

It's Raining Men ... Glory Be!!

Black Orchid Danse Najm al Danse Orientale
2011 - Dolce Atlanta-Peachtree Hotel, May 27-30
reviewed by Alima



Photo of Alima by Celestial Studios, Gainesville, GA

It is difficult to write one article and feature all the outstanding performers and teachers at Black Orchid 2011. So to begin I will list the star team brought to Atlanta this year by Saamiyah, in alpha order by first name: Amira Mor, Nath Keo, Sharon Kihara, Tarik Sultan, Tito Seif, Willow Chang and the Music Master DJ Amar.

It was a magical weekend at Dolce Atlanta, Peachtree, that started with a tremendous storm prior to the Welcome Party at Thai Heaven. We experienced wind, rain, lightning, and the tempestuous rage that

nature can produce on a stormy evening. It did not dampen our weekend or evening. Once again a Black Orchid Memorial Day Weekend held that charm, hospitality, master teaching and eye opening performers that many of us flock to each year. This one would be no disappointment.

In memory of the stormy evening with lightning bolts and driving wind, I was jolted into deep thoughts of nature and power. That power translates its self through all of nature and people. So what was so powerful and natural about the amazing instructors and performers for the weekend? The power was the love of our dance and the instinctive way we all respond to music and these talented individuals. They opened our senses and we responded with enthusiasm and joy. The dancers came from all walks of life, a remarkable contrast of backgrounds and ethnicities. Not just women! Men! All are absorbed by our dance. Men, Yes the Men!! It was raining men!!! Not one, two, but more!

How wonderful to have the instruction from the beautiful and gifted female teachers: Amira Mor, Sharon Kihara, and Willow Chang were excellent teachers and captivating performers. How fortunate for the male students to have the star studded male instructors, Nath, Tarik and Tito. It is such a treat to be able to learn from female and male teachers and important for us to have our role models in all art forms. I'm sure that each of us took so many impressions, history and invaluable technique home with us after the weekend of dance.

As a veteran dancer, I reminisce about the men I have had the honor to take workshop classes with and meet on the dance circuit over the last 30 years. They each have a remarkable history in Middle Eastern Danse, to name a few, Mahmoud Reda, Ibrahim Farrah, Bert Balladine, Aziz, Amir and Serigo. Of this elite group Mahmoud Reda and Aziz are still in life, however regrettably Aziz has retired. People en masse are still seeking Mr. Reda and we are so fortunate that he is still traveling and teaching.

At Black Orchid we also embraced some excellent male performers: Lebanese Simon, Sal, Andrus and Gabriel. Regrettably, I did not have the opportunity to interview all of the men, but will provide four interviews that time allowed. Hopefully, next time I can talk at length with Lebanese Simon, I so enjoyed his outstanding Debke and sword performance. It was evident he has a strong dance background. He danced with Caracalla International Dance Company in Beirut, Lebanon. He is now based in Texas as an instructor and manages Al Awtar, a Lebanese Zaffah Troupe. He was very kind to assist in the interview with Tito Seif of Egypt. Thank you, Simon!

I also did not have the opportunity to interview Nath Keo. What an intriguing artist. His history could fill a book, born in Kav Lan Refugee Camp on the border of Thailand and Cambodia and immigrated to Canada at the age of nine. His work has been celebrated internationally as a writer, dancer, singer, songwriter and model. In the past 8 years, Nath has performed in 7 tours in 51 cities numbering over 1,000 performances. In 2006, he was ordained as a Bikkhu Theravada Buddhist Monk at Wat Tuol Taong, Cambodia. He is the Artistic Director and Choreographer for Sacred Centre Dance Company based in Victoria BC, Canada. As of this writing I have been informed he will back in Atlanta with Black Orchid in October. It will be a treat to see him again.

We will begin with the interview with Andrus:

From Miami Florida, known for his elegance, sharp moves, shimmies and oriental expressions. Winner of the Dance Competition Black Orchid 2011. Andrus dances with Belly Motions, one of South Florida's top dance academies. They have 2,000 students and have 2 showcases a year.

Q. I see that you are the sole male performer in your dance school. What is it like to be the only male dancer?

A. I get along with everyone. I am open to love and live life. I see life through the dance. I'm just one of the girls. (Big smile from Andrus.) They nurture me in their community.

Q. What about our dance do you like?

A. So many aspects! One of my mentors, Portia, gave me good foundation and feedback. She teaches about business, presentation and history. All of the people that I have studied with have taught me so many aspects of the dance. It is very important to study history, such as where does our dance come from and how does it evolve. I like to see change. It

is a natural process. Flowers are a good example of constant change. Dance constantly changes and this is good. It is very important to go to the roots.

Q. What is your heritage, how does it affect your dance?

A. I come from a different culture than our dance, Mayan Indian, Christian home, Guatemala.

Q. What sparked your interest in our dance?

A. When I was a little child I would watch the history channel. I was glued to the T.V. I just loved it. I was intrigued! We had a Bible with pictures. I would sit and look at the pictures and think what was life like in the Middle East, what about Palestine?

Q. What is your favorite dance venue and why?

A. A new location. It is fresh and a new start. New eyes are seeing you. It is beautiful to continue to share the dance with different audiences.

Q. Who makes your costumes?

A. It is difficult to find new costumes on the rack. They do not fit me, most are just too big. Joharah gets my costumes from Egypt. We discuss the details and how I wish to be presented. I know my body and what looks good on me. Costuming is very important for my first impression by the audience.

Q. What is your favorite type of dance music?

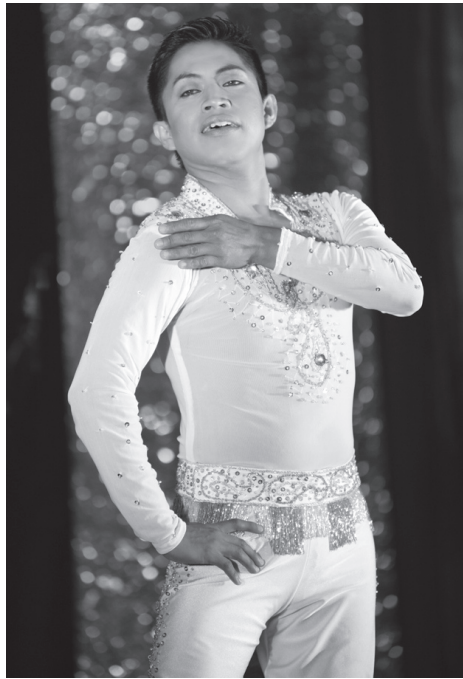
A. Egyptian Oriental, slow, pop, but best described as elegant and regal. I love a beautiful singing voice and poetic translation. You should understand the translation to get to the core of the song. You should understand, it is important. Know what they are saying.

Q. How do you see your future?

A. I see it as positive. Dancing! My refuge is dance, happy or sad. It is my first love!

Q. What advice do you have for other male dancers?

A. Study, take classes, but research. Be open to the possibilities and styles, not just Tribal or Saidi, the dance is a never-ending art form. Listen to the music, let it take you somewhere; it will lead you on the path. Study Saidi to know about the man's dance. I was so impressed when I watched



Andrus

Raqia Hassan, you could envision the dance, as she expressed it through her body. One thing I have learned, allow yourself to be comfortable on the level you are. Fall in love with each level or plateau. Work through the levels and continue to grow. Dance will grow through you also.

Interview with Sal Maktoub: From Houston Texas and the Sirrom School. Accomplished performer, instructor and choreographer in Middle Eastern, Brazilian and Latin dance genres. Winner of the Drum Solo Dance Competition Black Orchid 2010.

Q. What is your heritage?

A. I am Salvadorian. My parents are from El Salvador. I am first generation American.

Q. Do any of your family members play musical instruments or dance?

A. No, no one plays instruments, but growing up there has always been music in the house. It has always been a part of us. Everyone will get up and dance when it comes to a social setting or get-togethers.

Q. Do you play any instruments?

A. I do not play any instruments, but I do make a valiant attempt at zagats, but that is as far as I get.

Q. What types of dance do you do?



Sal

A. Belly Dance, Middle Eastern, Samba, Salsa and Punta. I don't think many people outside of Central America know about Punta. It is a dance from Honduras and what I grew up dancing to. It is heavily influenced with African drumming. I think that is where I developed such a love for percussion and drum solos. Latin dance forms are very infused by drums and they

are a good foundation for me. Overall I would say I dance to pretty much anything that is Latin and Middle Eastern.

Q. Who makes your costumes?

A. I make my own costumes. It is hard being a male dancer; it is difficult to find costumes. You can't go into a store and say "Oh, I would like that for my drum solo! And that will be perfect for my Oriental." You have to go with what

makes you comfortable. It is a good thing for me there is no set style. You can pretty much do what you want. There is no defined example for men. I do like the Galabaiya that Tito wears and those are great.

Q. Where do you teach?

A. I teach at Sirrom School in Houston, I teach two classes a week, beginner Belly Dance and Brazilian Samba and I have rehearsal with my group.

Q. What is your group called?

A. JAKS, we took the first letter of each member's name to create the acronym. Our main focus in dance and performances is on the Brazilian Samba because that is what people are interested in right now. That heat is hitting big time and everyone wants a piece of it. It's a lot of work, but so much fun!

Q. What is your job in real life?

A. Assistant manager for a luxury boutique.

Q. What is a luxury boutique?

A. High price designers, such as Louie Vinton, Gucci, Fendi, Prada, etc.

Q. What make you happy?

A. Dance really and truly, I can dance and not even be aware of anything else. It is my happy place, I feel like it brings me closer to a higher power. I remember reading a quote by Tahiyya Karioka, I think, of which I don't have exact words but in essence said, *"Dancing, I feel, brings me closer to God. My dance is like my prayer I am offering to Him, and when I step onto the dance floor, it is as if I have stepped into HIS temple."* That is how I feel. (Interviewer's note: Tahiyya Karioka, "Queen of Oriental Dancing", Egypt, took her name from the Brazilian samba dances she performed)

Q. What makes you sad?

A. I don't know how to answer to that question. I think the concept of time makes me sad, because we live under the constraints of deadlines and punctuality and constantly being on-the-go. Instead of enjoying life, people, family, friends, good food and having a good time. But at the same time, without it, we would do whatever we want, whenever we want. There would be no structure.

Q. When was your first visit to Atlanta?

A. Funny thing, about three or four years ago, and I was only in the airport. (Big laugh here) We missed our flight going to San Salvador. There was only one other with Delta going into the city and we missed it. So we stayed here in Atlanta in a hotel. Other than that short visit, it was last year with Black Orchid event in 2010.

Q. Are you in any way surprised about the love and hospitality you have encountered here in Atlanta?

A. No, I am not surprised. I think I am naïve and believe in "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I believe I am kind and courteous and people return it. What you give, you get back.

Q. Were you surprised when you won the drum contest?

A. I had never competed before, I have never been so nervous and wanted something so badly. It was fun and a wonderful learning experience. It gave me the boost of confidence that I needed. It made me think, "Ok, what is the next step?"

Q. How did it change you?

A. I think in a year, I definitely feel more comfortable and am ready to advance. Atlanta has changed my life and dancing career. Cheryll (a.k.a. Saamiyah, Seminar Producer of Black Orchid Dance) has made my dreams come true! Just in two years, with the drum solo contest and this year my teaching for the 2011 production. Hayat could not be here, Cheryll asked me to cover and teach. I ended up teaching two workshops and it went super well. People gave me good feedback. They said they enjoyed the classes. Cheryll has given me opportunities aplenty and I don't think she will know how much she has changed my dance life. I can't thank her enough.

Q. Short term goal?

A. To grow more as a dancer and artist. And to get into the teaching/ touring circuit and attend more workshops. People tell me I have had a drastic change in one year and they encourage me to keep it up. I guess this would be short term and long-term goals. I enjoy sharing what I love to do.

Q. If you could leave one lasting impression in life or with dancers what would it be?

A. I would hope that people see in my dancing the passion that I have for this art form. I am sharing every venerable part of me on that stage. I am putting my heart out there. I just hope, wish, and pray people take, accept, and enjoy it. This is what I love and find such ecstasy in sharing this form of self-expression with people.



Tarik

Interview with Tarik, New York: Tarik is a noted pioneer of Male Middle Eastern Dance in the world. He began his formal training in Oriental Dance as a student of Morocco in 1985. His articles on the role of Oriental Dance in the professional and social arenas in the cultures of the

Middle East and North Africa throughout history have been translated into several languages. Tarik's talent and dedication has earned him the reputation as a dynamic performer and inspiring teacher and choreographer. He has taught seminars across the US as well as internationally in the UK, Japan, Australia, Trinidad and Argentina. In 2003 Tarik Sultan was one of the first male dancers to perform at the Ahlan Wa Sahlan Festival in Cairo, Egypt. He has performed in many of the top nightclubs in the New York, New Jersey area. Currently he performs weekly at Le Souk and Feluca in New York and teaches weekly classes in The Bronx, Manhattan and Jersey City.

Q. Your Birthplace?

A. I was born in New York City, but grew up in Jamaica.

Q. How many children are there in your family?

A. I have two brothers and three sisters.

Q. Does anyone in your family perform as a dancer?

A. No, but we did have a magician!

Q. When did you first perform?

A. My first dance performance on a stage was in a summer camp talent show at Christ the King, Summer Day Camp in 1979. My very first Oriental Dance performance was in College at the Indo Caribbean Club Talent show in 1987.

Q. Do you have a studio?

A. Most people in New York do not have a studio, they rent. I teach in the Bronx, Manhattan and Jersey City, where I rent space.

Q. Do you have another profession?

A. I was a high school history teacher.

Q. What countries have you visited?

A. I've visited Morocco, Egypt, Jerusalem, Turkey, United Kingdom, Australia, Argentina, Japan and Trinidad, but I've traveled to Egypt the most often.

Q. What Languages do you speak?

A. Some Arabic, Spanish, the Jamaican dialect Patois and English.

Q. What is your favorite pastime besides dancing?

A. Bike riding, eating different foods and being in nature. I enjoy being in the midst of anything that is green.

Q. What advice would you give to American male belly dancers?

A. Choose positive role models, watch YouTube, see performers that you like. Watch Tito Seif, Egypt. Watch tapes or videos of common social dancing; and pay special attention to body language and their responses to the music. (Interviewer's Note: watch Tarik)

Q. What is the biggest professional error you see in our dance?

A. Not charging a reasonable price for your job, working too cheaply. When you start very low on the scale it is difficult to raise the price when you are well established. Do some

research, find out the going rate and don't go below that. The rate for a set in New York is \$85.00 for a small establishment and \$100.00 for larger venues. In New Jersey the current rate is \$120.00 for a show.

Q. What is your short-term dance goal?

A. I am always working to improve and expand, study and evolve. I do not want to stagnate.

Q. What lasting impression do you wish to leave with our dance community?

A. I hope to make a valid contribution in our dance and in the general public to have them learn respect for our dance and see it as a valuable dance form.



Tito

And conclude the article with the interview with Tito Seif:

There are no superlatives that come to mind that can adequately describe this unbelievable accomplished and exciting performer. He is the "Ambassador of Egypt Dance" with the smile that leaves us with the lasting impression of true joy.

Tito started his dance career as a folkloric dancer in Egypt. Over the past 20 years, and with great passion, his style has developed in the Oriental "sharqi" style. Tito is a master of Oriental and Folklore and is extremely gifted instructor. Tito currently lives in Egypt and performs with his own show group "The Tito Show." As a coveted instructor, he has traveled all over the world, to many countries including Germany, England, Spain, USA, Sweden, and Russian.

Q. What is one of your favorite dance memories?

A. In my early twenties, it was the first time I was on stage dancing Oriental. It was not for pay, just fun. And it was such fun.

Q. When were you first paid as a professional performer?

A. About 1996 as a folkloric performer.

Q. With whom did you train as a folkloric performer?

A. I studied with Amir Sharif, a former student of Mahmoud Reda.

Q. In your early dance history did you dance with a folk troupe or as a soloist?

A. I performed as a soloist with a troupe. I would open the show as a soloist with a cane dance.

Q. You show us such joy when you dance. Is it always a wonderful emotional experience?

A. Always, yes! As a professional dancer you should always be positive and expect a good result.

Q. Are their musicians in your family?

A. No

Q. Do you plan any instruments?

A. No

Q. I have not seen you play zills. Do you play zills?

A. Sometimes, however, if I play, I make it real quick and then it has to be perfect. If it cannot be perfect, I will not do it.

Q. Is it traditional for men to play Zills in Egypt?

A. Sometimes the Dervish, but often only one man. As a Belly Dancer in performance the orchestra usually plays for you.

Q. You had a CD for sale last year. Is the one you had during our workshop in 2011 a new one? Do you have a DVD?

A. Yes, this CD is new and I have a DVD available for sale of four routines. (Interviewers note: for info email: Tito_Oriental_Show@hotmail.com; Tel: 0020101506563; Also on facebook Tito Seif)

Q. How does the selection and arrangement of the music come about for the CDs that you produce?

A. I sometimes take the music to a group of musicians or orchestra and we work on the arrangement together for some songs. Other times I may use some of the Shaabi songs from other CDs that are popular, it is a combination of both.

Q. Sometimes American dancers do not understand the lyrics of the Arabic songs. How do you feel about providing the text to the songs on your CDs?

A. If you watch me dance to them you can see the meaning by my expressions from my face and gestures. That is how I can provide to the audience what the song means. I do not translate all of them to English. Therefore I do not provide that in my liner notes.

Q. What makes you happy?

A. When I see everyone happy and enjoying my dancing that makes me very happy!

Q. Do you have children?

A. Yes, (Big smile from Tito) Three: a girl 16 years old, boy 7 years old and a girl 7 months old.

Q. Are you surprised at your reception in the U.S., and how much we love you in the South?

A. No, I have experienced wonderful times in America and many other countries. I also had a great reception in Spain.

[At this point I hear that we have to conclude our interview, planes to catch, and meals are waiting. So I hastily went to the last question.]

Q. When are you coming back?

A. I will be in Miami, Florida for Rakstar, October 7-10, 2011.

As always there is never enough time to share with these wonderful performers and to just hear something personal from them. I hope you do enjoy the info and some of the personality of each.

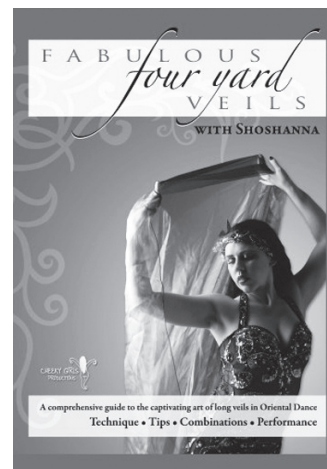
My thanks to Black Orchid Danse, for inspiration and continuation of phenomenal weekends of dance. To the friends, performers and instructors at Najm Al Danse Orientale, you will forever be a highlight in my dance memory and if I forget the beauty and sheer genius, I can see the beautiful pictures from Pixie Vision Productions. All show photos in the article are from Pixie.

Alima, Performer Instructor since 1978, currently in Georgia. Second Place winner in Drum solo contest, Black Orchid 2010.

DVD Reviews

DVD Review: Fabulous Four-Yard Veils with Shoshanna

reviewed by Thalia del Fuego



Introduction: Here, you will see dramatic footage of Shoshanna flowing together with her veil, set against a dark background with the luminous veil back-lit. Meanwhile, you will hear Shoshanna present her philosophy about self-expression, and about how to elevate your dance to the level of art.

Granted, a beautiful, inspiring introduction is not an essential feature in an instructional DVD. However, I personally find that the positive energy generated by such introductions always infuses my practice session/ dancing with extra energy when using the DVD.