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Feature Article

A Visit with Dr. Robyn C. Friend

by Janie Franz

When **Dr. Robyn C. Friend** presents a performance of Persian dance and song, audiences see more than memorized choreography and lyrics. They see a glimpse into the culture of the Persian people. Through Robyn's extensive study and research of **Near Eastern and Balkan languages, folklore, and culture**, she is able to offer the audience more than correctly sung **lyrics** and authentic **costuming** and **dance steps**. She is able to capture the essence of high Persian art.

The history of Persian art is rooted in **mysticism**, Robyn says. Everything about Persian poetry, painting, song, and dance reflects a connection with **nature and high romance**. Roses, fountains, breathtaking vistas, beautiful women, and the exquisite movement of a hand embody a refinement and sensitivity to spiritual and sensual elements. Robyn says, "A dancer will never understand this if she only sees people dancing in nightclubs."

Robyn's life-long love of dance began when she saw Buddhist temple dancers in a Japanese street festival when she was three years old. She began at that age, taking classes in modern dance, then moving into ballet, Balkan folk dance, and Middle Eastern dance.

Her love of languages came from her Bulgarian grandmother who herself spoke several languages, among them Turkish. It was natural to combine her love of languages and dance when she came to UCLA as a student and decided to take a course in Persian language. She found she had a **real gift for languages and dialects**, studying many, including Persian, Russian, French, Bulgarian, Turkish, Azeri Turkish, Uzbek, Suleimaniye Kurdish, Chaghatay, and Ottoman Turkish. This interest eventually led to a Ph.D. in Iranian languages from the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department of UCLA. Through her studies and her friendships with members of the Iranian community in Los Angeles, Robyn began to study Persian song and later dance.

Dance Teachers

Robyn Friend's first Persian dance teacher was **Leona Wood**, one of the founders and directors of the **AMAN Folk Ensemble** which taught a variety of ethnic dance forms. Ms Wood herself had learned originally from a rather low-class cabaret dancer and later was introduced to the genteel, upper class traditional form. Ms Wood combined the two styles and that became the basis for Robyn's study.

Later she studied with an Iranian woman, **Haleh Farjah**. "Of course," Robyn says, "I learned a lot of folkloric dance along the way from Iranian friends at UCLA and in 1975 I went to Iran to do some field studies there...I learned a lot from Haleh Frajah. She was a wonderful, wonderful dancer. Her parents owned a nightclub on the Caspian [Sea]. They had a rotating lineup of the best singers and musicians in Iran. She grew up dancing. She studied ballet, and flamenco, and a lot of other things - Quite a lot of differences in styles and cultures as well. There were many things that I learned from her and suspected were her own invention. Later when I learned from other people, they were doing the same steps."

That was her last Iranian teacher until **Medea Mahdavi**, who is Iranian born but lives in England. She has a very theatrical style of dance, combining Persian, Arabic, and Indian movements. It is still a very classical style of dance "Every time we get together," Robyn says, "she teaches me a few things, and I teach her a few things."

Robyn also teaches at the **Majma** Festival in Glastonbury, England as often as she can. It is a weekend gathering of teachers and students, like a big dance camp. Teachers offer dance demonstrations and seminars. This past year she studied with Venus Seleh, who is Persian, and teaches two styles: Baba Karam and Jaheli.

"Along the way, I've also studied Indian classical dance," Robyn adds. Because of the historical connections between Persia and India, she feels that it is a natural progression to her study of Persian dance. "There is a clear Persian influence in Indian classical dance: upright posture, no bent knees, and a real emphasis on pure dance." There is, however, more storytelling and footwork with Indian dance.

What She Teaches

As a teacher, Robyn Friend teaches small classes in Los Angeles, California to Americans who want to learn the culture and dance of Persia, Iranians who want to improve, and children. For her American classes, she teaches **Persian classical dance** and **folkloric dances of Turkey, Morocco, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia**. Her Iranian students learn movement, timing, and rhythm. **Classes for children** cover Azerbaijan, Persian Qajar dances, and cultural information. "It's easy to correct people with a small class. You can adjust posture, body alignment, and carriage individually." She says that the reason she feels that she is a good teacher is because she has the ability to break down the music and the steps. She tells the story of learning from an Iranian teacher who did a complex series of movements. She asked the teacher to slow it down and show her the part she missed, and the teacher just repeated it all at the same breakneck speed. She says that her years of analysis of languages have allowed her to develop this gift as a teacher.

Robyn C. Friend is respected among the Iranian community as a talented Persian classical singer who dances.