



SEMA YILDIZ A STAR OF TURKISH BELLYDANCE

Interview with Sema Yildiz,
one of Turkey's leading Belly Dancers and Teachers



With flowing waist length black hair, fluidly graceful arms, powerful shimmies and unforgettable smile, Sema Yildiz is Turkish Oryantal incarnate, embodying the passion, dexterity, skill and emotion of this wonderful dance form. She dances like a whirlwind, beautifully and with incredible energy. Fixing her audience with her queenly gaze she draws each individual in to her performance. Sema commands attention as a dancer and her audiences are rewarded with her rippling veil work, ringing zills, floor undulations, sweeping turns, dramatic hair flicks and pulsating stomach accents.

I first met Sema one scorching Turkish summer morning at the newly set up Gokpinar Dance Centre, a small village based dance studio where I am currently teaching. Sema had heard of the studio and while holidaying in nearby Bodrum had decided to come and inspect the studio and meet the owner with a view to also running her own workshops and classes there. So over a typical Turkish breakfast of cucumbers, olives, tomatoes, white cheese, olives, crusty white bread and strong sweet black tea I had the pleasure of meeting Sema.



Sema is recognised as one of Turkey's leading dance teachers and she has taught nearly all of the well known dancers currently performing in Turkey including Asena. Her "girls" can be seen in resorts and clubs all over Turkey and similarities in their dance styles can be traced back to Sema's focus on grace, energy and energy projection. Currently teaching in Istanbul she is still much in demand by young dancers wanting to enter the world of bellydance performance as well as by foreign students wanting to gain a unique insight into Turkish style bellydance as well as the 9/8 rhythms.



Even with this impressive profile in the Turkish belly dance world and her own extensive international dance career; Sema is surprisingly approachable and very willing to share her knowledge. After helping clear away the remains of our Turkish breakfast and pouring another round of black tea into our tulip shaped glasses, she bought out her collection of her performance DVDs and CD compilations for viewing and discussion. Although she has an in-depth knowledge and obvious love of Turkish produced belly dancing music, as I listened to her CDs with her and watched some of her recorded performances, her preference at times for Egyptian classical style belly dance music for some of her choreographies is apparent.



Later in the afternoon, relaxing on Turkish cushions in a corner of the dance studio after we had digested the last of the tea and fresh baklava. Sema changed into a stunning red beaded velvet costume and danced for us. I was mesmerized by her elegance and energy; and accompanied by a ney (Turkish flute) player and drummer who were also at the studio that sweltering afternoon she whirled round the floor like fire, dipping and thrusting and even later dropping to the floor in a back bend to allow the drummer to play his darbuka on her belly.

It is this level of passion, ability and strength of performance personality that I believe have been the hallmarks of Sema's success as a dancer. Now over 50, she has been dancing since growing up in Istanbul near a "wedding house" where as a young girl she would regularly go and listen to the music and watch the wedding dancers. Married to her first husband at age 14 and subsequently living near the gypsies of the Sulukule district in Istanbul, famous for its proliferation of gypsy musicians and dancers, Sema had direct experience learning in a very musical and colorful environment.



Entering a belly dance competition at 17 she progressed quickly on to the stage and for the next 20 years was a much loved and regular performer at major Istanbul dance and club venues. Later she performed through Europe and the Middle East, appearing with Nadia Gamal in Iran and subsequently living for 9 years in Belgium with her second husband.

A few days later over a Turkish mezze dinner that I prepared for Sema at home here in Bodrum, she danced again for us as after we had poured the black tea into our tulip shaped glasses. This time without the shining red costume, rippling silk veil and cascading beadwork, Sema's dancing was just as compelling, memorable and powerful as she had been that hot afternoon in the studio set amongst the pine trees. This is Turkish Oryantal in its best form, sensual, spontaneous, fiery, expressive and completely mesmerizing.



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