

Whether as exercise,
spiritual fulfillment
or a celebration
of womanhood,
belly dancing
has become ultra hip.

Swaying *the* masses

BY DIANNA STAMPFLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF HAGE/
GREEN FROG PHOTO

Maybe it is the allure of the Petra exhibit at Calvin College. Or it could be the influence of music or movies that incorporate Middle Eastern sounds.

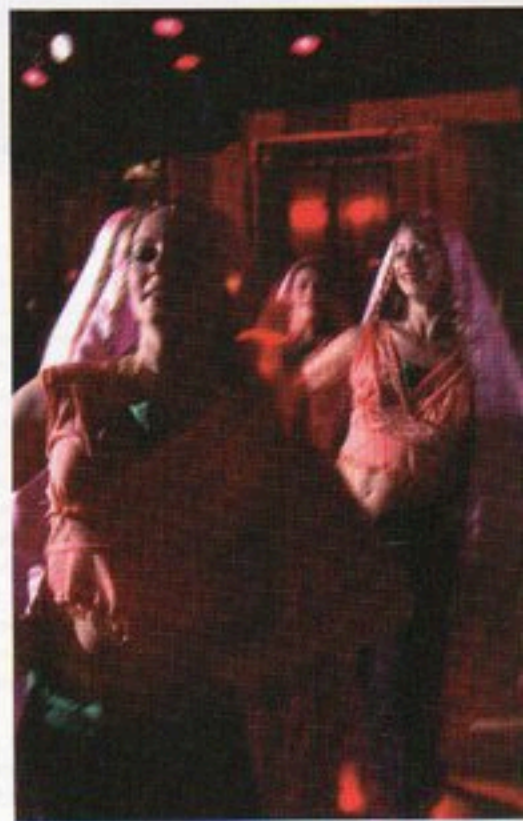
No matter how it has unveiled, the centuries-old, sensual and spiritual form of personal expression commonly referred to as belly dancing has gracefully swept into Grand Rapids and is becoming a 21st century mainstream dance form lauded for its artistic expression, health and fitness benefits, and spiritual fulfillment.

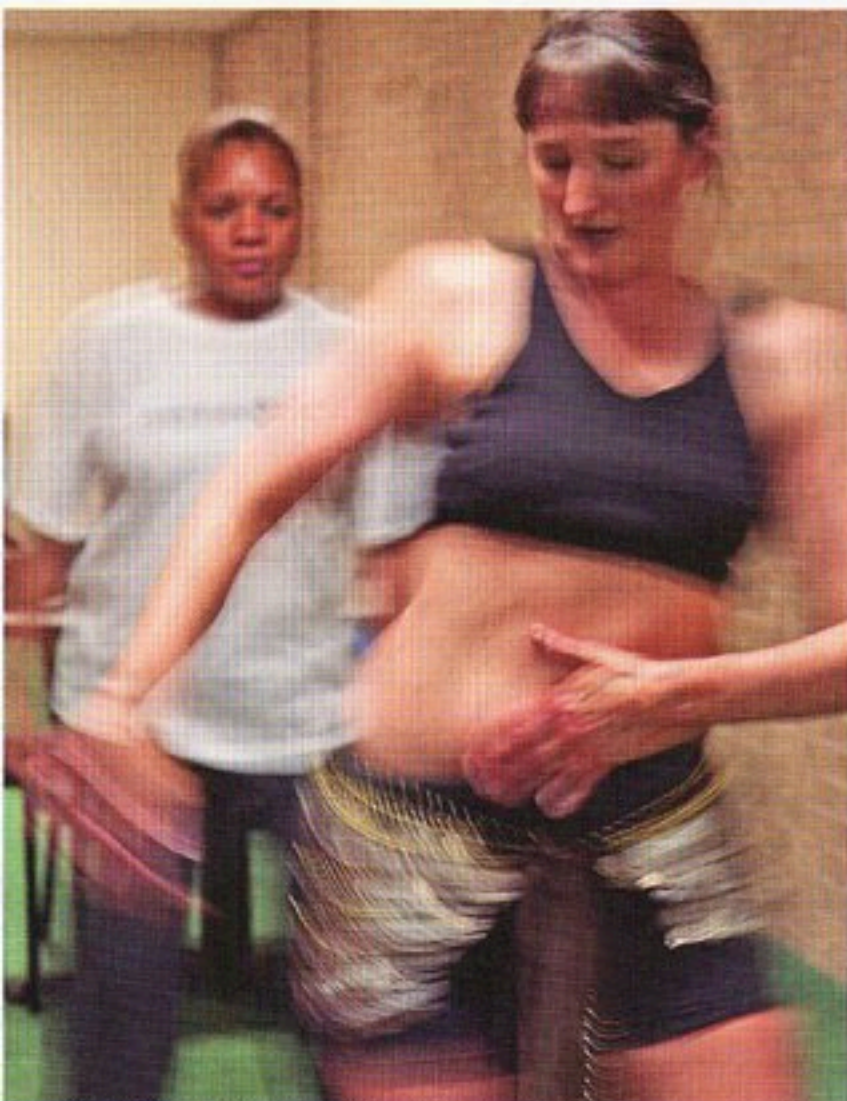
"The belly dance of today is a direct descendant of an ancient dance," said local dance instructor Laura Armenta. "It reflects the respect people once had for the body as a creation of nature and temple of the soul. It is intriguing, fascinating, enchanting and empowering."

Armenta, owner of The Armenta Studio, 951 Wealthy St. SE, has been a ballet and modern dancer for 20 years and a belly dancer for 10. She performs Thursdays from 9-10 p.m. at downtown's Mezza Café & Cabaret with the At-Neemrah Dancers, including Paula Foley, Shelley Marinus and Jill Smith.

This ancient form of dancing dates back thousands of years in Middle Eastern and African history, initially prac-

Opposite: At-Neemrah dancer Shelley Marinus performs a fusion between Egyptian cabaret and American jazz at Mezza Café. At right, At-Neemrah members, from left to right, Paula Foley, Laura Armenta (artistic director and choreographer of the company) and Marinus dance in Bhangra (East Indian Traditional) style.





Grand Rapids area instructor Adrienne Marzette's self-created Bellyrobics is more a belly fitness class than a belly dance lesson.

"It reflects the respect people once had for the body as a creation of nature and temple of the soul. It is intriguing, fascinating, enchanting and empowering." — LAURA ARMENTA

ted as a way for women to prepare for pregnancy and birth. As entertainment, it began as a folk dance performed at joyous occasions like weddings, births and community festivals. The sahty dance arrived in the United States in the 1880s, when Turkish dancers appeared at the San Francisco Fair to perform the "danse du ventre" or "dance of the belly," which was later converted to "belly dance."

Belly dancing has few limitations. Age, body size, ability and prior dance experience matter little. Students from age 8 to 72 have taken Armenta's classes. What matters most is being passionate — about music, movement, fun and life, Armenta said.

With no prior dance experience, 44-year-old Mindy Carpenter — a letter carrier and mother of two grown children — joined The Sultana Dancers, a troupe

organized by Lynese Hoogerhyde at Foxworks Dance Co. in Grand Rapids. Carpenter said she finds the members of the troupe very supportive.

"Everybody does the best they can. No one fusses if someone messes up," she said.

As much as for its artistic expression, belly dancing has gained popularity for health and fitness reasons. In fact, the American Council on Exercise has endorsed belly dancing as a legitimate form of exercise. A one-hour belly dance class puts a student's heart rate in the low-to-moderate end of the fat-burning range and burns approximately 300 to 500 calories, according to a report in "Habibi," the "official" belly-dance magazine.

The health benefits do not end there. Belly dancing can improve posture, increase the strength and flexibility of the rib cage, back and belly muscles (it's an unproven myth that it makes the belly bigger), build hip stability, help bone alignment and coordinate motor skills, and qualifies as a major weight-bearing exercise — gentle on the joints, but still taxing to the muscles.

"The benefits are many, including working the core muscles in the midsection and developing cultural awareness," said Jean Guile of Dance 'n' Sport in Grand Rapids, which has offered belly dance classes for years. "This, or any form of dancing, is wonderful for exercise, social interaction and mental stimulation."

Belly dancing can be therapeutic, too, Armenta said. She's had students who have had fused vertebrae, hip replacement or knee surgery. Last year, she had three breast cancer survivors who learned to belly dance after undergoing full mastectomies.

"One of the women was a runner, physically active prior to surgery," Armenta said. "Belly dancing gave her back a full range of motion."

And the opportunity to rediscover her body, which is perhaps belly dancing's true allure and value.

"This dance really is a celebration of womanhood," said Armenta. "It's a celebration of who we are, developed into a form of entertainment. It's a chance for spirited women to dress up and dance with other like-spirited women."

That would include Michelle Young, member of The Sultana Dancers.

"The transformation is amazing when we're in full costume," said Young, who has danced for 24 years. "It's a great way to show off your femininity." **C**