

As Cairo prepares for the 3rd international Oriental Dance Festival, Ahlan wa Sahlan, next month, the Reporter attended the 7th Oriental Dance Fest in Sinsheim, Germany. Samia Fouad reports.

Shimmies in Sinsheim

Every year for the past seven years, droves of belly dance devotees have converged on Sinsheim for the "Sterne des Orients Im Temple Des Tanzes," the town's Oriental Dance Festival. For those of you unfamiliar with the little town of Sinsheim, it is located in the South of Germany, below Frankfurt, and close to Heidelberg. Perhaps its most notable feature being the Auto and Technik Museum, it is hardly the place you would expect to find Middle Eastern dance performed on such a scale. If anything, this yearly gathering indicates the rising popularity of belly dancing in Europe and the rest of the Western world, where it can now be found in the most unlikely places, small country towns, suburban evening colleges, even now as part of a university degree program (Orange Coast College, California).

A GRIPPING PERFORMANCE

The main event of the festival is an Oriental Dance gala, held at the Sinsheim Stadhalle (this year on April 27th), which is always packed to capacity for the event. Some guests drive from miles around just to attend. Zory Halter, a skilled belly dance performer and teacher, organizes the festival each year. The best of her students are selected to perform along with other dancers of renown invited from all

around Germany, and a special guest star from abroad, an honor given to only one dancer each year. This year the invitation went out to the Australian belly dancer, Caroline, who lives and performs in Egypt. Shows included some authentic *Saidi* (Upper Egyptian) stick dances by Egyptian-born Mahmoud Mustafa. He also performed a delightful *Fellaheen* (country-folk) dance with the German dancer, Beate Müller, that was both humorous and authentic in costume and style. Another dancer, Fatima Serin, of Kurdish origin, who has trained in Egypt, performed an accomplished feminine version of the stick dance in an *Assiuti* dress. Zory and Sula Ambra brought to life the Oriental cabaret style, complete with elaborate sparkling rhinestone studded bra-and-skirt style costumes. The program included certain "Western" touches, as well, such as the sword dance, where a sword is balanced on the dancer's head and the "dance of the seven veils". Although not originating from the fundamentally Egyptian dance, foreign dancers have added these props as a way of capturing the Western audience's attention.

THE EGYPTIAN CONNECTION

The dominant style of the show in Sinsheim is

always noticeably Egyptian, which is unusual outside of Egypt as many western countries have cultivated and adopted a corrupted variation of the dance, often referred to as the "American" style. However it is not so surprising once you learn of Zory's connections to Egypt. Zory is a true 'Egyptophile' and travels here regularly to study with the world-renowned Egyptian Oriental dance teacher and choreographer, Raqia Hassan. She also has numerous acquaintances in Egypt and hence has a deeper understanding of the culture, as she is often invited to weddings and other occasions of which dancing is an integral part. Not only that, but also the presence of Egyptian teachers in Germany, such as Mo Mo Kadous (formerly of the Mahmoud Reda

Troupe), and regular visits by Egyptian teachers, including Raqia Hassan and Aida Nour, contribute to the quality of the performances presented.

The Reporter spoke to Zory about the perception of the dance in Germany. It is interesting to find that, there, unlike in some other Western countries, belly dancing carries with it some negative associations. "Many Germans have seen scantily clad Turkish dancers both in Germany and Turkey and have hence formed the opinion that it is akin to a strip tease," she adds. "The people are surprised when I tell them that I even have children performing in my show, then they come to see and realize what this art form is about." Every year, more and more people are converted as the festival continues to grow in size.

AN ARTISTIC EXPATRIATE

One has to ask why is such a dance so enticing to foreigners, while in its own home, its allure is fading? Ten years ago in Cairo one was swamped with choices of which bellydance *fanana* (artist) to go and see. Famous dancers filled the scene, such

