

Riskallah Riyad: Journey Through Dance

by Donna Lococo

When I attend workshops and dance events, others often ask me what “style” of dance I study. This shouldn’t really be a difficult question, but after a pause I have to answer “Riskallah Style”. I cannot think of any other label that adequately describes the predominant influence in my dance.

For those of you unfamiliar with “Riskallah Style”, allow me to explain. I have been a student of Riskallah Riyad (Dolores Matzen) since 2004, when I attended her class by chance, after which there was no turning back. Since that time I have been privileged to know Riskallah as teacher and mentor, as performer and choreographer, and as a friend. While her work is continuously evolving to incorporate new interests and inspirations, it is also highly disciplined and focused, making it both fresh and timeless.

Riskallah Riyad has performed and taught nationally for forty years, and her style in both is energetic, articulate, and from the heart. Riskallah’s style cannot be properly described by any single category, because her interests and inspirations are so diverse, and all find their way into the dance. Drawing on her Arabic heritage and love of Middle Eastern rhythms, Riskallah weaves her knowledge of folk and classical styles with her training in jazz, ballet, and modern dance to create a tapestry that is both clearly Oriental, and distinctively



Riskallah and Lorelie
photo by Daniel Hripak



photo by Michael Baxter

her own. Riskallah’s impeccable technique reflects years of study with notable teachers and mentors including Serena Wilson, Ibrahim Farrah, Valarie Camille, Elena Lentini, and Marta Zorina. Beyond the technical accomplishment, Riskallah’s complex and textured repertoire exhibits a highly developed sense of narrative and drama delivered through dance.

When I watch Riskallah perform, I stop breathing. It is not just her amazing choreography – more on that later – but her ability to engage her audience emotionally and intellectually, as well as visually. Riskallah invites her audience not just to watch, but to come along and share her experience. In

doing so, I cannot imagine what will come next, but I can’t wait to find out. I will gladly follow her to wherever she wants to take me, whether it is the cathartic farewell of *Incense Rising*, the fluid and joyful freedom of *Metamorphosis*, or the passionate and playful *Faces – Reflections of the Inner Journey*. The precise, clear isolations of classical Oriental dance fuse sometimes with graceful, ballet inspired elements, other times with bits of Broadway, into a cohesive, beautiful, and interesting whole. Riskallah always delivers a shimmering, multi-faceted jewel of a performance that is technically dazzling, but also inviting and accessible.

Riskallah is equally skilled and innovative as a choreographer. She understands how to create visual and energetic clarity, even when delivering choreographies for very large ensembles. Every movement and pose has a purpose; her use of contrast and counterpoint result in choreographies that are not only challenging to learn, but spectacular to watch. Whether designing choreography for a solo

routine or for a cast of over 60 dancers, there is always a focus on clear, clean isolations, strong visual lines, smooth transitions, and enough variation to keep the audience interested. Another signature element in Riskallah’s choreography involves understanding what you are communicating to the audience. Not only movements, but motivations need to be expressed clearly for the work to be complete. In workshops and classes, her students learn how



the choreographies are so much more than a series of steps; there are always new layers of technique, of nuance, of emotion that bring our execution of the work closer to her vision.

Fortunately for all of us, Riskallah is also a dedicated teacher with a commitment to raising our standards as students and performers of Oriental dance. Those who have taken classes or workshops with Riskallah will not be surprised to learn that she has BS and MS degrees in Education. She is able to work effectively with students at all levels, developing their abilities and confidence through exercises that are always fun and fresh. Riskallah's own passion for learning is obvious as she integrates new inspirations into class work, continuously challenging herself and her students. I think this is why Riskallah successfully retains so many advanced students in her classes; there is no opportunity to become complacent in our abilities, and it is inconceivable that we would ever find our classes uninteresting!

In addition to workshops on specialty topics ranging from Costume Construction and Beading to her signature Double Veil Technique (which she originated in the 1970s), Riskallah has recently introduced two new programs: "Footprints: A Journey towards Teaching Excellence" and "Choreographic Design." In the first, Riskallah helps current or aspiring instructors develop techniques that will help them not only become better teachers, but promote their classes and develop their student base. In the ongoing "Choreographic Design" series, Riskallah applies her considerable skills as a teacher to analyzing and presenting the critical components and processes that have made her own body of work so exciting. She delivers inspiration and exercises based on her own creative process that are designed



photo by Michael Baxter

to help each dancer synthesize their own experience into dance, and ultimately into an Oriental context.

Above and beyond her own workshops, Riskallah was honored to host the legendary Mahmoud Reda, pioneer of Egyptian dance, at a special event in 2007 which attracted national and international attendees to Connecticut. Due to its overwhelming success, the exacting and disciplined Mr. Reda returned in 2010 and 2011 to once again work with her students and area dancers. Riskallah hosts workshops with other notable instructors as well. Among them are Momo Kadous, Karim Nagi, and a frequent visitor to our studio, Elena Lentini.

I hope this brief introduction to Riskallah Riyad will inspire you to learn more about her and her contribution to our art. Should you have the opportunity to study with Riskallah, I highly recommend the experience! Riskallah's invitation, below, says it best:

"Come share the passion for this beautiful dance, so ancient and timeless, yet ever new. Oriental Dance gives expression to all aspects of human experience, illuminating the ordinary and transporting it to new realms. It is my desire to share with you my joy and to pass on the knowledge, the love and the respect I have for this dance, all of which began in the Middle Eastern roots of my childhood. In this beautiful dance, the body caresses the soul and each is elevated by the other."

~Riskallah Riyad

Riskallah currently teaches Middle Eastern dance to students of all levels at her studio, CT Dance Oasis, Center for Middle Eastern Dance, in Danbury, Connecticut. She conducts master classes and special workshops nationally. Riskallah also directs a performing group, which presents concerts and performances for both stage and cabaret. For more information about Riskallah Riyad, including performance, class, and workshop schedules, please visit her website: www.riskallah.com

Cover photo by Michael Baxter

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The artist's statement: This image of Riskallah is a rare one, because I do not as a rule make portrait drawings. I express a concept or a feeling through my dancer images, rather than portray individual dancers. However, the Averof Restaurant in Cambridge, MA asked me to create something in black and white to announce her booking there. I observed and sketched her at workshops and performances in Boston clubs, then created the final image in the studio. I am particularly fond of it because, to capture her essence, I used pen, brush and ink, a most difficult medium to master. No mistakes are allowed; if the pen slips, you start over. I make many drawings in succession, sometimes up to twenty or thirty, until I get the one I want. I have known Dolores for years and have always admired her dance, her dedication and her professionalism. She is one of the icons we are lucky to have, continually inspiring us with the dynamic beauty and honesty of her performances. I think I nailed it with this drawing.

Riskallah Riyad: An Enduring Friendship by Chelydra

I was a baby belly dancer in what many of you would consider the Dark Ages. If you wanted to communicate with someone, you called them on your landline phone, sent them a letter by postal mail, or visited them in person. Belly dancers learned to dance by attending classes and workshops, and learned the history of the dance from magazines like Arabesque, Habibi, Southern Dancer, and Jareeda. And belly dancers made their own costumes. We were like snowflakes, every one of us was unique.

My first interaction with Riskallah Riyad was through her belly dance supply business, the Dance Bazaar. Thanks to Riskallah's eye for color and texture, and her exacting quality standards, the Dance Bazaar could be counted on to provide creative solutions to your costuming needs. I was on a hunt for the elusive purple iris bugle bead, and the Dance Bazaar came to the rescue.

My second interaction with Riskallah was at a workshop in Bethesda, Maryland, sponsored by the lovely Chandra of Damascus. Riskallah was teaching veil choreography (the art of the veil being one of her signature skills), including a dramatic drop, tuck, roll, and rise combination that had us all, literally, rolling on the floor. A royally good time was had by all, and the seeds of a life-long friendship were sown.

As I matured as a dancer, I partnered with another southeastern Virginia dancer to sponsor master workshops under the name Cairo on the James. We alternated choosing the instructor, and my first choice was Riskallah Riyad. I knew that I could count on Riskallah to present an upbeat, high-energy, challenging, and slightly quirky class that would

send the participants home inspired to create new and beautiful dances. Our friendship continued to blossom.

Riskallah met and married her soulmate, and for a number of years led a nomadic existence dictated by the whims of corporate America. Imagine the culture shock for everyone when this vivacious Yankee belly dancer landed in Bristol, Tennessee, a bastion of NASCAR in the heart of the southern bible belt. We had some interesting telephone conversations, and Bristol was never quite the same after her sojourn there.

When I established Beach Blanket Beledi in 1994, there was never a doubt who one of the first teachers would be. I needed

Riskallah's energy, passion, dedication, and humor to start this new adventure off on the right foot. And we've never looked back. Riskallah is an every-other-year instructor, and her classes continue to inspire new generations of belly dancers.

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a member of the belly dance community is the friendships forged over the years. My enduring friendship with Riskallah Riyad is one of the most precious of those bonds.



*Riskallah teaching at Beach Blanket Beledi
photo by Donald Lococo*