

OPEN SESAME

Arabian Nights are about to arrive in Madrid. Erin Walton looks at the opportunities to indulge in Middle Eastern music and dance.

“I can show you the world, shining, shimmering, splendid,” crooned a turbaned Aladdin, with a personality snappier than Lady Gaga aged five, to his doe-eyed Jasmime atop a flying carpet. However, luckily for us it won’t be necessary to step into cartoon land or manhandle such a precocious means of transport to understand what he meant that starry night, because “the world” in question is coming to Madrid.

From Wednesday 6 to Sunday 10 July, those of us whose traditional “dance” is knocking back a couple of *cuba libres* then throwing our hands in the air like we just don’t care, will be treated to a taste of exoticism and enchantment by the *Raks Madrid Festival Internacional de Música y Danza Árabe y del Medio Oriente*. The objective is to educate and entertain, making the Arabic and Middle Eastern music and dance world accessible to all.

Best of the best

The world of Arabic dance runs alongside well-known, loved and much-marketed dance forms such as samba and tango, but until recently it has been not so much their ugly sister as their shy sister, for whom its super-confident and bendy samba/tango siblings wouldn’t spare a thought as they entertained the masses. Superficially, all three forms share sensuality and a focus on the female figure.

However, it could be argued that the increasing unrest in the Middle East has dragged the marketability of Arabic dance somewhat under the radar—political unrest is not necessarily conducive to art forms. Aware of this, the creative team behind the Raks Madrid Festival, now in its seventh year, will be presenting the *crème de la crème* of artists and teachers of traditional dance forms and modern fusions from the Arabic and Middle Eastern cultural world.

Meeting point

Raks was created in 2005 to fill a niche in the Spanish, and global, festival circuit. Being a country with a long history in the visual and performing arts, Spain has become the adopted home of many of the foreign-born creators involved in the festival, artists who note that the country is “the ideal place to celebrate an event like this, being the geographic and cultural tilting point between East and West.”

Throughout the five days, teachers, film-makers and dancers also aim to shine a spotlight on lesser known art forms flourishing in Arab countries and the Middle East, by allowing already converted aficionados to dive in again, but also encouraging a largely rookie audience to cut their teeth. Presented under the slogan *solo se ama lo que se conoce* (more or less, “you can only love and respect what you know”), organisers are looking to immerse participants in Arabic artistic tradition. Executive producer Eric Godfroid bills the culture as one that “rings true of happiness, elegance, sensibility and generosity... not of violence, fear and extremism.” His team hope that participation

in the festival will assist the process of breaking down prejudices against Arab and Middle Eastern cultures.

Classic classes

A chock-a-bloc menu of concerts, workshops, shows, cinema and exhibitions is scheduled, in a festival which is “unique in the current spectrum of international cultural festivals (as) the participant can not only dance alongside the greats, but may take music classes, wander through conferences or participate in any number of varied cultural activities.”

Available individually, or at a reduced rate upon buying an *abono* of 6 or 12 classes, all paid workshops run for two and a half hours, and include instruction in the technique and choreography of dance forms such as Andalusí, Egyptian Baladi and Shaabi, Oriental and Saidi. Alongside a boundless list of opportunities for locals to dance *folklórica* style, there will be eclectic fusions too: dance cocktails forging traditional moves with a dash of flamenco or an African tribal twist.

Show your style

Thinking of joining the toe-tapping, treat-tasting, scarf-twirling multitudes? Want to whip out that metaphorical flying carpet? Organisers have fashioned an “entertaining but also educationally vigorous and culturally authentic” experience; in which the feet, hips, heart, eyes, mind and belly all play a part.

Instructors and performers from the Arab states and Middle East join forces with others from Hungary, Poland and Spain. The tutors include masters such as Mahmoud Reda, who can boast more than 60 years experience. He pioneered Egyptian dance as theatre, and has performed at Carnegie Hall in New York and the Olympia in Paris. His production, *Dances of Egypt*, is one of seven shows at the Häagen Dazs Calderón Theatre during the course of the festival; others include a Folklore Night and oriental dance fusion, *Marhaba*.

Artists sharing their memories as instructors at past festivals especially remember the nights, “filled with laughter and spontaneous dances after long, hard days giving workshops; nights where spirits never wavered, despite knowing that the next day would be as artistically and emotionally challenging.” With the festival’s aim of “distinguishing itself with its stylish and interpretative richness”, the whole period is likely to be filled with fun and fascination.

For full details of the events and workshops, see www.raksmadrid.com