

Ibrahim Farrah; Memories of My “Uncle Bobby”

By Tarifa Salem



My “Uncle Bobby”, better known as Ibrahim Farrah in the world of Near East Dance, left indelible memories to the many dance students and artists who had the opportunity to study with him or perform under his direction. The memories I share with my siblings and cousins of this wonderfully unique man are probably quite different than the memories of you who knew him as the dynamic Near East Danseur, Choreographer, Master Teacher, Scholar or all knowing “Wizard of Oz”. Though I studied with him and performed in his company for a short period of time, unlike my siblings, he was and always will be “Uncle Bobby” to me.

Ibrahim Farrah, born Robert Abraham Farrah on February 27, 1939 in the small town of Everson, Pa. to Lebanese immigrants, George and Abla Farrah, is my mother’s brother. All of her siblings were a constant presence in our lives; in fact, my early childhood years are filled with memories of lively Farrah family celebrations where music, dancing and impersonating were gleefully anticipated. My mother lived with her family at the time of my birth. Bobby, who had just turned 16 a month before my birth, did his fair share of babysitting my older sister, Linda and I. According to my mother, when I was about 3 months old, he had to accompany us on our move to Philadelphia in a van that they borrowed from close Lebanese friends of the family as my dad’s car had broken down. Bobby had been given the responsibility of stabilizing my make-shift bassinet as there were no infant seats at the time. He was also to help with our care, willingly or not, until my father was able to drive him back to Pennsylvania. From what I have been told, he went above and beyond his duties in most amusing ways. I like to think of this early bonding as a sign of how intensely I would come to admire him.

Early memories of my uncle trigger unbridled laughter among my siblings and I. Not only was he the family comedian; he often fell into situations quite innocently that were hilarious. While in Philadelphia he and my mother got separated on the elevated trains. She got off holding the baby.... he stayed on with the empty stroller. Being the resourceful young man that he was, he got off at the next stop, pushing the empty stroller as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do, and found my mother holding the baby and laughing hysterically. Later when I was about 7 years old and living in Johnstown, Pa., Uncle Bobby, being on break from classes at Penn State came to spend the summer with us. The plan was that he would look for employment and while earning a bit of money, could help with our care. (At this point, there were 6 of us) He got a job selling encyclopedias and on his first day, the gentleman that hired him picked him up and

drove him to a very rural area where he was to solicit door to door sales. After being dropped off in this pastoral region, the heavens opened up and the rain assaulted poor Uncle Bobby until he was covered with mud. The sight of him when he came home resulted in uproarious laughter and though upset, he amused us with impersonations of all the folks (mostly illiterate) he attempted to sell encyclopedias to. That was the first and last day of that job. When his employment plans didn't pan out, he returned to Everson to take a job he had while in high school for the rest of the summer.

My siblings and I stayed with my grandparents for vacations often and when home, Uncle Bobby told us electrifying bedtime stories of Zsa Zsa, a fictitious character he dreamed up from somewhere in his inventive mind. He relayed all of her adventures with extreme animation. We were captivated by those stories; however, they did more to excite us than to lull us into dreamland. His theatrical gifts were quite well received; however, grandma was not always thrilled by his aptitude to get us giggling wildly when we were to be settling down. Sitting on the back porch in between meals or other activities was always a special treat for me. This was the time when the family would laugh and tease each other endearingly and mimic the many amusing characters within the Lebanese social network of the day. Both of my uncles were quite adept at the art of mimicry, therefore, as they competed to relay their impersonations of the poor dupe they were making fun of, the acting became more and more outrageous. Uncontainable laughter powered more of these renditions until any one of us could become the target of the teasing. Oftentimes, when my uncle was home on break from school or in the early days after he moved to Washington D.C., we would make the trek to Everson to visit him. After a huge Lebanese dinner, the entertainment would begin as dishes were being washed over coffee. Eventually, we would retreat to the tiny living room where my grandmother kept her phonograph and her collection of Arabic albums. The music instigated the start of our own private hafla. Inevitably, everyone had their turn at performing the "happiness dance" but when Uncle Bobby and Aunt Peggy (Margaret A. Farrah) took the floor, the rest of us withdrew to the role of captive audience providing the traditional "zarghareet" initiated by grandma Abla. Somehow, Uncle Sonny (Jacob Farrah) would get into the act inaugurating dance impersonation hour. Let the games begin. Serious dance hour was over and comic belly dance contest begins. Uncle Bobby would perform his rendition of the more gifted dancers, exaggerating facial expressions and other distinctions they were notorious for. Uncle Sonny performed renderings of the less talented dancers as Aunt Peggy critiqued and corrected their versions. We kids would want to get into the action and were encouraged to execute our own adaptations. This often generated our first lessons in traditional Lebanese "moves". Tips were taken care of during our goodbyes when Uncle Bobby handed out money which we were not supposed to accept. If we refused, he would just throw the money and we would pick up the bill before it got lost. (He continued this practice when I first moved to NY. I would visit him at his apartment and when he walked me out to Broadway and 70th would hand me a \$20 bill. If I refused, he would just throw it among all the pedestrians, and I would quickly scramble to pick it up before someone else did.



The Eastern Orthodox Churches in our area had annual picnics and Haflas. These were occasions we looked forward to as a time to dance with live musicians (who were like Gods in our eyes). My uncle often came home for these affairs and invariably was beckoned to dance by congregates. He and my aunt were the cr me de la cr me of church dancers and became the regular show-stoppers. There were many other beautiful dancers, but in my eyes, the Farrah siblings were by far the most talented. They lead the dabke with a dynamic flare using steps that were too intricate for most participants. As the rest of us would do our "step-step-stamp-kick" routine, they would break off and perform their more advanced rendition in front of the dabke line. With hanky twirling, high

jumps and heavy stamping, Uncle Bobby would make the guttural sounds (Hi-Yah!) of the folk when engaged in exciting movement. Money was showered excessively and the church happily collected. Traditional Lebanese weddings were a

special treat and my own was quite exciting as my “superstar” uncle brought his protégé and life long companion, Phaedra (Phyllis Saretta) as well as his good friend, the very talented and comical Eddie “The Sheik” Kochak to perform at our reception. Needless to say the dancing was amazing, but the most memorable moment to me was when Uncle Bobby danced with his mother, my grandma Abba as the guests surrounded them, clapping and making zarghareet, inducing a most dynamic presentation indicative of a Farrah family gathering!



As a freshman in college, I took a weekend train trip from Philadelphia to NYC to visit my uncle. With guitar and back pack in toe, I stepped off the train to find my uncle excitedly awaiting my arrival. He laughed when he saw my guitar but I thought I would be discovered as the next Linda Ronstadt while there. He had arranged an itinerary that left no time for my discovery as a singer; however, my first visit to a NYC Middle Eastern Nightclub where beautiful Jemela Omar was performing planted a seed that years later would bring me back to NY to pursue a career in dance. I went to see his company perform in Cherry Hill, N.J. a year or so later and was totally captivated by what I saw. He of course would become my mentor



providing me with the encouragement I needed to attain a graduate degree in Dance as well as refine my art as a professional dancer. Though I had taken a lot of ballet, modern and jazz classes he stressed the importance of studying other genres of dance, hence my studies in Bharata Natyam, Flamenco and African dance began. I performed with a NYU based modern dance company called Kaleidoscope of which he was very proud. Though his schedule was hectic, he found time to attend a couple of my performances. For one of my classes, I was required to choreograph a piece and do the lighting design. He suggested I choreograph a cane (assaya) dance with another of his protégés, Mish Mish. We performed the number to shining reviews and later performed it with modifications he made at the Darvish’s Grand Opening where he and many of his other protégés were featured artists.

His company, The Ibrahim Farrah Near East Dance Group, was doing quite a bit of performing in NYC at the time and he decided it would be in my best interest to learn how to stage manage since I was taking a lot of production classes. Hence, he threw me to the wolves and I found myself being stage manager for his concerts at the Riverside Theatre Dance Festival and Avery Fisher Hall. The lighting designer took me under his wing and gave me a crash course in stage management, lighting technology and backstage protocol. I even got to iron my uncle’s costumes. God forbid, I screw that up. It was very stressful, though an invaluable education. Being at all rehearsals, I probably knew the choreography for every piece since I called cues off of movement sequences. This later earned me a place on stage when the beautiful dancer, Valerie Camille injured her knee badly. She danced the part of “the possessed” in his well-known zar number. Being nervous about dancing that part, he re-assured me that I would have no problem since I was possessed already. It was during the rehearsals for this Town Hall performance in which Nadia Gamal was the special guest artist that I realized how committed he was to his art. He was a fanatic perfectionist and had an amazing vision for how to present his dances artistically. Each one of his dancers had their own special gifts but when onstage together, they performed as one under



his direction. I so admired his dancers and they became my ideal. Though he encouraged me to work hard to earn my place, I felt at times he was extra hard on me, both in class and at rehearsals. At one point, feeling really vulnerable to his criticism, I visited him at his apartment and we discussed his expectations of me over 5 cups of coffee and at least 1 pack of cigarettes. His reasons for being tough on me were that he didn't want anyone using the "nepotism" excuse for my inclusion in the group. He wanted me to be recognized for my hard work and talents. I realized that this was an expression of his love for his niece and the need to protect me from some of the ferocity of the business. My strong bond with my uncle remained intact though my performance career came to a hiatus when I became pregnant with my first born. Though I continued to take his classes, my expanding girth invited a lot of wisecracks from the "soon to be godfather" of my son, Justin. In July of 1983, Uncle Bobby became "Great" Uncle Bobby, though we had previously associated the word great with the man, it was now official. Shortly after the birth of my son, we moved back to my hometown and I would not see my uncle as often. Nevertheless, we chatted on the phone often and true to character, he conveyed what was happening in his world with comedic flare. I looked forward to his visits to Pennsylvania as he always enlivened things.



Having relocated to south Florida in 1986, I was quite isolated from near east dance. I was able to relive a bit of my NYC years when Bobby came to West Palm Beach in 1993 to teach a two-day workshop and perform at a gala event. He asked me to dance.... actually, he told me I would be dancing and to start preparing. It was a week filled with laughter. He stayed a few extra days to visit with us. My children, then ages 9 & 6, learned to speak the fictional language Bobby invented and to this day, speak fluent "Chamunga". Over the years, my family, like all families had their share of tragedies and heartbreaks. Uncle Bobby was very emotional at these times, but, always attentive to his surroundings, would store comic material for later use from his observations of unsuspecting grieving relatives and friends and later act out hilarious impersonations for our amusement. I never would have guessed that I would eulogize this man publicly



at the time of his sudden passing in front of so many admirers world-wide that came to grieve with the family. It was a dark time for the family, however, his presence was felt as those who came to grieve from Australia to Japan, from New York to Texas and all places in between shared stories with us about something he had done that was incredibly funny or incredibly kind. That is the "Ibrahim Farrah" that I remember..... incredibly funny, incredibly kind and totally amazing. Anyone who truly knew him truly loved him.

Photo Information

1. Tarifa dances with Ibrahim at sister Linda's wedding; Photo Courtesy of Linda Diane Salem, 1987.
2. Ibrahim (Bobby) Farrah with niece Linda Salem lead the Dabke at Tarifa's wedding; Wedding Album by Andrews Photo Studio, 1976.
3. Ibrahim (Bobby) Farrah and Phaedra (Phyllis Saretta) dance at Tarifa's wedding; Wedding Album by Andrews Photo Studio, 1976.
4. Ibrahim (Bobby) Farrah dances with his mother, Abla Nasser Farrah and his sister, Helen Jane Farrah Salem at Tarifa's wedding; Wedding Album by Andrews Photo Studio, 1976.
5. The Ibrahim Farrah Near East Dance Group, Town Hall Performance with Nadia Gamal, 1981, Photo Courtesy of Dr. Phyllis Saretta (Phaedra), Arabesque Archives.
6. Ibrahim (Bobby) Farrah and Brenda Jane Salem stand as Godparents for Tarifa's son Justin Smith; Tarifa's private photo collection, 1983.
7. Ibrahim (Bobby) Farrah with godchild, Justin Allen Smith in NYC; Tarifa's private photo collection, 1985.