

QUESTIONS FOR ANNE WHITE

Every single person who performs or teaches belly-dance is creating a new moment in the history of this ancient but continually evolving dance. They bring everything they fell in love with along the way, everything that inspired them, everything that came naturally to their own body, and everything they worked hard to achieve. They are also taking their own inheritance from a long line of performers and teachers and passing it on to their own students and audience. In this way something that lasts only a moment becomes a piece of forever.

Anne White, founder of London's *Planet Egypt*, a monthly performance showcase for established and emerging dancers, has become intimately involved in the flowing lines of our belly-dance inheritance – Qamar14 couldn't wait to ask her how it all came about:

How did you start out as a belly-dancer? Was there "a moment" or was it all "by accident"? I lived in Cyprus in my early 20s: there were loads of Arabs there and their music was played in the Greek nightclubs. The music got me first and then the dance got me! I was shameless! I used to get up and do two moves all night long and still I wanted to dance more. (I'm glad and relieved that there isn't any film footage, though!)

Did it come easily or did you have to work hard? I found belly-dancing very natural as I learn kinaesthetically and visually. I am not saying that it was always easy though!!!!

Once you'd realised you'd started out – what made you stay? Well, I always loved it. It made me feel good to listen to the music and then to join in. I did it for fun as I had a highly paid TV job. I never imagined that I would make a career of it, though. My initial training was driven by my need to find and be the best I could. Many years later I still feel the same way...plus now I have LOTS more fun! And LOTS more friends!

What keeps you going? What gets you out of bed in the morning? I am an optimistic and motivated person so am always "in gear".

You're perhaps best known for the cabaret-club nights of Planet Egypt – can you tell us a bit about how that started out back in 2003? I had a performance class and wanted them to develop performance skills in a safe environment. We opened our evening get-togethers to professionals so they could inspire my students and help them get to know other dancers and other styles of dance. Plus I'm a social animal – I like people to get together and socialise. So Planet Egypt started out for my students, but gradually became THE professional performance platform in London. It also helped to achieve two of my aims, which were to create a meeting place for lovers of the dance, and to foster greater communication and awareness at the same time. I believe as a stronger united community we can achieve a lot more. In the early days we would only have a few audience members – about 5-8 only – then that grew into 350 people per show very quickly, probably because all our events were



free for the first three years. Back then, there was not much precedent for dancers from other disciplines in London to fraternise and collaborate. I was initially viewed with scepticism and great suspicion. It was not a comfortable place to be in at times, but we soldiered on...

It must get pretty manic at times – did you ever think it would last seven years? What makes you keep going? Well, it was very hard when we suddenly found ourselves with such a huge audience. It did not feel very “safe” either, as a crowd of 350 people is not easy to manage in a tight space. It got manic, but the venue helped a great deal. They were making money on food and drink and so had a vested interest in our success. We also, and always, received lots of love, help and support from the belly-dance community, and there are people, students and friends, who were part of our early days and who are still with us now....and many of these are now dancers in their own right and making names for themselves.

I had had 15 years of teaching experience and events organisation behind me when we started Planet Egypt, so this all helped, but we would not exist without the Team. They are the backbone, but choose to operate mostly behind the scenes. It's their choice, but they are an amazing and talented group of people and many are very successful in their own right. We are devoted to each other.

In seven years you must have seen a few trends in dance styles come and go – what stood out? I see a greater awareness of other dance disciplines coming into belly-dance. Performers are diversifying and bringing other performance arts into their dance. I see them creating fusion with other styles: Latin, Flamenco, Gypsy, Eastern European folk-music, Bollywood, Kathak, even Bharatnatyam and temple dances. I think that this may be driven by a perceived need to be “different and therefore more marketable”, as well as being also a reflection of inter community and cultural exchange. This has also introduced new props to the dance, such as Isis wings, Chinese fans, poi-poi, rope, and tea-lights and candles.

Tribal and tribal-fusion is growing in popularity too. Another emerging trend is for dancers to specialise in other Arab dances not just

Egyptian styles. This has been influenced by performers such as Nawarra, from Morocco, and Ozgen who is popularizing Turkish folkloric styles. But the biggest appetite is still for Egyptian dance: this comes from the audience as well as the performers.

I should also observe that the standard of UK belly-dance has improved considerably: I see this with newcomers as well as established artistes

And costuming – how has that changed in seven years?

Well, it has improved significantly! Good costuming is far more accessible and affordable now, whether imported from Egypt or the Far East or found in the UK, perhaps through Mandy and her wonderful Shimmy Shop creations. Gone is the 1970s style of costumes - unless we feature Turkish dancers for whom they are still a large part of their inheritance and identity. Now we have a huge variety of costumes. Cairo fashion trends always make their mark and will continue to do so.

And perhaps more interestingly – is the UK belly-dance audience changing? I can only speak for London, for although I travel about the UK I don't know other areas well enough to comment. In London our audience is multi-cultural, mostly women, of all ages and sizes; it includes ladies in *hijab*, many Arab women with their friends and families, and also men who want to dance – and sometimes meet pretty ladies. We get the curious as well as the aficionados. The appeal is broad. We tend to get younger dancers who are keen to see what's out there as well as older ladies “with a lot of juice” who want to strut their stuff.

There are many event organisers and teachers publicising their own events and we may all be chasing the same “belly-dance pound”, but we have been able to go outside our usual market place to increase awareness of Planet Egypt. We have been featured in many “non-trade” press magazines and I was commissioned to write an article for *Dance Matters* which is published by the National Dance Teachers Association, a national body for Dance Education in schools. We have also been featured in *Fate and Fortune* magazine, and the World Music magazine *Songlines*.

Getting a foothold outside our market place is hard, though, as we have to combat many

negative stereotypes, but we have still been able to make “converts”. My ideal audience – having worked a lot with Arab bands – is an Arabic one: part of my personal remit with Planet Egypt is to educate British audiences to respond in the same way as Arabs do. Fortunately, I’m quite fearless...!

How do you pick a really good line-up for an evening’s entertainment? What do you look for in a dancer? I try and have a balanced programme of different dance styles and disciplines, featuring local, national and international artists. I look for people that appeal to me. After more than 20 years on the scene I know what I am looking for and I vet everyone I don’t know.



Anne White photo by Derek Lee

You must have seen a great many fabulous dancers come and go. Who stood out for you? And do you have any tips on star names of the future? Arabs – and especially Egyptians – always “grab” me, whether they’re male or female. People who impress me are those who truly love the dance and surrender themselves to it. I also love those who I see raising their game. I have seen many dancers “evolve” and some who still put on a good show but never seem to develop. In this market place where so much is so readily available all of us should be aspiring to improve: we never stop learning. I also see people who have truly emerged into their power and do what I can to quietly support them behind the scenes

Musicians talk about the “Great Gig in the Sky”, where Mozart jams with Keith Moon and Mahalia Jackson, and sports fans pick their imaginary “Dream Teams” – who would be on the bill in your belly-dance “Dream Cabaret”? Mostly any one who has ever been Star Guest. I am thinking of creating a programme with this theme so would rather not divulge any names right now.....

It used to be really difficult to get hold of Arabic music, and then the Internet brought it within everyone’s reach. Now, perhaps influenced by the Bellydance Superstars, it seems like there’s less and less Arabic music being used by dancers – what’s your take on this? In the “Olden Days” we ALL danced to the same stuff as we did not have access to music the way that we do now. I found out the names of all the music I liked when I danced with Arab bands. I got the names and went shopping: as a result I have a good library of resources. Really good

music is still available, but the old composers like Mohammed Abdel Wahab have left spaces that have not been so easily filled by others. Social and cultural developments in Egypt have also had a bearing on music for dancing – there are western inspired arrangements and many younger Arabs prefer western music; there are also traditional “music” families whose musical inheritance has not been passed down to their children as they prefer other careers and professions. There is a lack of support for the traditional Egyptian music market at home and its patronage is diminishing: a great many of the old style clubs are closing down, just as they are in London, for different reasons. Dancers continue to have music written for them but they must also support the band and be responsible for the whole production: with the diminishment of live entertainment in Egypt (and London) there has been some considerable effect on music that is available to us as well.

At my events we have an equal measure of old classics and pop, and we embrace fusion and trends from the Arab world as well. A good example of this would be that modern pop/shaabi, the rough-and-ready street sounds that appeal to 20-somethings is finally entering our market place. (Caroline Afifi is a great exponent of this.)

What’s your favourite piece of music for dancing? What’s the instrument that plays for your perfect taqsim? Whose voice makes you melt? I always choose songs to dance to if I can. I especially like Abdel Halim Hafez, so the instrument for me would be a voice (with a *mawaal*) and after that the *nai* (flute) or *oud*.





If the hafla sound system blew up and we had to form a scratch band - what would you play? Counter beats!

Do you think being a belly-dancer has made you a different person? I don't know the answer to this one! I believe that we all are influenced by the things that we love, and whilst stereotypes exist in this dance, there are many other female personae that can be represented. As we go through our "life journey" we will see them all, albeit in different quantities. This is a young woman's dance, but the experience of being older and wiser adds more depth and resonance to a performance. We have the psychological transformation of unconscious to conscious, and I am really interested in psychology so this influences me.

Or does belly-dancing bring out the real you? This *is* true. When we dance, we are naked – to use Hossam Ramzy's neat catchphrase – and we totally expose our soul for "public consumption". Unconscious and sometimes conscious messages are transmitted, so we need to work not just on our dancing but also on what we transmit. I know dancers who refuse to video themselves. I think that if we are performers, though, and we strive to grow and develop, then we should be aware of how we come across. This does not just include the technical and artistic side of our dance.

I would like to think and hope that we all evolve as part of our life experience. Both parts of this question are really "meaty" and I think that I am going to have a long juicy discussion with Siouxsie Cooper, who is doing a PHD in Belly dance and with whom I can dialogue for hours... So my answer is not quite complete but I hope it at least gives a glimpse of my initial response. My last comment would be that belly dancing has helped me evolve tremendously as a person in terms of my self

awareness, self expression, self acceptance, and personal creativity: and therefore I recognize and accept that it has transformational and therapeutic qualities.

It's often said that belly-dance is the perfect union of motion and emotion - what does it feel like to be a woman who dances? I feel very womanly myself, when I am dancing or otherwise, but then, the way I look at it, with all my curves it would be hard not to! I also feel that there is scope to explore other aspects of my personality too: I can be mischievous, playful – and worse !!!! (Don't ask!)

Who were – or are – the biggest influences on you as a dancer? Apart from the Big Names of Egypt (and for me those are notably Fifi Abdou, and Suheir Zaki as well as Nahed Sabri), I am influenced by the older dancers who preceded them such as Nehmet Mokthar and Zeinat Olwi as well as the *awalim* and the dancers of Mohammed Ali street from the 1950s. I have LOTS of videos at home... My former teacher Suraya Hilal, too, as she was in the 1980s, helped nourish and foster a great love and respect for this dance.

What's the best piece of belly-dance advice you've ever been given? I don't know, but Vashti is the best Agony Aunt ever! I suppose the best advice is always *to be professional* and to remember the culture that this dance comes from.

If there was a belly-dance Agony Aunt what question would you send to their Problem Page? I would ask them what more could be done to better represent the dance in the UK, how we could raise standards, and how we could collaborate and work more closely with each other in a supportive way.

I hope that when Siouxsie Cooper's PHD is finally released into the Public Domain that this will give us all some additional impetus and focus.

Belly-dance is absolutely exploding in the West – where do you see the dance going in the next 10 or 20 years? I think people will always love the dance and want to learn it. It already has a huge national foothold. I would like to see belly-dance as an option on the National Curriculum so that training could be started early and would like belly-dance to become better recognized and accepted by other dance disciplines.

I would also like to see more cultural awareness too. I would like more teachers to speak Arabic or to have lived in Arabic countries so that they have a good cultural awareness to bring into their teaching practice. I would like us all to be able to see and hear more live music, and, finally, for us to have good quality theatre shows. For this to happen, audiences will **really** have to invest in the dance.

Thank you for such thought-provoking questions!!!!

So there you have Anne's thoughts on the "now" and "next" of UK belly-dance. The dance scene has never been bigger or more vibrant; there has never been more interest, money, or opportunity for the emerging dancer; and we are truly standing at a social and cultural cross-road. But even with all these "big things" at stake, the essence of belly-dance remains an intimate and personal experience, and a precious inheritance to be treated well and wisely. Are you up for the challenge?

Anne White was talking to Qamar14 in June 2010. In July 2010 Anne is coming to Leeds to teach her first workshops here – although she can't bring all of Planet Egypt with her, we are quite sure she'll be out of this world!



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