

Episode 1: Navigating Between Religion and Art

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[ANNOUNCER, MUSIC UNDER]

"This program is a production the Rutgers Centers for Global Advancement and International Affairs."

[MUSIC UP FULL]

[OPEN MONTAGE OF SOTS FROM TV SHOW, MUSIC UNDER]

"Rutgers' vision//globalized world//international learning//unique opportunities//global health//study abroad//expand my horizons."

[MUSIC UP FULL]

[HOST PRITA SINHA, MUSIC UNDER]

"This is... Rutgers Around the World— a finger on the pulse of all things global at Rutgers."

[MUSIC STINGS]

HOST: Hi, I'm Prita Sinha, Rutgers senior and host of the podcast Rutgers Around the World. Welcome to our premier episode.

Dance often puts one's body literally at center stage and that can sometimes be at odds with one's desire for modesty particularly for those who practice Islam. Our next guest was so intrigued by this that she made it the focus of her research here at Rutgers. Dr. Aydin Ersoz is the first Fulbright visiting scholar to the dance department at the Mason Gross School of the Arts. Dr. Ersoz is a native of Bulgaria and associate professor with the art and design faculty at Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul, Turkey.

Dr. Ersoz, thank you so much for joining us.

AYRIN ERSOZ: Thank you very much.

HOST: So, you've called Muslim woman's approach to dance a negotiation of sorts, a desire to practice a religion while devoting themselves to an art that puts focus onto their bodies. As one of only about 20 dance professors in Turkey, what interactions did you have with your students that led you to do this research?

AYRIN ERSOZ: So, last year I was giving a lecture for freshmen, for the first grade students at the School of Art and Design where I am. So I was giving this lecture about dance. After the class ended, a group of students came to me and they said we want to dance. Among these students, there were two women, two young, female students who were wearing headscarves. It was very exciting eh for me, it was very interesting, and I was really happy to hear that. But both of these girls had different issues regarding their participation in any dance practice.

One of the girls said, "Is it OK to enter the dance class with my headscarf?" and the other one said, "Is it OK to dance female on the environment?"

So these young women, in the moment of our discussions, they were in front of me talking to me, next to each other at the same university, same country, same culture—with completely different understandings of Islam, completely different ways of practicing the religion and um different ways of negotiating their desire to dance and their desire to be modest and devoted Muslims.

HOST: So you said you began to conduct this research you had some preconceptions about how Muslim women in the United States would perceive dance. Through your research, how have your studies supported or negated those preconceptions?

AYRIN ERSOZ: When I came and started to conduct my interviews, I realized that most of the students that I interviewed accept dance as an art form and accept it as a profession. This was something that I was not expecting directly or actually immediately, maybe let's say, because I was thinking that they would, you know ... that the perception of dance would be somehow framed within the concepts of religion. No, they didn't talk about religion when I asked them about dance. The religion was not the first thing that came to their minds. Dance as a profession was the first thing that it came to them.

HOST: Other researchers have attempted to examine these challenges, but your research fills a very specific gap. Can you tell us more about this?

AYRIN ERSOZ: To prepare my project, I had to see what was done in the last 10 years in the research of young Muslim woman and participating in bodily practices. Most of the research was considering—especially in high school, because it is a compulsory education—physical education, and there were many problems in western countries. For example, swimming classes: it's very difficult for them to enter the swimming classes because some of them, they cannot wear the swimsuit with the male present. But, I realized that nobody was asking these young girls what they think about dance as an art form, especially in the western countries where dance is really important form especially America; modern dance is an American invention. Rutgers is a perfect place to conduct this kind of research. The presence of diversity is cherished and supported, that's very important.

HOST: So even before you started this research you have been teaching an on-line course at Rutgers. In your course you use some original music to document the history of dance in the Ottoman Empire. Let's take a listen.

..Sample Music playing:.

So can you tell us a little more about this piece and what makes it so perfect for your choreography?

AYRIN ERSOZ: In this piece, I am telling a story of a young küçük dancer—a male belly dancer of 16th/17th century Ottoman time and her killing, because actually, she is a woman, and they found out that she's a woman. She's persecuted and the music is from Sultan... one of his poems and music was composed to that poem by Ali Ufki Bey, a Polish composer who was living in the Ottoman time in Istanbul. And, my friend and colleague, Evrim Demirel, composed a piece for my choreography, and I think one of the most exciting part of the courses this period when I am talking of the entertainment dances or spectacle dances of the Ottoman time. I think that with the responses from the students, I realize that really they enjoy that period.

HOST: Well, we are all out of time. Dr. Ersoz thank you for sharing your insights with us today. Best of luck to you in your research and please keep us updated.

That was Dr. Ayrin Ersoz Fulbright visiting scholar to the dance department at the Mason Gross School of the Arts and associate professor with the art and design faculty at Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul, Turkey.

That's all for this episode of *Rutgers Around the World*. Join us next time as we discuss all things global with members of the Rutgers community.

Thanks for listening.

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