

From Our Cover

SORAYA

The following is an interview with the lovely and vivacious Soraya who has been performing the ancient art of Middle Eastern/Mediterranean dance since the tender age of five years old and is still going strong. Just give her a 20 oz. Starbucks coffee (with chocolate syrup) and boy, can this girl talk! She made me feel right at home in her Moroccan theme living room, complete with Middle Eastern drums and ouds on the walls, while she put on a selection of music by one of her favorite singers, IHAB TAWFIK. She said, "I love it when the music sounds awesome,

guys are not the only ones who enjoy great stereo equipment!" This "twenty something" exotic beauty has been a full-time professional dancer/entrepreneur all her life with no signs of slowing down. With her large dark doe eyes dramatically outlined in black kohl eyeliner, this modern-day Cleopatra takes herself and her art so seriously that she never ceased to amaze me. I have always enjoyed Middle Eastern dance and culture all of my life. She is a beautiful young woman who captures the true essence and spirit of Egyptian dance with her keen sense of timing, precise technique and her vivacious theatrical stage presence. Since I am of Lebanese descent Soraya's fascinating artistry really caught my eye. As a musical contractor/entertainment booking agent, she provides an eclectic array of ethnic talent to many of the Atlantic City casinos and hotels in particular the Trump Taj Mahal. She offers fabulous Arabic musicians, unusual variety/specialty acts, including: Fire eaters, Indian/

Egyptian magicians, stilt walkers, jugglers and of course belly dancers. She has really made quite a successful career out of her dancing, because she has her own entertainment agency entitled: Soraya's Middle East Dance and Music Productions, and promotes Arabic dance, music and culture. She freelances all over the East and West coasts performing and booking the entertainment at private parties, conventions, and in L.A. she entertains many top Hollywood celebrities. Soraya produces elaborate "Arabian Nights" theme parties with her band, and calls her show "Soraya and Middle Eastern Sounds". She creates an atmosphere reminiscent of a desert oasis that transcends her clients to a romantic Moroccan Casbah in the Mediterranean. Soraya mesmerizes her audiences to the point where they feel as though they are actually in Cairo, Egypt with her precise and intricate choreography, and intense,

yet playful personality, not to forget her incredible custom-made MADAME ABLA costumes. She has recently mentioned a new designer that is supposed to make gorgeous and strong costumes also, a man named MAHMOUD ABD GHAFAR, right now one is being made for her in Cairo, but, as SORAYA says it is "ENSHALLAH," a dancer can only hope that it is perfect, when it is finished! By speaking with her one can sense that her style is truly authentic, ethnic, elegant and what makes her so unique is how she understands the customs and



the traditions of her culture. Soraya tells me that one cannot forget that this is a dance of another culture and it is crucial for dancers to know more than just memorizing steps and other instructors choreographies. Individuality and personal interpretation is best. When an artist represents this dance it is important to remember this is not jazz, modern or ballet, understanding every nuance of the music, the emotion of what the song is about is paramount. Soraya stated, "Don't just dance to the music, become the music. Don't rush, slow down and listen to how the music (speaks) to you. Express your inner artistic individuality, discover your own personal style and always have fun!"

Soraya is a world renown performer, choreographer and producer who was born in the United States, but is of Middle Eastern/Mediterranean descent. I asked her how she became so

involved in her craft, she replied, "as a young girl, I became entranced and mesmerized by the powerful and amazing excitement and magic of Arabic dance. I was exposed to the rich ethnicity of my heritage at numerous family hafalas, weddings, celebrations, etc." The quarter-tones in the music of the East brought her back to her roots. Soraya said, "I felt I just knew at such an early age that it would be my destiny. It is of a spiritual nature for me when I dance." Nothing upsets her more that when people are ignorant and take the dance the wrong way. Especially when their facts are all wrong and the meaning gets taken out of context and made into something that it is not. Soraya made another important point, "It is ridiculous when people refer to Go-Go dancing/stripping as something "exotic". Exotic means from a far away land, foreign, rare, alien, etc. Get the point? HELLO! It should be referred to as "Erotic",

because it is most definitely not exotic." Oriental dance or Raks Sharqi" celebrates feminine strength, power, agility, self-esteem and creativity and that cannot and should not be exploited by any means, it should be respected. A belly dancer should never forget that we are representing the art of another culture.

Soraya performs for a select clientele or as she refers to it as "high-end gigs". She hand picks everything that she undertakes because her reputation is very important to her. She would never "sell-out" and feels that when she performs she represents not only herself, but all women. Soraya deals so often with a respectable Arabic clientele and is the premier dancer at their haflas and concerts. Soraya does not do business or waste her time with unprofessional people. She knows that when a strong woman is in control of a situation, for example, on stage with thousands of eyes on her, how she handles herself means everything. Unfortunately, some men hate it when women are in a superior position, well paid, public image in a culture where a female is usually very demure. Soraya's clients are people, whether Arab or American that respect and celebrate feminine expression. Soraya says "when you honor and respect yourself, you pay homage to the art in ways you won't believe." Talk about a select audience, Soraya had the honor and the privilege of being invited to entertain the ROYAL FAMILY in MOROCCO at a gala celebration in CASABLANCA. Soraya said, "it was one of the most incredible experiences of my life, both professionally and personally!" She said, "the Moroccan people are so warm and hospitable, I felt at home." I learned a lot from interviewing Soraya, not only about the dance, but, also about the history and folklore of Mediterranean/Mid-Eastern culture. What I find is that the people from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (the MAGREB-which means farthest West) are of a very laid-back nature and don't seem as over zealous than that of the Eastern side of the Arabic world, it does depend on the individual. It seems as though the Arabs of the Mediterranean are a bit different in the way that they carry themselves. Maybe it is that "old world" feeling that one senses in Morocco, and the mint tea is not bad either! What I find so educational is the fact that the Mediterranean Arabs are all descendants of the Roman Empire (Carthage) first, then the Arabs came in the 6th century. That whole region, the Arabic side of the Mediterranean were all a part of the empire. That explains why everything gets dipped into dark green olive oil! To learn more about the art, history, heritage of this richly exotic culture please visit Soraya's elaborate WEB SITE at www.

So, I am finding that Soraya is not just an accomplished virtuoso of belly dance, she is very academically educated as well. She holds Bachelor of Arts Degree in cultural Anthropology/Sociology with an emphasis in Middle Eastern/Mediterranean studies. What I admired about her while talking with this talented artist is her humble and down-to earth personality. I could sense that she was uncomfortable talking about her accomplishments, she is actually very shy, but, explodes with energy on stage! If you ever have the opportunity to speak with her, watch her dance, or study with her, I am sure the feeling would be mutual. Not only is she an intelligent and sharp business woman, but her very eccentric and unique character is glued together with intense energy and creativity mirrored with a dramatic lust for life.

Soraya is the premier dancer and a favorite among the Arabic singers when they perform in the U.S. and has graced the stages as the opening act for numerous famous Middle Eastern singing stars. Soraya travels a lot to dance because her area does not offer that much to an Arabic dancer. It is a very quiet shore town on the ocean and bay. When she danced in Morocco for the royal family she made wonderful connections, and Soraya usually gets booked for many shows through overseas contacts. The largest venue that she ever performed in was the Mark G. Estess Arena at the Trump Taj Mahal (where she has been

dancing and booking the ethnic talent Arabic musicians, dancers, variety/specialty acts in her ongoing "Arabian Nights" performance troupe for the past 7 years), dancing with beloved Egyptian sensation, WARDA to a packed house of 4,500 Arabs was a real treat. Soraya told me that this was "awesome" for her because WARDA is one of her favorite singers! When she worked with the fabulous WARDA, it was her only U.S. engagement. She states, "I opened WARDA'S show for three consecutive evenings, and I wore three completely different costumes. Each day I rehearsed my favorite Arabic selections with her breathtaking musical ensemble,"THE MAGDY AL HUSSENI Orchestra." She said, "After my intense show, the first thing on my mind was to get out of this sweaty costume! I just wanted out of the gauntlets, take off the armour and stretch, but, I told myself, soon! The moment that I finished performing a distinguished Arabic man was waiting for me. We proceeded to walk down a long dark hallway, when I passed WARDA'S dressing room. Her chorus singers came rushing out and told me how much they loved my show. They thought that I was Egyptian, they spoke to me in Arabic, and I answered in broken Arabic: I told them that I am American born, but of Mediterranean/Middle Eastern heritage. Even WARDA herself was impressed with my opening number to "Zai El Hawa," "Sawah"(one of my favorites) and "Lissa Fakir." I made an excellent contact that night. The fact that WARDA herself and her singers/orchestra loved my dancing was one of the greatest compliments." Some other singers Soraya has worked with include: A national tour with Lebanese star GEORGE WASSOUF, exciting pop singer, RAGHEB ALAMEH, MELHAM BARAKAT, Iraqi star, KADHUM AL SAHIR, WAEL Kfoury, SAMIR SULTAN, NAWAHL AI ZOUGHBY, AMR DIAB, TONY HANNA, HANI SHAKER(he is the singer on Rakia Hassan's musical cassette and workshop video from Turquoise Int'l, (Galbi Mala), and even famous Egyptian composer and arranger, maestro HANY MEHENNA (who was responsible for composing the famous "PRINCESS OF CAIRO" and "ME SHAAL" for the legendary Nagwa Fouad and Algerian superstar SAMIRA SAEED, etc. Soraya continues to work and tour with famous Arabic legends in countless concerts all across the U.S. and abroad.

Soraya is mostly a self-taught dancer and when she performs her dynamic movements communicate to her captive audience the passion, emotions, beauty, sharp technical detail and subtle artistic nuances that is Middle Eastern dance. Soraya has worked the fabulous choreographer and "dance trainer to the stars", the epitome of Egyptian dance, MADAME RAGIA HASSAN. Soraya studied with RAGIA HASSAN privately in the city (NYC). RAGIA was shocked herself when she saw Soraya's gift for Oriental dance when she stated to her, "Soraya , you are so smart!" Wow! now, that is a compliment. She was so impressed with Soraya's ability to absorb and interpret the choreography, internalize it and make it unique. RAGIA couldn't believe that she born in America, but, she owes that to her heritage. Soraya emphasizes proper Egyptian technique and stated, "The dancer must always be in complete control of herself and reach a point where the mind, body, and soul reach a plateau and merge as one, a kind of artistic, aesthetic, nirvana. When a performer enters a dance space, it is important to take over, to own it and absorb the moment and offer your audience a total experience, one that they will never forget. Every show should be your best, no matter how big or small it is, you never know who is watching. An artist constantly grows with each new experience, I treat everything I do with immaculate detail and I put the same amount of originality into all of my shows, no matter if it is for an American party or for Arabic royalty, dignitaries or International superstars." As I quickly learned from this intense Scorpio, one of her mottos is, "When a belly dancer goes on stage or T.V. or whatever, she must always remember that her image is crucial and that is so important that we as artists, present our dance in the most professional way. A lot of the general public do not realize that belly dance is not something to be

made fun of or just a distraction at an American birthday party to embarrass someone's husband. It is a serious art form and I am sure we as artists will take our dance higher into a new millennium." After speaking with her a great length. It is obvious that she "hand picks" all that she undertakes. She is the "first call" for the best in the business, and if a show or the people involved are not true professionals and respect the art 100%, she does not take the gig. She is extremely well respected herself as an impeccable professional, whenever a high class Arab family or agent is looking for a true Egyptian dancer they call her as far away as NY, PA, Wash D.C., TX, and Boston and Detroit. Integrity and elegance not only as a person, but as a "belly dancer," are her top priority, she feels she represents all dancers and strives for perfection! Even before a concert the Arabs usually ask if Soraya will be dancing, and if it is a top show, she is there. If the show is run by a "fly by night" wannabe, she does not waste her time. She said to me that a dancer must be careful when choosing a show, make sure and be cautious, because a good reputation is everything. Another "SORAYAISM" is, "quality NOT quantity", the quality surely finds her, though! What is so nice about her is that if a gig, no matter how big or small, comes in to her entertainment agency, if it is not sound, "kosher" not only does she turn it down, she does not even recommend any of her dancers because Soraya does not get herself or other performers involved with anything that does not reflect an image of professionalism, with a capital "P"!

When I got the opportunity to watch her, I was captivated, and I do not throw bouquets very easily! Soraya invited me to a casino showroom, where she was dancing with one of Egypt's top singer's. She held her audience with her amazingly strong stage presence and dynamic moves, her graceful finesse and the fact that she knew and anticipated every change in tempo and rhythm, proved her intuitive mastery of this art form. An interesting comment that she made to me really started make sense. She said, "What makes a great Arabic dancer is not how much she moves, but, how little. It is as if the body interprets every subtle Arabic time signature and beat in the music. Memorizing a rigid choreography is not enough, in order for a dancer to be exciting to look at and keep the attention of an Arabic audience, she must flow, and understand the cultural meanings and symbolism, that is what EASTERN dance is all about, whether it be Arabic, Persian, Gypsy (Romany) or East Indian. I have seen instructors teach a choreography that appears mechanical and robotic, instead of fluid, smooth and strong; the performer had not incorporated a very important ingredient, personality! As professionals, we must stay true to the roots of Oriental dance and to what makes it special and different from other forms of dance, by using a full range of emotion, interpretation, body language, gestures, etc. I am sure most belly dancers would know exactly what I mean. When a belly dancer appears as though she is counting, her performance loses that spark. I have seen dancers, who, had absolutely no (transition) between her movements, they actually wait for the next phrase of music to begin while just remaining still. The beauty of EASTERN DANCE is it's soul. Don't get me wrong, but, a personal unique style, creativity all mirrored with proper technique is the true flavor of Middle Eastern dance."

At the onset of the show, the Egyptians in the showroom didn't move from their seats and if any of them were eating, they put their forks down and watched. When the Arabic M.C. emerged on the stage, under the spotlight, he welcomed the audience in Arabic talked about the renowned singer, and when he announced Soraya, the audience clapped and whistled even before the orchestra started. What was so interesting was when the orchestra began her intro, and the crowd saw Soraya enter under the spotlight, the woman zaghareeted! She came out greeted her eager audience and began her show. It is obvious that the audience was waiting for her! As an American, her performance in a traditional Middle Eastern concert attended by mostly Arabs left a lasting

impression on me. I was so anxious to see her, but, Soraya wanted me to wait to view her at an ethnic event. Soraya's command of the stage and the elaborate orchestra that accompanied her every move coupled with her adorable personality was the glue that held it all together. I felt like I was in Cairo at a concert for FIFI ABDO or MONA EL SAAID!

Besides being the favorite at Arabic concerts, weddings and hafias, Soraya has appeared on national television commercials, her sultry expression has been featured in voice overs, she danced on national T.V. shows and even modeled for Italian Vogue magazine.

In the Middle East, being a professional dancer, model and actress is usually not a good thing. In a modest society, such self-expression is considered naughty. Soraya realizes that she cannot possibly change a collective mentality toward the art of belly dance, but she strives to show that she is an individual in love with her art, period. A prominent Egyptian newspaper referred to Soraya as, "An incomparable International star..... and her style has been viewed as reminiscent of famous stars, Zohair Zaki and Nagwa Fouad, etc. Soraya tries to preserve the classical style mirrored with a modern flare.

Soraya is very happy to announce her professional performance video, it is entitled: "SORAYA, LIVE IN CONCERT AT THE TROPICANA CASINO SHOWROOM". The video is approximately 45 minutes long and features 7 camera angles, a powerful Egyptian/Lebanese and Moroccan orchestra, and it is recorded in digital stereo surround sound. She was dancing with one of the most famous Middle Eastern singing sensations and it aired both nationally and internationally on Arabic television. The show was shot in front of an audience of approximately 2,500! The concert features an exciting entrance, haunting taqseems, folkloric Saaidi, funky tabla solos with five percussionists and much more! This video is a fabulous glimpse into an authentic Middle Eastern concert, not just in a studio, and makes you feel as though you were actually in Egypt! It is a MUST HAVE for all belly dancers who love the essence, soul and true spirit of Egyptian dance. Soraya is currently working towards dynamic a CD for Arabic dance that she is very excited about, which should be available in about six months or so. Well, I guess it won't be long until Soraya shimmies her way straight to the top or at least out of the Genies' bottle! Ahlan! Ahlan! Ya Soraya

