



We exist... Hawiyya Dance Company and El-Funoun rehearse *Curfew* Photo: José Farinha



RESIS

The arrest of an Iranian schoolgirl who posted videos of

-TANCE

her dancing shows how dance can ignite protest. Sally Howard meets artists

MOVE -

and activists who believe in dance's revolutionary potential.

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They danced in public parks. They danced on the streets of nighttime Tehran as men heckled and spat. They removed their veils and danced, in their tens of thousands, in video clips on social media, under the hashtags #freeMaedeh, #letsdancetosupport and #dancingisnotacrime. If the July 2018 arrest of 17-year-old Tehran schoolgirl Maedeh Hojabri by Iran's morality police was merely the latest volley in the Iranian state's decades-long attack on the 'moral corruptions' of dance, it was also a watershed.

'Maedeh allowed us to say enough is enough,' says Iranian feminist activist Masih Alinejeh, who danced in solidarity with Hojabri and campaigns against Iran's mandatory hijab through her online movement #WhiteWednesdays. 'Iranian women are saying we no longer dance to the tune of the regime,' she continues. Hojabri came to the attention of Iran's Gasht-e Ershad (literally: 'guidance patrol') for posting videos of herself dancing on her Instagram account; with and without a hijab, in western and Iranian dance styles. Sentenced to a month's imprisonment for indecency, Hojabri quickly confessed – in a state TV appearance decried by activists as 'coerced' – to 'breaking moral norms.'

Dance has long been a lightning rod for conservative and religious zealots. At the height of the 16th-century European witch-hunts, tens of thousands of peasant women were sentenced to death on the evidence



Enough is enough... above and below, Hawiyya Dance Company; opposite, Maedeh Hojabri on Instagram
Photos: José Farinha; Maedeh Hojabri

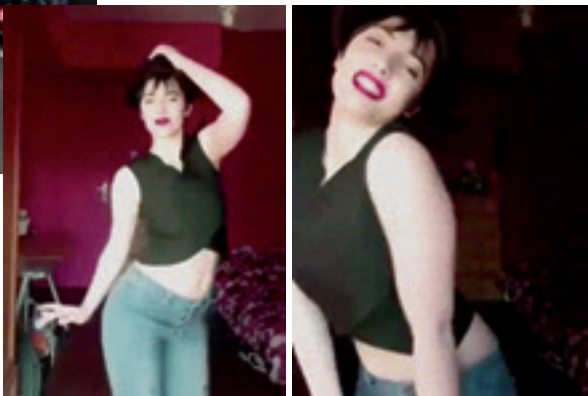
of ritual or communal dancing. 17th-century England saw high puritan Oliver Cromwell banning all forms of public dance as incitements to sin. Public dancing, remarkably, remains illegal in Sweden, and was only recently legalised in Japan following a 70-year ban. However, in modern times the assault on dance has been chiefly driven by certain factions of hardline Islamism. Although dance is not referred to in the Koran, recent decades have seen a rise in fatwas signalling dance as 'haram' (forbidden) or 'makrooh' (detestable). (Many moderate Islamic authorities and individuals challenge such interpretations of scripture.)

The religiously contested Middle East represents the frontline of hardline Islamists' attack. In Mohamed Morsi's post-revolutionary Egypt (2012-2013), gripped by the conservative Muslim Brotherhood, vigilante attacks on dance and dancers became commonplace, with Morsi denouncing dance as a violation not only of sharia law but of the Egyptian constitution. Under the current military-led presidency of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi these clampdowns have redoubled: Egyptian dance schools and performance spaces are regularly shut down and dancers arrested and imprisoned on charges of indecency. Meanwhile, in Iran, where women have been banned from dancing in public since the 1979 revolution, rising social conservatism under the clerical oligarchy of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has propelled further suppressions, including the 2014 arrest and lashing of six men and women for a video that showed them dancing on Tehran's rooftops to Pharrell Williams' Happy.

But events in the Middle East point to dance's revolutionary potential, as well as its plight. Egypt's Tahrir Square was the cradle

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of the 2011 uprising that demanded the overthrow of president Hosni Mubarak's autocratic 30-year reign. It became the scene of 'a theatre of immediacy,' according to historian Mark LeVine. 'From January 2011 to late 2012 occupied Tahrir was a rolling carnival,' he says. 'Magicians played, poets rhymed, artists painted murals and street theatre and dance performances replayed the events of the day.'

For LeVine this youth and leftist protest and similar festival-like occupations of Tunisia's capital, Tunis, and the 2011 anti-capitalist occupation of Wall Street, bespeak the importance of art to revolution. 'Art has always been a handmaiden to revolution,' he explains. 'It's impossible to move large masses of people onto the streets and convince them to risk everything without an artistic component to convey an emotional message.'

In *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (1995), American academic and dancer Barbara Browning argues that vernacular dance traditions often become sites of battle between tradition and modernity; state power and marginalised groups; and emancipating and objectifying depictions of women. In 19th-century Brazil, fear of the growing power of freed African slaves led to prohibitions on the slave-born dance/martial art form capoeira, so the folkloric samba was often used as a cover by capoeirists. During the military dictatorship of the 60s and 70s, however, samba was reclaimed as a symbol of resistance, with the 'blocos-afros' bands of the Bahia region emerging as expressions of a militant black identity.

The history of dance in slave resistance and community formation is also evident in north American and Caribbean vernacular dance, like

the cakewalk or the foot-stamping baboula of 19th-century New Orleans. On 18th-century slaving ships, historian Alan Rice has written, 'Africans were forced to dance on deck for exercise. Many took advantage of this to bond and communicate with their shipmates by dancing steps remembered from their past in Africa. This was to continue in the Americas in dances, religious ceremonies and other musical forms.'

It was frustration with self-referential contemporary dance that led British-Portuguese dancer and choreographer Sylvia Ferreira to explore dance's potential as a political tool. 'I began to feel dancing was self-indulgent,' she says. 'I reached out to people but only in this privileged white, middle-class context.' A chance meeting with Palestinian choreographer Ahmed Massoud led to her involvement, and later co-directorship, of Al Zaytouna, a company of European and Palestinian dancers who performed the traditional Arabic folk dance, dabke.

'Dabke was traditionally danced when houses were built and land fertilised,' Ferreira says. 'So when Palestinians dance dabke today it is in resistance to the erasure of their land and indigenous culture. They dance to say: this is our history; we exist.'

One of Ferreira's memorable pieces with Al Zaytouna was based on the tragedy of a refugee boat that had capsized en route from Gaza, killing 800 people; members of the troupe had known people on board. With Al Zaytouna, Ferreira used dabke to protest at arms fairs and at the British Museum (to highlight the plundering of colonial artefacts). In 2015 she was involved in an anti-UKIP cabaret at party leader Nigel Farage's local pub in Kent, featuring dance performances inspired by



quotes from UKIP leaders. ‘A UKIP councillor had said that gay people cause climate change, so we had gay dancers in glitter pants singing It’s Raining Men and we had migrants in toy cars causing traffic jams: a reference to Farage saying he was late for a meeting because of all of the immigrants clogging up the M25.’

Today Ferreira runs her own all-women dabke company, Hawiyya, featuring dancers from Palestine, Algeria, Syria, Italy and the UK. They recently choreographed *Journey: Safar*, performed in London at Shakespeare’s Globe and the V&A as part of Refugee Week which explored narratives around journeying and womanhood. They danced classical dabke – a jubilant synchrony of jumping and spinning, heel stomping and low and high kicks – to a diverse, and in some cases tearful, audience. ‘Women danced with us who were from Ghana, Taiwan, Zimbabwe,’ Ferreira says. ‘There was this shared understanding of what dabke means: speaking of lost land and continuing tradition. It was very emotional.’

Ferreira is organising a trip to the West Bank for spring 2019, where Hawiyya hope to perform with modern dabke company El Funoun, known for versions of dabke featuring high kicks and afro beats. Like many Palestinian artists, the company is frequently the target of crackdowns by Palestinian and Israeli state authorities.

Other powerful uses of dance as a gesture of dissent are interdisciplinary, and transnational. In 2011 Iranian-German artist Anahita Razmi made *Roof Piece Tehran*, a re-staging of American choreographer Trisha Brown’s seminal 1971 *Roof Piece*, originally performed across the rooftops of New York’s SoHo. *Roof Piece Tehran* is a filmed performance of 12 dancers dressed in red, improvising movements in sequence across 12 rooftops in Tehran, exhibited on 12 separate screens. Razmi used rooftops of disused buildings and construction sites, so nervous were locals about involvement in the project. ‘In the [presidential election] protests of 2009 Iranian rooftops became political spaces, as protestors chanted and waved banners from

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Shared understanding... Hawiyya perform *Safar* at Shakespeare's Globe Photo: José Farinha

them,' Razmi says. The piece also illuminates the disparity between artistically blooming 1970s New York and modern-day Iran where 'there are no dance performances and for artists there are strict rules every exhibition has to go through.'

In an online video, a mestra in a pink baseball cap, foil legwarmers and a face-concealing bandana counts in. The three sambistas are variously dressed in silver masks, baby pink wigs and flamingo-pink skirts and trousers. As the surdo rhythm kicks in, they strut in sequence: with arms outstretched, elbows at their waist, in the carnival samba step nicknamed 'delivering the pizza', then twisting 360 degrees with their arms perpendicularly lifted in the 'airplane'. Inspired by the blocos-afros bands of 1960s Brazil, Rhythms of Resistance are an anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-capitalist network of amateur and professional dancers and musicians who use samba dance and music as a method of protest. Dressing in pink and silver to denote their use of what they dub 'tactical frivolity', ROR samba activists have protested climate pollution at Heathrow airport, Global South impoverishment at IMF meetings and neoliberal capitalism at G8 summits and they were instrumental in the shut-down of the 2000 World Bank/IMF summit in Prague. Their non-hierarchical online community offers online videos teaching samba steps, as well as tips for building DIY samba drums and snares from fruit pie tins and bins.

'Frivolity is disarming, in the literal and metaphorical sense,' an ROR member, who requested anonymity, says. 'There is no opposition, in our view, between strength of belief in a cause and creative forms of resistance.'

The networking potential of digital tech is behind much of the global outpouring of protest art we've seen since the dawn of the 21st century, says Mark LeVine. 'Digital technologies have profoundly reshaped the production and dissemination of art. Professional quality films can be shot cheaply by young people – even in moments of revolutionary upheaval – and watched by anyone, anywhere, at any time. The Arab uprisings produced some of the most innovative art the world has seen in generations. It was just the beginning.'

Sylvia Ferreira has silenced the nagging internal voice that accused her of creating culture for the privileged few. 'I now know that dance can feel like a revolutionary act,' she says.