

Shahrazad - Temple Dancer

- by Suzy Evans of IAMED



The temple dancer glides across the floor of the cave as if she were floating on air. Her arms move with incredible grace as her hands and fingers form intricate movements. The ageless huge statue of the stone goddess seems to greet her and welcome her to her temple. Suddenly the dancer is transported to the palm of goddess where she finishes her dance. A seven-year-old Shahrazad watching “The Tiger of Ishnapoor” on her TV set is captivated and decides then and there that this will be her life.

Shahrazad’s Indonesian uncles, having lived in Malaysia for many years, were also a heavy influence on her dance career. They told her fairy tales and stories about their culture. Her first exposure learning basic temple dance movements, such as head sliding with eyeball movements came from her uncles. At the age of 16 she memorized a book about South Indian temple dancing.

As a young girl Shahrazad had a great hunger to learn as much as she could about any form of dance. Fortunately, her mother had been a ballet dancer in her youth. She taught Shahrazad proper dance position and form. Her mother had travelled extensively and brought home folkloric dresses and music. Both of Shahrazad’s parents supported her love of dance. They took her to dance shows and variety shows. She was given a broad musical and cultural education. Her Father taught her philosophy, psychology and religion. Shahrazad had become a well-rounded and well-educated young woman.

Shahrazad spent four months in 1976 travelling through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India for the first time. During her six years of study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Maastricht Holland, she started taking lessons in the discipline of Bharat Natyam with Dr. Ronald Sequeira from Bombay. 1978 was a pivotal year in her dance career for that was when she started learning Middle Eastern dance. Her first classes were from a dancer called Samyra. She continued her oriental dance instruction with other professionals. The most important and influential of these teachers was Prof. Hassan Khalil of Cairo and Kuwait.

Shahrazad continued her travels in 1982 when she went to Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria for the first time and stayed for four weeks. Part of this time was during Ramadan, the traditional fasting month. She was very fortunate to meet musicians and singers from the Om Kalsoum Music Ensemble and dancers from the national ballet troupe. She met their families, enjoyed Cairo and its nightlife, and was introduced to some of the most famous oriental dancers. The dancers that impressed her most were Zohair Zaki, Nagoua Fouad, Fifi Abdo and Nadia Hamdi. This was also the first time she saw the whirling dervishes. She was mesmerized by them and went back to see them perform several times.

1983 found Shahrazad working with an Egyptian folklore group, which was directed by Magdy el Leithy in Tunisia. She performed in 30 shows with them. Later that year she returned to dance in a large wedding. Nabil Barsoum, who now has his own studio "Al Ahram" in Vienna, taught her about the Egyptian folklore

She travelled five more times to Egypt, and each time she had a different purpose for going there. Once to study the Pharaonic sites in Luxor. Another time for the recording of a piece of oriental music, at Michel al Masri's studio which was a gift to her from the former Minister of Culture of Oman, Mr. Abdallah Saakhr El Aamri, from whom she learned about the Arabic upper class culture. It was at this occasion that she met several very famous musicians. One of these was Mr. Mahmood Aafat, one of the greatest Egyptian flutists. This was truly a revelation for her to see these masters at work.



*Shahrazad in
["The 3rd Awards of Belly Dance"](#)*

Shahrazad went to the Middle East on numerous occasions to dance at weddings. The last time she was there she performed and taught in the Mena House at the International Festival for Middle Eastern Dance, organized in 1993 by Dietlinde "Bedauia" Karkutli.

Morocco holds a special place in Shahrazad's heart. She has travelled there seven times since 1985. Apart from the culture and the rich Berber folklore, her interest grew in a whirling. There is a whirling wedding dance that is performed in Morocco by both a man and a woman. Travels to Morocco have been a breakthrough in her Islamic studies and it was there that she has had her deepest Sufi experiences. She has also performed in Morocco, once in a large double wedding in Casablanca and at a prestigious business party in Marrakech.

Reading a book by Hazirat Inayat Khan on Sufism in 1972 peaked her interest in this subject. A sheik in Konya, Turkey passed his knowledge of dervish whirling techniques to Myra Bai in Amsterdam, who in turn passed this knowledge to Shahrazad in 1980. This understanding of whirling was deepened when she went to Egypt in 1982. Advanced studies and techniques from Egyptian choreographers enhanced her performances. At that time she started to perform whirling with a group of musicians from Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq.

After her first trip to Morocco in 1985 she began regular Islamic studies at the Islamic centre in Cologne, where she also did the Shahada. Shahrazad's second trip to the south of Morocco lasted 6 weeks. During this time she was veiled at all times lived as much as possible in accordance to the Islamic rules. It was a mystical and spiritual travel into a realm that went beyond all that she had experienced before. It took her two more years of intensive reading and studying to fully understand these experiences. Many Muslim friends from several countries patiently helped her, for which she was very thankful. Shahrazad has learned the Arabic, Persian and Turkish language.

In 1986 she began teaching whirling on a regular basis to a group of women in Düsseldorf, and later on taught whirling to hundreds of women in seminars. In 1996 she met a Turkish dervish teacher, from whom she learned further techniques and a Moroccan Gnawa, Abdelmajid Domnati, with whom she studied and worked with for a year. His special knowledge and experience with trance dance took her even further into the healing aspect of Sufism.



Shahrazad started producing dance shows in 1992. Her first show production was an African-Oriental show. The production included nine musicians and 11 dancers. The show took more than a year to bring together and get to the stage. The idea for the show came to Shahrazad easily, since her husband and the father of her young son is from West Africa.

The show "The Story of the Lotus" was a much bigger production. The concept came to her in 1993 and was based on three levels:

1. The Indian Chakra system.
2. The spiritual development of women.
3. The spiritual development of mankind as reflected by the history of oriental dance.

There were seven tableaux:

1. Pharaonic mythology
2. Indian temple culture
3. Mongolian power
4. Gypsies
5. Persian Court
6. Arabic Court
7. New Age

The production came to the stage in 1995 and included an Arabic orchestra of nine musicians and a dance ensemble of up to 21 dancers, and a number of actors. There were about 24 dances performed. The show was staged in a number of large cities, with audiences of 400 to over 1000 at each performance.

Since "The Story of the Lotus" was to some people too difficult to understand, Shahrazad decided to produce a show with a simpler format. "Dreams of Peace" was the result. It premiered in 1997 with the frame concept of a little girl that is taken to bed by her mother, and then dreams about fairytales. Her dreams included scenes of kings (court dances), about joyful dances (Oriental and Hispano-Arabic dances), about dancing animals (drum solo, underwater scene with fish and mermaids) and about light (Moroccan tray and Egyptian chandelier dance).

The final dance is called the Dream of Peace. Shahrazad spins, in the dark, wearing a dark blue costume with stars, above her head is a glowing planet earth. Then eight dancers dressed in white and holding two electric torches each, spin around her. They shine their lights on the globe and then shine their light-beams on the audience, then pray for peace and freedom and then disappear. The little girl wakes up and dances around the globe with her own torch until she receives the earth. She starts spinning, holding the planet above her head. 20 dancers come out of all corners, with chandeliers on their heads and holding a white dove of peace. They form a protective ring around the girl and circle along with her. Shahrazad's dance company had the great honor of performing this dance for Palestinian leader Arafat in an Unesco benefit, where 2 million Deutsch Marks were collected to help needy children.

The latest show production is "The World of Tara." It is still a work in process. Twelve of the planned twenty-one "pictures" premiered to an audience in 1998. The main difference in this production is that the theme is Far Eastern rather than Middle Eastern. The main focus of this show is the Himalayan tantric Buddhist deity Tara, a beautiful goddess which comes out of a lotus flower to help all suffering beings overcome fear and reach enlightenment. Splendid visualizations of the goddess and the mythological history are presented in this production.

Shahrazad went to Kathmandu, Nepal to study the so-called Charya dances, ancient temple dances depicting all known deities of the Buddhist pantheon. These ideas were then adapted and dances were choreographed in the show according to the themes she chose to display. Prajwal Vajracharya and his father assisted in this project. The show uses fascinating new-age musical compositions from different Countries such as India, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia and even China. Shahrazad has been very thorough in her studies, but she also takes the artistic liberty to create new forms, all the while respecting the iconographical rules, to make the essentially foreign ideas presentable and understandable for a mostly western audience.

Twenty-four oriental dancers are devoted to this show. This project required much more than the normal preparations for a standard oriental dance show to make it work. Shahrazad performed dance archaeology; digging into a past time period and into an area that was of great influence to our oriental dance. The court dancers and the gypsies that travelled from this time and area to the Arabic countries to perform, pushed by Muslim conquerors and Mongolian invaders, carried a hidden treasure with them, which she is now trying to recover.

What lies in the future for this fascinating woman and dancer? She is continuing her Middle Eastern dance career by performing all over the world in many different types of venues. Her investigations into all forms of sacred dance will also continue.

One of the themes that fascinates her and is a future project is the relationship between Tibetan mandalas and the Native American medicine wheels. She plans to continue to play a part in bringing people of different nations and convictions closer to each other, in order to enhance worldwide mutual understanding and cooperation, respect and compassion. She is and always will be concerned with the education of women through art and healing through the joy and ecstasy in dance.

Shahrazad – dancer, instructor, student, world traveller, choreographer, producer. The 7 year-old Shahrazad never would have thought that not only would she be that temple dancer but that she would be so much more.