern Mediterranean* (Rowe, Buck & Martin, 2014), where, through multi-sited ethnography I interviewed over 100 dance performers, teachers, and makers from a wide range of dance practices, spanning formal and non-formal contexts, in large cities to small towns. This led to further research publications focused on the distinct aspects of dance in the region, with a particular focus on education. I wrote a book titled *Women, dance and revolution* (Martin, 2016) which looked at the experiences of female contemporary dancers in the region in relation to the contemporary political landscape, most notably the uprisings, civil unrest, conflict, and occupation of the past decade. Most recently I have engaged in a project that reflects on the narratives of Syrian artists in exile in light of the Syrian Civil War (Martin, 2018, 2019).

Methodologically my practice is grounded in multi-sited ethnography where I seek to build relationships with those I work with to co-construct the narratives that are then shared in the research. This involves me spending varying amounts of time in each location, often making multiple visits, and building relationships with individuals and organizations over years. Sometimes I participate in the local dance activities, other times I have led workshops or classes for the communities I work with. I spend time observing rehearsals and performances, and getting to know particular individuals that are comfortable to share their experiences with me for the purpose of research.

Within my research I use ethnographic interviews that are informal, conversational and semi-structured in design (Davis, 2008; Patton, 1990), allowing the process to be flexible in format and style. Semi-structured interviews offer the researcher opportunities to ask questions in a different order or wording for each participant and for new topics to be introduced if and when they are required (Davis, 2008). The semi-structured interviews tend to build on diverse experiences I have while ‘in the field’. From watching moments of teaching, rehearsing or performance, I would see things that I then wanted to ask about in an interview. Through my participation in dance classes or workshops I found I developed a more embodied sense of the work that was happening in the region, and feel that this in turn led to richer conversations about their dance practices. The informal off the record conversations throughout the research

process were key to develop interview topic guides, understand contexts and to direct discussions in interviews. I then would conduct at least two audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with each participant. These varied in length between one and three hours.

Beyond the numerous informal conversations with dance practitioners that we had while squished into the back seats of taxis, sitting in local restaurants eating manaesh and drinking cold lemon and mint, or in dark theatre auditoriums while waiting for a rehearsal to begin, we also had conversations by telephone, over Skype or by Facebook chat and e-mail. Informal conversations through these modes allowed for the details of an individual's story to further emerge, which gave me, as the researcher, the ability to probe for more information if required and to have a sense of informality during the conversation, which often allowed the participant to relax and feel more at ease. Such informal conversational interviews have been referred to as "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 2006, p.302).

All interviews used in my research are audio recorded and transcribed in full. I seek further clarification on translations where required. The transcribed and typed interviews are returned to individuals for review, and they are given the opportunity to clarify, change, add or delete any information, while being offered the chance to reflect on their experiences further. In my research I tend to use the participants real names, rather than pseudonyms. This is to provide a sense of authenticity to the experiences and narratives, rather than remaining concealed behind false names, while also giving individuals ownership of their stories and words. With that said, there are times where due to safety concerns pseudonyms are used and identifiable details of individuals are kept to a minimum.

From the millions of words produced through hundreds of hours of audio-recorded interviews and from the multiple notebooks I filled with observation notes, musings and personal stories, meaning had to be made. From the multitude of words, anecdotes shared by the interviewees had to be found within lengthy transcripts through a thematic analysis process. I then selected, organized and entwined these anecdotes with personal observation notes and reflections. This process took a significant period of time. I became attached to stories. I was often tempted to include more of an interview rather than less or to use more words to describe an observation. I had to restrain myself, and often had to step away from the transcripts, narratives and notes, to return with a fresh set of eyes and a clear head to edit a little more ruthlessly.

In editing the interview transcripts, I worked to engage with a critical perspective. I tried to interrogate my own assumptions of what might be interesting or significant pieces of information shared by the dance practitioners I met. I sought to balance the voices of the interviewees with my own as the author. There was often so much I wanted to say around a

particular anecdote shared by one of the participants, but I had to remind myself that these were their stories, and that their words often said things with much more clarity than my own ever could. The integrity of the interviewees' experiences became the site of motivation first and foremost, and within this I was extremely conscious of how much each wanted to share about their journeys and simultaneously what might be of most interest readers to be drawn in to the narratives and ideas investigated.

### **Dance education in the southern Mediterranean: Context and issues**

Exploring the context and issues of contemporary dance education practices in the southern Mediterranean, it could be asked, where and how is dance education currently being taught and performed in the region? There are several established, sustainable training institutions and dance companies in locations across the southern Mediterranean region that have emerged from varied dance lineages, and dance education plays out in various ways in community and general education contexts. It can be noted that dance is not included within the formal education curriculums in the region. Some schools engage arts specialists to teach, and in some contexts, movement-based ideas are included in some theatre or physical education practices in formal education. However, it is to be noted that this varies greatly between locations, is somewhat limited, and the number of teaching specialists is not evenly distributed, nor are dance or movement practices actively articulated within the existing curriculums (Baltagi, 2007).

In contrast to Egypt, Syria, Morocco and Tunisia where there are state funded (or partially state funded) institutions that offer training (and where there is a company and professional employment) in contemporary dance, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Jordan have no such institutions. Rather, in these locations, for dancers to receive contemporary dance training, performing experience and professional work there is a reliance on dance institutions that are either partially subsidized by the government or foreign cultural organizations, or alternatively to attend entirely independent schools or companies.

It may be of assistance to provide a brief summary of some of the state funded, independent organizations and individuals who have influenced dance education in the region over the past decade. State funded institutions in the region include: Conservatoire National Choregraphique, Rabat (Morocco); Municipal Conservatory of Casablanca (Morocco); Institute of Higher Education of Dramatic Arts of Tunis (Tunisia); Higher Institution of Dramatic Arts (Syria); Cairo Contemporary Dance Center (Egypt); Higher Institute of Ballet (Egypt). It can be noted that some of these institutions have been in flux over the past ten years, with state funding and relationships shifting, and political instability limiting the resources and training that some of these organizations are able to offer at this time (particularly in the case

of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus).

Independent organizations that have offered a variety of dance education experiences include: Cie2k\_far (France-Morocco); Studio Bambou (Tunisia); Maqamat Dance Theatre / Takween: Beirut Contemporary Dance School (Lebanon); Al-Sarab Alternative Dance School (Lebanon); El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe (Palestine); Sareyyet Ramallah Troupe/First Ramallah Group for Music and Dance (Palestine); Al-Balad Theatre (Jordan); Studio Emad Eddin (Cairo). The intentions of these independent organizations vary, with some seeking to engage in professional level training, while others have a community outreach focus. Some of these organizations offer dance education to diverse age groups and throughout the year, while others focus on one specific age group (often youth) and deliver workshop or short course experiences rather than consistent training.

Some of the dance practitioners influencing the teaching and performance of dance in the region include: Taoufiq Izeddiou, Hind Benali, Bouchra Ouizguen, Anne-Lise Riscalla and Meryem Jazouli (Morocco); Noora Baker, Ata Khattab, Farah Saleh, Shyrine Ziadah, and Sharif Dar Zaid (Palestine); Dr. Nadra Assaf, Nada Kano, and Omar Rajeh (Lebanon); Dr Krystel Khoury (Lebanon / France); Karima Mansour, Dalia El Abd, and Hala Imam (Egypt); Adham Hafez (Egypt / Germany / U.S.A); Noura Murad (Syria) and Mey Sefan (Syria / Germany); Rania Kamhawi (Jordan). It can be noted that the practitioners mentioned above are just some of the many who are contributing to the dance education landscape in the southern Mediterranean region. Many of these individuals also work between the state funded institutions and independent organizations. In many cases they also work abroad, and some are now based in locations in Europe rather than their home locations (sometimes by choice, and other times due to the conditions in their home environments).

In connecting to this context, I have, over the years, found that some issues and concerns have remained steadfast and others have shifted. While the scope of this paper cannot allow for an extensive analysis of all of the key moments, problems and changes that have taken place in the region over the past decade, I can offer insight of major themes that I have witnessed reoccurring, and that I have questioned in my previous scholarship. These themes are: the internationalisation of dance education in the region; and dance education responding and negotiating changes in the social, political and cultural landscapes. Following on from unpacking these themes and some of the findings I have in relation to the issues, I conclude by asking the question ‘where to from here for dance education in the region?’ and offering possible directions and areas to be critically considered moving forward with development of dance education in the southern Mediterranean.

Internationalization of dance education over the past decade Travelling abroad to gain further dance education, or alternatively international exchange and cooperation for the purposes of dance education is not a new or unusual phenomenon (Scollieri, 2008). However, as the world becomes more integrated through globalisation, with greater mobility and fluidity of culture due to contemporary processes and technologies, students and teachers engaging with international education in dance are encountering a world that is changing rapidly, and they are moving between complex social and political landscapes to receive learning experiences and to deliver their pedagogies.

Many of the dancers and teachers I have met from the southern Mediterranean region have encountered dance in what could be described as an ‘international’ context – either because they themselves have travelled abroad to engage in their practice, or because they have worked with practitioners from other parts of the world in their home locations. What can be acknowledged is that the experiences shared are unique, and while they may have the common themes of training abroad in dance in a Western cultural context there are also many distinctions within their experiences. For example, some of the dancers I met trained abroad for a number of years, conversely some trained abroad for just a few months at a time. Some remained abroad for some time after training to teach, perform or create dance, others returned home immediately after completing their training. Some trained abroad in university dance programmes based around liberal arts philosophies, some sought conservatoire training, and others participated in workshops and residencies. Some have since returned home permanently, others are still moving between locations.

In the late 1990s and into the 2000s there was an approach of ‘going abroad’ to gain knowledge, experiences and skills that could then be applied to the dance contexts on returning home. Such an approach could be seen to align with the concept of the ‘native intellectual’ (Fanon, 1952/1970), and tended to position the foreign knowledge as more ‘advanced’, ‘sophisticated’, and ‘superior’, in turn perpetuating cultural hegemony and the assumptions that dance education abroad was ‘best’. The concept of the ‘international guest teacher’ has also permeated dance education in the region for decades. The international teacher visiting the region tends to stay for short periods of time to provide experiences and knowledge to a local group of students, with these visits often being supported by foreign funding and situated as part of cultural diplomacy programmes in the region. These practices, while offering a dance moment that potentially engages the community and stimulates interest and knowledge, are not necessarily enabling a sustainable local practice to emerge, but rather one that is reliant on foreign teachers being present and facilitating such activities. While international exchange in

this way certainly continues across the southern Mediterranean, there have been changes in how this internationalization plays out in the region and in certain locations within it.

The development of dance festivals and workshop programmes in the region have provided space and visibility to dance in the region in a general sense, and within these festivals and workshops there are educational aspects of the programmes delivered. Festivals such as the Beirut International Platform of Dance (BIPOD) have now been running for over a decade, and have become key events for dancers, teachers and choreographers in the region. Some workshop programmes are more regional in nature where most students are from the local area where the workshop is being hosted. Examples of this can be seen at the Cairo Contemporary Dance Workshop Programme which runs month long workshops three or four times per year in Cairo or the Takween Collective: Beirut Contemporary Dance School that runs workshop intensives between October and December every year (however, it can be noted that in recent workshops the Takween Collective have sought to include students from outside the southern Mediterranean region).

What has been noted over the past decade is that international guest teachers are now working for longer periods of time or on a more frequent basis with particular organizations, and in a more collaborative way in the region. There appears to be less of a 'west is best' mentality, and those in the region are becoming more selective in who they partner with internationally and how the relationship will be relevant and sustainable for the local dance and wider community. For example, dance workshop programmes engaging international teachers at organizations such as Al-Balad Theatre in Amman and El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe have been built over years, involving cohorts of international teachers working alongside local teachers, dancers and directors to tailor programmes and material that is of most interest and applicability to the dancers in each location. This has led to a shift in the dance practices in the region. There have been a number of instances where western dance techniques and practices (such as ballet, release technique or Graham technique for example) are taught in the region and then held on to with the idea of replicating and sustaining these as a way of developing a more 'sophisticated' dance practice. This could be identified as a hegemonic approach to the development of dance teaching and learning in the region. At the same time there have also been encounters where organizations and individuals in the region have actively rejected any dance form or approach that could be viewed as 'foreign', in turn taking what can be described as a counter-hegemonic way of managing dance education. While such views and approaches, still sit within the landscape of dance teaching and learning in the southern Mediterranean, over the past decade there has been a visible shift to what could be seen as an anti-hegemonic

approach to dance education. An anti- hegemonic approach to dance allows for a variety of approaches and practices to be used, with no intention of privileging one over another. Through this approach there has been a more genuine exchange and dialogue between international dance educators and those based in the region, to find ways to allow knowledge to be synthesised and applied based on the needs and concerns for the community, and at the same time an openness to include international practices and dialogue as part of the development of dance in the region. Within these more frequent international exchange and partnerships, it can be noted that the use of technology, social media and virtual platforms are often contributing to sustaining this international practice and dialogue alongside face-to-face meetings and teaching experiences. Simultaneously, artists from the region are working between locations on a more frequent basis, being based in multiple locations and shifting knowledge and practices between cities and countries. Dance practitioners, educators, and scholars such as Mey Sefan (Syria/Germany), Dalia Naous (France/Lebanon/Egypt), and Adham Hafez (Egypt/Germany/United States of America) are creating a fluid platform dance teaching and learning in the region.

Alongside these activities and practices that are creating a rich landscape for dance in the southern Mediterranean, there are also specific challenges being negotiated. It is to be acknowledged that the international partnerships that take place are still not always 'equal' in the power dynamics of the interactions, and could still be viewed as hegemonic at times. This in turn is still fostering a sense of 'exotizing' dance and dancers from the region. There is also the difficulty of shifting between locations, which causes some challenges in adapting practices and how to articulate creative work in diverse socio-cultural settings. Within this the notion of the 'international' dancer, learning experience, or company, still seems to hold more 'power' in the region, in contrast to local practitioners, teaching and learning resources, and organizations.

An experience shared by Karima Mansour, arguably Egypt's most well-known contemporary dancer and choreographer, illuminates some of the challenges that arise when returning home after training in contemporary dance in a Western cultural context. In an interview with Yasmine El-Rashidi, Mansour (2002) discusses her experiences of growing up in Beirut, Kuwait and Cairo, her training abroad at the London Contemporary Dance School, performing in Europe and then her subsequent return back to Egypt. She explains the circumstances for her return to Cairo: "I have an Egyptian passport [...] I realized that I was going to have to pack my bags and come home [...] after spending seven years dancing six hours a day I felt I had suddenly stopped" (p.5).

It appears that the journey between locations, cultures and contexts has not been easy for Mansour, raising questions over identity, family support and personal motivations in relation to dance. She explained how upon returning to Egypt she was continually negotiating societal perceptions and structures to continue her dance practices as a full-time profession. In more recent interviews with Ismail Fayed (Fayed, 2011a, 2011b), Mansour shares her experiences of working in Egypt and abroad and the presumptions that accompany the complex situation of being a dancer and choreographer from the “Middle East” (Fayed, 2011a). Mansour explains that she perceives there to be particular expectations of her work, specifically by those observing her work outside of the southern Mediterranean region, where there is an assumption that her creative work should draw on specific themes such as belly dance, folklore, Sufism or Zar. She explains, “my inspiration from my ‘culture’ is subtler, I don’t need to have a label or flag on my work” (Fayed, 2011a, p.3). It can also be seen that there are also expectations within her home environment, and Mansour hints that her work is not appreciated in the same way in Egypt as it is abroad (El-Rashidi, 2002). Mansour explains how, when working in Egypt, she finds the context and environment predominantly values artists that are either “old or foreign” (2002, p.6). This could possibly be a very challenging notion for an artist, who is not considered to be ‘old’ nor foreign, and who wishes to pursue creative practices that are seen to be valued in her home environment. It could be seen that the experiences shared by Mansour reveal issues surrounding alienation, confusion over place, home, location, pressure on creative work and expectations of her work inside and outside of her home environment.

Dance education responding and negotiating changes in the social, political and cultural landscapes Dance education within the southern Mediterranean region negotiates the complex social, political and cultural landscapes of the location. Over the past decade events such as the upheavals and huge shifts of politics in locations such as Egypt and Tunisia, and the trauma and ongoing crisis of the Civil War in Syria and the Occupation of the West Bank of Palestine, have marked the dance practices occurring in the region. While some of these conflicts are not at all new, others have emerged powerfully and swiftly, paving new trajectories for how dance might fit within the social and political fabric of a place. The complexity of how dance fits within these changes, or indeed how these changes fit within dance, is reflected upon in the following narrative from Amie, a dancer from Cairo. Amie was a ballet dancer in the Cairo Opera Ballet company, and is now considered a ‘superstar’ belly dancer in the wider Arab world. In late 2011 Amie said:

I remember in the last interview there was a small part where I was talking about dance and how it’s seen in Egypt. I mentioned that dancers of various styles rarely mix and there’s really

not a lot of interaction, between the public and dancers, or even among dancers themselves. In the earlier interview I mentioned that I was curious to see how the public would react, “If dancers could march right into Tahrir Square and have a movement revolution”.

**Ironically you asked the question, how would ann el dawla react?**

This was all in the same section where I was expressing my views about movement being an integral part of everyone’s life in Egypt - and about 7 months later we had our revolution, and sure enough state security showed us their reaction! Just thinking back at this section of the interview is giving me goose-bumps.

The first day of the revolution, January 25, 2011, I went down to Tahrir Square. I didn’t really know where I was going or what was going to happen but as I saw the development of artistic activity that was happening there I realized how prophetic - disturbing, emotional, bittersweet - my words really were! As the first million-man march happened, the Square turned into a theater; installations were set up, a screen, street art, break-dancers, singers, and even an exorcism dance. It was amazing to see so much artistic self-expression emerge. And in the midst of it all there were horrible disasters, people being injured and hurt - but the art prevailed. I was there with my camera on the day of the camel stampede, and it was amazing to see people from all walks of life creatively come up with hilarious slogans, caricatures, more than happy to be photographed. Everyone wanted to be seen and heard - the show must go on!

There has been so much speculation about why the revolution happened in Egypt. I think people expected the reason to be poverty. Yes, Egypt has high poverty rates, but from my interactions down at the Square, poverty was the last thing on people’s mind. I saw invalids in wheelchairs carrying colourful signs, families who had nothing to eat marching with flags, people who put themselves at the front-line risking losing their life, who were threatened to lose their jobs and who knew that there would be repercussions on their own lives, they were not likely to be thinking about money. I think this revolution was about respect for self-expression. People who went down to the Square were tired of being kept in the dark. Even if it was their last day on earth they wanted their chance to perform, and they did. Even as Mubarak kept refusing to step down and it became increasingly frustrating and dangerous, people were still taking pleasure in coming up with more outrageous forms of self-expression, ways of performing and funnier slogans and that became the only positive thing that came out of those long days of waiting.

I think all artists here are at the moment in a bit of a creative vacuum just because of the nature of things now. We’re worried about personal security and this curfew is blocking everyone’s creativity. Egyptian artists sleep all day and get creative all night, so the thing of being back at home by 2 a.m. is not sitting well with most of us. I think the creative block will be pretty much

shattered when life returns to normal - artists get together and talk and generally the talk turns to politics at which point everybody gets depressed and switches the conversation.

If the revolution continues as it started with the same initial goal of self-expression I think dance in Cairo will experience a major boom. Unless there is a major political manipulation that happens that tries to refocus people, which has been the growing fear among artists the past few weeks.

In the meantime, of course, we're just waiting to be creative again. I'm considering this the time where "Egypt is closed for renovation" and I'm waiting until things get better.

Amie's narrative is just one of many that reveals how dance sits within, alongside and around wider political and social events, upheavals and challenges that have occurred in the region over the past decade. As I have met with dancers across the region they have shared stories of seeking to sustain dance learning in times of occupation, for example Noora shared her perspective as a dance educator working in Occupied Palestine:

The travel bans and restrictions on travel have inhibited where we can perform and train over the years. These things have loosened up and not so many dancers were being put in prison – however the prison itself became within Palestine. So, for example, I could travel to France to take a workshop, but I cannot go to Gaza or I cannot go to Nabulus at times. With this travel you get to interact and work more with people outside, and so I went different training and workshops abroad, and it made me realise that many of the young dancers that I interacted with and met abroad when I was 16 or 17, had this very bitter experience with dance because they were technically trained very well, and they wanted to make it, to become dancers, but they didn't really know why. I felt I was in contrast to this, I really knew why I wanted to dance, I felt that there was a desperate need for me to dance and to teach others dance because of the conditions that we find ourselves in living in Palestine.

Others have reflected on the challenges of developing dance education in times of war, when dance teaching and learning tends to slip to the side of more pressing concerns. As Ahmad, a dancer and teacher from Damascus now living in Amsterdam, said:

The dance school I had in Yarmouk Camp with my partner kept going for quite a long time after the War started. It was only when the Camp was bombed and the buildings became unsafe because of the fighting that we stopped teaching there. People had started to take their kids out of the classes because they were worried about them getting to and from the studio safely, and going to dance class became the last thing on the list of things people needed to do. It was really sad when we left the studio, and while we kept teaching some small groups in our homes and on the rooftop of a friends building, it was not the same.

There are then the times where the trauma of ongoing conflict, instability and has shaped how dance education is delivered, perceived and welcomed. As Nadia, a dance teacher from Beirut explained:

I have been teaching in Lebanon for many, many years – in war time, and in peace time. What I have noticed is that in the hard times, when there is war or the conditions for living are hard, we need dance and art more than ever. I see that it is the thing that sustain our spirits, and in teaching dance in those times I have found it to be most rewarding. I can give people the chance to escape for a moment, an hour, just one class. They have a focus and I have a focus that is not based on some fighting or the struggles we face. It is just about learning, enjoyment, coming together as a group and having a positive focus.

While the experiences noted above reveal how dance education navigates, is challenged by or is prompted by the various social and political contexts, there have been developments in how dance practices might be ‘speaking’ to the needs to the contexts in which they are taking place. For example, there are curriculums and structures developed in some locations that are clearly seeking to attend to local needs, and provide dance education in a culturally responsive way. For example, El Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe have spent several years working carefully on building a training programme that suits the cohorts of dancers that work with the group and the repertoire that they perform. A number of senior dancers and trainers in the group, such as Noora Baker, Ata Khattab and Sharaf Dar Zaid, have engaged in dance and arts administration learning abroad and have synthesised a variety of knowledge to develop the practices and processes the group engages with, while also networking and inviting international teachers to work with the group and co-construct meaning of what dance education in Palestine might look like.

Within the political challenges and tensions that exist in the region there are individuals and organizations that are illustrating how dance education is taking place right through to tertiary level. The Lebanese American University in Jbeil created a Performing Arts major with a strong thread of dance courses. Dr. Nadra Assaf who has been leading this initiative paved the way with the annual International Dance Day Festival held at the LAU campus with the intention of promoting dance and sharing dance education opportunities with a diverse community.

Alongside the development of dance programmes in the region, there has been a growing visibility of dance through mainstream media shared on television, social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. The visibility of mainstream dance, such as the TV show ‘So you think you can dance’, is

sharing dance to a wider audience, and motivating individuals to take dance classes. Many of the people I have met in the region have talked to me about how they have watched dance or learnt dance through media. For some they tell of stories of learning dances from YouTube in their bedrooms for years before they took their first dance class in a studio or with a teacher in person. For others it was watching a performance on television that led them to seek out a dance class where they could learn that particular dance style. Therefore, private dance studios are flourishing in some parts of the southern Mediterranean region, and classes in styles such as hip hop, salsa, and tango are in high demand.

### **Conclusion**

The political contexts and conservative waves that ebb and flow across the region inhibit the visibility of dance in some locations at various times. It can be challenging to simply rent a space to create a dance studio, or there are people who feel pressure from family to stop dancing due to the social and / or religious views of what this might mean about the individual. The censorship that exists in some locations in the region can delay performances, change artistic visions and require careful negotiation. The places where dance happens might be a little obscure or 'hidden' when compared to other parts of the world, and the forms that dance takes might shift based on the expectations and assumptions of those teaching, learning, performing and watching dance.

The challenge of having dance excluded from general education still exists, and to ask for this to be included in curriculum across the region may seem like a bold ask. School resources are limited, in some locations the school system itself is fragile, or in tatters. The tensions between religious and secular views impact on teaching and learning, and the more general understanding and appreciation of and arts practice such as dance and how this has a wider application beyond technique and performance influences how dance may be valued (or not) within learning.

Dance education in the Middle East is complicated. It is diverse. It is sporadic. It is exciting. It is frustrating. It is all of these things, all at the same time. Often those working at the grassroots level are the people who can most eloquently offer reflections and deep insights as to why dance education in the region is valuable. It is the stories of the hundreds of people I have talked with that have revealed so much about not only dance and education, but the social and political considerations that shape the teaching and learning of dance in this part of the world. An example of this was revealed to me in an interview with Jordanian dance educator, director and choreographer, Rania Kamhawi. Rania said:

From my perspective the arts are not a luxury, we cannot treat the arts as a

luxury. The arts have to be an integral part of developing the next generation and encompass and interfere with the lives of people. Arts have to mobilise people. The question of “should we be living while other people are dying?” is something that we often get asked in the Middle East. From my perspective it is a responsibility to give people hope and lightness, to let them really live their lives.

The Middle East is facing extraordinary social and political challenges, some of them old and some of them new, and dance education is intrinsically interwoven with questions of political, social and cultural power. Dance education in this part of our world demands our attention and understanding as informed global citizens, and I clearly believe that dance education in the Middle East moves beyond aesthetic engagement or creative expression, it has the potential to act as a form of resistance, protest, peace, tolerance and change within society.

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