



Belly dancing is the embodiment of her heritage

Cultural anthropologist was born to practice the art of her Syrian ancestors

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By LORENDA KNISEL Staff Writer

MARGATE – She shimmies, swivels her hips and undulates across the stage, captivating audiences with her charm, talent, and exotic beauty.

International belly dance superstar Soraya frequently performs at all of the Atlantic City casino in concerts for audiences of thousands, black-tie soirées, beautiful ethnic weddings and Hollywood A-list celebrity parties. The Margate

native is the dancing genie in the naturally aired Taj Mahal casino commercials, and has performed for the official grand opening formal Gala of the King Tut exhibit at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

She even caught the eyes of Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie, who asked if they could film a segment of their reality show “The Simple Life” in her home (she graciously declined).

One of her most notable achievements was dancing for King Hassan and the Moroccan royal family at their palace in Casablanca, Morocco. She was personally invited there to perform for a Gala event. Soraya was tapped to open the milestone casino showroom concert for over 6,000 people for Egyptian global singing superstar Amr Diab.

Soraya, has been belly dancing since she was 3. Belly dancing is something she grew up doing at family gatherings due to her cultural connection and very supportive creative parents. She has danced on television shows and began performing professionally at a very early age. She said belly dancing flows through her veins – literally, because it is part of her heritage.

“Belly dancing has been my calling from as far back as I can remember. It is as natural for me as breathing,” she explained. “I knew that was what I was going to do for the rest of my life. When I first heard the music of the Middle East and Mediterranean region, something very spiritual and deep awoke in my soul and I just knew.”

Soraya practices the Egyptian style of dancing. She owns her own entertainment company, Soraya’s Mid-East Dance and Music Productions, a highly successful

professional booking agency that provides dancers, full orchestra's, DJ's, MC's, bands and variety acts for upscale events. She greatly profits from global sales of her belly dance DVDs, and said all of her earnings are donated to charity (it helps being married to a prominent doctor).

Soraya is also a cultural anthropologist, a dance instructor, a makeup artist and a vocalist who sings in both English and Arabic.

She received her bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology/sociology with an emphasis in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean studies from the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, and gives lectures and writes articles, trying to spread the message of what her art is about.

"Belly dancing celebrates the feminine archetype and the human experience in general," Soraya said, and is not only for women, but for men and even children.

"There are elements celebrating femininity and masculinity, the yin and the yang, the sacred and the profane, and is highly spiritual. It is sensual yet not sexual," she said.

"Through this dance we become in touch with the earth and with God. We circle back to ourselves, tell a story of the human experience, and reach out to the entire human race as a whole. We express every feeling imaginable and more within this ancient dance craft."

There is more respect for belly dance in the Middle East, Near East and Mediterranean, Soraya said.

"Americans sometimes – not always – think it is a form of stripping or go-go dancing rather than what it really is – a very ancient, cultural art form."

She is committed to "keeping it real" and trying to change negative misconceptions about belly dance.

"My goals are to continue to knock down cultural barriers, banish any stereotypes and societal ignorances towards my art. I think that my professional belly dancing should have the same respect as other fine forms of dance such as ballet."

Belly dance, also known as "raks sharki," or dance of the Orient, had been practiced throughout the world – including Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Israel, the Mediterranean region and the Middle East – for thousands of years before being brought to Chicago at the World's Fair in 1893. There is no known date of origin, as it has been practiced since before recorded history. It is believed to have arisen out of a time when matriarchal societies were in power.

“My dancing is definitely ritualistic and does celebrate the divine feminine,” Soraya said, noting that the dance originated as a birthing ritual to aid women in bringing a child into the world.

In the 20th century it was studied and performed in modern dance by Martha Graham, and its influence can be felt in hip-hop dance, which also utilizes fluid undulations and isolated movements.

“I think that anything that gets people moving and off the couch is a good thing,” Soraya opined. “However, when this delicate art becomes just another trend, too scientific it can lose the spiritual sensuality and its soul. It is important to keep the cultural and spiritual aspect IN the dance”.

“Too many people think it is just about shaking your body without any rhyme or reason, jumping about to the music, running, enticing men or mindlessly throwing a veil. There is specific technique which is crucial yet unfortunately too often ignored. This is not a class in a gym, it is an ancient dance form that should be respected”, Soraya said. “It is so important to really feel the music, understand the lyrics, and knowing how and when to interpret rhythm changes correctly. The Middle Eastern audience has a very delicate ear, and demand top notch authenticity. I love offering this to them and also dressing in very beautiful, glamorous and custom made beaded costumes. My style of costuming is very feminine yet conservative which is what the high-end clients want. I am known in Arabic communities for a strong attention to detail and the most professionally orchestrated events. The best part of Egyptian dancing is that it is improvised. Nothing makes an audience go wild quite like it. Improvisational Egyptian dancing, and knowing when to use choreography (more like adding a fine spice), without over doing it separates the east from the west. This is what makes this dance truly a cultural art. The movements should come from your heart. Belly dance should be executed without over-thinking, counting or memorization because that is way too easy and removes the cultural flavor. The rich complexity in the music dictates authentic Middle Eastern style belly dance. It is so not about old Hollywood or the seven veils. It is about so much more.”

For information or to book an event call Soraya’s Mid-East Dance and Music Productions at (609) 823-2029 or E-mail SorayaEnt@aol.com. To learn about the culture and history of belly dance visit www.bellydancebysoraya.com. For videos of her many performances see www.youtube.com/NJBellyDanceEvents