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Changing the World, One Hip at a Time

An Interview with Paulette Rees-Denis

BY HILARY GIOVALE

For this issue's column, I am pleased to introduce you to Paulette Rees-Denis, director of Gypsy Caravan Dance Company. Paulette was one of the original members of FatChanceBellyDance in San Francisco; she has been a leading figure in the Tribal Bellydance scene for over 20 years. In 1991 Paulette moved to Portland, Oregon where she started teaching classes, created her own Tribal Style language of dance, and founded Gypsy Caravan. Paulette is now known throughout the world as a master teacher in this art form. Her style of

dance is beautifully organic and pulls from many different cultural traditions, creating a dance that feels traditional, has the tribal vibe of the universal improvisational dance language and group dancing togetherness and synchronicity, but is also innovative and ever-changing.

Since 2007, Paulette has been teaching Collective Soul worldwide. This is a certification program she developed so dancers can learn more about the origins and intentions of Tribal Style, become comfortable with her approach to the dance, and gain fluency in the Gypsy Caravan language of movement. Through this course, they gain self-confidence, and strengthen themselves in their bodies and their minds as dancers and artists. Many of the dancers who have been certified in Collective Soul are from different cultures, have never met, and may not even speak the same verbal language. However, since Tribal is based in group improvisation, this allows a common structure and the potential for shared improvisational dancing among women throughout the world.

I became acquainted with Paulette through her Collective Soul and Teacher Trainings in 2007 and I've been privileged to continue studying with her since then. I talked with Paulette recently; here's some of our conversation.



Hilary: Which nationalities of dancers are certified in Collective Soul?

Paulette: So far, we have English, Scottish, German, Italian, New Zealanders, Australians, Taiwanese, Canadian, Spanish, and American.

H: Your concept for Caravan Soul Collective International is very exciting. How would you describe it?

MY IDEA IS THAT THE WOMEN OF THE WORLD SHOULD BE ABLE TO COME TOGETHER WITH A COMMON DANCE LANGUAGE.

P: This idea is still in the formative stages, but I'd like the group of Collective Soul certified dancers to be able to perform with me. My idea is that the women of the world should be able to come together with a common dance language. I see eventually having one big event every year where the dancers come together to dance and possibly perform, although performance is not the ultimate goal. My intention is not to be exclusive, but I would like to create

this opportunity for my students around the world to gather and dance together.

H: What's the benefit of having a common dance language?

P: For a group of dancers to come together in a really connected way; they need common roots and understanding of the dance. Don't get me wrong, I don't think everyone should dance exactly the same or be carbon copies of my style. I want my dancers to have the freedom to be creative and expressive with their art. A common tribal language should have many dialects to allow room for creativity and diversity. But they learn how to watch each other, and how to read bodies, so that they can all dance together, with power and inspiration.

H: What's it like to travel and teach bellydance internationally?

P: It is a truly amazing experience. I am blessed. I love to teach and my goal is to help make people better dancers. I love to see how the dance is universal, and even though people change things all the time, this dance is still so beautiful and intuitive. Tribal Style is still newer in other countries, which always helps keep it in perspective for me.

It has grown and changed so much already in the United States and is still very vibrant and freshly new in other places. I enjoy working and dancing with people who love what Tribal Bellydance is, and can celebrate the joy as well as the hard work of being a dancer.

H: What is Tribal Bellydance?

P: It's about the joy of dancing together, the joy of connection. Sometimes I think people have lost the original intention because they want to follow trends or fads to change the look of it. But it doesn't have to follow trends or be about choreography to be beautiful. It doesn't have to be put on a stage to be powerful.



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TOGETHER AND ADMIRE
OURSELVES ...

H: What are some cool things going on around the world in Tribal Style dance today?

P: It's exciting for me to see the enthusiasm and freshness of people just experiencing it. I get excited

when I see people who have studied with me and they approach a move as dancers, with respect to roots and integrity, but they have a new take on it. The dance needs to evolve because it's art.

H: What draws women to Tribal Style?

P: The community aspect of dancing together and connection with each other. Our world is calling for community of any type. We need to learn from each other and have fun together and admire ourselves and accept ourselves. It's exciting to be a dancer and move your body energetically (on a woo-

woo level) as well as physically. I think a lot of people are drawn to it because movement is exciting and healing. People are attracted by the costumes, the music, the spiritual side of dance, the emotional release. Tribal also helps women accept themselves as they age. That's what makes it so damn cool...everybody should just dance!

H: I think your book Tribal Vision is the best one out there. What has the public response been to your book?

P: Really good. It's deeply personal, but I also wanted to share other women's stories and inspire other women because that's what matters. You can change your life and be empowered and beautiful no matter what. Writing, and then publishing, this book has been such an enormous feat for me. I am touched by the response, with many rave reviews in magazines, and so many wonderful letters that readers have written. I am so proud of it as a bit of history, as an art piece, a memoir. Telling about this amazing dance form. And not only being able to share my story, but to share other women's stories about this dance we call Tribal. I could share a million other stories, and I hope to somehow, because these stories are meant to be heard, written, shared, talked about, and inspired by. The book and the stories really are a celebration of life through Tribal Bellydance!

H: What is the most important message you'd like to share with the world?

P: Live your life fully and be remarkable.

H: Besides dance, what are you passionate about?

P: My farm, writing, my husband Jeff, and animals, spinning wool, art, playing and listening to music, books, food, wine, cooking, vegetarianism, creating community, making art, saving the planet - check out "NOne More Thing" on my blog for ideas! (www.tribalbellydanceblog.com) And I'm learning how to "lwnng out" better!



Fun Facts about Paulette



- She raises on her farm in Oregon Corgis and Maremmas (dogs!), and a cat.
- Her goat barn and chicken coop are decorated with art of goats

and chickens. Everyone needs inspiration!

- She's a shoe fanatic, but finds wearing her high heels a bit difficult on the farm, and has a new passion for wearing cowgirl boots (while wearing aprons).
- She loves tattoos & photography.
- She has bleached blond hair, like in her early punk rock days of being a keyboard player/singer in the notorious SF band— Fade To Black (now she plays hand drums and guitar!).
- She does yoga, and teaches that too.
- She's part of a group called the Farmgirl Divas - they take tradition, use and learn from it, and make it contemporary too, (like

the dance), and make cheese, can tomatoes and pickles, spin wool, knit and drink wine together, another community in the making!

- She got a masters degree at age 50 in publishing and writing.
- She has a publishing company and produces award-winning DVDs and COs.
- She's got more books coming, as well as teaching an online writing class for dancers.
- She's proud of all her dancing girls, they are like her children.
- She's working on an anthology of dancers' writings, which was released in November 2009—A Tribal Dancer's Anthology. (To submit pieces see her free newsletter, available at www.gypsycaravan.us)



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