



2018 - The Year of ITI



*Original version (submitted by the author)*

## **International Dance Day Message 2018 – Arab Countries**

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EAST, WEST: Dance dialogue

Amman. Sunday, 26 August 1979. King Hussein and American-born Queen Nour enter the royal box of the Palace of Culture. Ovation. Jordanian anthem, American anthem.

Silence.

The curtain opens, to reveal royalty of another nature: a petite woman standing very tall in her sequined dress and long black gloves, an ancient-looking throne by her side. She bows, smoothes herself onto the throne.

### **MARTHA GRAHAM**

In a half whisper, she speaks about her company, her ballets. When she comes to the body, the King before her, a fine sportsman, listens with warmth and understanding. Her words carry me to my own beliefs: to me, our body is a temple. In it life begins; in it is the soul; in it the heart, that muscle that pumps love; its brain is the power of thought; good and evil struggle within its depths. The body brings movement, essence of life, to its most sublime form of expression: DANCE.

My attention returns to Martha. As though she had lived all her life in our part of the world, she speaks of the sands that come and go, covering up the traces of invaders. “THE VOICE OF THE LAND DICTATES WHO REMAINS” she declares.

Oh yes Martha! we have been here for perhaps more than humanity remembers. The sands of our deserts, the waves of our seas have given our women the graceful and seductive sway of hips which has travelled to the farthest confines of Spain. It is said a poet once exclaimed: “Fa la haramouna Allah menkom” – “May God not deprive us of you”, which, once the guttural difficulties of the h was dropped became “falamenko” to finally be “flamenco”. A true tale? It

does not matter, it may just be a beautiful lie! .... And are not poetry and dance two magnificent lies? yet lies that reflect the DEPTH of human feeling.

Whereas desert and sea gave us undulating movement, high mountains and revolt against invaders gave birth to vigorous male stamping of feet and jumps in rhythms wild as tempest air. Sword dances and equestrian choreography accompany them. Each region over this vast Arab world defined its own style and colours.

The first expression of dance, however, was prayer, and the “three religions of the Book”, as we call them, were born on our shores. The movements and gestures of prayer are thus considered a form of spiritual dance. Their origins may travel back farther than we can trace, but they are certainly the purest, oldest and most mysterious expressions of the human body.

A small wink is due here to pharaonic dances, to fathom the age of dance in our region. They were PAINTED in angular style, but most certainly the actual movements themselves must have been as fluent and stupendous as the waters of the Nile.

With the advent of modern times and the arrival of foreign residents, classical ballet and contemporary dance studios opened, and the practice of dance moved to more specialized levels. From simple rural celebrations or occasional sophisticated urban social entertainment, it rose to professionalism and entered the theatre.

But, back to Jordan. Defying the war still raging in Lebanon, I risked persuading 10 students to travel with me to Amman to see the Martha Graham Company, but more particularly for the privilege of seeking a master class. Company dancer Peter Sparling conducted it with enthusiasm, and the experience was great. Applause, big smiles, hearty hugs, and of course, as the head of the group, I said a few words to thank Peter. He looked at us in utter surprise. “YOU are thanking ME? It is lwho should thank YOU. Here we came, I from the U.S., you from Lebanon, from Jordan and elsewhere. We sat on the floor, and suddenly we were all speaking the same language”.

Indeed, whether we sit on the floor, hang on to a barre, fly in the air, stamp our boots on some mountain peak, whether we wave our hips lasciviously under a tent or in a nightclub, our language binds us together! For dance is not only an expression of feelings, a celebration, or just entertainment. DANCE IS A STATEMENT. A statement that says more eloquently than any spoken language, that we are ONE.