

Melissa Smyth and
Teresa Tomb as
Rakadu Gypsy Dance



Phot by Mick Jeffries

MECCA LIVE STUDIO & GALLERY AT 10

Zombie Gypsy Vaudeville Free Jazz Marching Band
Performance Art Nation – With Fire.

By Kakie Urch

With a crowd of 7,500 pushing forward, the police watched with wary interest as a horde of snarling, disheveled figures in black, blood red and mold green lurched down the street, heading with frenzied urgency and much loud percussion toward the courthouse at the center of the sweet Southern college town. But this was no civil unrest. This was civil creativity.

It was “Thriller 2008” — a Lexington Halloween tradition. About 250 civilians, children, seniors, students volunteer to costume up, learn complex choreography and follow two inspired sometime-belly dancers down Main Street.

Behind the hundreds dancing joyously in choreographed zombie unison and the thousands cheering them on — there is a central force that flows through Lexington on a daily basis — sometimes throwing fire, wearing twirling skirts, mammoth papier mache heads or mismatched band uniforms. And it’s celebrating its 10th anniversary next week.

Mecca Live Studio & Gallery, a remarkable community dance, performance and arts incubator is that force. Mecca has been home to the Rakadu Gypsy Dance company, a crazy quilt community band known as March Madness, firedancers, tribal belly dancers, interactive performance art happenings, alternative music concerts and the nationally known free jazz series Outside the Spotlight.

And Mecca is, for the most part, a 40ish woman named Teresa Tomb from Owensboro. Tomb came to Lexington to go to UK for pre-pharmacy, took a right turn at the theatre department, studying African dance and flamenco and belly dance and Indian Kathak and playing in bands with names like Quixotic and Dying Kitty. She answers to “TT” or, when performing, to her dancing name, sri TaraSita.

“Thriller is a huge task but at the end of it, every year, it’s like ‘Oh my god, I am so glad we’re still doing this. The Mardi Gras Parade is another one where you have the whole community involved,” Tomb said of Mecca’s biggest and most spectacular activities.

“One of the definitions of Mecca was a place where people of common interests and ideals come together and gather. So, for me, just making expressive art accessible to anybody in the community is so important to me. As someone who teaches dance, my focus isn’t on working with ‘professional dancers,’ my focus is on getting dance into the bodies of everyday people,” said Tomb, who with Rakadu Gypsy Dance partner Melissa Smyth, teaches all comers to the former tobacco warehouse on Chair Avenue the “Thriller” dance and costuming over several weeks.

“I don’t think anyone really understands the huge impact that they’ve had in this community,” said Amber Luallen, cultural arts director for Lexington Parks and Recreation, which, for the last two years has helped Mecca

with the increasing security, sound and traffic control needs for the Halloween event.

And that is probably because Mecca’s creative outreach is so broad. In any given month, you might see the Rakadu Gypsy Dance group at Natasha’s downtown, catch the hoop girls dancing in front of the March Madness band in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade or see a special ‘vaudeville style’ dance performance at this weekend’s Beaux Arts Ball or witness a performance with the ‘Balkan vaudeville’ group The Mezmer Society at Al’s Bar.

“With the community events you have such a variety of people participating and creating something larger than themselves. I think those are the things that really strike me as amazing and awe-inspiring” said Tomb, who first founded Mecca simply as a place to continue the study of tribal belly dance after the death of her mentor Suzanne Armetta, who taught dance out of the YMCA on Eureka Springs Road.

And at the center of it, is the dance, the importance of a fusion of cultures and expression with movement and music inseparable. But the center reached out.

“Mecca and Teresa helped give a focal point to the DIY energy that was starting to blossom amongst young artists and musicians and the young arts audience in the early 00’s. The studio became a hub for creative expression and interaction running the full spectrum from novice/avocational to master/professional — it wasn’t unusual for the two extremes to intermingle in the course of a single event,” said Ross Compton, the Lexington arts and cultural organizer who is one of Tomb’s closest collaborators and the principal in thelexingtonproject.org.

“And, Teresa saw the value in all of it. She gave a lot of people a chance and a space to actualize the crazy ideas in their heads — to make tangible our own personal visions of what culture in Lexington could be — and, by doing so, empowered a lot of us to believe that we didn’t have to leave Lexington to be happy. She helped us understand we could stay here and build our own world,” Compton said.

Compton’s “Outside The Spotlight” series at Mecca has featured performances by legendary new music composer Pauline Oliveros, MacArthur Award winner Ken Vandermark’s Vandermark 5 quintet, Sonore (a reed trio featuring Peter Brotzmann, Mats Gustafsson, and Vandermark), New York City cellist Erik Friedlander, some of the best of Chicago’s young free jazz scene including Triage, Dragons 1976, and the Rempis Percussion Quartet.

Bruce Burris of the Latitude Artist Community, agreed with Compton. “Mecca really is the essence of a living, breathing community arts program. Beyond providing opportunities for dance Mecca has hosted concerts, readings, installations, Thriller and beyond. I really do not think there is a more innovative, exciting program within 100 miles.”

Mecca was a starting point for Burris’ program. “We began Latitude Artist Community, an arts program particularly designed to support artists considered to have disabilities, eight years ago without any start-up money. At the time, Teresa Tomb was renting a space on N. Limestone. As is still true, most of her programming occurs in the evening and on weekends, while ours in M-F 8:30am-4pm. Teresa allowed us to use her space at 10% of whatever we brought in for the month. I’m also pretty sure she offered her space for free. Anyway rent for our first month was \$25.00,” he said. “Sharing space with Mecca for a year enabled the artists in our program to benefit from amazing interactions with those associated with Mecca,” Burris said.

Those interactions included the Re: Arrangements Performance Art showcase that would happen after Gallery

Hop when Mecca was located downtown.

"We would combine a visual art show with performance art following it. We commissioned a lot of local artists, poets, performance artists, dancers and just basically would have a showcase that was one or two hours long. One of the things about Mecca was that we always called it a gallery. For me that is a live gallery, performance art based gallery. It's not an art gallery per se, it's a performance art gallery," Tomb said. "For our Gallery Hops we wanted to make sure that performance art was an element of the Gallery Hop — that people were not just exposed to a still life on the wall or an amazing sculpture but that they were exposed to real people from the community expressing themselves in an artistic manner."

The most recent success at Mecca is the March Madness Community Band put together by the Local First! Lexington group. Supported by local merchants such as CD Central, the Morris Book Shop and Isle of You boutique, the band welcomes all comers, works with their talents, helps them with uniform styling and has a corps of "hoop girls" choreographed by Tomb and Smyth.

"Lori Houlihan (Isle of You owner) got us all together to do March Madness. We worked with whoever showed up. It was 'Who can play an instrument; who wants to be in the flag corps? We decided that what we had were Hula Hoops and we could do a lot with Hula Hoops. Mel and I lord over the hoop girls. We just would kind of play around in the studio with the props and try to make it easy and accessible because basically we had to march down the street while doing it all," Tomb said.

"Mecca is a great blueprint for anyone in Lexington who's ever thought of opening any kind of cultural enhancing entity. An artistic vision, passion, talent and dedication to go along with a commitment to making this city a more interesting place — Mecca's creative path is DIY perfection," said Brian Connors Manke, a musician/artist who is a trombone player in March Madness.

"Last year when we were doing it, so many people came up and said 'How can we be one of the dancers.?' People just love it." Luallen said.

"The most impressive thing in 'Thriller' is when you're standing at the Kentucky Theatre looking back towards Limestone, and everybody, even on the side, is dancing and singing. It's just a totally happy thing. Their vision and their concern for the community speaks volume about them and their commitment," Luallen said.

It starts with the dance and it comes back to the dance — as an expression and, as Tomb says, of "Women transcending time. I think that image of the goddess, moving with music and it seems so timeless and pure ... I think seeing that out in the open was very comforting and empowering to women and men."

As women come to Mecca Live Studio to study the tribal belly dance, Tomb said, "You see this transformation ... they seem to gain an appreciation for themselves and others around them as far as body types and physical attributes. I think that the whole self image and body image changes. I know it did for me too. Seeing the dance on so many different shapes of

women and ages of women, it's an amazing dance because anyone can do it, regardless of how old you are or your physical condition or appearance. It looks good on everybody."

Tomb and Smyth, as Rakadu Gypsy Dance, travel to cities like Ohio, Louisville, St. Louis, San Francisco. Rakadu has performed in Santa Fe, New Orleans, Fort Lauderdale, St. Louis and Mecca.

They were commissioned by the Western Kentucky Botanical Garden in Owensboro for its "Big Bugs" exhibit in Oct. 2008 to perform a dance of the tarantula. "We went with that and designed our set according to that. A lot of the way I choreograph is what might be called a progression sense and a story line ... put together with certain sections that are improvised."

And true to form, you can see the studio's hand at 9pm on Friday, April 3 at Al's Bar with The Mezmer Society and Pezhead at Al's Bar, witness their special set at 11pm Beaux Arts Ball on Saturday, April 4, or see their standing monthly tribal belly dance performance at Natasha's, this month on April 18 with Gypsy Nomads, or take classes at the studio or volunteer for March Madness or Thriller.

"If you came to Beaux Arts Ball to see us perform it would be a much different set than say at Natasha's. You might expect circus antics and a vaudevillian sense of humor —and a little bit of the absurd," she said, with a wide smile.

For the future, Tomb says, she would "want to focus a lot on a more intense study of what Mecca already does. My wish list would be that we are able to do twice the amount of artwork that we already put out. Again the connection between music and dance is so strong for me that I really want that concept of the melding of the two to take off. Being able to create performance based out of this spontaneous melding of creative forces," she said.

How does one person channel and fund so many creative performances?

"Almost every month, it's like, 'Am I going to make it to my 10th birthday?' It's funded through (paid) class participation and a lot of struggle," says Tomb, who also works on the "Theater of Possibilities" summer camp program for at-risk, low-income kids with Bluegrass Impact.

Tomb said, reflecting on the 10 years of Mecca Live Studio and the most recent successes of the March Madness band project summed up her project with the energy and joy of the ensemble's noise:

"We're all people who want our sense of community and we want a sense of an artistic community. We want to live a creative life. It's not that we want to sit in our houses and paint pictures while we look out the window. It's that we want to live creatively and pull the rest of Lexington in with us." ■

Kakie Urch is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky.

Mecca performs 9pm on Friday, April 3 at Al's Bar with The Mezmer Society and Pezhead.
Mecca and March Madness will perform at the Beaux Arts Ball, Saturday, April 4 at Old Tarr Distillery.
Mecca Live Studio & Gallery is at 451 Chair Ave. (Off S. Broadway).
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www.meccadance.com
e-mail info@meccadance.com.

A Brief History of Mecca

Mecca Live Studio Highlights Timeline

April 10, 1999

Opens its doors at 209 N. Limestone (next to Columbia Steak House) as a continuation of tribal belly dancing instruction Teresa Tomb had taken with her late mentor.

November 2000

Teresa Tomb and Ross Compton meet through Dave Farris, as Compton was searching for a place to put on a number of music shows he had booked.

November 2000

The first WRFL-sponsored show at Mecca, Ross Compton booking. The collaboration grows to include the Outside the Spotlight jazz series.

October 2002

Teresa and Melissa Smyth debut the first "Thriller" parade in downtown Lexington.



Photo by John Chan

February 2004

Mecca and the Lexington Action Arts Collective debut the Lexington Fat Tuesday Jazz Parade (in 2005, it became the Mardi Gras Jazz Parade). In 2005, the parade was led by the Sun Ra Arkestra under the direction of Marshall Allen. In 2006, it was led by the sprawling NYC jazz/funk big band Burnt Sugar.

2004

Tomb's original partner, Lisa Duggins bows out and Tomb was left to run Mecca by herself, with good help from Melissa Smyth and Jeff Watts, among others. Financially and, for the most part, logistically, Teresa Tomb is Mecca Live Studio, which is home to the Rakadu Gypsy Dance troupe she heads with Smyth.

Fall 2005

Mecca is forced out of its N. Limestone location to make way for a 'loft development.' Teresa relocates the studio to its current location, a former tobacco warehouse on Chair Avenue, just off South Broadway.

2006

Mecca is awarded the Downtown Lexington Corporation's Urban Innovation Award

Fall 2008

Mecca helps create/donates space to March Madness, ragtag community marching band/dance squad. MM debuts at Christmas Parade and thrills the St. Patrick's Day Parade crowd.

Spring 2009

Mecca celebrates 10th anniversary. ■