

# **BEGINNING MEN'S MIDDLE EASTERN DANCE**

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Men's middle eastern dance has experienced a growing interest within the SCA and it is this interest that has led to this class. During my research of women's middle eastern dance, I have come across illuminations and resources for men's dance. The steps and ideas presented in this class are based on this research and traditional men's middle eastern dance from areas across the middle east. This class does not attempt to directly recreate a period dance form, but should provide the male dancer with a starting point in his own research.

That men danced during the middle ages is a fact. How and why they danced is the question. Most of the examples that I have found in illuminations are based on a religious ecstasy, such as the Sufi dancers. I have found mention in several translations of period sources that men danced during celebrations or court parties, but so far have not seen any depictions of this. There was also a fairly well documented system of dancing boys from Turkey.

While in modern society men engage in dance that is similar to the woman's solo or "belly dance", all the research that I have done shows that while men did indeed dance the woman's solo, they did so only when dressed or disguised as women. This tradition is still observed today in the male shikkat dancers of Morocco. Men in period danced as men, in a man's style, and not as women unless pretending to be women. This is an important concept, as far as period recreation of the dance is concerned. Men should not, in my opinion attempt to emulate the women's style unless dressed as women. The women's style is definitely effeminate when seen on a man, as it is designed to accentuate those movements which display a woman's grace and elegance not a man's grace and elegance.

Traditional middle eastern dance has MANY dances which depict a man to his advantage, emphasizing a man's agility, strength, war skills and his own grace and elegance. These are the dances which the steps from this class were taken.

## **FOOTWORK:**

This is the basis for many men's dances.

**Shuffle:** a small scuffing or shuffling step which slowly moves the dancer in a direction.

Mock Horse Step: Standing on one foot, the dancer raises the other foot and “paws” the air in front of him. One arm is on the hip and the other is waved above the head as if using a sword in battle.

Hops: There are many variations of this movement. The dancer hops up into the air and then drops, bent knee to a squatting position and then hops up again. The can be done one footed, on both feet, or with spins.

## HANDS & ARMS:

Mock Sword Moves: There are many variations of this. Basically the dancer uses movements that resemble those used by fighters during a fight. These are usually spaced by waving one hand above the head in a circular motion and then “striking” again.

Hand Shimmy: The hands are held at waist level in front of the dancer, with the arms bent at the elbows. The hands are then quickly vibrated back and forth in a “shimmy” type motion.

Clapping: Many of the men sing while dancing and this is often accompanied with different clapping rhythms.

Basic Position: This is where the arms are held loosely out to the sides at shoulder level. Often used when the dancer is performing more complicated footwork, leaps, or doing finger snaps.

## HIP MOVEMENTS:

These are usually small and subtle when danced by men. They are not common movements found in men’s dances.

Hip Twist: The hips are twisted forward and backwards with small sharp thrusts. Similar to the 50’s dance of the same name only much smaller movements that are isolated from the torso.

One-Sided Hip Drop: One hip is dropped and then returns to center. This is used with the shuffle step and the hand shimmy.

Figure 8’s: A side to side undulation of the hips accompanied by weight shifts.

## SHOULDER MOVEMENTS:

Shoulder movements are often found in many different men’s dances.

Basic Shoulder Shimmy: The shoulders are moved in a very fast, small forward/backward motion. This is an isolated movement, only the shoulders move - not the entire torso.

Up/Down Shoulder Shimmy: The shoulders are alternately raised and lowered in a small fast motion until they vibrate. This is an isolated movement, only the shoulders move - not the entire torso.

#### ACROBATIC MOVEMENTS:

Many dances include leaps, flips and tumbling movements that are similar to those in gymnastics. In one dance, mentioned historically, the dancer dances on horseback. This class will not cover those movements.

#### PROPS:

Handkerchiefs: There are many regions where the men hold a small/medium handkerchief in each hand while in the basic arm position. They are occasionally snapped up and down or are circled about the body on various planes to accent movements.

Sticks: Men use two types of sticks when they dance. Short wooden sticks about 12 inches long are used. They are struck together to produce a rhythm. Often the dancers strike their own sticks and then their partner's sticks if they are dancing in a group. The second type of stick is longer (sword length) and is used when doing the mock sword dances or precision sword movements with a partner. They will strike the ground or the partner's "sword" during the dance.

Swords: Real swords are used in some dances. Either in mock combat or simply to show off the dancer's dexterity and skill with a sword. In more recent times riffles have replaced swords in some areas.

Ka-Ka-bas: Large metal zills are used by male dancers in North Africa. They are shaped sort of like a dog's bone, but flatter and are carried and played while the men sing and dance.

Small Hand Drums: There are a variety of small hand drums that are played by male dancers while they dance. Usually these drums are used to accent leaps and other acrobatic movements.

#### STYLES OF DANCE:

Circle Dances: Men often dance in this format. Sometimes the dancers are linked and at other times they are not. The short sticks are used in this type of dance.

Line Dances: This is another common format. The dancers usually link in line dances, but not always. Many times there is a “caller”, who sings or chants and calls/encourages the men to greater dancing or to dance a solo away from the line.

Male/Female Dancing: This is a rare format, both historically and in traditional dance. In North Africa it can occur during courtship dances and there are writings from Islamic Spain that talk of dancing a Zambra with a Moorish girl. Generally there is no direct contact with the women. On occasion a line of men will dance with a line of women or a woman will dance a solo while the line of men dance behind her.

Mock Combat Dances: These are usually conducted in pairs and almost always involve the long sticks or real swords. The dance recreates a combat between the two dancers. When dancing with sticks, the dancers will whip the sticks around at full speed, hitting the other dancer’s stick or the ground. At times this dance is performed by two combatants that are encircled by dancers waiting to take the “loser’s” place.

Man’s Solo: This is a dance generally used to display a dancers great skill and agility. It can also be done out of pure celebration or high spirits. Usually acrobatic in nature, but not always. One North African male solo is done balancing an item on his head and uses more graceful elegant movements.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

This is a listing of a few sources that should act as a basis for further study.

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