

Review: Cassandra's Weeklong, March 2002

by Sherezzah Bint al-Waha

I was not entirely happy when I first heard about Cassandra's weeklong workshop in Minneapolis in mid-March, 2002. I have studied regularly with Cassandra at Oasis Dance Camps (which might be considered "half-weeklongs") and elsewhere, and I really *really* wanted to go, but I had a scheduling problem. However, that changed and it turned out I could attend after all. But then there was some concern about cost, and arranging a place to stay, and the fact that it's cold in Minnesota in March, especially for a Florida wimp like myself. Fortunately, the people in Minnesota are warm: quite a few members Cassandra's dance company made their homes available at low cost to participants in the weeklong. I had dance friends there who were willing to put me up (and loan me a good winter coat!)

So, everything worked itself out fine and, happily, I was one of about 28 students at Cassandra's first weeklong. (Cassandra had limited the number of participants to ensure everyone could receive adequate attention.) The friends I was staying with were also attending, so it got to be rather a fun routine getting up and driving in to dance class together each morning. We thought how wonderful it would be if we could do that *every* day.

I thought the event itself was well organized (it reminded me quite a bit of Oasis Dance Camp that way). The first morning we each received a packet containing a schedule and a tape of the music we'd be using, along with other useful information and goodies. Each day included 5 hours of classes, plus an extra "sit-down" class after lunch. There were also some bonus evening events included that had not been mentioned in the advertising... three shows, one in a restaurant with dinner. The whole package turned out to be a better deal than it might have seemed at first.

The classes were held in Cassandra's studio in a wonderful big room with mirrors and wood floors. The mornings were devoted to technique (to live drumming by Nicole LeCorgne), starting with stretching; the afternoons were for choreography, ending with a cooldown. I think the warmups and cooldowns were highly instrumental in allowing everyone to make it through 5-1/2 days of intense workshop without getting any major cases of "screaming thighs."

Each class was monitored by members of Cassandra's Jawaahir Dance Company whose job it was to assist the students, correct their posture, etc. I think knowing that a couple extra sets of eyes were watching helped me stay on my toes, as it were. I found them to be quite helpful and never obtrusive. My friend Rasha commented that one company member not only pointed out a problem she was having with a particular stretch, but gave her a specific tip (that worked) on how to correct it.

Cassandra taught two choreographies. This may seem like a small number for a weeklong event, but both choreographies were rich, and rather long. Given the complexity, I think that was exactly the right amount. It allowed us to get somewhat comfortable with the choreography, without getting totally overwhelmed. I am quite sure nobody felt it wasn't enough. We spent the first 3 days on an Orientale choreography to Sohair Zaki music which was just exquisite. The last 2 days took a more folkloric turn as we learned a Melaya Leff choreography that was way cute. The last 1/2 day was devoted to summary and review.

The sit-down classes provided a nice break to allow our food to digest after lunch before we started really moving again. Cassandra had compiled a lengthy list of possible topics, including things like Arabic music theory and dance history, and on the first day had us choose which we wanted.

The shows were the icing on the cake. On Wednesday we had dinner at the Beirut (what many consider the best Middle Eastern restaurant in the Twin Cities) along with a show featuring those weeklong participants who wished to perform. On Friday evening, Jawaahir Dance Company performed some of their "greatest hits" back in Cassandra's studio, which had been converted to theatre format for the occasion. I always enjoy seeing Jawaahir, and I especially enjoyed finally being able to see some of the numbers I had previously only heard talked about. And on Saturday evening, again back in the studio theatre, we were treated to a live band with performances by Cassandra, Jawaahir, and other top dancers from the area. The evening closed with everyone getting up for some informal freestyle dancing as the band continued to play. It may have been cold and snowing outside, but inside the Cassandra studio everyone was enjoying the warmth of the music, the dance, and old and new friends.