



BELEDI BEAT



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Notes from our new General Manager

Happy New Year everyone! I'm very happy and proud to take on Jawaahir's General Manager position this year. I follow in the graceful dance steps of Eileen Goren who retired at the end of last year. I look forward to tackling all that this wonderful job entails with grace and fluidity. Sincerely, Jenny Piper



photo by Terra Sura

Shelley Thomas World Music Vocalist

Shelley Thomas, who was the vocalist in the musical ensemble at Jawaahir's annual show "Sing to Me a Little" this past year, gave our audiences a unique and impressive performance. Her voice is fresh, melodic, and evocative. Everyone who had the opportunity to hear her was enthralled.

Shelley's voice definitely gets a workout, too. She can sing in fifteen languages, and her talents are very much in demand on the World Music scene. Shelley sings in four folk ensembles and specializes in Bulgarian, Arabic, Ukrainian, and Russian music and song. She's also recorded with Hassan Hakmoun, the Moroccan Gnawa star, and performed with countless notable singers and musicians, including Bassam Saba and Belyamani, at festivals around the world. Given everything she has accomplished with her singing talent—recordings, awards, world travel—she is also remarkably down-to-earth and easy to talk to.

Like many people who have become professional singers, Shelley was a child who grew up in a musical household. Her mother was a classical pianist and one of her favorite childhood memories was falling asleep at night listening to her mom play Beethoven. As for her own talent, it emerged very early. "My mother told me I could hold perfect pitch when I was two," she said, and she banged on pots and pans for musical accompaniment. She grew up primarily in California (now she lives in New York City), singing and playing the piano and guitar through high school, and like her mom, was focused on Western classical music.



When she went to the California Institute of the Arts, however, her life in music radically changed. A class in voice diaphragm technique exposed her to Hindustani, Persian, and Bulgarian singing. "I fell in love with it," she said. "It ignited a passion."

She switched her major and graduated with a BFA in World Music Vocal Performance. “I love the scales, the flexibility of voice, the spontaneity and freedom. I feel a deep soul connection to that music,” Shelley said. Now she gives her creativity free rein as a singer, composer, poet, and music arranger.

Her passion for her work is demonstrated in the intense commitment she gives to studying the music she sings, and her attention to getting it right is no small feat given the breadth and scope of many world musical traditions. Not to mention that when she came to Minnesota to sing for Jawaahir’s show, she had a limited time to learn five new Arabic songs (the original singer had to drop out). “I love a challenge and I was up for it,” she said. Shelley drilled the songs nonstop for three weeks straight, letting the music take over all aspects of her life—listening to recordings of them on the subway, constantly researching and rehearsing at home—in order to completely inhabit them on stage.

Did she ever! Shelley’s performance was sublime. “I work to be completely present on stage, to be natural and not anxious. Singing is what I’m here for, and everything inside me I give to the crowd. Mastery should look effortless,” she said.

Shelley also said she really enjoyed the experience with Jawaahir and liked working with Cassandra, another artist who makes mastery look effortless. Shelley’s seen a lot of belly dance shows, she said, but not many that feature full Arabic ensembles to accompany it. “It’s so much more beautiful and mystical to bring the music and dance together.”

In addition to her regular performance schedule, Shelley will be releasing an a capella album of Bulgarian folk songs in early 2016. To be on the mailing list announcing its release, go to her website at www.shelleyvoice.com and fill in the form on the Contact page.

Jawaahir Year in Review

Now that the Jawaahir Dance Company and the Cassandra School of Dance has fully settled into a third year in its new space, both the school and dance company have been busier than ever. In addition to the annual henna party, open houses, cabarets, Cassandra’s Weeklong Intensive, and gala events, the company has done more collaborations and performances out in the local community.

The dance company did several outdoor festivals this past year, a departure from occasional school visits. “We like being able to do festival dancing because we can add an educational component, including a lecture or demonstration, where we can talk directly to the audiences about the dances and costumes,” Cassandra said.



One of the highlights this past year for Cassandra was dancing at St. Catherine’s in St. Paul in the Yuval Ron Ensemble’s Sacred Music Concert in April. “They have a beautiful and unique repertoire of sacred songs from around the world,” said Cassandra. Cassandra joined them in a spinning performance. “It was our first time working together, and we hope to do something collaborative in the future,” she said.

Samantha Burnstein, an expert on folkdance, particularly Iraqi Kawleeya, did a workshop at the school in June. It’s a dance style associated with the Rom people and known for its high energy moves and dramatic head tossing. Cassandra said, “People may see that in an upcoming Jawaahir show.” Karim Nagi also did a workshop in October on Arabic Music for Dancers. “It was an extremely clear and concise workshop,” she said, and as the inimitable performer he is, he also danced a debke at the Amwaaj Hafla while he was in town. Both workshops drew more men participants, as well.

On the staffing front, the amazing Eileen Goren retired from her role as office manager and two decades as a dance company member this past year. The transition has been ably handled by Jenny Piper, current office manager, dance teacher, and member of Jawaahir. Lori Wilczek became “costume mistress” and has been organizing the dance company’s vast store of costumes, which have been in storage since the move. Lori is not only organizing the storage and labeling of the costumes, but keeping an inventory database of them. “It’s a big job,” Cassandra said.

Of course THE highlight of the year was this past year’s show “Sing to Me a Little” which was launched in The Lab Theater—a first for Jawaahir. Cassandra also had new musicians join the Georges Lammam Ensemble—Michael Ibrahim from the National Arab Orchestra, and cellist Khalid Khalifa—and said they were great additions to the show. “The annual show is the thing I’m most proud of, and it was interesting to be in a new space working with new people for the first time,” she said.



Upcoming Events

[Register now](#) for **Jawaahir’s 23rd Annual Henna Party**. Delight in an afternoon of henna, dance, food, and fun as we once again bring the Middle East to the Midwest. Sunday, January 17, 2:30–5:00pm.

[Buy your tickets now](#) for **Cassandra’s Cabaret: Winter White!** Join Cassandra as she transforms the Jawaahir Studio Theater into a Cabaret! Intimate tables, delicious *hors d’oeuvres*, and an evening of fabulous dance and music. Saturday, February 6, 8:00pm. Seating starts at 7:45.

[Caravan under the Stars](#) is fast approaching. Jawaahir’s annual gala and fundraiser is sure to be magical once again! Join our mistress-of-ceremonies, TPT2’s Almanac co-host Cathy Wurzer, for an exciting evening with performances by Cassandra and Jawaahir. Of course, we’ll also have silent and live auctions, and henna artist Angela from [Ancient Traditions Mehndi](#). Thursday, May 12, 6:00–10:00pm

[Cassandra’s 2016 Weeklong Oriental Dance Intensive](#) will be here before you know it. Join us for this six-day workshop taught by the fabulous Cassandra! Monday-Saturday, June 13–18, 2016. Space is limited to 25 participants so [register now!](#)

For further information on any of our upcoming events, check out the [Jawaahir website](#). You may also call 612-872-6050, or email us at admin@jawaahir.org.