

To: Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund
From: Karen Hardman

17th August 2004

Dear LUTSF,

Visit to Ahlan Wa Sahlan Dance Festival, Cairo
Exploring Egyptian Oriental Dance in Cairo today

Please find enclosed a report on my visit to Cairo from 26th June – 4th July 2004 to attend the Ahlan Wa Sahlan dance festival, organised by Raqia Hassan and now in its 5th year.

Getting the funding to travel gave me this fantastic opportunity to experience Egyptian oriental dance at source. Without the funding, it would have been very difficult, and I am eternally grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for enabling me to travel to Cairo. The experience of having the opportunity to see such a wealth of the top dancers from Egypt was indeed a very rewarding experience, for me it was the experience of a lifetime. I would certainly want to go there again in the future.

For any future awardees I would suggest giving yourself a few days either side of the festival, as it is an intensive week of training, and it is important to pace yourself. There are about eight hours of training on offer each day (for 6 days of the festival), and it would be far too exhausting to do all the classes you would like to do. Also take US currency, as classes have to be paid for in cash.

Yours sincerely,

Karen Hardman

Visit to Ahlan Wa Sahlan Dance Festival, Cairo, to study Egyptian oriental dance.

I travelled to Cairo in June 2004 with Khaled Mahmoud's group (Khaled is an Egyptian dancer based in London) to attend Cairo's biggest festival of Egyptian dance - Ahlan Wa Sahlan. My aim was to experience the dance at source and to see many top performers on the stage, and also to learn from the wealth of teachers offering classes. As a dancer, I wanted to see the dance at source, develop my own skills in order to enhance my own performance, and to observe how teachers in Egypt pass on their knowledge. It was an immense help to receive funding from the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund, and I will be ever thankful to them for this. I could not have done it without, as the cost of the classes, shows, etc. was far too costly.

Once the plane touched down in Cairo, I felt an overwhelming sense of happiness and anticipation of what was to come. I couldn't believe I had actually made it to an event I had dreamt about for several years. It really was a dream come true.

After a very late night I went to Mena House, a truly magnificent hotel right by the Pyramids where the classes were taking place in order to register for classes of my choice. It was a very difficult decision as there was so much on offer, and dancers I had seen on video or read about were available to me!! After great deliberation I chose the classes I felt would benefit me the most, and booked for the opening and closing gala shows at the same time. There were classes on offer with master teachers, lasting for three hours, and classes with folkloric teachers, lasting for two hours.

That evening the opening gala was attended by many dancers and dance enthusiasts from around the world. The first dancer was called Dalia, and I was very excited to see her perform with such a large scale Egyptian orchestra. Dancers in Egypt do not use CDs!! It is absolutely essential to have your own musicians, and this makes such a tremendous difference! After Dalia, Dina, Cairo's diva of Egyptian dance today, gave a mesmerising performance. The audience were spellbound and there was a buzz of excitement. She was absolutely fantastic to watch, with such skilled movements and interpreting the emotions of Egyptian music so beautifully. I was literally speechless! She was so expressive, with the music being visually interpreted through her exquisite movements and facial expressions. It was a truly emotional experience, and one I felt could only

be had in Egypt. She has a very distinctive style. There was great harmony between her and the musicians, and every change in the music was seen through her bodily interpretation. I think Dina's performance was one of the highlights of the event.

My first day of classes began with a folkloric teacher called Freiz, who taught a very lively Saaidi dance with a cane. There was a very enthusiastic drummer to accompany her teaching. She came across as being very passionate about what she was doing. I observed her way of interpreting the music, and obviously she understood the lyrics, which play a great part in how a dancer expresses herself. Most Egyptian songs are about the joy or pain of love. My next class was with Soraya, a Brazilian who is living and dancing in Cairo. Her shimmies were very strong, and she also taught ways of going down and rising up again to the music. This was very hard on the legs. I felt there was a Brazilian feeling coming through in the way she danced, which fitted Egyptian dance beautifully. I learnt some new and very interesting techniques.

The class I had really been looking forward to was next, with Randa Kamal, a dancer from Alexandria. I had seen her perform in Cairo before and I was very impressed with her style. I love the way she interprets the music – she is very dramatic, with clearly defined, well-controlled movements and isolations of the body. She put so much feeling into her dance. I thoroughly enjoyed her class and I got such a lot from it – particularly the way she taught. What I really noticed, and was very impressed by, was the way dancers have such control, grace and fluidity.

I attended Dina's class, one of the master teachers, and the diva of Cairo. Her class proved to be an excellent class. Her style is so unique and I realise it would be impossible to ever dance like her. However, there was a lot to be learnt from the way she held her body, the tiny subtle movements and her own unique hip circles, which are very powerful. She has such a presence both as a teacher and a performer.

I made a lot of notes on combinations of movements, music etc., which I found vitally important when I got back to the UK. On top of all the classes, there was a fantastic choice of costumes, which you would never find on a normal trip to Cairo. It is amazing to see how styles and fabrics are changing to move with the times.

One evening the group went to one of Cairo's top nightclubs to see Lucy, who is very well known amongst Arab circles. One point that interested me was the diversity of people in the nightclub - families, veiled women, single men and women and a few Europeans. Most performers in clubs do not appear before at least 2.00 a.m., and although I was very tired at this point, she was well worth it. Lucy has been dancing for many years, and again, she has her own very unique style. She put on a spellbinding performance, lasting for a few hours with four or five costume changes. Her orchestra was amazing. She danced various styles – oriental, saidi and khaleegy (which comes from the Gulf). It was about 5.30 a.m. when we got back to the hotel, falling into bed to have a few hours sleep before attending the next class!! Watching her, and how she kept her audience interested, was another learning experience. It is very important to make a connection with the audience.

The next day I did Dandash's class, another dancer from Alexandria. She shimmies all the time she dances, and layers movements on top of movements. It was very inspiring to see her powerful shimmies, which she made look effortless.

In the evenings there were student shows and live music which was provided as part of the festival. I saw some very talented performers from different countries. I had put myself down to do a performance slot with live musicians, but I was unable to take part because of times, etc. The next day I left myself free to do some shopping for music, as it is vital to have a good variety of different types of music. I just wish I could capture the sound of those Egyptian live orchestras – but it is impossible!

On the last evening there was the closing gala, and my favourite dancer from this show was Khadia. She did a wonderful stick dance and her talent really shone through. There were several other up and coming dancers from Egypt who all had their own style. Sadly, you were not allowed to take photographs at the opening and closing shows. However, I hope to get a video of the shows later on in the year.

Reflecting back on my experience, expectations and aims of going to the festival, I can say that I had a truly rewarding experience. I learnt a lot about how to combine movements and how important it is to develop your own style, which must reflect your own passion for the dance and love of the music. You can be taught technique, but not how to express feeling – this only comes from within.

I will pass on what I have learnt to my dance students, and I feel I have been inspired by the great love Egyptians have for this part of their culture. Whilst I was there I was invited to dance for a bride and groom in a hotel (there were weddings taking place most nights), and I considered this to be a great honour. No wedding seems to be complete without someone to dance in front of the bride and groom alongside the wedding musicians. For me this was a great privilege. Although the dance is frowned upon by some conservatives in Egyptian society, it clearly has its place as an art form and a great source of entertainment to be enjoyed by male, female, young and old alike. To sum up, attending this festival was a wonderful opportunity and source of inspiration that could only be experienced in Egypt. It was a learning curve, and an important step for me as part of my own personal growth as a dancer and teacher. I have come back with even greater enthusiasm for what I do and I hope my own dancing will be enhanced from this experience.

Karen Hardman