

DANCE

Dance Troupe is Dedicated to Spreading Energy and Love (Not You-Know-What) Through the Craft of Belly Dancing Shaking Off Stereotypes – One

LISTEN TO A FEW EGYPTIAN SONGS and you'll soon start to recognize the word "farha." Ubiquitous in Egyptian music, it means "good energy" or "full of happy love." For belly dancer Rania Kandil, it sums up why she dances: to spread "farha."

"I wish more people understood Arabic music. It's always about love in some form - loving someone or loving life," said the ebullient, dark-haired member of Austin's Sabaya Belly Dance Collective. She is one of four Sabaya members who entertain enthusiastic crowds on the second Saturday of each month at the Copa Bar & Grill downtown on Congress Ave. (a fifth dancer is on sabbatical overseas). Previous Sabaya gigs include One World Theatre, the Paramount Theatre, La

Zona Rosa and Austin Music Hall. Sabaya members have also performed individually in Egypt, Canada, Europe and South America.

"I think what we're communicating is different for every member of Sabaya. For me, it's about unity and love. I'm kind of a hippy," Kandil said, with a bright smile.

"To get out there and perform, it's like you're communicating with a bunch of different people and there are no words, and for one moment, everybody understands. I'm almost addicted to that now. I want to connect with people so that words don't get in the way and there is no misinterpretation."

Belly dancing has a reputation for being sexually provocative, but nothing could be further from the truth,

explained Kandil. Done correctly, belly dancing is not a "hootchie-kootchie thing" at all, she said. It's an art form that is more sensual than sexual. Dancers wear revealing costumes to highlight their curves because the dance is about the beauty of the female form and how it moves.

Sabaya, the name chosen by the troupe members, is Egyptian for "beautiful young woman."

Hang around the belly dancing world and you'll see women of all ages, shapes and sizes, perfecting their hip drops and chest pops. In fact, when Kandil began her first belly dance classes at the age of 30, she weighed 170 pounds and was shy about revealing her body. But a classmate who also weighed 170 pounds inspired her to continue. "She

had been dancing for a while, and she moved so beautifully. She made me realize it didn't matter what size you are. It broke that barrier."



Sabaya belly dance troupe, from left: Rania Kandil, Yasmin Youssef, Stacey Wuest (Stacey Lizette) and Maribel Rivero.

Shimmy at a Time

Another old-fashioned notion - that beauty and brains don't go together - has been laid to rest by the Sabaya troupe. It's something of an inside joke that almost all the dancers work in the high tech industry in positions ranging from software programmer to director of interface design. Kandil is a freelance graphic designer, and Maribel Rivero is the food and nutrition program director at the Sustainable Food Center.

As serious as they are about their careers, the dancers are also committed to the art of belly dancing. Each Sabaya member has been dancing for seven or eight years, and one member has danced for 12. They train extensively and study with master dancers all over the United States. To top it all, they are planning a two-week trip to Egypt in November to study with several renowned Egyptian belly dancers.

Each Sabaya dancer brings a slightly different style of belly dancing to her performance: Rivero, born in La Paz, Bolivia, infuses her dancing with a Latin sensibility, including some Flamenco moves. She is also known for her ability to shake and shimmy. "We call her the Shimmy Queen," said Kandil. "I

think she's the best in Austin at it."

Stacey Wuest, who goes by the stage name Stacey Lizette, is an extremely athletic dancer, with amazing muscle control and the ability to isolate various muscle groups.

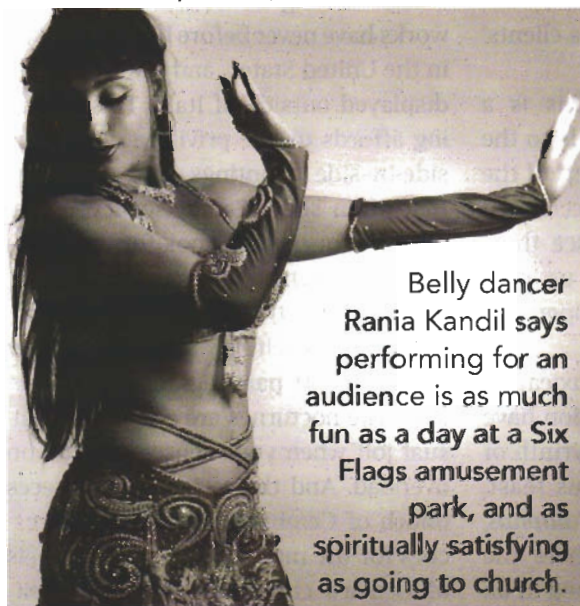
Yasmin Youssef has been dubbed "The Butterfly." Her style is slow and flowing.

Lili Tsai, on sabbatical in London and New Zealand for the past two years, brings an American tribal flavor to her performance, complete with African-style movements and costumes.

Kandil, born in the United States but with Egyptian heritage, focuses on the classic Egyptian style. She is somewhat of a purist, although she appreciates all the influences on belly dancing. To supplement her traditional Arabic style, she takes ballet and jazz classes. "You can have all the basic belly dance moves, but you also have to know how to turn and how to be graceful. I get that from ballet."

But the fusion of dance styles only goes so far. Kandil said when she goes to a salsa club, she simply can't master the salsa moves. She ends up doing hip drops instead of swaying her hips and then she can't help but revert to belly dancing to a Latin beat. "Everyone on the floor looks at me like, 'What is she doing? What IS that?'"

Kandil noted that Sabaya offers free belly dancing lessons at their monthly Copa performances and she is passionate about wanting every woman to take up belly dancing. "Every woman should! It's feminine freedom. It doesn't matter what size or shape you are and it doesn't matter what age you are. Truly. Because it gives you confidence. Not only are you saying, 'I can move beautifully and I'm beautiful,' you are showing that to the world." ★



Belly dancer Rania Kandil says performing for an audience is as much fun as a day at a Six Flags amusement park, and as spiritually satisfying as going to church.