Choosing Belly Dance

By Gail August (Gazella), Hostos Community College, CUNY, USA

Abstract:
Belly dance originated in a patriarchal tradition, viewing women's lives and bodies as objects for male oppression and sexuality. In this context, a female soloist performing an eroticized form of dance generally became an opportunity for the performer to be demeaned or exploited. Although these uncomfortable possibilities still exist in the contemporary performance world, modern women have found ways to control these situations and to turn the dance into a vehicle for the expression of their sexuality and female power. In fact, many women are extremely attracted to this dance form and find their involvement in belly dance to be a personally enriching experience. This individual ethnography describes one woman's history working as a belly dancer in New York City. It uses details about costume, body image, performance environment, interaction with the audience, attitudes to sisterhood, and the transformative power of artistic expression to explore how belly dance intersects with modern women's perceptions of gender and sexuality.

1 Belly dance is a solo performance form with a vital erotic component. It is a complex dance genre, integrating a personal artistic vision with self-expression, musical interpretation, sensitivity to the Middle Eastern origins and culture, drama, and palpable sexual energy. The exaggerated sexuality of the costume augments the innate sensuality of the movement, and each dancer must create her own formula for being convincingly erotic without being vulgar or going beyond the constraints and traditions of the dance form. Belly dance frequently occurs in small cabaret settings where the performer is physically close to the audience. There is no "fourth wall" to insulate the performer—either imaginatively or physically. Depending on the venue and the particular energy communicated by the dancer, audience members may be inspired to come into the performance area to tip the dancer, either by showering her with money or placing bills somewhere in her costume. After the ritual of tipping, some individuals may be inspired to remain with her and join her in dance. This intimacy with the audience, the aura created by the costume and movement, and the historical associations with the dance, inevitably entangle its artistic expression with complex issues of gender and female sexuality.

2 In this personal ethnography, I will look at gender and belly dance, exploring my experience with these issues. I will expand this discussion to include comments and insights related to me by a few dance associates and materials from on-line articles and discussion forums. My analysis will relate mainly to situations which are most familiar to me, a solo belly dance performance by a woman, in New York City, with a live band or to a CD. I will begin with a summary of my own experience in the dance and a short history of its origins in

the West. In describing my life as a dancer, I will focus on reasons why women choose this particular dance, the costume, issues of personal body image, how the intimate performance venue influences the dancer (both positively and negatively), and efforts in the dance community to maintain artistic standards. I will suggest how theories of gender might apply to this discussion and what insights they can provide to the belly dance world. I will conclude with speculation about the artistic experience of performing in such a gender entangled art form, and how the impact of artistry can affect concepts of gender and power relations.

3 It is important to realize that the dance and the dancers change with the times and with the venues where it is presented. In fact, it appears that the conventional cabaret style of dance—the 20 to 30 minute show with a live band—has become almost non-existent, and is being replaced by shorter programs using DJs for music, and attended by an audience with very different expectations (Costanza *DJ*). Nonetheless, I believe that this narrative will reflect themes that will be relatively constant and familiar to other dancers today, in New York, around the US, and in other Western countries. This is a personal ethnography, and as such, should not be approached as an exhaustive or statistically valid discussion of the "true" circumstances of the dance. However, it contains a great deal of truth. Just like the dance itself, this discussion is a solo performance. It should be approached as a uniquely personal expression, deeply felt, resulting from many years as a belly dancer.

Personal History

4 After graduating from college, I came to New York City with dreams of becoming a dancer. With many other young women and a few young men, I studied ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and showed up for all kinds of auditions. In time, I had performed in many downtown theaters, various outdoor performances, a few bus tours, and also Tully Hall (Lincoln Center), Miller Theater (Columbia University). On the way, I met the young Ibrahim Farrah (Bobby), who later became one of the greatest teachers and leaders of Middle Eastern Dance in the world. Bobby wanted to put me in his company and make me a star. However, the nightclub life and the seemly blatant sexual expressiveness of the dance persuaded me that I would rather devote my efforts to becoming a "real" dancer. A new baby, a Cesarean scar crossing my belly button, and an asthmatic reaction to the cat in Bobby's home-studio convinced me that belly dance was not going to be my calling. About 12 years later, with a second child and second scar, I was looking for new ideas for modern dance choreography and returned to Bobby's studio. The cat was gone and it was love at second sight. All of the sexual/ gender/ performance issues that had previously frightened me were now transformed into some of my

strongest motivations for perfecting this dance. There, in the classes and in the clubs, were women of a wide variety of sizes, shapes, and ages, moving their bodies in a sensual erotic manner that seemed sublimely suited to the female shape. No one was leaping around, lifting her legs above her head, or contorting her body into acrobatic positions. And no anorexic women were crying in the dressing room because they noticed a chunk of cellulite on their thighs (belly dance costumes hide the upper leg). And, even more exciting for me, the dancers performed to live music.

5 Well, like any love affair, things are always better, worse, and different than first expected. However, when the love is good, it may be different than anticipated, but it is still good. Sometimes it is even better than one could have imagined. And so it has been with those gender issues and belly dance.

Belly Dance History

6 The term "belly dance" is disliked by many serious performers, as they prefer it to be called Middle Easter Dance, Oriental Dance, or something of that nature. Some dancers find the term demeaning, as it conveys burlesque associations (Keft-Kennedy 105-108), and detracts from broad artistic potential of the dance. However, belly dance is a generic label, easily recognizable to the public, and will be used for this discussion. This designation is a broad term used to describe a genre of dance derived from women's dances of the Middle East (Deppe 8). There are many theories about how belly dance got its name. Some say that at the time of Napoleon, French soldiers in North Africa referred to it as dance du ventre "dance of the stomach" (AlZayer 70). Others trace it to 1893, when the promoter Sal Bloom brought Little Egypt and her dancers to the Chicago Exposition of the World's Fair to dance the "hootchy-kootchy" (Costanza DJ). According to historical accounts, Little Egypt, who was neither little, Egyptian, nor a very good dancer, made a memorable impression, shocking staid Americans by her performance at the Midway Plaisance (AlZayer 12-16; Wilson 14-16). These rather tawdry beginnings resonated with Orientalist fantasy images of harem dancing girls and the strip tease implications of the legend of the "Dance of the Seven Veils," and hover over the dance today.

7 In spite of these responses from Western society, belly dance has had a long and more conventional history in the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey. Many people believe the term belly dance is actually a corruption of the Arabic word *beledi*, which means *my country* in Arabic, and which refers to the folkloric section of the dance (AlZayer 70). There are numerous other names for the dance, which the Egyptians call *raks sharki*, in the countries

where it is traditionally performed. In these countries, it is commonly featured as part of the festivities for important occasions, like birthdays and weddings. Cabaret dancing developed the 1920's in Middle Eastern nightclubs, evolving as an embellishment and glamorization of various folk genres. In time, many Hollywood-style musicals were created by Egypt's film industry, with belly dancers as movie stars, and composers writing the songs and music for the films (AlZayer 76-81; Luscher 18-23). We can see a direct link between these glamorized dancers and today's belly dance scene. Our costumes are modeled after those seen in the films, and much of the music created from that time until the 1950s can still be heard in today's dance performances.

Personal Training

8 My own experience of belly dance is as both a solo and group performer in either improvised or choreographed dances, performing at cabaret/restaurant settings, parties, various kinds of celebrations, and in small theaters. These performances have ranged from classical Middle Eastern style, modern, folkloric, funky, jazzy, and fusion. My teacher, Ibrahim Farrah "Bobby" shaped many of my attitudes to the dance. He motivated me to find ways to exploit the enormous possibilities of the dance, and with his colorful admonitions and biting criticisms, gave vociferous clues about how to be creative and innovative without annihilating the constraints of its Middle Eastern heritage and sensibilities. Besides Bobby, I was able to study and associate with many great teachers and performers, including Elena, Yousry Sharif, Anahid Sofian, Serena Wilson, and Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu), as well as various talented professionals who learned their craft from these instructors, such as Samara, Jehan Kemal, Jajouka, Pheadra, Rayhana, and Amar. I also took workshops with Egyptian stars such as Mamound Reda, Raquia Hassan, and Nadia Hamdi, who came to New York to share their knowledge. I have also had the opportunity to interact with artists from previous generations, such as Jemela Omar and Sabah Nissan, who frequently attend our performances, offering their impressions and opinions.

Theories of Gender and Belly Dance

9 Every belly dancer has her own reason for choosing this form of dance, but for many the possibility for sexual expressiveness may be one of the key attractions. I have studied and worked professionally in several different forms of dance (modern, ballet, jazz, ballroom), and none of these dances come nearly as close to the issues of gender, power, femininity, and sexuality as belly dance. Theories of gender may give some insight into the strong draw this

dance has for certain women in the Western world. Estelle Freedmen defines gender in terms of context, as the social meanings of male and female in a given culture, as well as the rules and practices that define gender behavior (*Feminism* 6). Freedman also places the discussion of gender in a framework of dualism, originally derived from Greek philosophy, in which males are associated with rational thought and women with emotional, irrational behavior (44). Another conceptualization views gender from the perspective of either essentialism or social constructivism. Essentialism assumes that certain human attributes are natural, universal, and biologically determined (Irvine in DeLamater 2), entailing a biological basis for sexual behavior. Social constructionists, on the other hand, look at gender from an external rather than internal perspective, as being created and re-created from social interactions and culture (DeLamater 16; Freedman *No Turning* 5). Belly dance flirts with all of these conceptions of gender relations. The image and the experience of the dancer can be interpreted as representing the dancer, not as a person, but instead as an idealization of a woman functioning to please male fantasies and egos, a concept inherited from a patriarchal society. It can also be interpreted in the context of gender dualism, an illustration of non-rational (emotional rather than cerebral) expressiveness via the medium of a woman's body. And from the essentialist perspective, the erotic ambiance of the dance can be understood as derived from supposedly biologically determined female behaviors.

10 These negative gender associations resonate within the belly dance world, provoking various reactions. Many times I have been asked how I, as a feminist with a doctorate and an academic position, can justify being a belly dancer. Other dancers describe how partners, husbands, and family members have tried to discourage them from entering the field. As a result of these attitudes, some women choose to use the dance exclusively as an exercise outlet rather than confronting these issues by performing in public. However, many women who work as belly dancers perceive a rather different sense of the relationship of this dance to gender. It is true that the dance embodies many stereotyped female attributes and can be superficially understood within a patriarchal, dualistic, essentialist gender framework. In reality, however, the creativity and artistry of the solo performer are able to transpose the power relationships implied by these categories. As a result, in creating a dance, the dancer uses these "female" "non-rationalistic" elements for her own purposes, choosing how they will be integrated into her concept of the dance so that it is she, rather than the audience or some patriarchal ideal, who ultimately determines her role as a woman and an artist. If there is an essential female, it is the dancer who uses her creative intelligence to get in touch with that part of herself and to use it to transmit the joy and erotic power of her sense of womanhood.

In this context, the dancer is constructing her own concept of femaleness through her own concept of artistry.

Choosing Belly Dance

11 In my experience, belly dancers do not necessarily avoid these uncomfortable gender associations. In fact, it is the closeness to these issues that attracts many women to the dance, inspiring some of their most authentic artistry. Certain women are drawn to the dance because it offers an opportunity to fully express their sexuality in a way that is not otherwise possible. According to Buck, women do this dance because they "may feel stripped of their femininity" (63). Osweiler suggests that they may perceive "a gender imbalance in their lives" and are attracted to its female expressiveness (*Contemporary* 1). Halimeda explains "[The dance required a] confidence level in your own femininity that was certainly lacking in the rest of my life…Here was something that was feminine and strong." (1) Anaheed says, "The image that I started with was, just my personal image, a powerful feminine, woman in touch with her body." (1) Anahid of New York writes similarly, "The Middle Eastern dancers have such an enjoyment of their body and being female. They project femininity and a sexuality that is not a come-on thing. " (3) In choosing the dance, I also found that the expressive sexuality of the dance was one of the aspects that was very important to me.

12 This attraction to belly dance suggests that certain women are aware of having a powerful sexuality that is not able to be fully expressed in the other lives they choose to live. In some cases, belly dance can be a safe arena for the expression of this sexuality. Historically, many cultures have considered a woman's sexual power to be threatening (Freeman *Feminism* 44), and a few belly dancers have also articulated a wariness about their own sexuality. A good friend of mine used to call the dance "safe sex." Another dancer, in sharing her history of sexual abuse, explained that she "grew up with this underlying fear that my sexuality was somehow poisonous. Dance, in general, was a path for me to try to redeem myself as a feminine and loving being." Amar, also points to belly dance as providing "a vehicle for that expression. I used to joke that belly dancing kept me from being promiscuous." (email interview) In spite of the apparent freedom for modern middle-class women to construct their own selves, there are aspects of their sexuality that do not really have a suitable outlet. Women can be sexy, yes, but not too sexy. They can enjoy sex, but must not appear too promiscuous. They can have good sexual relationships with their chosen lovers, but might have to tone down the depth of their needs and responses to avoid overwhelming or intimidating their partner. There are powerful social forces that consistently

try to define and limit women's sexuality. Art, however, can break boundaries, allowing us to create alternate narratives. The passion for belly dance is partially explained by its erotic nature, providing a relatively safe opportunity to explore and unleash a deeper and more authentic aspect of female sexuality.

13 Feminism has struggled to empower individuals to create their own identities, and to free them from definitions imposed upon them from society (Freedman *No Turning* 5-7). Since feminism entails expressing one's womanliness in the way one chooses to express it, there is a subtle political feminism in using the agency of one's body and artistry to be sexual and erotic. However, there is safety here also. This is a performance and not real life, and so the risks are of a different nature. Moreover, this is first and foremost an artistic venture, not a personal exercise in exploring one's sexuality. The demands of artistry are paramount, and the dancer's major focus is directed towards integrating many complex performance variables. Nonetheless, in the performance environment, the artistry validates the performer and the eroticism becomes part of this validation.

14 From my perspective, I would describe the relationship of belly dance to concepts of gender as an amalgamation of social constructivism and gender essentialism. The dancer chooses to dance, and also chooses the movements and how they will be performed. Because she is controlling the choreography and performance, she is very much in control of creating (constructing) her expression of gender. However, in my experience, constructivism is not the whole story. As an artist, creativity comes from delving deep into oneself, and so there is also the sense of discovering and communicating one's essential sexual attributes. The performance presents the dancer with a unique opportunity to access an essential sexual/erotic center that is relatively unavailable outside of this arena.

The Costume

15 I've often wondered what really makes belly dance so sensual. The moves are no more sexual than those seen in African or jazz dance, and the performers are much less aggressive. There are many factors which contribute to this effect, including the performer's attitude, the traditional connotations, and the expectations of the audience. However, the nature of the costume is surely a crucial component. The costume enhances the validity of the imaginative experience for the audience while assisting the performer in the transformation necessary to the embodiment of her artistic conception. From Goffman (20-21), costume can be seen as a special subset of dress which conveys an identity which differs from the usual identity of the wearer. When costumed, an individual has the liberty to express different aspects of herself,

or even an alternate identity, without obliterating other roles in her life (Miller 231). Gregory Stone explains that visual symbols such as uniforms or costumes also help others to corroborate the identity that a person may be appropriating (109). A performance requires an imaginative collaboration between the artist and the audience, and for belly dance the costume is a vital feature of that collaboration.

16 Historically, the costume is a response to what 19th century English male audiences would find sexually appealing. Egyptian dancers at that time actually wore something quite different--pantaloons covered by a long sleeved gown. But in response to the British protectorate in Egypt, dancers modified this performance attire and adapted the style of the *nautchnee* dancers of Northern India who wore a divided dress with bare torso and a wide skirt. This outfit was later glamorized by the Egyptian film industry, which took its inspiration from Hollywood and American nightclubs (Stewart 102-103).

17 This costume, which is designed to accentuate the movements of the hips and the isolations between the upper and lower torso, usually reads “sexy.” Certainly women cover their bodies less at the beach, and costuming for other popular performance forms can be more blatantly sexual. But there is something very special and specifically sexual about the style of the costume and its elaborate ornamentation. I will admit that when I first encountered dancers in the costume, I was a little uncomfortable. After many years as a modern dancer, performing in leotards and tights with minimal makeup, all this attention to costume seemed foreign and a bit “unfeminist.” Moreover, even dancers with very full breasts generally add padding to their bras to achieve the traditional hourglass line. Amar relates a similar first impression, before becoming accustomed to this new norm of presentation. “At first I thought the dancers I saw looked cheap and "whore-ish." Andrea, in a panel on feminism, describing herself as a tomboy, also recounts initial problems with the belly dance presentation (Gilded *Feminism* 2). A few years ago, my own mother was induced to cover of a photo of me in costume after the husband of one of her friends described it as scandalous.

18 However, seasoned belly dancers generally accept and embrace the costume. In fact, they dedicate a great deal of time, thought, and money to creating a costume that will enhance their body and contribute to their unique expressiveness as an artist. Costumes are imported from Egypt or Turkey at considerable expense, or dancers make their own pilgrimages to the renowned costume designers in these countries. There are also talented designers and costumers in the United States, and some dancers create and craft their own. By whatever means the costume is acquired, however, it demands a considerable amount of money and effort. A dancer rarely finds a costume ready for her body; hooks and bra-lines inevitably

need special attention and adjustments. Many performers will also add their own embellishments which can include beading, sequins, antique coins, jewels, sparkles with mirrors, and materials such as silk, chiffon, velvet, lame, etc.

19 There are also the silk veils to match, decisions about skirts, and the addition of other accoutrements such as wings, swords, trays with candles, candelabras, fans, etc. These costumes can be quite heavy and are not easy to lug from show to show. In a suitcase, they can easily result in an overweight charge on a plane trip. At times the costumes can be uncomfortable, difficult to put on, requiring multiple safety pins and hooks to keep all of the pieces functioning properly. Many a dancer has been seen peeking out before a show to commandeer a woman from the audience to assist with a stubborn clasp. We sometimes joke that we spend more time costuming and making-up than we do in front of the audience.

20 Iris J. Stewart describes the costumes as "symbolic and glorious" (101), and they serve to link us to the historic and cultural roots of the dance. They become part of the magic that enables us to tap into our "essential" sexuality, transforming traditional dance imagery for modern audiences. They are also expressions of our individuality in performance and extensions of ourselves as belly dancers. I remember listening in horror as a dancer related that her ex-lover had cut up and destroyed her costumes. We all perceived her experience as a violent assault and a brutal attack on her sexuality. One of our identities is that of the erotic sexual belly dancer, and the costume supports and enhances that identity.

21 Audiences respond to our costume. They may not always "get" the dance, but they surely get the costume. In one of my most memorable experiences as a belly dancer, I was asked to do a dance at the funeral of a close friend. When I discussed it with her partner, I specifically inquired about the costume. Many priests were to be in attendance and I was worried about making the "wrong" statement. But what she had requested was the full costume and the full sense of the dance, which she had considered the embodiment of a positive sexuality and life force. I was, or course, extraordinarily honored to be able to do this for her.

22 The fantasy created by the costume is attractive to the audience, but also helps transport the dancer from her modern conflicts about body image to a world where she is beautiful, glamorous, and in control of how she is perceived. We are all bombarded by unattainable commercial images of homogenized female bodies, where beauty is translated into a woman who has voluptuous breasts but is thin everywhere else, glamorous, has perfect skin and hair, and is toned and youthful. Although belly dancers who are really overweight or look old are rarely able to perform in certain venues, the dance definitely casts a wider beauty

net than some other dance forms. One dancer talks about a mild body deformity that always made her feel "weird looking," and how critical lovers caused her to consider herself "sub-par as a feminine being." She relates that dance became a way for her to express her "inner self," explaining that she doesn't feel quite like "me" without movement and dance (confidential interview). Her words are very meaningful to me as a dancer. I understand that "me," as the part of myself that is beautiful and sexual and is not diminished by commercial or patriarchal images of the perfect body. In the non-dance world, I am rather small and tom-boyish. However when I wear a costume and am inspired by the music and audience, I suddenly feel enormous, powerful, and totally sexy.

Cabaret Environment

23 Belly dance developed in a cabaret atmosphere. In the last decade, however, we have seen many changes due to economic constraints and demographic shifts. Nowadays, we rarely see a large orchestra, and most dancers perform with a keyboard player and tabla, or to a CD (or ipod). The audience is also different, as it is not nearly as ethnic and is less familiar with the conventions of the dance (Costanza DJ 6). In fact, Contanza is highly pessimistic about the future of Middle Eastern cabaret, "Vaudeville is gone forever, and so is the Middle Eastern cabaret in NY" (5). Nonetheless, these cabaret roots remain in the dance form and impact how it is created and performed. Belly dance may be presented in living rooms, small gatherings, clubs, and restaurants without stages, and the style is particularly suited to a small venue. In restaurant settings, the dancer will move among the tables. In the rare cases where there is a formal stage, she may come off the stage and dance in the audience space. Generally, she is in close contact with the audience, making eye contact, choosing people to join her in parts of the dance, or wrapping her veil around one of the guests.

24 The dance has a special informality that must be carefully orchestrated by the performer. Audiences can be drawn into the show, but must not take over the performance. Intimacy is fine, but the dancer needs to control people who may be unfamiliar with the conventions of Middle Eastern performer/audience interaction or just disrespectful. Occasionally someone may touch the dancer aggressively or interfere with the flow of the performance. Dancers have all sorts of tricks to maintain distance in an atmosphere of intimacy, modifying eye contact, using humor, and smiling with complicity at other audience members to ostracize anyone who is acting tastelessly. Sometimes an annoying person (usually a male) will be given a public "dance lesson" and hopefully returned to his place, chastened and quiet. The tricks usually work, though not always.

25 At times, the intimacy of the cabaret venue may invite stereotyping and disrespect and it takes a strong dancer to go beyond these events and not to absorb them as part of the definition of who she is. Tipping, for example, is a topic of heavy discussion among dancers. Tips can be thrown over the dancers head, collected in a basket or a plate, or placed in the costume. Traditionally, they are a sign of appreciation, indicating that the tipper knows the culture and understands the rules. A well-informed audience member would consider it an insult if a talented dancer were not showered with money at some point in her show. Tips can also be an important source of income for the dancer. The musicians will also be tipped (throwing over the head), and in a live show, all tips are generally split with the musicians according to some formula determined by the establishment. However, for people unfamiliar with Middle Eastern culture, tipping may imply that the performer is somehow beneath the level of the tipper. Tippers have been known to try to put their hands in a dancer's bra, lick bills and plaster them onto the dancer's body, or to place money in her mouth. I once went to a gig where the dancer was told that she could keep any money that remained on her body, but bills that fell to the floor belonged to the house. However, unless the dancer has chosen to perform in a sleazy situation, tipping is generally under control. In an email interview, Amar explains:

> I feel about tipping the way I feel about being called a "belly dancer." It does not concern me much. I know as a performer how to control when and where they tip and how to take them offstage if need be. It is never bad-intentioned, just sometimes ill informed, as to courtesy and protocol. It never interrupts what I am doing; just something extra to be aware of in a live performance, where anything can happen. I decide in the moment whether to allow money to be placed on me, depending on the nature of who it is and how it is approached. I never allow tips in my bra (except straps). Usually I lead the tipper to throw the money or place it in my hand; but it has never been that big a deal to me. [The] truth is, the customers are never the ones in control. The performer can always lead the way.

26 Working in the cabaret environment can also produce uncomfortable gender situations with employers, as the dancer negotiates the best way to survive economically while maximizing her commitment to her art. Although many performers earn a substantial amount of their income from teaching, good teaching jobs are linked to the dancer's reputation as a performer. Moreover, we are artists; we cannot thrive without the energy and stimulation of performing. A few employers really support the dance as art, but many are mainly interested in the bottom line. I have always been lucky in having another profession, which allowed me to choose and refuse gigs according to my goals as a dancer. But many professional dancers do not have a "day" job may not be able to choose when and where they dance. At times, they may have to work in places that they do not really like. Because the pay is generally not very

good, the dancer may need to gear her performance to those audience members who give good tips. Also, the competition can get rather ugly and some dancers may take less pay to cut another dancer out of a job. Sometimes a prettier, but less qualified, dancer may be hired over a better dancer who is more mature. Owners may hire the cheapest rather than the most talented dancer, and it is not unknown for a dancer who has worked regularly in an establishment to suddenly be bumped by someone less expensive.

27 These cabaret problems are not exclusive to belly dance and many musicians who play bars and clubs complain of the same economic conflicts. However, because we are women dancing alone, costumed and performing in an erotic ambience, these situations contain negative gender overtones. Owners have been known to proposition dancers, and hire those who appear most willing to indulge their advances. Sometimes dancers are pressured to socialize with the customers. Agela, in Atlanta, says she has only worked in two restaurants where owners treated her with great respect (Osweiler *Contempory* 4). Although the cabaret atmosphere tends to generate many of the uncomfortable gender situations, dancers find ways to deal with this, consistently how this venue contributes to the spirit and effectiveness of the dance. Ayshe loved those places where she could create her own erotic visions, using fusion music to enhance her concept; Amar reminds us of the vibrant subculture of Arabic night clubs with live music. Amara relates the excitement of creating dances in different spaces and settings, and of the dynamic relationship between music, dancer, and audience, where so much can happen in the moment (Osweiler *Loving* 2). I have had varied experiences, but was lucky to work regularly with one owner who treated me like part of his family. The two years I danced in that restaurant were some of the best performing experiences I have had. There are also a few restaurants in New York who are very supportive of the dancers, and, consequently, at this point almost all the belly dance happens in those places.

28 Belly dance often takes place in an outrageously unglamorous environment. New York restaurants are small and the space can be very constricted. At times the dancer is practically in the lap of the audience members. Silk veils may skim a cup of coffee or may get stained with spaghetti sauce. And it is almost unheard of to have a clean dressing room with a light and a mirror. Frequently dancers have to change in a wine cellar basement with cats, mice, or other crawling creatures, or, more often, in the bathroom. I cannot count the times I have locked myself in the only available ladies room, with impatient customers banging on the door, and struggled in the tiny booth to get my costume hooked and fastened before my show. We all laugh over the story of the dancer who made a grand entrance with a long piece of toilet paper stuck to her foot. Really, it is amazing that we take our gorgeous expensive

costumes into those toilet stalls, remove our shoes, and emerge into the lights and music to create something important and beautiful.

Sisterhood

29 Another negative that places the dancer head to head with gender issues is the concept of sisterhood in the dance, or the lack of it. Andrea explains that it is a myth to assume belly dance to be a supportive group for women (Serpent *Feminism* 1). It is really hard to make a living at this dance at this time; it is very different from the 70s 80s where a small professional group of dancers worked regularly in clubs with a knowledgeable and appreciative audience (Constanza *DJ* 5). Sometimes it is difficult just to find a place to perform, any place. Sisterhood and solidarity can fall apart in this kind of competitive situation. Amar explains that because the dance is a solo art, it lends itself to egos and narcissism. Younger and more attractive dancers may enter the field for the bling, glitter, sex, and attention, and they may take jobs from the more mature practitioners. In fact, what she likes least about the profession is "the cattiness, competition, and shallow artistic values within the dance scene. It is not generally an embracing dance community."

30 Nevertheless, there is also sisterhood. I have had dance friends for years, and I know dancers who regularly perform together, share family functions, and operate as best friends. A dancer rarely performs without at least one dancer friend in the audience to support her, helping out with the costume, cuing the musician or dj, deflecting rowdy audience members. And our mutual experiences create a special bond. We love to compete for the worst or craziest performing story: The toilet paper trailing on the floor, padding slipping out of a bra, a skirt falling down, bras becoming unhooked, the old man who had a bathroom emergency just when the dancer was putting on her costume, the occasional fights in the audience, miscommunications with musicians, slipping on food. Only dancers who have tried to create art in this environment can really appreciate the humor and poignancy of these situations.

Standards

31 Perhaps as a result of the negatives of the club atmosphere, or perhaps because of the possibility of confusing the dance with less "respectable" dance forms like stripping or go-go dancing, there are great efforts within the community to maintain "standards." Some of these are motivated by a genuine effort to protect an art form which is loved and revered. But they may also stem from our awareness of the uncomfortable association with gender/power issues. Examples of exploitation by male restaurant owners, disrespectful treatment by male

audience members, exhibitionistic sexual behavior by poorly trained dancers, women who take money from men, or dancers who give sexual favors to further their careers bring us too close to the prostitute, harem girl image. These situations are exactly the opposite of the affirmative power of our erotic artistry, and most belly dancers are disgusted by them.

32 Dancers are also motivated to assure that the public appreciates the dance as a "real" artistic dance form. We study for years to perfect our technique and we also invest a lot of money. Aside from our regular lessons and our expensive costumes, we attend workshops with major teachers and many dancers travel to Egypt to study with the icons there. We also buy videos made by dancers here and in the Middle East, and pay to see our friends and teachers dance. Because some of the dance vocabulary --the hip and torso movements, pelvic thrusts, and shoulder shimmers which cause breasts to shake-- can be quite sexual, we are very conscious of our posture, line, and body placement so that movements do not look vulgar. Also, the arms and hands, which are very characteristic of the traditional roots of the dance, are perfected to correctly embellish our movements. Bobby, my teacher, insisted that everyone in his company take ballet class to acquire correct dance alignment. He tried to use his influence to maintain standards in the clubs, complaining about what he termed "three-year career girls." He was referring to a stream of poorly trained dancers who were hired for their looks. When the novelty wore off, they would disappear, only to be replaced by a new and younger three year career girl. He would also rant about the "living room dancers," who were dancing in their own fantasy world, but who lacked polish and technique and did not belong in the public sphere.

33 Many belly dancers are highly proprietary about standards .We are very careful about our nightclub behavior. Before and after performing, dancers will conceal their costume with a "cover up" garment. Most try to keep their distance from the restaurant owners and avoid sitting with customers who are not close personal friends. It is a definite no-no, and pretty stupid, to arrange a personal interview with a restaurant owner in a private area. Most dancers hate bachelor parties, and many refuse to do them. Anne Thomas Soffee, in her delightful book, *Shake Hips: Belly Dancing and How I Found True Love*, talks about the "belly dance police" and their special rules: Do not touch your body while dancing, keep legs closed when doing stationary movements, avoid certain moves when close to audience members, etc. My friend, colleague, and sometime mentor Rayhana, is an extraordinarily sensual dancer. But she has her rules, and dancers who work with her are politely informed of them. Bra straps must be tight—no sagging breasts--no leg showing, arms covered, floor work should be done with taste. After she completes a move that might be interpreted as aggressively sexual, she

will counter it with her friendly conspiratorial smile, aimed directly at an audience member. The message is always the same: This is a dance which is essentially sensual and erotic. However, it is also art and we are the artists.

Artistry and Power

34 Given the various belly dance negatives --economic hassles, complex social issues, proximity to uncomfortable stereotypes-- there must be a compelling reason for women to embrace this dance. Belly dancers remain committed because they are artists and are inspired by the artistic potentiality of the medium. For them, the artistry supersedes the other concerns about gender, exploitation, or economics, and experienced performers will direct their energy and concentration away from the negatives and into the goal of artistic expression. When creating art, the entity of the dance can replace the entity of the individual, and complex social issues can be subsumed into the process of art and the goals of artistry. Dancers will connect with the music, experiencing a kind of high, in-the-moment communion that feels quasi spiritual, with best performances happening "when music is dance and dance is music" (Elena). Elena, a venerated performer, relates that she deals with the economic/social/gender concerns by focusing exclusively on the dance, "taking the dance seriously not myself has been the answer to most everything." Amar explains that it is the artist and not the audience or the venue that determines the effectiveness of the artistry, "I do know that if I am sincere and embrace the audience - bringing them into my dance "space" -- they will come, if I am real and if I am good."

35 The gender issues in belly dance are intrinsically related to the power and artistry of the expression. Some dancers avoid these issues by viewing the dance as a spiritual expression, as in Iris Stewart's *Sacred Woman Sacred Dance*, or a manifestation of an archetypal goddess essence, such as Jehan Kemal portrays in her Goddessdance. However, in the end, what makes it all work is the honesty, clarity and artistry of the performer. When all of the artistic components come together, this dance manifests its own special power, emanating from the artist, who creates and shapes the dance, fusing her personal vision with the music. I have observed that certain groups, generally considered as lacking in power (children, gays, seniors) are particularly attracted to this art. Of course, part of the effect is the dazzling beauty of the costume, music, and movement. However, there may be more that. Perhaps they are able to recognize a compelling truth, and are able to identify with a woman using images that were historically associated with oppression to express a uniquely personal and womanly power.

Artistry and Gender

36 This dance is deeply enmeshed in historic and modern gender conflicts. Because of political ideology, some may choose reject it in its entirety, believing that traditional concepts of femaleness and eroticism must necessarily be a validation of a patriarchal image of women. From this perspective, it would be difficult not to associate the erotic side of belly dance with oppression. However, we may also choose another way to think about these issues. Is it really necessary to reject all visions of female sexuality as a consequence of their historic origins? Or, on the other hand, is it not possible for art and human expressivity point to another way for women, by appropriating some of the images that have long been associated with patriarchal values and suppression? With this kind of transformation, concepts of femaleness that were developed to remove power from women, can actually become our own concepts, our own womanhood, and our special power. For many years, archetypal images of female sexuality were stolen from women and were instead defined and controlled by a patriarchal culture. But, with the freedom of women to construct their own gender, and the power of an expressive erotic artistry, we as dancers can reclaim some of these images and make them our own. With our own bodies and our own psyches, we can distill the truth and the beauty from the historic images of exploitation. It is then possible, as Wolff states, "to simultaneously affirm these identities while questioning their origins and ideological functions, thus working towards a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body." (97)

37 In my experience as a dancer, an important part of the spirit of the dance lies in the nexus of those complex gender issues. The power of the art comes from its truth, and a significant element of the truth of a female is the truth of her sexuality. If this art is honest, it could never be exclusively a male's vision of a woman. Agnes DeMille "No dancing lies; no body lies" (In Stewart 5). The dance is much more than a re-creation of traditional movements and patriarchal values. It rings true in the modern world because it confronts serious cultural tensions and conflicts about women's sensuality. The challenges of intimacy and distance imposed by a cabaret culture, the struggles to present art in a complicated economic situation, the sensual nuances of the movement, and the ornate sexuality of the costume all contribute to the creation of a very individual and modern expression of gender and eroticism. If we are to move beyond patriarchal stereotypes, we have to figure out how to create our own concepts of gender and sexuality. This is an awesome challenge and this art gives us an awesome opportunity. In belly dance, a woman uses the medium of a traditional genre to express her own sense of eroticism and artistry. And through this artistry, each woman creates and communicates her own authentic vision of gender and sexuality.

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