

INTERMEDIATE #7

BALANCE – DANCING FROM THE CENTER WORKING WITH FIRE, SHAMADAN, TRAYS, WATER JUGS, BASKETS, CANES AND SWORDS

Now that you have studied the mechanics of many basic movements you must begin to develop technique. **Isolation, Fluidity** and **Balance** are important keys to good technique. Balancing something on your head can help you achieve Isolation and Fluidity. Balancing causes you to maintain good posture while you isolate movements in different areas of the body while keeping the neck relaxed and the item balanced as still as possible. Bend the knees more deeply than ever before. Move carefully and purposely, flowing movements from the chest to the hips and back to the chest again. Flow through traveling movements with more grace than ever before. Push your limits and refine your technique by balancing something on your head.

Balancing and Dancing with Fire

Although historians are still uncertain as to when humans discovered fire, many assert that woman was the initial guardian of the hearth as well as the Priestess tending the fires of the early alters. The ancient worship of Demeter and her daughter Kore/Persephonie included dancing with fire.

Demeter was the daughter of Rhea, a Minoan Goddess from Crete, so her worship is pre-Greek however over time Demeter and the Greek Hellenized Isis became almost interchangeable. Apparently the Greeks believed the worship of Demeter originated in Egypt, a descendent of the ancient nighttime mystery rites of Isis. These mysteries became Demeter's Mysteries with Demeter in the role of Isis, Life Giver, and her daughter Kore/Persephonie in the role of Osiris, ruler of the Underworld. The worship of Demeter was centered predominately in the area of the Middle East known as Eleusis, located in Attica [the general area of Athens, Greece], also referred to as "The beautiful land of Corn" (Eleusis means land of corn but this isn't the American maze, instead the word corn refers to barley, a kernel of which was central to Demeter's greatest Mysteries). It was the worship in Eleusis that gave rise to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Among the Eleusinia, or the rites of Demeter, are torch dances, which makes sense as many of her rituals took place at night or in dark caves. But there is also a dance where the Priestesses carried a covered vessel on their heads called a *kerna*, or small hearth.

Eventually the worship of Demeter was subsumed by the worship of Dionysus and his Priestess/worshippers, the Maenads, also danced with torches. In more modern times there are Wedding traditions which are very similar to each other in Turkey, Persia and North Africa, that take place during the evening of the Bride's Henna Ritual or the *Lelit il-henna*. The participants at some point during the night perform a circular dance carrying candles on plates. Both the dance and the henna are thought to give protection. Many American Cabaret dancers perform a candle dance either as a line dance while simply holding a lit candle in each hand or as a solo performance perhaps balancing a candle on the head while also holding on in each hand.

Balancing and Dancing with the Shamadan

In modern Egypt families still hire one if not more *Sham'adin* (shamadan) dancers to head the marriage procession. Raks (raqs) Al Shamadan translates as the dance of the candelabrum and is traditionally performed at weddings and other festivals, although these days it's also performed in nightclubs for tourists. The Procession of the Bride or the *Zeffah al-arusah*, takes place at night. In the days before electricity the shamadan dancer lit the way through the dark streets, her lights a visual announcement of the marriage. However before shamadan was used traditional three foot candles which were held in the hand (and still used today), lit the way.

In modern times this is a multi-tiered candelabrum, supported on the head by a headband, which may be decorated with mirrors or dangling crystals, anything to make it look brighter or flashier. The performer dances balancing the shamadan on top of her head with all the candles burning and playing *sagat* (zils). It's also traditional for the shamadan dancer to perform with acrobatic skill on the floor. The early shamadans didn't have headbands and required greater balancing skills.

The roots of Raks Al Shamadan, according to the famous Egyptian choreographer Mahmoud Reda, can be traced back to the Turkish court dancers influence in Egypt during the Ottoman Empire and although there's photographic evidence of dancers wearing shamadan at a Paris exhibition as early as 1901, several dancers are credited with popularizing the use of shamadan in Egypt in the 1920's. One was Badia Masbni who ran a famous nightclub in the 1920's and may have arranged the Raks Al-Shamadan for her stage. Two others were Shafiyya el Koptiyya (Shafi'an il-IbTiyya) who is credited with inventing the Rak al-Shamadan and her student Zouba el Klobatiyya who is credited with first performing splits with a lit shamadan. It's popularity waxed and waned until the 1950's when the demand for shamadan, as well as other public entertainment, increased ten fold under President Sadat's reign.

Balancing and Dancing with Trays

Balancing anything on the head may be considered circus type entertainment. The Roma have long been associated with balancing and juggling and Jamilla Salimpour was a circus performer prior to working at the San Francisco Renn. Fair. So there is a tradition of balancing items on the head for entertainment, even in the USA. Trays lend themselves to the task beautifully. From Greek Tavernas to California's Habi Ru, performers place lit candles upon a tray and then proceed to mesmerize. For variation try a tray of flowers instead, or a tray holding a goblet and urn. Make it really hard, pour some liquid from the urn into the goblet for all to see. Then return the whole upon your head and dance, being careful not to spill a drop. At the end of your dance remove the tray from your head and after saluting the audience with your goblet drink the contents in one dramatic flourish. Place it all back on your head and depart.

Balancing and Dancing with Water Jugs

In Egypt *Raks Al Balas* is the name for the water jug dance. This is a dance in which the performer dances while balancing a water jug upon the head. Many arid countries are bound to have versions of a water jug dance, since carrying the water jug on the head is the most efficient way of carrying such a heavy load it makes since they would show off by dancing with it. Tunisia has a popular water jug dance called *Raks Juzur*, which originated in a Southern Tunisia region famous for it's pottery. This dance features rapid and sharp hip movements and staying raised through out the dance on demi-toe.

Balancing and Dancing with Baskets

Like water jug dances in arid countries I would think that dancing with baskets would be ubiquitous in farming regions. Whether carrying in the harvest or carrying home food from the market the head is a most convenient carrying space. Use a round basket of almost any type or size; just make sure it's sturdy and not droopy. You might want to place a bag of beans or rice in the center to give the basket a little more weight making it easier to balance. Place a wadded up veil on top so that when you do floorwork the audience can not see the bag and the veil will give the impression the basket is full of something.

Dancing with a Cane or Assaya

In all honesty I have yet to see a Middle Eastern Dancer balance a cane on their heads; however, I have seen several American dancers who dance with a cane and balance it as well. Eva Cernik does it beautifully and just because I have yet to see it doesn't mean you can't do it. Remember to wear the cane side to side on the head. When turning, you can stop the rotation of the cane when you stop rotating by lifting the left arm straight up over head so that the cane touches the back of your arm and stops turning.

Balancing and Dancing with a Sword

As with the cane I have yet to see a Middle Eastern female dancer dance with a sword, period, much less balance it on her head. There are many countries in the Middle East where men dance with swords but I can find no documentation that women ever have. It's possible some woman may at some time have put a sword on her head and danced, but I really don't think so.

Jamilla Salimpour popularized sword dance in the USA in the 1960's for her shows at the San Francisco Renn. Fair. The famous dancer Rea of Athens was the first of Jamilla's troupe to perform with a sword. The concept was inspired by a few famous Orientalist paintings depicting women dancing with swords. Rhea practiced for weeks doing household chores while balancing the sword. At the end of her performance she executed a deep back bend and thrust the sword tip into the ground, leaving the sword vibrating in the earth as she took her bow. It became her signature ending but it was the beginning of American dancers' fascination with sword work.

Here are some tips for working with a sword:

When purchasing a sword make sure the blade has a curve to it as straight swords do not balance well at all. The larger the curve the easier it is to balance the sword.

When holding a sword out of the scabbard never grasp the blade, even if it's dull. You must always give the impression that it's very sharp!

Always wipe your finger prints and any perspiration off the sword before you place it back in it's scabbard to protect the metal and prevent rust.

Some dancers balance the sword bare headed, some dancers wear head scarves, some dancers wear turbans. It depends on your costume and style and really your own personal choice. If you have a very heavy sword you may be more comfortable with a turban to cushion the

weight a bit. If you wear anything on your head make sure it's very, very tight and won't slip or slide.

You may wish to dance for a short while with the sword still in its scabbard to help create drama.

Balance the sword predominately side to side on the head. Front to back is a great variation, however the audience can get a better view of the sword if they can see its full-length head on.

You can also balance the sword on the back of the hand, the inner wrist, above the breasts, on a hip and on the top of the foot. When doing floorwork and in the position of lying down between the legs, place the sword on the stomach and execute tummy flutters and belly rolls. See if you can make the sword jump with the stomach muscles.

Sword work really shows off the sensuous and slinky movements, but you can travel quickly with the sword, spin with the sword or even use bouncy movements as long as the vibrations are maintained in the lower body, the knees and the hips.

If the sword begins to teeter on the head you can try to stop it by changing the movements or steps you're executing at the time and slow down. Bend the knees more deeply and center yourself. Raise one arm straight up in front of the sword, allowing the sword to gently touch the back of the arm, hopefully stopping the movement. If none of this works do not hesitate to put your hand on the sword to steady it. The audience won't mind in fact it will prove to them that you're really balancing it not just doing a trick.

If the sword starts to fall get out of its way quickly! Do not try to grab it! Take it from me, I have impaled my hand and foot. Luckily neither was badly hurt but I have heard horror stories. So remember you are dancing with a weapon and take the proper precautions. Also remember to not get too close to your audience, accidents do happen and you don't want to impale an audience member.

Never allow an audience member to handle your sword. Maintain the illusion of weaponry and avoid being sued for Doctor bills.

I don't recommend ever sticking your sword into anything much less the ground or the floor. It's very hard on floors not to mention the damage to the sword!

When moving the sword from one point on the body to another, say from décolletage to hip; grasp the sword from the outside with your palms facing you. This gives the audience the view of a more attractive hand and arm and allows you to maintain the balancing concept. Although it's quite allowable to grasp the sword by the hilt and the tip (use fingertips to hold the tip).