

Moving the Midriff

Getting Physical and Spiritual
with Belly Dancing

By Gail Collins
Photos by Dana Felthouser

Before I walked through the door of my first belly dancing class, I wondered, would the women be wearing yoga pants like me or would they be splashed out in vivid costumes with jangling doo-dads? I discovered most of the dancers dressed the part — and they invited me to join in. Instructor Hilary Giovale pointed to a basket of accessories

where a ruby chiffon hip scarf fringed with clinking coins caught my eye. In an instant, I was ready to shimmy and swivel.

Giovale began the class with a moving meditation. “It’s a group centering exercise,” she said, “to help us focus and be mindful of our intentions.” They acknowledged the space with a lotus gesture — a symbol of the ongoing nature of life. Gratitude for music, teachers and ancestors followed with arms



Instructor Hilary Giovale.

pulling in for the final motion that gathered these elements. Belly dancing's vague history began more than 6,000 years ago, so invoking this sort of ancient attention seemed appropriate.

This exotic dance is featured in rituals, spiritual practices, childbirth preparation, physical education and, of course, entertainment. Its earthy, fluid, complex and sensual moves of the belly, hips and upper body are punctuated by shaking and gyrating. Such physical expressions have been found etched in Egyptian tombs and painted as Persian miniatures, making it the oldest of social dances.

Giovale teaches Tribal Belly Dance, a culled distillation from the myriad tribes of the Middle East and Northern Africa. "It's based in fusion and interpretation," she said. "It's a group-based form with improvisational leading and following — not cabaret, not authentic, but interpretive."

People often think of belly dancers as glamorous, choreographed soloists in

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floating, sequined fabric, reminiscent of 1930s Hollywood movies. When they see Tribal Dancers with their heavy, grounded look, they believe this to be the genuine representation. Tribal, however, is a contemporary version that melds the flavors of the many regions, cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

Giovale began belly dancing five years ago, after the birth of her first child. “I just fell in love with it at the first class,” she said. “The variety of ages, shapes and sizes all together with their bellies showing. It was kind of shocking, and really unique. I thought I’d never show my belly ... but this was so powerful. It changed my self-perception.” She was so inspired with transformation of body image through belly dancing, in fact, that it became her master thesis.

As the class worked on belly rolls — undulating their abdominals — Giovale

said, “Women have to learn to let it out. Women are taught to hold their stomachs in, but here, they get to push it out. They feel really safe. It’s funny, we focus on all the parts women try to minimize — hips, derriere, belly — and in this dance, we accentuate them. They are remarkably exposed.”

Initially, students learn basic steps. With progress, experience and comfort, they begin flowing from one movement to another. The group works together, taking turns as leader and followers in this “language of movement.”

Giovale said, “They have to learn to cooperate. It keeps the ego in check. It’s not about me, but what benefits the whole group. They share in creation.” This is tribal style. “By dancing and taking turns leading, they develop trust. It’s based on nonverbal communication. They get telepathy.”

The majority of students in Giovale’s class are in their 40s, 50s and even 60s,





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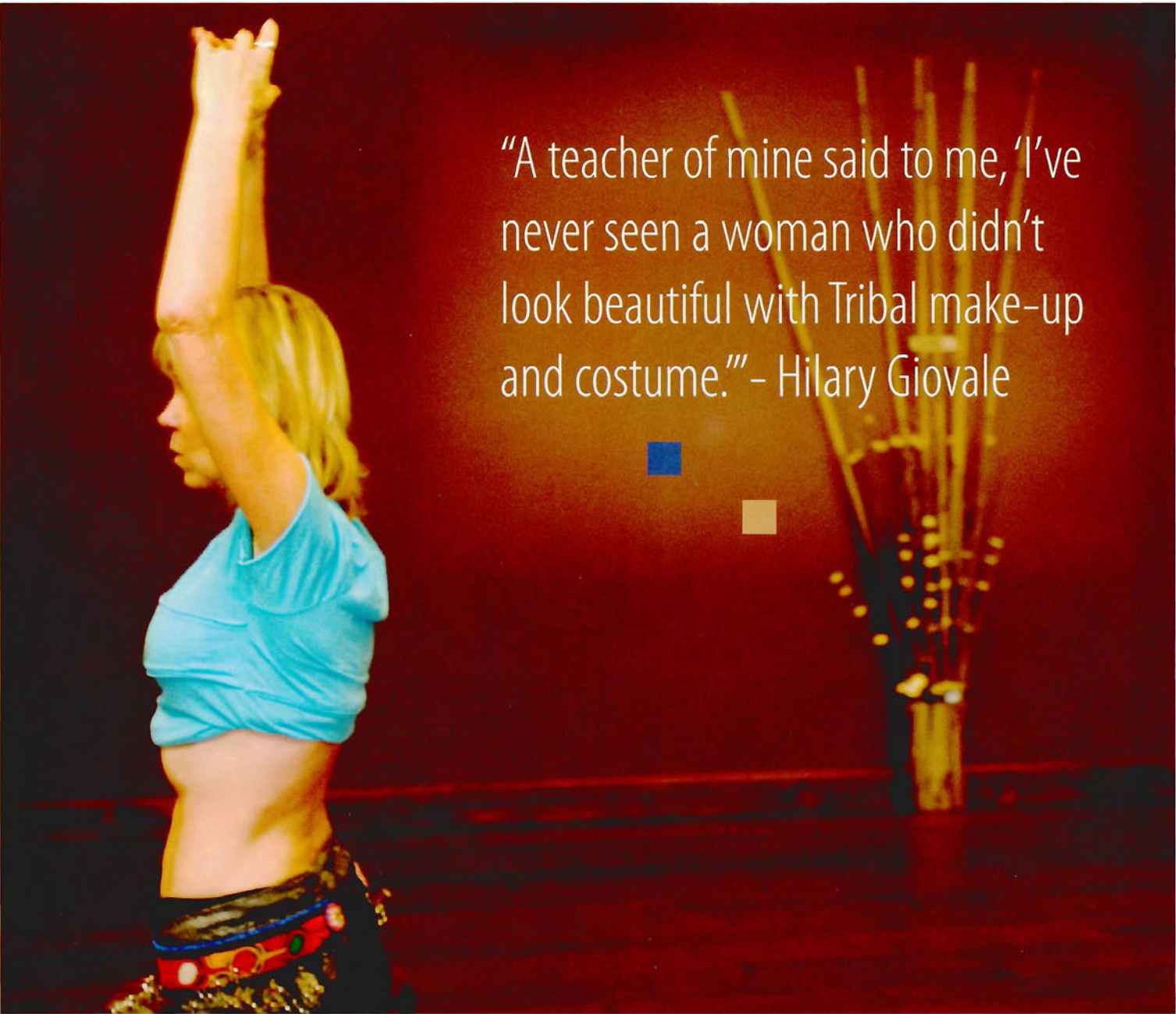
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Clara's intent is to be of service to others and to empower them to make changes and heal on all levels.

She gives presentations and workshops on healing. For further information, please call (928)527-0170.

HEALTHY MINDS



“A teacher of mine said to me, ‘I’ve never seen a woman who didn’t look beautiful with Tribal make-up and costume.’” – Hilary Giovale

although my class had a mother-to-be in attendance — pregnant, eight glorious months. Giovale danced three times a week and during labor with her second pregnancy and felt in better shape than with yoga. Its benefits during pregnancy and post-partum are total flexibility and strength while building pelvic floor muscles.

Don’t underestimate the physicality of the dance for its sensuality. The core — back, belly and abdominals — firms up through this free-spiritedness. An erect and lifted carriage works the shoulders and laterals for sterling posture, and the semi-squat positioning of the legs targets quadriceps. Giovale always works both sides of the body for symmetry and balance.

Names for the moves that accomplish

these tasks often hail from their origins — Egyptian, Tunisian, Mayan and Gah-wazee. Some gestures invoke imagery with snake arms and the many shimmies. All are muscle-oriented and proudly performed.

Many women love a good outfit, and belly dancing costumes deliver in visual fantasy. The list of garments that completes a costume stupefies: Turkish pantaloons; two 10 to 15-yard skirts for flamenco styling; hip scarf; ornate tassel belt; coin belt; choli — an Indian Sari top with partial or total arm and chest covering that leaves the belly bare; coin bra; head covering such as a turban, scarf or flowers; and kuchi—Afghani jewelry.

“Lots of jewelry,” Giovale assured me and added, “A teacher of mine said to

me, ‘I’ve never seen a woman who didn’t look beautiful with Tribal make-up and costume.’” All told, the ensemble is a weighty endeavor, but Giovale said, “The heaviness of it helps me to dance better.”

Belly dancing seems to nurture the body and soul, liberating both. Student comments ranged from “gentle workout” to “aching in muscles I didn’t know I had” and summed with, “I just feel so happy.”

That overall impression makes Giovale smile. Maybe women become comfortable with who they are, which motivates them to take better care of who they find in the process. Belly dancers become free and bold, I learned after only one class.

“Yip! Yip! Yip!” they chanted with zeal, which confirmed my thoughts. ■