



Bellydance with Nicola

Reflection on the Dance Manitoba Dance Festival, May 15 - April 2, 2005 (and beyond)

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I had the pleasure of once again competing in the 25th annual provincial festival this year, my fifth time competing in my dance career. This festival is open to Dance MB members of any age who submit their names (and fees) to dance in the genres of Tap, Musical Theatre, Hip Hop, Modern, Jazz, National and Ballet. I competed in the category of National dance, a genre which is widely diverse, and can include everything from Middle Eastern to Ukrainian to Irish to Indian. The festival participants compete for an audience of friends, family, fellow dancers, and most importantly, an adjudicator.

Dancers are further divided up based on age and number of dancers, from solo, duo, small group to large group. Dancers have 3-6 minutes for most genres, depending on the number of dancer, up to 12 minutes for musical theatre numbers. I competed in the solo/over 20 category of National, as well as with Ahlan Dance Company in small group/multigenerational. Needless to say, both categories are small. The festival tends to attract mostly dance schools who enter their students for competition and thus exposure.

My past experiences at the Dance Festival have been mixed. There is one adjudicator for National dance, and s/he may or may not have any training or knowledge of Middle Eastern dance. The first time I danced there, the judge's only comment was "You should be more sexy". Other judges have offered feedback that, when considered, is helpful, constructive, and instructive from a perspective that spans dance genres.

This year, we were blessed to have a judge who knew his stuff, Sashar Zarif of Toronto. Knowing ahead of time that the adjudicator was trained in Middle Eastern dance was both exciting and daunting. Mr. Zarif is a performing artist of Azerbaijani descent, trained in his native country, and studying Fine Arts at York University. He is also an instructor in the faculty at York. Mr. Zarif is trained in Indian Classical of Bharatanatyam, Uzbek, Tadjeeek, Persian, Georgian, Chechen, Afghan, Middle Eastern, Turkish, Flamenco, and Lezginka dance traditions. He is also the founder and director of the Canadian Joshgoon Academy of Azerbaijani Dance and the Sashar Zarif Dance Theatre, among other professional activities and honours. Soft-spoken, direct, clear, and specific with his feedback, he charmed the young dancers who were nervously lined up on stage to hear and receive their assessment and award (if any). Interestingly, Mr. Zarif took

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time during his commentary to those dancers to ask them why they dance and what their favourite style is within their dance tradition. He had words of inspiration and advice for many, and his gentle sense of humour made everyone more relaxed as well as attentive. His comments to most dancers (us included) had to do with expressiveness (more), energy (more), a sense of fun (more), clear/clean movements (more), and “living in the moment of the dance” (which I was praised for as a soloist and the troupe as small group).

I competed dancing a drum solo choreographed by Hadia. Since I only had 3 minutes as a soloist, other dance options are limited (e.g. veil, sword, cane). Mr. Zarif was extremely specific in his feedback, praising and instructing in his comments. I received a Silver medal. Later that evening, Ahlan and I danced Shayera’s choreography of Khaleegi, a Saudi Arabian dance. We, too, received a Silver.

Dancers in the various categories do not compete against each other. They compete against and are evaluated by standards of the dance--whatever a specific genre demands of a dancer, plus qualities that transcend all dances: expression, energy, poise, posture, technique, grace, and fluidity. The judges give a mark out of 100 (I don’t yet know mine), and supply dancers with comments that are written and mailed out to participants--which is great considering it’s easy to forget what was said when you’re sweaty, nervous, and pumped full of adrenaline.

The following morning, I put in a volunteer shift for the ballet adjudicator, and found her to be equally constructive and excited about the crop of young, enthusiastic dancers. Ms. Mary Jago-Romeril knew exactly what to expect from each dancer at each age, and adjusted her expectations and evaluation to fit. I learned a lot from her, and was really interested in the kinds of aesthetic details she noticed, from the turn of a foot, to the way a dancer used his or her head, to tension in the hands. Much of what she commented on could be applied to any dancer in any genre.

What struck me most profoundly on both occasions, competing and helping, was how incredibly talented the dancers were. Most were under the age of 15, and it was clear (regardless of genre)

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that based on the complexity of their choreographies, the quality of costuming they wore, and the conversations between them and their teachers, that there are high, clear, and stringent standards for them to meet. Again, this was across the dance traditions. Most of them were more talented, more powerful and more expressive dancers than many women calling themselves “professional” level bellydancers in this city and others in Western Canada. Great dancing is great dancing, whether the dancing is performing the Scottish sword dance, Khathak, tap, or ballet.

I would encourage any dancer to compete for the experience, to submit themselves to the professional assessment given, and to enjoy so many talented people gracing one stage. Perhaps also for a reminder of why you dance, or, as one young dancer said, “When I dance, I feel free”.

Author: Nicola (a version of this appeared in the June 2005 edition of the Belly Button Bulletin, EDCOM's newsletter)

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