

Middle Eastern Dance

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BELLYDANCE OASIS



AMERICA

australia's got talent
egyptian revolution

sashi

tribal corner

australia's princess of bellydance

amera

Interview with Amera Eid
by Kerry Stewart Sydney 2011



Kerry

In view of the event 'This is Your Life, Amera' at the 2011 Sydney Middle Eastern Dance Festival, our senior writer Kerry Stewart interviewed Amera at

Amera's Palace Bellydance Boutique, which recently relocated to Marrickville. Kerry asked Amera whether preparing for this event had led her to reflect on past events and her journey to now.

Amera: Oh yes! I decided to go through the boxes of my stuff that are packed away, scan it and put it out there. It seemed easiest to put it up on facebook. I've kept contracts, newspaper cuttings, anything that means a lot. It has been a time of reflection and the memory of the emotion at that time comes alive. That's when I wonder whether I'd have done things differently if I'd known what I know now. I probably wouldn't have, because it was my naivety that got me on a plane to Lebanon, in the middle of a war, with \$100 in my pocket. Crazy! But I had two suitcases full of costumes, so I was right as far as I was concerned.

Amera is well known as the founder and owner of Amera's Palace Bellydance Boutique in Sydney. Amera danced internationally for many years in Lebanon, Jordan, Greece, Egypt, Syria, Africa, Oman and the Arabian Gulf.



Photography by Avi Ohana at www.celebrity.com.au

Amera and Caroline Evanoff assisted Raqia Hassan in establishing the first Ahlan Wa Sahlan Festival in Cairo at the Cairo Sheraton.

With the assistance of Yasmina, who is based in Cairo, Amera runs yearly trips to Egypt, and has recently extended some of the tours to Lebanon, Syria, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Amera has also "brought Egypt to Australia" by sponsoring the Farha Tour to Sydney

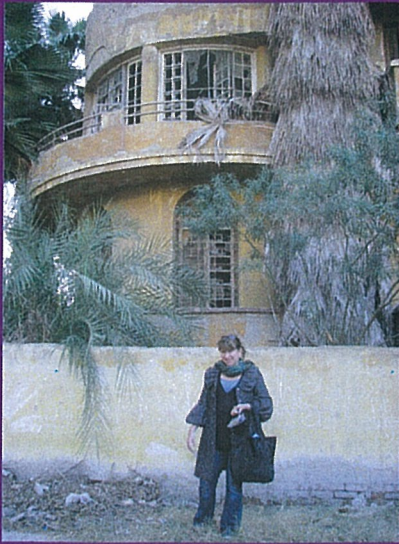
in November 2008 and Dina in August 2010.

Amera began by speaking to Kerry about her deep connection with Egypt.

Amera: My family emigrated from Egypt to Australia in the early 1950s after my great-grandfather died, and my parents met shortly after coming to Australia on the ship. They were only about nine when their families met, and they got married in their twenties, so there's a big love story there!

When my grandfather celebrated his ninetieth birthday, my sister did a PowerPoint presentation for the family based on the idea that our whole family started from the moment our grandfather waved to our grandmother from his balcony in Cairo. They were married for seventy years! After my grandmother and grandfather met, they lived in Alexandria for a short time, then in Port Said, and they built the house on the island of Port Fouad where my mother grew up. We have very strong connections with Egypt, besides them being born there.

My grandparents on my father's side were from Cairo and my great grandfather was from Malta. My grandparents on my mother's side were from Port Said. My mother's family was four generations from Port Said, with a Greek background, and her mother was French. I relate more to my mother's



Amera at the Port Fouad house



Meme and Pepe (Ameras grandparents)



An early publicity shot taken in Amman Jordan

side because the house my great-grandfather built was still there until a couple of years ago and I was able to go back there with my parents in 2007.

My grandmother had Alzheimer's and died a couple of years ago, but she used to talk about her life in Egypt all the time. She'd loved her life in Egypt and she found life in Australia really hard. She lived with us and always talked about her life in Egypt. She spoke French, mixed with Arabic. I learned Arabic myself later, but I had always listened to Arabic music and heard it at family parties, so when I finally went to Egypt, it was like coming home. I could hear my grandmother in my head; she was very visual, and to find the house she'd lived in and go into it was amazing.

Port Said is a bit of a ghost town now. The house was actually in Port Fouad, an island a short ferry ride from Port Said, and it was a beautiful place surrounded by white sandy beaches. There were a lot of heritage listed villas there which were allowed to fall down and the man whose father bought the house from my great-grandfather began to knock it down a couple of years ago, even though it was heritage listed.

My mother wrote a book about her experience growing up there, because there's not a lot written about Port Fouad. There's a lot of history about the Suez Canal, but there's not a lot written about the lives of the people. After World War 1, the directors of the Suez Canal Company created Port Fouad on the opposite side to Port Said and built houses there for employees around a central park. Then top personnel built their own houses there as well. My mother fondly remembered the "tall ceilings and large rooms and the magnificent parquet floors".⁽¹⁾

Kerry: You also feel a real connection with Egypt as it is now, don't you?

Amera: Yes, and I have ever since I was little. I always wanted to be a bellydancer. We had relatives who lived in Egypt and every time they came to Australia we'd dance and they'd teach me to dance, and that's what I wanted to do. I didn't know how I was going to do

it or how it was possible in Australia, but I was insistent. One day my auntie was saying to me 'how are you going to learn bellydancing?' and we turned and there was a bellydancer on television. She turned out to be Rozeta, who became my teacher.⁽²⁾ I believe there's no such thing as co-incidence. It's maktoub! Everything is written. You can spend your emotion and time and struggle with things. But I'm a great believer that if it's meant to happen, there's a reason for it.

Of course, no-one from an Egyptian-European background wants their daughter to be a bellydancer, especially my grandfather who was the patriarch of the family. 'That's for uneducated girls,' he said.

Kerry: So how did you overcome that family attitude to becoming a belly dancer?

Amera: I had to leave home. I suppose in today's terms I wasn't very young, sixteen or seventeen, but I came from a very sheltered family life. I was the eldest girl and I hadn't been allowed to do a lot of the things my friends were allowed to do.

However, I moved out and went on my journey. It was really difficult, but my focus was to become a dancer. I'd just finished Business College (because my parents said I had to) and I had a 'temp job' at an office for very low wages. I had a pushbike, and I hitchhiked to work. My focus was on the \$60 a week for my class and I remember being left with \$12 a week to buy bread, eggs and milk and \$2.50 was put aside every week for a packet of sequins to make my costume. I lived like that for six months, because I couldn't tell my parents. I lived a very isolated life. I had no idea where I was going to go with it, because I was passionate and focused.

I'd only seen Rozeta dance in a nightclub once, because I didn't go to nightclubs. Lebanese nightclubs were for the Lebanese. I didn't know how you went about performing in a nightclub, but after six months, which wasn't enough time, Rozeta said I was ready. I wasn't, but I was young, and I got by somehow on a wing and a prayer. At first, I danced with her, and then there



With Claude and tabla player



Performing in Beirut

were lots of bookings. In those days there weren't many dancers and there was show after show. The nightclubs were open to 3am, and were open all weekend. Three dancers worked in each nightclub and we worked constantly, with twenty-five shows over the weekend. I made friends with a lot of the other dancers.

Kerry: Was this the time of the civil war in Lebanon when a lot of Lebanese immigrated to Australia?

Amera: Yes, it was the 1980s (we still had records and cassettes!). There was a lot of money around and people loved going out. They were recreating the nightclub scene in their home country because they were nostalgic for their motherland. People used to burn scotch on the stage and open bottles of champagne and throw tips. Unfortunately for the tipping, there were \$1 and \$2 bills then, so it often looked a lot more than it was!

The Lebanese were the entrepreneurs who opened up the clubs; they employed a lot of Egyptian musicians, who'd come out from Lebanon and Egypt. They were really strong musicians and I remember feeling the power of the musicians behind me. The drummers

used skin on their tablas, not plastic, and sometimes your skirt would catch on fire from the lamp heating up the skin! They were exciting times and we learnt a lot from them about how a dancer relates to the musicians. In fact looking back, I feel I was carried away, floating over the music and the whole excitement of the times.

Amera began her professional training in Sydney in 1983 with Rozeta Ahalyea, and then began performing in Sydney's Middle Eastern nightclubs, such as "Hunnas", "Beirut by Night", "Mykonos", "Sheik's Tent", "Sahara City", "The Middle Eastern Club", "The Egyptian Club", "Chez Liban", "Cave Du Roi", "Cedars of Lebanon" and "Sheherazade". Amera also remained the resident dancer at the "Golden Nights" for over eight years, inbetween contracts overseas.

Kerry: Tell us about learning from Rozeta.

Amera: Rozeta was an amazing person. She was very popular because of her personality and stage presence. She was little, but she had a huge personality. I tower over her, but she was so powerful: when she put that costume on, it was like going to war.

She generated such electricity on stage and she had standing ovations. She was a catalyst who opened the door for me.

We didn't have the vocabulary, she would just say dance and follow; she'd put on some music and just dance. I don't dance like Rozeta (although I did at the beginning because I mimicked her). She was always pushing me to find out how to dance for myself and what worked for me. Terezka, Soraya (Veronica), Aziza and Violet, who started Bellygram: all of us who were taught by Rozeta went on to take our dance to another level. She was always pushing us to do that and we all went overseas.

In 1985 Amera flew to her first overseas engagement in Athens, Greece, to work in leading Arabic nightclubs "Kantari" and "Layalina's". Her contract was extended over a six month period to include performances at private functions for visiting dignitaries, princes and sheiks.

On her return to Australia, contracts around the country, television documentaries, interviews for newspapers and magazines both in Arabic and English, and work on neighbouring islands and resorts such



as New Caledonia, kept Amera busy with her dance career. She appeared as a support act in concerts for numerous visiting Arabic singers such as Mona Merashli, George Wassouf, Rageb Alame, Rabih El Kholi, Amr Diab, Ehab Toufik, Melham Baraket, Tony Mohanna Mayez Al Bayah, Pascal Mashalany, and Nawal El Zoughby.

Kerry: When did you open Amera's Palace; was it after you went overseas?

Amera: I opened the shop in 1987 before moving overseas to work. I was working in the Sydney nightclubs, and one of the nightclubs, Sheik's Tent in Enmore Road had an empty shop underneath. I started bellydance classes in the nightclub on weeknights when it was closed and I just had an idea one day that we needed a shop: my friends and I painted it pink and put up a chandelier and put down some pink carpet. The shop was very small, the rent was cheap (not like Enmore Road nowadays!) and I made everything myself. Then one day a guy came along and put a sign out the front with 'Ameras Palace' on it. I don't know where the name came from, perhaps someone said are you opening a palace and I said yes... it's something that just happened.

It was just like in Egypt, my friend Dee (Samira) and I and the other dancers sat on the floor and made costumes. We hung them in the window and if no-one bought them, we'd dance in them on the weekend! We sold costumes for a good price in those days because there was nowhere else to get them from. We also sold records and cassettes and Egyptian knick knacks.

It was around then that the ABC did the documentary 'The Bellydancer' and everything opened up. It showed me in the nightclubs, Terezka with her school and Leonie in the shop (which she and a partner had taken over at that stage) and from that point bellydance became something you could do for exercise and fitness. It took bellydance out of the nightclubs. We had feedback from people all over the world that the documentary had made them want to

try bellydancing. It also showed things happening in Perth then that we didn't know about over here. That was a real turning point. That documentary even went to the United Kingdom!

In 1990, Amera was put in contact with Lebanese agent Toros Siranossian, and became one of only a handful of non-Arabic dancers to work with him at that time. Mr Siranossian represented Amera for the next seven years, with continuous year-round contracts throughout the Middle East. Amera made Beirut her home base. She wrote the following for publication "From the Diary of Amera"(3)

I arrived in Beirut airport in June, 1990, in the middle of a blistering hot summer, the air was humid, bullet holes decorated the walls, and the place was swarming with Syrian army officers. After a three hour battle with traffic, I arrived at my rented chalet in Batroun and slept for eighteen hours. I was woken by the bed moving and the room shaking. I got up and looked at the calm Mediterranean from my balcony. To my left I could see Beirut city. The tremor stopped and calm settled. I made my way downstairs and one of the waiters said 'Welcome to Lebanon, they just put a bomb in the stadium!'

Amera moved into an apartment owned by friends, which she shared with their two sons, who were in the Lebanese army and were often away. At times there was no electricity, there was no telephone, and one night she realised that something hard under her mattress was in fact a machine gun.

Amera: It was an isolated life of hard work, but it was the summer season and there was work at a lot of private parties. Breaking into the tight-knit family of artists in Lebanon wasn't easy, and I soon learnt that you had to be seen at the right places, with the right people, have your publicity in the right magazine and your costumes made by the right people. At least I had the 'right' agent! (Toros)

In the Middle East, I learnt a few lessons quite early: that you almost never negotiated work for yourself, as

that would put you on the lower rung of the ladder, never work less than five star places, and never bring a male friend or husband with you anywhere, let them think you are single.

One day, my agent, Toros called and said that I had a contract at the famous Al Atlal nightclub, in Achout Beirut. Every dancer in Lebanon had started or performed there, Nadia Gamal, Amani, Howaida Hashem. I went to my first 'prover' (band practice). "What, no shoes?" the manager screamed at me, "All dancers must wear shoes!"

As usual, I had notes for my Majensi (opening music) and the band were impressed that I knew what I wanted. After three hours of 'prover' they had read and memorised my music and my thirty-five minute show was ready. I appeared with Mayez Al Bayeh, a singer I had worked with on his numerous trips to Australia. The government in Lebanon was still unstable, and late night was not a good time to be driving to and from work, so I had a chauffeur. Some nights were very unsafe; when I could hear bullets in the distance and see fires burning, I always had army or police escorts.

Amera's army escorts proved helpful in other situations. When her agent suddenly sent her to Jordan for a two week contract and a nightclub owner refused to pay the \$1000 USD owed to Amera, the appearance of her army escort with their guns resolved the situation very quickly. "No problem, I just didn't have any change," he said.

In Jordan, Amera stayed at the Jerusalem Hotel Amman, Jordan with the Lebanese singer Nawal El Zoughby. They worked together at the hotel nightclub and spent a lot of time together in the hotel because the hotel manager would not allow Amera to leave the hotel without written permission.

Amera: I had a great band. The band leader was the violinist and a composer, and I was a more than willing protégé to try out some of his compositions. The band comprised of two violins, four percussionists, keyboard, nay, oud and

the now famous Lebanese singer Nawal El Zoughby. The excitement of being on stage made up for the long lonely days in the hotel room.

At the end of her contract, Amera was excited to be going back to Lebanon; already Lebanon felt like her second home. Amera was frustrated to be detained at the airport for eight hours because she didn't have a 're-entry visa'. Her visa was for 'entry into Lebanon from Australia, not re-entry from Jordan' and she was not allowed back into Lebanon. Eventually, an exhausted Amera caught a plane to Cyprus, found a hotel and slept.

Meanwhile, Amera's agent put her in touch with a local agent, Mr Ernest Basil, while he organised her return to Lebanon. Within two days, Amera was in Athens for a month's contract at the Shaharaman nightclub. Work was seven days a week and Amera's show started at 2am. In Greece, Amera fell under the spell of a Canadian Greek, George Logos, who proposed on her last night in Greece. Amera flew back to Cyprus and boarded a ferry for the twelve hour trip to Beirut and pondered her future.

Amera: The ferry was an old Manly Ferry with photos of Sydney in the early 1900s all around the walls. I had to decide what I was going to do, go to Greece and live with George, or stay in Lebanon and pick up where I left off. As we approached the shores of Lebanon in the early light of dawn, I looked at the huge mountains of Lebanon, so still, silent and full of wisdom, as if they had been waiting for me and I knew where my heart wanted to be.

Amera was met at the port of Jounieh by a General, a Colonel and three Army sergeants and safely escorted to her agent's office. She worked her way from the north to the south doing parties, weddings and working at nightclubs, with the occasional guest spot on Lebanese television. Then, Ramadan gave her a month off to return to Australia before her first contract in Abu Dhabi.

Kerry: I'd like to talk about your experiences in the Arabian Gulf and your special relationship with the khaleegy style. On the flyer for your



DVD "Learn to Dance Khaleegy" you said:

"My journey into the Gulf commenced in the early 1980's... I lived in Sharjah, I danced through Dubai, Abu Dhabi, danced at the palaces of the Sheiks and Sheikhas and became a part of the desert in Al Ain for many years. I shared the campfire with the women of Oman and danced for the Sultan. I embraced the music of the Gulf and the immense and intense desert took me into its arms... "(4)

Amera: My first contract in Dubai was in 1988, and from 1990/91 when I started working with the agent Toros Siranossian in Lebanon, I had constant contracts in Dubai. He was the agent for everyone, he had all the Arabic singers and musicians and no-one could compete with him. (He's still working but he's quite old now and not so prominent.) In those days you couldn't go to Dubai as a dancer, you had to go as school teacher or something else; I was once a puppeteer! It's more open now.

Dubai was becoming westernised, but people were still living in the desert and you had to walk across the desert to get to the creek. There was only one nightclub in Dubai, at the Claridge Hotel and they had Egyptian dancers, who I later found out were Eman Zaki and her sister Hoda Zaki, when I met them again as designers !⁽⁵⁾

Dubai was on the brink of deciding whether entertainment and alcohol were going to be allowed. One of my friends at the time married a sheik and still lives

in a palace in Dubai, so it has been an interesting experience to visit her over the years.

Kerry: Was it dangerous to be a dancer in Dubai then?

Amera: No, although I had a bodyguard during my first contract in Dubai. You know the big guy with the metal teeth in the James Bond movies? He was my bodyguard. He was a very quiet man - he didn't say much! He was massive, maybe eight foot tall, and I remember my first contract to dance at El Nasr Leisureland. I'd never seen guys in their dishdashas, and when I walked off the stage at the back, they literally pounced on me, and there I was surrounded by these men in their dishdasha. It felt as if I was in a movie, in a sea of white galabeyas, and my bodyguard just ploughed in, picked up the guys by their galabeyas and threw them all out. After that, they barricaded the stage and he stood there and walked around with me whenever I wanted to move around. ⁽⁶⁾

My first contract in Abu Dhabi was at the Gulf Hotel in 1992. They had a resident Egyptian band with one of the best tabla players from Egypt. I had to do a forty five minute show every night, seven days a week and was expected to include khaleegy, which I'd never done. I had no costume and no feel for the music. I had twenty four hours to learn! My musicians produced a dress out of nowhere and lots of tapes. I locked myself in the nightclub for eight hours, listening to the music, and my tabla player, who had spent many years in the

Gulf, tried to teach me what he knew.

Khaleegy literally means 'of the Gulf' and it can refer to the Arabic dialect spoken in that region of the Persian Gulf and UAE, and also the type of music from the Arab States and Emirates (UAE) of the Persian Gulf. From the very first night, when it came to the part of my show that I performed khaleegy, the room would erupt with pleasure and excitement. Many of the locals (males) leapt up and danced - and could they dance! I learnt a lot from watching the men dance.

After two months, when my contract ended, the locals in the nightclub presented me with a photo of myself doing khaleegy. This was the ultimate compliment; I had fallen in love with their music and I felt that they acknowledged I had captured the feeling and movement of their dance. It was very zaar-like, people were just dancing it was as you felt, there was no right or wrong. It was a good time.

I was taken into private homes, where I spent time with the local women. They showed me beautiful thobes, some passed down from generation to generation. They danced for me and with me, letting their long luxurious hair down and throwing their manes from side to side in a frenzy. I felt so privileged to learn a dance for the people from the people. When I think of khaleegy, all I see is the Gulf and the expansiveness of the way it was. I think that's been lost now. I used to drive from Dubai to Al Ain and there'd be camels



walking down the road in the desert. Now I don't recognise any of the roads!

That whole experience of going out into the desert, the expansiveness & freedom, the camels and the breeding; you'd see the animal and the man, the camel owner and the camel. That's how I see khaleegy, the experience of the freedom, and the man with the animal. You don't get that in oriental dance, but with khaleegy, you're very free and natural.

Kerry: So, all this time while you were travelling and fulfilling your contracts, you were relying on what you'd learnt from Rozeta and were just out there learning and experiencing it all?

Amera: Yes, and whether we were doing it right or wrong, it was our livelihood and our customers were happy.

Kerry: When did you work in Egypt?

Amera: Initially, I went to Egypt with Yasmina. We were both working for Toros and had become firm friends. At that time Toros only had a few "foreign" dancers – Yasmina, myself, Liza Laziza, Gisele Bometre (who was Brazilian but based in Lebanon) and Shadia (from North America). Gisele used to wear over the top stuff like gold pant suits and she was the first dancer to perform with a sword on her head.

Yasmina had done a contract in Bahrain and met a lot of Egyptians there. She decided that she'd go to Egypt, and she invited me to go as well. She got a contract at the Meridian Hotel (after

Sahra Saeeda finished her contract) and decided to stay. I visited her in between my contracts for Toros (and being married and breaking up with Claude). Liza had also come over to Egypt, stayed with Yasmina, and decided to stay. I stayed in Egypt for a six month contract and left again. Yasmina was in love, but I had no reason to stay. The money wasn't good, you couldn't survive.

Kerry: Was that when you trained with Ibrahim Akef?

Amera: Yes, and I can't even remember how we found him. It was before we met Raqia, and trained with her. The foreign dancers used to hang around together, that was our social life, with Liza, Shadia, who also worked for Toros, and Samasem, who was an amazing dancer. We meet Raqia through Samasem (from Sweden), who was being trained by Raqia, as was French Diana, who was working in Alexandria.

In Yasmina's DVD ⁽⁷⁾, she has a clip of him, taken on my video camera. Ibrahim would normally never let us film him; he was very sick then. He'd teach with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and you'd walk into the studio and think, how can this guy even get out of the chair, let alone teach you to dance! Yet, he was amazing. In the first hour of the lesson, he'd just make you shimmy. He had a cane, and he'd whack you on the back of the leg like a school child. He'd have a cup of Arabic coffee in one hand, a cigarette in the other, one eye cocked like this, and then all of a sudden he'd

put it all down and dance – sometimes with the cigarette still hanging out – then he'd go into a coughing fit and sit down and say 'Dance!' then he'd say 'No! No! follow me.' Even if we were behind him and following he'd know whether we were on the wrong foot. He had eyes in the back of his head! He was the most amazing person and teacher.

One day Yasmina and I went to a class and he was quieter than usual. When we asked whether anything was wrong, he told us that his wife had died that morning, yet he still came to class. He was so dedicated. He used to talk about Naima [Akef] a lot, I think she was his cousin, and he choreographed for her. He used to talk about their time in the circus. He taught a few other Egyptian dancers then, but not foreign dancers. He was "undiscovered", teaching in a dusty old studio downtown, (like the roof of the Yacoubian building in the film)⁽⁸⁾. You'd go up the stairs and go in and he'd be sitting there, puffing on a cigarette. Sometimes he would say hello, sometimes not, and you'd get ready and dance. Sometimes he remembered who you were, sometimes not. I often saw a young man there, I think his nephew may have helped him.

Kerry: Then you felt drawn to come back and spend more time in Sydney?

Amera: Every year I used to come home during Ramadan and bring the family presents and one year I came home and brought a husband [Claude Eid] instead. We met in Oman while



Photography by Avi Ohana at www.celebrity.com.au

working for Toros and it was love at first sight. My relationship with Claude was based on our great love for the music; he was the musician and I was the dancer. He was the only son, and for an only son in a Lebanese family to decide to be a musician is not easy. I have a great respect for him as a musician. I still record CDs with him, and he understands the way I work, he understands me better than anyone else.

We worked really well together and worked for Toros for two more years, but then we could see that the scene was changing, and that we would be separated even more and we wanted to come back to Australia and have a family. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work out the way we planned. We worked well together but we weren't good married. It's all maktoub – that's my life!

Leonie Sukan and a partner had taken over the shop at that point, and when the shop next door became vacant Leonie had opened up a dance studio there. So, when I came back, I was in partnership with the shop for a while, then Leonie took on the studio fulltime and the shop became my focus again.

I have always tried to stock culturally

appropriate clothing and not cheap imports from China. I also want to support the industry in Egypt for the sake of our dance. Not just for us to sell stuff, but because I'd like teachers to support the people whose living depends on this dance. Everyone is struggling in Egypt, and there are very few tourists. I know a lot of people who are struggling badly. They don't go hungry, because food is not expensive and people always share, but they need money too.

I don't have a problem with going back and running tours. Everyone knew this Revolution was going to happen, it was just a matter of time. Yasmina stayed on, she'd just finished renovations on her flat and had nowhere else to go. She said that all the nightclubs in Haram Street were burned down in that period between the police leaving and the army coming in.

All I wanted to do was get on a plane and go back. I've lived through wars and unrest in the Middle East. I was in Lebanon during their war, and the Middle East has always been so. People still smile and get on with what they have to do. Even in the war in Lebanon, there were still nightclubs and people were still dancing. Music takes people in a war to a

different place and they need that.

Kerry: I also wanted to ask you about the risks you take bringing something of Egypt to Australia. You brought the Farha Tour to Sydney in 2008 and Dina in August, 2010.

Amera: It's madness! If I ever have the option to promote the dance, I'll go without other things to do this. The Farha Tour was huge, and I'm still paying for it, but the joy I got in bringing that and creating Egypt here was something that surpassed everything. I just wish more people had come to experience it, but they missed out. Dina also, whether you like her or not, is an icon. She is very down to earth, and she is very passionate about what she does. I thought that nothing could beat the Farha tour, but she certainly did it as a "one woman show".

Everyone I know who has made a living out of the dance is like that, passionate, and generous. It's as if nothing else exists. It was like that for me when I was dancing on stage. There was nothing better in the world than that. Nothing and no-one could beat that. You have such an amazing relationship with the music, it's like pure love. Some people felt that with the

Farha Tour, and felt the inclusiveness of it all. You have to be completely in love when you dance and surrender to it as you would to anything you love.

For me, it's all about trying to share the essence of Egypt. I just want everyone to have a good time, and fall in love over and over again with the dance. I suppose it's like a marriage, you've got to keep the spark going - and all dancers need to do that! My thing is going home to Egypt, so if I can't take everyone there, I'll bring Egypt to them!

Kerry: Do you think there is a future for Egyptian dance in Egypt?

Amera: It's a question that everyone asks, even the Egyptian dancers. Dina herself says, who is coming after her? She came from that era where you could 'be famous'. So many dancers now are just copies of Dina. The Ahlan wa Sahlan Festival in Egypt tries to promote Egyptian dancers, but I haven't seen anyone.

I think for the dance to survive, it has to get over all the fusion. It was exciting, but everyone needs to get back to basics. The days of the ghawazee and the awalim were so important. Sometimes you just have to be with the music, and the dancers of the 80s emitted emotion rather than did lots of steps. The music for fusion is more for listening to than for dancing. We need to retrace to keep the dance alive and provide a good foundation. As long as there are good musicians and people who want to dance to their music, then there will be dance.

Kerry: What inspires you to keep going?

Amera: It's always about the music for me. I love to watch a good dancer who talks to you on that level. I love watching Dandesh, she's inspiring, she has that thing you can't put into words. She "talks" the music to you. You could speak any language but you'd understand the music through her. With Dandesh, you could see flavours of Soheir Zaki, but Dandesh is not performing now.

Fifi was my inspiration all through the 80s and a dancer called Saha Hamdi who was amazing, with a wonderful

orchestra. When Fifi was dancing, I'd go every night. She had such a strong presence, she only needed to walk on the stage and she'd move me to tears. Dina has that quality. These days, it's hard to find dancers with that quality. I like to see a good singer or an orchestra too.

Kerry: Did your family reconcile to you being a dancer?

Amera: My parents didn't talk to me very much for a long time; they weren't happy, although when I opened the shop, they began to think I was doing something respectable.

I'm the eldest and they say I'm the warrior of the family. My brother and sister got married and had houses and stable jobs and kids, and I was different. My mother took up yoga and went on her own journey and became a yoga teacher and learned to let me be. They're very accepting now.

Kerry: What do you see ahead for yourself?

Amera: Every day it changes; I think I'm a bit of an emotional gypsy. I want to fall in love again! Love has taken me many places; I fall in love all the time. When I'm not in love, I'm not as passionate about everything!

I'm very much involved with foster care. After Claude and I split up, which was for many reasons, I got into fostering, which was life changing in itself. I started doing respite foster care in 2005, having children for short term, and I ended up with Bradley, Gaby and Emmanuel. I fostered them with my partner until 2008, then by myself for a while, but it was too much alone. Bradley and Gaby live in the Blue Mountains now with wonderful foster carers and they come to me every six weeks.

I'd like to write a book about my journey and how I came to have the kids. My life took such a different turn: I started it to help people and it became a permanent thing in my life and has been such a big thing. I'm in the process of adopting Emmanuel, whose birth father is Greek-Egyptian, and he has a great affinity with Egypt too.

Ideally, I'd live half the time here and

half in Egypt.

Now that Rita is in the business with me, I can concentrate more on dancing and teaching. With the dance, I'd like to concentrate on teaching workshops, and I have gone back to my roots with how I was originally taught. I teach a beginner's class and I teach an open style class. I teach people to dance to the music and experience it for themselves. I got so much out of expressing myself.

I did a Certificate IV in 2002 because I developed an interest in fitness and I think you have to be careful of your responsibilities for other peoples' bodies. People doing bellydancing go through a transformation and whether it be in their mind or their body, you have some sort of responsibility to work with them. I think everybody should have bellydancing in their life. You know what it does when you put that music on! •

Footnotes

- (1) Borg, Irene *The Life of a House*. Private document
- (2) bellydanceoz.com/2011/03/rozeta-ahalyea
- (3) "From the Diary of Amera" published in the *Flowers* newsletter, Melbourne.
- (4) Amera, *'Learn to Dance Khaleegy, from the Traditional to the Modern DVD'* 2009 available from Amera's Palace www.ameraspalace.com.au
- (5) www.eman-zaki.com
- (6) Richard Kiel is best known for his role as the steel-toothed Jaws in the two James Bond movies, 'The Spy Who Loved Me' and 'Moonraker' www.richardkiel.com
- (7) *Journey of Desire, A Foreign Dancer in Cairo DVD* by Yasmina of Cairo available from www.yasminaofcairo.com
- (8) From the novel *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa al-Aswany

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- www.gildedserpent.com/aboutuspages/AmeraEid
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