

Pangalos and the 1893 World's Fair

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In 1893 George Pangalos, a Greek from Smyrna was the co-manager of the Cairo Street exhibit at the Chicago Columbian World's Exposition. Located on the Midway Plaisance the Cairo Street exhibit included all the so-called 'Theatres of the Midway,' whether known as the Algerian, Persian, or Turkish Theatre; they were basically all the same in character and performance. This is where 'Little Egypt,' who is said in several sources to have been Fahreda Mahzar and in others Bele Baya, performed.

In point of fact the performances typical to the Greek Cafe Scene one hears about in the writings on smyrnaika and rebetika are what George Pangalos brought to North America. More than simply belly-dancing the standard musical and dance entertainments presented on a daily basis in any cafe in the Ottoman Empire were first brought to Chicago, Illinois in 1893. One out of every four Americans alive in 1893 visited the Chicago World's Fair. Given the popularity and notorious publicity of the Cairo Street performers it is an accepted fact of history that a significant number of the total audience visited Pangalos' theatres.

INTERNATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR

Available documents tell us that Pangalos, as a child, was taken to Constantinople, where he was educated at Roberts College. His life after graduation was one filled with travel aimed at one business venture after another. Upon graduating he entered railroad service for five years in Asia Minor. Next he spent one year as a bank clerk in Salonika. Then one year as a journalist on the Greek language newspaper, "Gazette de Romanie." Afterwards Pangalos went to Alexandria, Egypt where he initially became a bank clerk but was soon promoted to be manager of the Anglo-Egyptian bank in Cairo remaining until 1888. Through connec-

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ions unknown to history Pangalos conceived the idea of building Cairo Street at the World's Fair in Chicago. In December 1890, Pangalos sailed for Chicago and with the assistance he received there successfully carried his project to a financial success.

ANATOLIAN PERFORMANCES ON THE AMERICAN PRAIRIE

The entertainers Pangalos brought to the prairies of Illinois were a diverse group from many different parts of the Ottoman Empire. Some were Greek, most were not. What has been so misunderstood for so many years is that the types of entertainment forms George Pangalos produced at the Chicago World's Fair were a mixture from many cultural traditions.

The performances were typical of what one could see in any port city or major metropolis in the Ottoman Empire. Today, only the 'dancing-girls' are remembered. But a host of events aside from the dancing, singing, and solo instrumental performances were regularly featured at the Cairo Street theatres. These ranged from contests of strength such as wrestling to staged sword battles on horseback. Mock wedding ceremonies and mimed theatrical events are also frequently described. We need to understand these performances not as the American reporters saw them but as someone from the Ottoman Empire, such as Pangalos and his troupe of entertainers, knew them.

ANATOLIAN AND BALKAN FOLK THEATRE

The 'plays' at the Cairo Street theatres, that all the American newspapers were writing about, were art forms in a state of transition. By the 1870s changes in the social conditions within the Ottoman lands allowed for the limited abeyance of the Muslim ban on women performing in public. In the nineteenth century the gradual appearance of Christian, Jewish, and Pagan women as dancers, singers, and musicians first began in private gatherings. By the 1800s these female performers were the key entertainers in the *tuluat* which were improvised popular theatre acted out on a small stage. These mixed gender performances of the *tuluat* were based on an earlier folk theatre always performed by all-male actors called, *ortaoyunu*.

These mime plays with their mock weddings and battles, their broad burlesque-style humor, and their acrobatic feats of strength cut across ethnic and religious lines. Such performances are known all across the Balkans and western Ana-



LEFT: George Pangalos, a Greek from Smyrna was the co-manager of the Cairo Street exhibit at the Chicago Columbian World's Exposition. RIGHT: Bachibonzouk played a boisterous Falstaff-like character in plays.

tolia. For Greeks *panegyri* celebrations with their folk theatre performances and contests of strength are most similar to the folk entertainments adapted for the public cafe.

THE MYTH OF LITTLE EGYPT

The cafe chantants or Oriental-style cafes of Europe were already the familiar locations of the eastern Mediterranean dance *du ventre* which eventually became known in North America as the belly-dance. But in 1893 this dance was so new there was no reference frame by which to describe it. Most reporters at the Fair simply called it 'the act by which John the Baptist lost his head.'

At one point the Fair's Board of Women in a much publicized battle had the dance *du ventre* performances banned. So popular were these dancers that the sanction simply could not be imposed for very long. No one woman was the real 'Star of the Orient.' A comparison of published accounts suggest that just like the title of 'King of the Gypsies,' each moon-faced newspaper reporter was introduced to one or another of the dancing girls who was presented as the authentic star of Cairo Street.

BACHIBONZOUK AND HADJIABEET

The Balkan and Anatolian theatrical performances were simply too foreign for the popular American imagination to retain. While the myth of Little Egypt has grown since 1893 the reality of two Greek male

performers in the staged theatrical events of Cairo Street has remained obscure.

This fact is especially striking given the extreme popularity of the giant Bachibonzouk. This man seems to have been a type of herald who announced in a voice that could be heard from one end of the Midway to the other when the different shows began. Bachibonzouk also appears to have played a boisterous Falstaff-like character in the plays of Cairo Street. An entertainer called Hadjiabeet is always seen in a full-dress *fustanella* and is described as the 'bride-groom' in the various theatre productions. While clearly both these men were using 'stage names' they are always identified—in all newspaper account—as Greeks.

American scholars and journalists unfamiliar with Balkan and Anatolian performance traditions have forgotten the theatrical performances and instead, focusing only on the dancers, read the historical record backwards. They have tried to understand the dance *du ventre* performers at the 1893 Columbian Exposition as if they were the hootchy-kootchy dancers one sees, today, in night clubs, at carnivals, and on television. Pangalos, unintentionally, provided too many cultural traditions for the unschooled American viewer to understand and so appreciate the subtle differences in dance and musical style performed at the various Cairo Street theatres.

FIRST GREEK SHOWMAN IN NORTH AMERICA

George Pangalos is one of the most influential showmen ever to mount a performance in North America. Single-handedly and within no more than a four month period Pangalos established the continuing vision all Americans have of the sensuous allure of the veiled belly-dancer. Ironically the seeming confusion and so conflation among the Greek, Turkish, and Middle Eastern belly-dancers is one that Pangalos also, unwittingly, caused. Regrettably, in all the heat to write about the dancing girls, Pangalos' singular role as the first producer of traditional Balkan and Anatolian folk theatres has been largely lost to history.

Aptly enough it is this enduring image of the sensuous Oriental belly-dancer that challenges the basic assumption that only western European or North American showmen and entertainers have influenced world performance arts. P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show brought popular American entertainment and cultural images to Europe and the rest of the world. But it was George Pangalos' Cairo Street Theatres that brought the first major productions of traditional Balkan, Anatolian, and Middle Eastern music, dance, and popular theatrical performance to North America. After the Cairo Street performances music and dance in America would never be the same.