



Bellydance with Nicola

Review: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

Dina is the current reigning Queen of Raks Sharqi in Egypt. Known for her tight, tiny movements, saucy and unusual costumes, elaborate footwork, graceful sways, complex pulls, pops and undulations of the torso, and an all-around unique interpretation, she has developed a style that is unconventional, and very difficult to imitate.

Little Egypt of Texas, better known as DeeDee and Ahmed Assad and their 3 charming kids, hosted the 3-day event in Minneapolis, Minnesota June 2-4. I drove down with my husband, fellow dancer Za'ina Dilshad, and organizer/importer/ President of EDCOM (Eastern Dance Circle of Manitoba), Cheryllynn Saramaga-Martai. All events were held at the Minneapolis-St.Paul Holiday Inn Select, a modestly-priced and very comfortable hotel located right near the airport and the Mall of America.



After settling into our rooms and enjoying some refreshments in the hotel lounge, we ventured upstairs where Little Egypt and Audrena had a conference room filled with costumes, music, videos, DVDs, jewellery, veils, scarves, wings, and other lovely goodies for sale. We were a-quiver at the racks upon racks of costumes by Pharonics, Eman, and other Egyptian ateliers. DeeDee and Ahmed were on hand with their 2 daughters and son, greeting all the guests and helping everyone find their tickets and, of course, shop. Dina entered the vendor room without any attitude whatsoever, quietly looking at CD's and videos, and laughing at quite a number of video covers with her own image on them. She was dressed in jeans, a sequined halter top, and high heels, her trademark mane of hair straightened. It was hard to take one's eyes off her. She smiled and greeted anyone who approached her and was very patient with dancer after dancer talking to her and asking for photos. Za'ina and I felt like school girls in her presence, reduced to blushing and excited exclamations of "Hi! You're amazing!" (or something like that, I was too excited to know what exactly I was saying!).

Friday night's show was held in a large banquet room with a small, raised stage. Seating was at circular tables in 3 rows, so every seat was a good one. Dina sat front and centre with the Assad family, and looked around the room quite a bit, smiling at audience guests throughout the show. She was very gracious and patient, clapping for all the dancers (some more than others) and at

(Continued on page 2)



Bellydance with Nicola

vReview: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

(Continued from page 1)

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

times politely looked away or down. The line-up was predominantly Midwest-area dancers in a variety of Egyptian and Middle Eastern styles. We were, for the most part, impressed by the quality of the dancers and their very polished, professional costuming. Most performers were quite strong, but noteworthy among them were Monique, whose small, powerful and muscular build made for beautifully clean, strong, and dynamic dance. Mirah Ammal, Tina, and Aliyah Ammal were more Minneapolis dancers, all present or past students of Cassandra's, and it showed. Their dancing was pol-



ished, smooth, and well-composed. The Safar Student Dance Troupe was an audience favourite, and presented a lovely choreography, danced well and very much in synch, in simple black leotards, circle skirts, and coin scarves. Their youngest member looked to be about 13 years old, and was blushing and grinning her way through their dance. Jawaahir Dance Company performed 2 very strong pieces--a very difficult Tunisian water jug dance (the same dance I had watched them rehearse in June of 2005), and a very cute, very lively Khaleegi with gorgeous, glittering thobes, and lots of long, dark hair being tossed about. Cassandra danced an elegant and classical interpretation of "Cocktail Om Khalsoum". Our mutual favourite over-all was Vanessa of New York, who, we decided, is the long-lost twin of Winnipeg dancer Jamilla al Badawi, now living in Vancouver. Vanessa danced in a lovely pink baladi dress, and took the stage after a large portion of the audience left, as both Safar and Jawaahir troupes went back-stage to perform. Vanessa radiated grace, wit, and charm as she glided through her numbers. Surprisingly to us, the show was sparsely attended. (On Saturday, Cassandra guessed this was due to most of the dancers being local--more of the "I can see them any time" phenomenon we often see here in Winnipeg.) After the show, Nora Assad announced the "fun, fun, fun" dance competition that was to take place Saturday night after Dina danced. After a round of "I will if you will", Za'ina and I signed ourselves up.

(Continued on page 3)



Bellydance with Nicola

Review: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

(Continued from page 2)

Saturday's workshop featured a challenging choreography to a pop song. The day was well-attended and dancers were rotated forward in the room so that we had a chance to dance in a variety of spots. Dina arrived looking very casual in simple red and white work-out wear, devoid of any hip scarf. Standing on the same stage the show has been on, she lead us through a short series of warm-up exercises, one flowing into another, and promptly into the dance. Dina teaches in the traditional, Egyptian manner, with very little breakdown--she shows, you do. Her expectations of us were higher than we could meet, and even the very experienced professional dancers in the room, Cassandra included, requested more repetition in smaller chunks. Dina was, for the most part, patient with showing the sequences again and again and again. She seemed surprised that most of the dancers needed to be shown so many times, and that movements such as her trademark quick catch steps, turns, and travel steps were difficult for us to follow. She talked quite a lot about how much training she has had, and how much practice it has involved (e.g. ballet starting at age 8). Dina demonstrated a number of basic exercises for learning foundation movements such as turns, Arabesques, and use of flat versus ball of the foot. Repeatedly, she told us to "Go home, practice this 10 minutes every day, and maybe you will get it. Not today." Exchanging exhausted looks with dancers around us, Za'ina and I joked that we'd have about 2 hours of practice for the worklist Dina had given us all. We did enjoy a brief lunch break to rehydrate, nurse our sore feet (one of mine split open from turning so much on the carpeted floor), and shop some more. We took lunch in the hotel lounge, where Dina, DeeDee and a then unknown male guest came in and sat at a nearby table. We had a little laugh over Dina's choice of chocolate cake and coffee for lunch, and we exchanged smiles with her throughout the meal. In the afternoon session, Dina seemed frustrated that many of us had not remembered the morning's material completely. She had to re-work some se-



(Continued on page 4)



Bellydance with Nicola

Review: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

(Continued from page 3)

quences to make them simpler, but was remarkably patient in dancing the choreography over and over for us.

The day was, in a word, advanced. It was also thrilling, challenging, and fun, and it was a great eye-opener for a totally different way of learning than many of us are used to. In many ways, it reminded me of Denise Enan's teaching. Dina spent some time on shimmies, and advised making shimmies small. "Everything is better small," she said, then added, "Well, maybe not everything!", blushing and laughing. (She actually left the



stage momentarily after that joke, as she could not stop laughing.) A central theme that emerged in day 1 was musical interpretation. Dina talked a lot about the lyrics of the song, and how Arabic-speaking dancers feel the music differently than American and European dancers do. Nora Assad was on hand, and she and Dina translated the lyrics one line at a time. Dina stopped us all repeatedly when we were not feeling the music properly. At day's end, she danced the whole piece (which of course we were nowhere near finishing) with her compelling, emotive style, enchanting us all and looking so incredibly beautiful, even though she was sweaty and without costuming.

Additionally, aside from some very unusual layered Dina movements, we learned how various dancers re-work the choreography as it is being taught. Sometimes this meant dancers were dancing the movements incorrectly, because they were not able to do most of what Dina can. However, with the more experienced dancers, we observed small changes in styling, foot placement, arm position, size of the movements, and emphasis. For example, watching Cassandra adapt Dina's choreography, I saw how a very tall (even taller than me) and very advanced dancer modified things slightly, making them more glide-y, more classical, and, well, different. (Short dancers don't often appreciate how taller dancers must dance differently. We feel and take up space differently.) Most of the pros in the room were making very small changes, including Vanessa, Rivkah, Aliyah, and Mirah.

Saturday's show an excellent dinner buffet, was very well-attended, and featured Egyptian

(Continued on page 5)



Bellydance with Nicola

Review: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

Phone: 957-7520

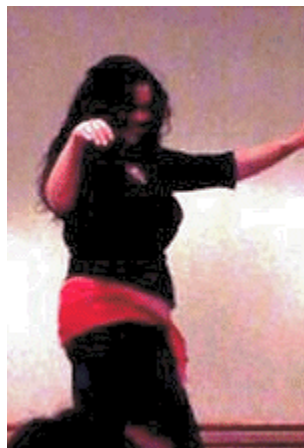
Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

(Continued from page 4)

dancer Mohamed Shahin (Dina's lunch guest), on tour in the U.S.. He danced a very lively, adorable Hagallah dance, with Vanessa. After a quick costume change, he emerged in to perform tannoura, or whirling. Tannoura is a stage version of Sufi whirling "dervish" dance. Holding a variety of decorated frame drums and wearing long, colourful skirts, he spun continuously through a lengthy piece from Jalilah's Raks Sharqi Volume 1. While he spun, he moved the drums through a variety of positions and poses, reminiscent of Aboriginal hoop dancing. After putting the drums down, Mohamed removed the top skirt and moved it up and down his body, creating different angles of swirling colour. It was a beautiful, very dramatic, very strong dance. Mohamed also danced a graceful, vigorous tahtib, the men's cane dance of Egypt. We were enthralled, and my husband leaned over to me during his dancing and said "I want to learn to do that!". Mohamed's use of the tahtib was effortless, playful and masterful, and reminded Za'ina and I of Mahmoud Reda. He looked so relaxed and happy throughout his performance.

After a short break, Dina burst onto the stage and danced her way through "her" songs and compositions, including my favourite "Tahil Shibbak". Dina zoomed in and out of the room, in costume changes so fast we wondered how many people were helping her in and out of her various outfits. She danced a slow, very emotional piece that moved me to tears, and Cheryllynn, Za'ina and I were looking at each other in wonder. I have never been so moved by dancing in my life-- Dina was resplendent, divine, and absolutely, positively wonderful. We had few giggles over some of her costumes--one was covered in large circles and the bra and belt looked as if they were made of several old vinyl 38's. Another had a decorated thong peeking out above the skirt,



and seemed to poke fun at the American thong trend. Still, Dina would look stunning in a paper bag, and can dance circles around almost anyone, so we enjoyed every last minute. Her performance was quite lengthy, but still, I was sad when she was done. I also felt uplifted and could not stop smiling.

After a surprisingly short break, the "fun" dance competition began. With Dina back at centre stage, this time seated with DeeDee, Ahmed and family, the rules were thus: 12 volunteer dancers from across North America were each given a random pop song of the

(Continued on page 6)



Bellydance with Nicola

Review: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

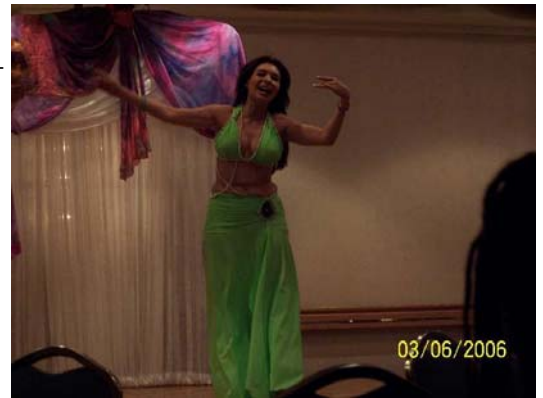
Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

(Continued from page 5)

DJ's choice, and with no prior preparation and no costuming, and had to dance the song. Audience applause would choose the winner. It was nerve-wracking waiting our turns, but after a few dancers, I started to relax. Although I had never heard the song before in my life, I had a whale of a time up there, and while I could only glance once at Dina, I had a table full of dancers, including Vanessa, clapping enthusiastically. Za'ina danced smoothly and confidently, and seemed to know her song really well (she didn't). Audience applause was very closely matched for a couple of us, so Dina got to pick the winner. The lovely teenager from Safar troupe won the grand prize (a free admission to Ahlan Cairo Nights in Texas with Nagwa Fouad, Mo Geddawi, and Randa Kamel), and Rivkah got runner-up with her campy imitation of Dina (she won \$100 USD). The night closed with dancing and general goofing around on stage with many dancers and Dina bopping away amongst us. She was very gracious and patient with photographs.



After, Vanessa complimented us both on our dancing, and we had a lively and long talk with her about dance and her "twin", Jamiila. We also met a number of Thunder Bay dancers, whom we invited to Winnipeg for our next workshop. Za'ina, Cheryllynn, Greg and I joined Vanessa and the Sirens of the Sahara (aka Leslie and Christine), chauffeured into downtown Minneapolis by Sam, a very funny and hospitable Egyptian man who had attended the show. The group of us went to a club and danced to a live Arabic band. It was exciting to hear about dance work in other, bigger cities, and the opportunities the dancers have to perform.

Day 2 of the workshop was another challenging choreography to a different pop song. Again, Nora and Dina translated, and Dina really stressed the importance of understanding the music and what the dancer is supposed to convey. Again, she pushed us hard to absorb, move on, and remember the dance. Again, she had to simplify her combinations. I kept thinking, "I am so glad there will be a DVD because I am going to remember NONE of this!". I was too busy smiling at

(Continued on page 7)



Bellydance with Nicola

Review: Advanced Workshop and Show with Dina of Cairo

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

(Continued from page 6)

her and trying to keep up. There were more dancers on the sidelines and at the back on the second day, tired out and/or trying to figure out what some of the more complex combinations were. The rows were rotated, we took turns sitting and watching, and some dancers were reluctant to take a turn up at the front. At the lunch break, I had a nice, brief talk with Cassandra about dancing and about the workshop. Then more shopping, more trying on of impossibly gorgeous costumes and more visiting in the bathroom, hallway and hotel lounge with other dancers. We approached a tired and sweaty Dina to take some photographs, and waited in line with other workshop participants to receive autographed certificates.

Most of the specific technique Dina taught, and the combinations in the choreography, are not suitable for most dancers. Her style is so advanced, so special and so her that to try to imitate her is to look awkward, and even silly. Most dancers do not have Dina's strength and ability. More importantly, Dina's style is a reflection of her vivid personality, and like Delilah, trying to dance a style that is so much a part of the soul of that dancer, when you are not her, comes across as artificial and forced. I won't be teaching most of what I learned, but I am adapting some of it, paring it down and using it in my classes as well as my dancing. I am looking forward to the DVD coming out--hopefully there won't be too many shots of me craning my neck to figure out which foot she came out of that groovy turn on, and how she worked in that hip rotation on that transition step, and so on. I left with even more respect and awe for her. It was really exciting to be challenged to that degree, and I look forward to attending another Little Egypt event. They were gracious and attentive hosts, the shopping was amazing, and it was really convenient to have everything held in one venue. It was worth the long drive there and back, worth the hundreds of dollars, and renewed my commitment to dance.



Author: Nicola (a version of this appeared in the Fall / Winter 2006 editions of the Belly Button Bulletin, EDCOM's newsletter)

Copyright: © 2006 Nicola, Last updated: 2006/09/14