

15<sup>th</sup> July 2009

Dear LUTSF

**Arabesque Pro course, July 7-18 2008  
Arabesque Academy, Toronto, Canada**

Please find attached my report from the studying which you were kind enough to fund my travel for last year. I cannot apologise enough about the first report which seems to have gone astray at my end, and recently I have been unable to organise anything due to my father passing away.

I was able to attend the full training course provided by Arabesque including workshops with international performers, instructors, actors, costumiers, musicians and many more.

Highlights included being given the opportunity to perform live with Arabic Orchestra (of which there are none in the UK currently) and to see several professional belly dancers performing at events organised by Arabesque. Later in the year, after returning to Canada, I was invited to audition for the troupe and was accepted as an apprentice dancer.

LUTSF was invaluable in making this study possible, and this is a unique way to help dancers achieve their goals by further study and travel.

I regularly write articles about my experiences in Canada and occasionally these are published in dance magazines and online sites about belly dance.

Anyway, I hope that this is all correct now and thank you again for making this trip possible for me.

Kind regards,  
Shema (Emma Lucy Cole)

**REPORT FROM EMMA COLE**



Review of Arabesque Academy Pro Course Intensive July 2008  
by Shema

Ever since I first saw Yasmina Ramzy teach a workshop in Bristol about 5 years ago, I have been planning to study at the Arabesque Academy Studios in Toronto. Caught up in the whirlwind of running my own business and trying to secure my own future as a performer, I was distracted from this dream and many years have passed without me taking steps to achieve it. However, this year I was finally in a position to make the trip across the ocean and applied for the Pro Course Intensive held in July.

I was thrilled when my application was accepted and I feel so honoured to have been given the opportunity to learn from so many experienced and passionate individuals that I wanted to review the course for any of you who are considering moving to the next level in your dancing

careers.

So, how did it begin? The first step was to apply with a clip of myself dancing and the reasons for taking part in the course, which is no small commitment- 2 weeks (more than 60 hours) of studying at the academy, with a 7 hour flight either side was difficult to fit into my schedule, but proved to be worth it! Fortunately, I was also able to take a week either side of the course to recover from the jet-lag (highly recommended!) and experience living in the city for a short while. This itself was invaluable and enabled me to get to know not only the culture, but a few of the locals too. The next stage for me involved an application to the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund, who generously agreed to give me a grant for the flights to and from Canada.

After 6 months of planning, worrying, packing (and re-packing), I arrived late afternoon into Toronto's Pearson Airport, absolutely exhausted (and having made some new and dubious friends whilst stretching on the plane!) and made my way into the city by coach. Imagine my surprise when the driver changed his route to drop me nearer to the B&B- my first indication of the generosity of the Canadian people! This was closely followed by a walk to the B&B straight through the heart of Toronto's main Gay Pride Festival Party- a better welcome to a city I don't think you would find anywhere- more leather thongs and waxed buttocks than I've ever seen before (or would like to see again, to be honest!). I made it finally to The Mulberry Tree B&B which is lovely and highly recommended for trips to Toronto- small, clean, homely and very friendly (they do great vegan pancakes and waffles for breakfast too!).

I spent my first week exploring the city which would take pages to describe in any detail but the main things which I noticed were the friendliness and inclusiveness of the people and how multi-cultural the city is. I also learned quickly that taking a book to dinner when you are on your own saves endless hours of staring into space and re-reading of the cocktail menu!! I was able to see Arabesque Dance Company performing at Queens Park on Canada Day, complete with the 9-piece orchestra (I was ecstatic!) which was a wonderful opportunity to see how professional and talented they all are, not to mention well-versed in the many varieties of Arabic Dance.

After a week of walking endlessly around the city, eating at more restaurants than I have in the past 2 years and training furiously to get fit for the upcoming course, the day finally dawned and I made my way 1 block south of my B&B to the Academy. We were a varied group of women- 3 are from the academy and in training for the troupe/teaching, 3 were from a studio in Kingston (about 3 hours away) and 1 lady from Mississauga who has also studied at Arabesque for some time. Our jobs ranged from Psychiatric Nurse, to Tarot reader to Librarian and Mother. Over the fortnight, as we got to know each other and formed more of a bond, I realised that I was in the presence of an exceptional and intelligent group of people. Not all are full-time professional dancers yet, but all have very bright futures ahead of them, both as dancers and in other parts of their lives. It was wonderful to be with so many talented women.



I was quite overwhelmed by the first day- we spent time discussing where a professional dancer could perform these days and talking about integrity and presenting the dance as respectable. What comes across very strongly from Yasmina is how determined she is that Bellydance be recognised as an Art Form and a valid form of dance expression. Just the fact that she has collaborated on projects over the years with so many other dance professionals (and is on the board of some major dance organisations in Toronto) shows how committed she and the other members of Arabesque are to portraying the dance as unique

and expressive as are many of the other more mainstream dance arts. You may notice that the Arabesque literature does not refer to the troupe members as 'dancers', but rather as 'Dance Artists'- a play on semantics with which they hope to change the community's perception of the performers.

Prior to the start of the course, we were told comparatively little about the actual content. This actually proved to be a great tactic and avoided too many nerves about what to expect so I am not going to list in detail every workshop and experience we had- if any of you are tempted to enrol then I think that the beauty of this course is that you take from it what you need personally as a performer, artist and individual. However, I would like to mention a few highlights which have had a huge and long-lasting effect on me both as a dancer and on a more personal level.

Firstly, Arabesque runs a weekly event called 'Layali Arabesque' at which you can sit, drink Retsina, eat a Greek salad and watch the city's best Bellydancers perform with the fantastic Arabesque Orchestra before hitting the dance floor to the live music of Oum Kalsoum and many other classics and more modern pieces. If you get the chance to visit Toronto, don't miss this wonderful night- dancing with such high calibre live music is a rare treat



and what I noticed most about the orchestra is how much they love their jobs! They feed off the energy which the audience gives them and if the dance floor is buzzing, then so are they- a most talented yet humble group of musicians (and really nice guys too!). Midway through the course, Yasmina herself performed at 'Layali' and despite a few technical sound issues, the evening was wonderful. It really shows when a dancer knows the musicians to the depth that Yasmina does and the way that they worked together was inspirational- the whole restaurant was filled with people and we all felt very lucky to have the chance to share in the experience.



During the programme, Yasmina had arranged for visiting 'lecturers' as well as running workshops herself. These covered Marketing, Persian and Azerbaijani dance, Egyptian Folklore, History of dance and costume in Egypt, How to dance with live musicians, Meditation and Stage Presence, Acting, Choreography, Working in

Theatres, Ballet/Movement, Improvisation, Image and Costuming, Arabic Music structure and Instruments, Singing in Arabic and of course, our performance at 'Al Haima' on the Saturday mid-way through the course. This was accompanied by 4 musicians and had an audience of around 40 dancers, friends and interested parties, who encouraged us no end as we improvised. We had only 6/7 minutes, so could choose 2 from an Opening, Finale, Taqsim, Drum Solo or Song. I decided to go for a Song and 'Mawal' (voice improvisation without a beat behind it) sung by Bassam Bishara who I cannot praise enough for his skill, generosity and ability to make all of us look good even when we got a little lost! Although all of us were terrified at the thought of performing our new skills in public, it was a tremendous opportunity and everyone rose to the occasion beautifully.



We spent the whole of Monday analysing and studying the videos of the show and giving each other feedback and were given a copy of the whole show to take home for posterity (and, no doubt, many hours of agonising re-plays to figure out how to make it *perfect* next time!). We could also take up to 12 academy classes during the course- I'm not sure if everyone got through them all- we reached saturation point after a while and my thighs were refusing to do any more dancing after the first week, but it enabled us to put some of what we were learning into practice and for those of us new to the Academy, it was a useful insight into the style and techniques taught.

At this point I ought to talk about some of the less-positive elements of the course, but I have to say that I am hard-pushed to find any. It's worth noting that the price quoted does not include tax (almost everything in Canada has tax added on top of the advertised price) so make sure that you allow a little extra although with the current exchange rate, it is fabulous value for money. It was also a shame in a way that we weren't all staying together (most of the dancers were local so went home each night) but then I think if we had been, the intensity might have been too much and affected the group dynamics negatively. One other suggestion would be for us to spend some more time with the Professional Troupe at the Academy and to see how the Pro Course had affected their practice- we rarely had time to chat to the girls and it might have been nice to learn from their progress as teachers and performers. Beyond that, I can find little to criticise. Yasmina and her team put together an



incredible journey for us all- challenging but not terrifying and all conducted in a way which never once made us feel inadequate or even remotely like giving up!

Toronto might not be the first place you would think of going to study Bellydance, but with the wealth of dance and music experience here, I wonder how many other places in the world could offer people who are such experts and who are so generous and excited about sharing their knowledge. The city itself is friendly and welcoming and cheap by our standards, with a great transport network to get to and from all the events. There are festivals galore over the summer so experiencing the multi-cultural nature of the area is happily unavoidable and there is so much to do you will never fit it all in!

If anyone would like to chat about my experiences at Arabesque, then please contact me via my website [www.tangerina.org](http://www.tangerina.org).

*Since writing this article, Shema has moved to Toronto to continue studying with Arabesque and is now a member of the Dance Company and Orchestra as well as teaching at the Academy.*

Arabesque Academy

[www.arabesquedance.ca](http://www.arabesquedance.ca)

Toronto events and listings

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