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# January

## Fifi Abdou

Those of you who came to SummerSteps were lucky enough to watch some clips of Fifi Abdou.

She was born in a village outside Cairo about 1953. After some training in folkloric dance she became an orientale soloist at only 13 years old.

Fifi Abdou is very much the bint al balad. Her dancing can be provocative (especially in later years) and some people find her act vulgar, but her down to earth dance style can be exquisite. She never overworks the music (although her 1980s costumes were sometimes a little over the top!). She has a subtlety which is found in all the best Egyptian dancers. While thinking “she’s only doing a couple of moves” really watch that ab work.

She has not danced in public since about 1999 (or 2004 after a brief come back). She has also acted and danced in a large number of films.

At Zumarrad’s hafla on 16 March, it was my privilege to try and channel the late career Fifi – in a copy of her famous white gallebaya. This led to a blog entry (<http://kashmir-bellyraqs.blogspot.co.nz/2013/03/becoming-fifi.html>) reproduced below:

## Becoming Fifi

It’s not often you get a chance to become Fifi Abdou – but that was what was handed to me by the organizer of a local hafla when Zumarrad suggested performers take the challenge of dancing in the style of a well known dancer.

Foolishly I thought it would be easy. Fifi has been one of my dance role models for many years due to her relaxed beledi styling and her attitude. I can do beledi and I have lots of attitude!

I started by gathering several hours of video I have of her performing. Then I watched them – and rewatched them. I danced along with them - mirroring her posture and moves. I sat and analysed – taking notes about characteristic moves and transitions.

After a month or so, I had found one part of her style that I thought I could do justice to – late career beledi. Now to select music and costume. I selected music that I could (in theory) maintain the loose beledi shimmy throughout that is one of her trademarks. I had already had a white, silk gallebaya from Aida Nour and a trip to a costume jewellery shop got me chunky, shiny anklets and bracelets. Red nail polish – of course!

Next I made a short list of characteristic moves that I would include. I had already noticed that Fifi was able to play with a single move for minutes at a time. The question was – could I? Did I have that much confidence? I was willing to try – I intended to improvise in her style hitting the three or four moves I had noted (loose, continuous shimmy, flat footed hip drop-swivel, bust shimmy and chest heave) – with typical manipulations.

The hardest aspect, though, seemed to be her arms and hands. Sorry, but they really are not attractive. The often static beledi second with splayed hands (palms forward) is a look I’m forever trying to train out of my students. My own dance also tends to use a lot of soft shoulder rolls, arm undulations and weight shifts with ribs. All scratched.

Time to go solo – and I froze. Instead of dancing I was thinking – “is this typical?”, “where can I fit that in?”, “mustn’t do that!”. The flow had gone. The connection with the music became mechanical. It was almost like learning to dance all over again. I briefly toyed with the idea of creating a choreography to smooth out the rough edges but in the end hung in there. Practice. That’s what it takes.

When I night finally arrived, I was glad I’d stuck with improvisation. That gave me the chance to interact with the audience in a way no choreography would have allowed. I mean, I’m sure if there had been cell phones in Fifi’s day she would have stopped and checked members of the audience’s text messages just like I did. Oh, and yes I did dance too. I suspect a little more busily than Fifi herself would have but not at all like how I would have performed as myself.

The whole experience was very challenging – but very valuable.

## March

### Shimmies with Layering

A quick reminder that a shimmy is a repeated, smooth, relaxed, driven movement in time with the music. Before attempting layering or weight changes make sure your underlying technique is solid. It does no harm, no matter how experienced you are, to spend a few minutes every week (or day) working on your basic shimmies.

Once you can shimmy for a few minutes though, it is time to start layering. The first step with hip shimmies is to be able to shift (some) weight over one leg or the other while shimmying. If you lose it, go back to a plain shimmy with the weight evenly placed over both feet. If need be, go right back to a half time hip rock (heels on the floor).

Also try shimmies with figure eights (some people prefer a twisting shimmy for this one), twists and hip rocks. Yes, you can shimmy and hip rock at the same time – but it is hard.

Walking with a shimmy requires you to have good abs and the ability to shimmy on one leg – for most people this means you must be able to drive your shimmy with your lateral flexors. Although some people can do a thigh driven shimmy and walk with it.

### **Nadia Gamal** (1935-1992)

One of the best known Lebanese Dancers is actually Egyptian!

Nadia Gamal was born in Alexandria to Italian and Greek parents. Her mother was a travelling dancer with the Casino Opera and Nadia received her orientale dance training there. Nadia debuted at 14 years old due to the illness of another dancer. She also studied classical ballet, modern dance, acrobatics, jazz and tap and spoke seven languages.

Later she was to move to Lebanon and she considered it her home becoming extremely distressed when the civil war started. At the time she was touring the States but said she was too sad to dance. She was much admired by Bobby Farrah and Arabesque ran a series of articles on her in 1975-1976

She is also credited as the first dancer to perform zar within an Oriental choreography.

## May

### **MEDANZ**

The Middle Eastern Dance Association of New Zealand was formed in 1992. Its purpose is stated as “We are a group of dance enthusiasts committed to supporting each other in a spirit of friendship. We believe in sharing information to educate both dancers and the general public about Middle Eastern Dance”.

MEDANZ has had good years and not so good ones. Like many incorporated societies it is run by a volunteer committee whose skills and commitment can vary. It would appear that 2013/2014 may be one of the good periods with the new committee already off to a flying start with a re-vamped newsletter, travelling mini Festivals, and a number of financial initiatives for teachers and students.

More information can be found at [www.medanz.org.nz](http://www.medanz.org.nz)

### **Fusing What?**

At the recent MEDANZ Festival in Dunedin, I attend a couple of fusion workshops. Belly dance fusion can be a mix of belly dance styles – for instance Egyptian and Turkish, or a fusion of belly dance with non-belly dance music, or a mix of dance styles such as belly dance with flamenco or Latin. Good fusion requires expertise in both forms.

This workshop, however, seemed to be fusing Indian dance with Western Theatre dance. With the exception of a few mayas there seemed to be no belly dance at all. Which begs the question why MEDANZ was paying to bring out the teacher (who, as a teacher and dancer, was excellent – it was just the wrong event).

### **Roots: Ghawazee**

The term “belly dance” can be used to describe not only the developments from raqs sharqi but also a number of other folk styles which are characterised by being torso intensive. These styles are also studied by many belly dancers and inform their performance. One such is Ghawazee.

The term “Ghawazee” has changed over the last few hundred years. It used to mean a low class dancer, in Egypt, who performed in public (as opposed to the `awalim who performed only for women and were trained in poetry and music as well as dance).

More recently it has been applied to rural dancers who are said to be non-Egyptian. That is, they are outsiders – often described as “Gypsies”. The most famous group are the Banat Maazin – the Maazin Girls – based in Luxor. They are probably Sinti and have only been in Egypt for a few generations. There were a number of other groups such as one in Sumbat. Today there is only one real ghawazee dancer left - Khairiyya.

Ghawazee dancing had little or no impact on the development of raqs sharqi. It is a much heavier style with flat feet. One characteristic move is a sideways step with a reverberating hip push. They also used shoulder shimmies, zills and cane (sometimes all at the same time).

# July

## Improvisation

Improvisation lies at the heart of belly dance. After all, for a short time there was a push to use Andrea Deagon's term SITA (Solo, Improvised Torso Articulations) instead of the controversial "belly dance". Yet, to many people is a fearful concept.

But, is it any different from boogieing on the dance floor? Oh, you have problems with that too? Plus of course, if you are improvising belly dance and it is new it is hard to know what to do. If you have learnt other dance styles for instance, they tend to leak through. Initially, ignore that. Get moving then worry about whether you are actually belly dancing. So, how to start?

First, separate your technique practice from your improvisation practice. It uses different parts of the brain. So, yes, you do need to practice your technique under it is automatically clean and will flow with grace without conscious control. That takes time. No shortcuts.

But at the same time take time to work on your improvisation. There is no point spending five years waiting for your technique to be good enough then start trying to improvise – you'll be five years behind.

Start small. Listen to music. If you are listening for belly dance – then the music has to be music for belly dance. That is a broad choice – but it has to have a Middle Eastern base. Avoid rhythm only tracks ie drum except for a bit of a change. Listen to the same music over and over until you can begin to anticipate what is coming. If possible listen to different versions of the same song.

Allow yourself to bop occasionally. No stress. Music on; wandering around the house; washing your teeth; doing the dishes; bopping.

Watch good belly dancers. Not just a brief once over, but take a performance and really look. Maybe try to follow some of it. You are not looking at copying the technique but the interpretation and feel.

Now, set time aside – 10 minutes maybe. Pick one or two moves. Dance to music using only those moves. Do the same for several days. Now change the music (or the moves).

Now start teasing out the music – all that listening will start to pay off. For instance, pick and instrument and dance only to that. Pick the drum and only dance to that. Dance to the flow of the voice.

Turn on you analytical brain. Listen to see how the music is put together. How do the repeats come in? Is there a call and response? How does the rhythm change? Are there folk elements that need to be acknowledged?

Then try to make your movements fit the structure of the music. If it repeats with small variations, then your dance should repeat with small variation.

As your technique improves this will flow into your improvisation practice – without being forced. At this stage do not think about whether the movements are good enough or look good – enjoy the feel.

Later you may need to come back and work on the improvisation as a performance piece ie make it audience friendly but if you already have the joy of the movement in there it is a much easier thing to do than starting with a stiff but "perfect" performance which is soulless.

Enjoy the dance.

# September

## Khaleegy

“Khaleegi” (pronounced ka-lee-gee with the “k” like the “ch” in loch – that is back in the throat) means “of the Gulf”. In belly dance circles it is used specifically for the women’s social dance of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and to a lesser extent Kuwait and Iraq.

Traditionally, this dance involved a lot of hair and beautiful thobes. For several of our shows, I used a Khaleegi tableau with a mix of group and duet movement. Modern Khaleegi has lost the thobes – which is sad.

What defines it as Khaleegi is the music and the movement. Khaleegi dance is done to Khaleegi music (duh). One characteristic of the music is the rhythm – which can be played in a variety of speeds – but basically throbs.

The footwork is very simple – variations on flat, ball (ie Arabic I). There is minimal hip work – although there can be a little butt lift. There are some graceful arm and hand work. And hair. Okay, hair is no longer required – but it is fun if you have long hair.

# December

## Internet Forums (Fora?)

I spend time on a couple of belly dance forums OD (Oriental Dancer) [www.bellydanceforums.com](http://www.bellydanceforums.com) and Bhuz – [www.bhuz.com](http://www.bhuz.com). Each has its own character – and many dancers belong to both. On the whole Bhuz is a more “serious” forum whereas OD tends to be a little more relaxed with a few more flaky threads.

As with anything on the internet take the information with a pinch of salt – however both forums have a good number of very experienced dancers and teachers who will often try and pull the loonies in. There is often a wealth of free information and tips available.

## Dance Practice

One thread I recently contributed to on Bhuz was in reply to a student who was trying to learn via DVDs. I thought I would share my response with you as I think I made some good points.

**OP:** Okay so I have got most of the moves. I can do most of them well but I am struggling to put them together and...well...dance! I know it must sound odd but because I learnt from DVDs where the moves are taught in isolation when faced with a piece of music I just can't string them together very well in an improvisation

**Kashmir:** You have learnt a great truth, Grasshopper, belly dance is not a bunch of moves.

You have also highlighted a major limitation of DVDs (and lousy teachers) - drilling "moves" (and, actually, I'd surprised if you have learnt "most" of them - probably just most of what is on your DVDs - decades on and I'm still finding new ones! Let alone foot patterns)

Next, dance training can be thought of as made up of two parts - which for the sake of simplicity you can label left and right brain. The left brain practice is all about generating perfect movement - or replicating steps in a choreography. The right brain practice is about actually dancing - by drawing on the skills you developed earlier.

Left brain can be easily broken down and packaged as DVDs - although people have varying ability to be self aware. (I have stood in front of a mirror with a student and pointed out the difference in her movement and mine and she has insisted she was doing EXACTLY what I was doing) Right brain is harder to package - a live teacher is really recommended. I guess you are getting sort of free live teaching here - but one in the flesh is much better.

My advice? Try the dancing to two moves as the previous poster suggested. Take a track and dance only with (say) a hip rock and a horizontal eight. Express the music with these two moves. Follow the texture, the phrasing, etc. Next repeat with more awareness - here a teacher is helpful because they can observe and feedback. Not only does this mean you are not needing to switch modes but (hopefully) their experience in a wide range of movement can give you fresh ideas. For instance, on a repeat you might repeat with a different arm position (arms are not belly dance so don't count as moves) or a direction or level change.

Also, watch lots of good belly dancers. Watch the same performance over and over. Dance with it. (And buy your own DVDs - don't use YouTube)