

Almas productions presents...

What it takes

issue: one - spring '08

a quarterly production with articles on all aspects concerning belly dance performance

'Almas Productions presents...' is the creation of



Emma

Emma is an experienced teacher and performer based in Berkshire, UK. She has many years of experience and enjoys passing on her knowledge through classes and workshops.

You can learn more about her by visiting www.emmapyke.co.uk or on Tribe at <http://people.tribe.net/emmapyke>



Kathryn

Kathryn is UK (Berkshire) based teacher and performer of Egyptian Bellydance. Kathryn loves sharing her knowledge and experience, especially within her classes and workshops. For more details about Kathryn please visit www.egyptianbellydance.net or www.myspace.com/kathrynbellydance

Editorial

Welcome to "What it takes" - which we hope will prove to be a useful addition to your current resources. We decided to concentrate on the performing aspect as it is a subject rarely taught and we will feature regular articles by guest writers on a wide range of subjects, aiming for 4 issues a year.

We are proud to support Just Because (see over for details) and although we are not subscription based, the profits from any adverts placed in future issues will all go to this worthwhile cause. We hope you enjoy this first issue and welcome any feedback, opinions or ideas for future issues.

You can contact us at almasproductions@yahoo.co.uk

Emma and Kathryn

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Taking Dance outside of the classroom

by Emma Pyke

From time to time I have been asked to teach and perform at various events from school-based pamper evenings to corporate events. Each event has had its own little anecdote but this article really addresses what we could expect from each situation. Lets start with the pamper evening - here I was asked to dance a 15 minute set - on a very rickety stage and surrounded by everything ladies 'need' to pamper themselves. It was held in a school hall and by the time I went on the main rush had gone - but the stall holders enjoyed themselves! I didn't expect (and didn't get) any audience participation so I viewed it more as a chance to really project to the person farthest away in the room and to give some new performance pieces their first airing. I left cards in reception as you never know when the next opportunity will arise!

I have also taught a number of different parties and business events. For younger girls I have taught them a few basic moves and we have played around adding them to music so they feel like they have put something coherent together. Its then fun to have a break and I take along my pinkest costume for them to ooh and aah over. Then I pull out the veils and we pretend to be butterflies or mermaid's under the sea - basic imagery is never a problem! Teenage parties need to be approached in a different manner - here they don't want to be embarrassed by such things as role play so moves that link into a choreography to a well known western pop song are ideal.

The other events where I have performed and/or taught have always had the presence of alcohol and I have always made it clear to the person hiring that I would be in no way responsible for any injury that occurred to someone who had been drinking if they decided to take part. You should expect to deal with mature adults not drunks who can hardly stand up. These events have ranged from local flower clubs, hen parties, birthday, wedding, anniversary, charity and corporate events. To these last 5 in the list I would normally advise you take a chaperone - because you can never tell how alcohol can blur the lines between being an entertainer and being an object. This isn't intended to put you off these events (unless you hate the thought of teaching people who aren't into it for the serious dance aspect) - just a few hints and ideas of how to make the most of it all

DVD CORNER

Michelle Joyce Cheeky Girl Productions.



Michelle Joyce is a professional belly dancer who has performed for audiences around the globe. She has won several awards including 2004 People's Choice Belly Dancer and 2006 East Coast Classic Belly Dance Competition Champion. She also has a Master's in Counseling, and draws on that knowledge to incorporate techniques such as progressive relaxation, visualization, meditation, and stress response reduction.

Her high quality DVDS are excellent and the one that is most relevant to this newsletter is Secrets of the Stage (vol1). This came about as she realized that most dancers simply focus on the mechanics of their movements and don't train themselves in the art of performing, believing that performance skills should come naturally - when most often they do not.

The DVD can be ordered directly from <http://cheekygirlproductions.com> and Emma will be reviewing it in the next issue of 'What it Takes'. The second DVD in the series - volume 2 should be released in April 2008 - check the website or the related tribe for details (<http://tribes.tribe.net/cheekygirlproductions>)

A day of workshops & a show with
International Dance Star
Sadie
Saturday 5th April 2008

Tadley Community Centre
Newchurch Rd
Tadley RG26 4HN

Workshops
11.30am to 2pm - Pops, Locks & Shimmies
Explore the art of Belly Dance "Sadie style", by learning how to make the most of your isolations with muscle control & creativity.
General Level - £25.00 (Early Bird £22.50)

3pm to 5.30pm - Drum Solo
Sadie is famous for her exciting drum solos, this workshop will primarily focus on technique. General Level - £25.00 (Early Bird £22.50)

Hafilah with performances by Sadie plus a great line up of supporting artists.

Hafilah tickets are just £13.50 for adults & £12.00 for children under 14 years. There will be a bar & a soul, plus the chance to boogie! Please bring a small plate to share. Doors open at 7.00pm. No tickets available on the day.

Buying your ticket:
2 Workshops is £45 or EB £42.00
1 workshop & Hafilah is £37.50 or EB £35.00
Both Workshops & Hafilah is £55.00 or EB £52.00

Early Bird expires 28th February 2008

All tickets must be paid for in advance & we regret that we are unable to offer refunds.

Sole traders to ABRA AL-KAHIRA, P.O. Box 72, Bideford, Devon, EX38 1FA (Please include an SAE)

Or buy online using PayPal at www.abrakahira.co.uk/online.htm (there is a small fee for this service)

All enquiries to Abu al-Kahira Tel: 01227 424077 / 01229 281152
Email: abra@abrakahira.com / www.abrakahira.com



Celebrating Dance
Oct 31
to Nov 2nd 2008

With International Guest Stars
Morocco of NYC
&
Dondi Dahlin

DEPOSITS ARE ON SALE NOW!

Celebrating Dance is held at the Torrak Hotel in Torquay. A residential ticket includes: Dinner Bed & Breakfast in a 3 Star hotel, all your tuition on Saturday & Sunday and tickets to both our popular evening events. Plus access to all the on-site amenities (indoor pools, spa, sauna etc).

Ticket Prices for 2008:
Deposit - £50.00 (non-refundable) ON SALE NOW!
Early Bird - £195.00 (expires 30th April)
Standard - £295.00 (at May onwards)
Local Dancer - £99.00 (non-residential - see website for more info)
Local Dancer (Saturday only) - £60.00 (as per £99.00 ticket)
Partner Pass (residential non-dancer) £115.00

Full Tickets on sale early 2008
To pay a deposit either send a cheque (made payable to Celebrating Dance) to: P.O. Box 72, Bideford, Devon, EX38 1FA or buy online at www.abrakahira.com

Deposit holders will receive priority notice when workshop booking is available. All enquiries to Abu al-Kahira at the above address or Tel: 01227 424077 / 01229 281152 - dancer@abrakahira.com




If you would like to advertise here contact us on: almasproductions@yahoo.co.uk

If you would like to join our community visit: www.myspace.com/almasproductions



Raising funds for a mobile mammography unit for the women of Egypt

Breast cancer accounts for 33% of all cancers in Egyptian women.

More Egyptian women die from breast cancer than in car accidents.

Every year more than 18,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer in Egypt and those are the ones who went to their doctor; the large majority die without being diagnosed and keep their physical symptoms secret due to lack of knowledge about the disease and social fears.

Just Because not only wants to raise money to provide essential equipment but also to enhance the work of awareness raising organisations within Egypt enabling women to talk to trained staff about their concerns, find out more about treatments available and make informed choices.

www.justbecause.org.uk

The aims and objectives for Just Because as a fundraising charity focus around everybody involved in bellydance worldwide working as individuals and or groups to support the work of the charity by promoting it and more importantly donating profits to it.

Internationally in the belly dance world dancers attend dance workshops and a variety of events the most popular being Hafilas (parties) where they can perform and watch dance performance. Events such as these provide ideal opportunities to link dancers worldwide through a network of on-line communities such as www.bhuz.com and also dance festivals worldwide. In addition we can access international dance publications and email mailing lists with publicity materials promoting the charity and the work it supports.

Groups and individuals can organise their own events under the Just Because banner, with us providing information on the charity including the Just Because logo. Details of their event are to be listed on the web site with an ongoing diary page to include details and images from Just Because events worldwide.

As an established charity this will allow us to have collection tins which we can supply to UK events and vendors of costumes who attend most events. We already have a network of organisers and traders.

Tracey Gibbs (Trustee)

Dancing on the outside

by Afra al Kahira

In recent years I have become known (particularly via my festival Celebrating Dance) for being prepared to push the boundaries and to be a little more daring than other dancers when it comes to the cutting edge world of Experimental Dance and Dance Theatre.

I first seriously began to dabble in the area of what I would now define as experimental or dance theatre 7 years ago, when putting on a student recital that required me to present a range of styles to educate my students about our dance form in general. On this particular occasion neither of the numbers I offered could have been described as 'daring' but they were both a little different from the type of things other dancers were calling 'fusion.' At this stage that is the label I was still giving to these numbers even though I was aware that it wasn't really an accurate one. Cue moving to a different part of the country and the opportunity to return full-time to teaching and performing, and it was at this point that I started to experiment a little more and play around with boundaries. I now had more time available to explore combining my love of theatre with my love of dance. I have trained (and continue to do so) as an actress and I could see lots of interesting avenues to explore utilising those skills.

The first of those numbers was a very powerful piece called 'The Chair' which focused on the pain of loss/bereavement and with that piece came a powerful and important lesson - whilst it is okay to feel the passion and very deep emotions that the piece is about so that you can move your audience, it is not okay to allow oneself to get so carried away by the strength of that passion that you lose yourself within the character. If I want that kind of catharsis then it is best kept for private times and not put only display in a way that would make an audience feel voyeuristic or in any way too uncomfortable (a little discomfort that makes them think is no bad thing though!). In later performances I was better able to harness the power of the emotion without being carried away and this also taught me a great deal about making the combination of dance and acting work together effectively..

Performing this type of work enables me to mix my love of theatre and drama whilst still engaging my Middle Eastern dance based movement repertoire. Just as in fusion where I use movements and styling that I have learnt from studying other dance genres like Flamenco, Jazz and Ballroom/Latin American, in experimental works I will draw upon my acting skills to add another dimension or layer to a performance. I like the fact that I can by turns be thought-provoking, a story-teller, a mythological character or sometimes just plain scary - you can't do that in the middle of dancing to Oum Kalthoum! However experimental dance should not be seen as only being about pain, anger or loss! I use it to explore a wide range of emotions and also have a huge amount of fun playing around with popular archetypes and indulging in my love for scary movies, myths and fantasy too! This is where numbers like Water, The Siren and The Bride come from, and they are really about the general themes as much as anything else. Many people ask me to confirm their theories about 'the story' they think I am telling as part of a number, but many of these works do not have a specific story. Instead I prefer to create a general theme and then provide the subtle challenge of allowing the audience to draw their own conclusions about what they have seen me dance.

I do sometimes perform numbers that have a strong underlying message and I will give the audience pointers by how I name a piece (Can I escape? Or Doll? for example) but I only give them the title - the rest is up to them!

It can be fun to turn the tables on the audience and make them think about what they have seen and if they read a narrative into it that is drawn from their own personal experiences then so much the better. Giving the audience permission to do that can make experimental work a truly exciting and challenging area to work in. It isn't for the faint-hearted though! I put a lot of preparation into dancing anything from within my more traditional repertoire and you can double that for an experimental number. I love the fact that I can use this work to indulge in outlandish costumes, strange music and sometimes stranger make-up - it can be a heady and sometimes addictive mixture!

Often I start with the character and then wonder what it would be like if I could only portray that character through dance. I will spend many months in preparation for an experimental number and it will often go through several incarnations before I feel it is ready for an audience. Whilst I don't consider myself to be that proficient at sewing, it is surprising what you can put

together in desperation when even theatrical shops can't supply the image you have in your head of that perfect costume! Headdresses (mostly made by yours truly) 'distressed' skirts/veils and dresses/sarongs that don't bear close inspection all have places of honour in my costume collection and I have a great range of truly 'out there' wigs too! One of my favourite costumes was a cat suit that required painting with abstract colour splotches - the only way to do it was to arm my husband with pots of paint and glitter, don the cat suit and then stand on a chair for 3 hours whilst directing his art work and then waiting for it all to dry. Sometimes it's not easy being a performer of experimental dance!



For the future I have quite a few ideas already in the planning stage but the real difficulty is finding the right kind of

venue in which to present them. If I am honest they are not really suitable for things like haflahs - they belong on a stage. However, theatrical performance opportunities or indeed the money to fund such performances are rare things and I treasure each and every one that comes my way. I have created a tradition at Celebrating Dance for presenting at least one experimental number each year and I hope that other events will find space for them too. It isn't an easy road to travel down as on the whole people either love or hate what I do - there doesn't seem to be a middle ground. I am happy if an experimental number provokes any kind of reaction at all - good or bad, it will have made people think!

For the future I would love to be able to stage a regular event specifically aimed at the Experimental/Dance Theatre performance genre within our dance community and I am a big admirer of EEMED (Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance) run in the US by Amara (www.eemed.com). The Tribal Fusion and Goth dancers are beginning to take up the challenge to provide arenas for the not-quite-mainstream parts of our dance form, and I see what I do as being separate from this again. I might perform a number which has a Goth-type theme to it but it isn't something that is a part of my dance personality - I have lots of other areas I want to explore that would fall into the category of 'Experimental.' An event dedicated to this kind of work is a long-term vision of mine and I hope that it won't be too far into the future before that dream becomes a reality here in the UK.

Afra al Kahira

There are photos of Afra performing several of the works mentioned in the article on her web site at www.afraalkahira.com

Dancing to live music

by Kathryn Dawes

Within this article is my own personal experience and views regarding dancing to live music – from watching top Egyptian dancers in Cairo, what I have been told within workshops or from professional dancers on how to deal with bands. On the whole it is recommended that you practice with the band several times before the performance, so you both know what you expect of each other, how you will enter and exit and at what point during the music. The dancer should be in complete control of the band at all times (this is how the Egyptian dancers do it), but in my experience this hasn't happened to me yet! So far my experiences have been mixed; serious and extremely professional for a theatre show compared to a relaxed (but still professional) restaurant work. The orchestra for the theatre shows usually had two drummers (tabla and riq), accordion, nay, violin and keyboard players, whereas the band for the restaurant would be one drummer, a violinist and keyboard player.



La Fontana – Reading

With restaurant work I like to meet the band 40mins before the first set would start – this included giving them my set list and having a quick run through the songs. I always have a few backup songs just in case they don't know or prefer not to play my choice. The hardest aspect is the difference between live music and CD. With pre-recorded music you know exactly what is coming and how it sounds (main reasons why you fell in love with that piece), but when it is played live it sounds different and you can become disorientated quite quickly – this is where your musical interpretation and improvisation skills kick in. You need to be confident that you can perform well especially to a piece of music that you haven't heard before. On the odd occasion I have asked for particular song and when they started playing I didn't recognise it, but I had to remain professional and keep performing – this is where you rely on your musical construction knowledge, interpretation and listening skills as they are vital. If the audience realises that you don't know what you are doing and you look uneasy then they start feeling uneasy too – you are there to entertain and make their night out even more enjoyable. I tend to dance quite close to the band (unless I am dancing round the tables) because space is limited, and I enjoy interacting with them, so everyone has fun performing or watching the show.

In the theatre work I have done I have found that performing with musicians for a theatre show is a completely different situation compared to the restaurant – and both the dancers and musicians increase their professionalism. You do not have the luxury of relaxing into the music, the audience have come specially to see you and the orchestra rather than a nice meal out with a bonus of dancing thrown in. As a result the atmosphere is far more serious but you are still entertaining, just on a different level.

Regarding the January 2007 show in Cardiff, I met the orchestra a few days

before the show at their rehearsal, to hear how the songs would sound. I was blown away with the music: it was incredible and far better than the original on CD. I watched how they interacted with each other and followed Hossam as he conducted them while playing the Tabla – truly remarkable. When I performed with Helen and Nadine to our first number with the band, we were quite far forward, in some ways distant to the orchestra so I found it harder to interact with them. Dancing as a troupe to live music is harder because you have to constantly watch each other in case the music doesn't quite go to plan and you all need to react as one so the audience doesn't realise what has happened.

On the Farha Tour 2007 I danced with an Egyptian Band and singer: I have danced with a band on quite a few occasions, however dancing with a singer as well was a whole new experience for me. I spent most of 2007 taking workshops which dealt with dancing to a band. Kay Taylor organised the Farha Tour which bought over Yasmina of Cairo's band 'Fer'et Negoum' from Cairo. So I took all workshops I could with one that was specific to dancing with a singer. I was nervous during the workshop but I had to get over my nerves because I would be performing that night in the show. I figured out the reason for the nerves, the singer was mobile – on previous occasions they normally sing while playing an instrument. A golden tip was to acknowledge the singer while performing: this makes the performance more rounded as well showing respect. During the performance I was aware of interacting with the singer, basically

Farha Tour – courtesy of Kay Taylor



dancing a few moves near him, which matched the music and words, and when it was appropriate I danced away and interacted with the audience. I found that I tended to dance further away from the band because of the stage layout, so this made it harder to interact with them. Regarding the music I did find it strange at times because not all the accents were there compared to the CD, but it sounded just like the CD, which was perfect.

In conclusion I have found that you need several skills to dance to live music: confidence, musical interpretation skills, understanding musical structure, listening skills and communication skills – verbal and non-verbal. All these skills will help you during your performance especially when you have no idea what you are dancing too, you will be able to interpret the music and anticipate what is coming next. When you perform with a band, it is polite to wait before you enter as they are demonstrating their skill as accomplished musicians – you are both there to make each other look good so you need to work as a team. It is also important to interact with them during the performance and acknowledge them at the end of your set.

There are so many versions or parts to famous songs you have to be so specific when you inform the band what you are performing too, even if it means playing the version you like or singing it. Whatever the situation you need to know your music inside out so you know exactly where you are in the music. You must also be very clear with your entrances and exits otherwise the band will wonder where you are or you could be dancing for a very long time!