

Sparkles in My Eyes...A gem in the middle of one dancer's journey

The lights fade to an enthusiastic crescendo of applause, zagareets, and shouts. Six dancers in elegant rhinestone dresses edge past me in the dark; their exhilaration is nearly tangible in the air at a successful *danse orientale* performance. The lights brighten slightly; I glance at the network of twinkling lights overhead, reminding me of starlight and canvas tents. I test the tassels of my Tunisian yarn belt one last time. Beside me, Cassandra herself — behind-the-scenes stage manager for this show — flashes me a grin; I draw confidence from the ease of my mentor. The lights fade; *fezzani* music begins, quiet at first; the lights brighten slowly, and I imagine the sun rising on a village market, so much that I can almost smell the dust in the morning air and hear the sounds of a new day. The drum begins, my right foot moves, and I once again am in my element...

It's been a decade since I last shared the stage with Cassandra and the Jawaahir dancers. Since then, I've traveled far, and frequently, encountering many dance interpretations and artistic communities, every place I visit completely unique. Although I've had many exciting adventures and experienced a myriad of novel outlooks, in my heart, the Cassandra School and Jawaahir Dance Company has remained my artistic home.

This past fall, Cassandra called on Jawaahir alumni to share the stage once again with their colleagues in Minneapolis. Three of us – Lilah Perry, Mary West (Amina Beres), and myself – were fortunate enough to have the time and means to join in this new, Jawaahir-produced artistic venture. As on two other occasions in the past, Cassandra turned artistic control over to company members and apprentices of Jawaahir to create new choreographies, which resulted in new choreographies as unique as the individuals that created them.

Sparkles was a great success. The show opened with the fiery *Shihab*, choreographed by Helen Voelker. This intricate and graceful veil piece established the ambiance for the rest of the show, capturing the excellent lighting produced by Jeff Bartlett in a swirl of red and gold silken flames. Helen created one other choreography for the show, a modern interpretation called “Phantoms” featuring Cassandra, a dark dreamland in which Cassandra interacts with four sometimes benevolent, sometimes hostile dancing phantoms. Dark, flowing dresses combined with often graceful, and occasionally dramatic, movement created a tableau of fears and hopes, reflected in the masterful expression by the dancers.

Naima's (Kathy McCurdy) joy in her dancing was expressed in two pieces she choreographed. *Awwedouni*, a veil creation later in the show, set daring veil technique to a gentle piece of music, complete with the shimmering beauty of off-the-shoulder twinkling dresses and flowing organza veils. Contrasting this quiet, elegant piece, Naima's second choreography closed the show with a jubilation of dance – she herself calls it the “happy bouncy dance” – a thoroughly enjoyable, fun finale (complete with disco ball!) after which the audience cannot help but leave with a big grin on each face. As the final setting for this jewel, all of the eight bouncy dancers wore costumes appropriate for mall-walking, café-sitting, or simply for being seen; miniskirts competed with faux leather and a few 1980's-style ensembles.

Peg Deppe and I shared our love of folklore on the stage; while I danced through the urban streets of Tunisia, Peg took a fantastical journey into rural-inspired folklore, mingling traditional steps from multiple ethnic Arabic dances with modern interpretations. Long flowered dresses, reminiscent of prior folkloric masterpieces from Cassandra, help create a scene of four rural

friends enjoying a moment of fun together. Also among the traditional pieces, Tatyana's Kalybytky Bylyna Russian gypsy dance opened the second half with a high-energy mix of swirling skirts – Tatyana's own was a double circle! – and stomping heels. Tatyana graciously balanced a choreographed dance with the individual interpretations of each dancer, a great task given that the disparate dance backgrounds of each dancer: classical Flamenco, folkloric Russian and ballroom, hip-hop and jazz. The end result: the audience did not want to sit still, and was ready to dance too!

Yet another striking piece sent shivers up the spines of a few audience members: *Ya Ain Moulayetin* choreographed by Zahirah contained trays of lit candles balanced on the tops of the dancers heads! In full dresses, two dancers not only moved around the stage, but made their way to the floor and back up again – difficult enough in full dresses, but even more amazing with live flames and hot wax overhead. The audience was wowed yet again when the trays were easily removed at the end of the dance; as one audience member gasped audibly at the end of one performance (about the trays of candles), “they weren't attached!”

All of these folkloric, fun, and dramatic works of art were rounded out by two glorious *danse orientale* pieces. Sarah Jones-Larson presented an elegant and sophisticated choreography of six Raks Sharqi artists in beautiful, rhinestone-clad dresses that reflected sparkles of the “moon and stars,” echoing the translated title of the piece. She ascribed the inspiration of the piece to Cassandra, which manifests in the phrasing of the music and the combinations of slow and staccato moves. To close the first half, Jemorah gave the audience an exciting “drum solo done as a duet,” again in beautiful rhinestone costumes, which caught the dancers' shimmies in glittering lights.

Interspersed between these stunning Jawaahir productions were guest performers, alumni dancers and other surprise artists. Lilah Perry, a Jawaahir alumna in a daring little black dress and hot pink hip scarf, successfully captured “the longing and suffering induced by love” in her improvisation of tango-bellydance fusion, complete with silk Chinese fans. On Saturday night, Amina Beres, another Jawaahir alumna, wowed the audience with the twirling skirts of a “Turkish-inspired solo...spoons included.”

Artistic surprises for the show included original music written and performed by Michael Yonkers and traditional Arabic pieces by percussionist Tim O'Keefe and Laura Harada (Friday and Saturday) or Salah Fattah (Sunday). Michael's music, unusual for a Middle Eastern dance show, was well received; several audience members commented afterwards that they enjoyed Michael's contribution to the variety in the *Sparkles* show. Arabic musicians Tim, Laura, and Salah created beautiful music that kept dancers in the audience swaying and everyone joyous; many audience members applauded with standing ovations.

For all the glitter and glory of a successful, troupe-produced show, in some ways, producing and integrating multiple Jawaahir members' choreographies is more challenging than the troupe dancing to Cassandra's masterful creations. From earlier Jawaahir experiences, I realize that learning choreographies from troupe colleagues rather than one's dance mentor comes with both frustrations and rewards, and that choreographing for one's colleagues under the discerning eye of master choreographer Cassandra can be quite intimidating. However, this end product, these “sparkles” resulting from months of hard work, muscle strain, frustrations, and accomplishments has turned out to be something phenomenal, a true set of “gems from Jawaahir.”

And, as I continue my dance journey into Canada and future lands unknown, there are some “sparkles” from this show that I know will continue to inspire me. As a few examples, recalling the playfulness of Peg’s fantasy folkloric and Kathy’s “happy bouncy” choreographies will encourage a smile when I face difficult artistic challenges. Eileen’s incredible and fast spins in the middle of a swirling montage of dancers in street-wear, her grin catching the audience with each turn, still “wows” me. The joy expressed in the Russian Gypsies, with their flashing skirts and dashing heels, and the excitement of Amina’s Turkish spoons has opened new dance horizons for me. Lilah’s passionate dance makes my heart ache with the beauty of her performance and has taught me a new level of dance expression. Every nuance of Cassandra’s performance in Helen’s *Phantoms*, like a movie etched in my mind, will remain with me always, as only Cassandra’s dance can do. And of course, spending time with dance friends and new colleagues, in addition to once again being under the mentorship of Cassandra, however briefly, was priceless. In short, all of my experiences, as performer, colleague, dance student, and audience member, have been inspirational, and have added many a sparkling facet to my own dance “gem”.