



Samay:

A Journey Into The Heart Of An Inspirational Artist

BY DANNA YASBET

THE LINK BETWEEN EGYPTIANS AND THE MASTERY OF BELLY DANCE IS OBVIOUS. SO ONE HAS TO WONDER: WAS SAMAY AN EGYPTIAN IN A PAST LIFE?

SAMAY, OF SAMAY MIDEAST PERFORMING ARTS, IS AN INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED PROFESSIONAL INSTRUCTOR AND CHOREOGRAPHER ABSORBED IN THE ART OF EGYPTIAN DANCE. SHE HAS TRAVELED EXTENSIVELY IN THE MIDDLE EAST TO LEARN THE TECHNIQUE AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF ORIENTAL AND FOLKLORIC DANCE STYLES. BUT IN ORDER TO LOOK INTO THE LIFE OF ONE OF MIAMI'S LEGENDS, WE SHOULD START AT THE BEGINNING.

Music and dance have always been a part of Samay's Cuban family traditions. Like many people of the MTV generation, Samay watched countless hours of music videos, admiring the moves of artists like Depeche Mode, Prince and, of course, Michael and Janet Jackson. Her love of dance was evident as she jotted down each movement and practiced them over and over until the choreography looked flawless, even teaching them to her cousins to perform at family events. Formal dance classes didn't come until junior high, when she enrolled in modern dance. A few years

PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSIE RODRIGUEZ

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later, she took flamenco as her curiosity for dances from other cultures grew stronger.

From a very young age, anything having to do with the Middle East inspired Samay. But it wasn't until a Prince concert in 1992 that she discovered her true calling.

"Prince walked in with his face covered, followed by his entourage dressed in galabeyas, in what seemed to be a zeffa entrance," she recalls. "In one of the last numbers, his wife at the time, Mayte, performed a beautiful sword dance."



Samay & Issam Houshan

PHOTOGRAPHS ON THIS PAGE BY DENISE MARINO

Who would've imagined that it was Prince who inspired Samay's career?

After experiencing the beauty of Middle Eastern dance, she searched for classes. Samay's first stop was Middy Garcia's Studio in Miami in 1993. She found that the dance came natural to her, swiftly picking up the movements and feeling of the music.

"It was as if I understood the language and what movements I was supposed to do next without having studied it," she says. "It was very weird, yet wonderful."

After about a year, she decided to learn more about the culture and other aspects of the dance, so a friend led her to Mid Eastern Dance

Exchange (MEDE) in Miami Beach.

FINDING HER CALLING

One class was enough to win Samay's heart. Veils, zills, gorgeous costumes and exquisite melodies filled the room, all tied together by an enchanting dancer and teacher, Tamalyn Dallal. This world renowned instructor, choreographer and performer became one of Samay's first mentors, challenging and pushing her to become a stronger dancer.

Tamalyn believed in Samay's talent, encouraging her to overcome obsta-



Samay at Ahlan Wa Sahlan

cles and stay true to the culture of the dance. One class per week did not suffice. Samay continued on her journey with three classes a week, then went on to join the MEDE troupe, along with other prominent Oriental dancers such as Amar Gamal, Bozenka, Virginia, Hannan, Faride and Sabah.

"Everyone in the group had their own individual style, she says, "but it worked beautifully together. I feel lucky to have worked with such a talented group."

Her later mentors include Jihan Jamal, with her fabulous feeling and knowledge; Ylsa, with her passionate interpretation of music; and Maria

Jammal, who shimmied like no other. To say that these women had an impact on Samay's career path is an understatement.

"Samay is one of the few American dance artists who truly represents, in her performances and choreographies, the true essence, traits and colloquialisms that distinguish the Egyptian style from the rest," Jihan says. "I have observed her dance development throughout the years, and I am quite happy for what she has achieved for herself and for our dance."



All of Samay's teachers have served as a mentor to her in one way or another. Workshops with Raqia Hassan, Mahmoud Reda, Yousry Sharif and other Egyptian artists opened her eyes to the authentic Egyptian style that seeps through her performances today.

Samay has been given the opportunity to perform in many different places throughout her career. Her first paying gig was doing a sword dance (for the first time ever) with Tamalyn. Several gigs and shows followed, many of which she will never forget.

"Tamalyn made us learn finger cymbals to the speedy part of the song 'Shik Shak Shok' one time, while

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doing barrel turns," Samay says. "I still cringe when I hear that song."

Samay performed at restaurants for about four years, generating a very large Arabic following and establishing a clientele for Egyptian weddings. Although Samay had no desire to become a dance instructor, Tamalyn motivated her to teach her very first class at MEDE. In 1997, she began teaching at Miami Dade College, where she presently oversees one of the largest Middle Eastern dance programs in the United States.

"It's funny; I started all of this as a hobby, and tried out the teaching without a clue that I would fall in love with it," she recalls. "I have a degree in education and [I intended to become] an elementary school teacher. But now I'm really doing what I love and could never picture myself doing anything else."

SAMAY, THE INSTRUCTOR

Within the Middle Eastern Cultural & Arts Program at Miami Dade College, students are offered an array of classes to meet varying needs and levels. Students of all ages can immerse themselves in all aspects of the art form for non-credit certification, including history, music and dance. It's one of the largest programs of its kind, giving dancers the opportunity to learn all aspects of the dance.

The philosophy behind her teaching style is simple: Understanding that everyone has a different style of learning. During class, she helps her students learn each movement with visual examples, imaginary scenarios, and even sound effects. She is constantly assuring her girls that she, too, started in a beginner class, and that a perfect shimmy doesn't happen overnight. Many of her students describe Samay as humble and approachable, finding it encouraging and even entertaining when she



Samay with mom and daughter at Petra, Jordan



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAMAY

pokes fun at the mistakes she used to make with the same movements. She believes a good teacher should always make sure that the students are the priority.

In the classroom, Samay encourages creativity by constantly having her students picture themselves in different scenarios as they are dancing. For instance, she has them imagine a stunning costume they have on, or that they are a queen and must always look up, never at the floor. When she teaches to Oum Kalthoum music, she has her students recall situations in their life that have made them sad or happy, in order to inspire true feeling. She also has her students carefully listen to the different instruments in the music and picture how they would interpret the sound with the movements of their body.

"I like for the students to feel comfortable with their bodies and carry a

certain confidence and attitude when they dance," she says. "Life has taught me that women are truly the strongest creatures alive, and it makes me so happy when I see a woman leave class feeling empowered."

Her ultimate goal is to instill strength and confidence in every woman that takes her class.

Throughout her career, Samay has traveled to many locations in order to study with numerous master instructors. Early in her studies, she realized that glamour is just a miniscule part of the dance. She also believes this art form must involve the study of its culture, music, rhythms, technique and its famous singers and dancers. Visiting different cities in Egypt has aided her study of the diverse styles of the dance. For instance, it helps to visit Aswan to understand the mannerisms used for Nubian dance.

"Teaching is what helped me realize all of these aspects," she explains. "My favorite question of all, especially when asked by a beginner student, is 'How long it will take to learn it all?' I always answer, 'Be patient, even I am still learning.'"

SAVORING THE MOMENT

In 2004, Samay attended the Ahlan wa Sahlan Festival to continue her studies with Egyptian master instructors. It was Tamalyn who encouraged her to participate in the competition. Without a costume to wear, she chose her favorite music from Oum Kalthoum and became enthralled with the idea of performing to a live band.

"I remember when she danced at the first-ever belly dance competition in Cairo," says Dallah. "The audience was spellbound as she stood still on stage, seemingly looking each person in the eye. Then, she took her time with each movement, savoring every moment. It was amazing."

As the large orchestra eloquently

played Lissah Fakker, Samay enjoyed the ultimate high of dancing to live music.

"I'll admit I was very nervous," she confesses. "But once I stepped on the stage and heard the violins actually live next to me, and realized I had a band of over 25 pieces, I felt like a child in a candy store."

Usually, dancers are lucky to have a five-piece band in the U.S. Samay's emotional and elegant dancing helped her place first in the competition. Since then, she has returned to the festival as a featured instructor.

Today, one of the things that Samay is widely known for is her devotion to the Egyptian style.

"Nothing compares to an Egyptian dancer," she admits.

Most of us will readily agree. The feeling and intricate movements that have come from dancers such as Samia Gamal, Taheya Carioca and Sohair Zaki (who are among Samay's favorites) have mesmerized crowds for ages. The musical is also beautiful, she explains, and she continues to admire classics by such greats as Oum Kalthoum, Farid al-Atrache and Abdel Halim Hafez.

Another thing Samay is recognized for is the feeling she conveys during performances; the music seems to run through her veins and empower her movements and emotion. She believes that such feeling cannot be taught, and that one must allow it to come from within, by portraying each instrument's purpose and telling a story with each dance move.

One of her favorite contemporary instructors is the legendary Raqia Hassan. Since she first laid eyes on her, Samay has had a high regard for the feeling that Hassan puts into her teaching and the 'juiciness' she adds to the dance, encapsulating much of it in her own dancing.

A mentor who has played a big



PHOTOGRAPH BY ZIZI ZABANEH

role recently in Samay's dance career is Egyptian master instructor Aladin El Kholy.

"I have been blessed to be able to work side by side with such a wonderful teacher," she says. "Through his knowledge I have been able to learn folklore dance in depth, and stay true to the roots of the dance."

TAKING A DEEPER LOOK

Outside the limelight, Samay is as down-to-earth as she appears, plus she has a beautiful personality and a free spirit. She is a child at heart who loves going to Disney World, and is content with Starbucks in hand and a day spent at the mall. Dancing is something she is always doing, even if it's just goofing around. Among her many hobbies, Samay loves to travel and learn about new cultures. Samay isn't one who seeks the limelight. One might say she is so genuine that even she doesn't realize how much of a superstar she truly is.

Her family has always been her strength, she says. Sadly, her father passed away in 2009 and, the same year, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"My [earliest] inspiration is definitely my mom," Samay says. "She has always encouraged me to do what I believed in, and has given me the power to feel like I could conquer the world."

Throughout the hardest moments

of her life, Samay learned that everything has a solution and anything is possible. Her mother, now a cancer survivor, has taught her to be a fighter through all of life's trials and tribulations.

"People take life for granted," Samay says, "when it can end in a heartbeat. I always tell my students to take advantage of the dance and enjoy every second of it. Take pleasure in every day of life and do what you love. Don't let anyone stop you."

Samay has been blessed with a beautiful daughter and enjoys her role as full-time mom. She continued to teach her classes until her ninth month of pregnancy, holding the bottom of her belly while she undulated during choreographies. Although she doesn't have the same amount of time to dedicate to her dance career now, being a mom has been a blessing.

"It's funny, because she loves Arabic music," Samay says. "I am definitely saving some of my costumes for her. But, of course, I want her to have a college degree and a backup [plan] if she decides to pursue dance."

Samay travels with her daughter, and has already taken her to the Middle East and to Europe.

"I want her to never be afraid to say no," Samay says. "And never to take 'no' for an answer."

AN ONGOING PASSION

In addition to her college program,

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Samay has directed annual student showcases since 1999, featuring over 200 performers and successfully selling out to crowds in Miami. She also continues to create annual productions in large theaters.

For the first time, Samay sat in the audience and did not perform for her 2010 show, *Egyptian Nights*, while she recuperated from her C-section.

"I immediately started crying," she recalls. "I was nervous that I wasn't running the show back stage, but it was such a wonderful experience to watch from the audience's perspective and not from the wings."

This ambitious dancer and director has also created her own dance troupe, Samay Mideast Performing Arts Company. In the beginning, she wanted to see them execute her choreographies and represent her as a force. Over the years, her goal with the troupe is to see them all grow as dancers and teachers, and develop on their own with what they have taken

from the dance.

"I have been blessed with such a wonderful dance troupe," she relates. "Everyone cooperates in helping out with rehearsals, events, costuming, etc. And we have such a good vibe in the group. Everyone gets along, and most importantly, we have grown to feel like one big family."

The troupe executes beautiful and elegant choreographies of folkloric and classical Egyptian dance styles to provide audiences with an authentic Egyptian dance experience.

Samay has been fortunate enough to be a featured workshop instructor throughout Europe, Asia, and Egypt. More international seminars and performances are definitely in store for her future, as she continues on the workshop circuit. Her annual student showcase is scheduled for October, with over 100 performers expected. This year, she will present *Arabian Dreams* at the Manuel Artime Theater in Miami, using music from her first

CD, *Miya Miya Raqs Ma' Samay*. She also plans to continue producing choreography for her troupe.

"I am very proud of Samay's accomplishments and her artistry as a dancer," Tamalyn Dallal says. "Most of all, I appreciate that she educates dancers, not only about dance, but about culture."

Samay hopes to continue to visit the Middle East with group excursions, to help expand people's knowledge of the culture.

"As far as what I'll be doing 10 years from now," she says, "Well — Insha'Allah — to keep teaching and choreographing." ☆

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