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IN THE SPIRIT OF BELLYDANCE

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Dance Magazine

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or Breaks Relationships

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The Meeting Point
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Part II

Body Image

What's Bellydance got to do with it?

BY HILARY GIOVALE

IN THE LAST ISSUE OF SHIMMY, I WROTE ABOUT HOW MY BODY IMAGE RAPIDLY TRANSFORMED WHEN I STARTED LEARNING TO BELLYDANCE AND HOW THIS EXPERIENCE INSPIRED ME TO FIND OUT ABOUT ITS EFFECTS ON OTHER WOMEN. HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED NEXT:

I had been working on a master's degree for awhile. It was an interdisciplinary degree in sustainability, and with my newfound passion for bellydance and body image, I decided to research this topic for my thesis. It all began with reading...lots of reading. I read about sociological theory, qualitative research, feminist philosophy, the history of bellydance... and I began to see that women have been limited for a long time by the status quo – the pervasive idea that our bodies and minds are inferior to those of men. Over the last 100 years, this concept has been reinforced by the introduction of advertising and consumerism. And in the last several decades, more than any other time in history, we've been constantly exposed to images that tell us how we're supposed to look.

This could be OK if the images we saw were realistic. But they're not. You know what I'm talking about—we see these pictures every time we stand in the checkout line at the grocery store, or turn on the TV, or go to a movie. They're of young women, with a very specific type of beauty: almost always white, usually blonde, skinny, with small waists, large breasts, and long legs. Just about any product you can think of, from beer to toilet cleaner to mascara has used this stereotypical image of women to boost its image and sell more products.

The downside for us as women is that most of us grow up feeling badly about ourselves... comparing ourselves to this





How about you? How has bellydance changed your life, body image, or ideas about beauty? I would love to have readers' responses be a part of a future article! Email me at contact@bellyroles.com



standard, picking ourselves apart, "working" on ourselves by trying to change specific aspects of our bodies rather than focusing on overall emotional and physical health. For lots of women, the idealized images we see all the time add up to a feeling that the way we look is the only thing that really matters about us. And since 95% of us don't look like what we see in the magazines, we get depressed, judge ourselves and others, and even develop problems such as disordered eating.

But never fear, THIS is where the bellydance comes in. After reading all this sad stuff, I had even more motivation to see how bellydance might benefit women. I designed a study to work with undergraduate women (most were between 18-20 years old) at Northern Arizona University. The idea was to see how a 6-week Tribal bellydance course would influence their thoughts about women's bodies. When I put fliers up at the university, there was an overwhelming response. College students clearly wanted bellydance, so much that they'd volunteer for a research project to get it!

I put together two photo collages. One had typical images of models from mainstream media. The other contained images of Tribal Style bellydancers in costume. Because bellydance embraces all types of women, it was easy to find images of a variety of shapes, sizes and ages of dancers (although I was disappointed to see how hard it was to find images of bellydancers

of diverse racial backgrounds).

When the students all gathered on the first day of class, they looked at the collages and wrote their impressions. Then they took six weeks of bellydance classes (taught by my teacher at that time) that focused on isolations and beginning Tribal Style techniques. At the end, we pulled out the collages and they wrote their impressions again.

When I analyzed the first set of writings, I found the women's writing was judgmental. They judged the models as being too skinny, too bitchy, and of trying to be seductive or appeal only to men. They judged some of the bellydancers as being fat, old, and having big bellies. It was clear that they also felt some conflicting emotions. Even though they judged the models, they wanted what those models had: beauty, prestige, and above all, thinness. And even though they judged the bellydancers, they sensed the dancers had something powerful and elusive: self-confidence despite their "imperfect" bodies.

When I read their first impressions, I could relate. Part of what we all learn to do in this consumer culture is to judge: to look at ourselves and others with a critical eye. And most of the advertising out there encourages us to see ourselves and others as objects, instead of appreciating those qualities that make us real and human.

In the second set of writings what I found was inspiring. After learning bellydance for 6 weeks, the students had

shifted some of their judgments from personal critiques of the models to being more critical of the culture and advertising industry that create and promote a limited version of beauty. Many of them expressed increased self-acceptance and more confidence. One student wrote, "Bellydance has given me more confidence than losing any amount of weight on a diet could have. I'm proud of my curves and my entire body; I'm finally comfortable with being myself."

The most common thought that ran through the students' second writing was about how happy bellydancers look. To share a few of their thoughts with you:

"These ladies look happy and full of life... confident and strong."

"They all look so happy. There are all different body types and no one cares."

"These women look confident and they are glowing. These women are bold and happy. I admire them."

They had come a long way from judging the bellydancers as being fat and old!

When I completed my thesis after many months of writing (and bellydancing!) I realized how incredibly blessed I am to have stumbled upon this style of dance. Not only has it changed my life, it has given me the inspiration to work with other women and discover how it changes their lives. I am a firm believer that the more we can love ourselves and each other and find the common thread of divine beauty that connects us, the better our world will be!