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True Passion

Patricia Auch was one of the early pioneers of Jawaahir in its remarkable journey to become a significant dance company locally, nationally, and globally. Patricia began dancing at Cassandra's school with Eden Torres (who started the dance school with Cassandra) in the early 1980s and then continued her studies with Cassandra. She auditioned to be in Jawaahir Dance Company in 1989 and couldn't believe she was chosen... "It was really cool." Joining five other original main dancers and three apprentices, Jawaahir Dance Company was born. It was exciting breaking new ground in the early years of the dance company, and it was a lot of fun for Patricia. She remembers an early show at the St. Paul Student Center that was disappointing due to the small audience.

Performing at different venues and trying to get positive exposure in the dance community was not always a pleasant experience. Breaking into the Twin Cities dance community, consisting mostly of modern dance and ballet companies, proved challenging. Jawaahir did not always get the opportunities they auditioned for, but persistence did pay off. Patricia recalls the time they were at the Hennepin Center for the Arts. This was sort of a coming out moment for Jawaahir as they moved closer to being accepted in the community as real dancers.

Early difficulties were soon replaced by live musicians and wonderful performances at the Southern Theater. The musicians added a new creative dimension: they can make or break a performance due to the complexities and subtle changes in the instrumentation that create different feelings and allow the choreography to work. Dancing at the Southern was an



Patricia Auch

incredible experience for Patricia. "But if the band goes into a new chorus or verse when they're not supposed to, and you have two, six, or twelve dancers on the floor, it can create a major traffic problem," Patricia said laughing.

The company has grown, and performs shows that are not only pure dance concerts but theatrical pieces. In Patricia's words, "What, you want us to act, too?"

She also notes that there are ongoing adjustments of energy and group dynamics as new apprentices come and go, which is to be expected. "It's great when we get enthusiastic apprentices because that helps boost the rest of us!"

Patricia also worked in the office and helped with the business end of the dance company. She had no previous similar experience except in committee work and substitute teaching. She jumped in with both feet, learning by trial and error. Cassandra was very supportive, training her on the computer system, grant writing, tour initiatives, and how to sell the dance company. Jawaahir is educating the public about Middle Eastern dance and creating new ways to make it interesting so more people will attend the shows. Although Jawaahir has a dedicated and generous

core group of followers, the Friends of Jawaahir, it is a constant battle to reach out to the broader public which does not really understand the diversity inherent in Arabic styles of dance. Jawaahir's efforts are paying off as it continues to get substantial support from the St. Paul Companies, the McKnight Foundation, and other foundations. General operating grants are essential to the company so they can produce professional videos, and meet the high overhead to produce their shows. Ticket sales only cover approximately 25% of the cost of the shows.

Patricia is adjusting to her new home in Seattle. She and her husband, Fred, live in a beautiful house where she looks forward to throwing parties and gardening. It is widely known that she is a fabulous cook and creative hostess!

As she reinvents herself in her new environment, Patricia will definitely include dance and continued collaboration with Jawaahir and Cassandra. She would like to get Jawaahir out to Seattle for a show and/or Cassandra out for a workshop. Her first priority is to continue putting together video footage for digital work samples of the dance company for publicity and grant submission. Her goal is to organize a digital documentation library to refer to when reviving dance pieces. She has signed up to dance at the Mediterranean Fantasy Festival in West Seattle to perform a solo piece. The day I interviewed Patricia, she was on her way to a women's business networking group hoping to meet contacts to continue doing lecture/demonstration programs in the Seattle area.

Patricia is busy, and it is evident how much she misses Jawaahir,

Cassandra, and the family of dancers that were such a huge part of her life. She is passionate about the pioneering days when the synergy of the company grew to such an important place in the local Middle Eastern dance community, allowing other dancers and dance companies to benefit from The Cassandra School and Jawaahir. She is very grateful for Cassandra's mentoring: "She is an extremely intelligent woman, and that is a joy to be around. She is open to sharing her knowledge, and I just lapped it up. I learned so much about the dance, the culture, the music. I hope I became a better dancer." She sure did!

Highlight of the Year

For seven seasons, Georges Lamnam has been the musical director for Jawaahir's performance season at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis.

Georges often performs at festivals and concerts at universities and colleges. Playing with Cassandra and Jawaahir is so much fun for him because his biggest band is here in Minneapolis. Combining this with dancers and the wonderful Southern Theater venue creates the largest scale event he participates in all year, "a

completely unique production." Combining all the instruments together in one place, the full *tahkt* (orchestra), allows him to bring the authentic traditional Arabic sound to the show...a treat for Georges. Rehearsals for the show are intensive — 30 to 40 hours over four days under Georges' direction — but the results are incredibly rewarding.

Georges considers himself an ambassador of Arab music. "After living in the United States for 20 years I feel I must present the richness of my Arabic culture the right way for American audiences." He is impressed with Cassandra's work and how she has built such a big audience of people embracing Arabic dance and music in Minneapolis. He would like to thank Cassandra for "keeping the music alive in the Midwest."

Georges Lamnam enjoys playing with the Jawaahir Dance Company especially because Cassandra knows so much about the Arabic music and culture. "Sometimes she really surprises me, big time, by her choices and knowledge of music." He loves Cassandra's creative choreography and the overall show she puts together. "Coming to Minneapolis and working with Jawaahir is really one of the highlights of the whole year."

Georges is a prolific artist, involved with interesting projects around the world. In fact, during this interview he told me he was leaving for Cairo and Turkey the next day. He strives to keep the music fresh by creating new styles. This is evident in his new CD, "Dreaming the Diaspora," a combination of Arabic sounds mixed with harmonic Western fusion, and recorded with his band, Shabaz. However, traditional Arabic music remains his favorite.



Georges Lamnam

Upcoming Events

Jawaahir performing at Minnesota Garlic Festival, Howard Lake, MN	August 18
Cassandra and Jawaahir at Minnesota Renaissance Festival	August 18-19
Cassandra's Cabaret, "Psychedelia"	September 8
Second Annual Midwest Festival of Oriental Dance	October 15-21

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