

Kismet: One Man's Destiny

By Katya Faris, Bloomington, IN

On August 10, 2002 in River Grove, IL, a suburb of Chicago, I was treated to an evening of rare talent and showmanship, unlike any other Middle Eastern dance concert I have seen before. The show, "Kismet: One Man's Destiny," was produced and directed by **Jasmin Jahal**. Having had previous training in ballet, modern and jazz before beginning Middle Eastern dance, I have, at times, noticed the lack of quality theater performances in the Middle Eastern dance field. The usual dance show takes place after a workshop, rather than being its own independent production. A full-scale theater concert with Middle Eastern dance as the focal point, clearly take us a step ahead in our genre, and Jasmin Jahal is leading the way.

I had attended an earlier performance by Jasmin and her troupe, **Ward el Sahara**, at the Genesis at the Crossroads event held October 28, 2001, at the Cultural Center in downtown Chicago. **Genesis** is a not-for-profit organization that brings together artists from the Arab, Persian and Jewish cultures, with the goal of improving communication and promoting peace. The special guest artist for the evening was **Ali Jihad Racy**, an Arabic ethnomusicologist from UCLA. At that performance **Ward el Sahara** was only a year into their training for "Kismet," with perhaps half of the pieces ready, but even then I could tell that their technique was flawless, and Jasmin's choreographies authentic and well conceived. She presented folk dances from different regions and peoples, including, among others, Saudi Arabia, Saidi (Upper Egypt) and Ghawazee. When she performed an Egyptian classical choreography, it was in good taste with a well-executed drum solo. Her other solos that evening included a beautiful Pharaonic dance with incense and her famous Egyptian *shamadan* piece. Afterwards, I felt refreshed and invigorated by such talent, beauty and professionalism.

The **Ward el Sahara** performance had been just a taste of what was to come, and I could not wait to return to Chicago to see the entire presentation. According to the program notes, she had been in production for two years, auditioning dancers and training them specifically for this concert. Jasmin also designed the sets and made many of the costumes. Jasmin held two performances of "Kismet" on August 3 and 10, and I attended the latter. *Kismet* means "destiny" in Arabic, and this play was about one man's destiny to find his true love. The Sufi themes of Lover and Beloved, Union and Separation, provided the foundations for "Kismet." Jasmin took the classic literary theme and turned it into a fairy tale

that people of all ages could enjoy—the children were as enraptured by the show as the adults.

The first dance introduced the modern fairy tale romance and its main character, a wandering traveler, played by **Randall Craig**. He had been sent to Lebanon to find a fortune teller named **Nadia** who would help him find his true love. An old Gypsy in Andalusia had given him a ruby amulet, which he gave to **Nadia** in exchange for telling his fortune. She told him that he must go on traveling in search of his beloved. The music used in this segment was a Lebanese

piece written for **Nadia Gamal**; and the late **Ibrahim Farrah**, Jasmin's mentor, served as inspiration for the choreography. That night the traveler fell asleep and had a dream in which he glimpsed his beloved, encouraging him to go on searching. The dancing in this piece, a mix of Middle Eastern and modern dance, was effective in producing a dream-like atmosphere, with blue light, dry ice and costumes in white and gray with a hint of red.

The next piece was a Turkish suite of three songs; opening with a *bazouki taxim*, followed by a traditional 9/8 and ending with a modern Turkish pop song, **Tarkan's** "Kiss-Kiss." I would have preferred that the 9/8 be performed faster and with more fire, as the Rom do it in **Sulukele**, rather than the more demure 9/8 folk dance version. Unsatisfied with Turkey, our Traveler ventures on to Saudi Arabia. Jasmin's knowledge of *khaleegi*, a style of Saudi dance,



Jasmin Jahal in "Kismet" with shamadan

is evident in this soft, flowing piece. The visual appeal of several different women dancing together in various colored *thobes* made this one of the most satisfying group pieces, in my opinion. It was performed authentically and with feeling—a rare combination. The Traveler then visits the region of the Sa'id in Upper Egypt, where the dancers in the scene performed a well-researched, authentic stick dance. Entertained but tired, he leaves the Sa'id village with a caravan.

Falling asleep under the desert stars, he experiences a vision of his beloved with other dancers glistening above the sand as if they were *jinn*, compelling him to keep on searching. The music in this piece was "Feras" by **Natacha Atlas**. *Feras* is Arabic for "knight or horse rider," and it was easy to imagine our Traveler riding in on his horse from across the desert towards his beloved. Jasmin used the instrumental sections of the song, repeating them over and over. This was effective, but knowing what the complete song sounded like

had me wishing that she had used it in its entirety. Here too, Jasmin incorporated her ballet and modern dance training, using the troupe successfully to produce the illusion that they were floating above the sand with their veils. Jasmin appeared halfway through the piece, once again showing the Traveler the way to her heart, symbolized by the red in her costume. This piece, a fusion of modern and Middle Eastern dance, was my favorite one of the concert.

The Traveler awoke the next day thinking he had hallucinated. He decided to travel north with the caravan. They stopped for some rest and entertainment, and encountered a band of Ghawazee. Again, Jasmin's showmanship and her use of authentic movement and music were displayed in this piece; she did not stray from the culture or invent a style based on the fantasy of Orientalist paintings. Our traveler still has not found the woman of his dreams. Clearly he has enjoyed the dancing he has seen, but is compelled onward. He now goes to Alexandria, Egypt where he finds women dancing the *melaya lef*. Mahmoud Reda, Jasmin's second mentor, taught her a modern version of the regional dance, which was performed by dancers wearing face veils and street-length dresses, with *ship-ship* on their feet—the backless high-heeled “mule” sandals. Alexandria is an ancient port city, and many a sailor has come into its harbor looking for a good time. Typical of the dance, there was an obvious, playful use of the *hijab*, or veil, that covered the dancers' faces.

The traveler leaves Alexandria for Giza, and transported by the history of the place, has a vision of an ancient

Pharaonic ceremony, danced effectively by Ward el Sahara with Jasmin as the Egyptian Goddess Nut. From Giza our traveler continues on to Cairo, where he hurries to a new nightclub, “Club Kismet,” sensing something special in the air. Among the dancers performing that night, was the headliner, a soloist in a ruby red costume wearing the ruby amulet. The traveler was taken by her beauty and talent, and his earlier dream of her seemed to come alive. Jasmin was the soloist, performing a gorgeous *raks sharki* set to classical Egyptian music. Making his way backstage to meet the dancer, the traveler realizes that she is Nadia, the fortune-teller from Lebanon. She had been with him from the very beginning of his journey. Rather than waste time on a long engagement, they decided to marry quickly. The last dance was the *zeffa*, or wedding march. This was a simple but exuberant dance, performed as the couple proceeded to their reception. The Goddess Nut, from the Pharaonic piece, led the *zeffa* with the *shamadan*. The old Gypsy woman from Andalusia brought the bride her bouquet, and representatives from all of the concert's dances followed after them. Our Traveler had found his Beloved.

I was impressed with Jasmin's talent and dedication to our art-form. She has definitely paved the path for our dancing daughters of the future by mixing authentic folkloric dance with theatre, appealing to audiences of all ages and persuasions. With more concerts like this in the future, perhaps we will one day be recognized as a valid form to be included in arts productions everywhere.

Studio Djinn presents

“Glam Orient”

with

