

# The *Zenne*: Male Belly Dancers and Queer Modernity in Contemporary Turkey<sup>1</sup>

JOANNA MANSBRIDGE

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*This article explores the history and contemporary revival of male belly dancers – zenne or köçek – in Turkey and in cities with large Turkish populations, such as Berlin. What does the current revival of male belly dancing tell us about the relationship between modern ideologies of sex and gender and narratives of modernity as they have taken shape in Turkey? The zenne dancer embodies the contradictions of contemporary Turkish culture, which includes a variety of same-sex practices, along with sexual taxonomies that have developed in collusion with discourses of modernity. The revival of zenne dancing can be seen as part of a series of global transformations in the visibility of gay, lesbian, and trans people in popular culture and public discourse. However, it is also an unpredicted consequence of the Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) purposeful revival and romanticization of Turkey's Ottoman past, which has been ahistorically remembered as more pious than the present. Re-emerging in the twenty-first century as an embodiment of competing definitions of sexuality and modernity in contemporary Turkey, precisely at a moment when Turkish national identity is a hotly contested issue, the zenne dancer is queer ghost, returning to haunt (and seduce) the present.*

In June 2016, at Zarifi, a popular *meyhane* (traditional tavern) in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district, an audience comprised mainly of locals slip money into the bejewelled belts of male belly dancers like Diva (Ali Murat Sahiner) between bites of *meze* and shots of *raki*. Like most *zenne*, as such dancers are known, Diva is young, lithe and boyish. With hair immaculately sculpted, eyes thickly rimmed with black eyeliner, lips brightly coloured, and chest aglow with glitter and oil, he rouses the entire room, shimmying provocatively toward individual tables, where people clap to the rhythm of the music, cheer their appreciation, and often join in the dance. The coins on the belt of Diva's skirt jingle brightly, and his perfume permeates the air. Lips slightly parted and formed into a faint smile, he commands attention with his gaze, inviting the audience to look at him and appreciate his beauty, and animating the polymorphous desires that live solo dance, in particular, puts into play.

The above scene is not the image of Turkey that has been portrayed in the media in recent years. But in Istanbul, Bodrum and Berlin, a growing number of *zenne* dancers – historically known as *köçek* – are displacing female belly dancers in clubs, *meyhanes*, cabarets, private events and resorts.<sup>2</sup> As Turkish dance scholar Metin And notes, at the beginning of the nineteenth century 'there were some 600 dancing boys in the taverns of Constantinople'.<sup>3</sup> However, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and then more decisively when the Ottoman Empire was transformed into the modern Turkish republic

in the 1920s, male belly dancers fell out of fashion. The tradition of dancing boys in the former Ottoman Empire was largely eclipsed by the changes in societal structures and the containment of sexual desires that accompanied processes of modernization in the Ottoman Empire and, later, in the Turkish republic.<sup>4</sup> In the twenty-first century, however, *zenne* dancers are back on Turkish stages and screens, part of the growing interest among Turks in the Ottoman past and the increasing global visibility of queer subjects and the political issues to which this gives rise.

What does the current revival of male belly dancing tell us about the relationship between modern ideologies of sex and gender and narratives of modernity as they have taken shape in Turkey? With its unique geographical, ideological and cultural position at the intersection of Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia and its historically decisive political shift from Ottoman imperialism to secular nationalism in the twentieth century, Turkey productively complicates the ideological polarization of the West and the Muslim world, even as the country is presently experiencing internal and external conflicts relating to that polarization. These conflicts include increasing authoritarianism under the Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), which has been challenged by both Kemalist nationalists and left-wing groups through the occupation of Gezi Park, an echo of the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring; eroding relations with the European Union; entanglement in the instabilities roiling the region, which have involved Turkey in a complex set of geopolitical alignments with global powers; instabilities associated with the influx of Syrian refugees; resumption of armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and renewed aggression towards the Kurdish population more generally; and, finally, a coup attempt in July 2016, which resulted in increased popular nationalism, a crackdown on academics and journalists expressing dissent against the AKP, and the detainment of military, educational, and government officials associated with the religious leader Fethullah Gülen. By comparison, the *zenne* dancer may seem an insubstantial figure on which to focus. However, the meanings of this performer in the cultural archive and collective memory of the nation help put into sharper focus the anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality that underlie many of the nation's broader anxieties regarding modernity, democracy and its own history. Moreover, that insubstantiality has its own force. Re-emerging in the twenty-first century as an embodiment of competing definitions of sexuality and modernity in contemporary Turkey, precisely at a moment when Turkish national identity is a hotly contested issue, I shall argue that the *zenne* dancer is queer ghost, returning to haunt (and seduce) the present.

### **The *zenne*: historic figure and queer icon**

The *zenne* dancer embodies the contradictions of contemporary Turkish culture, which includes a variety of same-sex practices, along with sexual taxonomies that have developed in collusion with discourses of modernity. As Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray explain,

the contrast between 'Western' and 'Islamic' homosexualities is not so much one of visibility versus invisibility or modern freedom versus traditional repression, but of

containment versus elaboration, of a single pattern of homosexuality defined and delimited by institutions and discourses closely linked to the modern nation-state versus the variety, distribution, and longevity of same-sex patterns in Islamic societies.<sup>5</sup>

The history of male belly dancing and its contemporary re-emergence highlight these competing sexual epistemologies. The Ottoman Empire – an Islamic political and geographical entity founded in 1300 by Turkic tribal leader Osman I that, by the early nineteenth century and until its demise in 1922, spanned modern-day Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Palestine, Serbia, and Romania – was made up of heterogeneous populations and included a spectrum of desires and sexual practices.<sup>6</sup> The Ottoman elites began major reforms (*tanzimat*) in the early nineteenth century, under Sultan Abdu'l-Aziz (1861–76) and Sultan Hamid II (1876–1908), in response to European pressures to end the international slave trade and conform to the political, economic, social and legal systems of the Western-defined nation state. The suppression of harem culture, and the slave trade on which that culture depended, was a central part of these early reforms, which accelerated in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the political movement, the Young Turks, formed in opposition to the constitutional monarchy of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup>

Dancing boys, or *köçekler*, first emerged as entertainers for the Ottoman court, and their decline in popularity must be seen as part of the changing structures of the modernizing empire. Accounts and representations of *köçekler* come from the writings of European visitors describing performances, from the poems of Ottoman-era writers praising the beauty of dancing boys, and from murals in Topkapı Palace depicting them dancing for the Sultan and at social ceremonies. Historically, there were both male and female (*çengi*) belly dancers in the Ottoman Empire, but cross-dressing belly dancing boys proliferated between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when it was deemed improper for women to perform publicly.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while the wives, female relatives, concubines, and eunuchs were secluded in the harem, boys took their place as performers in the court. Recruited at the age of seven or eight from the *dhimmi* class – non-Muslims who were of Greek, Armenian, Romani and Jewish ethnic origin – *köçekler* would begin dancing at Topkapı Palace at the age of fourteen, serving as both entertainers and sexual servants.<sup>9</sup> *Köçekler* grew their hair long, dressed in female costumes, danced suggestively, and imitated the gestures of upper-class femininity. Once the practice of young male dancers spread from beyond the palace walls and into the city's taverns, troupes (*kol*) formed and toured throughout the empire. Enthusiasm for the boys in *meyhanes* would often result in shouting and fights among the male spectators who courted them. Indeed, as And notes, 'the popularity of the dancing boys led to so much trouble and quarreling among the Janissaries [the Sultan's army] that, in 1837, Sultan Mahmud forbade their appearance'.<sup>10</sup> Dancing boys thus lost the official support of their imperial patrons and, as the harem culture faded, so too did the *köçekler*. Although men continue to belly dance among themselves today in the rural communities of Turkey, as well as in Morocco and parts of the Middle East, more public performances have been discouraged in modern Turkey. In a new republic conscious of the Western system of sexual classification – homosexuality/heterosexuality – and of the image of the publicly



FIG. 1 Postcard of an Ottoman *köçek* dancer, nineteenth century. Photo: ND Phot. Source: Belly Dance Museum, at <http://belly-dance.org/shop.php?id=122>.

displayed female body as the emblem of modern attitudes towards sex and gender, the *köçek* fell out of popularity and the belly dancing woman took his place in the modern Turkish republic.

The twin processes of modernization and westernization in Turkey are associated mainly with the massive reforms instituted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, which gave rise to the modern Turkish republic. This swift transition involved a decisive adoption of Western models of government, education, and industry, if not Western morality. The westernization process was always selective and strategic – and subordinated to Atatürk's authority as the nation's founding father. Atatürk's republicanism enforced the assimilation of the diverse cultures and religions of the Ottoman Empire into a homogenized Turkish cultural and national identity and an Islamic religious identity and contained sexuality within the patriarchal institutions of the modern nation state: family, religion and the military. Kemalist secularism extended to dress as well. In 1925, Atatürk instituted a ban on religious attire (the face veil, turban and fez), and women wearing headscarves were prohibited from attending universities and working in the public sector as teachers, lawyers, doctors and public servants.<sup>11</sup> The veil reforms, in particular, were aimed at encouraging women to participate more directly in public life as professionals. However, on 9 February 2008, the AKP removed the ban on religious clothing, and there has been a subsequent marked increase in veiling practices throughout Turkey and a surge of interest in Islamic fashion, demonstrated by Modest Fashion Week in Istanbul in May 2016, which showcased the conservative-chic collections of seventy designers from around the world.

The enforced secularism and the subsequent return of suppressed cultural and religious practices illustrate the dialectical 'push-pull' movement of Turkish modernity,

and are indicative of the fact that, until recently, modernization in Turkey involved severing all ties to its imperial past.<sup>12</sup> In 1923, the military was established as the secular Kemalist force keeping in check religious influences in government, while its accompanying rituals became, as Yael Navaro-Yashin explains, a primary ‘rite of secular statist initiation into masculine adulthood’.<sup>13</sup> Turkish men are required to serve two years in the military, and although under the AKP the military has been gradually divested of its power, its disciplinary structures, homosocial bonds and respect for hierarchy continue to inform Turkish masculinity. The easy affection among men and pervasive male gaze regulating the public sphere establish a thread of continuity with the Ottoman past by way of a social ideology governed by masculine authority. Amid the changes and continuities incited by modernization, female belly dancing, or *oryantal dans*, as it is called in Turkey, has remained important to modern Turkish culture as a festive part of social ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions, birthdays and anniversaries, and as a ‘folk’ performance popular among tourists. While women belly dancers have dominated in Turkey and elsewhere, the *zenne* dancer has been usurping their popularity in the last several years. At once modern and traditional, the *zenne* offers multiple points of identification within Turkey’s varied social landscape, appealing to both younger urban Turks looking for a trendy night out and more conservative Turks who would prefer to see a man scantily clad and dancing seductively rather than a woman.

One way of thinking about the revival of *zenne* dancing today is as part of a series of global transformations in the visibility of gay, lesbian and trans people in popular culture and public discourse. But it is also an unpredicted consequence of AKP’s purposeful revival and romanticization of Turkey’s Ottoman past. AKP president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s deeply conservative vision of ‘New Turkey’ is redefining what modernity means to its citizens, in part, by invoking a glorified Ottoman past ahistorically remembered as more pious than the present. In relation to gender and sexuality, Erdoğan’s position is unambiguous: his regime has denounced the LBGTT community as social deviants who are spoiling public morality, a position that has resulted in a seemingly related sharp rise in violence and prejudice against gay, lesbian and, especially, trans people.<sup>14</sup> Sociologist Hakan Ataman explains, ‘homophobic and transphobic attitudes and behavior in Turkey have significantly been motivated by Turkish nationalism, traditional family values, culture and conservatism’.<sup>15</sup> Rasim Özgür Dönmez confirms this, stating in no uncertain terms, ‘Turkey’s democratization can solely be provided by the deconstruction of the state’s and the regime’s hegemonic masculinity in order to change the symbolic gender identities of state and social relations’.<sup>16</sup> Groups serving the rights of minorities have come under threat as they are perceived to be dissenting from the moral majority. For example, Lambdaistanbul, Turkey’s largest LBGTT organization, was founded in 1993 and became an official organization in 2006, only to be dissolved in 2008 by a court order that deemed the group to be against ‘law and morality’.<sup>17</sup> The rise of the anti-nationalist, left-wing People’s Democratic Party (HDP), which advocates for minority groups, such as Kurds, LBGTT people and Alevi Muslims, defined a newly emerging political ideology in Turkey, a fusion of queer and leftist politics. However, on 4 November 2016, the co-leaders of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were arrested in their homes, charged by the Turkish government with supporting the

PKK. It is within this vexed context that the *zenne* has re-emerged, at once historical figure and queer icon.

### **The style, class and geography of *zenne* dancing**

The *zenne* dancer has been revived as a figure rich in interpretive possibility, even as he is also inevitably part of the socio-economic fabric of Turkish society. Sexuality, social class and forms of labour are all closely linked in Turkey, and these relationships can be mapped onto public spaces in Istanbul. *Lubunya*, a slang term used in Turkey that includes a spectrum of queer sexualities from gay men to trans women, constitute not so much an identity as a socio-economic class. *Lubunya* often work at night, as sex workers or entertainers. *Zenne* dancers are among the most privileged of *lubunya*, perhaps because of their unequivocal, if effeminate, maleness. Trans sex workers and drag performers, in contrast, are ghettoed in areas like Tarlabası, an area located adjacent to the busy commercial strip, İstiklal Caddesi. Home to Kurds, Romani and the trans community, Tarlabası is part of the entertainment and shopping district of Beyoğlu, which is deemed an 'illegitimate' area, or in Turkish *gayrimeşru*. Ece Saltan explains that this word has two meanings in Turkish, 'unlawful' and, interestingly, 'out of wedlock', an etymology that gestures toward the intimate relationship among sexuality, moral law, and public space in Turkish culture.<sup>18</sup> Beyoğlu is itself divided into class-marked zones: the derelict section of Tarlabası, the busy commercial and tourist area around İstiklal, and the up-scale neighbourhood of Cihangir. Likewise, the district's residents, consumers and forms/performers of labour are divided into these low, middle and upper classes. At the intersection of these three areas is Taksim Square, the heart of modern Istanbul and the monumental centrepiece of the Turkish republic. Within these areas, we can trace the re-emergence of the contemporary *zenne* dancer.

The *zenne* offers audiences a chance to revel in a uniquely Turkish form, while at the same time providing an avenue for young gay-identified men to express their sexuality in a safe way. A career on the professional circuit typically begins at restaurants – or less desirably, cabaret – and from there moves to private performances and, ultimately, television appearances. Most *zenne* are self-taught. However, as more young men become interested in the form, older dancers are setting up classes aimed at training the next wave. The costumes of *zenne* dancers are similar to those of their female counterparts: loose-fitting gauzy pants (*şalvar*) or skirts trimmed with shimmering coins and chest pieces adorned with sequins and tassels provide both visual and aural pleasure. Props are an extension of the performer's body: veils, wings of Isis and zils emphasize the contours of the dancer's body and the rhythm of his movements. *Zennes* also imitate their female counterparts in their movements. The basic vocabulary of belly dance includes: lifts and drops, slides, shimmies, twists, circles, figure-of-eights and undulations. Women generally perform these movements slowly, using their hips, lower body and arms, while men perform faster, sharper articulations focused on the torso and shoulders. Women often turn their backs to the audience, using veils to play with the boundary between concealment and exposure, while male dancers shimmy directly towards the audience, avoiding gestures of vulnerability and surrender, such as turning their backs to the

audience or raising their arms above their heads. In the abstract, these movements – their style, speed and location – are highly gendered. In performance, however, the control and directness suggested by the masculine style, and the coy seductiveness of the feminine style, are easily – and often – intermixed.

Among the hundreds of *zenne* dancers in Istanbul, Segah Demirdelen is one of the city's most celebrated. Segah dances at private events and at Club Chanta (recently renamed Opera Club), a cross-over gay club also located in Beyoğlu, though on the 'other side' (geographically and socio-symbolically) of İstiklal Caddesi from Tarlabası. Segah's audiences – which include a large proportion of women and gay men – revel in the sensuality and precision of his movements. In an interview, he has claimed that he modelled his dance style on the female belly dancers he saw perform as a child: movements that focus mainly on the lower part of the body, especially hip rotations, smooth belly rolls and undulating arm movements, comprise his aesthetic. He also refers to the Colombian pop star Shakira, whose signature belly dance has become part of her celebrity image, as a major influence on his dance aesthetic.<sup>19</sup> Segah claims, 'When I dance, I create a kind of gender confusion. I am a man – with a beard! – but I'm dancing just like a woman. And that really shocks people. They're shocked into enjoying it'. His beard is unusual, a divergence from the traditional boyish *zenne*. Metin And notes of the *köçek*, 'boys [could] dance as long as they preserve their good looks and . . . conceal their beards', adding that 'dancing boys were so loved and praised by their audiences' that poets wrote poems praising the art of their dance and their beauty.<sup>20</sup> Dror Ze'evi explains further that, in the Ottoman context, beardless men were 'objects of loving contemplation' for older men. Male sexuality was viewed in two distinct phases in Ottoman culture: until puberty, boys were thought to possess an untamed sexuality that could be used to attract older men (although the boys themselves could be attracted to either men or women); but once a full beard developed, men were expected to be the desirer, not the object of desire.<sup>21</sup> Segah's deviation from the aesthetic and gender conventions of the *zenne* dancer and the deliberate dissonance between the artifice of the display and the body of the performer suggests something close to drag. However, it is not only the incongruity between male body and feminine appearance at play in Segah's performances, but also the incongruity between a boyish sensuality and an adult masculinity. Although Segah had intended to get an exemption from military service, which is done by showing photographic evidence of homosexual acts, he was not comfortable being out to his father, so he served for eight months before being released. 'I didn't mind', he says. 'I had more lovers there than anywhere else'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even as Segah's bearded appearance and feminine movements confuse performances of gender, his reluctance to come out to the military and to his father illustrates the vexed status of queer subjects in Turkey's central institutions.

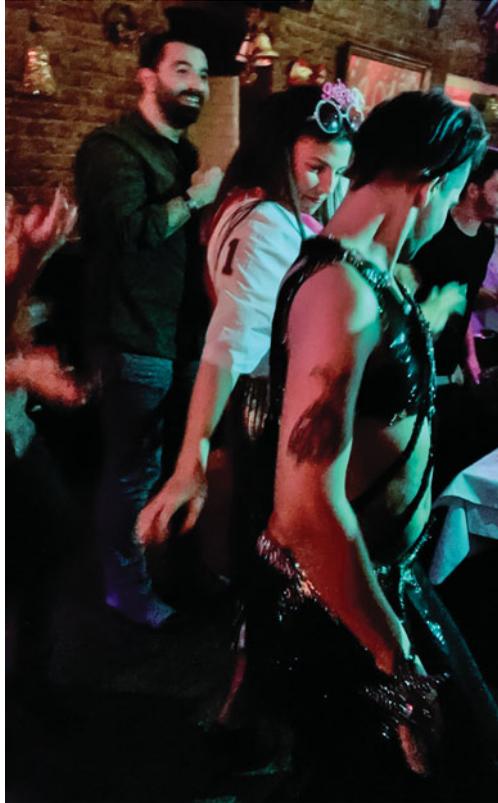
*Zenne* dancers, however, inhabit a fantasy realm onstage, wherein the rules governing sexuality and gender are temporarily suspended, or at least reconfigured, and the erotic nature of the dance is contained by the conventions governing audience–performer interactions and aestheticized through props and costumes. As a performer, the *zenne* is both active subject and passive object, and his audiences also oscillate between these same positions as both active and passive spectators. Part of the next wave of *zenne* dancers in Istanbul, *zenne* Baha deliberately fuses different traditions and approaches. A student



FIG. 2 (Colour online) *Zenne* by © Mathias Depardon. *Zenne* Segah performs onstage at Club Chanta. Segah dances at private parties and clubs, sometimes performing several times a day. Istanbul, Turkey.

of Diva and a newcomer at Zarifi, Baha also dances at private events, supplementing his income by teaching private classes to women. His costumes range from brightly coloured billowing skirts to elaborate masks and showgirl-style head pieces to go-go-inspired fringed pants and faux-leather vests. Compared to his more established counterparts, Baha's dance style is improvisational, focusing more on audience interaction than on technique. He dances flirtatiously with both men and women, maintaining the delicate balance between seduction and distance and inspiring a spirit of revelry. What Baha lacks in technique he makes up for in his ability to galvanize a crowd and get them all shimmying. As competition among *zenne* dancers increases, the form will doubtlessly be reinvented as dancers find new ways to differentiate themselves and the fantasies they foster.

In places where the *zenne* is more of a rarity, the emphasis is less on developing a distinctive aesthetic and more on maintaining (and marketing) an enduring fantasy. The popularity of Turkish German *zenne* dancer Zadiel (Mehmet Sasmaz), for example, illustrates how orientalist scripts have been reinvented in cities with large Turkish populations, where the history of the *zenne* converges with Western homosexual communities and practices. The political ties between Turkey and Germany date back to 1790, when a peace treaty was signed between the Kingdom of Prussia and the Ottoman Empire. This alliance led to enduring military, economic and cultural relations between the modern nation states of Turkey and Germany. Today, three million Turkish citizens live in Germany, many working as domestic and manual labourers, and every year four million German tourists visit Turkey.<sup>23</sup> The labour flows that accompany this political and economic relationship inevitably include artistic forms, like *zenne* dancing. Born



*FIG. 3* (Colour online) *Zenne* Baha dancing with a bride-to-be at Zarifi. While the men and women mostly danced in their own groups at this wedding party, *zenne* Baha moved easily between them. Author's photo.

in Berlin and of Turkish ethnic background, Zadiel trained as a dancer with Horacio Cifuentes, founder of Oriental Fantasy Productions, a Berlin-based dance company that creates shows replete with harems, veiled women and dancing men. Today, Zadiel moves primarily among Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Bodrum, a Turkish Aegean resort town popular with British, German and Russian tourists. Zadiel both replicates and updates this orientalist scene from within the context of global neo-liberalism, which involves the circulation of images, affects and fantasies, as much as of capital. Commanding five hundred euros for twenty minutes of dancing in Berlin, Zadiel markets and distributes his 'brand' in DVDs and private classes aimed at both women and men. As he describes the international belly dancing circuit, 'The supply of male dancers is low. It makes me all the more exotic and raises my marketability'.<sup>24</sup>

Less of a novelty when he performs in Turkey, Zadiel can nonetheless be distinguished from his Istanbul and Bodrum counterparts by his mature age and more masculine appearance and aesthetic. Not only does he wear less make-up and more minimal costumes, but also Zadiel's dance style is coded as more masculine, focusing on upper-body movements performed to a fast, regular beat. His dances are choreographed

to the rhythm of the drum (*doumbek*), rather than the string or wind instruments, and his style is characterized by precise, rapid articulations of his chest and torso, along with sharp pelvic tilts. Zadiel admits that he performs in a more traditionally feminine way when he comes to Turkey – slower, more fluid movements focused on the hips, rather than the chest and torso – but insists that his German audiences expect a more ‘masculine style’. Eschewing discussion of his sexuality, Zadiel claims that it has nothing to do with his dancing and that ‘art is not necessarily sexual’.<sup>25</sup> Emphasizing the artfulness of belly dancing is a frequently deployed defence against the (homo)erotic associations of the dance. The *zenne* sublimates sexual difference into a fantasy of cultural and historical difference, but the meanings he animates differ depending on the geographical context, the audience’s identifications and expectations, and the historic echoes of similar encounters.

### Representations of the *zenne* in film, television and theatre

No longer only a revitalized dance form, the *zenne* has, over the last several years, been transformed into a shifting series of malleable representations circulated in film, television, theatre, social media and gallery exhibitions. The 2016 Istanbul Design Biennial, *Are We Human?*, included an installation called *Köçek Dance Floor*, a collaboration between Turkish artist Asli Serbest and German artist Mona Mahall that uses the *köçek* as a point of access into other subjects and affects disavowed by Turkey’s decisive modernization. The artists describe the project as follows:

*Köçek Dance Floor* presents the practices, spaces, costumes, objects, and music of the *köçek*, the young male dancer of Ottoman times. Evading traditional categorizations of gender, the figure of the *köçek* is a reminder of how the Western understanding of sexuality was imported onto pre-colonial Islamic societies during 19th c. modernization. Composed of a series of videos around a dance floor, the installation creates an open and ambiguous environment that invites visitors to mobilize their bodies.<sup>26</sup>

Encouraging viewers to move within an environment constructed to look like a dance club, the installation suggests that interacting with this history might activate the particular histories embedded, but at rest, in our own bodies. In this way, the installation unleashes a rediscovered archive of potentialities in the present.

It was Mehmet Binay and Caner Alper’s 2012 feature film *Zenne Dancer* that brought the *zenne* – as a historical figure – back into public consciousness in Turkey. Inspired by the story of twenty-six-year-old university student Ahmet Yildiz, who was shot in Istanbul in 2008 in what has been called Turkey’s first gay ‘honour killing’, the film explores relationships among three men – Daniel, a German photographer; Ahmet, a Turkish man from a conservative eastern city in Turkey; and Can, a *zenne* dancer. Ahmet (Erkan Avci) moves to Istanbul where he can live somewhat freely as a gay man. There, he befriends Can (Kerem Can), and Daniel (Giovanni Arvaneh), who comes to the gay nightclub where Can dances, wanting to photograph him. When Daniel and Ahmet begin to develop an intimate relationship, a detective hired by Ahmet’s mother starts to follow Ahmet, serving as a not-so-exaggerated version of the regulatory gaze of the Turkish public sphere. When Ahmet’s mother finds out that Ahmet sleeps with men, she orders her husband to kill their son.

*Zenne Dancer* both highlights homophobic attitudes embedded in Turkish culture, and raises troubling questions about the implications of importing Western attitudes towards homosexuality into a Turkish context. In Turkey, many people consider being openly gay a lifestyle choice and associate it with a Western-influenced morality. In contrast, the rituals of family, religion and military maintain hegemonic heteronormativity for most Turks. The Turkish military makes exemptions for mandatory service in cases of homosexuality, which is classified as a mental illness. In cases of exemption due to sexual orientation, the man must provide photographic evidence or submit to a rectal examination. Surprisingly, the film plays this requirement for laughs, showing a dragged up Ahmet walking into the recruitment office and eagerly giving over photos of him and Daniel having sex. That the military is an object of satire in the film is reinforced by the concluding statement in the final shot: 'The Turkish Military is in possession of the largest pornographic collection in Europe.'<sup>27</sup> The tragic elements of the film revolve around family dynamics: absent fathers, psychologically damaged brothers and overbearing mothers. Even as the male figures operate officially as the supreme regulatory force, it is the mother (*anne*), whether lovingly devoted or violently oppressive, who rules the moral universe.

The desire between Daniel and Ahmet seems on a superficial level to replay a familiar orientalist dynamic, but the finer details of script and casting reveal a mutual fantasy. Daniel sees in Ahmet his mirror image: they both wear beards and are of similar height, weight and general appearance. Ahmet is also someone Daniel thinks he can save, unlike the children he failed to save from a land mine in Afghanistan, as his flashbacks tell us. It is Daniel who insists that Ahmet come out to his family, insisting naively, 'They are your parents. They love you'. Meanwhile, Ahmet himself morphs into the caring mother he perhaps wished for, urging Daniel to eat his home-made food and shave his beard so that he sports only a moustache, like Ahmet's own father. Thus we see Ahmet, a Turkish man from a conservative city and family, find a bit of freedom as a gay man in Istanbul and, more specifically, in the club where the *zenne* performs, even as he still cannot emotionally escape the control of his family. Meanwhile, Daniel represents the liberal westerner on a mission to save the vulnerable and less powerful, only to be revealed as lost himself. He talks via Skype to his German wife, who is a caricature of vacuous hyper-femininity, and we understand that he feels out of place in his privileged role of the white, Western, 'hetero' male. Neither man is comfortable in his socially assigned role, and each seeks refuge in his desire for the other.

The *zenne* dancer, Can, is a fantasy figure and unifying force between these two men, existing somewhere between the real and the longed-for, public and private, past and present. Fantasy sequences depicting Can dancing in a dream-like setting imply that he is something close to a mythic figure. A flamboyant character with a loving mother and a brother psychologically damaged by his service in the military, Can is the embodiment of everything Ahmet was refused growing up: for example, we see a flashback scene in which Ahmet dances in his sister's tutu, with feathers floating down on him, only to have his mother find him and beat him severely. Can also exemplifies a kind of 'out' sexuality that only exists within a few precious spaces, such as the club at which he dances, which operates in the film as a utopian space of safety and community. Hanging

on Can's dressing room wall is a calendar depicting an Ottoman-era homoerotic scene, a detail that implicitly historicizes both Can's sexuality and his dance practice within a specifically Turkish context. Outside the club, however, gay bashings are an ominous threat. In one scene, Can walks home from work down a dark street, quickening his pace in fear that the young men walking behind him are going to jump him. He is wrong, in this case, and yet we understand that his fear is based on past experiences. A few scenes later, we see him return home to his apartment with a bruised and bloodied face, further reinforcing the pervasive threat of violence.

Although homosexuality is not illegal in Turkey, homophobia is common, and it is difficult to live publicly as a homosexual outside certain areas of Istanbul.<sup>28</sup> Even in relatively safe areas, however, homosexual, transsexual and transgendered people are frequent targets of violence and harassment by police. Violence against trans people, in particular, became systematic after the military coup of 1980, when they were forcibly "exiled" to Eskişehir, a mid-Anatolian city.<sup>29</sup> Those who remained in Istanbul were the targets of surveillance and violence. As Saltan reports,

Trans folk in Istanbul are visible day and night . . . The neighborhood has been different each time but the violence trans folk have experienced has been the same since the 1980s: their homes were stoned, burnt down, evacuated. They have been murdered, physically and verbally abused, dismissed from their apartments, streets, and neighborhoods.<sup>30</sup>

Due to the religious laws governing female honour, and prejudice against passive homosexuality, many sex workers in Turkey are transvestites. The ambiguous position of transvestites in Turkey – whether working as sex workers or as popular entertainers – is wrapped up in the broader residual history of same-sex practices. On the one hand, they are celebrated, as the *köçekler* once were; on the other hand, they are degraded as a sign of public corruption and sexual deviance.<sup>31</sup> A progeny of this same history, the *zenne* is refracted through the modern imagery of theatricalized gay male identity, making him less threatening, because more distant and phantasmic. In the final scene of *Zenne Dancer*, after the tragic climax in which Ahmet's father shoots his son on a dark Istanbul street, we see Can teaching children – boys and girls – how to dance like him, the *zenne* guiding the way to a more accepting future. It is a sentimental ending, to be sure, but the film represents the *zenne* as a utopian figure and fantasy site, where longings can be safely felt and forms of belonging, however implausible, can be imagined.

In 2006, when Binay and Alper started researching *zenne* dancers for their film, they saw it as a 'vanishing culture' – found only in rural areas and in a few underground gay clubs in Istanbul:

'We are very much under the influence of Western entertainment and culture and show business', says Binay. 'Oriental' dance is no longer as popular in Turkey as it once was. Even among Istanbul's sizable gay community . . . 'people would rather watch drag shows or go-go boys. Male belly dancing was something [from] the past'.<sup>32</sup>

Now, however, going to see a *zenne* dancer is considered a fashionable night out for young professional Istanbulites. Moreover, the *zenne* is a status symbol at private events. Expensive to hire, he signifies the sophistication and wealth of his patrons. Something of



FIG. 4 (Colour online) Promotional poster for *Son Zenne*. Photo: Fethi Karaduman. Graphic Design: Berkcan Okar.

a cross-over figure, the *zenne* has even entered more mainstream media contexts, such as on the Turkish version of the US reality television franchise *So You Think You Can Dance?* (*Dans Eder Misin?*), which ran from 2007 to 2012. *Zenne* dancers became an audience favourite on the show, attesting to the growing interest in this performance tradition in Turkish pop culture.

While the Binay–Alper film brought large-scale attention to the *zenne* and turned him into something of a Turkish queer icon, a recent play by Istanbul playwright Serdar Saatman depicts the *zenne* as a tragic figure. Staged in 2015–16 at Bo Sahne, a small theatre in the up-scale neighbourhood of Cihangir in the Beyoğlu district, *Son Zenne* (*The Last Zenne*), revolves around a *zenne* dancer who embodies both a repressed past and the promise of a ‘modern’ present. Set backstage at the *son muzikhol* (the last music hall), the play depicts a series of confrontations and convergences between a beautiful *zenne* dancer, who opens the play by performing a veil dance for the audience; his lover, whose moustache implicitly signifies the hegemonic masculinity of Erdoğan’s Turkey; and a young woman from rural Turkey, who is referred to only as the Girl (*Kız*). Escaping after killing a father who was molesting her, the Girl comes to Istanbul and seeks refuge in the dressing room of the *zenne* dancer. The entire play takes place in this liminal space of seclusion and transformation, which is filled with feather boas, belly dancing costumes, beefcake photos, a picture of Richard Gere, a velvet-covered divan and an immaculate white bed, which is set up as a shrine to the *zenne*’s mother, who shunned her son after he came out as gay. The *zenne* and the Girl chastely share the bed, becoming like siblings and finding comfort in their shared sexual traumas. He teaches the Girl how to talk, shop and dress like a city girl: tight dresses, high heels and curse words. In these scenes, the *zenne* appears as fully westernized, dressed in trendy clothing and playing the caricature role of urban queer who teaches the Girl how to be a modern woman. But his lover returns, swinging his *tespih* (Muslim prayer beads), while demanding sexual favours from the *zenne* dancer, coercing him into selling drugs, and tormenting him by destroying his passport – and thus destroying his dreams of moving to Berlin to reunite with his mother. Displaying both a hyperbolic masculinity and religious hypocrisy, the lover embodies two competing forces of contemporary Turkey: secular nationalism and Islamic authoritarianism.

The ending is tragic; the *zenne* dancer is killed by his lover, just before he himself dies from a shot fired by the Girl. Concluding with this deadly stand-off between patriarchal nationalism and queer modernity, the play suggests that, while the Girl has a chance of survival in modern Turkey, the *zenne* does not. As both a sign of a lost pre-republic past and an impossibly modern present, the *zenne* ends up an abject figure caught in the deadlock between a global sexual democracy and an increasingly repressive Turkish nationalism and conservative religious morality.<sup>33</sup> The Girl becomes his apotheosis, a force of retribution and sign of futurity. The *zenne*’s death, perhaps, calls the audience to recognize the homophobic and patriarchal ideologies underpinning Turkish modernity, along with the reactionary forces rising in Turkey to contain the liquidation of traditional values that accompany the juggernaut of global capitalism. Representing the queer subject as modern martyr, the *zenne*’s death also suggests the impossibility of returning to history as a salvation for the present.

### **Return of the repressed, or back to the future?**

The *zenne* has thus become a multivalent figure that enables diverse identifications and desires to be expressed and imagined. By invoking continuity with an Ottoman past

and projecting that past into a hoped-for future, the *zenne* embodies a utopian fantasy, performing illegitimate desires that are nonetheless authorized by history. As this figure has circulated in popular culture, he has been taken up as a symbol of inclusivity, not merely of sexual difference but of many of the differences that the modern Turkish republic worked hard to obscure. *Zenne Dancer* director Binay explains,

all sorts of minorities are coming out of the closet now . . . The Pandora's box has been opened. Whether it's Armenians, Alawites, the Kurds, everybody has things to say that they couldn't have said for the last decades or centuries . . . The LGBT issue is part of the bigger picture.<sup>34</sup>

Four years after Binay's remark, that Pandora's box has been closed again, for now. In the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt and subsequent state of emergency, many forms of difference and dissent – religious, cultural and sexual – from the status quo of 'New Turkey' are being treated with increased suspicion, if not outright persecution. Amid the unrest, however, the *zenne* continues to gain in popularity, signifying both a pre-republic past and a utopian future.

*Zenne* dancing and the ambiguous sexualities with which it is associated are attached to a complex historical, religious and cultural context, wherein modernity and secularism are often in tension with obligations to preserve the honour of family and uphold religious law. By tracing the various movements of this figure in contemporary Turkey, I have sought to emphasize the force of a distinctly embodied history in the present, a 'temporal drag' that Elizabeth Freeman has theorized as a 'countergenealogical practice of archiving culture's throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted'.<sup>35</sup> In *zenne* dancing, we can see the coexistence of differing systems of social and sexual classification, re-emerging as unfinished histories in the unsettled present.

The revival of the *zenne* suggests that history can be used as a source of agency, the very material with which to imagine and fashion possible futures. The popularity of the *zenne* across the cultural spectrum in Turkey suggests attachments to culture and identity that are rooted in the past but remembered differently in the present. The uses to which history is put in the present, then, are always unpredictable – and never disinterested. On the one hand, the *zenne* represents the endurance of patriarchal codes of public display, which celebrate male bodies and regulate female bodies. On the other hand, he embodies the possibility of imagining more diverse forms of erotic desire (and perhaps even more diverse forms of ethnic and religious identity). The *zenne* dancer is at once nostalgic relic, utopian figure and tragic martyr. In his performances, history appears in drag, in all of its extravagance and radical difference. And from the *zenne's* recycled repertoire of movements, ornaments and affects, new fantasies of both past and future are formed.

#### NOTES

- 1 All my thanks to the editors of *TRI* for their astute and encouraging help with this article. Deepest thanks to Daniel H. Leonard, my ideal audience, for his incisive comments.
- 2 Several terms are used to refer to male belly dancers: *köçek*, *zenne*, *tavşan* (rabbit), and *rakkas* (generic word for dancer). While *köçek*, deriving from the Persian word *kuchak* and the Turkish word *kiçük*,

- both meaning 'small', is used to designate young dancing boys in historical sources, contemporary male belly dancers invariably refer to themselves as *zenne*. Hereafter I will use *zenne* when talking about contemporary performers and *köçek* (plural *köçekler*) when referring to boy dancers in Ottoman history.
- 3 Metin And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Dance Perspectives, Inc., 1959), pp. 29–30.
- 4 To make this claim about the relationship between modernization and sexual desires, I draw on Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kapaklı's *The Age of Beloveds: The Loved and Beloved in the Early-Ottoman Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), which explains how patterns of same-sex desire were expressed in Ottoman poetry and in the public sphere, as well as Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), both of which look at the way modern Western categories of homosexual/heterosexual affected, respectively, Ottoman and Iranian cultural attitudes toward erotic desire.
- 5 Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, 'Introduction', in Murray and Roscoe, eds., *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 3–13, here p. 6.
- 6 The ethnicities and religions encompassed by the Ottoman Empire included Turks, Persians, Arabs, Albanians, Greeks, Serbs, Pomaks, Bulgarians, Zazas, Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Jews, Assyrians and Laz people.
- 7 See Erik Zücker, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd edn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 50–75, for a description of the kinds of social, political and economic reforms made during this period, which aimed mainly at creating a modern nation state. Western nationalistic ideology has been among the most influential and enduring ideas to be imported by late Ottoman and Turkish society. See also Andrews and Kapaklı, *The Age of Beloveds*, pp. 281–5.
- 8 See Judith Lynne Hanna, *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 54. Although each has a very distinct cultural and theatrical history, female impersonation onstage is a practice found in Chinese, Middle Eastern, ancient Greek, Indian and British societies, often relating to broader gender conventions and arising from taboos regarding women performing in public.
- 9 And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey*, p. 29. See also Hanna, *Dance, Sex, and Gender*, p. 57.
- 10 And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey*, pp. 27, 30–31.
- 11 Zücker, *Turkey*, p. 187, argues that Atatürk's ban on religious attire was 'motivated as much by a desire to claim all visible expressions of authority as a monopoly of the state ... as by the wish to secularize society'.
- 12 Zücker, *Turkey*, pp. 125–30.
- 13 Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 118.
- 14 Rasim Özgür Dönmez, 'Coup d'Etat and the Masculine Turkish Political Sphere: Modernization without Strong Democratization', in Rasim Özgür Dönmez and Fazilet Ahu Özmen, eds., *Gendered Identities: Criticizing Patriarchy in Turkey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 1–32, here p. 24.
- 15 Hakan Ataman, 'Less than Citizens: The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Question in Turkey', in Rasim Özgür Dönmez and Pinar Enneli, eds., *Societal Peace and Ideal Citizenship for Turkey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 125–58, here p. 139.
- 16 Dönmez, 'Coup d'Etat and the Masculine Turkish Political Sphere,' p. 24.
- 17 'Turkey: Courts Show Bias, Dissolves Lambda Istanbul', *Human Rights Watch*, 1 June 2008, at [www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/01/turkey-court-shows-bias-dissolves-lambda-istanbul](http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/01/turkey-court-shows-bias-dissolves-lambda-istanbul), accessed 9 May 2016.
- 18 Ece Saltan, 'Transness: An Urban Phenomenon in Istanbul', MA dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2013, p. 24.

- 19 Joe Parkinson and Alya Albayrak, 'Male Belly Dancers Make a Comeback in Istanbul', *Wall Street Journal*, 10 March 2015, at [www.wsj.com/articles/male-belly-dancers-make-a-comeback-in-istanbul-1425949434](http://www.wsj.com/articles/male-belly-dancers-make-a-comeback-in-istanbul-1425949434), accessed 11 November 2016.
- 20 And, *Dances of Anatolian Turkey*, p. 27.
- 21 Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, p. 93.
- 22 Quoted in Tara Isabella Burton, 'Inside the World of Istanbul's Male Belly Dancers', *Smithsonian Mag*, 9 Dec. 2014, at [www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/inside-world-istanbuls-male-belly-dancers-180953539](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/inside-world-istanbuls-male-belly-dancers-180953539), accessed 14 December 2016.
- 23 'Relations between Turkey and the Federal Republic of Germany', Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at [www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkey-and-the-federal-republic-of-germany.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkey-and-the-federal-republic-of-germany.en.mfa), accessed 28 November 2016.
- 24 Pinar Tremblay, 'Belly Dancing Men Make a Comeback in Turkey', *Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East*, 30 December 2014, at [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/turkey-zenne-male-belly-dancers.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/turkey-zenne-male-belly-dancers.html), accessed 10 May 2016.
- 25 Melisa Karakuş, 'Zadiel: Wenn Bauchtanz zur Männersache wird' (Zadiel: When Belly Dance Becomes a Man Thing), *Renk*, 2 May 2015, at [www.renk-magazin.de/zadiel-wenn-bauchtanz-zur-maennersache-wird](http://www.renk-magazin.de/zadiel-wenn-bauchtanz-zur-maennersache-wird), accessed 11 November 2016. Quotes from this article are the author's translations.
- 26 'Köçek on the Dance Floor', 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial: Are We Human?, at <http://arewehuman.iksv.org/exhibition/kocek-dance-floor>, accessed 14 December 2016.
- 27 M. Can Alper and Mehmet Binay, dirs., *Zenne Dancer* (CAM Films, DVD, 2012).
- 28 According to the 2010–14 World Values Survey, more than 85 per cent of Turks would dislike having a homosexual as a neighbour. See p. 74 of 'Codebook: Turkey, 2011, WVS wave 6, 2010–2014', *World Values Survey*, at [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp), accessed 15 May 2016.
- 29 Saltan, 'Transness', p. 29.
- 30 Saltan, 'Transness', p. 18.
- 31 Three of Turkey's most beloved popular entertainers, Zeki Müren, Huysuz Virjin and Bülent Ersoy, are transgender or transsexual. However, after having a sex change operation, Ersoy self-identifies as a heterosexual woman.
- 32 Burton, 'Inside the World of Istanbul's Male Belly Dancers', n.p.
- 33 I am borrowing the term 'sexual democracy' from Eric Fassin, who describes a 'sexual clash of civilizations', especially focused around tensions between 'the West' and Islam, that has crystallized as international rhetoric in the post-9/11 world. The politics of 'us' and 'them' have in the last two decades, Fassin argues, increasingly revolved around issues of visibility (epitomized by the debates and bans around veiling) and sexual politics. See Eric Fassin, 'National Identities and Transnational Intimacies: Sexual Democracy and the Politics of Immigration in Europe', *Public Culture*, 22, 3 (2010), pp. 507–29, here p. 509.
- 34 Dorian Jones, 'Turkey: Film "Zenne Dancer" Examines Risks of Disclosing Sexual Identity', *Eurasianet.org*, 7 February 2012, at [www.eurasianet.org/node/64968](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64968), accessed 30 April 2016.
- 35 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xxii.

JOANNA MANSBRIDGE ([mansbridge@bilkent.edu.tr](mailto:mansbridge@bilkent.edu.tr)) is an Assistant Professor of American Culture and Literature at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. Her book Paula Vogel (2014) is the first book-length study of the playwright. Her essays appear in *Modern Drama*, *Comparative Drama*, *the Methuen Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and *the Journal of Popular Culture*. She is currently working on two projects, a study of five key works of contemporary American drama and a comparative genealogy of feminist popular theatre and political activism. She serves on the advisory board for the performance studies journal *Performance Matters*.