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FOLKLORE : Spell It R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Folkloric dance doesn't seem to get much respect in the belly dance community, and I am on a crusade to change that attitude.

Just What Is Folkloric Dance, Anyway?

If you look at the term literally, *folkloric dance* translates to “dance of the folk”, or “dance of the people”. Folk dances relate to a cultural or geographical region, they display unique, recognizable step combinations, and they are generally performed to distinctive music, with the participants wearing characteristic clothing. There is usually an underlying social and/or historical basis for a folk dance.

There is preparation involved in presenting a folkloric dance. A belly dance does not become a folkloric dance by pinning a couple of glitter scarves into a tunic over your cabaret-style costume. A belly dance does not become a folkloric dance by simply adding a cane, playing a tambourine, or donning a candelabra. A belly dance does not become a folkloric dance by performing your cabaret-style moves to a folkloric musical selection. These things may add a folkloric aspect to your performance, but you are still presenting a belly dance.

You can perform an authentic folkloric dance without any understanding of its background, but you would be doing an injustice to both yourself and your audience. Being able to place a dance in its regional, social, and historical context provides an added richness to the performance. Knowing the origins of a movement will allow you to perform it with more character and conviction, and allow your audience to understand and appreciate it more fully.

The steps that you should go through before staging and performing a folkloric dance are:

- Research the history and context of the dance. Is this dance a celebration, a healing ritual, a social protest, a rite of passage, or something else?
- Become familiar with the distinctive underlying rhythms of the music and the instruments used to perform it, and locate appropriate music.
- Research the appropriate costuming, and be as faithful as you can in recreating it.
- Learn the characteristic technique, movements, and step combinations of the dance.

Folk dances, by their very nature, are intrinsically repetitive, and charmingly unrefined. Resist the urge to over-theatricalize both the costuming and the movements by “jazzing it up”. The folkloric dances of northern Africa and the Middle East are varied, colorful,

challenging, and rewarding. Your challenge, as a performer, is to keep the spirit of the dance intact, and constantly be on your guard against “cabaret creep”.

It takes time and effort to stage a folkloric dance, but it is worth the investment. The responsible folkloric dancer is both an entertainer and an educator. Both you and your audience will benefit from the experience.

What’s In A Name?

Some of the more popular folk dances have been theatricalized to the point where the original context has almost disappeared under the window-dressing. Perhaps it is time to return to their origins. A brief overview of a few of the more popular folk dances is provided here, for review.

Cane Dancing: Cane dancing takes its movements from the activities of farming, shepherding, and real & mock combat. The men’s stick dance is an example of combat-oriented folk dance. Women added a gentler side, using spinning and tapping movements reminiscent of planting seeds, or herding animals. The highly theatricalized cane dances seen in Egyptian belly dance performances have taken these movements to a more abstract entertainment level, but note that even today in the middle east, the dancer almost always dons a beledi dress for the cane segment of the performance, and the music is usually folk as opposed to classical orchestra or pop.

Shamadan (Candelabra): Using candles to “light the way”, especially at weddings, is a symbolism found across the middle east. At Persian weddings, for example, dancers will lead the bride and groom in the wedding procession, holding candles, incense, and other symbols to guide them into their new life. In Egypt, the candelabra dancer has become a tradition in their *zeffa*, or wedding procession, where she is also “lighting the way” into their new life. Because of its difficulty and implicit danger, the *shamadan* is another frequently theatricalized folkloric dance. Again, however, the traditional dancer should be in a beledi dress or jumpsuit, use finger cymbals, and be accompanied by earthy music.

Roma/Romany (gypsy): The dances of the Roma are many and varied – Indian (kathak), Turkish, Russian, Spanish, Egyptian, and more. Each has its own distinctive movements and music, along with common elements. Voluminous skirts are usually worn. Contrary to popular belief, tambourines are not characteristic of Roma dance.

Ghawazee: The ghawazee, or ghaziya, dancers of Egypt are said to be descendants of the branch of Roma who migrated south into Africa, instead of north into Europe. Although the ghawazee have been known to borrow from the latest dance fashions, there are two traditional costume styles. The classic style consists of a long fitted coat, worn over a full white dress and voluminous bloomers (harem pants). The modern style consists of a fitted vest and short (knee-length) skirt, with horizontal rows of beaded fringe and a ribbon-panel overskirt. The crowning touch of the modern ghawazee costume is the padded and highly decorated headband. Ghawazee dance is characterized by very strong hip movements (the costume also includes a padded, rolled hip enhancer to accentuate the

movement), and continuous zil playing. The music is strong, earthy, and played by traditional folk instruments.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

In summary, before you perform a folkloric dance, stop and think: Respect your audience. Respect yourself. Respect the culture that you are representing. You are an ambassador of an endangered heritage. Treat it gently, and with respect.