

Spotlight Dancer: Aziza

Her Raqs Sharqi career has taken her to Egypt, across the U.S., and has included touring with Greek band “The Spartans” and a command performance for Saudi Arabia’s Prince Fahad.

In Egypt, she danced for the Minister of Agriculture and at a contest sponsored by Cairo’s Sheraton Hotel and Nagwa Fouad. Sohair Zaki, several Egyptian entertainment professionals, and Madame Fouad judged the event. They declared this Alabama dancer the best in the contest. When the event was featured on ABC’s “20/20”, Commentator Thomas Hoving reported “the Egyptians were enthralled”.

But Birmingham, AL’s Aziza says that she is proudest of teaching this dance to the daughters of Arab immigrants. “I’m thrilled that they trust my interpretations, and for the chance to keep this dance alive. I especially enjoy working with the American-Ramallah Christian community brides before their weddings, and the American girls marrying into the Arab Community. It’s local custom that the first bride and groom dance be to Eastern music. The brides, of course, want to be confident and self-assured at that time, so they usually re-visit my classes just before the wedding.”

Introduced to the Near East through her Palestinian mentor, Najwa Bateh, Aziza has spent almost three decades introducing this dance to the Southeastern Bible belt---thru performances, weekly classes, workshops, newspaper profiles. In the

very early years, religious groups protested her teaching Near Eastern dance at a local university, but after they visited Aziza’s class, some even joined.

She is considered family by most Birmingham, AL Arabs, and for 32 years has been spoon-fed both dance and culture. They laud her style as purely Arabic. When she first saw Aziza dance, an excited Nagwa Fouad proclaimed, “You have studied with an Arab!”



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Cairene Ahmed Barrada added, “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 some-

thing akin to that spirit here, until I saw two dancers, New York’s Ibrahim Farrah and Birmingham’s Aziza.”

A dedicated fan of Farrah and Aziza, Ahmed added, “Aziza has something from each of the masters . . . She presents Raqs Sharqi as it should be.”

A mainstay on the Near Eastern dance scene since 1974, Aziza’s career continues with primarily word-of-mouth advertising. She was recently Voted Favorite Southern Dancer 2001 by the Treasures from the Harem website in TN, and was a “Best Kept Secret” nominee in Zaghareet Magazine’s 2001 national poll.

She admits to blocking dance segments, but does not choreograph her shows. “I express what the music is telling me at the moment—not what I felt last week. And when I teach, I encourage students to dance what they feel. I don’t want a group of Aziza clones. I want students to feel the joy of their own emotions, and actually dancing, rather than reciting. I teach them about the music, about body align-

ment and isolation, a repertoire of movements, and phrasing, but I want them to eventually learn to rely on the music and their feelings.”

“I love Raqs Sharqi,” says Aziza, “You can express every emotion---anger, love, happiness, sensuality. You involve your entire being, from the top of your head to the tip of your toe. I love it.”