



AMBARA

by Kerry Stewart



Kerry

In March, 2017, the BOLD Festival was launched in Canberra "to celebrate the legacy and impact of professional and community dance ... and to explore healthy ageing, the health

impacts of creativity and the cross-generational exchange of ideas and practice". The Festival⁽¹⁾ was the dream of world-renowned choreographer Liz Lea. Guests included Dr Laura Osweiler (Amara) from the USA who delivered 'Threads of Classical American Belly dance in Contemporary American Middle Eastern Dance', a presentation and performances. Amara is a choreographer, teacher, performer and producer. She holds a PhD in Dance History and Theory from the University of California, Riverside and a BA in Music History and Literature with a certificate in Ethnomusicology from The Florida State University. She has taught accredited courses in dance at universities and presented papers at international conferences. Amara was the producer of 'An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance'(EEMED) and is Co-producer of the Austin Belly Dance Convention.⁽²⁾ She developed and taught X-MED workshops and Teacher Training and Production Training Certification Courses.⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾

Amara was recently awarded a two week Ausdance 'Dance Artist in Residence 2017' at the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre to develop an interdisciplinary collaborative work with Paul Osbourne (director, designer and lighting director) and Cassie To (composer).⁽⁵⁾ She spoke to Bellydance Oasis magazine from Sydney.

BDO: You have a visa to work in Australia for four years: what are your plans?

Amara: I am General Manager of Critical Path, an organisation which supports choreographers to develop new collaborations and engage in discussions and critical appreciation



of dance; it is a research facility; a think tank for choreographers.⁽⁶⁾ I run programs which give people space and time to explore choreographic processes without the pressure of having to create a dance or show. For me, it's a great way to meet Australians and learn how others are approaching choreography while supporting their processes. I am also teaching dance classes and have started a new student dance group. In the future, I'd like to restart my pedagogy workshops. I have done some performances and look forward to doing more. And, I am continuing to create new choreographies and expand my choreographic methodology.

BDO: The BOLD Festival had a very exciting goal: to explore healthy ageing, creativity and cross-generational exchange. What was your experience of the festival?

Amara: Promoting and supporting artists at different stages of their career as they age is a much-needed initiative. It was exciting to meet third-generation dancers and artists working as older dancers, or coming to dance later in life. It is very important to keep those conversations going on how to maintain the body and to have platforms for older dancers. There was such a diversity of dance forms at the Festival, including dancers with disabilities, intercultural and cross-generational styles represented across a range of panels, lectures and performances in different venues.

BDO: In your presentation, you discussed what is known in the USA as American Cabaret, or Classical Belly Dance. Can you explain what this is?

Amara: American Cabaret developed in the USA in the late 1950s to early 1970s. A huge influx of people from the Middle East settled in large urban areas such as Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Detroit and Chicago. These immigrants set up night clubs and restaurants; dancers, musicians and audiences from all over the Middle East came together and mixed in these venues. Musicians from different countries, such as Armenia, Lebanon, Egypt, Greece and Turkey, played together. On top of this was the incorporation of American pop culture, including Rock music and 'Western' instruments and tonality. Dancers learned from each other. They may have kept their distinctive form but also, for example, a dancer from Morocco might incorporate a movement she saw on a Turkish dancer.

Dancers of non-Middle Eastern descent also brought their own forms such as Flamenco, Ballet, Modern dance and Jazz. This mix of different people, each with their own culture, started to learn from each other and to fuse their music and dances. There was a lot of experimentation, mixing, fusion and hybridisation.

The dancers were expected to do thirty to forty minute sets, so five and seven part routines developed, including



Photography by Darin Nupul

the veil routine (with three yards of fabric), extended floor work and drum solos; the dancer all the while played zills. These routines held onto the established ideas of the solo form, the dancer as musician, improvisation and tarab; all elements of the relationship between performer and audience. That relationship is a strong part of the dance. The audience lets the dancer know whether they are bored or engaged and, because the dancer(s) and musicians are improvising, they can make decisions accordingly.

American Cabaret is sometimes called American Turkish dance or American Vintage.⁽²⁾ American Cabaret (or 'Am Cab') was an experimentation which became a codified genre. It was a messy mix of ideas and styles, a product of the time and of different people coming together; a diaspora of communities who needed to understand how they fitted

into a new culture. So, here is a history of experimenting and fusing in dance in the USA. (This reaches even further back to the introduction of Middle Eastern dance to the USA in the 1860s. A whole other story....)

Although there were Egyptian dancers in the US, and Farida Fahmy (principal dancer in the Egyptian Reda Troupe) received her MA in Dance from UCLA in 1987, it was not until the mid to late 1990s that Egyptian style started to dominate the USA scene. Americans like Shareen el Safy, Aisha Ali, Morocco and Sahra Saaeda had been to Egypt, learned the traditions there and brought that information back to the USA.

(Egyptian dance changes too, but within its own framework. Knowing the rules and structure of the genre mean that a dancer knows how far to push them. The famous dancers in Egypt work within their form, but they are each unique because they can continue, bend, or break the rules.)

BDO: How did this American Cabaret style of dance lay a foundation for American Tribal Style®, Tribal Fusion, Improvisational Tribal Style, Theatrical Bellydance and experimental forms of bellydance?

Amara: Carolena Nericcio came out of that period. She studied with dancers in California who worked at the Renaissance Faire during the day and danced at night clubs in the evening; at the Faire, though there was overlap, they had more ethnic and tribal looking costuming than in the night clubs, but the dance vocabulary was pretty much the same, unless they were doing specific folk dances.

Carolena learned American Cabaret style in this context. I see her mixing the ethnic elements from that time with a folk sensibility in which the dancers move in unison, but in an improvisational manner. Carolena changed the dance posture, which completely changed the look of the dance.

ATS® has a very different posture to American Cabaret style and very skeletal movements, while maintaining the drum solos, zills and sword work

from the period. The posture is almost a hyperextension; the upper torso has a Flamenco-uplifted and bent back posture while the arms reflect an exaggerated Bharatanatyam posture. ATS® has larger movements and is less muscular than Egyptian *raqs al sharqi*. Cues were developed in order to keep improvisation a part of the unison movements.

ATS® developed on the West Coast and was quickly codified. It is now a copyrighted format.

For a while, the term 'ATS' encompassed many dance companies and formats. Many dancers on the West Coast broke away from what is now known as ATS®. From what I saw, Improvisational Tribal Style (ITS), as a name, came out of the East Coast; there wasn't much communication with ATS® (pre-internet). ITS developed its own vocabulary (on both the East and West Coast) which includes elements of urban dance, such as Hip Hop. Whereas ATS® vocabulary is all on the right hand side of the body, ITS vocabulary includes the left hand side.

The movement vocabulary of Tribal Fusion developed from both ATS® and ITS (depending on the training of the dancer), adding more urban dance vocabulary, such as Gothic and Industrial. Tribal Fusion, as a solo form, has returned to some of the American Cabaret stuff lost in ATS® and ITS. Group unison slows the movements, therefore, some of the musicality is lost and there is a lot of repetition. As soloists, Tribal Fusion dancers returned to interpreting the music (more along the lines of traditional Middle Eastern dance solos), which changed the quality of the movements. In a sense, Tribal Fusion has taken the *taqsīm* section of the five part American Cabaret routine and made it the show. Tribal Fusion focuses on much more muscular movements. I see this as the influence of *raqs al sharqi* and the yoga training many Tribal fusion dancers have, as well as an overall trend in the USA towards hyper-isolation.

In ATS® the upper torso, head and arms are used to cue movements, whereas Tribal Fusion has a much freer

upper torso, more like American Cabaret. They are also doing floor work; it's almost a rediscovery of American Cabaret, although Tribal Fusion dancers do not generally play zills.

My experience in Los Angeles with Theatrical bellydance was through EEMED (which started in 1999).⁸⁰ Many (although not all) of these choreographers brought narrative styles into the dance. Some started as Am Cab dancers, some were folk dancers experimenting with adding narrative to Middle Eastern dance, or were ballet and jazz dancers bringing Middle Eastern dance into their work. I saw a rise in these participants in the shows a few years after EEMED started and when Tribal dance was more established in LA.

BDO: How do you see the future of these styles of dance?

Amara: I see the Tribal world growing; ATS[®] and ITS as a form are being brought in, taught and performed in new locations (rather like Egyptian dance being brought to the USA or Australia).

Theatrical bellydance is growing in terms of adding narrative structures, although that will take time to develop; it's not a skill most of us in Middle Eastern dance have. It takes time to master the processes of taking an abstract dance form and making it a narrative.

There is, however, a history of narrative and Middle Eastern dance. Mahmoud Reda, in the 1960s, created a theatrical form by fusing folk dance, ballet, ballroom and Western proscenium staging. He added narrative structures to his works.

Both Jillina and Bellyqueen have toured the world and come through Australia with their Theatrical bellydance shows in the past few years. I think that Theatrical bellydance will continue to grow. And fusion is happening in all sorts of ways.

I see Theatrical bellydance underneath the Experimental umbrella, along with some Tribal Fusion. I call myself (when not doing 'traditional' or 'commercial' work), an Experimental Middle Eastern dancer. In Australia, I am also labelled an intercultural dancer. Like many of the EEMED choreographers, I create

works which are both narrative and non-narrative, frequently for the theatre. As an experimentalist, my focus is on maintaining a sense of experimentation, not on trying to create a genre, such as Theatrical bellydance. As a lifelong goal, I'm continually trying to shift and change in my own choreographic processes and to explore and create new spaces.

BDO: Who has inspired you in your own dance journey?

Amara: One of my first teachers, Halimeda taught me how to add humour and joy to the dance. Aegela (Atlanta) taught me how to explore and create layered techniques. Artists I worked with in Los Angeles like Anaheed, Tandemonium, Djahari (now in NYC), Elayssa and Tatianna formed a group who worked together and pushed each other. It was like a Golden Age for me to have an inspiring support group for my experimental work. In fact, the group became the subject of my dissertation. Many of the teachers and authors I studied while going through both UCLA and UCR graduate schools also inspired my investigations into choreography and dance.

In Sydney, I've met several dancers doing intercultural work, such as Annalouise Paul and Raghav Handa, who I find inspiring. Like me, they are experimenting and working within and between dance forms. Currently, I'm working with the lighting designer, Paul Osborne on a new work which explores materiality and immateriality of the body, moving centres and lines of flights, and multiplicity of the one.

BDO: We are in an unusual position to love, learn and practise the dance of a very different culture. Why do you think Western women are so drawn to Middle Eastern Dance and music?

Amara: I don't know why in general ...for me, it was a movement form that spoke to me on a physical level. I had been a ballet dancer and a musician, so Middle Eastern dance was a challenge, but also something my body could do. I loved the joy of being a happy performer, the community and the support system. I love the music. I love the culture,

the political and social dynamics. The political and social issues that I have to deal with as a dancer fascinate me. There is space to create an art that represents who I am as a person.

BDO: How can we respectfully practise Middle Eastern Dance?

Amara: By understanding the form you are practising, who you are as an artist. Be the best you can be. Respect that there are different ways of doing this dance. Understand the roots and foundation of what you are doing to the best of your ability. It's a living art; make it your own, contextualise yourself in wider parameters and understand why you are doing what you're doing.

BDO: What do you see ahead for yourself?

Amara: I teach Middle Eastern dance. My commercial style is a combination of American Cabaret, Egyptian and folk dance; I love teaching that, teaching the roots and understanding that style. I strive to improve, especially in my interaction with the audience and in dancing to live music.

I want to do more teacher training and more choreographic work. I am continuing to experiment and develop my methodology. I am always expanding into new areas and am currently working with different artists in cross disciplinary ways. I am working on a new genre of dance and some new dances, including a film and a theatre piece. My time in Australia has already opened new areas for me. •

References:

- (1) <http://theboldfestival.com/about.html>
- (2) www.theABDC.com
- (3) www.AmaraDances.com
- (4) www.Training4DanceTeachers.com
- (5) <http://ausdancensw.com.au/dair-2017>
- (6) www.CriticalPath.org.au
- (7) Amara: I tend to use multiple words to indicate and keep in the forefront that names and terminology are very fluid and messy. 'Am Cab', 'Bellydance' and 'Turkish American' refer to specific styles, but a person, depending on their politics and history, may use one and/or another.
- (8) www.EEMED.com