



BELEDI BEAT

A quarterly publication of Jawaahir Dance Company and The Cassandra School

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Raqs Nouveau: Turath wa Jadid

Jawaahir Dance Company's upcoming show at the Southern Theater marks 20 years of the group's theatrical dance performances. It's a milestone anniversary and one that has been, in part, inspiration for *Raqs Nouveau: Turath wa Jadid (Traditional and New)*.

The company's first performance was in 1989 in the Nancy Hauser Dance Studio (what is now the Jawaahir Dance Company's space), and over the years the show grew in scope, size, and attendance. The company expanded its capacity to the Southern Theater stage, where Jawaahir has been a mainstay for 15 years. Throughout the years, the company has exposed audiences to striking costumes, superb live music, and beautiful movement from modern and traditional dance forms found throughout the Middle East.

In two decades, Jawaahir and Artistic Director Cassandra Shore have had significant accomplishments, yet it's the question of 'what's next?' that continually inspires Cassandra to do more, to take those leaps of faith, and work to expand Jawaahir's vision and reach.

Raqs Nouveau audiences have a lot to look forward to. This year's performance is motivated by contemporary Arabic fusion music, and, in keeping with this musical muse, the entire program will be accompanied by live music. In addition, two long-time dance company members will have an expanded creative role in the show.

In particular, the music of Lebanese composer Charbel Rouhana, and Arabic music virtuoso Georges Lammam, have served as a launching point for



Rebecca, Tatyana, Jenny, and Jenna in rehearsal for Raqs Nouveau as Theresa looks on

Cassandra's ideas. "They are using traditional instruments with contemporary forms and styles," she said. She explained that their music is different from some fusion in that the sound still comes from an Arabic milieu. It's distinct in that it derives from musicians who are changing the art form from within their own musical traditions, rather than adding things from unrelated cultures. Georges Lammam and an ensemble of musicians will be playing music for *Raqs Nouveau*.

Cassandra feels passionately that only through live music can audiences get a better understanding of how the music and dance are connected. In this respect, the company productions are a real labor of love, since hiring musicians often outweighs other costs. "That's why we apply for grants and have our benefit gala," she said. "To hear someone play a Middle Eastern instrument and see how the dancer relates to the music is getting harder to get in the U.S.; so it's important."

Likewise, Cassandra thinks it's important that the style of movement for the dance be connected to Arabic tradition. "What's new for Jawaahir is that we're using the music in new ways to express ideas," Cassandra said. "I want people to feel something personal." Historically, Jawaahir's dance productions have been choreographed exclusively by Cassandra, but this year, company members Kathy McCurdy and Helen Voelker will each choreograph two pieces in *Raqs Nouveau*. Cassandra said she is eager to highlight company talent in this way, and believes their activities will contribute to the longevity of the company and the Middle Eastern dance community.

"It's a pretty long process to develop your own voice and it's great to watch it happen, to see their abilities and expression mature," Cassandra said. "It's exciting."

To say that Kathy and Helen are thrilled is an understatement. Their expanded responsibility in *Raqs Nouveau* is part of their evolution as artists, and they are excited about the challenge.

Kathy joined Jawaahir in 1989 and has been General Manager of the company for the past five years; she has been an instructor at The Cassandra School since the early 1990s. Kathy said she has benefited from stretching herself and being more of a creative force in Jawaahir. "It keeps me sharper and it's pushing me to grow. To have Cassandra believe in me and ask me to do this is an honor."

That's not to say she doesn't feel the demands. "Sama'i Nahawand" is the show's opening piece set to a 10-8 rhythm, and she'll also be directing Cassandra in the ensemble. "Cassandra wouldn't want anything presented in her name that's not good," she said. But these are welcome artistic challenges. Finding herself at this stage of her career has been highly rewarding. "When I first started dancing if you told me I'd be a teacher and making my living as a dancer, I never would have believed it," Kathy said.

Helen has been a Jawaahir company member since 1990 and is known for her intense, soulful dance style and technical proficiency. Helen said the opportunity allows her more artistic freedom. She too finds it to be an imaginative as well as painstaking experience. When she's working on something, she said, "I put a lot of effort into it. All my free brain space

is taken up with choreography."

Helen's particularly excited about the musicians' collaboration with the dancers. "The dancers have to be conscious that live music may not be the same. It's a separate challenge for the dancers, and the choreographer has to be aware of that." At the end of the day, though, Helen said it all boils down to one word: "Pride. When the dancers dance well and the audience is enjoying the choreography, you feel it is all worthwhile."

It's the artistic rigor behind these endeavors that has brought audiences together year after year to Jawaahir's Southern Theater shows. Jeff Bartlett, the lighting designer for the upcoming show, and artistic director of the Southern Theater during the company's tenure there, said, "Jawaahir always brings a really special and vibrant energy to the stage. After a 20-year performance history, that's something to be celebrated and honored."

The Details

Raqs Nouveau: Turath wa Jadid

August 13-23, 2009

at The Southern Theater

1420 Washington Ave S., Minneapolis

Tickets are \$29; by phone at 612-340-1725 and online at SouthernTheater.org.

Free post-show discussions on Saturdays. Pay-as-able show Wednesday, August 19.

Two classes: the Southern, 10:30am, \$15: Sat, Aug 15: Georges Lammam's Arabic Music lecture/demonstration.

Sat, Aug 22: Cassandra's Middle Eastern Movement Intro class.

Join us as we celebrate the new (*jadid*) and honor the traditional (*turath*)!



Nadilia and Jenna in rehearsal for Raqs Nouveau

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Coming Events

Annual Concert Season: *Raqs Nouveau* at Southern
 Cassandra School Showings
 Jawaahir in 8 @ 8 at the Ritz Theater
 Fall session starts at The Cassandra School

August 13-23
 August 28-29

Thurs Sept 10 – Fri Sept 11
 week of Oct 5

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