

By Kay Taylor

When I lived in Cairo summer 2002, I was lucky enough to share an apartment with American dancer, Carolyn Hamilton. I was there to study Arabic & dance. She was there to follow her dream & try to work as a professional dancer in Cairo. It is a dream I have always known could never come true for me “ by the time I was good enough to consider it, I was too old to be considered. It is completely true that it doesn't matter what your age or size is “ anyone can dance. BUT “ to be a professional dancer in Cairo it helps if you are young and gorgeous as well as being a gifted and talented dancer. So far, the only British person in recent years to be fully licensed as a professional dancer in Cairo is Yasmina. Lot 's have tried. Many have done auditions or the occasional wedding, which can be padded out to look really good on a CV. Even better, there are those who have paid the entry fee to dance at the Ahlan wa Sahlan festival and suddenly on their CV appears performed at the Mena House, Cairo I find it entertaining to a point - but feel people are misrepresenting themselves.

Carolyn & I studied Arabic together “ both slow at languages, we persevered. She got auditions and I went along with her for moral support. It was great “ I got to go through the whole process without putting myself on the line! The other interesting factor was that everyone assumed I was in charge '. Being the older person, they all spoke to me “ as if Carolyn (stage name Leila which I will now use) didn't have a voice.

Leila had gone to Cairo with all her savings. Invested in lessons & costumes, rehearsals with a band, money for papers which never seemed to appear etc. It all seemed to be money, money, money.

Leila did have a job in the Sheraton without the proper papers “ someone reported her so she had to stop. If you do not have the proper papers you can get arrested. You have to have a contract with a 4/5 star hotel in order to get your papers.

You don't understand the language and seem to go round in circles, never quite knowing what is happening. It is all very confusing.

I was there for 3 months. Towards the end of that time, Leila was starting to get desperate. Her funds were running low “she had a ticket home but it was about to expire. She could either get on that plane and give up on the whole idea“ or burn her boats, lose her flight home and be stuck with no money.

As ever there was the possibility of something “ but this is how it seemed to be throughout the time. A roller coaster ride of hope and despair! 2 days before I left, Leila got her contract and her papers finalized.

I was so pleased for her. Even in the short time I had known her, I had seen her dance develop and really wanted her to do well.

Since then, I have watched her style change, her range deepen & her confidence grow. When foreign dancers were banned from working as belly dancers for a year, I was worried about her. How was she going to survive? In the States, she had been a model before becoming a dancer. Yes, she is stunningly good looking. She was offered modeling work in Cairo. This was not why she had come “but it helped tide her over. She met a whole new group of people and it widened her horizons. When you are working full time as a belly dancer, you are incredibly isolated.

You may be doing 2 or 3 shows a night and not getting to bed till 4 or 5 in the morning. You sleep all day and go to work at night.

If you make friends who have normal jobs you never see them.

The only people you do see are your band. It is not a healthy lifestyle. Work is limited, rumors abound as to who has what job.

Paranoia reigns. And because this is your life, it all seems normal.

When Leila started taking some modeling work and then the occasional advert, she started to make a new circle of friends. She even managed to combine her dance with her new work and danced on video clips with top artists. She also danced on Muzeeka a music and video station where she danced live with many super stars singing in concert.

This meant she was seen by many Egyptians. There are only a small minority that can afford to eat at places that have live entertainment like music and dance. Now she was getting national exposure. People would come to see her dance "and recognize her from the TV".

It is very interesting how we perceive dancers and what the reality is in Cairo.

Most belly dancers are not known to the Egyptian public.

Because few can afford to eat in places where they dance, they are not big names. The stars of the 40 's and 50 's are all big names because of the films they were in. The same applies to Fifi and Lucy. Both also followed an acting career. Argentine dancer, Asmahan made her name partly from appearing on the Samir Sabry show. Dina too has made many television appearances and so is a well known face.

Dancers who do not get into the television game are probably seen by less than 1% of the Egyptian population. This does not make them bad dancers but they do not get the exposure to make them famous in Egypt.

When Leila was asked to act in a film last Ramadan, she was torn. To do it or not to do it? The part was a foreigner, an Italian "so it didn't matter that her accent wasn't perfect. The film "Abu Araby Wasal" featured one of Egypt's top comedians, Hany Ramzy and was directed by Mosen Ahmed.

Leila said it was really hard work "she had to have a speech coach and of course learning the lines and intonations was much harder for her".

But how it helped her Arabic! And as she played the part of a Greek/Lebanese girl, if her accent was a bit funny it could be accounted for.

So, from those days when life seemed very uncertain, Leila now has a great career. She combines dance, modeling and acting. She can be seen on billboards around Cairo, on television and of course, if you know where to go, dancing. Currently Leila can be seen regularly on the Nile Pharon and the Nile Maxim and at many weddings if you have an invite. She has danced at all the top venues, the Semi Ramis, the Sheraton, the Pyramisa & Merryland, Heliopolis.

Things change all the time but one thing seems for certain, Leila is going from strength to strength.

We were lucky enough to have Leila here in March at JoY "a festival in Yorkshire".

Her workshops were fabulous "she is a very giving teacher". Packed full of technique and tips on how to get that Cairo accent.

Leila had to change her dance style completely when she went to Cairo. She was very popular where she danced in America but it was all glitz & superficial. In Cairo she has had to learn how to feel the dance. When you dance, no matter how complex a thing you are doing it should look easy and effortless, relaxed and inside the music. She demonstrated this in her performances on the Saturday night.

I thought she was incredible.

Her web site is: www.leilainegypt.com

If you get the opportunity to see her in Cairo "DO".