

Written for the JamBallah Dance Festival 2012

Passion, Community, and the Dance

By Paulette Rees-Denis / Gypsy Caravan Dance Co.

What is it about our fabulous dance style of Tribal, with its plethora of fusion evolutions, which continues to mesmerize us, to pull us toward it and into it? When you watch it, you see the astounding beauty, the connection through the eyes, the smiles, and the movements that the soloist or group of dancers share. It has that so-in-the-moment kind of energy, as if nothing else exists right then. You can feel the power, the soul, sometimes the ancientness, the collective energy, and you want it too, to be a part of it, to feel it.

As dancers and artists, we feel the strength, the empowerment, the sensuality and the beauty, as we move our bodies to that innate rhythm inside. The pulse of life. It feels good, it looks good, and it does make us strong—physically, emotionally, and mentally. It can be all for fun, to get fit and just dance, have some laughs, and hang out with your friends. Or it can take years of commitment and training to get to a professional performance level. Whatever your personal goal is, the dance is yours to do and share as you desire. The body blossoms, the soul explodes with the mind/body connection, and the interweaving of each other is inspiring and energizing. It is marvelous to have control, flexibility, and groundedness in the body, to be able to move it, to feel healthy and alive, and to absolutely love being in your own skin!

Besides the physical movements, there are the costumes and the adornments that go with it! Glitter, gauze, cottons, sequins, coins, shishas, feathers, bells, bangles, bindis, lipstick, and so much more goes into the making of the look, individually and collectively, whether it is a solo performer or a troupe. You share and borrow, design, sew, put together a style. Artistry in group design or individual expression. It is delightful to spend time with oneself, as if in an ornamentation meditation. Dance to me is a moving meditation. With layers!

What about the Sisterhood that comes inherently with the dance? There is power in numbers, for sure. Talk about empowerment. There is nothing like the camaraderie that happens when the dancers get together. As in the dance itself, there are no age barriers, no size restrictions, no cultural biases. The dance has its own life, it's own community of support. As with the riveting zaghareet—that ululation that you hear all around you, which is a cry of encouragement—that incredible heart opening cheer of support is what can happen in the community of dancers.

I write with my experience from the Tribal Bellydance point of view, as I have taught and directed Tribal classes and groups for over 20 years. My main troupe, Gypsy Caravan Dance Company, Int., is a group of dancers who have trained long and hard,

and choose to dance together in our powerfully evocative improvisational and synchronistic style. As with many groups, there is a bond, sometimes silent, most times loud and clear, of assistance, support, encouragement; you know someone's got your back. Sometimes it is an astonishing reverie—what an awesome feeling! There is nothing like it.

Not all connections last forever, but as in life, one learns to allow the positivity of self and sisterhood to be strong. Individuals will move on to continue on their own journey. We are grateful for the time we've had together, with lessons learned and good memories to keep, as we also move forward on our own path. That, too, is empowering. That is why it is important to be in the moment, to really be right in it, to let the dance swallow you up and envelop you. It is so yummy. As a dancer, you learn to let go of ego, to live improvisationally, to be quick to change, and whoa, that is exhilarating! You realize it is not just about you but about the whole circle, and it takes all of us to create the circle, the community. We learn to take up space, alone and together, to be a part of something bigger, and wow, what a good thing. That is powerful stuff.

You see all these connections this weekend, at this 2nd Annual JamBallah festival. All the dancers and watchers come together, to share the love of the dance, the love of each other, the opportunities, and the community. There will be a-ha moments of brilliance. Hugs and kisses. Sweat and tears. Sore muscles from hard workshops. Sore cheeks from laughing. Mind-opening and body-freeing movements and styles. Of course, shopping for new costume pieces. New bonds will be formed, old ones renewed. Dance will always evolve. Dance is a living, breathing art form as we honor the tried and true, the traditions, as well as the evolutions. As in the maiden, the mother, and the crone, we honor the youth, the journey, the wise ones, along with the teachers, the students, and the observers. We share the love.

The brilliant power and energy of hard work, wisdom, and creativity fills the studio, the streets, the stage, with artistic support, freedom, and luminosity. Relish in the enthusiasm as it engulfs and circles you. Be in the moment. Enjoy the diversity and artistry as it all comes together for this long weekend of ecstatic movement in all its shapes and forms. The community is strong as we all share and unite in the pleasure and the passion of the dance.

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