

Mid-Bits Profile – Jocelyne Khan from Ottawa

How did you get started? What first got you interested in Belly dance?

I have always loved dancing. Even before I started taking ballet lessons at the age of five, I would dance around the living room to whatever music was playing. As a child I took ballet, jazz and tap lessons; I was out practically every night of the week at either dance or music lessons (some things never change)! I continued those dance activities up until the age of 16 when I took a break from dancing for a while.

After a few years of not dancing, I took a couple of ballroom dance lessons with my husband (he made me promise to never do that to him again!), but didn't really get back into dancing seriously until I found my way into a Belly dance class at the local High school. To be honest, there wasn't any special reason why I decided to take the class. I just thought it sounded like a fun way to get out one evening and get some exercise. So I talked my sister-in-law into coming with me to the class (she hated every minute of it and never went back). Once I started, though, something about the art form just seemed to click for me, and after that first session I found myself taking four classes a week with two different teachers at opposite ends of the city.

How long have you been Belly dancing? Plus: what changes have you noticed on the scene over the years?

That first class I took was in 1996. When I first started Belly dancing, I would search and search on the internet for any information, books, videos, music, costumes, anything. There wasn't as much out there (online anyway) and it was much more difficult to connect with other dancers. I feel that there's more of a sense of a global dance community now than there used to be. I've managed to make connections with dance friends in other cities who I otherwise would never have had the chance to meet, or even hear of, before.

Because of the recent surge in mainstream popularity, there also are so many more classes and teachers out there. Previously, whenever someone in Ottawa would mention that they took Belly dancing lessons and I'd ask who their teacher was, I always knew the person. Now, there are so many classes and teachers, it's almost impossible to know everyone even in my own city.

What's your life about when you're not Belly dancing... how do you balance work, social/family life, everything?

Besides teaching classes, taking classes, troupe practices, shows and weddings, helping out at the studio, doing websites, and chatting about dance online, I work

full-time and have a husband who likes to see me at home once in a while. Other than all that, I try to squeeze in a few hours of sleep and maybe even a little socializing with my friends who are outside of the dance community.

So, um, balance? If anyone has the answer to that question for me I'd love to hear it! To be honest, I don't really balance it all that well. I have a tendency to over-extend myself, especially when it comes to activities like dance that give me so much joy. I'm still struggling with how to balance all of my commitments. I have a few strategies I use to help me keep track of all the things I need to do. I'm a big list-maker. I do it out of fear I'll forget something, so I have all these scraps of paper with lists of things I need to do. I don't know if it really helps me be more organized or not, but it helps me deal with that overwhelmed feeling that I have too many things to think about. I just write it down and then I don't have to worry I'm going to forget it (OK, sometimes I forget anyway!). I'm extremely lucky and grateful to have a husband who is understanding and supportive of my activities (and a mom, who'll come over and help out with the laundry every now and then!). Luckily my friends are just as busy with their own activities as I am, so we make a concerted effort to organize regular "catching-up" sessions and usually keep in touch via email when we don't have time to get together in person.

I sometimes joke that my day-job just gets in the way of all my dance activities, and I only keep it so I can afford to go to all the workshops and buy all the costumes. I have a sort of loose prioritized hierarchy in my head that hopefully I'll never have to apply to my dance activities. If there were too many pressures or commitments, the first thing I would drop would be the solo performing and next teaching. Not because I don't love them, but because, I don't rely on the money I make from dancing and if I have to choose, I would rather keep my focus on dancing with the troupe and continuing to take classes and workshops. I hate having to choose, I'd rather do it all!

**What's your main involvement in the Belly dance scene... mainly teaching?
Solo performer? Choreographer?**

I still consider myself primarily a student of dance (and probably always will). My main involvement in the "scene" is taking workshops and trying to promote a sense of community among dancers by helping out with various local events, and connecting with dancers in other cities through things like the doCod (danse orientale Canada oriental dance) mailing list (www.doCod.ca). I have also helped out with the OMEDA (Ontario Middle-Eastern dance Association) website for a few years.

I do teach several classes a week and I perform as a soloist, but on the professional side my focus currently is more on the Enan Egyptian Dance Troupe

of which I am a member. Teaching a class, performing with a group and performing solo are really all completely different feelings, and I love them all.

Have you/Would you like to travel to the Middle East - what value do you feel traveling to the Middle East has for Belly dancers?

I traveled to Greece in 1985 and Israel in 1995, and had brief sightings of Belly dancers in both countries. Because I was not involved in Belly dance at the time, I sometimes wonder how I would view those performances differently if I saw them today through a dancer's eyes. If all goes according to plan our troupe directors, Denise & Ahmed Enan, will be organizing a tour to Egypt next spring (*Inshallah!*). How lucky we will be to go to Egypt with them as our guides! Ahmed is in Egypt right now, buying up all the things we've asked him to bring back and working out the tour details. Actually, I always had an interest in traveling to Egypt, even before I became a dancer, so this will be like a dream trip for me.

I think it can be extremely valuable for dancers to travel to the Middle-East. I feel that it is very important to have a good understanding of the culture from which this dance originates. We have a tendency here to try to take things from other cultures and "westernize" them; sometimes we can't help it because we are who we are, and sometime this is deliberate because we're under the mistaken impression that we're somehow improving things by making them fit our western way of thinking. I see that we are sometimes limited by our western approach to learning and teaching and I feel that there is great value in trying to let go and approach the dance in a more Oriental manner overall. It's very difficult to break free from the some often overly-structured and analytical approach to everything that we're so ingrained with here. It's too easy for the dance to become just about technique and movements, and we loose, or don't ever learn, the feeling the dance should have. Perhaps moving away from this limitation is something that can only be done by learning from real native teachers, either here, or in the Middle-East itself.

Any particular style of dance you prefer performing (cabaret, folkloric, Turkish, etc.)?

I have to confess that as a spectator I appreciate all kinds of different forms of dance if they're done well; any sort of folk dance, modern, ballet, Hip Hop, innovative fusions... everything! For myself as a dancer I love to do the Egyptian folkloric and I also really love solo Orientale.

I'm not so fond of the term "cabaret" though. I do have a total weakness for beaded and sequined shiny things, but I don't think that just because a dancer wears beads and sequins that it makes her a "cabaret" dancer. I think we misuse that word here without realizing that it can have negative connotations in other countries.

Though I can't honestly claim to do authentic Egyptian Oriental dance (I'm still working on it), this has been the biggest influence in my dancing so far. I would like to be more informed on some of the other Middle-Eastern styles out there, like Lebanese, Moroccan, Turkish etc, but for now am too busy focusing on the Egyptian (I've got a whole lifetime of learning ahead of me still).

Who have been your major influences in Belly dance? Any role models... well-known stars, teachers, etc.?

I am very thankful for all the teachers I have had the opportunity to study with, and each and every one of them has had a valuable influence on me in some way. I try to keep a little bit of something special from each one to continue the development of my own personality as a dancer that reflects my own dance experiences. Some of the instructors I've taken workshops with that have left a big impression on me are Aziza, Cassandra, Faten Salama, Hadia, Jalilah, Magdy el Leisy and Morocco. Of course, I've appreciated what I've learned from every workshop I've attended, but those are some of the ones that stand out in my mind at first thought as having had something particularly memorable about them.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my very first teachers, Gee Gee Robinson and Jauhara here in Ottawa, for igniting that spark of interest and providing me with a solid training basis to continue my development as a dancer. They were both excellent role models who helped me discover some potential and encouraged me to pursue my interests further.

Without a doubt my biggest role model has been my current teacher, Denise Enan. She is the most beautiful performer and has the ability to reach out and touch her audience and make them feel what she's feeling with the music. Her knowledge and experience are so vast; she is one of the few people who can truly call herself a master instructor, and yet she's such a simple personality, not at all arrogant or self-promoting. This can easily happen when people have international recognition. It amazes me that more people in Canada don't know her for the star she is, but that is probably because she has always been an artist and teacher first, not a business person or promoter. Since I joined the Enan troupe, Denise's husband and our troupe choreographer, Ahmed (who was also a professional dancer in Egypt, as well as researcher/recorder of regional folk dances for the Egyptian Ministry of Culture) has also provided me with valuable coaching and guidance.

A local dancer who I've seen who has made an impression on me was Luna. She doesn't do a lot of complicated movements or intricate choreography, but just watching her takes my breath away. She has such a captivating presence when she is performing. One day, I wish to be able to affect my audience that way.

I also have a collection of videos of Middle-Eastern dance stars who I wish I could see (or could have seen) in person; Amani, Fifi Abdo, Lucy, Samia Gamal, Tahiya Karioka, and I love them all; each one is different and projects her own style and personality.

What's the best thing about being a Belly dancer? And the worst?

The best thing is the dancing! I have noticed that I can have the very worst day at work, be stuck in traffic rushing to get to class on time, frustrated and cranky and ready to just explode, and five minutes into dance class everything is all better, the world is right again, and any stress I was feeling is just gone. It's an incredible feeling. Every aspect of dancing gives me so much happiness; sweating it out in a class, getting my butt kicked in a workshop, seeing a troupe choreography we've been working on for weeks finally come together, seeing people enjoying themselves in a class, or noticing a shy student come out of her shell and discover how beautiful she really is, watching grannies and little kids grinning from ear to ear and dancing along with us when we're doing a zeffa, the backstage camaraderie before a local hafla, chatting online with dancers in other cities about their events, seeing dancers come out and donate their time and talents to help support charities. There's so much to feel good about.

The worst? I think we have some work to do on establishing better standards and working conditions, including appropriate pay-scales. As long as we are willing to accept sub-standard working conditions and low-wages, we just can't expect to be taken seriously as artists or individuals. As teachers, we need to teach our students that it's not OK to accept professional jobs before they're up to it. If a dancer believes that she is not worth the \$150 (or \$200, or whatever the going rate should be) for a gig, then I believe the answer is to get better before taking pro gigs, not to drop the price. I strongly believe that it is our responsibility to assert this for ourselves. Restaurant owners and other clients will always try to get the cheapest price out of us. Who can blame them? I have seen that they do it to their other employees too. They're not going to volunteer to improve our conditions; it's up to us to establish under what conditions we will and will not work, and as long as we accept less than ideal conditions, our working environment will not change. It frustrates me to see some dancers who can't see the bigger picture and how they're hurting their fellow dancers just because they won't turn down every lousy 50 bucks that they're offered. I know it's probably easy for me to say, because I don't rely on my dance income to support me, but I would think it would be even more important for those dancers who earn their entire living from dance to improve these conditions rather than continue to

accept them. I say: better to loose the \$50 gig in the short-term and eventually have more \$200 gigs down the road.

What's the funniest or most outrageous thing that's happened to you as a dancer?

I've wracked my brains to think of some side-splittingly funny story and I can't think of anything super outrageous that has happened to make for an entertaining story....

There was one time that the troupe was doing a zeffa in a hall where the doorway was decorated with low-hanging white paper bells. The first few dancers made it though with no problems, but after the fifth dancer passing under the paper decorations with a lit shamadan, the bells caught fire and we have video footage of the troupe dancing while the groomsmen are stomping out a fire in the background.

Then there this other time I was hired to dance for someone's birthday celebration at a local beef-and-burger-type-place during the Sunday brunch buffet (not exactly a typical Middle-Eastern dance venue!). The other people in the restaurant seemed a little puzzled about what the heck was going on, but everyone was still very nice anyway and some little kids from another table even came over and danced with me.

But I think one of the cutest things was hearing my husband, while doing our income taxes, on the phone with Revenue Canada saying "My wife is a Bellydancer, can she write-off her pedicures?". The best part is that the answer is YES!

