

# Dancing Queens

## Queer Desire in Golden Era Egyptian Cinema



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**ABSTRACT** This article analyzes two popular Golden Era belly-dance films, *Sigara wa Kass* (*A Cigarette and a Glass*, 1955) and *Habibi al Asmar* (*My Dark Darling*, 1958), through concepts of queer spectatorship, queer time and space, homoerotic triangulation, and queer containment. The analysis centers women, attends to women's homoeroticism and nonnormative desires, and reads popular film as constituted by and constituting of mainstream conventions of gender and sexuality. It argues that mainstream belly-dance films made considerable space for homoerotic exchanges amid women. Golden Era belly-dance films reveal a rich gender and sexual diversity in Egyptian cultural production, rather than the Orientalist representation of an explicitly homophobic "traditional" Arab culture. In this sense, the article recovers women's nonnormative and queer legacies within popular Egyptian texts. It does not insinuate homosexuality as inherent but instead locates possible Arab cultural engagements with women's queerness that have been overlooked.

**KEYWORDS** Golden Era film, queer-of-color critique, queer spectatorship, femininity, gender and sexual nonnormativity

This article uses two popular Golden Era belly-dance films to argue that mainstream film in Egypt simultaneously enabled and disciplined nonnormative gendered and sexual behavior, specifically between women. Drawing on queer-of-color critique, I articulate how and to what end the films *Sigara wa Kass* (*A Cigarette and a Glass*, 1955) and *Habibi al Asmar* (*My Dark Darling*, 1958) portrayed nonnormative gendered and sexual behaviors. The queer possibilities I uncover indicate that on- and offscreen, Egyptian culture was engaged in discussions about sexual behaviors and desires, which may or may not have been legible under Western categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity (LGBT).

In studies of the Middle East, the use of queer to describe sexual and gendered nonnormativity is often framed in one of two ways — as a capitulation of Arab cultures to neoliberal identity politics or as a means to discuss organizations and performances of same-sex eroticism that are significant to and emergent within local cultures and histories (Amireh 2010: 635). This is a false binary. The history of colonization and Orientalism alongside the ongoing globalization of economies and cultures makes imagining an Arab subject hermetically sealed from the influence of the West impossible. Same-sex eroticism in Arab cultures is always about local cultures and histories at the same time that it is about the global location of these cultures. My primary concern is to attend to histories and performances of same-sex eroticism. Same-sex eroticism is a valuable and interesting expression of desire in Arab culture but may or may not be codified under a sexual identity like gay or lesbian. I follow precedent set by other scholars of this topic, and first, use queer “not as a field with a delimited object of study (such as homosexuality or even sexuality), but as an analytic, a methodology, a critical sensibility, a conceptual strategy, or a reading practice” (Baron and Pursley 2013: 203). Second, queer names modes of gendered and sexual interactions that resist or challenge heteronormative ideals but are (usually) not codified through a sexual identity (Kuntsman and Al-Qasimi 2012: 2). I include under this articulation of queerness displays of homoeroticism, nonnormative gender performance, and ambiguously oriented lust. The Golden Era was playful with regard to social norms; it was not uncommon to see men and women kissing, women undressing women, women drinking and fighting, and cross-dressing, for example. The two films discussed here demonstrate these flexible engagements with sexual paradigms in the mainstream film industry. In both films, and in the Golden Era in general, we see diversity and nonnormativity in performances of desire that today are uncommon or seemingly impossible. Queerness here is not exclusively or inherently intentional in the production of the film but is found within the reception and interpretation of the spectator. I locate queer possibility in these seemingly normative presentations of women, belly dance, and the Golden Era.

Queering Egyptian and Arab film resists the erasure of queer subjects from national and transnational Arab culture, challenges the notion that queerness threatens “authentic” iterations of Arab cultures, and asserts that queer subjects are neither alien to nor outside Arab cultures (Gopinath 2005: 15). Characters in these two films repudiate the elision of queerness from national and transnational memory. They simultaneously challenge the family and heteronormative sexual order through homoerotic and nonnormative behaviors while buttressing that normative model; moreover, they are central to the world the films construct. As such, my project develops a queer archive within popular Arab texts as a means of making space for queer Arab subjects in the culture.

My project departs from other studies of sexuality in the Middle East in the way that it centers women, attends to women’s homoeroticism and nonnormative desires, and reads popular film as constituted by and constituting of mainstream



found pan-Arab audiences (26). Egypt and her stars thus composed the image of the Arab world circulated by and in the Arab world. Consider these comments by Said (1999: 34) in his eulogy for Tahia Carioca, the renowned belly dancer:

Most Eastern Arabs, I believe, would concede impressionistically that the dour Syrians and Jordanians, the quick-witted Lebanese, the rough-hewn Gulf Arabs, the ever-so-serious Iraqis never have stood a chance next to the entertainers, clowns, singers and dancers that Egypt and its people have provided on so vast a scale for the past several centuries. Even the most damaging political accusations against Egypt's governments by Palestinians or Iraqis are leveled grudgingly, always with a trace of how likeable and charming Egypt — especially its clipped, lilting dialect — as a whole is.

Egypt as the center of cultural production and the circulation of Egypt's exports function to create three viewing audiences for Golden Era work: Egypt, other Arab nations, and the diasporic Arab world. If Arabs left the Middle East during the Golden Era, the Arab films they could access were most likely Egyptian. Even today, movie houses that distribute Arab films rely heavily on Egypt's classic cinema, perhaps even more so than their contemporary work. A cursory exploration of Arab satellite television demonstrates the primacy of Egypt's cultural production as well as the lingering attachment to Golden Era work. Of Dish Network's Arabic Elite Super package, the primary provider of Arab television in the United States, five of the twenty-nine channels feature Egyptian content exclusively. One, Nile Drama, touts itself as the viewer's choice for classic Egyptian film. Moreover, the channels that are not regionally affiliated, those channels understood as pan-Arab (e.g., Al Arabiya), all explicitly name Egyptian content in their programming descriptions. These same channels populate televisions in homes all across the Middle East as satellite television provides the primary mode of broadcast in the region. Online the Golden Era has its own robust afterlife on Pinterest, YouTube, and numerous other locations.

I have highlighted the dominance of Egyptian film in the virtual and satellite worlds to help explain why I consider the Golden Era a significant transnational Arab presence. With its transnational appeal, it expands the gendered and sexual dialogues of the films and extends the queer longing they express beyond the bounds of the nation and the Arab world and well into its diaspora. The playfulness of the Golden Era, its queer potential, reaches queer audiences within and without the location of its production. As such, it offers a queer history or genealogy within the culture to its queer subjects and viewers.

### Reading Queerly

I employ queer and queer-of-color critique to locate and articulate women's homoerotic and nonnormative behaviors within Golden Era Egyptian film. I refer to queer and queer-of-color critique separately because they represent distinct strains of



kinship structures suitable to life outside normative marriage and reproduction patterns (Eng 2010: 15–16). As I discuss below, queer time and kinship are salient concepts for reading the relationship between dancer Hoda and singer Azza in *Sigara wa Kass*. Meanwhile, queer space similarly describes how subjects othered from normative culture and publics create subcultures and counterpublics. It also refers to spaces that actively disrupt normative sexual paradigms or can foster nonnormative subjects and behaviors and are thus spaces where queer cultures and kinships might flourish. For example, Gopinath (2005: 25) argues that homosocial home spaces foster homoeroticism between women. Building on this thinking, I argue that in both films nightclubs and belly dance are nonnormative spaces that foster queer kinship and intimacy, especially for women.

Third, in this essay I engage in a flipped reading of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of triangulation from *Between Men*. Sedgwick (1985: 26–27) describes the tension in American literature and film between two men competing for a woman as one means by which men can negotiate homoerotic desires in a socially sanctioned manner. Women's bodies are both incidental and central: any woman might function as a proxy for men's desires, and it must be a woman, to avoid any allegations of eroticism between the men. The presence of the woman substantiates a heterosexual narrative. Writing on the "wiles of women," Najmabadi (1999: 210–13) asserts the agency of women rather than their flat presence as foils for men's homoeroticism. Women cast out boys and men from female homosocial spaces as part of an Oedipal psychoanalytic development, and in so doing actively encourage male homosociality and the by-product, homoeroticism. Moreover, the spaces from which they cast out men are domains of female power that "[mobilize] to combat male power" (220). I combine Najmabadi's and Sedgwick's approaches to articulate how women's actions might substantiate or create eroticism between women. I suggest that we can "flip" Sedgwick's triangle of eroticism between men to a triangle between women. In these films a triangle of eroticism exists between two women and one man; the women's actions in these triangles serve more than male sexuality. In the flipped triangle, when two women compete for the affections of a man, as Samra and Zakia do in *Habibi al Asmar* and as Hoda and Yolanda do in *Sigara wa Kass*, they also negotiate homoerotic tension between women. The man for whom they compete is both incidental and central: it could be any man, and it must be a man to substantiate the heterosexual plot. I make this argument by attending to the dynamics between women in the films. In these triangles, as well as in the friendship dynamic between Hoda and Azza, the intimacy between women is primary and continually supersedes the women's relationships with men.

Last, scholars seeking evidence of nonnormative gendered and sexual behavior often attempt to locate it through the analysis of punitive and disciplinary measures against those subjects (e.g., Shah 2011; Somerville 2000). In film, subjects might flirt with nonnormative or immoral behavior eventually deemed as such and



jealous of Mamdouh's head nurse, Yolanda (Dalida), and turns to alcohol for comfort. With the help of her best friend, fellow performer, and former roommate Azza (Kouka), Hoda narrowly escapes dying, and losing her husband and child, in a house fire she has caused. A secondary plot is Azza's attempt to marry, first a failed attempt to her and Hoda's former stage manager (no name given) and then successfully to a friend of Mamdouh's, Omara (Seraj Munir).

*Habibi al Asmar* (1958) follows two women, Samra (Samia Gamal) and Zakia (Tahia Carioca), as they negotiate love and money in 1950s Egypt. Samra is a *baladi* (country) girl living in her father's home and engaged to her childhood sweetheart, Ahmed. She dreams of dancing onstage with Zakia, her next-door neighbor, an older single woman who works in Zamalek. Under Zakia's influence, Samra meets and marries a wealthy businessman, Rostom, ending her long courtship with Ahmed and cutting ties with her birth family. With Zakia's help, Ahmed seeks revenge. Ahmed, Zakia, and Samra eventually uncover Rostom's illegal activities, and Rostom commits suicide to avoid capture by the police; Zakia suffers a fatal gunshot wound protecting Ahmed. Ahmed and Samra are reunited at the end of the film.

#### Queering Space and Time: Dance as a Source of Nonnormative Configurations

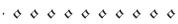
Dance is a central site of conflict and conflict resolution in the two films under discussion. Song and dance numbers in musicals are often scenes that address excess emotion and conflict not easily integrated into the narrative (Knight 2002: 14–17). In *Popular Egyptian Cinema* Shafik (2006: 166–67) discusses how women's dancing bodies in particular are locations at which moral, cultural, and gender conflict is raised and resolved. I argue that part of the excess rendered in song and dance scenes in these films is a nonnormative, homoerotic tension between women. Both films feature actresses who are also dancers and singers outside the film industry: Gamal and Carioca as the former and Kouka and Dalida as the latter. For women, public performances of dance and song are themselves highly signified practices in Egyptian culture and in Arab culture more broadly. In her study of female performance in Egypt, Karin Van Nieuwkerk traces how performers understand and experience gender expectations as they pursue what many deem *A Trade like Any Other*. Van Nieuwkerk's (2010: 129) qualitative research revealed that women's social status rested largely on the kind of performance and for whom and where they performed. Public opinion seemed to designate musicians most respectable, followed by singers, actors, folk dancers, and belly dancers. The venue of women's performance was also significant: wedding singers were more reputable than nightclub performers. The nightclub, catering to men alone rather than families, serving alcohol, and inviting intimacy between patrons placed performers in an already nonnormative space with regard to gender and sexuality; it threatened heteronormative family and religious values. Hoda and Zakia are nightclub performers in *Sigara* and *Habibi*, respectively.



Another way to illustrate how dance and performance venues challenge the heteronormative order is to examine two fantasy dance sequences, one from each film. Both films use fantasy sequences to imagine alternative time lines for the characters of Hoda and Samra. In *Sigara* Hoda has two fantasy sequences: the first at the time of her departure from the Casino al-Galaa'. The second takes place after Hoda and Mamdouh's relationship has foundered, and Hoda fantasizes about returning to the stage. In both sequences, dance is the vehicle and the object of fantasy, against the rather mundane action happening in real time.

At the time of her second fantasy arc, Hoda is drunk and mourning her rejection by producers and directors unwilling to bring her back as a dancer. They have rejected her on the advice of her friend, Azza, who is certain that Hoda's return to dance will end her marriage. Disappointed, Hoda stumbles into the Casino al-Galaa' and witnesses Azza singing. Azza is her former stage partner, who has sung to accompany her in previous scenes. Azza mesmerizes Hoda, who imagines herself the object of Azza's song, dancing alongside her friend. While Azza sings the titular song of the film, Hoda is transformed from her pedestrian clothing into dance costuming. The camera repositions us to view Hoda through Azza, repeating camera cuts from previous song and dance scenes between the two. We, like Hoda, imagine her return to the stage with Azza. During the scene Hoda's dance backdrop fluctuates from the nightclub, to a Spanish flamenco hall, to a desert with cacti, to a balcony with other Egyptian-style dancers, and finally back to the nightclub. The multiple backdrops speak to Hoda's longing for life beyond her marriage to Mamdouh, to the difference and richness her performance career could bring. Through dance Hoda transcends space and time and her heteronormative life. When the number ends, Hoda is back in the audience, bowing. She sheepishly realizes that her dance has been but a fantasy, which prompts her to drink more. She stumbles out of the nightclub and passes out on a stranger's front steps. When she wakes up, she is in another man's bed. The dance, the alcohol, and her longing for something more lead her well outside the appropriate model of heterosexual behavior and very nearly into immoral territory.

Like *Sigara*, *Habibi* features two fantasy sequences. The first is between Samra and Zakia; the second occurs after Samra has learned that her husband, Rostom, is a jewel smuggler. The dream scene opens on a long hallway with a domed ceiling and open windows along the left and right sides. It is a fairly dark background, and the hallway is lit just enough for us to see Samra enter from the left, wearing a fitted ball gown, elbow-length gloves, two sheer scarves draped over her shoulders like a cape, and a small tiara. She walks all the way to the back and begins dancing forward and then back. At first she is alone, but when she reaches the end of the hallway for the second time, men in black suits start appearing at the open windows and attempt to grab her as she walks by. Each time she advances in the frame, new men appear, until there are six of them pawing at her from all directions.

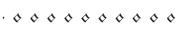




singer did it. While Hoda performs for a roomful of men, on a stage with some male performers, only Azza touches her. In the space of performance, the women's performance to, with, and against each other can be read erotically. Azza's attention to Hoda's features, her testament to her in music, and the intimate touch she gives Hoda — standing behind her, resting her hand on Hoda's hip — produce Azza as the desiring subject and Hoda as the object. The camera keeps both women in the frame simultaneously, never allowing the viewer to forget that the performance happens between them first and to the audience second. Indeed, the only interaction we have with the audience, in a four-minute song-and-dance sequence, is a three-second shot of Mamdouh, whose gaze rests on Hoda. We see him just before Hoda dances to a musical interlude in the song; I suggest that the temporary recession of Azza's singing allows Mamdouh to make an appearance but that, again, his desire is secondary to Azza's in order and scope. The stage not only enables but also necessitates Hoda and Azza's performance of desire for each other. Mamdouh's presence, despite the seemingly heteroerotic cabaret scene, takes a secondary position to the interplay. At best, his desire and the desire of the other patrons are enabled and enacted through the female presence of Azza. Still, the primary dialectic is Azza and Hoda.

The second moment that stages homoeroticism in the film is Hoda's farewell performance for the Casino al-Galaa'. The scene directly follows a conversation Hoda and Azza have had at their apartment before bed, in which Hoda agonizes over leaving show business for a man. This scene ends with Azza's face pressed against a pillow, praying that God will send her love. In the scene that follows, Azza watches Hoda perform her farewell dance from the wings. The stage manager follows Azza and gives her tokens of his affection. Undistracted, Azza rejects them. Instead, she watches Hoda, mesmerized. Because Hoda's dance is cut in immediately after Azza's dream of love, the audience can read Hoda as Azza's wish fulfillment; this reading is affirmed by Azza's response to the stage manager's come-on. The audience of the cabaret appears only when the performance is over; the main audience, and the person with whom the viewer identifies, is Azza. She becomes the conduit of desire for Hoda; like her, the viewer is enchanted with Hoda. The fact that Azza is Hoda's actual and only audience further queers this fantasy scene: desire is conducted homoerotically through the filter of Azza; thus the scopophilic gaze is arrested from men. Azza is not here, nor was before, rendered as the masculine subject, however. She remains as hyperbolic in her femininity as Hoda, and her longing for her fellow performer does not come from occupying a man's social position or affect. In fact, femininity is centered in the appearance of both women and is the means by which Azza cares for and interacts with Hoda. Their shared femininity is what allows for their intimacy. The similarity in their identity positions enables the enactment of desire.

The third scene that fosters an unusual erotic encounter in *Sigara* is the fantasy farewell dance itself. It is unlike previous dance scenes that emphasize eroticism between women or the refusal of heteronormative arcs. Instead, it fosters









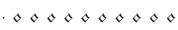
necessary: fixing Hoda's marriage to Mamdouh, marrying an Egyptian to stay in Egypt, and at one point physically assaulting Yolanda.

It should be clear how Azza's behavior could be read queerly in the context of the film. I want to pause on Hoda, who mostly serves as the object of Azza's desire, while her own desire is most often geared toward the stage and the acclaim that it brings. There is one moment that disrupts this mapping. When Hoda wakes up the morning after the party, Mamdouh, Azza, and Azza Jr. are gone. She runs through the house screaming, "Azza, Azza!" but it is not clear if she is looking for her child or for her faithful friend. We might be inclined to read this as concern for her daughter, but queer spectatorship invites us to indulge in the moment of confusion. Azza Jr. appears onscreen very little, perhaps three minutes total. Hoda has spoken of her not at all. The child is named for Hoda's former roommate and longtime friend. It is reasonable that Hoda would wake wanting her friend over her daughter. After all, what has the daughter done for her lately? Azza could easily inspire as much, if not more, longing.

As in *Sigara*, the relationship between women takes primacy over other relationships in *Habibi*. The first real-time interaction between Samra and Zakia occurs after the fantasy sequence in which Samra imagined Zakia dancing for her, herself dancing for Zakia, and themselves dancing together. Samra opens her window to find Zakia waiting for her — her fantasy come to life. They converse about Zakia's night at the club, and Samra wishes that she could come to see Zakia dance. Zakia promises to sneak her out the following night and encourages Samra to take up dance herself. That is, Zakia promises a night on the town that will remain secret from Samra's family. Though their secret relationship is indicative of its unacceptable nature because of its proximity to dance, it is also marked by the framing of Zakia as an overall unsavory character with whom Samra is advised not to associate by her family and fiancé, though she does anyway. After Samra is disciplined by her father and argues with her fiancé about her interest in dance, she continues to sneak out of the house to see Zakia.

When Samra arrives at the club to watch Zakia dance, she is as entranced of her as Azza is of Hoda. As Samra watches Zakia, Rostom watches Samra. He asks the club's manager about her, and together they approach her. But Samra spurns their conversation and continues to watch Zakia; when they attempt to touch her and claim her attention, she snaps at them and puts further physical distance between them. Her disinterest in the men and her focus on Zakia are manifest in her words and body language. Though the scene imagines heterosexual desire from Rostom to Samra, Samra herself upends it and asserts Zakia's centrality to her narrative. As such, her relationship to Rostom is staked out only through Zakia, and, by the same token, Zakia's relationship to Ahmed is enacted through Samra.

Infatuation with Zakia subverts Samra's heteronormative relationships and prioritizes their kinship over that of her biological family and her heterosexual



betrotted. She repeatedly relies on Zakia's counsel and company over that of her established kin and romantic relationships. She goes to the club to watch Zakia against her father's and fiancé's wishes, she enjoys watching the other woman dance, and she agrees to a ride home from Rostom only because Zakia will be there and because Zakia encourages her. Indeed, Samra overthrows her biological family and her fiancé on Zakia's counsel. She marries Rostom on Zakia's advice, against her engagement to Ahmed. Again, it is not that Samra marries Rostom but loves Zakia. Rather, the point is the heightened, often primary, intimacy between the women and the means by which it offers an alternate plot or narrative alongside the heteronormative one. Whatever we imagine Zakia's motives to be, Samra's affection for her goes beyond neighbor, student, or friend.

In both *Habibi* and *Sigara* the relationships between the women are fundamental not only to the plot but also to the character's development. In both, women display loyalty and affection to other women that precedes and supersedes their relationships to men. When we couple this primacy with the eroticism between women, we begin to hear the queer chords of the films. Though I have suggested that these queer longings are available through a position of queer spectatorship, it is not only from a queer viewing position that we can understand the nonnormative intimacies erupting onscreen. Additionally, we can see them in the ways that the films respond to those eruptions.

### **Managing Nonnormativity: Processes of Queer Containment**

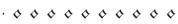
To undermine queer ruptures and sustain the heteronormative plot of the films, characters who most readily symbolize those ruptures are disciplined or disparaged. In *Habibi al Asmar* it is Zakia. In *Sigara wa Kass* the two characters subject to this process are Azza and the stage manager. In the film Azza and the stage manager invoke a queer pathology insofar as their mental instability is conveyed through their gendered and sexual performances. It is only against and through their abjection that the heterosexual couple can survive. Azza's affected (alongside the stage manager's seemingly actual) madness is used as a tool to produce and buttress heteronormative relationships. As I noted earlier, Azza often discusses love but has routinely rejected Omara and the stage manager as suitors. However, Azza not only refuses Omara after his initial proposal but convinces him that she is crazy to put him off marrying her. Azza uses mock insanity to escape normative heterosexuality, and her person is thus doubly queered by her supposed madness and her avoidance of men. Even without the use of madness, the absence of heteroromantic relationships in Azza's life reads queerly: her refusal to pursue men and the absence of even one reasonable suitor in the years that the film spans (about five) highlight her unusual single status. Azza's queer potential thus is marked both by her onstage eroticism with Hoda and by lack of heterosexual relationships. Until her decision to



stay in Egypt with Hoda, she has no intention of marrying for love, desire, or even money. She is really concerned only with national status, the necessary requirement for staying with Hoda.

Azza's devotion to Hoda is such that she is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice: marry the stage manager who has loved her for years, the same stage manager she has routinely rejected. When she informs him that she will marry him, the manager is at first ecstatic. When Azza leaves the scene, he faints. The next and final time we see him is in a hospital room in drag, dressed as a *hajja*, or older woman. He is even slapping his palms together in a gesture attributed to worrying women. I suggest that the stage manager's drag has three functions. First, it marks the possibility of a heterosexual union as threatening: the stage manager is so overwhelmed by the prospect of marrying Azza that he "becomes" a woman. Since Azza has never assumed a deviant gender role in the film, it seems suspect to read the stage manager's gender variance as a response to her gender performance and to locate it instead around the threat of sexuality. It might be possible to read his transformation as a mode of identification with the object he desires; after all, it is the similarities between Azza and Hoda, their shared femininity and positions, that allow for their intimacy. Perhaps the actualization of the stage manager's desire is not a sexual union with Azza but an emulation of her gender performance. In either case, what is not desired is heterosexual coupling. Garay Menicucci (1998: 34) outlines two possible reasons for men dressing as women, which became a recurring trend during the Golden Era, in Egyptian film. He argues that cross-dressing often introduced questions of class and that cross-dressing was persistently and explicitly tied to homosexuality in men. If Menicucci is correct, we can reaffirm how the stage manager's transformation reflects back on Azza. His infatuation with her and his subsequent terror marks Azza as queer by association. When Azza gives in to the request he has made throughout the film, the request is revealed as more complicated than marriage. Our understanding of the stage manager's motivations may be unclear, but the results of his decisions mark his and her nonnormativity.

Second, the scene reinscribes queerness as pathology. Azza has already done this throughout the film by avoiding marriage, with "insane" behavior, and the presence of the stage manager in the hospital for the "mental illness" of cross-dressing solidifies it. The pathologization of the stage manager overshadows Azza's queerness through its visibility, and in some ways she is repaired through his blatant nonnormativity. His body becomes the tangible site of queerness and diverts our attention from Azza's or Hoda's queer subjectivity. Ultimately the hyperqueer body of the stage manager buttresses Azza's sketchy sexuality, and Azza's now less queer but still nonnormative body serves the supposedly solid heterosexual relationship between Hoda and Mamdouh. The end of the film, through marriage, removes both Azza and Hoda from the performance space that fostered their queer kinship and allowed for the articulation of queer desires. Thus the homosocial space of dance in





reemerge. For Zakia, it is too late to be saved. Her lesson is passed on to Ahmed and Samra, who return to their pure, marriage-driven, and loyal love in the wake of her death. Like those of the stage manager in *Sigara*, Zakia's nonnormativity and moral failures make Samra and Ahmed recoverable. Like that of *Azza*, her queer potential is quieted through a common narrative trope. It is only in her complete abjection, like the stage manager's, that the correct couple can survive.

Both stories secure gendered and sexual normativity through the characters who disrupted that normativity in the original moment; this disruption and its solution avails the viewer of nonnormative performances of gender and desire that are active in the dominant narrative and that exist alongside normative ones. Both resurrect and contain queer potential. Both invoke homoeroticism between women, often located within the space of dance and performance. In these ways both films evidence and recover a rich and multifaceted dialogue about desire, gender, and sexuality in Golden Era Egyptian film.

### Conclusion

Queering Golden Era film asserts the presence of nonnormative gender and desire in mainstream Arab texts, resists the erasure of queer subjects from Arab histories, and signals that queerness is neither absent from nor foreign to Arab culture. This article contributes to scholarship on queerness in Arab culture by focusing on women and femininity over men and masculinity. My analysis demonstrates how dance fostered homosociality and homoerotic desire between women, how women's intimacy with one another challenged heterosexually driven intimacy, and how the rupture of that same intimacy and eroticism onscreen required a narrative resolution that guarded against leaving the film with an "untoward" message. The very regulation of queerness and nonnormativity in the film intimates how prevalent concerns around desire and sexuality were in the Golden Era, and via the Golden Era, in the larger Egyptian and Arab cultural scheme. The films reveal a more diverse gender and sexual dialogue in transnational Arab production than Orientalism and anti-Arab racism deem possible.

The films provide us with a rich collection of images and lessons about gender and sexuality within the context of dance. Dance performance both in real time and in film give way to homoerotic exchanges between women. In the films queer desire takes up as much space as, if not more space than, nonqueer desire. While heterosexuality is ultimately restored in the conclusion of the stories, the presence of nonnormative bodies and desires makes space in the culture of the film and the culture of the viewer for alternate geographies of kinship, coupling, and intimacy to assert themselves.

We see in these films, and others from the period, a history of desire that has morphed and grown more rich alongside the social political climate and that thus has felt its regulations and restrictions severely. The centrality of the Golden Era and

