

Dark Angel: Dark Priestess, Dancer and Story Teller, April Schaile

by Zan Asha

The world of Belly Dance, particularly Gothic Bellydance, often finds an audience surrounded in the fantasy world of dark illusion. Of the innovators of the genre, April Schaile stakes her claim by living authentically as a story teller and shamaness, unafraid of being directly in the heart of darkness.

Describe yourself a bit. I hear you are a dancer, theatricist, and musician.

First I'd like to thank you, Zan, for inviting me to do this interview with you!!

I'd say I am a storyteller first. I am also an astrologer, musician and composer, dancer and dance teacher, writer and mythologist. I am the artistic director for the bellydance troupe Exquisite Corpse Dance Theatre. I'm a long-time amateur Jungian psychologist. Animal rights advocacy is an important part of my life, especially the welfare of wolves and wolf hybrids, but lately I've become a bird watcher! I'm a certified fitness instructor. I have a Master of Fine Arts degree in a wonderfully amorphous field called "Interdisciplinary Art".

How did you come to be a dancer? What roles do your other talents play in your dancing?

I don't remember exactly when I saw my first bellydance performance. I do remember being struck by the magnetic beauty of the dance – it seemed an image of confidence and artistry of the feminine body. I was struck by the self-contained sensuality of it; sensuality as expressed by a woman as she was, not what she ought to be like. I wondered if I too could be so comfortable in my own body with such serpentine and magnetic grace. Being as tall as I am (6 ft), I'd never thought myself capable of the grace or control that it seemed to involve – I'd been athletic, and I'd always a certain amount of natural physical confidence – but to move my hips like that or to be so fluid and feminine in my movement – that was another matter!

But I took some beginner classes in VT with my first teacher, the talented and wonderfully nurturing Alia Thabit, traveling 45 minutes each way to do so. I was a slow learner, but I went to class regularly, and eventually it began to stick! From there I moved to Portland, ME,

and I studied with Josie Conte, from whom I learned bellydance with a strong ballet influence. (Josie was a Julliard trained ballet student as well as a bellydancer.) It is from Josie that I inherited an emphasis on veil work, and this inheritance is often apparent in the work of my students as well.

Before I was a dancer, my early creative work was as a filmmaker, director, actor, and writer. Dance and music making came later.

My theatre background and musicality are inseparable from my work as a dancer. I can't imagine choreographing a piece that does not have a story or some grounding in a larger meaning. For me, dance is another medium through which I can express the overall themes of my life, along with ancient and collective story. And my development as a dancer has affected my approach to everything creative and expressive: I can't imagine exploring art now without attempting to embody through musical movement; I can't conceive of conducting a ritual or creating a story, or even healing a trauma, without somehow creating physical gesture to express my intentions. To make art musical and embodied – it takes us somewhere so directly, on such a primal level. I think that all my creative endeavors have

benefited as a result; they feed one another.

Where do the ideas for your pieces come from?

I have come to the realization that my dance is neo-Symbolist in style: as in a Symbolist painting, I as a dancer, as a vision and moving physical presence onstage, become the embodiment of an archetype or mythical dream image using symbolic costuming, props, sounds and physical gesture.

I use my background in ritual-theatre in the creation and execution of my pieces: the piece is not complete without a healing conclusion – something internally transformative needs to happen – for me, and for my audience. Dance technique provides the physical tools, but that's not enough. I also draw upon theatre technique and experience and training in ritual. The emphasis of the piece is in the connection with the audience – I need them to participate, to feel it with me.

I conceive of stage performance as being very similar



photo by Peter Paradise

to erotic connection with a lover — sure, technique is important, and looks and appearance are important, too. But, it's most of all about how one relates to the Other; how one relates to the body and soul and spirit and heart of the Beloved, while remaining passionately centered in one's own being, too. This is what generates the Eros of it, or the life-force. Without this relationship, without the interchange of psyche and spirit, it's more of an exercise in ego and exhibitionism.

I consider myself to be shamanistic in my approach and effect. My ideas and visions come to me in shamanistic fashion — I don't run around looking for material about which to create. I create from within — often I'm not sure from where the images come — they come to me when it's time for them to be expressed, when they require a medium. I've had to work hard to become a good medium — mostly at letting go of petty ego concerns and vanity that can get in the way of authenticity. I admit I have a long way to go! I am called to be a modern shaman through the arts, which isn't always pretty or even fun.

I've heard it said that you are probably one of the more unique dancers in that you live your life almost exactly as you portray onstage. Beyond being gothic, is it true your religion is witchcraft and that you are a "woman who runs with wolves?"

Let me say first that I love all things traditionally "gothic": graveyards, taboo sexuality, the shadowy depths of history and culture...I love the music, the dark romance, and I love the club nights dedicated to the gathering of other people who also love such things. People often "defend" Goths by telling the world that we are not all death obsessed and perpetually in black — I say speak for yourself! I feel odd and out of sorts when not in black, and many of my thoughts do indeed center on the nature of death, life, and the "worlds beyond".

Yes, *I am a Witch*. I say this so often that I am sometimes surprised now when this statement evokes a charged response still, but the history of Goddess spirituality and Witchcraft is still a charged topic. I am noticing a trend in dance, particularly gothic bellydance and "fantasy" bellydance, in which dancers are using Wiccan and/or other neo-pagan terms to describe their work. I do not presume to know the spiritual leanings of any individual I do not know well and I do hope that this is done with respect, reverence and authenticity. Witchcraft is not a fashion or style, it's a mode of spirituality; a religion.

My personal spiritual practice is wide in scope; I claim ownership of my status as a witch, but also of my Catholic family background. I was presented with the term "Cathowitch" recently, which might very well be apt! For me, Mary is a goddess, the saints are a pantheon. Indeed, religions such as Voudoun and Santeria are blends of polytheism, shamanistic religion and Catholicism, so there

is certainly a precedent! I have a piece I've called "The Passion of the Mary's" in which I become the goddess Mary — a re-uniting of the Magdalene and the Virgin as a fusion of the destructive Mother/Whore split; a healing of the rift in the wholeness of the Feminine. I will be performing a new version of the piece at our show *Descent* this year.

I am a member and/or participant in several occult and/or esoteric and spiritual organizations ("occult" simply meaning "hidden or protected knowledge"). I'm an astrologer by calling and by profession. I am a studied and practiced Tarot reader, and I am a longtime yoga student. Lately I've come back around to ceremonial magic; I have a cyclical relationship to esoteric learning and practice. I am very much an advocate of an interfaith approach to religion and spirit, as all mysticism leads to the same place in the end, and all gods are One.

Women Who Run with Wolves is an excellent book! Yes I did indeed "run" with a wolf. His name was Coda and he was an English Mastiff/wolf hybrid. He passed on in September of 2007 at the ripe old age of 13. He was my soul-mate, companion and witness for 12 years. He was there with me through everything; a teacher, he carried me through hardship, and taught me about love. We saved one another's lives, and I loved him more than I could ever express. It was horrible for me to lose him, and the second of what became a series of pieces embodying the Celtic goddess Morrigan was an expression of my overwhelming grief for him. For that piece I became the Morrigan in her guise as The Washer at the Ford, the one who mourns and weeps at the river.

Now Coda runs at my side as a spirit.

How do these aspects of your life reflect in your dancing?

What I portray onstage is a concentrated version of some aspect of what is happening internally. I am what astrologers would refer to as a "Plutonian", or one who is touched or called by the Underworld gods. Pluto's (a/k/a Hades) name means "wealth" or "riches". A visit from this god means that a journey to the depths of the soul has commenced. I am an Underworld veteran a few times over now. I try to bring what I've learned on these journeys to the dancing I do. I also have a tattoo of Pluto on my chest, which is usually visible while I dance; it is there as a beautification of my heart's scars, and as a mark of initiation.

You say your work is "shamanistic." What does that mean?

A Shaman is one who serves the community by mediating the spirit world — often through trance, vision, and story. A Shaman journeys to the "upper", "middle", and "lower" worlds through a shift in consciousness. Shamans are traditionally a combination of healer, mystic, and artist. A Shaman becomes a Shaman through being "called", either through inheritance or through a call from the spirit world. Most Shamans go through a sickness

from which they must self-heal as a right of passage.

Though we don't live in a culture that officially recognizes Shamans, we have people who fill that role anyway. As I said earlier, my work comes from within. One of the most profound moments of my life came when I lived in a cabin in the northern Vermont woods – just Coda and I. No TV, an outhouse, wood stove, chopped my own wood... It was the most magical and absolutely devastating time in my life – I was down to my bare soul, my bare bones. There were times where I thought I might go insane from loneliness and heartache; I felt like a gutted, bloodied, walking skeleton-woman...

Yet I also never knew such intense joy in solitude and passion and reverence for the natural world. At wintertime, there would be nothing but me, Coda, and the falling snow; so much silence, so much cold, so much time to *listen*. With the constant quiet, I also grew in awareness of the invisible world; I began to have frequent out-of-body experiences which deepened and broadened my perceptions of time, space and identity. It was at this time that I began to immerse myself even further into astrology, tarot, and mythological story. I followed the myths of the Goddess's Underworld descent and return/rebirth – stories like Persephone and Erishkigal – as guides for what was happening to me. I, too, was undergoing an Underworld journey; I was healing from past trauma and the emotional and spiritual "sickness" I experienced was part of the healing.

It was at this time that I also began to play music, to sing and to dance. It was as though, through solitude and intense engagement with the invisible world – I opened up something inside of me. By developing a greater awareness of myself as existing beyond my body, I somehow became more fully capable of embodied creativity. In the Underworld, the Goddess gave me the gift of music and dance. And so it was that I became a dancer and musician.

This intense spiritual deepening and creative awakening both developed out of the same "big moment" in my life. To me, they are one and the same thing, part of the same gift. I see my current role as an artist as one who is to convey the messages from the Underworld – perseverance through heartbreak, the healing power and spiritual wealth within darkness and shadow, the light of divinity and the drama of transformation – I try to convey these experiences through my art, through bellydance.

The theme of the "Dark Goddess" occurs a lot in your work. Can you explain more about this?

Bellydance is an ancient feminine artform. The Dark Goddess has been my dominant archetypal theme for most of my life: darkness is half of the face of the Goddess! To me there is a crystal clear connection; an obvious relationship as we bring the intensity and mystery of the Dark into this natural artform of the Goddess we call Bellydance.

I think that we as women are collectively undergoing what the Alchemists called the "nigredo" or the Blackening. The Blackening is akin to what St. John of

the Cross called "The Dark Night of the Soul". We are collectively very attracted to the dark right now; I think on some level we instinctively know that acceptance of the dark is crucial to claiming power.

I taught a workshop recently that I call "Bellydance Drama and the Energy Body". In the workshop, students form a circle and dance one at a time within perceived auras of color. After dancing for a time, each student then transforms the color into a different one, and then passes it on to someone else in the group, and so on. During this particular workshop, I noticed that no one had yet chosen black; when the orb of color was passed to me, I asked if

anyone would allow me to pass them black. After a brief silence, the workshop host asked for black. She then performed a very dramatic dance in black, after which she passed it on, still black. From here it seemed that everyone wanted to dance in black, and in fact, the most dramatic and apparently powerful dances came from immersion in this color! It seemed to me that the students were hungry for this experience, as though with "permission" to go there, something profound and powerful was embodied and manifested in the dancing. Such is the power of the Dark Goddess.

I know that many people believe that dark energy is dangerous. I would say that people who say this are on to something! The Dark Goddess's energy can be unpredictable, difficult, devouring. However, it is not inherently "evil"; it is a source of power and authenticity. Working with her energy requires self-knowledge and Underworld initiation – which can also mean moving beyond fashionable "goth" sensationalism or trendiness – and it requires genuine acceptance of ugliness and shadow. I am always grateful to my students for their bravery, and for their trust – in me as a teacher, yes, but also in their own inner strength and wisdom.



8. You've been rather busy, I know you just completed *The ART of Bellydance*. Describe the experience.

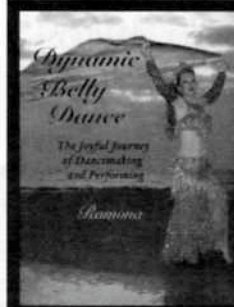
This past summer I co-presented the 2nd annual The ART of Bellydance show with the Salem Arts Association. The vision: to present a regional showcase emphasizing Bellydance as a higher ARTform – just as painting, theatre, etc. can be. Usually it is held outdoors for the community, but this year, because of the rain, it was held in the Salem Arts Gallery. The pictures for the show came out very beautifully in that you can see the artwork on the walls behind the dancers.

Could you also tell us about a few big events you are gearing up for? The next *DESCENT* and also *BELLYFUSIONS* in Paris?

I will be at *Festival Bellyfusions* in Paris, France this winter as a featured professional. This is a great honor for me! I will be teaching my workshop "Eerie Serpents and Ethereal Grace" on "inhuman and ghostly technique" for bellydance. I'll also be performing. The festival is January 23 and 24, 2010.

My show, the second annual *Descent: Dances of the Dark Goddess* presented by Exquisite Corpse Productions, will take place in Salem, MA on October 10, 2009. This year's theme is Desire. We're very pleased to be having the show in Salem this year, as Salem is otherwise known as "Witch City" after all! We've gotten lots of local support for this show, and Salem in October, with its witchy mystique and esoterically inclined atmosphere, is a perfect time and place for the event. The riddle put to *Descent* dancers this year was: "Where do Eros, the Sacred, and the Dark Heart of the Underworld intersect? Answer us in dance." I am very pleased with the response, and I can't wait to show the world what our performers have created! We're also thrilled to have JeniViva, and Sara Jezebel Wood of Solstice Ensemble, both up from NYC to teach workshops.

For more information about Aepril Schaile, see her website: www.aeprilschaile.com.



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