

# FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

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COLUMN ONE

## IN CAIRO, SEQUINS, SILK AND MEMORIES

By Jeffrey Fleishman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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CAIRO -- In a shop that looks and feels like the inside of a vaudeville trunk, Ahmed Diaa Eddin sits amid beads and sequins bargaining hard with a woman from Saudi Arabia over satin and chiffon.

“200.”

“The price is 400.”

“200.”

He won't budge. Neither will she. There's a stare-down, but Diaa Eddin hasn't spent 40 years designing belly dance costumes to let his wares go cheap. He knows the contours of a woman's body and the intricacies of her mind. He waits. The night outside the open window is cool; he's listened to the street below since he was a boy in this same cluttered room watching his father sew purses for rich ladies. The Saudi woman makes another offer, the deal is done. She walks out followed by her happy husband.

“I'm famous. Google me and I pop up all over,” Diaa Eddin says. “Nobody taught me this art. I mastered it. I am the first person in Egypt to export belly dancing costumes. I am the oldest designer in my trade. I love to watch the dancer. I love the way the costume flows. The truth is, though, you may design a beautiful, elaborate costume, but if an ordinary woman wears it, it won't attract much attention.”

He ponders this for a while, sort of lets it hang there, so you feel his pain. In need of a shave and with glasses resting on his bald head, Diaa Eddin rummages through his shop, a sparkly, rhinestoned, un-spooled thread kind of place with fading photographs of dancers, a computer misted in dust and, hanging above it all, an airbrushed picture of himself with a smirk that suggests he might whisper something intoxicating or perhaps slightly offensive into your ear.

At 60, there's a hint of nostalgia about him, as if somewhere along the way he slipped out of a Peter Lorre movie and can't quite find his way back to those times when the best part of his craft and the arousal it evoked were a swatch of silky fabric, a sliver of imagination and the mystery of the unseen.

Egypt's best dancers have worn his costumes, women who can earn up to \$3,000 for a single show. He knows the nightclubs, the orchestras, the bartenders, the discreetly sipped

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drink, the scent of the water pipe, and that feeling when the lights go down and the tables fall quiet as the tabla drum sounds and the silhouette appears, sometimes in high heels, sometimes not.

“Tastes change, beauty stays the same,” he says. “But, you know, the golden days of belly dancing are gone. It’s deteriorating all over Egypt. Most of my costumes are exported. This country has many dancers, but the quality is poor. I blame these music videos. They’re harming belly dancing. You get this director who hires five or six girls, dresses them in belly dancer outfits, but they’re not professional. They can’t dance. But people see them on TV and they get hired in clubs. This is what’s wrong.”

Even Mohammed Ali Street, the fabled strip of belly dancing, is not what it used to be. The artists have slipped away to other neighborhoods, leaving behind upholsterers and tailors, men with swift hands and steady feet working vintage Singer sewing machines. It’s a street that shows you a lot, but tells you little, a street of sweat and wrinkled cotton suits, of crinkled newspapers and rambling conversations, a tiny cramped universe shared by cucumber sellers, the ancient professors and the fast-talking cellphone salesmen.

“I began as a costume designer on this street when I was 16, but I’ve been in and out of nightclubs since I was 9,” Diaa Eddin says. “I was a loser at school. But if I hadn’t been a loser back then I wouldn’t be famous today. . . . Sometimes a woman will come to me today. She wants an outfit, but she doesn’t have big breasts, so I have to do a bit of cosmetic surgery on the costume to make her look bigger.”

Women come and go, flicking through catalogs, scrutinizing folds of satin and Lycra, shaking bead boxes. Some of them are shopping for bridal gifts while others, like the Saudi woman, who wore a hijab and covered all but her eyes, want to entice husbands in the privacy of their homes. Some belly dance for art, many ripple and shake their hips for exercise, especially in Scandinavia and Germany, which imports more of Diaa Eddin’s costumes than any other nation, including the United States, which comes in third.

“Have you heard that story about the American woman?” he says, settling back in his chair, swiveling every now and then and standing up to stretch his legs. “She had a spinal injury and started belly dancing for rehabilitation. She came to Egypt and danced for three years. It’s a famous story.”

Diaa Eddin enjoys imparting knowledge, stitching together a bit of this and a bit of that, giving thoughts shape. He’s busy, but in no particular hurry, talking to a customer, answering the phone, looking over a costume, moving through his office like a magpie, collecting needles, spindles and ideas.

“Belly dancing is a legacy from the time of the pharaohs,” he says. “Ancient Egyptians believed the belly dancer had an easier time in labor during childbirth. The costume is a sign of joy. It shows the allure of a woman’s body. Egyptian women are inherently good at

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belly dancing. I don't know why, they just are. Today, though, it's the foreigners who like the traditional costumes and the Egyptians prefer the more revealing, tighter-fitting style."

The office is crowded. A professional dancer, in a ponytail and a pink sweat shirt, sits next to Diaa Eddin. She prefers Lycra to chiffon. He has lost a number of clients. Renowned dancers Hendeyya and Sahar Hamdi became devout Muslims. They wear hijabs and keep their midriffs covered, part of an Islamic revival here in recent years.

"I think there were motives other than religion," he says. "Some of the dancers and actresses taking up the veil now just want to get married."

It bothers him, but he doesn't linger. There are new orders to fill. Everyone on Mohammed Ali Street knows who he is. Their children know and their grandchildren know. He's the man with the lighted window and the tiny neon sign with the curvy girl. He's got pricked fingers and miles of thread, and the women come, slipping through the grit of ordinary life to buy something exotic. They hurry home through the night as if someone just handed them a bag of magic. Diaa Eddin keeps working, wandering the cramped rooms of his shop, plucking fabric from racks, arranging sequins and beads.

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*Noha El-Hennawy of The Times' Cairo Bureau contributed to this report.*