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February 2015

Transitions

We spend a lot of time perfecting our individual moves; after all they are the basic vocabulary of the dance – the way we communicate. So we ensure our hip rocks are vertical – removing sideways slip or twists; that they are isolated from the upper body; that we have a range of textures to play with. We develop them into more complex moves like hip drops or layer them into shimmy walks.

But we don't stand up and do 3 minutes of hip rock (or circles or eights) – or at least we shouldn't! We use a range of moves. Connecting these sometimes need some practice too.

Going from one move to the next should usually look **smooth**, effortless, seamless. If there is a disjoint it should be deliberate – because the music calls for it.

As a general rule, **each move should be completed** – unless you have a good reason not to. That is, you don't cut something short and smear into the next move because you are not sure what you are doing.

Which means you need to consider **alignment**; how a move finishes and how the next one starts. If you finish on the left but want to be on the right – how do you get there? If you want to push to the side but are twisted to the front, what is a clean/interesting way to do it? Or should you reconsider your selection of movements?

What surprises some people is that belly dancers also need to consider where the **weight** is. Standing on the left, then step out on your right (we don't do the marching girl jumpy thing). Or shift weight with your hips. Simple slides/pushes can do it. Circles and eights are also useful.

But you can also rock forward or back. Doing a hip drop on your right? Then the weight is on the left. Rock forward and pop – now your weight is on the right.

Practicing simple transitions will give you more choices and confidence. You can make up your own or try a beyond-basic choreography – where you should find a range of different ways to transition from one move to another. Either way, the process involves **practice** – the more the better.

Dancers of Note



Badia`a Masabni (1893-1974) - a Lebanese dancer who was pivotal in changing the Egyptian dance scene. In 1926 she opened the 'Casino Badia' and later the 'Casino Opera'. This sâla included comedians, singers and dancers. Her target audience was the uppercase and Western identified rich. For these she staged a new style of "classy" dance using Western choreographers and floor patterns. What we now call *danse orientale* or *raqs sharqi*.



Fifi Abdou (1953-) The original *bint il beled* from Egypt.

In this photo she smokes a traditional shisha - which is not something nice traditional girls do. The shisha smoking forms part of her ma`allima tableau routine. In this, Fifi plays the female owner of a coffee shop who not only smokes but orders around the (male) staff and cheeks the (male) live audience - all while wearing a white silk Saudi man's gallibaya accessorized with long red nails and high heels

April 2015

MEDANZ Festival

Here in Christchurch this weekend. Workshops, AGM, hafla, and shopping are at **St Andrews**, Normans Rd, Papanui) and the show on Saturday night at the Majestic Church Theatre (85B Moorehouse Ave).

There's more details on the website. For instance start at

<http://www.medanz.org.nz/festival/festival-2015/general-information/> and you can also find timetables and workshop details from there.

Identifying Styles

There are many definitions of belly dance, but for the sake of brevity I'll break it down to four broad types of belly dance (and some people will only include the first under the umbrella):

- Orientale and Urban Beledi
- MENA folkloric **excluding** circle and line dances, warrior dances and religious observances
- ATS and its direct offshoots
- Any dance with torso articulations

Off the bat, I'll state the last one is **not** belly dance – otherwise hula, salsa, and Kathak as examples of belly dance. They're not.

What I want to look at is "Orientale and Urban Beledi" (Urban Beledi is the topic of my workshop at the MEDANZ Festival this weekend).

"Orientale" is short for *danse orientale* and is how the Egyptian professionals refer to dance that is not folkloric (as in "if Fatima takes the Orientale, I can do the Sa`iidi"). It is the French for *raqs sharqi* – which is a term I have never heard and Egyptian use!

To confuse matters, "Orientale" can also be used just for the highly polished sophisticated style associated with the classical music of the 1960s-80s; orchestrated often with western touches. But if we go down that path we have no umbrella term. Maybe we can call that style "Orientale aiwa".

At the other end of the spectrum you have beledi. The dance of the people. True beledi (shaabi) is not a performance dance. It is a street dance – but on stage beledi often uses Orientale elements (but not always – depends on the music – and the education of the dancer).

Styles of Orientale vary; between regions; between dancers; across time. Over the last decade "Egyptian" dance has been popular. But this "Modern Egyptian" is only one Egyptian style – characterised by upright posture, the famous "straight legged shimmy", and heavy use of abdominal movement generation. One thing that does link Egyptian styles, however, is the connection between the dancer and his or her music. Egyptian belly dancing is about the music – not the dancer.

Lebanese and Turkish Orientale are very different. The music is different. Although the movement vocab overlaps – it's slightly different. The attitude to the dance is different.

Then there is a host of American belly dance styles. In the 1970s you could say there were two broad styles – East and West Coast. Influenced heavily in the east by the immigrant population and by the counterculture movement in the west.

What you didn't see then was much "Egyptian" influence. Why? Because there were not large Egyptian populations in America – or Egyptian restaurants or clubs. There were strong Greek, Turkish, and Armenian influences (bands were often a mix of nationalities).

American Orientale is often called "American Cabaret" (AmCab). But that label causes almost as many arguments as "belly dance". In many cultures, a "cabaret" is very seedy – often just a live sex show.

The Classic version is often limb driven – not surprising as the first generation dancers usually came from a western dance background and the native styles were not as heavily ab focused as today. Zills, veils and floorwork were de rigour – and "belly work" such as rolls and flutters were common (something not seen in the ME).

Why does it matter? Labels are important. If I signed up for an AmCab class and got Egyptian – or vice versa I would be annoyed. If the actual class was a blend that would be sad – as they are each distinct styles with much to offer and don't deserve to be blended into the purpley muck you get when you smear all your Plasticine together.

July 2015

Home Practice

You all do this, right? You cannot learn anything in an hour a week!

Practice does not have to be in big bites – **small and frequent** works well for improving motor skills – like shimmies or zills. Shimmy while washing the dishes. Zill when you go for a walk. Practice figure eights while waiting for the bus.

Best practice includes a short **warm-up** (essential if you are doing anything extreme with your body). Go for a walk before your dance practice; climb stairs; do the luxing. Anything to get your heart rate up – and you'll help a little towards your cardio fitness.

Make a plan. There probably have been moves you have struggled with in class. Write them down; keep a diary. Tackle one or two each session. Use a mirror and go for accuracy. If it looks wrong. Stop. Correct. Try again. (Drilling with your brain turned off may help cardio – but it is counterproductive to good dance technique.)

You can also **revise a choreography**. This keeps it fresh – and also runs through technique. Again, do it consciously. If it is wrong, stop and correct it. A choreography revision may lead to extra items in your technique diary.

Dance. That's right. Just turn on some music and move. (This time turn the brain off – see what your body already knows)

Listen to music. Understanding and anticipating Middle Eastern music is very important in belly dance – where your aim is to become the music.

Don't ignore **cardio, strength, and flexibility** work. You don't need to go to a gym. Christchurch has lots of hills – climb them. Or, if the weather is awful, a few rounds of Bunnings or the Northland Mall is better than nothing.

Many of you have problems doing veil work for extended time. Walk around with your arms out for a track (this time it doesn't have to be ME music). In my Exercise Dancing class we do arm swings then hold the arms out while walking (with shoulder rolls), weight shifts and repeat. Never dropping the arms below the shoulders. Next step, fill a couple of 1litre containers and hold them out.

For flexibility, work on those areas that you actually are inflexible in. A general stretch program is a waste of time (unless you just want to fill in time). Do it **after** your warm-up and practice. Make sure you are targeting the right muscles group and are correctly aligned.

See you in term four!

September 2015

Props

A prop should be something you add to the dance. Your dance should stand alone **without** the prop. Too often poor dancing is obscured by adding a prop. Over the years I have learnt a number of “prop” dances where we spent most of the time learning the dance – which could stand alone - and only added the prop in the last couple of run throughs – this included dances with veil, stick, and candelabra.

So, what are the “standard” props in belly dance?

One of the oldest traditional prop is actually a walking **stick** (although sometimes you will see a straight stick used). This style of dance comes mostly from as Sa`id in southern Egypt – although beledi and ghawazee versions of *raqs assaya* (stick dance) are also found. A similar dance comes from Lebanon – but to different (Lebanese debke) music and small sticks are sometimes used in Khaleegi dance.

A very common prop is the **veil**. Veil dancing was introduced recently into belly dance from the west. It is not traditional in the Middle East and local dancers make very little use of it. Two main versions are out there: the hide and the reveal and the dance of the fabric.

Musicians usually object to **zills** being counted as props – insisting they are percussion instruments. However many dancers see them as such. It is surprising how much harder it is to dance while also playing zills! It is not uncommon to add zills to dances which already have veil, stick, or candelabra (yes, you can manipulate a stick, zill and dance at the same time – with practice).

There are also a range of balancing props: candelabra (*raqs Sham`idân*) from Egyptian weddings, pots (*raqs al juzur*) from Tunisia and trays (*raqs al seniyya*) from Morocco. Canes are also some times balanced. In addition there are swords from the West (dating from the 1960s). The Middle Eastern balancing dances tend to be fast and scary – showing the skill of the dancer. Western sword is more often slow and dreamy.

In addition belly dancers sometimes bring in props from other dance styles such as wings, fans, poi etc. As there is no history of these being used in belly dance, a dancer has to work very hard to make it a “belly dance” performance. Prior training and a belly dance costume is not enough. Often the result is a nice piece of contemporary or world dance – but not “belly dance”.

December 2015

Dr Mo

[Dr Mo Geddawi](#) is one of my teachers. He was born in Egypt in 1939 to a family who enjoyed music, dance, and the arts. He studied ballet as a young boy and at 11 was fond of sneaking backstage to meet singers and dancers. As a young man he studied pharmacy while continuing his interest in diving where he met Mahmoud Reda and was an inaugural member of the Reda Group. He has appeared in numerous films and on TV.

Mo left Egypt in 1964 and currently lives Berlin. Since 1999 he has been involved full time in the dance as a teacher and choreographer.

In June Dr Mo will be returning to Brisbane after 10 years. He will be giving two series of workshops. The first four days will be targeted at anyone who has a love of Egyptian or Orientale dance with a mix of folkloric and Orientale workshops over four days.

This will be followed by four days of workshops aimed at teachers. These won't be so much "how to teach" but fundamental knowledge such as basic technique, exercises to develop technique, anatomy, history, folklore, props, etc. And there will be an exam. (Unless things change – always possible at this early stage)

Brisbane 11-19 June 2016. Contact [Maria on Facebook](#).