

Donna Mejia

By Nancy Loyan Schuemann

*Photos of Donna from 2015 Bellydance Masters
by Carrie Meyer of the Dancer's Eye - www.thedancerseye.com*

Part One

Donna Mejia is a renaissance woman: a renowned dancer, choreographer, director, instructor, scholar, writer and an inspiration. She is an Assistant Professor of Dance in the Theater and Dance Department at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and teaches and tours abroad and in the United States. She specializes in contemporary dance, traditions of the African and Arab Diaspora and emerging fusion traditions in Transnational Electronica. She is also an authorized instructor of the Brazilian Silvestre Modern Dance Technique. Ms. Mejia is the first professor of tribal/transnational fusion, globally.

She completed her undergraduate degree in Business at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and received her Master of Fine Arts degree on a full scholarship from Smith College.

Ms. Mejia has headlined over 50 international festivals since 2012. She was the director of the Colorado College International Summer Dance Festival for five years and was managing director of the award-winning Harambee African Dance Ensemble of the University of Colorado, Boulder. She has performed before dignitaries such as President Bill Clinton, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and was a featured soloist in the off-Broadway production *11 Reflections on September*. Her performances, commissions, lectures and scholarly works are too numerous to mention.



I had the honor of studying with and interviewing Ms. Mejia.

1. Who/What influenced your choice to pursue a dance career? Particularly ethnic dance?

My first college degree is a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. My first job after graduating was serving as an admissions counselor for a university. I found employment on the same campus where I was managing a dance group because I couldn't bear the thought of ending my involvement with dance. By the age of 25, I found myself using all of my vacation and discretionary income for dance projects, and soon it was apparent to everyone that all of my energy was going toward dance. The only respectful thing to do was get out of the way, let the office find someone new, and take the plunge towards dance paying my bills. I took a big pay cut and found work as an arts administrator while teaching and performing. It was a tricky balance, but it allowed me to be in the world of dance all of the time.

As a multi-ethnic human, I have been magnetically drawn to the study of cultural collisions and layered, overlapping identities. Through dance, my own life began to make sense to me, and that sense of resolution began to grow into a methodology and eventually extended into scholarly and professional interests.

Along the way, people like Letitia Williams, Rosangela Sylvestre, Carmen de Lavallade, Artemis Mourat and Rachel Brice created new dimensions of understanding in me. The integrity, beauty, dedication, humility, and intelligence of these women inspires me endlessly. To me, a dance practice is a way of encountering the world... all of my thoughts, sensations and observations flow towards movement as my primary response. I'll always be a dancer, but that doesn't automatically translate into being a performer. Dance is my spiritual, intellectual and artistic lens to living.

2. You had mentioned during a seminar that you didn't experience an international career in dance until you were forty. What influenced your decision? Why not earlier? What obstacles did you encounter and how did you overcome them? Had you danced earlier?

I began dancing recreationally at the age of 12. I began working full time in my local dance community at the age of 25, with a few overseas teaching assignments here and there. I was perfectly happy with it all and felt very fortunate. I was a mother, had already experienced some congenital medical

challenges, and really didn't define myself primarily as a performer. I thought of myself primarily to be a teacher and educator. At the age of 40 an audience member uploaded a bootleg film of my 2006 dance performance for Smith College to Youtube.com. The video clip garnered thousands of hits and that's when my international career in dance exploded. I was initially caught off guard, but knew I was triple-blessed to see my art resonating around the world.

Throughout my life my heart was bursting to dance and make art all the time. It was all I thought about. I used to make tumbling routines on a stone wall in my childhood yard. I would construct long routines on roller skates in my driveway. I would jam by myself to a rickety turntable as a youth. As I grew older, I sincerely tried to follow a conventional path of education and an office career, but everyone around me could see I was forcing a fit. So my first obstacle was finding the courage to see myself truthfully, and honor what gave me the most joy: dance. Many loved ones gave me significant resistance out of genuine concern for my future stability, but I've done just fine. Dance as a profession has not been limited to performance. Dance is also my means of engaging research, critical theory, writing, cultural analysis, health management and spiritual growth. It is so much more than just performance, and has been a viable, stable life path at all times for me.

3. When did you begin the study of Middle Eastern dance? Where/With whom did you study?

Under the direction of Letitia Williams, I danced in an African Diasporic ensemble for twelve years. One of our works was choreographed by Hamid Esseyah in 1996. He is a glorious and generous artist/professor from Morocco (now based in France). His dance became my favorite work in our repertory of over 32 dances. After the group was lovingly retired, I found myself seeking more information on North African dance traditions. A former college student, Shaunti Fera, and a department colleague, Gypsy Ames, gave me generous information, encouragement and guidance as I entered the waters. I bumped into Rachel Brice's work in 2000, and like many others inspired by Ms. Brice, I began studying the technique sincerely.

Because I craved context for what I was learning, I also immersed myself in the history, anthropology, ethnomusicology, literature, cuisine, demographics, languages, philosophy, politics, and religions of the Arab

world and North Africa. I spent all of my free time in the reading rooms of libraries, archival film centers, and social events of the American-Arab communities. I was not interested in discrediting or negating anyone's teachings. I simply craved input and conversation from multiple perspectives—to learn what elements of the dance may have been transformed or outright omitted through our Western lens.

There are so many wonderful teachers of all nationalities and ethnicities, and there are also many who are combative, proprietary and righteous about their knowledge. Over time, I came to understand how historically representations of secular Eastern Dance traditions have been distorted and altered by colonial thinking, imperialist perspectives, and general Western agency. Am I saying we should apologize for our passion and interest in the form, or be made to feel guilty for our interest in another's culture? Unequivocally no... not at all. In fact, I think the world would be better off if everyone took the time to learn more about people, beliefs and customs beyond their nation-state.



Specifically, I aim to encourage a generation of artists informed in post-colonial scholarship, critical thinking, cultural appropriation, the politics of privilege, and the conventional tools of gender bias which all intersect with contemporary, secular forms of Eastern Dance, and especially belly dance. For me, the study of movement alone felt incomplete. Belly dance has such a disrupted history complicated by our current political landscape. So, the long answer to your very direct question is: I have studied with as many teachers as possible, socialized in the Arab-American community, and sought the writings of many scholars, both contemporary and from ages past.

4. You study and dance so many styles, which has your heart?

I'm a transnational fusion artist who allows everything I've studied to be in dialog through my body, and no lone tradition commands my singular focus. My most referenced systems of movement, in no particular order, are

- Transnational (Tribal) Fusion
- Sylvestre Technique (Originated by Rosangela Sylvestre in Bahia, Brazil)
- Yoga (Ashtanga, Baptiste, Shridaiva, and Iyengar)
- Hip Hop and subcultures of this genre
- Secular and Rural Dances of Morocco
- Transcendental Dance and secular dance traditions of the African-Caribbean peoples
- Ballet

I follow the emerging and evolving hip hop styles of the Arab World, so I'm also researching how movers in Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, etc. are choosing to dance to the Hip Hop music that originated from my people in the U.S.A. I consider it a counter-manifestation of Middle Eastern dance fusion here in America. It's amazing and wonderful to witness such a dynamic exchange of ideas and culture across the borders of nation states.

5. What influenced you to enter academia? Most people don't equate scholar with dancer.

Great question. I've always been the kind of person who conjures questions and researches for further understanding. I'm a methodical, introverted, philosophical, contemplative and curious soul. I was drawn to work at a university because I have been monumentally transformed by education, and I'm still hungry for learning. I view higher education to be one large, concentrated laboratory for investigation. So

many resources are at your disposal in one location, and the intellectual exchanges are incredibly dynamic and rich. I begin to miss it when I'm away for too long. I'm still in love with education and am evolving vicariously through my students. I'm a "lifer" in this quest for knowledge!

6. I loved your seminars at Bellydance Masters, 2015 in Orlando, Florida, where you will be instructing from August 4-7, 2016. They were more about body alignment, space and movement and I loved it. Is this representative of your instructing style?

Thank you very, very much and yes. It's the inner dynamic of engineering movement that motivates me to learn further... not the momentary gratification of performance. After dancing for over 30 years, the study of consciousness through dance is where I invest my energy, and I get very excited when participants in my classes allow themselves to sink into that level of inquiry. I know we all dance for different reasons, and I sincerely don't judge what others crave from dancing. But there is literally a universe of knowledge in our bodies, and being in dialog with that innate intelligence is so much fun to me. I could geek out on it all day. Well, actually... I do. Thankfully I have found an international family of kindred spirits who crave the same kind of play and investigation through movement.

7. How would you describe your teaching style?

Whew... my teaching style? I think the sacred and the profane co-exist comfortably in my mind, my body, and my classroom. I'm a big music nerd, and my maturing body craves extensive warm-up and conditioning in order to move in extraordinary and precise ways.

I have no idea how to encapsulate that approach into a "style" other than to say I use a philosophy that is deeply investigative.

My striving for teaching excellence is entirely self-motivated and self-serving. My loyalty to self and my Creole lineage serve as my first touchstone: I am the descendent of slaves. I was fortified by the stories of my family ancestors and their endowment was absolutely clear: education was our deliverance from a trajectory of manipulation and suffering.



My second touchstone is the advancement of women in all aspects of intellectual, public, political and creative life, until a balance of power has been achieved. My Creole grandmother was always quick to always remind me that in her day women were not expected to pursue higher education and few institutions permitted their admission. My time teaching and studying at two historic colleges for women (Smith College and Mount Holyoke College) cemented my understanding of how crucial women's perspectives are in problem solving. My personal experience of subjugation, devaluation, trivialization and manipulation remains ever-fresh, serving to fuel my insistence that students of all gender expressions never settle for mediocrity when their minds are what is at stake.

My third touchstone is a private one: all that I have

learned has monumentally transformed my inner life, and I am grateful for the privilege of access to education. Several educators underestimated me. Once I was accused of cheating on a high school paper because the teacher presumed a Black girl (no-less a dancer) didn't have the cognitive muscle to write with sophistication and analytical rigor. At another time my scholarship-winning essay was considered a fluke, and I was denied admission to honors writing courses. Unlike those teachers, I want to be truly generous and encouraging, always checking my assumptions about people. I now vicariously thrill in the growth of the students in my care ... it keeps me young at heart and in love with my work to witness their epiphanies and insights.

My consistent opportunities in the commercial arena could sustain me, but I have chosen to be an educator because I observe dance to be an immensely powerful tool for critical thinking. The intrinsic value of art in society is lauded as having a non-descript enriching social component; as if the development of poise, grace, social skills, confidence and expression were all it had to offer. Beyond those generalities, I hold the true role of dance education to be *problem solving through the cultivation of multiple intelligences*. For those drawn to dance, the ability to "think" in images, sensation and movement is equivalent to the skill set of thinking in words.

Most importantly, dance is ubiquitously present in all human cultures, regardless of efforts to legislate or limit its public expression. The study of dance allows us a view into how we code meaning and signification into our identity presentation and social organization. The lens of dance is a compelling and entertaining path for students to begin thinking critically about themselves and the world around them.

Where do you derive it? Your influence?

My college professor, Letitia Williams (Instructor Emerita, now retired), is my model for "miraculous mindfulness" as a teacher and ensemble director. She discussed every single decision and development with us as a group. She cultivated respect, communication, discipline and friendship among our many diverse personalities. So much so, that we willingly and enthusiastically rehearsed at 6:00 a.m. several days a week--for 12 years--without the thought of compensation. "Mama Tish" inspired us to love dance and live for it with the devotion of fanatics. Through her leadership, we learned to handle our achievements with grace, steady ourselves

through transitions and challenges, find joy in the toil of technical development, and prioritize the richness of spirit and generosity in presentation.

She was astoundingly patient with my immaturities, missteps, and ignorance. She is my icon of what a true educator should be. My success has everything to do with the breath and scope of knowledge Mama Tish endowed to me. As my adventure grows, my reference point for every decision, artistic and personal, is "*What would Mama Tish do?*" There are no words to adequately express what she has given me, and what I have seen her do for many people.

My indulgence of humor in the classroom can only be attributed to my own twisted persona, and I can't blame another soul on this Earth for it. I'm just goofy in that way: work hard; laugh hard; dance hard; love hard and question everything.

8. Do you differentiate instructing belly dancers versus other dance artists? How does instructing belly dancers differ (if it does)?

Hmmm, I do observe one difference that intrigues me. In most genres of dance, a master class with an instructor rarely requires a "topic" or theme stated beyond the genre of dance (i.e. ballet with Misty Copeland, or Modern Dance with Michael Foley). In the belly dance community there is a custom of providing workshop descriptions and topics for each segment of study in a convention environment or immersion weekend. It doesn't "bother" me per se, but I feel so excited when I am permitted to choose the contents of a workshop after conducting some assessment of the participants. For example, it would be unethical for me to teach jumps and turns if participants' knees and ankles were not aligning efficiently. I would need to coach them on alignment first, or I would be placing them at risk for a devastating injury. Sometimes I arrive to a location on tour and feel the marketed topic of the day is not what the participants truthfully need in their bodies. Less subject specificity is one element of the contemporary dance community that I feel might have beneficial cross-pollination for our practices and norms. On the flipside, the contemporary dance world would do well to learn from our embracing of body-positive aesthetics. We celebrate all kinds of bodies! Much of the concert dance world is plagued by a bias that is limited to very narrow standards of attractiveness. It's utter nonsense and I'm proud to be

part of a dance movement that subverts and dismantles such limitations.

9. What is your dance philosophy?

I am a dancer, choreographer and scholar-artist whose work investigates fusion as a methodology. My choices are never random and influences are well researched. I have had the privileged position of riding the first wave of a historical, global art movement, while straddling both the academic and commercial realms. I regard my position as both an embedded researcher and a “red-carpet headliner” to be advantageous rather than methodologically problematic.

Dance is a form of non-verbal communication. This non-verbal intelligence is ubiquitously present in all known human cultures. It carries the same importance as the spoken word, and should be regarded as a treasure of humanity.

This interview will be continued in the next issue.

Donna Mejia will be headlining a faculty of 14 inspiring instructors of 2016 Belly dance Masters in Orlando, Florida at the Doubletree by Hilton at Sea World August 4 through Sunday, August 7. For more information, visit www.bellydancemasters.com.

Nancy Loyan Schuemann

Purveyor of the written word, Nancy Loyan Schuemann has been writing since composing picture books for fellow students in elementary school. She is a multi-published writer and author in both fiction and non-fiction. Her passion is penning “fairy tales for adults.” Visit: www.NLSScribe.com. In addition, she is “Nailah,” a Middle Eastern dancer and performer for over thirty years (www.NailahDance.com).

