

## Interview for Jareeda

**This year has been quite full for you! You've won 3<sup>rd</sup> place in Little Egypt's 2007 Queen of Raqs Sharki competition, were nominated by Zaghareet for 2007 Instructor of the Year and 2007 Favorite Cabaret Dancer of the Year and became certified by Raqia Hassan in 2006 through her Winter Intensive teachers course. You've accomplished many things, but let's go back to the beginning. How did you get started in Oriental Dance?**

I had been teaching fitness classes, such as aerobics, kickboxing and Pilates, for a little over 10 years. As part of my certifications, continuing education is mandatory and each year, there are huge industry conferences where you can attend classes and meet the continuing education requirements. In 1994, I was living in rural upstate New York and traveled to Manhattan for a conference. One of the class options was "The Goddess Workout" with Dolphina of California. I thought, "Hey, I'm a Goddess! I better see what this is all about." Dolphina taught an introduction to belly dance with basic movements, followed by a beautiful veil dance. I instantly fell in love!

Where I lived at the time, there was no access to teachers (I was about 10 hours north of NYC), so I devoured all the videos I could find. Soon afterward, my family moved to Chicago for work requirements and I went from teacher to teacher, learning what I could, until I found Jasmin Jahal. I immediately connected with her as both a student and as an individual; I studied with her ever since. Even today, I attend weekly classes for consistent, high quality training (she truly is one of the best in the world!) and supplement regular classes with workshops and seminars across the country. In addition, I travel to Egypt at least once a year to study with Raqia Hassan in her Intensive Teacher's Course.

### **Tell me more about your training in Egypt.**

My training is very specific to Egyptian style belly dance. Throughout my dance career, I've heard so many times, "It's about the spirit." I did not really realize what was meant by that statement until I had the chance to travel to Cairo and experience the Egyptian spirit and life first-hand. There is such joy and passion in every aspect of life and it is translated into the dance. I travel to Egypt to emerge myself in the culture and the people and to continue my dance training.

Raqia Hassan (internationally known and highly sought after teacher, choreographer and producer of the annual *Ahlan Wa Sahlan* festival) hosts an Intensive Teacher Training certification each December. This course is simply amazing. For ten (10) days straight, participants learn from the world's greatest Dance Masters (such as Dr. Mo Geddawi, Randa Kamel, Dina, Beba, Magda and Atef and many others) from 9:00 am – 5:00 pm, with only 30 minutes for lunch and an hour dinner break, then attend lecture from 6:00 – 9:00 pm. The final evening is a student show, followed by a show from one of today's top dancers. Last year, Dina and her full twenty-seven (27) piece orchestra performed for us.

The entire course is a life-changing event for me and is the primary reason I go back. I've made many deep friendships with dancers from all over the world and the course gives me the chance to reconnect in person.

If a dancer is serious about Egyptian style dance, then I highly recommend participating in this workshop. It is well worth the investment of time, money and effort – and you will leave a much different person and dancer than when you first arrived.

### **You're on the competition circuit. Tell me about the advantages and the disadvantages of competing.**

Based on my experience, there are two routes that you can take as you progress through your dance career: artistic and competition. Both are wonderful and both serve distinct and delightful purposes.

The competition circuit gives you the chance to meet wonderful dancers and artists from across the country. From a personal perspective, this is a wonderful benefit as I've made several great friendships I would not otherwise had the chance to establish. From a dancers' perspective, you get exposed to other styles of dance, new ideas and a taste for the local flavor where the competition is held. Also, you get feedback from different perspectives on what your strengths are and where you can improve.

One of the best pieces of feedback I have received is with regard to costuming. I am a voluptuous dancer, with more curves than most professional and/or competitive dancers out there. I competed in several events and wore the "normal" bra and skirt costume. Judges told me that I would look better in either a pants suit or a full dress. I took their advice and the impact was amazing. The next competition I participated in, I placed – not only because of my performance that evening, but also because the fuller coverage accented my body and provided the complete package.

The disadvantage ... well, I've seen some dancers participate in competitions and place so much importance on the competition performance that they lose perspective of their entire talent base. Instead of realizing that a competition performance is a snapshot at one single moment of time, as opposed to a statement on who they are or their value/talent as a dancer, I've seen women internalize not placing or winning and really beat themselves up. That's the hard part. I honestly feel that, if you pursue the competition circuit, you have to do a lot of mental exercise to keep everything in perspective and embrace the journey for what it is – an opportunity to perform, get feedback and meet many wonderful women.

**In addition to performing, you own your own studio where you teach weekly classes and are sponsored for seminars and weekend workshops. What is your teaching philosophy and why are you drawn to teaching?**

That's a pretty deep subject for me and it reflects the way I look at life. These days, it seems like there are very few times when we feel connected and a part of a community. We wake up, hurry off to work, come home, gulp down dinner and either head off to dance class or fall into bed and wake up to repeat the process. This harried lifestyle can lead to a slow death – where there is little emotion, surface relationships and a seeming isolation from others as well as our self.

When I teach, I make a concerted effort to touch each student personally – to make the connection on the individual level and help each dancer increase her technical proficiency, express her through new choreography and feel even more confident as a dancer – and as a person. It's my responsibility as a teacher to bring out the best in each student and to encourage her to be the best dancer she can be.

It is the same when I perform. People who attend shows have paid for a ticket. They want an experience – something out of the ordinary. You never know what their day was like before they come to see you .... They may have had the most wonderful day, but maybe they just ended a huge argument, heard negative news about their health or had a day they'd rather leave behind. It's my duty as a dancer to touch each audience member on the soul level – to give them joy and let them walk out a happier person than when they walked in ... happier, because they've shared an experience with me and because the dance has brought beauty and art into their lives, even if only for a moment.

Why am I drawn to teaching? My greatest thrill and reward in life comes from seeing others embrace who they are, fall in love with themselves and become strong, beautiful individuals who believe in themselves and know their worth – regardless of their age, weight, beauty, economic status, whatever they previously held as their limitation. I've seen so many women's lives change for the better through dance and it gives me great joy to know that, in some small way, I was part of their journey to great esteem and self worth. That's on the personal side. On the dance side, I absolutely love to see choreography bring music to life through a dancer's movements. I believe

if we create art through dance and send good energy out into this world, the world becomes a better place for all of us.

**You own your own Studio. Tell me how that came about.**

After graduating from Clarkson University with my Master's Degree, I worked for a Fortune 500 company for six years, making my way up to Vice President of Marketing and Communication. Although I enjoyed my work, I realized that my true passion is dance and fitness, so I opened my own Studio and worked both at the corporate job and the Studio for about a year. Once the Studio was able to support me coming home, I left the corporate job to teach and run the Studio full time.

My husband, David, was recently able to leave his corporate job as well. He now handles the back end side of the business (accounting, marketing, operations) and I teach classes and do the creative work. I could not do it without the love and support from this wonderful man, my husband and best friend of nearly 20 years.

My son, Tony, has also been a tremendous help. From working back stage in shows to understanding when the Studio demands so much time, he truly is a gem. I'm grateful for these two men in my life.

**Who are some of today's artists who inspire you the most?**

Randa Kamel is absolutely amazing! She is like a lightning bolt of positive energy; I feel a very strong connection with her. Jasmin Jahal continues to bring me to new levels, constantly striving for excellence. Dr. Mo Geddawi is simply delightful with his elegance and grace and creates beautiful Oriental choreography. Nabil Mabrouk instills precision and discipline into his work. Magda and Atef, who are husband and wife, and Shalabee, have taught me many things in the folkloric and Reda style. And of course, Raqia Hassan challenges me (in a great way!) with technique and rich choreography.

**What three gems of wisdom would you share to other dancers out there?**

- **Know what you want from the dance and embrace it.** Looking for fitness? Enjoy the movements and the training, feel like a beautiful goddess and celebrate your success! Dance for recreation? Set fun goals and jump into new dance opportunities! Going pro? Talk to other dancers who make their living through dance, learn from their wisdom and train, train, train.
- **Love yourself and take care of yourself.** All too often, society promotes an unrealistic vision of "perfection" and "flawlessness" that is unattainable. Block out those damaging images and messages. Recognize and celebrate your strengths, look at flaws and imperfections as what makes you unique and an individual and love yourself. Take care of yourself mentally and physically (Mom was right – eat your veggies!).
- **Be the magic.** Jasmin learned this from her teacher, Ibrahim Farrah, and passed it down to me. When you perform, become the music. Touch your audience. Create magic for them and for you ... by *being* the magic.

*Raksanna is available for workshops and performances. For more information, please visit [www.raksanna.com](http://www.raksanna.com) or call her at 630-978-1149.*