

Rose Martin

Dancing in Exile: Performance, Protest, and the Syrian Civil War

On October 22, 2012, Mey Sefan, a Syrian dancer and choreographer, left Damascus alone. Carrying one suitcase, she made the harrowing trip to the north of Syria and over the border into Turkey. She then negotiated her way across Europe, arriving in Germany in late 2013. In 2017, I sit with Mey in the tiny Berlin apartment she shares with three other Syrian artists in exile, and she tells me about her life now as a refugee in Germany. We sip steaming hot Arabic coffee. Speaking slowly, Mey says to me, “artists are the makers of new myths. I might not be in Syria anymore, but I am still a Syrian artist, responsible for making a new Syrian history.”

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 5.1 million people have fled Syria since the Civil War began in 2011.¹ Among those who have escaped the horror of the conflict are dancers such as Mey Sefan. Other dancers remain in Syria, unable or unwilling to leave for various reasons, and often unable to continue making, performing, or teaching dance due to the political conditions.

To those in Europe or North America, *dance* and the *civil war* are concepts that may seem to be worlds apart. It might even be asked if it is even appropriate to be dancing or talking of dance while such horrific conflict, war crimes, and human rights violations are still occurring in Syria. But dance as a form of protest inside and outside of Syria, and protest within dance practices of Syrian artists, is nothing new.² It just has perhaps been reactivated in light of the uprising and then in relation to the country’s Civil War. Dance in Syria has been happening throughout the initial uprisings and the subsequent bloody war that then developed. This has extended into the rapidly growing Syrian diaspora, and dance artists in

exile are engaging with their art form as a platform for political discussion now more than ever before.

In 2011, for example, a collective *dabke* was performed through the streets of the Syrian city of Hama in defiance of the Assad regime. *Dabke* is a folk dance “made up of intricate steps and stomps”, often performed by both men and women in locations such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia, Occupied Palestine/Israel, and Yemen. The dance is often performed at weddings and celebrations; however, it is also performed in theatrical or contemporary modes.³ The *dabke* performed in the streets of Hama was captured on film and circulated around the globe through social media. Articles were written about the event and videos were posted on YouTube.⁴ Exactly where and how the street dancing in Hama originated is unknown, although one theory is that it began after security forces were kettling protesters into narrow streets. In the fuzzy video, the choreography seems to stem from traditional *dabke* movements, adapted from the traditional circular formations into dancing in long lines, an arrangement more suited to mass demonstrations.

Figure 1. *Video still from* |إباب قبلي |خافوا الله يا عرب. حماه |2012-1-18⁵

Sometimes the dancing resembles a stadium wave, a sea of bodies moving rhythmically; other times it is more theatrical, with the thousands of people captured in the short video clip first shaking their fists, and then clapping while singing. But this is not the only documentation of dance being used within the Syrian Civil War. There are other clips of protestors dancing *dabke* over a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The portrait is defaced with a red “X” painted over it and tossed on the ground so that the group can stomp rhythmically over the image. There are also moments where the Assad regime itself has used

dance to show the “normalcy” of life in Syria or to celebrate the re-election of the Assad government, hiding the hideous reality of what the country has been enduring.

Interviewing Syrian dancers prior to the uprisings was not easy. I traveled to Syria several times during 2009 and 2010 to work on my doctoral research investigating women dancing in the Arab world, and also to gather interviews for a book documenting dance practices Middle East and North Africa. Those with whom I met over this time were often under government scrutiny and negotiating a difficult political climate. I recall meeting one young dancer in Damascus in early 2010. As we sat and talked in a crowded café, he explained his efforts to avoid the compulsory military service that would cut short his dancing career. As he spoke about this, he lowered his voice to a whisper. Looking around the café and out toward the street, he said very quietly, “I just have to be careful, there are spies everywhere.” The political situation at this time pressed upon those that were making and performing dance.

Later, during the first few years of the Civil War, it was nearly impossible to interview dancers. As someone living outside of Syria, I found that making contact with individuals in Syria was often not possible; emails and Facebook messages would go unanswered. I was also aware that along with those who were among the innocent civilians killed in the conflict, many dancers were displaced inside Syria, arrested, or forced into exile. It has only been more recently, as Syrian dancers make new homes in locations such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, and Stockholm, that it has become possible to discuss dance and politics from a Syrian perspective.

Syrian dance artists with whom I have talked recently indicate that they are creating community through dance in order to foster a space for Syrian artists in which to engage in activism and political commentary once in exile. I have seen these dance artists create live contemporary choreographies situated in theatres, galleries, community halls, and in open

public spaces such as parks and squares; I've also seen them present creative dance works through the medium of film, which is then often shared on YouTube or similar websites. The audiences for these creative works are eclectic—locals curious about arts practices and narratives from Syria, local artists seeking to support their peers who now find themselves as an exiled artistic community, and fellow Syrians and those from the wider Arab region who are also finding ways to establish new homes and communities. While it is clear that dancers have used dance as an implicit protest tool against a dictatorial political regime and military forces in Syria, it is also often revealed that when outside the confines of the geopolitical space of Syria, dancers feel a responsibility to “speak” to political concerns pertaining to the Syrian crisis through their artistic practices. Sometimes this is explicit within the creative work presented, and other times it is subtler.

The experiences that have been recalled to me, and the examples of Syrian dance that I have either witnessed in person, through footage, or been told about by those involved, have a pressing concern first and foremost about the survival and extension of culture. In Mey Sefan's work, *Zerstörung für Anfänger/Destruction for Beginners*, she uses narratives of nightmares, gathered from fellow Syrians, as a starting point to develop her choreographic investigation, depicting processes of collapse, destruction, and displacement. In Mey's work, bold statements are made through imagery. For example, a dancer wears a vest resembling that which a suicide bomber might wear; however, multiple party balloons are attached to the shoulders and pockets, giving a whimsical feeling to what would be an otherwise very dark image. The dance movement that Mey has created is unsettling. For example, there is one moment where a male dancer arcs into a deep backbend and is pushed to the floor at an excruciatingly slow pace by a female dancer pressing her hand into his throat. The narrative and movement quality explored within Mey's work provokes questions such as: what else can still be told about a country in which war has become so commonplace that we hardly

notice it anymore? How do Syrians respond to the same questions that they were asked two weeks, two months, and two years ago? And what are they dreaming of today? Works such as Mey's that ask challenging questions and present contemporary Syrian issues through provocative performance reverberate through the audience. There is no clear measure of how "successful" or not the work might be in communicating what Mey intended, but as an audience member, it was apparent to me that she stirred something, and that the performance allowed space for continuing queries and discussion about the nexus between art and the issues facing contemporary Syria.

Figure 2. *Video still from Zerstörung für Anfänger (Destruction for beginners*
 ٦التخريب للمبتدئين ١- مكرر./)

In an exile-filled decade, with refugee populations of this size not seen since the World War II, the works of Syrian dance artists speak beyond solely the Syrian crisis and contribute to discussions of global mobility, displacement, and conflict in relation to culture. However, right now there is urgency to attend to the context of Syria, a country that has been torn apart and with a shattered population spread around the globe. Through ongoing investigations of the creative work occurring from Syrian artists both inside and outside of Syria, there is the potential to avoid catastrophic loss of culture, as was witnessed in other global disasters such as the Cambodian Civil War and the Holocaust. Scholars working at the intersection of art, politics, and the Arab world are in a vital position to share the voices and experiences of Syrian artists, creating a history that is currently ephemeral and is at risk of otherwise vanishing forever.

¹ “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal,” *UNHCR*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. The Syrian Civil War, also known as the Syrian Uprisings, is an ongoing armed conflict that began in 2011, within the context of the uprisings that were occurring across the Middle Eastern region. For information about the war, see Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013) and Christian Sahner, *Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Protests were initially focused on Bashar al-Assad’s leadership and government. The Assad regime responded to the demonstrations with force and the conflict morphed from popular uprisings, like those in Egypt and Tunisia, to armed fighting, military sieges, and an all-out civil war. Numerous factions are involved: Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian Army, the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front, Hezbollah (in support of the Syrian Army), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, داعش or Dā‘ish). Human rights violations, including massacres, occur regularly, and chemical weapons have been used in warfare. The exact death toll since the conflict started is unknown; however, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) estimates it to be more than 500,000 (as of February 2018). In addition, thousands of other Syrians have been imprisoned and tortured, many of whom are protestors, activists, intellectuals, and artists. For analysis, see Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud, eds., *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London: Saqi, 2014).

² For a history of dance in relation to political unrest in Syria, see miriam cooke, *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Edward Ziter, “Clowns of the Revolution: The Malas Twins and Syrian Oppositional Performance,” in “Theatre and the Arab Spring,” special issue, *Theatre Research International* 38, no. 2 (July 2013): 137-47; Ziter, “The Image of the Martyr in Syrian Performance and Web Activism,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 1 (2013): 116-36;

and Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

³ For discussion on and its use in protests, see Nicolas Rowe, “Dance and Political Credibility: The Appropriation of *Dabkeh* by Zionism, Pan-Arabism, and Palestinian Nationalism,” *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 3 (2011): 364.

⁴ For discussion of such events, see Shayna Silverstein, “Syria’s Radical Dabka,” *Middle East Report* 263 (2012): 33-37; “Syrian Revolutionary Dabke,” YouTube video, 3:52, posted by “freedomforall20,” July 2, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCS8SsFOBAI>. For further examples of dance occurring during the Syrian Civil War, see Sammy Ketz, “Damascus Nightclub Patrons Try To Dance Away the Pain of Conflict as Syria’s War Rages On,” *Huffington Post*, Sept. 17, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/17/damascus-nightclub_n_3941765.html.

⁵ Full video available at: <https://www.musicjinni.com/4tmdmUUMUag/%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%87-18-1-2012-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8.html>

⁶ Full video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_1976149281&feature=iv&src_vid=qstOCEi7KHI&v=rgpwtz8NXro.

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