



*Leila  
Haddad*

*Photo by Carl F. Sermon*

Performing at Rakkasah  
West the Ouled Nail dance  
(Bou Saada - Algeria) ~  
Photo by Michael Baxter



“Dance  
is my  
voice”

By Ma\*Shuqa Mira Murjan  
Photos by Birame Ndiaye, unless noted

**It's my pleasure to introduce a professional colleague who has been teaching in the USA for the last 25 years, Leila Haddad. Although many dancers have studied with her at the Rakkasah Festivals in California and New Jersey and many other US cities, they may not know Leila's childhood experience, development, and history and accomplishments in Oriental dance. Leila, how did you learn Oriental dance?**

I started dancing in the belly of my mother and came out in this world undulating. Dance is part of my life. As a child, born in Tunisia, from a Tunisian mother and Syrian father, I was very shy (Yes!!! Unbelievable, no? AHAAAAH!!!). However, I was so shy that whenever there were musicians playing in any feast, I would run into the middle of the crowd, dance, dance, and then run and hide under the table.

I was born a dancer, this was my IDENTITY. In Tunisia,

I could go to see the same Arabic movie many many times featuring Tahia Carioca, Samia Gamal, Nabawiya Mustafa, Naima Akef..., come back home and would reproduce their dances in front of my mirror for hours, hidden in my room. Coming back from school, I would rush into my room to dance, dance and dance to Arabic and Berber music.

During the summers, we vacationed and lived in a house by the beach where there were lots of weddings and family gatherings. I would sneak out of my room with my cousins, disguised, and hide on the terrace to watch the people dancing. In my family, it was like a tradition to play an instrument, sing, and recite poetry, not “professionally speaking”; but for our private gatherings, my mother played harpsichord, and we would dance all afternoon with our neighbors, our friends... That's how I 'was introduced to' Dance. For me, it was as natural as breathing, drinking, eating.

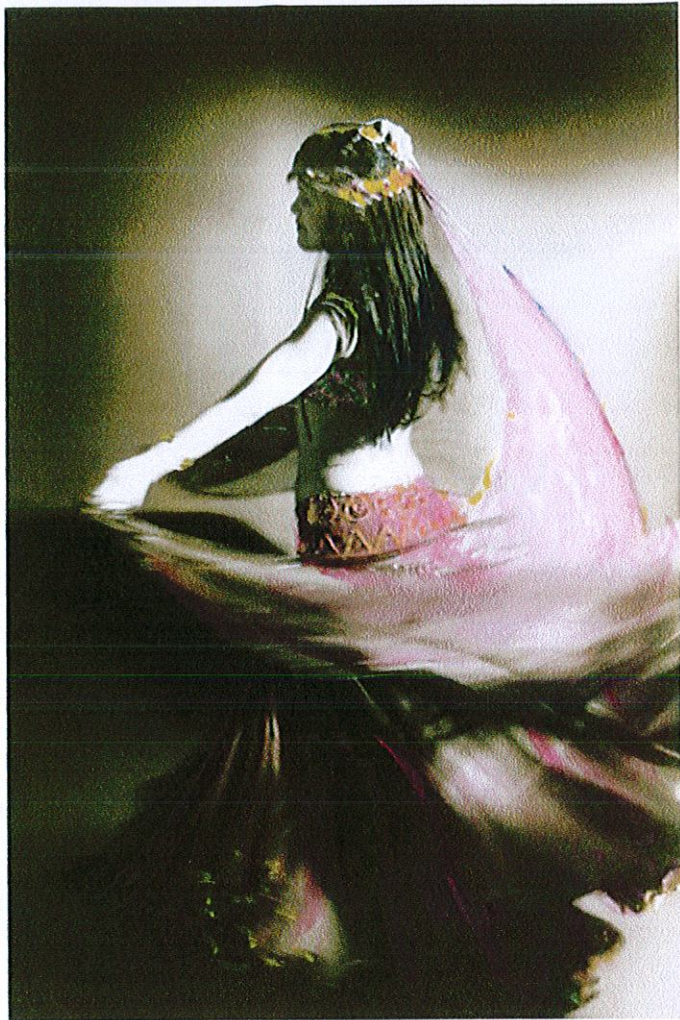
invited to perform original pieces after auditions. When I met the person in charge of the program, he asked me if my piece was Martha Graham's style, or Merce Cunningham style; I was totally lost, as I didn't know anything about Contemporary dance and so with total innocence, I said: "I want to perform danse orientale style". The dance program manager looked at me, rather shocked and answered, "No, not in my theater!!!"

This is how I made a decision to perform Orientale style dance in the best theaters of the world. Being an Oriental dance soloist, I started writing a choreographic piece for a solo of one and half hours and searched for theaters who would present my piece. In Paris, it was out of question for me to schedule my own performance at a theater, not for financial reasons, but due to limitation of theater producers who did not accept Oriental dance as a theatrical stage production art form. However, since I wanted to present Oriental style dance as an art form and open the doors of theaters to Oriental dance – the best way to do this would be to become part of the family of the Dance. Thus, I made it my mission for Oriental Dance to be featured in theaters just as ballet, modern dance, and other classical dance forms are presented."

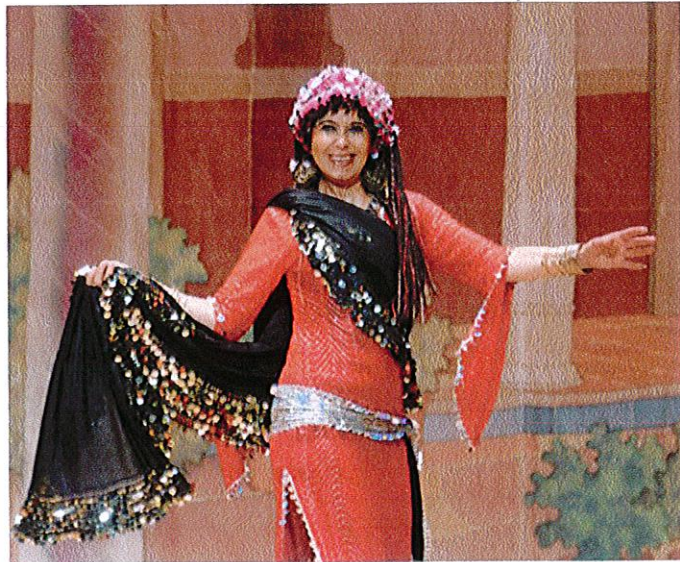
#### **What compelled you to begin teaching Oriental Dance classes and seminars?**

Leila says, "My involvement in this project to move Oriental dance into the theater was so high that I decided I must teach Raqs Sharqi and convince my students of the intricate beauty of this dance. I regarded my students as ambassadors (messengers) of my culture. I saw my teaching as a little door leading to big spaces of Arabic/Berber music, literature, poetry, and culture, and provide better knowledge of those post-colonialist countries to overcome the distorted ideas that foreigners held about the Arab world."

It's important to put Leila's mission in context: She was a student, an intellectual, and politically engaged and trying to find her place in the French society dealing with confusing images about Arabo-Berber people, in part because in the early 60s, France had lost its colonies - among them Algeria, with whom they were engaged in a war... Thus, Leila used dance as a political weapon; it was a language to communicate with the French public. She imposed herself as a woman, as a dancer with an Arabo-



*Photo by Carl F. Sermon*

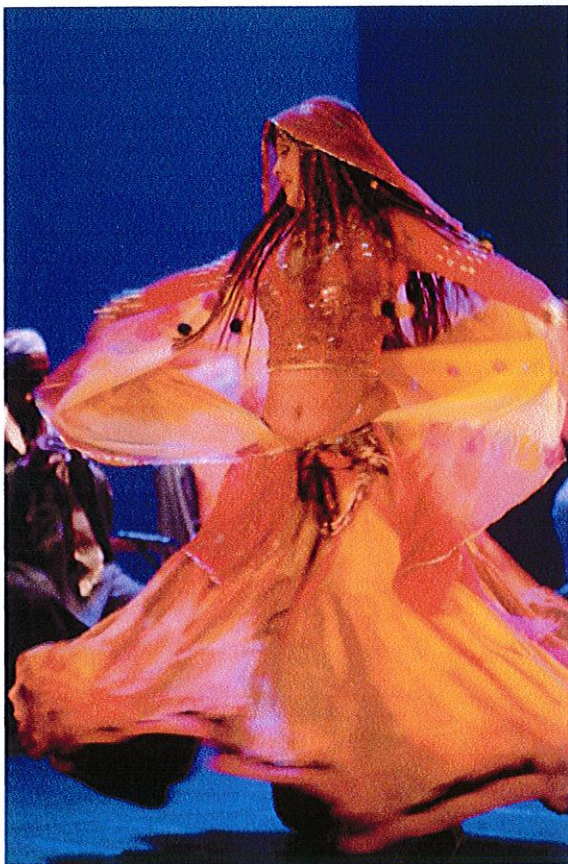


My grandmother would lead 'STAMBALI' rituals (the equivalent of Zar, in Egypt - American people are more familiar with this word, I think), again for the family, friends, neighbors, and I would hide to see this ritual of trance dance. That's probably why I always considered myself a DANCER. I didn't choose to dance. It is the dance who chose me!

**Why do you focus on dance in the theatre instead of the usual performance venues of nightclubs and restaurants?  
What ignited your passion for dance and theatre?**

Says Leila, "After my secondary schooling, my parents sent me to London to study Comparative Literature English and Italian. One day, I went to the theater to see a play (acting, dancing, and singing) by the Zulu Theater denouncing apartheid in South Africa and for the liberation of Nelson Mandela. I was struck by this strong and political message against apartheid!!!"

Leila goes on to say, "I was familiar with theater, going to see 'classical' European plays from Molière, Shakespeare... But to see a political play was new to me. I was entranced, found it magical and wondered how one could "educate"



and send a message to an audience through the theatre! So I asked permission to come to 'open rehearsals' of this theater group. After a while, the director asked me if I wanted to be part of this theater group and I immediately answered YES! We were a thespian group of more than 20 actors from 12 different nationalities (Europeans and Africans fighting for a better world). I had no idea how to place my voice, to act, dance, and sing on stage. And the first time I was on stage, I totally fell in love with THEATER WORK. And I decided that I would dedicate my life to my new-born passion. They could have me cleaning, changing the bulbs, whatever... but I had to be in a theater. The Zulu theater was present in three cities: London, Paris, and Berlin. So, I decided to join the group in Paris while continuing my studies."

Leila shares, "Because many people liked my dance, I decided to write a choreographic piece of approximately 20 minutes in order to audition for a festival called: *Dance Beyond Frontiers* where choreographers and dancers were



On stage in Paris with her dance company performing *Zikrayat - Tribute to Om Kalsoum* (choreographic piece of 95 minutes)

a page of commentary in the famous daily newspaper 'Le Monde'. For me, this signified that I had WON THE BATTLE FOR RECOGNITION of this dance as an art form. To paraphrase her critique: She didn't mention the color of my costume, how many minutes I shimmied, and how pretty I was..." "I dance being an African, an Arab, and a Human. My roots are multiple. Like Nazim Hikmet (famous political Turkish poet or Pablo Neruda (famous political poet and writer), I say: "Write, I am Human".

**I understand that you teach in Paris, but your work as a soloist and choreographer of Oriental dance has been recognized and you have also been invited to perform internationally. Tell us about some of these professional experiences abroad.**

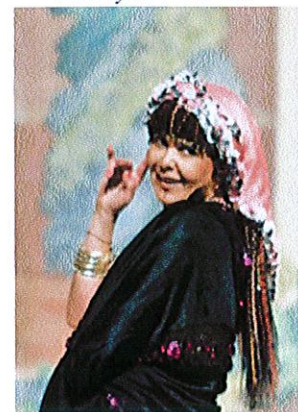
In part, what makes Leila unique in the genre of Raqs Sharqi is her style of dancing Raqs Sharqi. Leila says, "Thanks to my experience in theaters, what makes my Raqs Sharqi performances quite unique is my use of the space. I make use of the entire staging - covering the whole space. My secret to designing performance on the large stage is the use of architectural principles and drawing lines of movement and flow. My focus is the music as I translate it with the movements. Music is my master, and I translate it with my dance. Each instrument, qanun, ud, nay, tabla... is put in the limelight, but also in total harmony within the Tahkt. My only concern is to be at the service of the composer,

be in total synchronicity with the music. The most complex thing is interpretation of the musicality, the dynamics and expression within the music. It is like a play. Dancing is acting. Movements are words, sentences, poetry and each of my choreographies is a story I am sharing with my audience. For my point of view, it is very important to 'understand each style' and show it through dance, costumes."

Leila - among modern choreographers, her work as a choreographer and a dancer is recognized and her love for the dance led her to teach classes, workshops here in Paris, in France, in Europe and all over the world. Leila teaches, among other subjects, Raqs Sharqi, Balady, Saidi, North African Traditional Dances (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia). Leila is known for her beautiful dance and performs wearing elegant Assuit costumes she wears when she performs Balady; and when she performs Tunisian traditional dances - wearing the elaborate and authentic native costumes and jewelry of her beloved Tunisia.

Leila explains, "I started to become well-known among the dancers and choreographers and I had many articles in national daily, weekly, monthly

Photo by Carl F. Sermon



Berber identity. This is why so many have heard her always introduce herself as: "An Arab woman from Paris, France." Says Leila, "I have become so accustomed to declaring my background to others to justify my mission – it has become a personal mantra and personal behavior." Because she lives in a foreign country, she frequently encounters the need to define her background and culture.

**Tell us about your *raison-d'être* with regard to your mission to elevate Raqs Sharqi.**

A quote by Oberon of Seattle, Washington, USA, in a 2006 interview for *The Belly Dancer* magazine provides an excellent introduction: "Given our times and recent directions our dance has wandered into occasionally, here timelessly, from a worldly woman who 'walks the walk' and lives the dance within her heritage, are words to consider with care." to Leila's response regarding her '*raison-d'être*', goal and mission in life.

Says Leila, "Let me refer to the book of Edward Said *Orientalism*, who wrote about an image of this cheap Orientalism and characterizing the Arab culture, as a cross between the olives and the mint tea...(referencing the exotic culture of the Middle East). We have all been subject to the photographs of the most prolific Orientalist photographic duos, Lehnert & Landrock ... They used the money they made catering to the pornography market for naked & semi-naked 'native' women to finance their hundreds of real photos of people and places in Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt. ("The Colonial Harem" by Malek Alloula is a really good read about these sorts of 'French postcards'...), and the literature

of Flaubert, and the myriad of 'Orientalist' paintings depicting Arabo-Berber girls, and women with naked breasts posing in lavish attitudes among pillows in the harems of their imagination. Because of these erroneous images from 'Orientalism', Raqs Sharqi was not even regarded as a dance with a solid technical background, nor with a strong and intricate technique. I fought to teach in the best school of dance in Paris. I pioneered this dance in France."

Leila continues, "I know how to dance, but I had no formal training to teach. I found I had to deconstruct my dance in order to learn how to teach, as I had no experience as a teacher. And, funny enough, it is an American tap dancer living in Paris, Sarah Petronio of Chicago, IL, USA, who gave me my first opportunity to teach in her school. I was so passionate that I convinced her of the beauty of this dance and I explained to her: 'I have not formally studied this dance. My teachers have been my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, my neighbors...' And Sarah replied: "Well, why not! Let's try."

**Leila, how do you know your work as an Oriental Raqs Sharqi dance professional and teacher has been effective and accepted?**

Leila says, "I have had many articles written about my choreographic work and published in national very-well-known French newspapers, daily, weekly, monthly, like *Le Monde - Liberation - Le Parisien - Elle - Le Nouvel Observateur - Le Point - l'Express - Marie Claire - Telerama* and also major Dance Magazines : *Ballet 2000 - Danser - Dance Europe - Danser Canal Historique*, to name a few. Many dance critics came to see my performances finally, the same ones who are used to seeing at least 200 choreographic pieces per year of Ballet, Danse Contemporaine, Modern Dance, Jazz, etc... As professional critics they have the sense of dramaturgy, space, lighting, stage presence, and technique (of course). The first time one of the most famous dance critics came to see my work, I was at the same time happy, proud and frightened. I used to call her the "Khomeini" (despots) of the dance critics... AHAHAH! Every choreographer dreams to have even one line written by her, or her name mentioned by this particular critic. She liked my performance and wrote half



On stage in a theater in Paris, performing *The Dance of the Seven Veils* - solo of 90 minutes with 5 musicians

newspapers and magazines in France. Then I had many interviews in national TV programs in France, and was invited even to participate in debates. For the first time ever, the Institute of the Arab World in Paris invited me to give a lecture on Oriental dance. Thus, I understood that, in France, in order to impose your culture, your art, you must convince the people with your ideas. As the years passed by, I finally became recognized for my work in Oriental dance, and theaters opened their doors to my work as a choreographer and a soloist.”

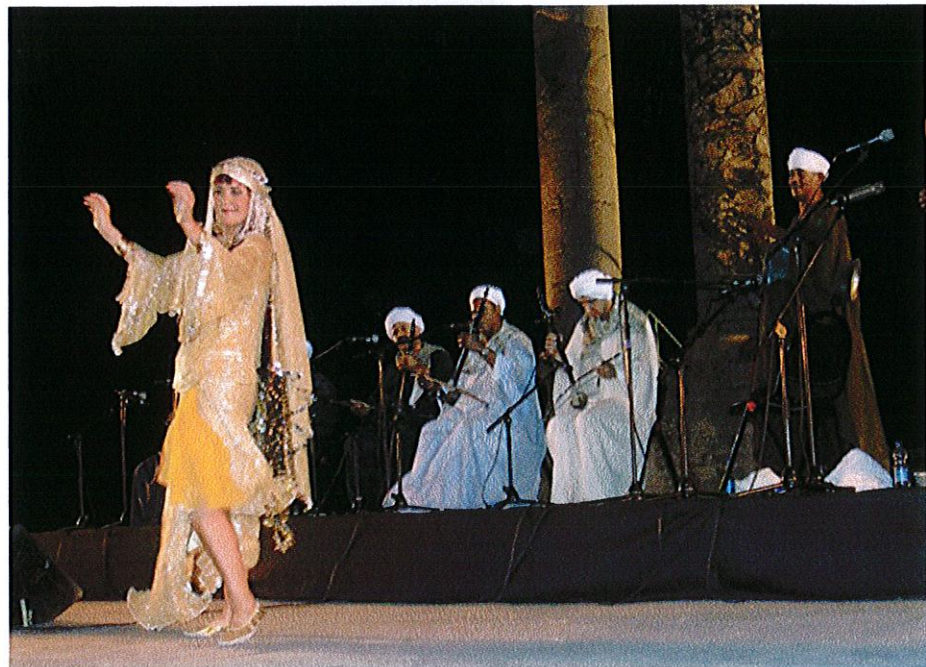
Leila recounts experiences of her many performances in theaters all over the world and among them, the famous Théâtre du Rond Point des Champs Elysées in Paris that programmed a new piece of work: “Aquarelles” – a 90 minute piece with a solo performed with 9 Arabic musicians. Over the years, Leila has produced 14 pieces of choreography as a soloist and with her Leila Haddad dance company.

Some years ago Leila was sponsored by the World Music Institute in New York to tour some cities in the United States – she performed in amazingly beautiful and huge theaters around the country. Leila says, “They booked her 90 minute solo performance called ‘In the Trail of the Ghawazee’ with the famous ‘Musicians of the Nile.’” On this dance tour in the USA, she performed, among many others, in the Royce Hall Theater of UCLA (Los Angeles), and the Skirball Theater (New York).

**Every dancer and dance instructor has a guiding light that focuses their work. Tell us about your mentors and the focus of your dancing and instruction.**

Leila tells us the story of her discovery about Oriental Dance instruction. Leila recounts, “When I started teaching Oriental Dance in Paris, I thought, being very naive and genuine, that I was the only one teaching that

**Performing in Le Théâtre Antique de Nîmes (South of France) with the Musicians of the Nile**



discipline in the world. I was not familiar with anything in the world of Raqs Sharqi in America (which started in America in the 1960s) as it was in the time before the internet! I had an Italian student living in Amsterdam who would come once a week to study with me, as there were no Oriental dance classes in Holland. One day, she comes to class very excited and tells me: “You know there is a very famous American dancer who will be teaching Raqs Sharqi in Stuttgart, Germany.” Leila said, “I have to go learn from him because I had never heard of him. I was curious, my God, an American man teaching Oriental dance. So I asked for his name and she tells me: His name is “Bert Balladine”. I quickly decided to go to Stuttgart to study with him for the weekend. Well, to make a long story short, I went there and I met the marvelous Bert Balladine and from that time on we became very good friends. Bert told me about America and the dance community there. Bert proposed that I go to America and teach during the summer - that he will help me meet with dancers there.”

Leila recalls, “I wrote to Morocco in New York City who immediately accepted my query and invited me to teach in her studio and stay with her. She was amazing!!! So I had two wonderful *mentors*: Bert Balladine on the West Coast and Morocco on the East Coast. I spent an entire summer, teaching in many cities, with the invaluable help of Bert and Morocco. While in New York, Morocco invited me to stay with her in her house for as long as I needed. The same offer from Bert when I was in San Francisco. And, it is thanks

to Bert that I met Shukriya, producer of the Rakkasah Festivals, who immediately organized a workshop for me. And thanks to Bert also, I met Najia Marlyz who wrote a beautiful article about me in the 'Habibi' magazine. I became a great success thanks to Bert and Morocco because they both talked to their contacts in order for them to sponsor me. Bert and I stayed very close until he went to another world. I want to share a story that I remember him telling me - this funny story about my coming to Stuttgart to take his workshop. Bert says with his inimitable accent "ZO... When my German sponsor told me there was a person called Leila Haddad coming to the workshop, I thought you were a very old Lebanese lady coming to criticize me... AHAHAH!"

Leila says of her Oriental dance career: "I love teaching: it keeps me grounded and humble. I consider myself always as a 'student dancer'. One day, I read an interview of a very famous French actor and he begins his interview with this sentence: 'Me, Jean Vilar, 83 years old, student actor... ' » WOW!!! Dance has taught me humility, patience, total dedication. Dancers are like flowers in an immense garden: different and unique. I am very proud to have opened the doors of what I consider the modern temple: THEATRE. Dance is my religion. Dance is my nationality. Dance is my life. I remember my muse, Isadora Duncan, who said 'DANCE YOUR LIFE. Dance of the future will come from the past. Dance of the future will come from Africa.'"



In a theater in Stokholm (Sweden)

**Leila, can you comment about the relationship of Oriental Raqs Sharqi to other classical forms in the world of dance and tell us the similarities and differences found in professional dance forms?**

Leila explains, "Our dance form, Raqs Sharqi, although it is an old art form within the contemporary world of dance, is very young in the world of dance performance on the theater stage. Raqs Sharqi has been taught in the US for 50 years, and by comparison, ballet started in the 16th century in France with Louis XIV – with movements from fencing. Contemporary dance was pioneered by the love of my life, the American Isadora Duncan. In the late 19th

century... Loie Fuller, an American dancer, put in light her dance with 35 meters of material, which is now used in our dance and known as 'Isis wings'. Other Americans, Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn, shed light on and introduced movement from the so-called *ethnic dances*. Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham were great choreographers, who put their performances in theaters and helped create a strong basis for Contemporary dance as a theatre performance."

Leila goes on to say, "I believe that Raqs Sharqi has to exist also in the theatres for its total recognition. Dance is a PASSION - Some people are born dancers, they have no choice. I was born that way. How many students study literature? And how

many of those students, how many become writers, poets - very few. Dance is LIGHT - Dance is FIRE - Raqs Sharqi is multidimensional: it is sensual, soulful, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. It has many layers. We use all our chakras. Put together, a dancer creates a sacred architecture on stage. 'DANCE' is the most beautiful verb in the world. Although we learn movement and dance choreographies, the most important thing that we cannot learn is CHARISMA. We dream of this ethereal element of dance professionalism – but it can only exist on the large theater stage."

**We see that you are organizing and leading travel tours to Rajasthan? How is East Indian dance related to Raqs Sharqi Oriental dance?**

Leila is ebullient and replies, "The reason why I organize trips/workshops to Rajasthan/India is my desire to share my love for the Gypsy dances, Kalbelyia Dances from the Kalbelyias people. A few years ago, I went to the theatre to see a performance of Gypsy dances, among them, the Kalbelyia, and I was struck by the similarities with the Ghawazee/ Gypsy dances from Upper Egypt. I then decided to go and study in Rajasthan and learn more about this connection. I was very fortunate to meet some dancers of this ethnic group and after I had traveled to Rajasthan a few times, spending between 4 to 6 weeks in country, I received a very prestigious European grant called 'Villa Medicis outside the walls' that is given to very few choreographers every year. Although



it is quite difficult to get that type of grant, I finally met their requirements and had the chance to stay in Rajasthan for 4 months. This gave me the opportunity to get to know many artists, among them the best gypsy dancers, singers, and musicians... as I totally fell in love with the true gypsy culture, as I studied with them, and sharing time with them.”

Because my students wanted to see India as I had come to know it, my students pushed me to organize a tour. That’s why I got into organizing 3 weeks tours to Rajasthan. In this very short time frame, due to the way I organize the tour, and because I invite local artists to share their knowledge with my students, these tours are quite successful and I now offer them twice each year. Every year I organize two tours with dance workshops: one in Marrakech/Morocco in Autumn, and one in Rajasthan/India in Spring.” Says Leila, “Part of the reason I plan and organize these tours is to promote and support the teaching gypsy dancers – and foster the tradition of learning and experiencing the culture – just as I have become a teacher of Raqs Sharqi based on my native-born talent and knowledge.”



Photo by Carl F. Sermon

*We all wish Leila much success in proselytizing and continuing to provide choreography, performances, and instruction of Raqs Sharqi/Oriental Dance throughout the world. With her immigrant background as an Arab with Syrian heritage – she is in the best possible position to extend her knowledge by mentoring future Oriental Raqs Sharqi dancers who may be among the new wave of Syrian immigrants in Europe.*

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#### MA\*SHUQA MIRA MURJAN



**Ma\*Shuqa Mira Murjan** has been performing, teaching, and coaching for over 40 years. Ma\*Shuqa and Leila have been professional colleagues for many years and their paths have crossed at many festivals and workshops. Most recently, Ma\*Shuqa sponsored and hosted Leila Haddad for workshops at her Los Gatos, CA, studio and for the Mendocino Music and Dance Camp 2015. Her **Ma\*Shuqa Method** gives dancers a structure for developing improvised choreography while performing with individualized styling. Her workshop is perfect for teachers and dancers who want to enhance performance dynamics and styling. She has authored many articles on aspects of professionalism and performance in Middle Eastern dance – including a key work entitled “**Raqs Sharqi Improvisational Takasim Dance Part 2: The Performance Intersection of Music, Raqs Sharqi, and Tarab**” found at [www.MaShuqa.com](http://www.MaShuqa.com) Ma\*Shuqa offers dancers extended study opportunity through her *Diva Dancer Professional Development Workshops* which offer dancers topics on

cultural aspects of music, rhythm, and dance theory to enhance their weekly studies and performances. As a dance photographer – what she sees through the camera lens reflects a dancer’s professionalism. Her husband, **Carl Sermon**, is well-known for his festival and performance photography of Oriental dancers. Ma\*Shuqa and her husband Carl work together to provide artistic direction and performance photography for photo sessions with Oriental dancers. See their work in *The Belly Dance Chronicles magazine*, *The GildedSerpent.com E-zine*, and [www.CarlSermonPhotography.Zenfolio.com](http://www.CarlSermonPhotography.Zenfolio.com)