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February 2012

What to Expect Dancing in the Show

There are a number of differences between dancing in a formal show and dancing at a party, in class or even an informal hafla

First, there is the stage. I usually have at least one rehearsal on stage because its shape, its orientation, its height, and its floor can throw some people. But other people love it. Some people like the formality of a stage that gives them permission to be someone else. Some love being the centre of attention; in the spotlight.

The lights are your friends – especially if you are nervous because under stage lights you really cannot see the audience. They are in the dark. But this also means your own features are washed out. **Being on stage means wearing makeup.** Without strong eyes, eyebrows and red lipstick you will have a white blob of a face that cannot express your joy in the dance. For those so inclined, full makeup with shading is a good idea. These days you don't use stage makeup but just normal stuff – except the lipstick which must be fire engine red to show (pink washes out, brown or blue! turns black).

Also be aware that the strong lights can make thin fabrics transparent. Diaphanous skirts will need underskirts or harem pants.

On stage, in a show, you only have one chance. When it is time for your item, you go out and do it once and do it right. So you have to be prepared. This means you need to really know your choreography. Know it without looking at anyone else. This means lots of practice. It can be a good idea to practice with other people out of class.

Practicing in your costume is also a must. So your costume(s) needs to be ready well ahead of the performance. For most items there is a specified costume style and/or fabric and/or colour. Please check with me before buying anything.

You will be expected to attend a certain number of classes prior to the show plus dress rehearsal and technical rehearsal unless you clear it with me well in advance. (Think weeks not days)

Fully prepared, on the day you just need to turn up ahead of time (sober) and do your best – and enjoy yourself.

March 2012

When is it “Belly Dance”?

This is a question that has eaten thousands of hours for hundreds of dancers. At one corner are those who refuse to even use the term “belly dance” as it is a misnomer which was coined to titillate preferring the Arabic **raqs sharqi** or French **danse orientale**. Then there are those who insist anything with an exposed belly and hip work is belly dance – Salsa? Hula?. The truth is somewhere in the middle.

Belly dance is a **movement vocabulary** (shimmies, undulations, polycentric isolations, layers with torso intensive movement), a way of interpreting **music** (normally Middle Eastern) with a **cultural** understanding. Take any leg away and the pot falls spilling into jazz, world fusion, creative dance or just self indulgent Arrrt.

Belly dance’s roots are in the folk dance of the Middle East and North Africa. Some will embrace any dance from the region as “belly dance”. Others include only the solo improvised dances based around the torso (*SITA – Robyn Friend*). Others limit it further to those dances based on **raqs sharqi** – ie the professional performance style developed in the 1920s from **raqs beledi**.

From the 1960s two new forms were developing – **AmCab** (aka American Nightclub) which used Middle Eastern fusion music and adapted what emigrant dancers were doing to American sensibilities and the skills of the non-native dancers who were filling the clubs; and **American Tribal** which plugged into an ethnic look and feel with music that could be played in the open air without amplification – ie drum and mizmar. The most well known development is ATS with its set moves and group following the leader format and an eclectic mix of music and costumes pieces from many nations, sexes, and species.

It can be hard sometimes to decide when something is belly dance and when it is not – and not even all the experienced dancers agree where the lines are. In our show I hope to present some traditional belly dance, some folkloric, some Tribal, Flamenco, and Bollywood. Hopefully people will be educated as well as entertained.

And if you have friends, family or work colleagues who want to try it for themselves – check out the coupon in the 7 March Star.

April 2012

Arabic Ssss

When you see an “s” in transliteration of Arabic, it can be one of three letters:

- *sin* س pronounced s characterised by three peaks
- *shin* ش pronounced sh three peaks & three dots
- *sad* ص plummy, swallowed s loop, no peaks or dots

The letter *sad* is “dark letter” and also affects the surrounding vowels making them thicker. In accurate transliterations the *sad* is distinguished from the *sin* by a dot under it, capitalizing it or printing it in bold.

As with most Arabic letters they change shape within a word.

Beginning	سعيد	sa`iid (sah-eed)	happy
Middle	السلام	es salem	peace
End	كسكس	kuskus	couscous
Beginning	شكراً	shukran	thank you
Middle	شيشة	sheesha	water pipe
End	شيش	sheesh	shutter
Isolated	طربوش	tarboosh	hard cap of red felt
Beginning	صعيدي	sa`iidi (so-oy-di)-	of the highlands
Middle	عصية	`asaya (ah-sigh-ah)	cane
End	رقص	raqs (rocks)	dance

May 2012

Is it Andalusian or Muwashshah?

Andalusia is in southern Spain. Spain (along with Portugal and southern France) was Al-Andalus - part of the Arabic Empire from the 8th to 15th centuries. This was ruled by the Moors – North African Berbers - and Arabs. There is no evidence of “belly dance” as we know it but Arabic music and poetry was adopted. And from time to time you will see “Andalusian” belly dance offered in workshops.

The first time I was introduced to “Andalusian” as a belly dance genre was by Yousry Sharif in 1997. He presented us with a fiery fusion of belly dance and flamenco. When I was later to perform it I really needed a couple of months with a flamenco teacher to give justice to some of the turns and footwork!

Imagine my surprise when the next time I came across it, with Aida Nour, it was all wafting hankies and arabesques. The next two workshops were similar; lots of graceful turns, good carriage, pointed feet, hip work – and hankies. Fortunately over the years Aida’s English has improved so we could ask more about this dance style she was teaching us (the last one was choreographed to the theme tune of an Arabic soap!)

As expected, Andalusian dance had not been preserved for centuries. Rather, what she was teaching was a theatrical construction from Mahmoud Reda. As part of Egypt re-creating itself after the 1952 revolution, it looked back to the greatness of the past. The Arabic (not Ottoman) Empire was one aspect they were proud to be associated with. Part of the classical Arabic culture was a style of poetry call *muwashshah* – which originated in 10th century Spain. The so-called “Andalusian” style of dance was an interpretation of this poetry – which is sophisticated with complex scansion, repeating choruses and themes.

More detail can be found in Farida Fahmy’s 1987 thesis*. For instance, she comments that the original complex rhythms were replaced with shorter ones while maintaining the feel of a chorus and repeating themes; the images being woven like a lace sash.

These days, I use the term *Muwashshah* – even though it is “foreign” – because it is foreign and people don’t get the mistaken belief that they are about to see belly dance from Spain – or for the more sophisticated – a belly dance reconstruction from Al-Andalus.

* Fahmy, Farida (1987). *The Creative Development of Mahmoud Reda, a Contemporary Egyptian Choreographer* (University of California Thesis)

June 2012

Practicing to Improve

Dr Noa Kageyama's blog for musicians included a quote from violinist Leopold Auer: "If you practice with your fingers, no amount is enough. If you practice with your head, two hours [a day] is plenty." This applies to dance as well. Mindless drilling is of limited use.

Yes, you need to repeat new movement patterns to embed them into your body (what actually happens is you lay down new neural pathways). But until you get it right, you need to be aware of what you are doing. If you "practice" a movement wrong, you have to unlearn the incorrect pattern first before re-learning it the right way.

Instead, practice mindfully. This is often slow, and involves repetition of small and very specific sections. It involves monitoring your body, continually looking for new ways to improve. This means watching what happens, so that you can tell yourself exactly what went wrong.

I cannot do this for you. I can guide you in class. I can correct you when you are wrong. But I cannot get inside your head and trigger the muscles in the right sequence. Only you can do this – and you need to approach with a positive attitude.

Past raw beginner **some of this will be in your own time** (unless you want to do private classes). Creating excuses not only frustrates your chance of learning, it eventually discourages me from helping. If you have physical issues which can be improved by (say) a specific stretch or strength work – then **you** actually have to take the time to do this.

Find solutions to your frustrations. If you have limited space – you can take smaller steps, you can practice in your head – even lying in bed. And basic technique needs no space. If you have limited time you can practice movements or sequences for short snacks of (say) 10 minutes while waiting for the spuds to cook – or while supervising the kids watching TV. Put your music on repeat while doing drudge work.

Set goals and keep a notebook. Bring your blockages to class – I may be able to help. Term 3 is going to be non-choreo. It'll be flexible.

Based on Dr Noa Kageyama's "How Many Hours a Day Should You Practice?" (www.bulletproofmusician.com) and lectures from Michael Dalglish.

August 2012

What to Practice – part 1

In the last newsletter I included some tips on how to practice. Some have asked what to practice. Each of you will have different needs, but a practice notebook is useful. Take a note of things you want to work on and (realistic and achievable) goals. Here's some ideas.

Basic Technique:

Do not forget that this underlies all of your dancing. Take time to go over this from time to time (you don't have to do everything in one hit!). For instance:

Posture – what happens when you dance? Are you dropping your pelvis? Leaning back? Are your knees soft and aligned?

Hip Isolations – slides (parallel with the floor);twists (isolated from the torso); rocks (vertical not sideways); horizontal eights and circle (should be parallel with the floor, evenly shaped and smooth); vertical and tilting circles and vertical eights (smooth with postural abs engaged to protect the lower back); hip drop and lift (isolated – no bouncing).

Shoulders and torso – distinguish between shoulder shimmies and torso shimmies; shoulder rolls and lifts (single and in smooth combinations); isolate rib movement (yes, you can combine with movement of the spine – but can you do it without?)

Weight Shifts – both “normal” and dance style – for instance sideways shift which moves weight across using foot/leg then hip, then ribs; using circles and eights to change direction using your hips.

Arms and Hands – are they too stiff? Do they wave around all the time? Are you missing the end positions? Are you missing the journey to the end positions? Are you palm forward, fingers spread?

A mirror can help at times – also consider using video and a knowledgeable friend.

November 2012

What to Practice – part 2

Continuing on from the last newsletter, here are some more ideas for your dance workbook.

Shimmies:

Remember a shimmy should be a **repeated, smooth, relaxed, driven movement in time with the music**. With any shimmy it is important to have the underlying technique off pat. If you cannot do a clean slow movement you won't be able to get a clean, fast movement.

So, start slow. Use your mirror. Can you get the movement clean and smooth, slowly? If not, why not? Is it a flexibility issue? If so, I may be able to find suitable exercises for you to improve your range of motion – but **you** have to actually **do** the exercises and do them correctly.

Is it strength? A common problem with some hip shimmies is weak abs. Much of the work in layering shimmies requires you to work on one leg. Again I might be able to point you in the right direction.

Is your technique correct? How have you placed your weight? What muscles are you using? Experiment. Play and see what happens.

Is it control? – ie can your body do all the right things but your brain gets in the way or simply you haven't done those 10 000 repetitions to move it into your automatic part of your head. Practice.

Different Types of Shimmies

The more shimmies you master the more choice you have in expressing the music with your body. No shimmy is "wrong" – unless it doesn't fit the music or you are unable to layer what you want to with it or you are doing someone else's choreography and they have decided on a particular look.

I have gone into more detail in my blog (kashmir-bellyraqs.blogspot.com). But in the next newsletter I will again look at shimmies – this time with layering and weight shifts.