

28 January 2008

A whirlwind dance tour round the continents

Review of a hafla in Croydon

By Michaela

When my friend Charlotte invited me to a hafla she was organising, my first reaction was to say: 'a what?!' Charlotte then explained that hafla is the Arabic word for party, and that it would feature world-famous bellydancers, so I took along my dance-mad nine-year-old daughter.

The energy, vibrancy and sheer exuberance of the hafla took our breath away. We hadn't known what to expect, but it certainly wasn't this incredible variety of dances.

The hafla took us on a whirlwind tour around the continents, from Croydon to Spain to Egypt and on. It was a display of technical brilliance and drama, but what made it so special was that it was performed with wit, good humour and an irresistible energy.

The show opened with an unforgettable Croydon chav bellydance, by a group called Johara. It was an ironic and contemporary interpretation of the traditional stick dance complete with south London style sneering, strutting and gum chewing.

Traditional Egyptian belly-dancers were followed on stage by a flamenco-bellydance fusion by Emma Chapman, then a funk-inspired dance by Pamela Austin that moved to an infectious rhythm and had the crowd ululating and clapping, and two street-bellydance performances one by Chantel Phillips and one by the Bellydance Allstars which my daughter described as 'wicked!'

Every dance was more astounding than the one before it. I'd only planned to stay for an hour, but I felt disappointed when Charlotte announced the last performer of the evening: Aziza, one of the world's top international bellydancing stars, who had come over from the US just for this hafla.

Aziza was anything but disappointing. She stole the show with a display of astonishing virtuosity. Aziza is a former Bellydancer of the Universe title holder and she seemed to glide around the room. Her performance combined wit with sensuality and muscle control that appeared to defy the laws of nature.

The woman sitting next to us, a student at Charlotte's classes, had been on Aziza's masterclass that day. "It was wonderful," she said. "A lovely atmosphere and not nearly as technical or competitive as those masterclasses often are."

On the other side of us was Numan, who has drummed for belly-dancers for 25 years, and said he had never seen such a technically brilliant performance. "I've never seen a bellydancer who can do so much shimmying and follow the music so exactly. Aziza moves like a swan."

The 250-strong audience created an intensely exuberant atmosphere, not just with their clapping and cheering but through the jangling of their spangled belly-dancing belts and skirts that more than half the audience wore.

I should have realised how good the hafla was going to be. My friend Charlotte Desorgher, who organised it, was the highest placed UK entrant in the first international bellydancing competition held in this country last year. She manages the UK's largest bellydance organisation *hipsinc.*, which has about 600 (oh yes, its growing fast!!) students and offers bellydancing classes throughout Surrey and Kent.

My daughter and I might not have fully appreciated the technical skill of the dancers at the hafla, but we loved being part of it. Oh, and my daughter has now started going to bellydancing classes herself!

The only other thing was adding in my rapturous applause!