



Question & Answer with
Kathryn Ferguson

 BY SHIMMY IN THE SPIRIT OF BELLYDANCE



Shimmy: You have been a world renowned dancer for quite some time... How many places have you traveled to for Middle Eastern Dance?

Kathryn: I have been blessed with an amazing dance career. As well as dancing in many cities in the US, it has been a great education to travel throughout the world on dance tours. For 12 years, I performed and taught workshops in Europe. Mostly my jobs were in Germany, Belgium, and fantastic Amsterdam. Many of the performances were great galas that only the Europeans know how to create, at times as many as 1000 people in the audience, i.e. at The Hague in the Netherlands, and the big cities of Germany. In these shows, I worked with Egyptian, Moroccan, African, Indian, and Spanish Flamenco dancers and musicians. I have the wonderful Bert Balladine to thank for all this. He initiated my world travels. I have also had dance jobs in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Mexico. And I taught

dance classes in Istanbul, an amazing city! I studied dance and music in Cairo, Egypt, and in Marrakesh and the brooding Casablanca. Performing with Egyptian musicians on boat trips on the Nile was a lovely experience.

In Istanbul, I discovered Bella. I went to the large flat where Evin designs her incomparable masterpieces. Just before her costumes became really famous in the West, I walked upstairs into the Bella "shop", a room full of cigarette smoke, and glamorous Turkish singers and movie stars who waited to be fitted. The room was a rainbow of jeweled costumes hanging on the walls. Evin created one-of-a-kind costumes for me. I feel that her costumes are the most beautiful in the world. Her prices are world class, too, but it's worth getting an extra job to pay for them! I would get fitted there or at her shop in Gent, Belgium.

S: Many might not know that you are a classically trained ballet dancer. How does this style of dance compare to ballet?

K: Since most dance is grounded in music (except for some Modern Dance pieces set to silence), the real similarity between forms is that the music must come first to the dancer, not movements. And with all dance forms, it is crucial to understand where every inch of the body is in space. We are usually oblivious to where a shoulder is in relation to the chin, where hands are in relation to the elbow, etc. Posture and lift, of course, are paramount in ballet and Oriental dance. Energy moving from



Photo by Gerald Harwood

the soul of the foot through and beyond the fingertips is also important in all dance.

I studied flamenco which is more connected to Oriental dance than ballet. They are similar in Rom origin, rhythm, movement and soul-

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fulness. However, I think of Oriental dance as being like jazz music rooted in the United States culture. There is discipline in learning defined rhythms and tempos. A long period of study is required. The dance begins with the dancer keyed into exact rhythms. Next, the dancer's improvisation floats upon this knowl-

edge, roams free, then returns to the discipline of rhythm - all within one dance. Add to that finger cymbals and you have a complex layered dance. Add to that soul and a willingness to be vulnerable and you have art.

S: We also know that the music is the driving force for your dance, what is your favorite rhythm to dance to?

K: Yes, music is the driving force. But I also like to find the silence in a performance. Dancing between the beats is like dancing between raindrops. You see, if you clap your hands once, it is really a very long sound that tapers off. I like to focus on the silence that the sound enters. It is like focusing on the silence of a brewing storm. It is overwhelming. It allows the dancer's psyche to go in many directions and she/he can choose one and explode, or choose another path and whisper. It makes for a passionate performance.

Literally, my favorite rhythms are samai and everyone's favorite, masmoudi kebir. Samai is a 10/8 count rhythm taught to me by musicians. It is usually heard in opening Oriental numbers and comes from the classic Arab vocals of Andalusian poems set to music. It is like a heavy perfume, very hypnotic and unforget-



Kathryn and The Xanadu dancers

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table. The classic Tahia Carioca danced to both samai and masmoudi kebir, as well as the innovative Nadia Gamal.

S: Your dance company is called "Xanadu." Can you define Xanadu for us?

K: "Xanadu — Kubla Khan" is from a sensual poem by the British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It is about a land, Xanadu, where people sang and danced, then, unfortunately as in all nightmares, went to war. The vision of Xanadu came to Coleridge in an opium dream.

I LOVE to create choreographies and set them on my troupe, the Xanadu Dancers. It takes 2 weeks to 3 months to create a choreography. And the process of setting one on dancers is at once organic and specific. In asking people to join my company, I look for dancers who have a special something that is hard to define. They need to be able to hear music, move, remember choreographies, have a complete sense of the body and have a visible joy. In addition, there is an ineffable quality that must be there—either a soulfulness or a personal immediacy that compels an audience to never take its eyes off the dancer.

S: Aside from the Kathryn we know in the dance world, you are also a filmmaker. When did you begin making films?


K: In my dance life, I started making dance related films in the 70's. In addition to the dance life, I worked at a PBS TV station. In 1998, I made my first award-winning feature length documentary that was in thirteen film festivals in the world. I recently completed another feature length doc, "Rita of the Sky," that was shot in Mexico and the US.

I co-authored a book that will be released February 2010 by the University of Arizona Press, "Crossing with the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail." I do search and rescue work with Samaritans, a humanitarian group. We go to the Arizona/Mexico border hiking trails, carrying medicine, food, and water to search for people who are dying or ill. The book is stories from the people we meet who come from Mexico, Central and South America and cross into the Arizona desert.

S: What part of the world do you resonate with?

K: Mexico. I live an hour from the Mexican border and my whole life has been involved with people from the two countries.

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S: Do you have a stage name?

K: I use my own name. If I spoke Arabic or Farsi, I would probably choose an Arabic or Persian name. But it seems a little phony for me to pick a name without knowing the language. If I were a flamenco dancer, I would choose a Spanish name because I speak Spanish.

S: If you could choose one dance company or one dancer to accompany you onstage, who would it be? (can be any genre of dance, past or present.)

K: Maria Benitez, the great flamenco dancer in Santa Fe. However, if she walked on stage with me, I would just sit down right there to watch her. I am in awe of her. Also, I would want to be onstage with an old friend, Gino d'Auri, a flamenco guitarist who played for Maria. It would be a great dream to perform Oriental dance with his flamenco guitar. Look for his music, he is one of the greats of flamenco music. I have rarely known music like his. Born in Italy, his music roots come from his gypsy grandfather. I sit with a cup of tequila to listen. RUSH to buy his cd's: "Flamenco Passion" and "Flamenco Mystico."

THEY NEED TO BE ABLE TO HEAR MUSIC, MOVE, RE-MEMBER CHOREOGRAPHIES, HAVE A COMPLETE SENSE OF THE BODY AND HAVE A VISIBLE JOY.

S: Do you have a mantra or ritual you perform before going onstage?

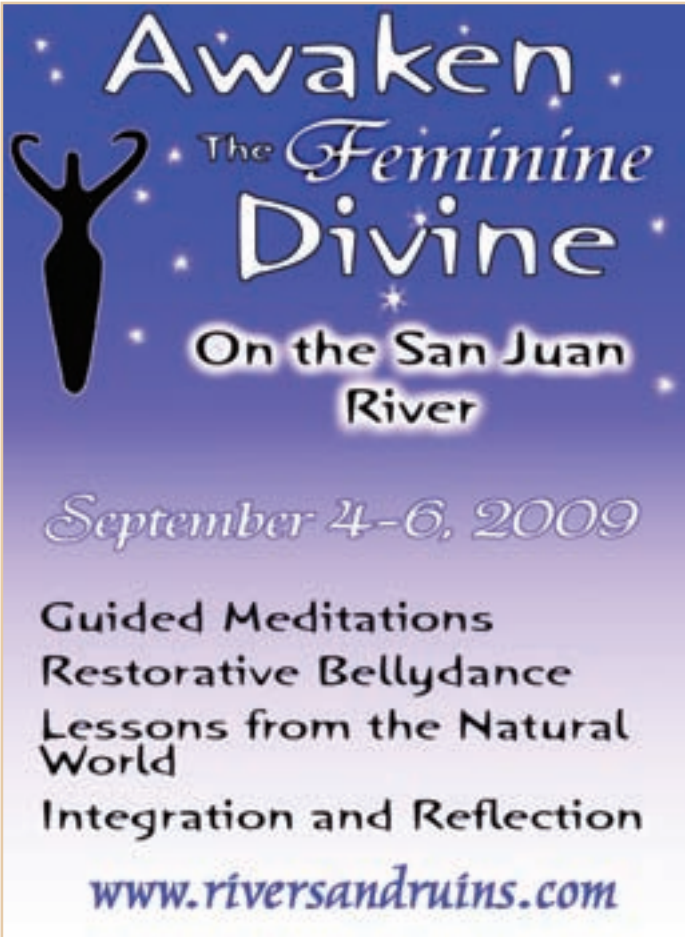
K: I warm up extensively. Then 15 minutes before, I keep moving non-stop, going over parts of the dance. A few minutes before I step on the stage, I get very quiet so I can remember who I am.

S: Coffee or tea?

K: Black coffee.

S: What is your word? (Just one word that captures your essence.)

K: Passion. And that's a word that can get you into a lot of predicaments!



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