



A quarterly publication of Jawaahir Dance Company and The Cassandra School

Volume 18, Number 1 Winter 2010

Celebrate Henna and Dance at Jawaahir

Applying henna designs to hands and feet has a long tradition as body art for women, and is a big part of celebrations and festivals throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and India. The henna paste dye is made from the leaf of the henna plant that grows throughout Middle Eastern regions. It is left on the skin for a few hours or overnight, and, depending on the strength of the henna and the process for applying it, the stain can be faint or dark, and last a few days or up to a month. Wherever there is a joyful gathering, henna is often part of it. It is applied for luck, beauty, and health — especially for weddings.

For 17 years now Jawaahir Dance Company has hosted a popular henna party fundraiser to spread cheer and brighten midwinter doldrums with food, henna, and dance. This year's party will be Sunday, January 10 from 2:00–5:00 p.m. at the Jawaahir studios. Tickets are \$10 per person, or \$8 for groups of five or more. This year, participants can also purchase \$5 raffle tickets for a chance (twelve chosen) to have professional henna artist Angela Skrade of Ancient Traditions Mehndi do a design on them at the party. Henna cones for applying henna will also be available for participants to use. All proceeds go toward paying for musicians, costumes, and staging for Jawaahir's annual show in August.

At the event, people can watch Jawaahir dancers perform in group numbers and solos, learn a few moves and take part in open dancing, eat some snacks prepared by company members, and henna each other. "It's a fun event," said Cassandra, Jawaahir's Artistic Director. "You get to enjoy yourself. It's women



Arabic style henna

cutting loose, doing girly things. It's our way of ringing in the New Year."

The impetus for Jawaahir's party has also been to give people the opportunity to experience an aspect of Middle Eastern culture that brings women together. Although dance and henna are not connected through formal ritual, often where there's henna (and joy), there's dance. "Henna happens in traditional Middle Eastern culture as body decoration for many reasons: someone's getting married, or hosting a leila al-henna (henna night) where women may be doing henna on themselves. They may also dance," Cassandra said.

When Angela Skrade first encountered henna, she found herself immediately captivated by its artistry and felt she wanted to know more about its uses and customs. "Henna is an incredibly ancient art form," she said. "Nobody knows exactly where it started, but Egyptian mummies have been found with traces of henna on their hands and nails. It was considered low class not to wear henna."



North African style henna

Angela spent years researching henna, or mehndi as it is called in some cultures, and perfecting her technique. Those familiar with her designs know they are absolutely gorgeous. "She has a gift," Cassandra said. "Her henna is quite extraordinary."

As part of her self-taught apprenticeship, Angela said she'd henna every available inch of her own skin and do work on anyone who would sit still long enough. "It was fun for me to have a challenge. I'm a perfectionist," she said, and she'd work on something until she believed it was the best. "I'm on a quest to have the perfect henna." In keeping with those high standards Angela uses high-quality imported Jamila henna that she mixes herself, and has perfected the process that leads to vivid long-lasting illustrations. This is the same henna that will be available for use at Jawaahir's henna party.

Time-honored henna designs also have very distinct styles that vary in use and meaning across the regions.

North African depictions tend to be very geometric. "This is because of their religious beliefs," Angela explained. "They don't depict people or living things. The shapes are symbols of things and are seen as practical protective art as much as a celebration. Some people believe henna has magical properties and can protect you from the evil eye."

More fluid and ornate motifs originate from the Middle East and Arabic customs. These portrayals allow for more space between the lines and are often sensuous floral patterns, purported by some to have an aphrodisiac effect on the viewer. In India, illustrations tend to be much more intricate and elaborate. "There are people, flowers, fruits depicted," Angela said. "For example, the mango is a symbol of virginity and fertility."

In the United States, henna experienced a surge in popularity when celebrities like Madonna and Gwen Stefani started wearing it. The images here typically borrow from the long-established conventions as well as being wholly original outlines determined by the henna artist.

No matter where henna is practiced or how it looks, it has a very intimate, personal quality that draws people to it.

Angela said she's inspired by henna as an art form because it's produced by women for women. "It's a special thing for women," she said, noting that men can and do participate in henna rituals or parties, but women have longstanding bridal and other henna party traditions. In the United States, Angela's also seen an increase in henna parties for women about to give birth. "They do it as a memento of being pregnant, something beautiful to remember the experience by."

Angela is also an accomplished belly dancer, and she said henna is the reason she started dancing. "I liked listening to Arabic music when I did henna. It felt right. If the music is not right, it is distracting. The designs could turn out bad." During a henna session one day she had an epiphany. "I was thinking how fun it might be to take up dance because I loved the music so much." Now Middle Eastern dance and henna naturally combine two loves for her.

Angela encourages people to come to Jawaahir's henna party and experience it all for themselves. And don't worry if you don't know anything about henna. She said that the henna she's mixed in cones for participants to use is perfect for beginners. "The cones make it easy, even if you've never done it before."



Angela Skrade of Ancient Traditions

It's a chance to experiment with henna, especially if you just want to try it. It's a really fun afternoon and a cozy way to spend a Sunday."

Details:

Sunday, January 10, 2:00–5:00 p.m. at Jawaahir Studios, 1940 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis

Tickets: \$10 per person, or \$8 for groups of five or more purchased together

More information and tickets at:

www.jawaahir.org/EventDetails.htm

BELEDI BEAT is published quarterly by:
 Jawaahir Dance Company
 1940 Hennepin Avenue
 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403
 612-872-6050
www.jawaahir.org, cassandra@jawaahir.org
 Copyright 2010 Jawaahir Dance Company

Coming Events

Jawaahir's 17th Annual Henna Party
 Cassandra's Cabaret: Tropical Dreams
 Cassandra's Weeklong Intensive
 Enchanted Evening, a Jawaahir show

January 10
 January 30
 March 22–27
 March 26

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

1940 Hennepin Avenue, Mpls., MN 55403
 DANCE COMPANY & THE CASSANDRA SCHOOL



Non-Profit Org.
 U.S. Postage Paid
 Permit #4891
 Minneapolis, MN