

BY JO-ANNE HOLMES

It's not I Dream of Jeannie – not even close.

"The North American image of I Dream of Jeannie is so 'Hollywood'," Nita Collins chuckles, but acknowledges that, yes, belly dancing is sensual.

"I Dream of Jeannie is a combination of Turkish and Eastern and Hollywood."

But, she says, it did help introduce the whole concept and was perhaps partly responsible for bringing the "East to the West ... a first window into it".

Collins has named her Middle Eastern Dance Ensemble, part of her Celebrations Bellydance!, "Saba".



Nita Collins and her Celebrations Bellydance! is performing Raqs Farrah, the Dance of Happiness at the Yukon Arts Centre on Saturday, March 19, at 8 p.m. The show then goes to Dawson City's Diamond Jubilee March 17, at 8 p.m.

"Saba is an Arabic word that describes a gentle wind from the east ... like a chinook," she explains.

Belly dancing has helped Collins to see "more beauty in the details of life" and she says that each of her students is a blessing. And she is pleased with the reaction of Whitehorse audiences.

"Whitehorse is very open artistically," she says, her hands moving gracefully as she speaks.

The most-common reaction to the dance is that people tell her how beautiful they think it is. And they don't just use words.

"They try to do this ... [Collins demonstrates the gentle rippling with her upper body and hands]. They try to express how exotic it looks.

"Or they'll say, 'Oh ... that "thing" you did', and they'll wave their hand in the air."

Collins is not poking fun at her audience, but is expressing her joy over their excitement.

In Raqs (pronounced "rocks") Farrah, the Dance of Happiness, Middle Eastern dancers feel joy when others celebrate with them.

"The dance comes from the East; Raqs Sharqui means Dance of the East.

"It takes a minute to learn and a lifetime to master.

"There are as many varieties of movements as there are moments," she says thoughtfully, adding that the movements are influenced by many things: "personality, experience, mood ... how you hear the music.

"That's the joy and beauty of this movement.

"And your freedom to express yourself inside that movement vocabulary is limitless," she says, her words bubbling to the surface.

The dance is not only about happiness and joy and celebration, but also about good health: "Those undulations in the torso ..." Collins emulates in graceful movement.

"Here in the West, we don't dance with our torso.

"You will definitely get a strong core.

"Core strength, posture and a wonderful sense of your own body."

Collins was inspired when she was "10, 11, 12 – preteen", she says, when her Mom started

taking lessons.

“She danced all the way through my high school years. I danced around behind her. I used to ‘steal’ her things,” she says, laughing, “and she would have to come up to my bedroom to find them.”

Collins loved the veils and the music, but more than that, she says, “I loved my Mom and was imitating my Mom.”

At 8 p.m. on Saturday, March 14, 11 dancers in 21 costume changes, will dance 26 dances wearing a total of 99 costumes. They will be accompanied by four musicians, Saqra and the Mediterranean Raqs Band (from Seattle, Washington), who will be bringing live Middle Eastern music to the North.

Saba Middle Eastern Dance Ensemble will perform Raqs Farrah, the Dance of Happiness, a dance Collins has been choreographing for the past year.

“I want people to see this as close to authentic as I can make it,” Collins says, her voice sparkling with enthusiasm over what she believes will be, for many, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The greatest challenge for the ensemble, Collins says, will be “to break that ‘fourth wall’” – that imaginary wall between audience and performers – as they engage the audience in a feeling of celebration.

Saba Middle Eastern Dance Ensemble will also perform March 17, at 8 p.m., at Diamond Tooth Gerties in Dawson City.

Tickets are available at Yukon Arts Centre and Arts Underground.

You can learn more about Celebrations Bellydance! at www.celebrationsbellydance.com.