

# SASHAR ZARIF DANCE THEATRE

*20 Years of Moving Memories...*

creation. education. research.



## THE COMPANY

Sashar Zarif Dance Theatre is committed to the integrity of the fine arts by bringing attention and awareness to them through research, education, and creative exploration.

Sashar Zarif Dance Theatre works in multi-dimensions of time and space through dance, and is committed to connecting the past to the future through a contemporary examination of the notion of place/home.

Sashar Zarif Dance Theatre specializes in the investigation of identity (the way human relates to the environment around them) focusing on Central and Western Asian Cultures, performing arts of Sufi and/or Shamanic cultures, cross-cultural collaborations, and identity.

Founded in 1994, Sashar Zarif Dance Theatre (SZDT) is a professional Toronto-based dance company with both traditional and contemporary repertoire. SZDT produces an annual performance series, tours internationally and offers residencies, lecture-demonstrations, and classes in Near Eastern and Central Asian dance character, technique and choreography. Based in eclectic repertoire, the company has enjoyed intensive touring across the Near East, Europe and North America.



*“Zarif’s expressive and  
charismatic dancing...  
was as moving as it was  
provocative...”  
-Globe & Mail*

*“Zarif managed to take even  
those inexperienced in his cultural  
heritage on a journey of  
discovery; spiritual and  
transcendent.”  
-Michael Crabb,  
Dance International*

Photo Credit: Lucie Galcanova & Sashar Zarif

## SASHAR ZARIF - BIO

Sashar Zarif is a multi-disciplinary performing artist, educator, and researcher whose artistic practice invites a convergence of creative and cultural perspectives. His interests are identity, globalization, and cross-cultural collaborations. His practice is steeped in the artistry and history of traditional, ritualistic, and contemporary dance and music of the Near Eastern and Central Asian regions. He has toured across the Americas, Europe, North Africa, Central and Western Asia, and the Middle East, promoting cultural dialogue through intensive fieldwork, residencies, performances, and creative collaborations. He is the recipient of numerous national and international awards for his collaborations with outstanding Canadian artists along with international icons such as Alim Quasimov (a collaborator on Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Project), and universities and arts institutions across continents. Zarif is a research associate at York Centre for Asian Studies and on the board of directors of Dance Ontario and World Dance Alliance – Americas. He was also nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award for outstanding performance in 2008. In 2011, he received the honorary title of Master of Dance from Uzbekistan State Institute of Choreography in Tashkent as well as Honorary Faculty Member at this institute for his work and contribution to dance in Uzbekistan. In 2012, Sashar Zarif was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.



# TEACHING METHODS

## **Dialectic Movements / Parallel Realities / Inquisitive Movements**

This is a contemporary practice that works to bring awareness by inquiring into individual memories and making them into a collective memory by bringing them onto a communal plane where they can exist in parallel realities. This is a result of a research study Sashar has completed based on the idea of finding an alternative way to approach displacement and identity crisis, a progressive alternative to the idea of acculturation, assimilation, integration. Focusing on not only the physical displacement but the spiritual and emotional displacement that the natives of a region can experience as well.

## **Cross-Cultural Collaborations**

Through a series of exercises and physical practices, as well as demonstrations and visual presentations of various works of a cross-cultural nature, these sessions creatively facilitate a healthy way of facilitating cross-cultural collaborations. The program was developed and tested at York University.

## **Sufi Dance Rituals**

This methodology emphasizes the Sufi philosophies and body psychology employed in Sufi dance rituals. Zarif introduces the Sama (known as Whirling in the west), the pillar of Sufi dance rituals that has connections with Shamanic dance rituals. Elements of Zikir are also explored in these classes.

## **From Traditional to Contemporary**

In these workshops Sashar shares both the process of dance making as well as the observations he has gathered through his research when it comes to negotiating the traditional in contemporary dance making.

## **Introduction to World Dance Practices**

Open to all levels of experience, these classes are designed to explore the cultures of the Islamic communities through their classical, traditional, ritualistic, and folkloric dance practices. These countries include, Daghistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizistan, Kazakhstan, Chinese Turkistan (Uyghur), Taraistan, Western Mongolia, Tuva, Krimia, Kalmicia, Turkey and all through Morocco and Algeria.

## **Intensive Production Camps**

This program is an ongoing touring program since 2001 and has been presented internationally across Europe, North Africa and Central Asia. Using any or all the above, these intensives are designed to bring an experience of learning (in class) and delivering (performing on stage).



# DANCE TECHNIQUES

## Dance of Mugham

Stemming from The Time Arts Trio / *Saghi*, *Dance of Mugham* is a developed style of performance that can both be an integrated form of solo performance where the dance, music, and poetry are all performed by one person or in it can be performed in collaboration with musicians.

While *Saghi* concentrates on the basic tools of form and content, *Dance of Mugham* emphasizes a more intangible element, one that lies between consciousness and the unconscious, integrating elements of thought (poetry), rhythm (nature), feeling, sensing (music) and practice/action (dance) of life.

The educational program introduces elements of Sufi and shamanic practice that are reflected in the folklore and rituals of Western and Central Asian cultures. It also references the time arts trio/*Saghi* structure. The traditional performance and ritualistic practices of these areas will also be referenced.

## The Time Arts Trio / *Saghi*

With an in-depth reference/research into calligraphy, Arabic-Persian alphabets (Since of Alphabets: Abjad), poetry (Since of Aruz and the structure of Eastern poetry), classical modal music of Mugham/Dashtag, and the affiliated Sufi mystical philosophy embedded in them, this project has both educational and creative/production elements.

The educational model demonstrates a dance synthesis that is constructed based on calligraphy and alphabets in form, modal classical music and the rhythmical structure of Aruz (or *Arud*: a system of versification that originated in Arabic poetry and spread to several countries of the Near and Middle East), and addresses the philosophy embedded in the poetry.

Thus the curriculum includes a movement style of integrated dance practice, using calligraphy, music, and poetry, all informed by Sufism. As all three elements of this integrated performance practice work with the dimension of time, the dance element is the only two-dimensional discipline - working with the element of place as well as time. Therefore it has been referred to as “the placing the time” in some cultures. The traces of this practice can be found in many of the Sufi and folklore dance rituals of the areas in which it is affiliated.

It was called *Saghi*, after the wine bearer, an important character in Sufi poetry where wine references are associated with knowledge.

# PRODUCTIONS ON TOUR



## CHOREOGRAPHIES OF MIGRATION

*A beautiful collection of distinct, yet inter-connected moments from the past in search of the future...*

Through this quartet of works, Zarif presents a very personal vernacular. From a pastiche of languages, cultures and movement, he creates a unique contemporary style and a fresh way of communicating using traditional Central Asian, Near Eastern and Western dance forms. Zarif's sense of displacement underlies *Choreographies of Migration*. Born into an immigrant family in Tehran, moving through India, Turkey, and other countries before arriving in Canada, he compels us to examine the various and often complicated relationships that inform ideas of home, identity and self. Each piece represents a different period of awareness and growth in his journey from Iran to Canada; each borrows from different stops in his physical and spiritual odyssey that saw him survive revolution, war and refugee camps.



## IN THE LETTERS OF MY NAME...

*In The Letters of My Name* was originally commissioned by Dance Ontario and was the winner of the 2006 Paula Citron Award at the Toronto International Dance Festival (formerly fFIDA), when she described; "The wellspring of the piece is the 38 letters of Zarif's full name which constitutes six different names in three different languages – Arabic, Persian and his native Azerbaijani. In impulses of movement and text, we get impressionistic glimpses of a life turned upside down, of a young boy who survived revolution, war, and a refugee camp. Horrors are intimated, but never explained. The choreography, much of it based on real life physicality, swings between graphic emotion and whimsical surrealism. The dancer is rendered completely vulnerable, whether executing tiny baby steps, absurd in a grown man, or crying out in passionate outbursts that are almost embarrassing in their anguish. This is a work which opens up the guts of an artist and exposes the raw soul. It is dance storytelling at its best, because it raises more questions than it answers...



## SAMA-E RAST

*An unprecedented, multi-layered evening of dance and music connected to the mystic traditions of Azerbaijan, Iran, the Middle East and Central Asia... The Dance of Mugham is the Sufi-Shamanic art of spirit that exists in and out of the physical realm.*

*Sama-e Rast* represents a mystical journey of man's spiritual ascent through mind and love to self-discovery in the dance style of Mugham. Centuries ago, Mugham was an integrated practice that brought poetry, music, and dance together to represent seven unique psychological moods. Over the years, the connection between the poetry and music disappeared and the dance element deteriorated such that only traces of it exist today. In *Sama-e Rast*, walking on the vulnerable edge of emotions, Sashar Zarif is in an extraordinary collaboration with internationally acclaimed Alim Qasimov and his Ensemble. The piece passionately reintegrates dance back into the art form, the result of eight years of collaboration between these unparalleled artists to reincarnate this lost artistic practice. Program includes presentation of the 20 minute documentary film.



## MEETING WITH SAGHI

*Meeting with Saghi*, has grown out of years of ethnographic fieldwork in Central Asia, Iran and Azerbaijan. This work reveals Zarif's journey to connect his worldly experience to his spiritual existence. In *Meeting with Saghi* he weaves together contemporized Persian Sufi music, poetry (Rumi, Hafiz, Omar Khayyam), and calligraphy (inspiring movement lines and flow) in this intuitive exploration of the lost mystical dance of Saghi, the adored wine-bearer. Saghi is the provider of inspiration, the bearer of enlightenment who offers the symbolic imbibing of wine, the elixir that brings mystical love and divine intoxication. The evocative tapestry created by Zarif and his dancers in *Meeting with Saghi* connects the threads of ancient mysticism to the present day in a multi-layered dance performance, with original sound score, to reveal an expression of earthly love, beauty and the Divine. This bringing forward of the past may be a tonic for our sullen era as we open our eyes and let the experience wash over us. When the uncommon becomes familiar we find we are all connected by what we feel in our hearts.



## 2014 / 2015 - Works In Progress

### **Dance of Mugham (30 – 45 minute solo)**

A solo choreography and danced by Sashar Zarif based on Dance of Mugham where the dancer will be also performing the vocals and percussion without using any instruments or music accompaniment. This form of performance also has historical references (for example Sufi masters such as Rumi were known to recite the poetry on a composition as they danced). When the music is produced with the dancing body it will bring new qualities to the movement and exciting choices to the dance. I will be working with Elizabeth Langley on this creation as my creative facilitator. The idea of this piece surfaced and was explored in early 2012 in my work with Elizabeth for the *Sama-e Rast* production. At that time we decided to investigate turning *Sama-e Rast* into a one man performance of the Mugham Trio and choreographed a piece based on this.

### **Nature Boy (45 minutes solo)**

A practical minimalistic yet effective multimedia dance work, this was commissioned by the Canadian Dance Assembly to address the issues of cultural assimilation. The work is an exciting venture, a melting pot of integrated performing arts, dance and music as well as projections where the projection elements are used to transform the space more to more effectively place emphasis on the element of displacement.

### **Element 7 (full evening show)**

This is a collaboration between Sashar Zarif and internationally renowned composer Franghiz Alizadeh. Sashar Zarif was invited by Franghiz Alizadeh to work together with a group of talented Azerbaijani musicians to create a dance/ music performance based on some of her renowned compositions, some of which have been performed by Yo-Yo Ma and the Kronos Quartet. These western classical and contemporary-based compositions have elements of Mugham music in them.

### **Shaman on the Komuz (full evening show)**

This is a collaboration between Sashar Zarif and internationally renowned musician Nurak Abdyrakhmanov. Nurak Abdyrakhmanov, Komuz master/elder along with his collaborator. Abdyrakhmanov plays the Kyrgyz national instrument, the long-necked fretless lute called the komuz, and sings; Chytyrbaev plays the kyl kyjak, a dry-toned spike fiddle. The melodies, instrumental sounds, and subject matter of the graceful, melancholy songs recall the better-known music of Tuva. Sashar Zarif will work with them to continue reconstructing the legendary dance of Komuz. Sashar and Nurak met in 2013 when Sashar inquired into this dance and heard stories about it from Nurak and his wife; tales of what they heard about the dance in their childhood. By the time of the arrival of the Soviet revolution, many of the ritualistic practices were lost, and what was left was the legends. Komuz symbolizes harmony and peace and it is known that Komuz's melody and dance has stopped warring between the Kirghiz tribes. Using these stories, folk movement vocabulary of the regions it connects to and the dynamic and unusual movement vocabulary that is used by Komuz players, Sashar Zarif, with the mentorship of Nurak ,will re/create *The Shaman on the Komuz*.



Photo Credit: Michelle Maria Kemble

## The 2006 Paula Citron Tidf Award

In recognizing the magnificent solo *In the Letters of My Name*, the award plays tribute to several important aspects of dance. First and foremost, the piece represents the new Canadian dance hybrid, unique to the country's multicultural cities. This collaboration could only have happened in a vibrant cultural mosaic like Toronto where the traditional arts of immigrants new to the country merge with Euro-American dance influences to create a whole new art form. Secondly, the award honours two senior artists, as well as the experienced masters of their creative team who helped to fashion the dance. Only wisdom and knowledge of life could have produced this powerful work. While dance is predominantly an art form of the young, we must not forget the generation who has gone before, and continues to give us their artistic riches.

Take a superbly expressive and charismatic dancer (Zarif), and an intellectual and seasoned choreographer (Small), and the result is a haunting portrayal of the horrors of war in the old country and the struggles of the immigrant experience in the new. This piece, with its cunning mix of text, movement and evocative soundscore by acclaimed composer John Oswald is as profoundly moving as it is provocative. Kudos also to director Soheil Parsa as dramaturge and Katherine Duncanson as voice coach. Together this quintet of artists embrace countless years of artistic integrity and daring. We must also not forget Dance Ontario who commissioned the work for its annual Dance Weekend, and so continues to enrich the repertoire of dance.

The wellspring of the piece is the 38 letters of Zarif's full name which constitutes six different names in three different languages – Arabic, Persian and his native Azerbaijani. In impulses of movement and text, we get impressionistic glimpses of a life turned upside down, of a young boy who survived revolution, war, and a refugee camp. Horrors are intimated, but never explained. The choreography, much of it based on real life physicality, swings between graphic emotion and whimsical surrealism. The dancer is rendered completely vulnerable, whether executing tiny baby steps, absurd in a grown man, or crying out in passionate outbursts that are almost embarrassing in their naked anguish. This is a work which opens up the guts of an artist and exposes the raw soul. It is dance storytelling at its best, because it raises more questions than it answers.

-Paul Citron, 2006

## Notebook - Dance International Review

. . . The other performance that shook me to the bone marrow also came from beyond my area of comfortable familiarity.

Sashar Zarif, 43, is a man in apparent quest of his identity, understandably when one considers his past. Zarif suffered horribly in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Even his escape to Turkey left him a stateless refugee.

Separated from his family able to settle in Canada in 1988, but while adapting to a new environment he remained drawn to his ancestral past and its rich, mystic cultural heritage. He has since become recognized as an expert on dance forms of the region once broadly embraced by the ancient Persian empire.

A few days before Christmas, Zarif drew an appreciative audience to the 1,000-seat George Weston Recital Hall, toward Toronto's northern extremity, for a joint performance with Azerbaijani music icon Alim Qasimov.

Qasimov is distinguished among other things for his championing of mugham, a musical mode with several variant branches. At one time, dance was an inclusive part of the mugham tradition's mix of song, music and poetry, but has been neglected in more recent times.

Zarif, after years of research, sought to right that imbalance not so much through an act of reconstruction as a re-imagining, based partly on traditional sources but equally driven by his instincts as a contemporary performer.

. . . Zarif can also move with great precision and speed, as he did in Sama-e Rast, the December performance... Through his almost introspective concentration and intensity, Zarif managed to take even those inexperienced in his cultural heritage on a journey of discovery; spiritual and transcendent. One was left wondering if it was really quite appropriate to applaud. But, of course, we did.

Sadly, there's precious little dance around anymore that can connect us to life's most imponderable mysteries nor the dancers with the humility to put themselves totally at its disposal.

-Michael Crabb, 2013



Photo Credit: Lucia Galcanova



# EDUCATION

From Traditional to Contemporary...

Working in multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural arts, Sashar Zarif is a dance artist searching for relationships between traditional and contemporary expressions. In this way, he brings about opportunities for creation and education out of the past, in the present, and into the future.

The arts of each culture, whether ethnic or popular, are a reflection of the way the people relate and read the world around them. With this in mind SZDT is committed to introduce the art of Mugham and its affiliated cultures of Azerbaijan, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia to audiences. These are the same cultures that have been introduced to the west through the timeless poetry and philosophy of life of Rumi, Hafiz, Omar Khayyam and Nizami. Some eastern scholars believe that most of these artists were not originally seen as poets only, but masters of the Time Arts Trio of Mugham. It is believed that, if they had had the means to record their creations, we could enjoy the music and dance associated with their works. In our time, the practice of Mugham, in its original trio format, further contributes to cultural awareness and reflects the social harmony from that past age.

SZDT workshops provide a rich artistic and cultural experience for participants. All workshops are designed to introduce an integrated arts experience through investigating Middle East and Central Asian poetry, music, calligraphy and dance. Additionally, all workshops present a fresh perspective regarding the East's history and contribution to human civilization; creating an angle of tolerance for countries that have more recently been misrepresented.



# EDUCATION - AN ARTISTIC PRACTICE

My creation is a reflection of the process of embracing the unity of mind, body, emotion, and spiritual being. Working in the tradition of dance, my work has been an attempt to share with others the ideas, experiences, and emotions I have witnessed within my own cultural identity and history. My migration history that led me to Canada in 1988 acts as a backdrop for how I have developed personally and professionally. The confrontation between assimilating into this new culture and preserving my own history has long been a struggle of mine. How can I negotiate this apparent contradiction between the appearance of “who I am” in the eyes of others and the reality of “what I feel” in my artistic practice? Or, framed more appropriately in the context of dance, how can I negotiate the apparent contradiction between form and content? I have been committed to inquire into my past and my present in order to construct a place for myself. Therefore, my artistic practice is shaped through research, fieldwork, studies, and residencies in Iran, Azerbaijan, Central Asia and other centres of Islamic culture on one hand, and the personal and artistic experiences and opportunities that Canada’s diverse cultural texture has offered me, on the other. My travels permitted me rare opportunities to study and train in the traditional performing arts of many cultures that I am deeply affiliated with and to experience nearly lost forms. The product of these studies was the material out of which I created my own dance pedagogy from which I created original choreographies and developed a teaching syllabus. At the same time during these years, through many cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary collaborations, I have developed my skills as a choreographer, dancer and teacher. This has also enabled me to develop my ability to communicate with people of many cultures. The results of these years of work is a healthy practice I take pride in, with which I have developed a strong and mutually respectful relationship with the dance communities and other artistic communities here in Canada and abroad. -Sashar Zarif



# STYLES OF WORKSHOPS & RESIDENCIES

## **Lecture Demonstrations**

Lecture demonstrations investigate poetry, music, dance and visual arts with dialogue about their historical and cultural relevance. Participants are given an opportunity to read poetry, sing, try dance, and draw as part of the demonstrations.

## **Academic Lectures / Residencies**

Research and investigation are integral parts of the company operations and creative evolution. Lectures, masterclasses, and seminars are available in formal or informal settings.

## **Workshops**

Workshops provide a rich artistic and cultural experience. All workshops are designed to introduce an integrated arts experience through investigating Middle East and Central Asian poetry, music, calligraphy and dance.

## **Performance Q & A**

After performances, the company offers Q & A sessions to allow audiences to ask questions and to provide honest feedback and inquiry in to the dance, art and culture being presented.

## **School Programs**

All school programs are designed to captivate youth, and provide an artistic investigation of concepts such as identity and migration. All sessions support educational curriculum themes.

## **Audience Participation**

SZDT promotes community outreach and engagement opportunities and welcomes using local participants to perform in larger group productions - a magical experience to perform and interact with the dances and art form.



## Workshops for Professional Dancers

The Sufi-Shamanic Performing Arts Workshops offer a special opportunity for dance professionals to be exposed to the integrated performance practice of Sufi-Shamanic Arts.

Concentrated periods of study expose participants to the many styles of Central and Western Asia Sufi-Shamanic dance with a clear focus on the common threads in their practice, in particular the symbolic interactions and the sociology of the movements.

Professional workshops include:

- Creating a setting where dancers are encouraged to re-conceptualize the body by redefining it as the expression, rather than as the tool of expression. In this way, the body is united more completely with the mind and the heart.
- Providing dancers with the cultural contexts for this philosophy of movement, using traditional methods of teaching dance by a process known as “Shadowing.” The shadowing method will encourage dancers to learn differently. It teaches them to learn more intuitively, and it awakens a different part of their minds and their connection to their bodies as interpretive vehicles.
- Providing instruction in vocal and physical patterns through role repetition for two short dances and two songs in the format of song-dance accompaniment and will feature poetry, music, Zikir (Sufi Chanting), Sema (Sufi Ritualistic Dance), and Calligraphic movement meditation. It will also introduce the dancers to an improvisation style that is driven from intuition, from looking inward.

# School Programming

"The students were fascinated... He clearly knew his audience!" -Moir Secondary School

"It was fantastic. The dancing and the music are very original and moving." -Centennial Secondary School

School residencies aim to bring awareness to the element of tolerance and harmony embedded in Sufi and Shamanic cultures of various countries/places (including Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghistan, Western Mongolia and some Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey and North Africa (Morocco), etc), and to provide students with a hands-on opportunity to investigate themes of migration and displacement (on a personal, historical, and/or reflective level).

During residencies, students will experience:

- Dance Introductions to Style/Form - where students physically explore an introduction to Eastern dance styles and form via in-class dance workshops. This portion of the program allows students to experience basic dance vocabulary and get a feel for the style and form.
- Creation & Choreography - where students reflect on stories of migration and displacement, develop paralleled or related stories, and create individual and/or group choreographies. The students will also be introduced to Sashar Zarif's repertoire as it relates to his own personal life of war, refugee camps, migration, and resettlement.

Curriculum Expectations & Themes:

1. Describe how forms and styles of dance reflect people's different social and political roles in various communities, times and places.
2. Analyze, using dance vocabulary, how elements of dance are used to communicate messages
3. Describe the evolution of dance as different groups of people have responded to external factors such as migration, etc





*"Working for Sashar Zarif has been a journey of profound artistic discoveries. Sashar's unprecedented use of imagery and his generosity in guiding each interpreter to find their true path within a work, has allowed me to dig deeper both as an interpreter and as a movement creator."*

*-Sylvie Bouchard*

*"Working with Sashar has reminded me of the importance of the expressivity of our most human aspects as dancers, the hands and the eyes, and the importance of telling our stories, whatever they may be through metaphor, text, song or a tilt of the head."*

*-Lucy Rupert*

## Letter of Support

I have known Sashar and his work since 2002, and have seen him perform and teach many times in varying circumstances. I have observed his work as a teacher at York University, and watched his students perform. I collaborated with him as a dancer in the creation of his 2006 work, *Anar*. I have observed his stellar solo performances, and the captivating shows he designs, showcasing his choreography for both students and burnished professionals.

Sashar Zarif is a luminary. He's a nomad, a poet of dance, a teacher, a builder of bridges among cultures. A stunningly charismatic performer, he is gifted with a completely unique stage presence. A creative thinker on a broad and visionary scale, Sashar embodies diversity. He is committed to addressing social and cultural issues through his work, and his belief in artmaking as an agent of social change is a guiding principle for him. The cultural wisdom Sashar embraces, committed to developing his own practice and his deep and mystical connection to dance, is always in balance with his desire to share, teach, enliven, broaden perspective.

He is a beautiful teacher, a master, yet humble and eager in his openness to all opportunities. He has travelled widely on research quests, adding to his store of knowledge of deep dance traditions in Iran, Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and teaching and performing throughout Europe. An expert teacher, he shares this lore with students, exciting exploration and discovery with the stimulating workshops and classes he designs.

-Carol Anderson

# CONTACT SZDT

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