



Company Biographies



Malika Benachour (Malika) has been a student of The Cassandra School since 2009. Her introduction to dance was studying Latin dance and Afro-Cuban rhythms with René Thompson, and that has continued for 7 years. Malika joined Jawaahir in 2011.



Tatyana Butkova (Tatyana) started studying Middle Eastern Dance with Tina Shokri while visiting her home city of Minsk, Belarus in 2002. In 2004 she started classes at The Cassandra School and fell in love with spectacular performances by Jawaahir Dance Company. Tatyana performs at the Guild of Oriental Dance Festivals, Pratt hafas, and the Renaissance Festival.



Laura Crocker (Lahlia) had the good fortune to attend her first Middle Eastern dance class with Cassandra while studying linguistics in college. She was captivated by the music and movements of the dance, and found that the interplay between the two was her new favorite language. In 2007 Laura joined Jawaahir Dance Company, and has been involved in many local and regional Middle Eastern dance performances since then. She also enjoys teaching the art form, and often fills in as a substitute teacher at The Cassandra School.



Lauren Fraga (Lauren) started studying Middle Eastern dance in 2006 at the Cassandra School, and immediately fell in love with the art form. She has studied with a number of different artists, both locally and abroad. She joined Jawaahir in 2010, and in 2012 moved to Brazil and continued her studies of Middle Eastern dance there. She is now back and performing with Jawaahir Dance Company.



Eileen Goren (Risha) began her modern dance education at an early age, studying with former members of the Martha Graham Company and at the Graham School for over 10 years. She also has many years of training in ballet, jazz, tap, international folk dance, ballroom, and Savoy-style Lindy Hop. She discovered Middle Eastern dance in 1987, and joined Jawaahir at its inception in 1989. She has continued her study with Cassandra as well as with internationally recognized teachers. Eileen is a member of the Board of Jawaahir and the Jawaahir General Manager.



Genevieve Johnsen (Genevieve) had her first taste of Middle Eastern dance through a community education class while attending college in Duluth, MN. After moving to Minneapolis in 2008, she was excited to find The Cassandra School and began taking classes. She continues to be impressed with the music, movement, and cultural expertise that Cassandra and the Jawaahir members share with their students. Genevieve joined Jawaahir in 2012.



Sarah Jones-Larson (Toha) performed internationally as a child with Philadelphia's Ballet Des Jeunes and New York's Ecos De Espana. Locally, she performed with Zorongo Flamenco and Theatre de la Jeune Lune before joining Jawaahir in 1994. A student of Arabic and a voice-over artist, Sarah made her Arabic singing debut with the Georges Lammam Orchestra in Cassandra's solo show “Orientalia.” In May, 2007, Sarah returned to Jawaahir after a year in Philadelphia hosting a radio program on WJJZ (under the name, Salina Jones.) In Philadelphia, she danced with Habiba's ensemble.



Theresa Kane (Theresa) began studying Middle Eastern dance in 1998 after attending a performance of "Shoma" and being struck by the beauty of the movements. She performs regularly as a soloist, teaches, and continues to study extensively with Cassandra as well as dance instructors from around the world. She joined Jawaahir in 2004.

Jawaahir Dance Company Biographies, cont.



Christina Lira (Christina) first started taking Middle Eastern Dance classes at The Cassandra School in 2003. Prior to joining Jawaahir, she performed with Sumunar Indonesian Dance Group and Al Bahira Middle Eastern Dance Theater. She has taken workshops from various teachers such as Karim Nagi, Virginia, Raqia Hassan, Aziza of Cairo, Nourhan Sharif, and Jillina. Christina continues to follow her passion for dance, taking classes and performing at local restaurants.



Alisa Martodam (Aleesa) was first introduced to Middle Eastern dance in 1999 at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. Captivated by the graceful movements and energetic expression of the dance, she has studied Middle Eastern dance ever since, attending classes and workshops taught by local and internationally renowned dance instructors. Alisa is Assistant Director of the Sisters of the Sahara dance troupe and dances as a solo artist in local restaurants, open stages, and haflas. She joined Jawaahir in 2011.



Jenna Neher (Jenna) began studying Middle Eastern dance in 2003 at The Cassandra School. She never passes an opportunity to learn new types of dance and has dabbled in jazz, hip-hop and salsa. In addition to being a member of Jawaahir, Jenna performs in area restaurants and cabaret shows.



Jenny Piper (Jemorah) began her dance career in ballet, contemporary, and pointe at the age of seven. She has studied Middle Eastern dance since 1995, becoming a member of Jawaahir in 2000. She now performs locally, tours with Jawaahir, and teaches at The Cassandra School in St. Paul.



Miriam Samuels-Schwartz (Miriam) grew up in the Twin Cities performing Israeli folk dance with Orim Dance Troupe. In 2005 while attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she took her first Middle Eastern dance class with Mona N'wal, and fell in love with the form. After returning to the Twin Cities, Miriam continued her studies under Cassandra Shore, and has since performed with multiple local groups including Caravan Dance and Music. Miriam has also studied Brazilian samba and Javanese court dance.



Angela Skrade (Angelina) attended her first Middle Eastern dance classes in 2001 with Julia at the now defunct Seven Bridges. After a year of learning with various local instructors, she moved on to classes with Cassandra, where she continues her studies to this day. Angela performs regularly as a soloist in local restaurants, and teaches occasionally through The Cassandra School. She joined Jawaahir in 2011.

When Angela is not dancing, you can find her working as the administrative assistant in Jawaahir's office, or practicing the beautiful art of henna through her business Ancient Traditions Mehndi.



Renee Szudy (Renee) began studying under Cassandra in 1996 and joined Jawaahir in 2006. She was drawn to Middle Eastern dance after attending the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) where she saw Arabic women perform social dances. She liked how they took their scarves off their heads and wrapped them around their hips in order to accent their movements; she was particularly inspired by their shimmies. Renee has a 12-year background in gymnastics.



Helen Voelker (Helen) has been a member of Jawaahir since 1990. She has performed with the Nancy Hauser Dance Company and the Continental Dance Theatre. Helen is a medical researcher at the University of Minnesota.



Heidi Waldron (Zahirah) began dancing with Nadia Sahar in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1995. After relocating to Minneapolis in 1998, she continued her studies at the Cassandra School. In 2004 she became a Jawaahir apprentice. Heidi currently performs at several Twin Cities restaurants and is an active member of the Guild of Oriental Dance.



Monique Yenamandra (Monique) has been studying Middle Eastern dance since the late 1980s. The first and major influence on her studies lies with Cassandra. While living in Bonn, Germany for six months, she studied with the excellent Turkish teacher and performer, Seina, and since has supplemented her education with workshops with Egyptian dancers such as Raqia Hassan, Nadia Hamdi, Mahmoud Reda, and Ibrahim Farrah and travel to the Middle East to study music and dance. Monique's performance career began in 1996 when she joined Jawaahir Dance Company.