

8

ON A HUMAN LEVEL I AM LOOKING TO DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH A GROUP THAT ALLOWS HIGH QUALITY COMMUNICATION TO DEVELOP, BOTH VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL.

- > shifting, waiting, listening, sensing, playing. When I work with groups I am aiming for them to:
- Become more aware - in relation to themselves, others and the wider world. Working to recognise the choices and possibilities that are available in the body at any time. Through this increased awareness of possibilities and choices that people can explore the 'grey areas' between black and white, appreciating their own and other's choices and therefore recognise and celebrate difference
 - Feel empowered - creating an environment where people feel safe to become active members in the group. That participants have a sense of belonging, feel comfortable and empowered to express their own ideas and opinions
 - Discover a playfulness that nurtures curiosity, allowing exploration and discovery to take place with ease.
- The physical dance work we do together then begins to develop a better sense of knowing ourselves, who we are and who we are in relation to others. This knowledge can become a source of confidence and celebration of our individuality. How rich and vital dancing and moving start to become as part of our development as human beings!
- So 20 years ago I was satisfied if

RUTH SPENCER AND YOUNG CHILDREN, LIGHT HEARTED LEAPS PHOTOGRAPHER: CHESTER CITY COUNCIL PHOTOGRAPHER



participants went home happy and hopefully came back the week after. But what am I looking for now? What are my markers for success?

On a human level I am looking to develop a relationship with a group that allows high quality communication to develop, both verbal and non-verbal. I'm looking for a confidence and ease of communication - it may be through eye contact, participants asking questions, expressing opinions, contributing ideas, the clarity of a physical instruction from a participant, a participant taking a risk/trying something new etc. I look out for these responses throughout a session and if they are not happening, I shift the work accordingly. The work cannot successfully develop forwards if this relationship is not in place - it may be that the group need me to slow down, speed up, find out more about them, ask questions, listen, give more/less structure...

I'm also looking for participants being 'in their bodies' during the session. This happens for me when the balance of attention within the body shifts from the external stimulus we are bombarded with to the internal sensations and rhythms of the body. With some groups, such as young children, I am looking for 'pockets' of this awareness. In others I look for longer periods of working with this different focus.

And last but not least I hope to sense an atmosphere of playfulness within the space. I'm looking out for people being comfortable and engaged with ease in exploring movement, moments when people try new things out and take risks; times when people consolidate movement within the body and through repetition make new discoveries. I am working to a point in a task or exploration where any guidelines that were given to set the exercise off become discarded by the participants as the movement work they are creating starts to drive itself.

I'm striving for the place where participants are empowered to make their own decisions, their own dances, their own art. And 20 years on... I hope participants are still going home happy but with a greater sense of learning and understanding about themselves and dance not just regurgitated steps.

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PARTICIPATION RAQS!

Desna Mackenzie, Bellydance performer and instructor

Since becoming involved with bellydance over ten years ago I have given much thought to what participating in it means. For the purposes of this article I'm going to consider participation in bellydance as a student. But before I start, here's a little background information.

'Bellydance' ⁽¹⁾ refers to a group of dances from the Middle East/Eastern Mediterranean. Bellydance varies in its presentation and styling in different countries, but is characterised by isolated movements of the hips and upper torso and undulating movements of the abdominal area, and is a visual representation of the music being danced



CLASS PARTICIPANTS IMPROVISING AT THE END OF CLASS. PHOTOGRAPHER: DESNA MCKENZIE

to. Popular forms of the dance are participated in at a variety of social occasions, and a professionalised form has evolved, with distinct styles emerging in Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and the USA.

The complex history of the Middle East has led to the formation of stereotypes about the area and its inhabitants that contribute to a form of racism called 'Orientalism' (2). Many stereotypes are projected onto bellydancers (e.g., harems and sultans, sacred prostitution), and participants in bellydance will come up against these sooner or later...some of them are even attracted to the dance in the first place because of them. As a Western teacher of bellydance there is a need to recognise that you are an outsider to the cultures in question, and to try and present information to students without falling into the traps of Orientalism.

So, hopefully you have a bit of an understanding of the context for bellydance... back to participation. I firmly believe that everyone should have the opportunity to dance, and participation in bellydance offers this. For me, dance is a way to overcome the mind/body split, to work out who we are and what the world means to us, and have fun!

A crucial area of participation is as an audience-member, particularly as it is often after seeing bellydance that people decide to come to classes. Dance can so often be seen as a rarefied thing that happens at a distance on a theatre stage, but bellydance in this country is most commonly performed in restaurants, up close. When dancing in restaurants I invite men, women and children to join in. After the initial shyness has been overcome, people really respond to this, and on rare and wonderful occasions it has been known for almost an entire restaurant to be on its feet, customers and waiting staff. Moments like these are a real joy!

Participation via learning is slightly different - for starters I don't have to stand on the street and persuade people into the class! Many people who come to my classes feel that other dance styles are not for them because they are not stick thin or they feel that they are the 'wrong' side of fifty, or their fitness levels aren't sufficient for more vigorous dance forms. This shows the gap between how they perceive 'real dancers' and how they perceive themselves, but also bellydance has a reputation for having a welcoming attitude to people of all ages, body types >



10

> and fitness levels.

People often characterise bellydance as being about sex, and some people do come to classes hoping to learn to be sexy. Bellydance is no more sexual than any other dance, in that it allows participants to engage with the sensuality of the moving body. However, many movements require dancers to focus on the breast/chest, abdomen, hips and bum. These are all parts of the body that have been sexualised in our society, and to which very deep taboos about the way we move them are attached, especially amongst older participants. Bellydance offers people a way to change their relationship with their bodies and become more accepting - it's OK to shake that ass!

A key element of bellydance is improvisation, which is a challenge to people who want a 'set of instructions' to follow. Learning to improvise enables people to find and express their own creativity, and this can be massively empowering. A couple of years ago I was invited to teach a class at a local secondary school as part of an International Day. Pupils took part in various arts activities from around the world, and at the end of the day shared their work in an assembly. From the bellydance workshop two boys and a girl volunteered to share, and improvised a dance to the music we'd used in the class. Towards the end of the dance one of the boys did some amazing hip movements to whoops and cheers from the audience. Later, one of the teachers told me that this boy had been picked on in the past, and that the acceptance of his performance by his peers would improve his kudos.

For me, successful participation in bellydance happens if someone watches and enjoys a performance, or gets up to dance in a restaurant with a bellydancer, or turns up to a class and has a go just once. Beyond this, successful participation is when students show curiosity about the dance beyond what I can provide in a class situation. They might tell me they've been on holiday to Turkey or Egypt and seen a bellydancer, and recognised the movements. Others will show an interest in participating in the global bellydance community, through haflas⁽³⁾ and festivals, joining bellydance organisations, or through participating in internet forums. And, just occasionally, I'll bump into students or ex-students at a nightclub and they are using their bellydance moves



CLASS PARTICIPANTS IMPROVISING AT THE END OF CLASS. PHOTOGRAPHER: DESNA MCKENZIE

on the dancefloor.

For the future I would like to see two groups of people given the opportunity to participate more in bellydance. There is an apparent absence of disabled people, and I'm only aware of a few teachers who have actually engaged with disabled dancers. And bellydance still excludes men, due to the widely-held belief that bellydance is for women only. However, this belief is not true, and doesn't reflect participation in either the social or performance versions of the dance historically⁽⁴⁾ and currently. I want everyone to know that participation raqs!

Desna Mackenzie is based in Lancaster, see www.desna-dances.co.uk for more information.

REFERENCES

- (1) Names for the dance vary between different countries - in Arabic for it is called 'Raqsh Sharqi'. In Turkish it's called 'Oryantal Dans' (both translate as 'Eastern Dance'), and in Greek 'Tsifteteli' (from a Turkish term meaning 'double stringed'). There is an ongoing debate amongst practitioners of this dance as to whether it should be referred to as bellydance, or other anglicised terms such as 'Oriental Dance', or whether one of the original names should be used
- (2) Orientalism, Edward Said, Penguin Modern Classics, 2003
- (3) 'Hafla' is Arabic for 'party'. It is usually used by Western bellydancers to describe a more or less formal event where performances (often by students) and socialising happen
- (4) For more information on male involvement in bellydance historically see "It's not just for women - men in Oriental Dance" by Tarik abd el Malik in *The Bellydance Book*, ed. Tazz Richards, Backbeat Press, 2000 and *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance* by Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004.