

**In the Starlight is:**  
**SORAYA, INTERNATIONAL BELLY DANCER**  
*Interview by Adry Svraka, CA and Hungary.*



**Soraya strikes a pose backstage before hitting the dance floor, performing in a very fancy Egyptian wedding at an upscale hotel in Philadelphia, PA**





Custom made Madame Abla bedlah in rich copper bronze, amber and topaz.

### **How did you start learning to belly dance?**

I began belly dancing at four years old with my family, it was as natural for me as breathing. When I was a child, my Mother loved to choreograph my performances. I grew up with the dance, music and culture constantly around me as a child. The fact that I become a professional belly dancer was enviable! The dance chose me, I did not choose it, and that is a wonderful thing. As far back as I can remember; whenever I heard Middle Eastern music it was as if it was a part of my soul and deep inside my psyche. My Mom said when I as a young child whenever I heard Middle Eastern/Mediterranean music, I would jump up and immediately begin to belly dance! My Mom made my very first belly dance costume and I starting performing on television shows in Philadelphia, PA, Atlantic City, NJ and New York. She hired professional seamstresses to make me a few other costumes, since I was dancing so much, I needed many costume changes. I still have them all too. As a young child, I performed in various well known children's arts showcases on the Atlantic City boardwalk like Lucille Russo's famous "*Boardwalk Star Review*" and other shows and events. We performed for various senior citizen centers, on the famed Atlantic City boardwalk on the big stage on Garden Pier, the annual Atlantic City March of Dimes telethon and each year we had a float in the Miss American parade. Both of my parents were great dancers and could dance beautifully! I just felt the Middle Eastern music naturally since as far back as I can remember...

### **Why do you dance?**

**I dance to celebrate all of the incredible happiness in my life, culture and of course my artistic and creative soul.** I was born to belly dance. I am also very into fitness and working out doing cardio and free weights regularly for stamina, strength, endurance and for overall health in my home gym. Dancing also has wonderful health benefits. I also believe in having frequent sports therapy/deep tissue massages regularly at home and I love it. I highly recommend it to everyone. I dance for the love, joy and fun that it brings to me, to my audiences and clients. I love for everyone to have a wonderful experience with belly dancing through my performances so that they can celebrate along with me. I love to share my cultural expression with people from all over the US and the world. **The art that I create on stage becomes the direct conduit of sharing this great happiness with the world.** I enjoy bringing them on an artistic journey through ethnic dance movement, soulful Middle Eastern music, elegant costuming and rich Middle Eastern culture. I feel I have touched so many people through my dancing and I love to continue making countless audiences happy through the craft. I have been dancing since early childhood like I mentioned above in this interview and thanks to my parents and the heritage, belly dancing was always as natural for me as breathing.

### **Who were your biggest inspirations and why?**

For belly dancing, it was definitely my Mother and Father. We have always been extremely close. We have a very unique and wonderful relationship and I come from a very tight family structure. They are not only my parents but also best friends which is an amazing and very special thing. I feel fortunate that I didn't come from a dysfunctional family as my family is incredibly close. My parents have always celebrated my love of belly dancing, and always encouraged me to follow my dreams no matter what from as far back as I can remember. I feel very thankful for their wonderful encouragement and coupled with my own personal determination and performance ideology has made me the successful artist, entertainment agent and entrepreneur that I am today. The dance training I had, was working privately with the late, great Ibrahim "Bobby" Farrah of New York and Lebanon, Mme. Raqia Hassan of Egypt and Dahlena. I also worked with Aunt Rocky (Morocco) and Serena of NY as well.

**Besides my wonderful parents, my inspiration is my incredible husband (*my true soul mate*), who is so very supportive of me in every way.** My husband is not in the arts like myself and is a prominent Physician. With all of the amazing success he has achieved in his wonderful career, he could easily be a "stuffed shirt" if he wanted to be but he is not. He appreciates how I enjoy expressing myself through my art and encourages me to continue because I love it. He even enjoys playing piano as a hobby... He tells me to dance for as long I enjoy it. This is music to my ears! He loves to take pictures of me when I perform and enjoys mixing my performance CD's when I am not using my live band: "Soraya and Middle Eastern Sounds". He jokes and calls himself my "Chief Technical Officer". He does a great job too! Someone recently referred to him as "**Mr. Soraya**". Smile. ;o) Everyday just gets better than the last and my life could not be any more incredible... I feel truly blessed in everyway.

### **What do you feel when you dance?**

I feel love, culturally connected, joyful as I am having so much **FUN!** I dance to celebrate the joy, serenity and intense happiness that I have in my life. When I dance I feel like I am drawing intense energy up from the earth, through my feet and into my entire body right up to God and back down again. When I dance, it feels as though I am praying as I thank God for everything as I

bare my soul to the audience. I love making a deep artistic connection with my audience as I perform. I dig deep into my soul when I dance, using the rhythmic music to expose my highly creative side.

I am very selective with what shows I will take personally. Everything is carefully chosen depending on the venue, type of event and if the show I am being asked to do really stirs my creative soul. It is a very simple formula for me. If a show comes in that is ultra special I will take it and if not, I will politely turn it down. I have this amazing freedom in my life to be able to carefully pick and choose everything I do and it feels terrific. I base all of my decisions on the fact that if the event strikes my artistic fancy or not. To be able to be so selective with my gigs, is a dream come true for me as an artist and nothing could be better than that for me. It is a dream come true...<3

### **What is your favorite venue and why?**

I have had so many memorable shows and danced in a plethora of wonderful, prestigious venues and it hard to pick just one or two. For many of them, I was the very first to ever bring Middle Eastern dance. I was the first and only belly dancer to perform in many of the Casino showrooms and other top prestigious venues. However, dancers that work in my entertainment agency have performed in the ballrooms and the banquet rooms. **The one venue that stands out to me as being my ultra favorite venue was having the incredible privilege and great honor of performing at the Palace of his Majesty King Hassan and the Moroccan Royal Family.** I also toured the best and incredibly gorgeous five star hotels in India as well as other fabulous five star hotels in the United States. **At this point in my life, I enjoy dancing in upscale venues only.** I enjoy performing at ALL of the Atlantic City casinos, fancy (noted) country clubs, beautiful banquets, black tie soirees, ballrooms and the like. **I personally avoid performing at house parties in someone's living room which is not conducive to a great artistic experience. I also never choose to dance in those kinds of parties that take place outside during the day in a backyard, American birthday parties/"belly grams", seedy restaurants and definitely no bachelor parties or private parties. I don't like performing in places that aren't well-known, respected, that do not treat artists well, or do not have great reputations. I also encourage and inform the dancers in my agency how to present their work in great venues and avoid the rest.** I am sure you know what I mean. It is important for a dancer to be as selective as she/he can if it is at all possible. My entertainment agency produces some of the best events. However, if I am ever hired from another source, I am told that I am the first call for such upscale Casino events/weddings/corporate theme parties, which is very nice. It is a great feeling to know I was the first choice on a great show. It is quite flattering to an artist. If I am not there performing personally, it is because I am either once again traveling in Europe with my husband or I am already booked for the same night somewhere else. Most of my events are booked way in advance. I never like to do last minute events. A lot of the fancy Egyptian weddings that I do are booked a year or so in advance...In a lot of cases; I also enjoy hiring the other entertainment as well such as the band, singer, variety acts or a professional DJ. The types of weddings I do usually have live music and not DJ's since they are quite upscale. Depending on what a particular client has in mind, I enjoy having a female warm-up dancer or male Tahtib dancers. I even help my clients find the perfect hotel or banquet facility if they don't already have one.

**I will be performing with the amazing Egyptian singing legend Mr. Amr Diab and the lovely Lebanese band The Four Cats at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino and Resort. 5,000 people are expected in the audience and will take place on the biggest venue stage in Atlantic City, NJ. It is going to be HUGE. The**

concert will take place in the prestigious Arena. I have prepared a very special choreography for Amr Diab's show.

**Have you visited any countries where you performed?**

Yes, many times and always by design. My husband and I enjoy our frequent European travel and enjoy going away on these fantastic holidays about 4-5 times a year. I feel very fortunate and thank God everyday for my incredible lifestyle. At this point in my life, I like to travel for the fun, pleasure and vacation aspect of it and not *have to* perform while on holiday and dance only if I fancy it. There have been many amazing shows that I have done in my career but the one that stands out as the most memorable is when I performed in beautiful Morocco. **I was personally invited to dance at the Palace of his Majesty King Hassan and the Moroccan Royal Family. I met the King, the Crown Prince as well as the family. Everyone was so respectful and wonderful.** They had one of the largest orchestras that I have ever worked with (*even bigger than with the famous singers I have danced/toured with*), and they were fabulous as well as the singers they flew in from Egypt and Lebanon. Everything about that excursion was amazing and something you will remember and cherish for the rest of your life. I stayed in Morocco for 7 incredible days. I did a lot of shopping (I love to shop), and bought some wonderful jewelry. One necklace in particular of the "evil eye" (wards off evil) in solid 24 karat gold has become my good luck charm throughout my life and my favorite in my entire jewelry collection. I love things that have deep meaning. I am actually wearing it now!

**I also was invited to perform in a tour of India's five star hotels and was again treated like a queen.** These hotels were so beautiful, they can rival some four and five star hotels in the US or Europe in their own right. The East Indian people look at a person's art like it is a spiritual gift that was bestowed upon you. I still keep in touch with a lot of my contacts that I made through my entire career, as I enjoy to network. I enjoy passing along great International shows to other dancers at my entertainment agency, in many parts of the world including Paris, the French Riviera, Germany, Switzerland and parts of the Middle East it makes me happy to do so. Performing at the best hotels in that ancient, mystical land and traveling to Agra (*the site of the actual Taj Mahal which was a beautiful place to say the least*), New Delhi, Mussourie atop a very affluent mountain resort, and Mumbai was a terrific experience for me as a professional dancer and as a cultural Anthropologist. Performing in India to welcome the Millennium and then tour for two weeks was just another amazing performance experience in my career scrapbook. ;o)

I have also toured and still frequently perform with many famous Arabic singing stars at many amazing venues like the Atlantic City and Las Vegas casino showrooms and other beautiful venue's around the US like in Florida at a hotel resort on a tour with **George Wassouf**. Some of the other star singers that I have worked with are: **Nawahl al-Zougby, Assi El-Hellani, Hani Shaker, Kazem al-Sahir, Warda, Tony Hanna, Meastro Hany Mehanna, Samira Said** and many others.



**Where have you been?**

A brief list includes: Casablanca and Rabat, Morocco, the entire continent of India, Seville (Andalusia) Spain, Brussels, Belgium, The Netherlands (*Holland*) in

beautiful/artistic/upscale Amsterdam and other amazing destinations around the globe. I have also performed in other states in the US including but not limited to New England, VA, FL, NV and others including CA for noted Hollywood celebrities and entertainment industry parties and art galleries. My brother lives with his lovely wife in Studio City, CA and is well known and fabulously talented drummer that works in the entertainment industry doing movie scores/soundtracks, session work, acts in mainstream movies and on sitcoms television shows. I am very proud of him and enjoy visiting him when I perform in the Los Angeles area.

My Manager and I get flown to other states for weddings and other lovely events. My husband enjoys coming along as well. The clients are very generous as they accommodate all of us. One in particular was in Florida for a weekend by an Iraqi Jewish physician for his wedding. The wedding took place at a lovely hotel and we had a blast. I have been flown to many states in the US. I recently was sent to Richmond, VA as well for lovely another Middle Eastern wedding. Some of the other events are corporate "Arabian Nights" theme events for fortune 500 companies. This November 2005, my husband and I are going back once again to Europe for another two weeks of more our adventuresome Globe Trekking, fine dining, romance, shopping and sight seeing. We made many friends in Europe and one friend in particular is a famous sculptor living in Amsterdam. We are also considering buying some property in Europe as well. We are so excited to go back on holiday this November!

In December of 2006, I was asked to perform at a very fancy Arabic wedding in beautiful Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The client told me that they were so impressed with my web site that they want to fly me over to do this super upscale wedding. They told me they wanted the entertainment to be truly traditional and authentic. How flattering is that? WOW! I will bring my dear husband and Manager too.

**How long have you had your agency and is running this business take up a lot of your time? Do you have help?**

Yes, I have help. With all of the overwhelmingly wonderful response to my comprehensive, extensive, multi-media cultural web site, word of mouth within the Middle Eastern community, repeat clients and so much more, I enjoy having help in dealing with booking talent and other facets to my agency. I also have a personal driver, Manager and special events coordinator. Due to so much world travel that my dear husband and I love to do, I have my manager taking care of calls and answering E-mails for me when I am out of the country on holiday. I love how my business is basically a fun thing for me now to enjoy, keep myself busy, for creative aspect and mostly the love of it. Since marrying Doc, I don't like to be bombarded with shows requests while on holiday. My Manager perfectly filters everything beautifully for me. I will then decide if I want to take certain shows personally or if I want to "sub" it out to other dancers in my agency. I donate the money that I make from my shows and strong DVD sales to charity. My husband is a very generous Philanthropist and enjoys donating to many wonderful charities and organizations. I love to support a "no kill" cat shelter and pay for their food, Vet bills, medications, etc... So many cats have now gotten loving homes and it makes my heart sing! I call it my: KITTY KARMA! <3

**What are your strengths besides belly dance?**



I love to sing for fun, I have been told I have a good voice (*giggling*)...I like to sing in English and also some in Arabic. **I enjoy drawing/sketching and I even took some acting class while I received my BA degree in cultural Anthropology/Sociology in University.** ALL art intrigues me and I find beauty in it all aspects of it. My hobbies vary as I am very eclectic. Some of my hobbies include luxury cars, investing, frequent world and US travel, shopping, dining out, antiques, fine art, and my husband and I are avid boaters.

### **Do you design your costumes?**

Yes, I *usually* do, but not always. I do not like to sew but rather sketch my costumes on paper and have them made by Madame Abla and other wonderful costumers in Egypt. I can also tell if a costume (or "bedlah" as it is called in Arabic), is the real thing or a cheap knock off of the designer. Unfortunately, there are so many unattractive costumes out there that seem as if they are quickly stamped out and not made with the quality and care that a professional bedlah should have. I am not a big fan of the Turkish style costuming, big ugly head bands, large belts and bedlah with coils that stick up. In the US, I have great seamstresses that make wonderful things for me. Also, my Mom loves to sew and she creates lovely things for me.

I love a smooth, symmetrical line with costuming. I do not care a lot for recent *cookie cutter* styles that seem to be so common, they don't stand out to me or seem to be made as well. I also do not care for the cut-out dresses with styles that are not pleasing to the eye. Some of them are so silly looking that they resemble a bad flapper dress and come with these horribly thick head bands! No fancy event would hire a dancer who would wear something like that. It is not attractive or professional looking. A lot of the dresses and/or cheaper costumes don't even look like authentic/professional belly dance wear. Every now and then I will see some dresses that are flattering and not too bizarre looking or have weird looking styles, but it is rare. I don't find a lot of the new dress and costume styles appealing to an upscale crowd, but it depends. **That is why it is so important for a dancer to be selective not only with the kinds of shows she takes but with what she wears.** However, I have seen a couple that are classy like **Nour** in Egypt wears. If I look at a costume and love it, I will purchase it immediately as if it says: "BUY ME"! LOL! Professional dancers love our glitz, glitter and glamour! I prefer the more elegant, upscale styles of belly dance fashion and couture. I love the Egyptian costuming by Madame Abla and some others. I have never been a slave to what everyone else does or wears in life, I have never been a follower and I am the same way with my costuming. I prefer to have my own style with everything and create a trend. I have a very strong personality, am highly individualistic and I like for that to be evident when I dance in all facets of my performances. **I enjoy being my own person not only when I create my art but also in bringing my own look to fruition, all dancers should be.** I do not think that many of the styles I see even resemble belly dancing costuming anymore, there are some very unattractive bedlah out there. A lot of them would be better suited for Latin dancing or Halloween costumes. I do not like mini skirts for belly dancing or gasp those awful Flapper looking dresses at all and that would never fly with the conservative, upscale Arab audiences and clients. **The types of audiences that I perform for would not appreciate these styles and would feel they are not conducive for a classy venue for a family oriented show.**

**I feel that a great costume should be the extension of a dancer's inner personality and the image she is portraying to the world. Your costume speaks volumes about you, so you don't want it to look like a cheaply made party store costume or in bad taste.** A dancer should take in all of the elements that makes her feel spectacular to look beautiful, unique and always be in great taste. Costuming is a matter of personal preference and style. **If someone likes the message a particular costume says about them personally then they should go for it, and only listen to their heart!** I do love long, lavish fringe which frames movements and

adds drama to a dance. **I prefer gorgeous beadings since I am the kind of dancer that loves to execute many different kinds of shimmies and accents.** I also have some bedlah that has very little beaded fringe and intricate flatwork is more prevalent. I choose my bedlah depending on the type of event I am performing in and how I feel. I also enjoy rich colors the most like metallic bronze/copper/gold/chocolate brown/topaz and amber. **I love elegant satin black the most, it timeless and fabulous.** I do not like washed out "Easter egg" or bad bridesmaid/prom dress colors like pastels in lavender and the like. I also love the colors gold, silver, gorgeous chartreuse yellow, some orange shades, the use of a plethora of stones, jewels and strong, heavy flatwork. Red is a pretty color when used properly with the right designer and when the costume is well made. If red is misused with a cheap costume, it can look cheesy. I also feel it is not nice to show too much skin with a bedlah. I only perform for upscale clientele and **do not choose** to dance in belly grams, house parties/private parties, nightclubs, birthdays, seedy restaurants, backyard parties or bachelor parties. **The types of events I perform in personally are carefully chosen based on the fact that if they are fabulous and cultural and I leave the rest.** I can't emphasize enough how important costuming is...A dancers' bedlah is such a personal and artistic expression of who you are that everything aspect about it should be perfect. It should fit like a second skin, yet always be comfortable and show off your individual style. I see a lot of costumes that don't fit the dancer properly and that can be distracting to the audience. I also love those gorgeous beaded/sequin crowns and tiara's, you feel like a princess in them and my clients love them too. The worst are those hideous, wide headbands! The professional, Egyptian crowns look nice for dramatic, classical entrances. I have them custom made in most cases. I enjoy beautiful jewelry, gauntlets and other embellishment on the arms, neck, wrist, ankles and ears without ever looking overdone. I don't like when a dancer doesn't wear any jewelry, it seems like the look is not complete, like something is missing. As you can see, a lot of thought goes into my individual looks.

A good friend of mine in CA, **Dondi Simone Dahlin** is a doll. We have been close since 1997. Dondi recently surprised me by sending a unique, beautiful chocolate brown veil. This awesome veil is trimmed in wide, gold lame' fabric. I love it very much and use it with my newest Egyptian costume that is fabulous. She does an excellent Marilyn Monroe impersonation and I love her belly dancing too!

**I saw from your clips on the web site that you often perform at weddings. How does a show like that look like from the minute you get there?**

**Please check out Soraya's direct belly dance video clip link:**

**<http://www.bellydancebysoraya.com/videogallery/>**

Adry, you are correct. I frequently perform in many fancy weddings, which is what I love the most besides performing in all of the Casino and corporate events. My website and *word-of-mouth* within the Middle Eastern community really gets out there! **It used to be that there was a particular "wedding season", but now for the past few years, weddings come in at ALL times of the year.** I also specialize in Egyptian zeffa too. Last winter, I was just as busy with weddings as in the summer/fall months. **I am told by many brides that they get "peace of mind" and "feel so good about hiring" me as the families' talk and know each other in these tight knit ethnic communities. A lot of times, I find out that their friends and family members were very excited that I am dancing, that makes me feel great that they are looking forward to it so much. I take that as a high compliment, any artist would.** They also see me perform in the Casino Showrooms besides fancy weddings. **A lot of these families are well-to-do. Their weddings reflect refined tastes for the best venues, food selections and music and they are equally careful with the belly dancer.** They held at very elegant venues, upscale country clubs and the best hotels. Many of the family members are coming from Egypt,

Lebanon, or Morocco, etc and I love for my audiences to be truly happy with my shows, I go all out for them and they know it. I performed in Philadelphia, PA, Bucks County, PA and Blue Bell, PA and NJ so far this month. October was a very busy month for me!

I get so many requests that I give a lot of weddings and other lovely events to the dancers in my agency and they are very happy. I try not and overbook myself anymore since marriage. I do not like taking up every weekend dancing like I did before when it was my living and I LOVE having free weekends. ;) My husband is so amazing, loving and supportive that it is hard to put into words in this interview. As far as my dancing goes, he tells me to take a show only if the mood strikes me. If the show fits into my creative, cultural and artistic ideology I will do it... **This is incredible to have the best of both worlds.** I enjoy creating, keeping my *chops up*, "shredding" (as my wonderful percussionist brother says), on the dance floor and keeping my artistic/cultural juices flowing. I decide if I feel like performing in a particular event personally I will take it and if not, I will give the show away to a dancer that represents my agency. If a request comes in and it is elegant, fabulous, upscale and being held at a really nice location, I will take it. I also have a wonderful Arabic band and singers from NYC that I bring in when live music is requested. It is not unusual for me to get more than one wedding in a night and hence, I will "sub" it out. The style they want presented must be either Arabic or Sephardic Middle Eastern/Jewish. I present my dancing at the area's most elegant Middle Eastern weddings throughout NJ, PA, DE, NY and other states on occasion.

**Each wedding is unique and I try and give all of the brides close personal attention to detail from what music she would me to use, to my costume style and color as I take into consideration her personal color scheme of her wedding and el-Zeffa, etc.**

When I arrive at a wedding, the banquet manager or wedding planner is awaiting for my arrival and entourage. They kindly bring my bags to my dressing room and make sure I have everything that I need. I do not like to bother the bride on her big day, so I am very through with all of the details ahead of time so that everything runs smooth as silk for her wedding. A Middle Eastern client knows that an unprofessional belly dancer could ruin their wedding day. People in the know find a bad dancer insulting. One bride joked with me that it can be compared to having a cheap wedding with bad food and a "cash bar, which is embarrassing!" The brides never have to worry that the belly dancing portion of the evening, it will be exactly what she wants and expects. **I love to deliver 100%. The bride can take solace in knowing there will only be GOOD surprises on her big day and they love that!**

I wanted to mention that my husband and I reside in more than one location, so this enables me to be able to cover a very wide region for my shows. Depending on distance, my clients offer hotel suites for the night or entire weekend, full amenities, ground/air transportation, meals, etc, plus my fee (which I happily donate to charity). **It is very flattering as an artist that the client wants to make sure they have secured your act for their fancy wedding and will do everything to make you feel at home like one of the guests.**

**I know that you are also a character actress. What characters are the children's favorites?**

Yes, I took some acting classes when I was in University obtaining my BA degree in cultural Anthropology/Sociology with an emphasis in Middle Eastern/Mediterranean studies.

I get hired to play by other talent agents to re-enact certain Disney and other popular children's characters. I also produce at lot of the shows myself at the Atlantic City Casinos, at corporate events and for other interesting shows. It is a lot of fun to see the children's faces light up! Since I have been told that I resemble Princess Jasmine and Esmeralda from Disney, I had professional costumes made and played the characters at numerous professional events. I sing favorite,

recognized songs along with the children from a particular movie, talk with them, pose for photos with the families, and even incorporate **BELLY DANCING!** I would put on my zills and dance for the kids and expose them to our craft...I would also be sure to bring extra zills and veils for the children and do a belly dance circle as I teach them how to belly dance. I use a riq too. I have the olive complexion of the characters and look like them, so it works!

The way I actually got started doing children's character acting is because I once got a phone call to my entertainment agency from a frantic mother trying to get an ESMERALDA look alike to come to her daughter's party. The little girl was obsessed with Esmeralda and she said that I look just like this Disney character. She saw me belly dance at an Israeli Bar Mitzvah at one of the Atlantic City Casino's, a few months prior. She begged me to please consider it and I did! To this day, the little girl still calls me because she thinks I am really Esmeralda. I remember doing her party in the afternoon, but then I had to get back to Trump Taj Mahal where I frequently dance for a show that was happening that evening. I said: *"Esmeralda must leave now and do her sound check because she will be belly dancing at the Taj Mahal Casino this evening"*. I will never forget that people my Manager and the parents roared with laughter! The cute little girl looked a bit baffled but said: "OK"...She was so adorable. Playing Princess Jasmine was also spawned out of me first playing Esmeralda, the Gypsy dancer from Disney's *"The Hunchback of Notre Dame"*.

I also play other well known character for other Casino events like a Fairy Princess, A Snow Angel with wings, and even Elvira for Casino and corporate Halloween theme parties. Hey, as belly dancers, we get to play dress like it is second nature, so why not have as much fun as possible in life right? What a wonderful way to go through life performing professional belly dancing and also character acting.

### **Do you dance any other styles?**

I mostly enjoy dancing in the Middle Eastern style. However, on occasion, depending on how a particular piece of music speaks to my soul, I may enjoy incorporating some steps from ballet into my performances. My parents gave me professional figure skating lessons and ballet lessons as a child. This early training, coupled with beginning to belly dance at 4 years old helped to shape the performer I am today. Some jazz movements can be cute, but I don't care for them in a belly dancing show. I don't like when a belly dancer makes her show overly jazzy. I have seen a lot of belly dancing where it became too jazzy without being Oriental enough. When I belly dance, I love emphasizing strong posture, chest lift, body alignment, clean technique, natural movement execution, smooth transitions and knowing how to be a good entertainer as well as a strong dancer.

### **Do you have a troupe?**

Yes, it is called **"SORAYA'S TROUPE TAJ MAHAL"** from the Atlantic City Casino by Donald Trump. Sometimes I use my troupe for shows not only at the Taj but for other major corporate theme events and Casino venues. I also enjoy frequently having warm-up acts like magicians for my stage shows and back-up/warm-up dancers too. The calls for the ethnic entertainment all funnels through my agency for the Atlantic City Casino's. I have also danced in Las Vegas as well for an engagement at The Luxor.

### **Do you write choreography for your troupe?**

Sometimes yes. I like for them to be familiar with dancing to a live band as well as taped music. I also like for them to be well versed in knowing Egyptian rhythms, songs, singers, composers and standards.

**If you are a soloist, do you choreograph or improvise or both?**

**Yes definitely...both.** Since we are performing ethnic dance, it is imperative to **FEEL** everything in the music and interpret how it speaks to your soul. I love watching a show that is both free spirited and also tight. **To be really great at belly dancing, it is so important to know how and when to improvise. Improvisation and using that “give and take” is a huge part of the magic of Egyptian dance. That is where real art lies.** It is so important for the dance to flow naturally in a soulful way, as well as never being forced, being *too busy* or frantic on the dance floor. **I don't like to watch a dancer that is all over the place. By knowing the proper technique, understanding Arabic music, coupled with how to use your moves to fit the music perfectly is pure kismet on the stage.** I once saw a dancer almost all over when she finished spinning, I felt so bad for her! **It is great to use some powerful choreography, but be careful not to over choreograph which can make your show seem predicable, mechanical and stiff. With Egyptian dancing it is imperative to be comfortable enough with the music to naturally improvise and let loose within the rhythms. The Arabic audiences expect and love that. Some of the best Egyptian dancing is rarely choreographed, unlike with other forms of non-ethnic dance.** If a dancer has a strong understanding for the steps, movements, musical rhythms, etc., a beautiful choreography can most definitely be created without compromising feeling. **Achieving the perfect balance is crucial.** I enjoy using choreography, but never want to get overly caught up in it, which is never good with belly dancing. Also, **an Arabic audience would not like it since belly dancing must be danced from the heart and soul. A Middle Eastern audience will know within the first five minutes if you understand and feel what you are doing or are just going through the motions.** A friend of mine, Sausan of San Francisco, and Shante' is also big advocate of really feeling and understanding Egyptian belly dance from the inside out and interpreting the music extremely well. **For the Egyptian belly dancing style, I notice an approach that is *less structured* seems to really free up the dancer to allow for the incredible creative process to flow rather than hinder it.**

I remember Bobby Farrah saying how important it is to listen to *everything* in the music and let it guide you. That is so true. He didn't want the dancer to get caught up in *too much* choreography. He would also emphasize how critical *feeling from the heart* is in this dance. I like to definitely use choreography but, not over use it and lose the delicate essence. Choreography is great, but I never like for my shows to appear over done since excellent improvisation is the core of Egyptian dance and what I love so much about it. Maybe over choreographing a routine works best with other forms of dance, but with belly dancing, it doesn't seem to be the case. **I strive in trying to capture a perfect balance between the right dosages of everything. It is nice to have a strong technical foundation and a good blend to achieve an ethnically artistic and entertaining show that feeds your creative soul as well as making the audience beg for more!** My audiences are mostly *Arabic Muslim, Arabic Christian and/or Sephardic Jewish/Middle Eastern* and they know just what to look for. There is no fooling a Middle Eastern audience. **They will know right away if they love you or not.** If not, they will look away and talk loudly as they ignore the dancer. I have seen this happen to dancers. I love it when the audience begins to clap during my intro, even before I have hit the stage, which is such a high honor as a dancer. When I perform for American audiences it

is always for an educated crowd in a classy setting like a corporate “*Arabian Nights*” theme party, which my entertainment agency is also known for being upscale Middle Eastern weddings. Also, not all weddings are 100% Middle Eastern, in some cases, the groom is American and the Bride is Arabic or vice versa. I love to represent the art with dignity, integrity and a close attention to detail. It is imperative to me to present belly dancing in a professional, positive and highly artistic/creative light for the American side of the family too so that they have a good experience with our craft. When I dance, it is like a good story and I like for my audiences/clients to leave my shows feeling not only truly entertained but feel like they have been transported on an exotic journey to Egypt. I love bring them home with my dancing...Sometimes though, both sides of the family are Middle Eastern.

I love being the **cultural attaché**’ at a mixed culture wedding. That is the Anthropologist in me! **I feel like I am performing center stage with the Middle Eastern side on the right and the American side on the left. I feel like my dancing is bridging the gap between two very different cultures and bring us all together as one.** I personally choose not to dance in the Belly Gram/American birthday parties, bachelor parties, nightclubs or restaurants. There are definitely classy Middle Eastern establishments, they do exist, but unfortunately for most dancers they are the exception rather than the rule.

### **Favorite Prop:**

I love dancing with my cane! Egyptian cane *Assaya* dancing is such a skill and looks so beautiful...I love the heavy, rhythmic Saaidi music as well...I always include a cane choreography in all of the many upscale weddings that I perform in. **Dahlana** does a beautiful cane dance with lovely technique. I also love playing zills. I feel a great zill player really makes a show. It can be a lost art anymore! How great is it to hear a dancer that has impeccable timing with her zills. My friend, Mr. **Harry Sorayan** so generously sent me his entire sagat collection to endorse and I do so proudly at all of my shows! I don’t have a strong preference for sword or dancing in a turban. Although some of the dancers I employ enjoy it and that is cool. I like to incorporate some props, I don’t like to *over use* them since I feel they can detract from the dancer and take away from her show. **A strong dancer minimizes the use of unnecessary props to really express her artistic skills within the dance itself and control. By over using props, it can detract from the dancer’s skills. I only like to use props that are culturally significant to the particular country of origin for my audience and that will enhance the show and make it as entertaining for the audience as possible.** I focus mainly on presenting the art to the individual ethnic demographic of a particular wedding. Before I do a wedding, I study the age and ethnicity of my audience in order to give them the best show possible. I perform in so many fancy weddings in upscale hotels and banquets facilities all over PA, NJ, DE, and NY and beyond. That is what I love to do most with my art besides my frequent Casino show and corporate parties.

### **Do you teach workshops? What themes?**

I love to entertain and perform it is in my blood, to do so is the most fun for me. I enjoy the excitement of dancing live mostly and teaching is not really my forte’. I just focus on doing what I love most and that is performing. I do

like to do the occasional master class and day long workshop sometimes. I get hired by major fortune 500 corporations, organizations, Universities/Colleges. Sometimes, before *the big day* for an Arabic wedding, the family wants me to teach and perform at the Egyptian engagement. In essence, they hire me twice. For Universities and Colleges, I do what I call: "*Dance-Lectures*" for Ivy League academia in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and for major corporations. I love to speak about the culture, Anthropology and ethnomusicology of Belly Dancing. I incorporate full performances with an academic lecture and master class. It is nice to watch ladies performing move you taught them while educating the general public at the same time. I also love to watch other people grow and have fun with belly dancing. When I do choose to instruct, I stick mainly to teaching Egyptian belly dancing and not water down the technique. I understand the Arabic language and like to emphasize knowing what you are dancing to and also understanding all of the subtle nuances in music. It is important for a dancer to know the meaning of a song when you translate it through movement. Even if they know a little bit of Arabic for the music they choose helps, especially if the audience is Middle Eastern. If it is for an American house birthday party, the dancer is there only for the amusement of a birthday boy, so it isn't as imperative, but it is still a great thing to keep it real.

### **Anything else you would like to tell me about you?**

Besides being an International belly dancer, choreographer and entertainment booking/talent agent, I also hold a BA degree in cultural Anthropology and Sociology with an emphasis in Middle Eastern/Mediterranean studies. **With my cultural website, I enjoy to break down cultural stereotypes through art and education. I strive for perfection in this dance and I am thrilled that I have touched so many people through my art.**

### **About You**

**I love to give professional advice to other dancers on how to be smart in business and also strong in the dance.** I get so many E-mails from all over the US and the world from dancers who are dealing with all kinds of scenarios that they need my personal assistance with. I enjoy helping them to make sense of it all. Some have jealousy issues because they intimate those *in the hen house* and need advice. I tell them: "*It is when they STOP talking about you, that you have to worry!*" I tell them to continue rocking, take it all as a big compliment, continue stirring the soup, always have fun and smile! That it all translates to meaning you are very special and to always follow your heart. I tell them to never let other peoples' insecurities and jealousies hold you back. Instead, allow it to make you work even harder at ALL of your personal and professional goals in life. **That it is a great thing to invoke so much intense emotion in others and that it means you are doing everything right!**

Through my large entertainment agency, I give a lot of great belly dancing jobs to other dancers throughout NJ, PA, NY, DE and other parts of the US. I like to give great shows to dancers that are not only strong performers, but are professional in the way they carry themselves at events. **My agency has a solid reputation for**

**excellence and standards of professionalism.** Even when I am not performing at an event personally, the dancer that I send out as my "sub" must leave a wonderful impression to my client, if not I can't refer her in good faith in the future. Because I am a nice person, I like to be very generous. I do love to take dancers under my wing and give them terrific paying, upscale shows and also give the more seasoned performers **fabulous** work too. I love getting so many happy phone calls and E-mails from dancers that did a show for my agency, enjoyed an incredible experience with an educated, appreciative, upscale audience, made a lot of money and had a serious blast doing it!

Actually, tonight, I have a dancer performing for my agency in Atlantic City. She is so excited about it and is breaking in a brand new costume. It is nice when the clients write to me about much a show was enjoyed by a dancer that I referred. ;o) I am very choosy about dancers that I will refer to represent my agency. I have to be that way. I learned my lesson fast because I had one that *almost* became a stalker, but I didn't let that sort of thing happen, I'm way too smart. She got so mad and bitter because I stopped giving her any more shows. She upset a client very much and didn't do a professional job to say the least and hence, I had to stop referring her. I was very kind about it, taking her feelings into consideration, but she freaked out anyway! She was a real mental case, not a person with professionalism, dignity or class. **When your reputation is at stake for professional quality entertainment, you have to do what you have to do.** With all of the many other dancers I refer, they always do a wonderful job and that was only one bad apple/bad experience. I am sure other professional artists can relate to what I mean since it is a business decision. At least I realized it early... **I am very nice person and really enjoy helping others, but, I am quite careful with whom I will associate with, you just have to be that way in life.**

I am excited that my cultural website has exploded as I am getting show inquiries from all over the country and the world constantly. Everyday, more and more interesting inquiries pour in. It is my pleasure getting many other dancers working and to offer them a lot of great shows for Arabic clients. I also do not take a commission. I would rather for them to keep everything that they earn. I don't need the money and to know that they are having fun, earning a great living doing what they love with their belly dancing and are doing so well makes me so happy. It is nice to see them not having to dance in common, low-end type restaurants and having to change in meat lockers or closets for almost no money. I don't like hearing stories of dancers that feel like they are being exploited in any way. I have heard horror stories from dancers and I do all I can to help them. It is important for the dancer to feel respected, content and celebrated. I was just called: **"THE GIG GENIE"** by a dancer that I give great shows to and it made me so happy to make her so happy! I enjoy going above and beyond for dancers that do a great job for my agency.

In closing, **I would like to say that I could not ask for anything more in my life and that all of my wildest dreams have come true in the biggest way. I am so happy, excited and content both personally & professionally that I could just burst!**

**Everyday just gets better than the last!**



**I got truly lucky when I met my prince, my dear husband, *Dr. Rob*, my true soul mate. I believe that my joyous serenity and happiness will rub off on all of my fans and friends. With each passing day, my life gets more magical and when I dance I love to project and share this with my audiences. We travel frequently to Europe (*approximately 4-5 times a year*) and our next trip will be this November! We can't wait!**

**I never knew it was possible to be so happy and I enjoy sharing my joy with the entire world.**

**Just remember to always follow your dreams, listen to the song in your heart and you too will have everything you have ever wished for too in life, I promise!**

**May everything you have ever wished for become  
a reality for ALL of you too!**

**HAPPY DANCING and happy holidays!**

**Much love and many shimmies,**

**SOBYA <3 <3 <3 xox**