

ADNAN SARHAN

A Dancer's Teacher, A Drummer's Drummer, A Sufi

by Jenna Gracia Woods

Adnan Sarhan's name is familiar to many people in many places. Originally from Baghdad, he comes from a Sufi family. He does not talk about his past or his family unless pressed, and then not much at all. His prodigious energy is entirely focused on his work, the Sufi work. He teaches at his summer camp in New Mexico and everywhere he goes, traveling all over the United States and to Canada, Europe and South America. When asked how he came to begin teaching the Sufi work years ago, he has said only that one time someone simply asked him to teach.

The Sufis say that experience is the best teacher. It is a tradition among Sufis to adapt the work to the needs and circumstances of each student, so teachers set up lessons in the form of many kinds of experience. Also, Sufi teachers are historically known to be distinct individuals. The work tempers, refines, and defines individuals so that those who are able to emerge from it do have definite personalities and ways of being in the world. Having this core strength of self, teachers like Adnan have a chameleon nature that enables them to behave in ways that can change a student's perceptions, as a means of providing



experiential lessons. Adnan is just such a chameleon. He can be charming, and he can be ordinary; he can be a shameless salesman for the work; he can be indifferent or seductive; he can be a whimsical comic; he can be a ruthless taskmaster and a tender caretaker. I have seen him be many things to many people, but always he is a teacher.

Adnan is a drummer, and has played for Middle Eastern dancers for many years. Music and dance, as well as all kinds of action, are integral parts of the Sufi work. For me, the beauty of being able to use my dancing for personal growth is beyond words. Many dancers are aware that the dance we do has the potential to change us from the inside out.

Adnan calls it "spirit dance." In truth, the body itself embodies who we are. The qualities of the relative proportion, size, shape, flexibility, mobility, tension, strength, weakness, vitality and resilience in the various parts of our bodies metaphorically reflect intangible equivalents within our thoughts, emotions, and memories. The outer is the physical counterpart to the inner. Therefore, any activity which provokes change in the physical has a direct effect on the intangible; the reverse is

also true. So when a dance form has possibilities for expressive motion which are exceptionally subtle, it has the potential to evoke profound shifts in the psychology and emotional development of an individual. In many cases, the effect is random, unconscious, accidental, unguided by any larger perspective of the self. The key to more focused, purposeful growth through the dance, as I've come to understand it, is the ability to pay deep, absolutely undivided attention, moment by moment, for extended periods of time, guided by someone who can see the larger perspective. This is where the Sufi work, as Adnan teaches it, has its most profound impact on dance.

I first began studying with Adnan in 1979. I was 27 years old then, freshly uprooted from Texas and busy sampling bodywork styles, movement therapies, and Eastern spiritual systems. I had been belly dancing for five years, had played *dumbek* for three years, and had been teaching and performing. It was the advertisement describing "drumming and dancing" that initially attracted me into the work, but in the beginning I had no understanding of what I might need a spiritual teacher for. I was bent on "Doing It Myself," unaware of any larger perspective. I was at that time directing my energy toward becoming able to dance responsively to music. Even then, I preferred live music. I preferred to be surprised and not to know ahead of time what music I would be dancing to. I wanted to be challenged, and to test myself against the music, to see how successfully I could respond at the exact moment that I heard it for the first time. I think it was this attitude that predisposed me to be receptive to the "work."

The Sufi work is a challenge of the same kind, for one never knows what will happen from one moment to the next. The challenge is always to respond immediately and wholeheartedly to the requirements set by the teacher, not knowing why and not knowing what will come of it. I prefer this work because its variety and activity engage me completely. It is the only path I have ever found that can contain, direct, and challenge my busy, creative, and curious nature. I stayed connected with it from the very beginning because it improved my dancing in ways that I could not have managed otherwise. I continue to do it now because, as a result of a time when I was (to quote Adnan) "in a state of holocaust," I understand more fully that the work generates energy, regenerates life, strengthens the self and the inner connection with the source of life (I call it "Allah," call it what you will), develops the capacity to perceive more subtly the events of life and people, and develops the capacity for creativity and intelligent pursuits. It is a way that opens to endless possibilities for self-

improvement.

I remember only a few specific experiences in the work that changed my dance, but those few were significant. In 1979, my back and neck were much less flexible than they are now. Although I had seen *zar* head movements, I was unable to perform any of them. There was an afternoon in one of Adnan's weekend workshops in which we were taught a simple Arabic chant. I found out many years later what it meant, but at the time the meaning of it was not communicated. We were simply taught to say the chant together as we sat crosslegged on the floor, swaying our heads from side to side. I have no idea how long the chanting went on. It may have been hours; I lost track of time. After that experience, I found I could toss my head freely when I danced. This was a profound and delightful liberation for me.

Another experience also occurred during a weekend workshop. Late one afternoon, after a long day of all kinds of movement and breathing exercises, Adnan put on music and asked us all to stand up. At that point my mind was completely quiet and receptive from everything we had been doing. He told us to keep our eyes closed, and to "move to the music"...not "dance," but "move to the music." I interpreted those instructions as permitting exploration, unconfined by any idea of what dancing was supposed to be, and since everyone was to keep their eyes closed, I also felt unconfined by anyone else's ideas as well. There was no one watching, so I could do anything. It was my first experience of moving like that. I followed Adnan's instructions implicitly and kept my eyes resolutely shut. I let the music fill me, heard it make all its tiny Middle Eastern nuances, felt all the different notes in their pathways and combinations and qualities of expression, tone, and pitch, and felt them moving, rippling, expanding and contracting within my dance. There are not enough verbs to describe all the movements those notes made; nothing existed except the music and the movement; I did not dance; I was danced. Again, I lost track of time, and within that time I found a new relationship to music which I carry with me still. It is the jewel beyond price that I lost during my personal holocaust, and it is the precious reward I regained once I started on the path of regeneration. It was the Sufi work that showed it to me, that single afternoon, and it was the Sufi work that eventually gave it back to me, though it took me years to recover.

When I think about my ability to pay attention now, and how it compares to my ability as it was in 1979, I reflect on a single point of reference. There was a moment in an early workshop in which Adnan was leading

us so slowly that he was nearly motionless. As I tried to follow him, I found that my awareness blinked on and off, and that I could not follow his movement continuously with my eyes. What I saw was similar to the effect of a strobe light, just as if I were deliberately opening and closing my eyes. If I compare that moment with a moment in a recent workshop, I find that now, no matter how he moves, I am able to stay focused. There are no longer any gaps in my concentration...that I know of; how well I know now that a teacher can see things that students cannot see for themselves.

I am aware, from the dance training I received before I met Adnan, that a lot of dance training does not cultivate the inner dance, it only feeds the intellectual hunger for techniques, facts and ideas. Sufi work actively cultivates intuition, creativity, and responsiveness on many levels. It also can put internal links into place so that dance is not isolated from life, but instead is part of life's natural continuum. The lessons of life and the lessons of dance intermingle, and can integrate more fully. While it is true that we can gain inner growth through many different practices, it is also often true that it can be difficult to transfer the gains from the activities of spiritual practice into all the other areas of our lives. This is because there have been no bridges built for that purpose. For such a transfer to occur successfully, it helps tremendously to build connections between lessons and ordinary life. For a dancer, the Sufi work, as Adnan teaches it, contains these connections within it. With the bridges built in, progress is impeded only by other kinds of limitations within each individual. Adnan does not call his work the *shattari* method, the "rapid" method, for nothing.

Adnan's Drumming

Adnan Sarhan's drumming is unmistakable. There is no other drumming like his drumming. It is hypnotic and powerful, and it is also unpredictable. Adnan's drum sings, often with more than one voice. Adnan makes music that is a call to wakefulness, for it does not ever settle into any kind of permanence. Rather than pursue any particular rhythms for very long, Adnan breaks rhythms before we can become complacent in our listening or dancing. Really listening to it compels one to stay awake: not awake in the ordinary sense, as opposed to sleep, but awake within the heart, alert to the activity of the spirit. His music is like a flight of birds; it is like the swelling of oceans, full of tiny waves and huge currents; it is wholly natural. Adnan's drumming is truly a force of nature, for it has that same quality that mesmerizes, refreshes, and heals, like watching cloud formations or snowfall, or listening to a rainstorm,

or water splashing over rocks, or watching and listening to the wind move through treetops, over mountains.

Adnan drums when his drumming is needed, and he plays until the playing is done, however long a time that is. I have also heard him play *deff* and finger cymbals the same way. It is his zillwork that inspired me to improve my own. I know, too, that his drumming has inspired at least one professional musician. Robin Adnan Anders, who plays percussion for Boiled in Lead and also played with 3 Mustaphas 3, freely credits Adnan Sarhan as his inspiration in the liner notes of his CD, *Blue Buddha*. Robin carries Adnan's name by choice, an indication of the sort of impact that Adnan made upon him.

Dancing to Adnan Sarhan's drum is something I have done and love doing. The music and the dance interweave. Adnan takes me where I need to go, pushes me where I haven't yet been, challenges me to keep pace, and laughs with me when I can and do. Dancing, I do experience his drum as a force of nature. It has a voice that declares: "I can see you, I know who you are, you cannot hide from me, don't try to hide from me, but come: come freely and SHOW who you are."

Many drummers have strong voices; there are others whose drums are just beginning to sing, and others still who have not yet found their voices. For those seeking evolution, it might be enough of a spark to catch a glimpse of what the voice of a drum can be: a voice that vibrates in the heart, driven by the force behind the forces of nature (I call it "Allah", call it what you will). In the drumming of Adnan Sarhan, it grows like a redwood, faithfully present, always changing, and vastly full of experiences of life.

Jenna Gracia Woods has been involved in Middle Eastern dance since 1974. She is also an intern Aston Patterning practitioner, and has trained with Adnan Sarhan to teach shattari method Sufi work. She teaches dance and Sufi classes in Boulder, CO, and leads drum, dance, and zill workshops. She has written for Veil & Drum and Massage and Bodywork Quarterly.