

# El-Funoun Palestinian Dance Troupe

## From the Vernacular to the Professional



By Serene Huleileh

representation of movement that is contemporary in the context of struggling with the duality of economic hegemonic globalization and the counter-globalization movement? Are these categorizations at all relevant?

Early on, El-Funoun realized that Palestinian *dabka* has the capacity to be regenerated through the creative development of new movements and choreographies inferred from the basic vocabulary of popular *dabka*. In the late 1970s, most *dabka* groups (including El-Funoun) remained, to a great extent, true to traditions: there was no set sequence of movements agreed upon in advance, the *dabka* dancers knew the various individual movements by name, and the *lawih* would call the name of the movement, indicating that everyone should repeat it together behind him. This required a great synergy between the musician (*shebabe* or *yarghoul*) and the *lawih*, at the same time as it required from the latter a great capacity to improvise

choreographies on stage. Therefore, in the early days, the *lawih* was the choreographer, and the ingenuity of each group was measured by the innovation it introduced to the individual movements, innovations that are intrinsic to the movement itself, in the spirit of what Munir Fasheh refers to as “changing traditions in a traditional way.”

At a time when all the other groups were repeating the movements they learned at weddings, El-Funoun was experimenting with ways in which this vocabulary could be expanded. Movements such as *Ghazal Jdeed*, *Taxi Jdeed*, and others were created and added to the common vernacular of *dabka* through the performances and the participation of El-Funoun dancers in various wedding celebrations. The presence of more than one *lawih* and the openness to expanding the base of vernacular knowledge through a creative process were among the main reasons that El-Funoun became

From *Dance Freedom*, Toubas, 2015. Photo by Nida Qatamesh.

El-Funoun dance troupe was established in 1979 in the town of Al-Bireh, Palestine, and continues today as the most prominent Palestinian dance group. Its work over the years has greatly influenced the development of what we can call, perhaps loosely and in a “politically correct” way, New Palestinian Dance.

When we approach Palestinian dance in general and El-Funoun in particular, the question of defining dance can become problematic: Is it a staged representation of traditional dance? Is it the body struggling with the occupation on stage? Is it a style or a technique? Does it correspond to some eligible criteria? Is it contemporary or modern or traditional or new or a mix? Is it an ideological

From *The Rooster (Al-Deek)*, Al-Bireh, 2018.  
Photo by Nida Qatamesh.



a pioneer in its field. Even with regard to costumes, members of El-Funoun were the first to wear the *dimayeh* with the sides pulled up to show the legs of the dancers (fully covered of course), and even though during the first couple of years the girls wore the long *thob* or Palestinian dress, they soon also lifted the sides of the dress (exposing no more than a pair of black trousers underneath) to better show the movements, and everyone else soon followed suit. The evolution of costumes over the years also found resonance in the changes that other Palestinian dance groups instituted (or even adamantly refused to institute) in their work.

The mixed composition of El-Funoun's members (different specializations, talents, backgrounds, professions, social class, and affiliations) informed the creative development of traditional *dabka* into *raqs* (dance), a process that was heralded by the *Marj Bin Amer* production in 1989, and continues till today with more daring experimentation in new forms of dance. While *dabka* groups in Palestine and abroad continue to follow the tradition of *Mishaal*, *Wadi at-Tuffah*, and even *Marj Bin Amer*, others started to be lured into the new dance form that El-Funoun is experimenting with



From *Tallat*, Ramallah, 2018. Photo by Ameen Saeb.

and promoting, one that may seem, on the face of it, to follow in the footsteps of the *Wadea-Jarrar* tradition of the 1960s or to imitate the Caracalla group style in Lebanon. Yet its roots and

gradual development find resonance only within the Palestinian context.

Of all the *dabka* groups that mushroomed in the 1960s and 1970s in Palestine, El-Funoun is the only one that has persevered without interruption till now. In addition, it remains, after four decades, a “youthful” group, thanks to its young artistic leaders (the eldest of whom was born around the time the troupe was established) who joined the group through the *Bara'em El-Funoun*, where budding dancers (as young as nine years old) are prepped to become part of the main corpus of *El-Funoun* dancers. Both groups are role models for Palestinian youth, even for those who do not have their hopes set on becoming dancers.

El-Funoun believes that dance is socially and politically engaged art. Against the dangerous backdrop of dance becoming either “popular” or a meaningless “copy and paste”

process, El-Funoun has proven that there is a level where dance – through the body – can transcend these dichotomies. Over the past 39 years, El-Funoun has managed to recreate the contemporary/current/new version of Palestinian *dabka*/dance through immersing the students/dancers as well as the audience in a microcosmic community that is as much a part of life for “creation” and creativity as it is for the creative and artistic act that takes place in studios. Not becoming popular, but true to life; not reflecting life, but being alive.

*Serene Huleileh is the director of the Arab Education Forum in Jordan. She is a member of El-Funoun and was one of the lead dancers and a member of the artistic team from 1980 to 1996. She can be reached at s.huleileh@gmail.com.*

From *Tallat*, Ramallah, 2018. Photo by Nida Qatamesh.

