

Middle East in the Southeast

~ 25+ Years of Dance

“Having grown up in Cairo, watching and admiring Sohair Zaki, Nagwa Fouad, Taheya Karyoka, Zinat Eloui, Safeya Helmy and others, I found it difficult to find something akin to that spirit here, until I saw two dancers. One was New York’s Ibrahim Farrah and the other is Aziza of Birmingham.” So says Cairene Ahmed Barrada. “Aziza presents Raqs Sharqi as it should be.”

“Her eye contact . . . her smile . . . her hand movements . . . her sensuality . . . she has something from each of the masters. Her dancing lifts your spirits and whets your appetite” for the music, the dance, the culture, he adds.

These are popular sentiments in the Southeastern U.S., where Middle Eastern Dance has been alive and well for more than a quarter-century, and where one mainstay in that growth has been this unassuming Alabama dancer. Mention her name to almost any Birmingham Arab and they will proudly note a deep respect and personal friendship.

“It hasn’t always been that way,” says Aziza. “I had to earn their respect.”

Her introduction to the Middle Eastern communities was 28 years ago, through her native-born Palestinian instructor, Najwa Bateh.

“But that didn’t earn me many points with the other Arabs”, Aziza clarifies. “They loved Najwa, but questioned her motivation in even teaching dance, and most certainly for befriending a dancer.”

“In their homelands, entertainment was not an honorable profession. No one wanted their son to marry a dancer. Daughters were not allowed to be one. Najwa’s friends questioned the fact that she included me in their social events, and her involvement in my dance career.”



“Now, they know me”, laughs Aziza, “but my acceptance wasn’t automatic. I had to prove myself a respectable lady.”

Something the Arabs have never questioned though is her dance interpretation. Aziza’s style sets her apart from many dancers. Watching her, you will see a unique, ever-so-slight undulation to her hands; soft, flowing arms framing sharp body articulations; gossamer

Arabesques and a unique understanding of Middle Eastern music. A popular performer, her Arab audiences gave her the dance name Aziza, which not surprisingly means dear to the heart. She has an essence that is Arab, rather than American, and with her dark good looks, Aziza herself is often mistaken for an Arab.

She has absorbed that essence from not only Madame Bateh, but also some of America's and Cairo's finest teachers and choreographers: Mahmoud Reda, co-founder and former director of Cairo's Reda Group; former Reda Group soloist Farida Fahmy; Mohammed Khalil, former director of Egypt's National Folkloric Troupe and noted choreographer; Nagwa Fouad; Soheir Zaki; Ebtisam el Masri (Madame Busi); Özel Turkbaz, and American dance pioneers Dahlena, Ibrahim Farrah, Bert Balladine; Elena Lentini; Cassandra and New York City's Shoshana.

Also a Birmingham seminar sponsor, Aziza remembers an intensive class she co-sponsored with Farida Ramadhani of Huntsville, taught by Cairo's Mohammed Khalil, Madame Busi, Fatma Labib Tewfik, Momtaza Mohammed, Eglal Yousef, and musical accompaniment by Qowmeya musicians.

"It was grueling," adds Aziza, "but definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Mr. Khalil taught barre exercises and combinations he used for National Folkloric Troupe training, and choreographic sequences he created for Nagwa Fouad. It was an exhausting, but remarkable class. With five master Egyptian instructors and such wonderful music, it was like being back in Cairo." (Especially since he taught Nagwa's class!)

Aziza herself has taught regional workshops, but concentrates primarily on weekly classes, her own study and personal performance schedule. Her resume includes Birmingham's noted International Festival, the Birmingham Festival of Arts, American Ramallah Club conventions, restaurant and night club shows, two Egyptian exhibit openings and "An Evening in the Middle East" dinner at the Birmingham Museum of Art, workshop shows, concerts, one Las Vegas show, and many Arab, Persian and Turkish weddings. Touring with a Greek band, "The Spartans", Aziza has danced for Greek and Arab events across the South. The Birmingham News has featured both Aziza and mentor Bateh in full-page profiles on more than one occasion. She also did a command performance for Saudi Arabia's Prince Fahad during one of his visits to the States.

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"I was nervous for a week," relates Aziza, "I even broke out in a rash." When I got to the performance site, "he

came backstage, talked with me and put me at ease. He was extremely gracious, accommodating and approachable. Afterwards, he said he was very pleased with my performance."

In Egypt, she danced for the Minister of Agriculture and at a contest sponsored by Cairo's Sheraton Hotel and Nagwa Fouad. Nagwa Fouad, Soheir Zaki, and several Egyptian entertainment professionals judged the competition. They declared Aziza the best in the contest. ABC Commentator Thomas Hoving said "the Egyptians were enthralled." ABC's "20/20" featured the event and Aziza in their weekly telecast, as well as interviews with Nadia Gamal, Mahmoud Reda, Nagwa Fouad and Spain's Dalilah.

"The segment highlighted the fact that Amer-

icans had traveled to Egypt to study dance,” said Aziza. “That was more than 23 years ago. I guess our pilgrimage seemed unusual.”

“All of the Egyptians were so kind and gracious, especially Nagwa Fouad” remembers Aziza. “She heard that I was ill, and when she arrived for our class, she immediately came to me. She then left and prepared tea for me. We had a very nice visit. I ended up with one of her dance costumes”, which Aziza says is her most cherished dance possession.

When asked about the biggest difference between the Egyptian dancers she saw and American interpretations, Aziza notes, “Egyptians are more relaxed and not dancing at top speed. Their dancing flows from within.”

Did Aziza modify her dancing after her Cairo study? “No, not in particular,” she says “But everything I saw made me try harder to perfect what I had learned from my Birmingham mentor, Najwa Bateh.”

Commenting on selecting performance venues, Aziza says she wants to present Raqs Sharqi in shows and concerts, rather than anything that resembles a dance gram. “Not that I object to grams, but I think there is better presentation in full-show concerts or family haflas, rather than in out-of-context appearances in sometimes odd settings. I have never danced in places where the primary business was alcohol, or for all-male audiences. I still do restaurant shows, but refuse to dance around salad bars or do-si-do with waiters anymore”, laughs Aziza.

“I don’t have some underlying need to promote myself. I’ve “been there, done that”. I am more interested in how the dance is presented. I care how people perceive this art. I want to perhaps gently educate some people,

but mainly see that everyone has a good time, and feels that their entertainment money was well-spent.”

Aziza’s career started before study trips to the Middle East . . . before wide availability of Arabic videotapes . . . before dance information on the Internet. Aziza had an Arab instructor guiding her, while some dancers relied on tricks or stereotypical Hollywood moves, such as rolling quarters on their stomachs.

“Well, to each his own,” she says. “but I feel very strongly about keeping this dance as pure as possible, without Americanizing it. After all, we borrowed this dance, we should try to take care of it. I was lucky I had an Arab instructor, in fact an entire community, to spoon-feed me the dance and it’s culture.”

And for more than 20 years, Aziza has nurtured this dance. A leader on the Southeastern dance scene, her career has continued with primarily word-of-mouth advertising. She was surprised to discover her recent Tennessee Dance Page nomination as Favorite Southern Dancer, and her Best Kept Secret nomination in a national dance poll. Though shy about the news, her shows are hailed by especially the Arab communities.

“Her style is totally Arabic,” said Lebanese-American Josef, “She dances as an Arab woman would dance.”

Palestinian native Hiyam added, “You can tell by Linda’s hands that her instructor was from the Levant . . . She moves her hands and arms like we do.”

When she first saw her dance, a delighted Nagwa Fouad exclaimed, “You have studied with an Arab!”

Dance master Dahlana adds, “Linda has captured the Middle Eastern character. She has a

great look for this dance, a wonderful smile, and a good ear for the music. She is a pleasure to watch. And she has tremendous support from the Middle Eastern communities. When I was in Birmingham, at least half her audiences were Arab.”

When Ohio musician/dancer Ergallis Karkias played at a recent Birmingham hafla, he noticed Aziza’s dancing from the bandstand. She was a party guest, dancing amid the crowd, in street clothing. After his set, he immediately approached Aziza and commenting on her style said, “You have a quality I’m always trying to stress to American dancers—subtlety and flow. Beautiful!”

That subtlety is exactly the quality many Arabs are seeking, when they send their daughters to Aziza for lessons.

“That is probably my proudest effort,” says Aziza, “I’m thrilled when I can introduce this dance to the daughters of Arab immigrants. I’m pleased that they trust my interpretation, and for the chance to keep their dance alive.”

She also cites the joy of seeing each of her students in their first performances. Local news programming recently featured Aziza’s twelve-year-old protégé Janelle Issis.

“Janelle strives for perfection and is as professional as many dance veterans,” says Aziza. “Her dancing remind me of Princess Mayte, when she was a child.”

Aziza’s style seems deceptively simple. On a foundation of floating floor transitions, she layers isolated torso movements, those distinctive flowing arms, and that hard-to-define spirit. She admits to blocking dance segments, but does not choreograph her shows.

“I express what the music is telling me and what I feel at that precise moment—not something I felt last week. And when I teach, I don’t want a group of Aziza clones. I want dancers to experience the joy of their own emotions and actually dancing, rather than reciting,” she says. “I help them understand the music, and with their alignment, isolation, and repertoire of movements, but gradually, I want to see their expressions, not mine.”

Aziza is cautious about Middle East dance fusions. “I feel to properly present a fusion, you should know each of the fused elements expertly. I have always concentrated solely on what I know best, classic Arabic and Egyptian styling, though I do study other genres. I prefer traditional orchestrations, but also enjoy modern Egyptian music, some Rai music, pop star Shakira’s musical blends, and Natacha Atlas. Middle Eastern dance’s recent resurgence and my younger students are inspiring me to evolve in new directions.”

“I may be more selective in where I present this art, but it is still a wonderful time to explore and to create—to just dance. I love Raqs Sharqi. You can express every emotion—anger, love, happiness, sensuality. It’s not a frozen, stiff dance. You express your changes, and you involve your entire being, from the top of your head to the tip of your toe. If you understand and feel the music, it will move from your heart, into your blood, and to every fiber of your soul. I love it!”