

## Loving Middle Eastern Dance

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During a recent interview, I was asked, what do I love about Middle Eastern dance? I was a bit overwhelmed because there were so many things. Where do I start?

I first have to thank a number of teachers who cultivated my interest and love of Middle Eastern dance. Halimeda, one of my first teachers in Tallahassee, really started me on this journey. She taught me what a great tool humor is to have while performing and how one thrives when surrounded by supportive dancers. Lynette, Najwa, Marliza Pons, and Viviane Hamamdjian all opened my eyes to a new dance vocabulary and the world of traditional folk dance. Aegela, who was in Atlanta at the time, has had the most impact on my approach to teaching dance. She inspired me to use her method of layering seemingly random moves in order to find new and challenging movements.

Today I fulfill some of my passion for learning Middle Eastern dances, styles, and vocabulary by taking workshops. Dancing with peers, such as those in *Perfumes of Araby* and *Desert Sin*, also nourishes my avocation. All of these interactions are invaluable means for discovering how others instruct, approach, and perform Middle Eastern dance while expanding my own dance pathways and core movements.

I also continue to learn through my personal practice. From the beginning, I was drawn to the different qualities of Middle Eastern movements such as the strong, bound flow of undulations; light, consistent shimmies; and sharp sudden accents. I enjoy exploring how it feels to put them together simultaneously and sequentially. I investigate where traditional styles connect and disconnect while experimenting with new movement. I am also becoming intrigued with understanding how different muscle groups can do the “same” move.

My study of dance does not end in the studio. I have always enjoyed school and so it was an easy decision to continue my dance studies there. What I love about academia is that it gives me space and time for intensive learning in a number of fields. At both UCLA and UCR, I was fortunate to have studied with amazing dance scholars including David Gere, Marta Savigliano, Jeff Tobin, Susan Foster, Sally Ness, and Linda Tomko. Each presented a new world of texts and methodologies for me to examine Middle Eastern dance. Others such as Tim Miller, Simon Forti, Judy Gantz, and Victoria Marks opened up new movement expressions and approaches. Graduate school has also developed my analytical skills in not only writing about dance but also creating dance. In addition, it gave me opportunities to teach and produce events while receiving valuable feedback.

During the first part of my artistic life, I was a musician and music scholar. I began studying Middle Eastern dance while getting a BA in music history and literature with a certificate in World Music at FSU. Unfortunately, there were no professors specializing in Near Eastern Music. So, I read all the books that I could and focused on the music of India and China. Not until UCLA was I fortunate enough to take courses with Professor Ali Jihad Racy, an amazing musician and professor. Like the dance, the intricate layers and endless styles Middle Eastern music fascinate me. And I enjoy continuing my music pursuits by playing the zils.

I have spent years performing both dance and music. But only when I started with Middle Eastern dance did I truly find my home. On an internal level, performing happens in the moment and so I get some peace and quite from my inner critic. I also get to experience how deep and integrated my training is. There is also the challenge of having to constantly deal with the unexpected, both positive and negative, that comes with the uniqueness of each performance. On an external level, I love sharing that moment and this art with others. I am always honored when people ask me to be a part of, as a performer, a special event in their lives.

There is also the enthralling challenge of dancing in different venues and settings: from an unseen space to one I have rehearsed in. I love the close interaction that I have with audiences when dancing at a restaurant or nightclub. There are also my explorations into the variations found within those settings: having to look downward at my audience sitting on poofs in a Moroccan restaurant; dancing between tables at a Greek Restaurant; and on a dance floor at a Persian nightclub. I also am delighted when I have the complete attention of an audience in a concert setting such as the Ford Amphitheater or at a small black box theater.

I enjoy how the space affects my dance. Whether it is a structured improvisation to keep up with the ever-changing audience position at a restaurant or a choreographed performance for a concert. I love dancing for different audiences: dancers who can appreciate my nuances; Middle Eastern and Arab audiences who will continually clap and get up easily to dance; and first timers whom I have to teach what their role is in the performance. And I cannot forget the thrill of dancing to live music and the dynamic relationship I have with the musicians.

My passion also takes me into the area of instructing. I started seriously teaching Middle Eastern dance nine years ago when I felt ready to share my unique pedagogy. I take delight in that students can use my techniques in a variety of styles. I love the challenge of coming up with different exercises to teach skills in choreography, improvisation, musicality, phrasing, transitions, and performing. I also enjoy giving lectures on Middle Eastern culture, history, society, and how these all relate to dance.

Similar to performing, I like exploring how different teaching settings bring on their own demands and expectations. I have discovered the nuances of teaching a private lesson, versus a small on-going studio classes, versus 50 students in an accredited university course. And, then

there are all those differences when you are teaching a one time class such as workshop and or a video lesson.

I am thankful to my students who continue my education. They often ask me to explain a concept in more than one way. They pose problems, which I work with them to solve. They make me a better dancer.

Ya Helewa!, my dance company started in 1999 out of necessity. I had several students who wanted to perform in a dance company. Like all my students, the company members challenge me to make harder and more complicated works. They also allow me space to try new dances and ideas out with them. The focus of the company is on the group, and so I work to balance choreography for the group while also playing up each individual's specific strengths. Like my solo work, Ya Helewa! perform in a number of Middle Eastern dance styles such as Egyptian, Turkish, and American Middle Eastern cabaret as well as a number of folk dances and experimental forms.

Producing and creating opportunities for dancers to express themselves has been another rewarding avenue of Middle Eastern dance. These events also give me chances to work with non-dancers such as stage crews, lighting designers, theater staff, photographers, and videographers. My first experience was a co-production; Dance Under Construction, a University of California system wide conference for dance graduates. Through this opportunity, I not only learned what goes into an event, but also experienced what it is like to create spaces for others to work. Since then I have produced monthly belly dance showcases, workshops, and my labor of love, An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance (EEMED). Last May, I co-produced X-MED, an experimental Middle Eastern dance seminar with Anaheed, Djahari, and Elayssa. It was an amazing experience as it carries a supportive approach to experimental Middle Eastern dance into the area of teaching.

For me, Middle Eastern dance shifts and changes as I grow. I appreciate that this dance and its community have given me a life long pursuit, a home, and amazing peers. It challenges me to keep learning while supporting my creative endeavors. I am grateful to have found such a passion in my life and to have it supported by friends and my husband, Greg. Contact Amara:

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