

A DANCE FOR ALL REASONS

What prompted this article was a comment made to me at one of my student recitals: “God bless you for letting them use whatever music they want.” It set me to thinking about the students I have had all through the years, and my teaching experiences.

Students come to me for many reasons: For recreation, for exercise, for self-improvement and self-discovery, because of an actual desire to learn and to ultimately perform, and sometimes for no more than to satisfy a whim or to accompany a girlfriend.

Belly dancing gives a woman the opportunity to move and socialize in new and different ways. It allows her to move in sensual ways, feeling her body during undulations and slow chifti-telli work. It allows her to move in controlled ways, such as when she has mastery over difficult hip combinations, or arm-hip coordinated movements. It allows her to learn to dance with abandon especially if she has worked hard to learn each step and combination, and has practiced until they are placed into muscle memory. A new-found interest in belly dancing opens up all sorts of new socializing opportunities too – from spending the day at the Magic Carpet Bazaar to spending an evening at the Athenian Corner to watch dancers and enjoy Greek food. Many students, especially those married ladies with young children, are giddy with delight as they announce it’s the first time in years they are out of the house without the kids – or the husband! They discover once again the richness of girlfriends.

My students are offered recital opportunities regardless of skill level. After having spent years going to violin recitals, I understand the need to offer students an opportunity to work toward a goal and to show off polished, although perhaps limited, skills. That’s why I have student *recitals*, not student shows. (Although advanced students are also in the recitals, student *shows* are held on separate occasions.) Even the students who joined only on a whim take such pride in showing family and friends what they have learned – and let’s not forget the dress-up factor. Students who wish to pursue this dance and perhaps become professional performers can use the recital not only to work toward a goal of polishing skills, but also to get a taste of performing in front of others.

In class we use Middle Eastern music exclusively, and I sell those CDs to encourage students to practice with this music. However, for the recitals I allow my students to use music that sings to their heart. They are going out on a limb to perform in front of people and I want them to be comfortable. For the student who wishes to pursue this dance to a professional level, it is strongly preferred and suggested that the choice of recital music be Middle Eastern. For the less advanced student, or especially for the student who is using belly dancing as a social or recreational outlet, more latitude is allowed. We have had wonderful performances to music that ranged from Baroque guitar to Mario Frangulis (pop) and from “Donna the Buffalo” to children’s songs. Of course some consider Shakira and Natasha Atlas on the line and can go either way!

Although study is, in itself, serious, and I expect full attention and discipline in my classes, I nonetheless value fun and humor above all else. I take tremendous pride in my students who have fun in a performance and share this joy, either through their choice of music, or, if more traditional music is chosen, through their movements and expressions. When there is laughter in the audience and a twinkle in the performer’s eye, I know that something – not common, has been achieved.

It is important as teachers and as “serious” students to understand that not everyone who takes belly dancing classes wants to be a professional dancer, or even has aspirations to be as good as a professional dancer even if that ultimate path is not chosen. Not everyone has the requisite passion to sink every dollar and every moment into the pursuit of finding perfect music or costumes, or lessons and practice time. Not everyone practices each week so that quick progress can be made with each class. Not everyone brings a notebook to class, or even cares to remember what the homework is. (However because there is a little bit of magpie in all of us, all students, of course, are eager to buy hip scarves and baubles!)

Because I approach this dance with such love and devotion it took years for me to also embrace the less serious student, and also to embrace the idea that working on one’s joy and fun is also important business, and that that particular path should also be respected and cultivated.

Therefore, the statement “God bless you for letting them use whatever music they want,” may have been intended as a covert insult, it came to my ears as a delightful

compliment. Whatever I can do to open a path to joy and fun and friendship is my pleasure. If that path can be paved with the joy of belly dancing, then it is also my pride.