

Review of Aziza's first visit to the UK, organised by Charlotte Desorgher
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A while ago I bought the "Aziza Raks – Passion of Bellydance" DVD from Aladdin's Cave because of the nice picture on the cover. It has now become the most played DVD in my whole collection, as Aziza is a beautiful dancer and pleasantly entertaining to watch.

So when I heard the rumours that Charlotte Desorgher was bringing her to the UK for the first time I was very keen to put my name down for it. This was not something to be missed!

And I was right. The weekend of workshops in Croydon and London was truly inspiring. They were the sort of workshops that make you re-evaluate your whole approach to Middle Eastern Dance, both to the dancing and to teaching. It was like she opened our eyes to a bright and shiny new vision of the dance. It was like taking my first class as a beginner, feeling the excitement of finding a whole new world of possibilities.

Strong words, I know, but I am not alone in this. There were a number of other teachers also there, including Charlotte, who spoke of that inspiration as though Aziza had lit a fire inside them and brought new enthusiasm and passion to their dancing and teaching.

Yes, we all groaned at being worn out, at having to work out our tummy muscles and do push ups. A weekend with Aziza is worth a whole year at the gym! But the honest chatter in the breaks was of our shame at being so unfit, so unpractised and at being so lazy.

Aziza's core message was that the grace and fluidity in her dancing all stems from the strength and control that she has and from engaging with the muscles to make each movement purposeful.

The weekend for me started on Saturday morning in Croydon with a workshop on combinations. Entering the room and meeting Aziza for the first time was a little daunting, as after having her dance for me in my living room for all this time she had gained a sort of celebrity status in our house. But she soon put us all at ease with her natural and encouraging manner. The combinations were all very pretty and taught in a clear and methodical way. Aziza took us through each combination without music first, breaking down the movements before putting them together in slow motion. We then rehearsed the combination to a slow piece of music repeating it over and over to establish the muscle memory. Then, when we were feeling more confident with it she put on a faster piece of music to practice to. Each combination had a name and we soon learnt to follow the call to move seamlessly from one combination to another.

For a workshop, I find this method of teaching in combinations much more effective than learning a whole choreography. The combinations are little building blocks that you take and plug in to your own dancing and so you can get more use out of them than a whole choreography, which more often than not is never performed.

After a very short lunch break we were back in the studio for a veil workshop. Aziza has a veil technique DVD (available from Aladdin's Cave) which has had excellent reviews and much of the workshop content is covered on this DVD.

Again, no choreography was taught in the workshop, but we learnt some beautiful veil combinations and intricate techniques to take away and use in our own choreographies.

When the workshops for the day were over there was plenty of time for a shower at the sports centre (ice cold!) and a piece of cake before the doors opened at the Fairfield halls for the evening hafla.

The first half of the show included some entertaining and varied performances from Charlotte Desorgher, Beatrice Curtis and a new face from Belgium; Artemisia. But, even with these fantastic performances, the real star of the show was definitely Aziza.

Having been dancing myself for 9 years, I have seen an awful lot of bellydancers, most of them very good and in entertaining performances. But the more you see, the more predictable it all becomes and those draw-dropping moments of awe and amazement happen much less often. When Aziza made her grand entrance at the end of the first half she looked stunning in an emerald green cabaret set with matching green silk veil. She did her tour of the dance floor, veil billowing behind her like a traditional oriental dancer. Then something amazing happened. You could hear the gasps of joy from the audience as the veil transformed and magically flew around her like a serpent under her spell. I'm not going to tell you her secret because I believe this is something that everyone should see. Everyone should have the chance to be amazed and surprised by this ingenious display of crowd pleasing showmanship that was the most exciting thing I've seen since Jillina first performed at Fantasia in 2003. Now I understand why Aziza has been crowned "Bellydancer of the Universe"!

The rest of her set was a whirlwind of fantastic dancing, charisma and comedy that left us wanting more; I think I could have watched her dance all night. Thankfully, after a very tasty and plentiful buffet dinner and about an hour of bopping on the dance floor we took our seats for the second half of the show. As in the first half Aziza was preceded by a few more of the "best of British" dancers, including a dramatic oriental dance from Galit and a sword dance from Afra Al-Kahira. Shafeek Ibrahim then performed an energetic Reda style Saidi dance with two sticks and got us warmed up and in the mood again ready for Aziza's second set of the evening. This time there was no trickery, just Aziza's skill as an entertainer. Her drum solo was particularly dramatic, with every nuance of the tabla being accented with a taq or a pop, a hip shimmy, shoulder shimmy or even head shimmy! Even with the intricate hip work in this choreography she still managed to travel around the dance floor; it was amazing to see such a petite dancer take up so much space!

By the end of the show the whole audience was wearing grins like the Cheshire cat, including the sceptics who hadn't even heard of her, let alone seen her DVDs.

Throughout the weekend Charlotte's introductions at the workshops became more and more complimentary, until on Sunday afternoon, much to her embarrassment, Aziza was heralded as the best bellydancer in the world! While there might be many more contenders for this title, we all understood what Charlotte had meant. And with an emotional end to the weekend, Aziza was unbelievably humble and thanked us for taking time out of our busy lives to come and see her. We left the workshop willing her not to leave us and hopeful that she would be returning again soon.