

2014 Contents

April 2014	2
Hip Drop Practice	2
Belly Dance and the World Fairs (1851-1931)	2
May 2014	3
Auckland Festival	3
Expressing the Music	3
Glossary	3
June 2014	4
Origin Myths	4
September 2014	5
Being Graceful.....	5
October 2014	6
Shimmies – Part 1	6
December 2014	7
Shimmies – Part 2	7

April 2014

Hip Drop Practice

When doing a hip drop, you can start at neutral – or above neutral and drop to neutral or below neutral. This gives a range of different effects.

By controlling the start and end you can also break your hip drop into two (or three) staccato pieces eg above neutral to neutral, then neutral to below neutral.

Remember also to do your hip drop without bouncing your torso or allowing the standing leg to push sideways.

Belly Dance and the World Fairs (1851-1931)

I thought I would share some of my presentation I'm giving in Auckland in April (places are still available).

The first documented examples of Middle Eastern Dance in the West were at the World Fairs starting with the Crystal Palace Exposition in London 1851. This involved a scene in a Tunisian café and was a scarf dance. This is unlike what we think of as “belly dance” having little hip work and involving mime as well as dance. This is likely to have also made it to the New York Crystal Palace Exposition two years later. There were definitely dancers and musicians in the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1867.

The first time dance we would recognize as “belly dance” appeared was in Philadelphia (1876). Although the official dance was again the demure Tunisian scarf dance, in the café this time they had something a little more belly dance like – and it was quickly banned.

In 1889 the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris included the infamous *danse du ventre* which the *Figaro illustré* described as “as though pinched by a needle [the dancer] started moving with hideous contortions ... with vibrations of her hips and her torso”.

By the time of the Chicago World Fair (1893) there were dancers representing Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco and Persia with a wide range of styles. But Sol Bloom whose name is linked with the transfer from the French *danse du ventre* to the English “belly dance” had the Algerian dancers – and this phrase was specifically linked with the Ouled Nail – who unlike the Egyptians did dance with their bellies rather than their hips.



Tunisian Scarf Dance
London 1851



Ouled Nail
Chicago 1893

May 2014

Auckland Festival

The MEDANZ Festival in Auckland this April was probably the best I've attended. The committee had brought over two great international teachers – Ava Fleming and Karim Nagi. They both gave workshops that addressed key issues of the dance; no flashy props to overcome the boredom of audiences with 15 second attention spans but rather the importance of addressing the music and technique tips not designed to dazzle but rather produce clean, simple dance with minimal (apparent) effort. (One of Karim's "rules" was to make hard technique look easy and easy dance look very difficult)

In addition Karim also gave classes in folk styles (debke and assaya) and gave us a taste of experiencing some of the Arabic maqamat. And I discovered you can layer a taqsim – if it's played on an instrument capable of playing more than one note at a time such as an `oud.

Their workshops were supplemented by a small number by New Zealand teachers. The one I attended was also great (as was the one I delivered ☺).

There was also an excellent formal show – one of the best I've seen in New Zealand in my 23 years of belly dance. Plus "informal" performances at the hafla. Again most of these were outstanding.

Add to this the AGM, shopping and the Meet and Greet and you have an idea what will be on offer next April in Christchurch (although Ava and Karim won't be teaching).

MEDANZ membership runs from 1 July to 30 June. This year there were significant discounts for members - \$45 per workshop of \$60 for non-members (and Candice is also offering MEDANZ discount at Aziza's workshops – four workshops for \$450 rather than \$550).

You can signup at www.medanz.org.nz

Expressing the Music

Belly dance is about interpreting the music within the constraints of the style. It is important to know your music well. Play it over and over. (Play it in the car or while doing tasks that take little brain activity.)

You need to express not only the form of the music but what it means to a person from its origin.

Find out what the lyrics mean – even if it is an instrumental version. If possible watch someone singing it. Watch their expressions – and also audience reaction if available. Try and feel the emotion connected to a song – even if it means using a related experience rather than an exact match.

Watching a singer is as important as watching a dancer – and more important than watching a dancer who is not from the source culture.

Sing the music (not necessarily the words) to get a feel on how the music makes your body feel. Is it full of uncomfortable intervals? Does it make you feel happy or sad?

Play with different parts of the music. Which body parts fit this bit – or that bit? Follow one instrument then another. Dance to the drum Then the voice. Mix it up.

Glossary

Assaya	"stick" – ie cane dance from as Sa`iid. Developed from tahtib
Debke	A folk style from the Levant characterised by people linked arm in arm with tricky foot work and lots of stamping.
Hafla	strictly speaking a party but commonly used by belly dancers to mean a less formal show
Levant	Where the sun rises ie Lebanon, Syria etc
Maqam	the Arabic system of musical "scales" which include quarter notes and have an associated feel. There are many more than the Western Major and Minor scales (over 90!).
Maqamat	plural of maqam
`oud	a fretless, plucked lute
as Sa`iid	the south of Egypt (ie south of Giza)
Tahtib	man high sticks used in a martial arts style "dance" from as Sa`iid
Taqsim	A musician's solo improvisation of a maqam. Usually unaccompanied by percussion.

June 2014

Origin Myths

I thought I had heard most of them. Most of them pure fantasy with no basis in history and often easily disproved. Yet they hang on. I guess people want to believe in dancing mid-wives, sacred prostitutes, sexy harem slaves, and carefree “gypsies”. One excuse is that after hundreds (or thousands) of years evidence is hard to come by. But the latest one I stumbled across had to do with the origins of Western (ie “American”) belly dance – which isn’t that long ago. It also happens to be the topic of my MEDANZ presentation so the facts are pretty fresh for me.

So the (incorrect) story goes like this. There was no belly dance in the States then there was the Chicago World Fair and Little Egypt. This created burlesque which slowly became more respectable over time to create AmCab then ATS.

Where do I start? I wrote a little about the World Fairs in my [April newsletter](#). In summary, Middle Eastern performance dance arrived in the States over 20 years before the Chicago World Fair. And Little Egypt may have been a performer there – but she was never a star – or got any sort of billing.

However, Middle Eastern Dance was there long before that. It came with the early Middle Eastern immigrants. Remember the basis of belly dance is the social dance form that many Middle Easterners do, themselves, at parties.

Meanwhile, the origins of burlesque were way earlier; beginning as theatrical parody in early Victorian England (thanks, Shanzel).

And while genuine Middle Easterners performed at the Chicago World Fair, there were already Parisian take-offs performing there as well. The influence on the American hoochie dancers may well have been French not Egyptian.

So for a few decades strippers dress like harem girls and Ruth St Denis pretends to be Cleopatra and Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller flaff around with lengths of fabric. But where was the belly dance? It was still in the homes of the Syrians, Lebanese and Greeks.

Belly Dance reappeared with the popularity of Middle Eastern restaurants – especially after the release of “Never On Sunday” in 1960. With a need for more professional dancers, non-Middle Easterners started to learn and perform belly dance. But not from burlesque dancers. They learnt from Middle Easterners.

It was from this seed that most Western belly dance grew (a full discussion takes me about three hours to go through!)



Ruth St Denis



Loie Fuller

September 2014

Being Graceful

Recently a student asked about becoming more graceful. The pat answer is to practice, practice, practice. But I thought I'd look at it a little more.

Let's start with travelling steps. "Graceful" has a number of synonyms – for instance "sure footed". That is, knowing exactly where your foot should be placed. This relates to getting the footwork "right" – not missing a step or mixing a weight transfer with a touch (or vice versa). Generally speaking, belly dance footwork is "natural" – but that may mean practicing it slowly until it becomes so.

Another aspect is being "smooth". That relates to both moving your muscles in the right order and using just enough movement to achieve your target. A common beginner problem is everything is too big. Or when you go to use one muscle lots fire at once. This is normal. These are muscle reflexes which are built into the body. Part of your journey as a dancer is to train your body to dampen down these responses.

Then there is "co-ordination". Once you get single movements looking sure and smooth it is time to add another. Belly dance is characterised by different parts of the body picking up different rhythms or instruments. The secret is to have each movement under control before combining them.

There is no short cut. It comes down to how many hours you put in. But it is important to make those hours count. Mindless drilling might improve your cv fitness but won't improve your belly dance. Be aware of your body as you practice. Use a mirror – or even better – video to give yourself feedback. Don't beat yourself up – but don't rush ahead when that transition is shonky. Go back and do it slowly and smoothly until it looks like it belongs.

Another aspect that can make a big impression is your arms and hands. They draw the eye, so make sure your arms form a nice curve; that your wrists flow gently from the forearm; that your hands and fingers look good. We are not doing jazz so we seldom have the broken joint look. Hitting the right position every time is not easy. Again it's practice.

And we also are neither doing Hula nor Indian dance – so we do not dance with our hands and arms; they should be used to frame or be a natural extension of the torso movement. And just to complicate things, the arms are isolated from the movement – without being rigid.

That should give you something to work on for a while.

October 2014

Shimmies – Part 1

Shimmies are an underlying part of belly dance. A **shimmy** is a **repeated, smooth, relaxed, driven** movement in time with the music – usually double time. This is in contrast with a **vibration** (tense), a **freeze** (generated by muscle fatigue/tension), a **reverb**(eration) – a driven movement followed by a loose, gravity generated shake, and a **mess** – just jiggling around. (Terminology does vary between teachers but I find this breakdown most useful)

With any shimmy here are things to work on:

Good underlying technique. For instance for a hip rock shimmy you need to be able to move your hips up and down with little or no sideways movement, ideally using lateral flexors. For the Modern Egyptian/Straight leg Shimmy you need to be able to drive your thighs back - without locking your knees – smoothly and consistently. Practice slowly and aim for perfection – technique drilling is not a CV workout.

Breathe. Never hold your breath. This will make you tense and your shimmy will disappear. Either breathe continuously – or for short shimmies breathe out on the shimmy. Singing or talking while shimmying not only ensures you are breathing but it'll also relax your face.

Build stamina. Once you have the technique, work on shimmying without a break for a minute, two minutes, three minutes, 10 minutes.

Listen to the music. Your shimmy should be a response to the music – in timing, texture, and pauses. If it is a fine sound – your movements should be small. But with a big loose sound your shimmy should be loose. If the music stops – so should you – and you should be able to stop in a beat.

Take it through the gears. Something we did with Ava Fleming. At the same tempo generate a shimmy at varying levels of energy from a tiny movement through to a huge wobbling plate of jelly. That is the speed stays the same but the amount of movement varies – so you have to move your body faster to stay in time.

December 2014

Shimmies – Part 2

As covered in the [last newsletter](#), shimmies which are a defining belly dance movement are **repeated, smooth, relaxed, driven** movements in time with the music – usually double time.

There are many different shimmies. For instance, the hips can go up and down (driven by the legs, the lateral flexors, or a mix of both), the hips can twist (again driven by the waist or the legs), the shoulders can slide forward and back, the torso can twist, and you can shimmy other, less common, parts of the body.

In every case, it is important to be able to do the underlying movement cleanly at a slow speed before trying it at full speed.

Last issue I talked about building stamina and variations of range of motion for a given speed. But there is more. Much more.

In class, I talk about doing a hip rock keeping your weight centred. This is because you need to be able to do it independent of where your weight is. So once you have it, move your weight over one leg – and shimmy. Back to centre and shimmy again. Now the other side. Now smoothly transition from one side to the other – while shimmying. Now – try it while keeping the upper body centred.

Once you can move your shimmy from side to side, try it on your horizontal isolations such as your figure eight and circle.

A common layer is a shimmy while walking. Ignoring the 3/4 shimmy (which has lots of variations itself) – just try a regular steady shimmy with no breaks and walk. Breaking it down, you can try counting up/down/up/down 1,2,3,4 and step on every “1”.

In theory no harder (but from experience with Tanya in Tauranga in November – much harder), try standing on one leg and shimmying then touch your foot in front and around in a semi-circle to the back. The shimmy should be continuous while the unweighted leg is moved and held in definite positions (at least 4).

In all cases the shimmy should be smooth and independent of the layer. It just takes practice. Then a little more practice