

Decorating you! - Interview with Maayan of Brighton Orient for Mosaic magazine

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When did you first start belly dancing?

I spent some of my childhood in the Middle East, so I was exposed to belly dancing from a very early age. Much later, I started doing prenatal yoga and birth preparation while I was pregnant with my daughter. When the teacher mentioned belly dancing, as an ancient birthing dance, over hip-circles and figures of 8, something inside of me resonated very strongly. When I was giving birth to my daughter, I felt like I was channelling the spirit of an old Bedouin woman. I literally danced my daughter into the water, giving birth in a way that felt natural and beautiful.

It reminded me of my grandmother, who, during the holocaust, had to flee and literally danced for her survival in the streets of Warsaw. This is how my grandfather met her and fell in love with her. So I've always felt like I've come to this world through dance. It's in my roots and dance feels like an inseparable part of who I am.

How did you then start retailing belly dance wear?

When I was a young adult I studied fashion design in London. For a while I designed clothes in India and sold individual and creative collections that resonated with who I was at the time.

I then moved away from the fashion industry and started working as an aroma therapist and a doula (supporting natural birth). Even though I decided to stop practising therapy, it left me with a strong sense & deep understanding of the female form, which corresponded with the sensuous undulations of belly dance.

I was going through some deep changes and found myself attending more & more belly dance classes as it was very therapeutic for me and seemed to bring a forgotten part of me back to life. At that time belly dance was the best thing in my life and it has had a huge effect on what I

have done since. Selling a few belts at classes and events seemed to grow naturally from my passion for the dance as it helped to fund my classes and provided a way for me to also give back to belly dance. These few belts have since bloomed into the biggest belly dance costume retail business in Europe.

About your costumes – what is their story?

I source rare Italian fabric (which is printed from actual hand-paintings), which I select depending on their patterns and colours for the effect that I feel they will create in a costume. I bring the material from the West to the East, to my designers in Cairo, who I sit with for hours and days envisioning and planning the costumes to come. We sit for as long as it takes to create the perfect collection of traditional and modern costumes to bring to the belly dance world. Some of my designs are cutting edge and provocative – they are well balanced with the more traditionally elegant ones, so that there is something for every taste and type. Each piece is special and unique, no matter what its design or style.

Tell me about Brighton Orient.

Brighton Orient started out as a hafla I organised for what I thought would be quite a small crowd. As this was the first attempt in belly dance history at a proper hafla in Brighton we very quickly had England's established and rising stars on board, among them Vashti, Storm, Angela Wooi, Galit Mersand and the legendary Khaled Mahmoud, who was yet a star to be discovered. Because of this impressive line up the event soon promised to be much bigger than anything I had handled before and I would like to thank Lyn Embling (the amazing editor of mosaic at the time) and her husband Henry for lending their support and expertise without which Brighton orient could not have come about, I was so touched by their generosity and help that they have become like my belly dance parents and will always hold a tender place in my heart. That was in 2003 – from then onwards, we had an event every six months, each Christmas and July to correspond with the excited atmosphere at those times of year. By 2007 the event had increased considerably in size, with a full weekend of workshops and a greater variety of fabulous international teachers and performers. They included dancers from all over the world, the aforementioned ones, who have always remained loyal friends to Brighton Orient, were joined by Natacha Atlas, Amel Tafsout, Keti Sharif, Miriam Aluan, Orit Maftsir, Mayala, Ozgen, Anne White, Hilde, Lubna Emam, Shafeek Ibrahim, and, of course, the legend Mahmoud Reda and his assistant Joanna of Cairo, to mention but a few. They all share a passion for this ancient dance, and it was a privilege to bring them together in one event and on one stage. They also set a wonderful example for the ability of diverse nations, religions and viewpoints to cooperate in the name of free creative expression and love of music and dance.

5. You've been in the industry for nearly 14 years – what major changes have you witnessed?

In the past couture costumes were almost always heavily laden with beads and crystals and at

floor-length creating a romantic flowing effect that suited the music and atmosphere at the time. Over the years some have become shorter and lighter and I am proud to say that Brighton Orient has been an active influence in this field. We're experimenting especially with asymmetric length, which tends to add more spice, gives interesting twists to the costume and look more flattering on some figures.

Working our way up, bras used to be much more traditionally shaped until about 6-7 years ago. The revolutionary change is probably due to the influence of Dina, Egypt/the world's most famous belly dancer. The first time I saw Dina dance, I was touched so deeply that I left with tears in my eyes and inspiration in my heart. Unbelievably Dina will be guest-starring next September at the London, Shimmy in the City festival! which I personally wouldn't miss (check out: www.shimmyinthecity.co.uk). Dina's provocative bras have influenced the whole industry – they lift the bust much higher than ever before & leave less for the imagination! Many designers have embraced the 'Dina-bra' and enhanced it with their own style creating a variety of looks, from traditional romantic to experimental and outrageous.

Another thing we've been seeing are more & more of the 'cut-outs' which gained popularity about 10 years ago with the rise of the Belly Dance Superstars, many of whom do the 'cut-outs' a world of justice, showing bare, perfect skin, leaving us all green with envy.

Brighton Orient are renowned for having always dealt with a first class selection of top designer costumes, and these often have quite a lot of weight to them, because of the amazingly crafted embroidery on them. I still love and immensely respect the traditional Egyptian bead by bead, crystal by crystal, meticulously detailed craft. This style of beading was founded and excelled in by Madam Abla (may her soul rest in peace); from the 70s right up to the 90s she was Egypt's top designer for stunningly high quality work, which is now represents the height of traditional Egyptian. we are fortunate to be able to work exclusively with here successors who still deliver the uncompromisingly high quality that can never be imitated by the machine made wares we see so often these days.

These are but a few of the greater changes that have come about over the years and as a fashion victim myself I try to keep up with them.

6. How is it working with the designers in Cairo?

I love it, although sometimes it can be an absolute nightmare! That sounds terrible but it's the reality of late nights and worry caused by misunderstandings big or small with the designers,

that can lead to all sorts of problems. The misunderstandings often come about through bad communication as a result of my imperfect Arabic. Pushing some designers beyond their comfort zone can also cause catastrophes, so we just take some losses on the chin and have learned not to get too upset by it over the years. Many are used to making traditional costumes, and cannot always produce the new and more adventurous designs.

Having said that, it can sometimes be thoroughly enjoyable to work with the designers spending hours of fun filled with creativity that results in amazing new costumes. Aziz, who is one of Cairo's current top innovators and daring designers, can be very entertaining and inspirational to work with as he isn't afraid of trying anything and is always up for a challenge. He absolutely meets and transcends my creativity and will go all the way with mad outfits, pushing beyond fashion boundaries.

But even with Aziz, there is no doubt that in order to get the perfect results, below which Brighton Orient refuses to go, a great deal of effort and strength of will is required. However, the end result never ceases to amaze, and even one of my friends, who has never had any chemistry with the belly dance world, could not stop saying 'Wow!' about our first exclusive Aziz collection. And that is how the 'WOW!' collection came about, that has earned many more 'Wow!'s since!

7. Where is Brighton Orient fashion going next?

Well, I cannot give away too much information yet, because inspiration is just beginning to bubble... what I can say is that we will probably launch the next 'WOW!' collection along with our fabulous annual, Brighton Orient beach party. At which unusual suspects such as Khaled Mahmoud and Natasha Atlas ha previously appeared, so that certainly is something to put in a diary and look forward to! In the process of working on collections, and in particular the next sequel of the 'WOW!' collection, we're always open to inspiring photographs, suggestions from anyone on the belly dance scene and/or the fashion industry.

I've been honoured to dress some of the world's most famous dancers and am so grateful for the good feedback I continue to receive. I immensely enjoy decorating ladies of all sizes, shapes and ages and making them look and feel amazing.

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