

## **So why did you first take up bellydancing?**

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Was it a love of Shakira? A desire to get fit, but a hatred of the gym? Or did you see a bellydancer on holiday and come away saying 'I want to do that'?

I remember exactly when I fell in love with bellydancing. It was in 1981, I was newly graduated with a dance degree, teaching stretch classes in Covent Garden and dreaming of travel. At the time I had an Arabic boyfriend, a singer, who took me to a fabulous Arabic nightclub in London called The Empress. There I saw some of the very best acts from the Arab world, including wonderful young bellydancers from Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. And I knew that was what I wanted to do.

In those days there were no classes or videos and no way to learn except watching and trying to work out how the dancers created their moves. A very fat Saudi man showed me how to shimmy, and later, when I lived in Bahrain, the girls there taught me their version of the dance. But I blush when remember how I danced in my early career – enthusiastic, but very short on technique!

Now of course we have thousands of classes every week throughout the UK, from beginners right through to advanced level. And workshops and DVDs help us acquire new skills and improve our dance technique. I am now a full time bellydance teacher and director of a growing organisation, so I see hundreds of new students every year, many of whom tell me they have always dreamed of learning to bellydance. And I'm fascinated by what this dance brings to their lives and how often they say it has changed them in a really positive way.

I don't need to tell Mosaic readers just how profound the results of learning to bellydance can be: the friendships made, the music discovered, the self-confidence gained. Not to mention the fun of dressing up!

I often wonder why it is that bellydance has such an ability to change women's lives. I think much of it is because on one level it is very accepting of a woman's body. Whatever your age, your size or your level of fitness, you can bellydance. And it is one of the few dance forms that require no partner, so you can shimmy while you are vacuuming or practice your hip drops in the storeroom at work!

In an age of body fascism and the cult of youth, the way that bellydance encourages acceptance of a woman's body, whatever its form, is particularly important. Students often tell me moving stories of how in the past they had come to believe they were fat and ugly, but bellydancing has taught them that they are beautiful and womanly. There is a wonderful bonding that often occurs within bellydance classes and communities and I love to see the way that students celebrate their curves and cheer each other to the rafters at hafas and other performances

But bellydance is maturing in this country. And with that maturity comes new challenges – for teachers and students alike.

When I started teaching regular classes seven years ago, the bellydance scene in the UK was a largely amateur one. Performance opportunities primarily came from haflas, where the audience was made up of other dancers and their families. Costumes were often homemade and technical standards were not particularly high. In addition, most of my students were in their forties or older and had no aspirations to dance professionally.

But I have noticed a significant change in my student intake in the last couple of years. Far more young students are coming to class, many of whom have backgrounds in ballet and other forms of dance, and their expectations are much higher for where they might take their dancing. They want to stretch themselves and work hard to achieve professional standards, they have access to designer costumes via internet vendors and travelling souks and they are hungry for performance opportunities.

Dancers and teachers are working hard to create those performance opportunities. In London we have monthly showcases such as Planet Egypt, Bellyworld and Saqarah, which demand high standards of their performers; teachers are building good quality troupes and taking them to the general public and more restaurants are hiring regular bellydancers.

This changing world is incredibly exciting for a teacher like me: I am able to demand more of my best students and they gladly rise to the challenge, I can choreograph complex dances and see them realised beautifully on stage and I can experience the satisfaction of seeing a few of my students earn money from what started as a fun hobby.

But these changes do bring problems. They are the type of problems that other dance forms have always faced, but from which bellydance has largely been protected. Extreme dieting is endemic in many dance disciplines and slimness is prized at professional level even in bellydance. America's Bellydance Superstars are all young, beautiful and size 6 and even if you don't aspire to be a Superstar, restaurant owners typically want their dancers young, pretty and slim. And if you dare to put your dancing on You Tube, you can encounter some very cruel comments.

As a teacher I find I increasingly have to manage students' expectations and undertake difficult conversations with keen students overcome by unrealistic ambitions. And it isn't just about body type. As bellydance becomes more professional, it demands higher dance standards and, harsh though it might be, some people are naturally more talented than others. They will naturally rise to the top, leaving others frustrated. It is the way of all professions, particularly the arts.

I tend to say these days that there are two worlds of bellydance: the world of classes, haflas and festivals and the world of restaurants and the general public. One is supportive and body accepting, the other can be far less kind.

But I don't see that as being totally negative. It tells me that bellydance is coming of age. And even professional bellydancers can still be much larger and older than in other dance forms. As a promising ballet student I remember the distress I went through aged 15 when my hips started to develop and I knew all my dreams of being a ballerina were finished. Even if I had have gone on to have a career in ballet it would have been finished by the time I was 30 and my body would have been pretty broken by the rigours of training and harsh dieting.

But as a 50 year-old, size 14 bellydancer, my performing career is by no means over – I still perform regularly and continue to learn and grow as a dancer. The world of haflas and festivals will always be with us, allowing anyone to experience the pleasure of performance and audience acceptance. And classes will continue to enable women to discover and love themselves for who they are rather than some unattainable ideal.

So yes, the bellydance world has changed beyond recognition from the days when that Saudi man taught me how to shimmy. It has changed enormously in the seven years I've been teaching. But it is still a wonderful, inspiring world, filled with wonderful, inspiring men and women. And there are amazing prospects for us in the future - a future we are all involved in creating.

Charlotte Desorgher  
Director, *hipsinc*