

# A PROFILE OF JOSEPHINE WISE

By Yvette Cowles

The length and breadth of Britain, from the sleepiest rural village to the largest, buzzing metropolis, more and more women are shaking off their inhibitions, throwing caution to the wind, and letting themselves be seduced by the strains of Arabic music... Yes, the Egyptian dance scene in England is currently flourishing, with more interest in classes and a better standard of dance being performed than ever before. One of the key figures in this renaissance has been **JOSEPHINE WISE**, a London-based teacher and performer, who teaches throughout the UK, runs a hugely popular annual summer school and has established her own highly successful dance company.

Josephine trained initially in contemporary dance with **Ernest Berk** from 1974 – 1978, and performed professionally for several years. Unfortunately the economic climate and lack of funding in the early eighties made contemporary dance in Britain an extremely precarious profession, and she was forced to rely increasingly heavily on teaching. Yet this failed to satisfy her. She explains, “While I enjoyed the challenge of teaching people of all abilities and ages – from pre-school to the elderly – I desperately missed dancing and wanted to try something new. I had always been teased by choreographers that my natural ability to isolate parts of my body would be more suited to Egyptian than contemporary dance, so I took up Egyptian dance as a hobby, with no idea of the profound impact it would have.” She began classes with **Wendy Buonaventura** and later trained with **Suraya Hilal** for five years.

The turning point came when she first saw a video of **Fifi Abdou**. In her dance Josephine recognised a relaxed, sassy, sexy style which she wanted to develop for herself. “I saw in Fifi the energy and earthiness I wanted to add to *my* dancing”, she admits. While she was receiving technically good training in England, her first visit to Egypt a few months later impressed upon her that technique alone was not enough. The many dancers she saw in Cairo had different technical abilities but all shared a joyful exuberance and emotional

intensity which Josephine sought to emulate. She had already been performing in cabaret, as well as Suraya Hilal's performance group, and used it as a means of developing the same rapport with an audience. "In those days it seemed that the entire population of the Gulf States descended upon London for the summer. I danced for everyone: a Kuwaiti princess, a Lebanese prince, members of the Saudi Royal Family." This cabaret work paid off, and when Josephine has performed professionally on subsequent visits to Egypt, with amongst others, the **Musiciens du Nil**, she is always complimented on the authentic feel of her dancing.

Josephine's dance classes have always attracted large numbers of students because of her distinctive approach. "As a teacher and performer I have always sought to develop my own style. It's neither 'belly dance', which in the UK is a mishmash of different styles and often of a very poor standard, nor 'raqs sharqi', which I have always found more authentic in technique but not in spirit. I have always looked to Egyptian stars like **Fifi, Samia Gamal** and **Tahia Carioca** for my inspiration." Her warm and relaxed approach makes it easy for women, many of whom have never danced before, to shake off their inhibitions and enjoy the dance as a means of self-expression; while her rigorous attention to good technique means they learn the dance correctly from the start and avoid the risk of injury.

This attention to correct technique and posture has been enhanced by Josephine's training in the Alexander Technique. After sustaining a neck and shoulder injury in a car accident in 1989, she went in desperation to an Alexander Technique teacher. The results impressed her so much that she decided to train as a teacher herself. The Alexander Technique works both mentally and physically on a person to release tension in the body, align the spine and body perfectly but effortlessly and allow them to use themselves in a more integrated fashion. This has revolutionised Josephine's teaching method, "I have found this means of releasing tension in the muscles to be absolutely essential for all movements in Egyptian dance, especially shimmies, where too much tension severely inhibits the movement." Her 'hands-on' approach means she can detect the tiniest irregularity, which, however small, can mar a dancer's performance. Even experienced dancers who have come recently to her classes have noticed a marked improvement in their dance after just a few months.

With this kind of commitment to both the spirit and the technique of Egyptian dance, Josephine has carved a niche for herself as one of its most respected teachers. Five years ago, in response to a burgeoning demand for classes from all over the UK, she set up an annual week-long residential course. While not the first UK summer school, it quickly established itself as by far the most varied and stimulating – attracting dancers from as far afield as Australia and New Zealand. Students have the opportunity to experience a variety of teachers and styles – from Persian and Gulf to Nubian and the classical Egyptian dance of the 40's and 50's – as well as to perform with Egyptian musicians. Percussion workshops and talks on different aspects of the dance, such as the cultural background, music and history are also popular. But the dancers work *and* play hard: impromptu parties, student performances and midnight swims ensure that dancers combine intensive study with adequate recreation! The only drawback is going home afterwards. As one student this year confessed, “The whole week was so enjoyable and inspiring. By the end, I felt my dancing had dramatically improved and I'd really gained in confidence. I'd made so many friends and shared so many valuable experiences that I just didn't want to leave!”

One of Josephine's proudest achievements is the creation of her dance company, **MASRIAT**, meaning 'Women of Egypt', in 1993. Her previous company, *Sharqi!*, comprised seven dancers, and while quite successful – performances included the Covent Garden International Dance Festival – was limited in its scope. However, once she had completed her training in the Alexander Technique, Josephine was motivated to establish Masriat. She had ambitious plans for this new, more technically accomplished company, consisting of nine dancers and a percussionist, “I wanted the opportunity to choreograph dances on a far grander scale, capturing the essence of Egyptian dance while incorporating some of the choreographic principles of contemporary dance, and making it as accessible as possible.” With this approach, Masriat has successfully bridged the gap between the worthy but somewhat soulless 'raqs sharqi' productions being staged, and the flamboyant but often technically inferior dance available in cabaret.

Masriat's debut London performance in December 1993 was a sell-out show at The Place Theatre, recognised as one of the UK's leading venues for dance. This, and subsequent performances to very different audiences, have demonstrated how, by forging links between East and West, Masriat is capable of producing truly innovative dance with universal appeal. Since then Masriat has continued to evolve and diversify. It has recently worked with Shamaa, A *Kathak* (North Indian classical dance) dance company, to compare, contrast and combine these two dance forms. As a result of this collaboration, in August 1995 Masriat and Shamaa were invited to perform in the prestigious Mosaics programme at the Lilian Baylis Theatre at Sadlers' Wells in London. This autumn Josephine and the company have been invited to a number of major dance venues in the south of England and they plan a UK tour next year.

And what of the future? Having worked as a dance teacher for all her working life, no one is more conscious than Josephine of the need for adequate training for teachers and dance leaders. In spite of the growing popularity of Egyptian dance, in many areas of the UK the teaching is poor or non-existent. To address this problem, she has established the Josephine Wise School of Dance, and together with another well-known teacher, **Maggie Caffrey**, has recently developed a comprehensive teacher training programme. Designed for teachers wishing to improve their skills as well as those new to teaching, subjects on the syllabus includes anatomy and safety, physiology, teaching methods, cultural background and administration.

In addition to running the course, Josephine is running her next summer school, and is currently choreographing a new Masriat show for Autumn 1996, and has plans for a European and possible US tour. Asked about any other long-term ambitions, Josephine says, "So much has been achieved in making Egyptian a recognised and respected dance form, but there's still a long way to go. I would like to take the dance to a wider audience by making it more theatrical and innovative. It is my goal to make the dance as popular and accessible in this country as it is in its natural setting!"

© Yvette Cowles 1995

*Previously printed in Habibi Magazine*