Chelydra
"Dancer With An Attitude"
P.O. Box 1973
Newport News, VA 23601
www.chelydra.com
chelydra@mindspring.com

Author's Note: *This is the first in a series of articles which appeared in Middle Eastern Dancer magazine beginning in May, 1991. I still receive requests for copies, and decided to review the series for reprinting. I am somewhat concerned that much of the text remains current to this day (6/2003).*

Part 1: The Surrender

For four years, I've been trying to write an article on my experiences as a seminar sponsor. The only problem is, I've been so busy with the seminars I haven't had the time to write. Well, that's about to change. I enjoy writing. I have come to realize that I *don't* enjoy sponsoring seminars. So I thought I'd spend a little time telling you why I've decided to retire as a seminar sponsor, and offer you (the future seminar sponsor) some things to think about before you jump in with both feet and, quite possibly, end up over your head.

Besides being a tad busy, I've also delayed writing this series of articles because I may anger people with what I have to say. Some of what I write will strike a little too close to home. There will be defensive reactions to my opinions. Tough! They're my feelings and my experiences, and I'm going to express them. If I can prevent just *one* poor soul (and their spouse, an innocent victim) from going through what I've been through, it's worth it.

There have been a number of articles written in the past on the ins and outs of sponsoring a seminar. They have usually taken great care to remain upbeat, detached, and clinical. I won't. I can't - and I don't think I should. I believe that it's only fair that you, the potential sponsor, should know that I've sponsored nine seminars in four years, and every single, solitary one of them has been a draining and gut-wrenching experience.

I have what I jokingly refer to as an "attitude" at the moment, and it keeps leaking through into my prose. I'm more than a little depressed. Depressed, angry, and mad at the world (the dance world in particular). I just had to cancel a seminar because I only had six (count 'em, six) preregistrations. There is a school of thought in the dance community that says the cardinal rule of seminar sponsorship is "*Never cancel!*". To those people (who, by the way, have probably never sponsored a seminar), I say: YOU lose $1500. I can't afford it. I can barely afford the $250 I lost by cancelling.

I have a friend who laughs at me and calls me a pessimist. I think she's wrong. If I were a pessimist, I would have stopped cold after the first seminar four years ago. If I were a pessimist, I'd stop believing that:

◊ this time, I'll find the ideal facility at an unbelievably low, affordable price (with a convenient, luxurious-but-cheap hotel and gourmet restaurant nearby)

◊ this time, the teacher will return my phone calls and get me the class description and publicity photos for the flyer before the day *after* it needs to be at the printers

◊ this time, I can believe all the dancers who said they wanted this particular teacher, and the time of year was great

◊ this time, dancers will actually get their preregistrations in by the cutoff date (instead of mailing them on the day of the deadline)

◊ this time, there will be enough preregistrations to reach the break even point so I don't have to agonize over whether or not to cancel at the two-week mark

◊ this time, the teacher will teach to current, easily available music - and remember to bring some cassettes to sell, instead of volunteering me to turn my home into a sound recording studio for weeks after the event

◊ this time, the performers will actually read the letter I send them and get me their bios and photos by the requested deadline, instead of handing them to me in the dressing room

You see what I mean? I couldn't *possibly* be a pessimist, or I wouldn't keep putting myself through this once (or even twice) a year.

The odds finally caught up with me this time; I had to cancel. That meant a monetary loss of $250 already spent for flyers, postage, and advertising (the long distance phone bill hasn't been counted in yet), and an intangible loss of trust within the dance community.

I know I disappointed a lot of people: the instructors who had been working hard on both their classes and their performances, the dancers who were kind enough to preregister, the vendors who depend on seminars for a living, the charity who was counting on us to help make their annual fund-raising drive a success, and most of all, me.

That list doesn't count the dancers who will be mad at me because they were planning on coming but never got around to preregistering. How *dare* I let them down? Well, all I've got to say is: you let me down first.

I feel guilty, angry, frustrated, hurt, and disappointed. I can't help but personalize the situation. I've spent four months and untold hours (including precious vacation days taken up by visiting hotel conference facilities) planning and anticipating the ideal dance experience. The pain and helplessness of having your carefully crafted creation flushed down the tubes is indescribable.

I know I'm not alone. There are a lot of other brave souls out there going through the same agony. I started sponsoring seminars because I thought it would be easier and less expensive to bring the teachers to me instead of taking me to the teachers. It's taken four years for me to realize that I'm wrong.

As long as that darned optimistic streak of mine doesn't come creeping back, I'm through. All of you out there can't afford to pay me for the hours I spend putting a seminar on the boards, and I can't keep working for you for free. For all the rest of the sponsors who haven't given up yet, I wish you all the luck in the world. You have more stamina than I do.

For those of you who are thinking about sponsoring your first seminar, in subsequent issues I'll share with you some of the many pitfalls and infrequent joys of the effort. To be truthful, I'm going to do my level best to talk you out of it. If I can't, I want you to realize that the experience is likely to be more like landing in a briar patch than a bed of roses.

Part 2: Establishing Your Expectations

So, you think you want to sponsor a seminar. My advice to you is: *Stop right there*! Before you jump in with both feet and start thrashing around, you'd better give some long, hard thought as to exactly why you think sponsoring a seminar would be a positive experience in your life.

I know what my reasons were, and I expect that at least some of them are yours:

- ◊ recognition and respect within the dance community
- ◊ profit
- ◊ an opportunity to showcase your dance skills
- ◊ learning from your favorite teachers
- ◊ enhancing the image of Middle Eastern dance with the general public

Admirable goals. Let's look at them one by one in the light of my experiences over the last four years.

Recognition/respect within the dance community: You will gain some name recognition within your area's dance community. You will gain respect as long as your seminars are successful. You will be shredded and hung out to dry if they're not. However, you're going to be far too busy managing your seminar to do much (if any) schmoozing during the actual event itself, so it won't matter much what anybody thinks of you anyway. You won't have time to notice.

Profit: Pardon me if I collapse into hysterical laughter at this one. Forget it. You may count yourself lucky if you break even, and blessed by the gods if you manage to make 50 cents an hour for all your pre-event labor.

An opportunity to showcase your dance skills: Let's see. You've spent three to six months preparing, and you've been on your feet all day trying to sandwich some class time in while being business manager, hostess, diplomat, stage manager, and executive producer. You either won't have had time to work on a new solo (and you had to postpone that new costume until you find out if you're broke or not), or you'll be so tired you're liable to fall down (or fall asleep) on stage. You certainly won't be at your stellar best. And you'll be dancing for the world's most critical audience - other dancers. I keep making the mistake of letting people talk me into dancing. Looking back on a total of three troupe performances and six solos, only two have been memorable for their excellence. Blazing mediocrity would describe the rest.

Learning from your favorite teachers: Let's face it; you're going to be brain dead (review the "roles" list in the previous paragraph). If you want to get anything out of your own seminar, you'd better have a video camera handy. And if you were planning on dancing in the show, too, you're going to be so uptight you can't see straight, let alone concentrate on learning something new. I remember one seminar where the instructor was teaching a sequence almost exactly the inverse of a part of my choreography for the evening's show; I knew I could either learn the new combination (and risk body lock that evening), or forego the combination for safety's sake. I played it safe, but lost some valuable lesson time.

Enhancing the image of Middle Eastern dance with the general public: An admirable, but generally unattainable goal. At least it is in my geographic area, which suffers from galloping ambivalence to the arts of any kind. The majority of your audience will come from the dance community (usually through bundling the ticket with the seminar). You will get a small number of the curious elite at your show. Treasure these small victories, and consider them sufficient.

You may have other reasons not listed here for wanting to sponsor a seminar. My advice to you is to take a good, hard, realistic look at them. If you choose to enter the world of seminar sponsorship, be darn sure

you have your priorities straight, your eyes wide open, and most importantly - a thick skin, a strong back, and a really good friend to turn to when you're pinging off the walls.

Next month: Communicating with alien beings.

Part 3: The Personality Type Conflict

My career job (the one that pays the mortgage) is as a Principal Software Engineer. Sort of a souped-up computer systems programmer, with an occasional side order of extra responsibility as a supervisor. As a supervisor, I have been subjected to a variety of corporate management training courses, including three different flavors of "how to manage diverse personalities". Those exercises have helped me to understand a large part of why I am so frustrated as a dance seminar sponsor.

Let me tell you a little bit about the basic personality type preferences of the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) test. Although the strength of an individual's preferences may vary from borderline to strong, each person's personality is composed of four distinct preferences. These are *extrovert/introvert*, *sensor/intuitive*, *thinker/feeler*, and *judger/perceiver*.

Extrovert vs. Introvert: *Extrovert* and *introvert* are fairly obvious. *Extroverts* thrive on being the center of attention. Their energy level increases when surrounded by people. *Introverts* avoid the spotlight and would like the world to leave them in peace; people and their demands exhaust them. *Introverts* need quiet time to recharge before girding their loins and meeting the world head on. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of dancers are *extroverts*.

Sensor vs. Intuitive: *Sensors* and *intuitives* are a little more complex; a *sensor*-oriented personality will look at a picture or painting and be able to itemize its components in great detail, while an *intuitive* personality will attempt to convey the feelings and atmosphere the picture evokes in them. *Sensors* are very comfortable with "what"; *intuitives* are always searching for "why". I see both of these types in the dance community - *sensors* want each step of a choreography to have a name and a count; *intuitives* want to know the feeling or attitude to be expressed.

Thinker vs. Feeler: *Thinkers* are very logical people; they take the scientific approach to decision-making. Reason reigns supreme in their view of the world. *Feelers* are exactly what they sound like; they are very empathic personalities. A *feeler* is devastated to find that they have hurt someone's feelings, or let someone down. Again, both types appear in the world of Middle Eastern dance, probably in much the same proportion as the general population.

Judger vs. Perceiver: The last MBTI preference pair is *judgers* and *perceivers*. These terms are the most obscure, but what it boils down to is that the *judgers* are the planners and list makers of the world. The *perceivers* are the free spirits - the idea of making a plan or a list is abhorrent to them. The artistic community, dance included, contains a higher percentage of *perceivers* than the average distribution in the general population.

For your information, my personality type is ENTJ (*Extrovert, Intuitive, Thinker, Judger*). I show only slight to moderate tendencies on the first three preferences. Had I left fewer test questions blank, and considering my reactions to certain life situations since the test, I could just as likely be INFJ (*Introvert, Intuitive, Feeler, Judger*). At least I now have a better idea as to why I often have difficulty making decisions; life is rarely black or white to me - it's an infinitely varied shade of grey. Except for that doggone *J*. I am, without a shadow of a doubt, a confirmed organizer, list maker, and planner. Those of you who have been paying close attention will notice that I even *write* in lists. (Worse yet, I caught myself talking in lists today. My husband started laughing hysterically.)

I have tried to apply these personality type insights to my experiences and frustrations as a dance seminar sponsor, and I have come to a conclusion. People who sponsor seminars (the *J*'s) are basically incompatible with the people who teach and attend dance seminars (mostly *P*'s). So the very act of organizing a seminar creates an inherently stressful environment for all involved. The sponsor wants everything to run on time, as planned (there's that nasty word again). The instructor and most of the students not only don't care, they may indulge in active or passive resistance to being kept to a schedule.

To put it another way, seminar sponsors are usually structured, businesslike personalities who, by their very choice of venture, are required to deal with a group of very unstructured, unbusinesslike personalities. It's a little like trying to mix oil and water; it takes a lot of effort, and it doesn't work for very long.

Now that I've figured this out, I ought to be able to do something about it, right? Wrong. I can see what's happening, I can understand why it's happening, and I still end up climbing the walls.

The point I'm trying to make is, if you're going to survive in the topsy turvy world of seminar sponsorship, you will need to lower your expectations (and then lower them again). Don't expect people to get you the information you ask for by the time you asked for it. Don't count on people reading anything you send them, even though you have to make the attempt. Don't expect people to be where you want them when you want them there, doing what you asked them to do.

As a matter of fact, don't expect anything to work out the way you want it to; the world (especially the dance world) just won't live by your rules, no matter how much you want it to or think it should. Be mellow or die.

Next issue: Surveying the territory.

Part 4: Research

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Figuring out where to start with a seminar is a little like that famous conundrum.

Well, I never did figure out a good way to start out. You can't get a committment from a teacher without a date, you can't pick a date without knowing if the facility and the teacher are free (or whether someone else is having an event around that time), and you can't reserve a facility without a date and a teacher.

Actually, if your first action is to try and pick a date, place, and/or teacher, you're already ahead of yourself. Stop immediately and back up. Before you do anything else, conduct a little research and answer some questions:

- How many other seminar sponsors are there in your area?
Your "area" should include your state and the immediately surrounding states. If there are already a number of sponsors, your area may be saturated. If there aren't any sponsors, it may be because your area can't adequately support a seminar. Find out.

- Do the existing seminars fit into a pattern?
Consult back issues of the Middle Eastern dance magazines or dance association newsletters to determine who's doing what, and when, and featuring who. Try to avoid duplication of format, and attempt to keep a four-week window between seminars.

- What kind/level of seminar do you envision?
Are you planning an "entry-level" seminar or a master class? Will the format be cabaret or folkloric? Has the same thing been tried before and bombed? Why?

- What are the demographics of the dance community in your area?
Check to see how many teachers, troupes, and dance associations are in your area; find out the average level of dance expertise. If the atmosphere is friendly enough, find out how active the area is, and what attendance has been like at other seminars. If the atmosphere is not friendly (which is not a good sign to start with), your only choice may be to have the seminar and see if anyone comes.

- How are you planning to contact your prospective students?
The obvious choices are advertising and/or direct mail. My experience has been that over 95% of attendance comes from the direct mail campaign; advertising is useful mainly for name recognition. If you can't get a starter subscription or mailing list from a dance magazine, dance association, or dance vendor, you might as well give up. Dancers rarely take the active role in seeking out seminars. You have to go to them, they will not come to you.

- Does your area provide adequate studio/performance facilities to support a seminar and show?
An obvious question, but one that is usually answered too late. You may be able to get away with a poor facility once, but dancers won't come back the next time.

- Do you have a lot of foul-weather friends?
Depending on the size of your seminar, you can't go it alone and come out alive. You are going to need a support network behind you. Do you have enough friends to help you out with duties such as addressing flyers, door registration/ticket sales, photography, videography, sound, announcing, stage setup/breakdown, etc.?

- Do you have an answering machine (or cell phone or pager)?

You're going to be playing a lot of telephone tag. You need to have a way for people to reliably get in touch with you.

- How much money are you prepared to lose?
Take off the rose-tinted glasses, shake the stars out of your eyes, and do some cold, hard, calculating. No matter how much you try to minimize expenses, a certain amount of up-front money is required: advertising, flyers, mailing labels, postage, long distance phone calls, etc. The initial investment can run from $500-$1000. If things don't work out, you aren't going to ever see that money again. Be damn sure you can deal with that fact.

Once you have determined that you have the potential support available and can afford to take the risk, it's finally time to begin the actual work.

Next issue: Getting out of the starting block.

Part 5: Starting Up

Here you are, back at the decision of *when, where, who, what*, and *how*. Resign yourself to the fact that you will probably have to start all over again at least once, if not twice. With that in mind, you should allow yourself plenty of lead time for planning and preparation, especially for your first effort. My experience is that a six-month lead time is the absolute minimum, and twelve months is ideal.

- When

Your guess is as good as mine. Prime seminar time seems to be March-May and mid-September through late October or mid-November. Stay away from holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas, and July (a July seminar was the straw that broke my back). If you're willing to take a chance, early June and mid-August sometimes work out. If you live in the more temperate climates, February can be a good time to break up the winter blahs.

Research the seminar pattern in your area – including out-of-town events in the areas you expect to draw from. Try to leave a four-week window between your event and competing events. People cannot afford the time or money to attend an event every week or two or three. If supply exceeds demand, attendance suffers across the board.

Pick a range of dates and then match them up with your instructor and facility. If possible, stick with the same weekend every year. People are creatures of habit.

- Where

This little item has been my worst nightmare, I suppose because it's completely out of my control. The ideal, affordable, seminar/show facility simply doesn't exist. I have come close twice. It is a source of constant amazement to me exactly how many resources are required to mount a seminar, bazaar, and show.

Factors you need to consider in finding and evaluating a facility are: space, visibility, sound capabilities, floor covering, staging, lighting, dressing facilities, seating, setup assistance, equipment (vendor tables, for example), parking, location (ease of access), overnight accommodations, restaurants, usage restrictions, insurance, and cost.

I will discuss the Great Facility Search in more detail in a subsequent installment.

- Who

You probably already have someone in mind, someone whose skills you hold in high regard. However, you need to realistically assess whether or not the rest of the dance community will share your view. It has been my experience that dancers are not very adventurous; if your instructor is not a "big name" in the field, expect to draw a much smaller crowd. Out of a mailing of about 1000 flyers, I anticipate about 50-70 students for a "big name", and less than half that number for a less well-known, albeit just as accomplished, instructor. In addition, even a big name may not be a consistent draw year after year. I have found the dance community notoriously fickle and hard to predict.

Remember that you are primarily choosing an instructor, not a performer. I have found that stellar performers are not always good instructors. Do your research – make your decision on known teaching skills, not merely performance skills. Name recognition may get someone to your seminar the first time, but if the quality of instruction is poor, they may not come back again.

Another “who” decision that you need to make is whether or not you will have multiple instructors. I would recommend that you keep things simple for your early efforts, and limit yourself to one.

- What
Decide on your format: how many days of class, how many hours of class per day, the content of the classes, and whether or not to have a show. To my personal disappointment, purely folkloric seminars are rarely successful. Cabaret is what sells. Also, a note of caution in marketing your event: choreography sells; technique does not. Choose your words with care when creating the flyer.

People like to know what to expect, and are uneasy at being asked to buy a pig in a poke. Decide on the content ahead of time, and put it in the flyer. The less well-known the instructor, the more important it is to describe what will be taught. Include information on any props that the student should bring (shc as zils, skirt, veil, cane, or sword). There is nothing more annoying than being unprepared because you weren't told what to bring.

Another format-related decision you need to make is whether or not you will be having a bazaar associated with the seminar. This decision will affect your facility search; you will either need additional space in the classroom, or a separate room nearby. Having the vendors in the same room can be distracting; placing them in a separate area decreases their business. My experience has been that the distractions are a small price to pay for the added aura of festivity vendors provide; attendance declines after a while if no bazaar is offered. I had to give up a near-perfect facility because the management decided that vendors were inappropriate.

- How
How covers everything else - all of those millions of technical and procedural decisions required to get from an idea to an actual event. I will discuss a lot of the topics in this catchall category in subsequent installments. One topic, the seminar schedule, didn't fit in well anywhere else, so I will discuss it here.

The schedule depends on the overall length of the seminar, any restrictions on the use of the facility, and the geographical distribution of the dance community throughout your attendance area. On a Saturday, you have to start late enough in the day to allow out-of-towners to arrive; if you try to start too early, you'll lose some students who can't afford the extra night's hotel costs. However, you also have to finish early enough to allow performers adequate time to prepare for the show, and for you to complete any necessary room setup. In addition, class often runs over due to extended breaks, and the room won't clear immediately - it may take you thirty minutes or more to get everyone out the door after class is complete.

There are similar trade-offs to Sunday classes. It is a wise idea to start a little later because everyone was up late with the show, but you have to finish early enough for people to make their connections home. Again, allow plenty of time for the room to clear. If you try and make everything work out to the minute, you will just get frustrated. It once took me an hour to pry the instructor loose from a group of well-meaning dancers who all wanted just a little personal time.

As to the rest of the *how* category, it includes: What kind of advertising? Who does the layout? How much money can you afford to spend? Who is writing the flyer? How will you reproduce it? What color/type/size of paper? How much will you charge? What publishing deadlines must be met? When will you do your mailing? Bulk mail or first class? Who will be in the show? What kind of incentive will you offer them? Should you have dinner show? Hors d'oeuvres? Theater seating? Tables & chairs? What about airline tickets (should you chance non-refundable ones?)? What liabilities are you subject to if you cancel? Do you need event insurance in case someone is injured? Will the show be open to the public? What kind of free publicity can you take advantage of?

The list is endless.

Outside of the considerations I have raised here, choosing a date and format are personal decisions that don't require a lot of technical assistance. Just cross your fingers and hope for the best.

Next issue: Negotiating with the instructor.

Part 6: The Instructor

I tend to make initial contact with the instructor before conducting the Great Facility Search. It has proven slightly simpler to match the facility to the teacher than vice versa.

The instructor, of course, is your star - the linchpin of both your seminar and your show. It's pretty much a seller's market; they have you over a barrel. Your courtship ritual will include establishing initial contact, negotiating a fee, agreeing on a format, and formalizing the deal. All of this is not wrapped up neatly in one quick phone call. You may play telephone tag for several weeks before all details are arranged to the satisfaction of the parties involved.

- establishing contact

Contacting your chosen instructor sounds like a simple task; in reality, it may involve great creativity and resourcefulness on your part. Many established, "big name" stars do not generally advertise in the Teacher's Directories of the various dance magazines. (They don't need to.) You have to approach them indirectly - through a recent seminar sponsor, or the company producing their albums or videos. If you are lucky, they will have a web site and an email address.

Once you have obtained an address, phone number, or email, whether it be from a fellow sponsor, an ad or directory listing, or a web page, it is likely to be a post office box or answering service. You may not make direct contact on the first try.

In all of your dealings with the instructor, keep one fact uppermost in your mind. Many top professional dancers that you will be talking to are of the *perceiver* personality type (refer back to installment three). This means that for most of your interactions, getting a response in what you would define as a timely fashion is not a high probability. Time (and time zones, for that matter) has a different meaning in their world. I once waited three months for a phone call to be returned; the call came at midnight on a weekday. My husband had to wake me out of a sound sleep, and I tried desperately to sound perky and competent.

Personally, I have a problem both understanding and dealing with this kind of behavior. The excuse "but he/she is an *artist*" raises my blood pressure. If someone is going to offer/advertise their services as an instructor, I feel that it is only common courtesy to behave in a responsible, professional manner. Of course, I'm using my definition of responsible and professional, and they are using theirs. Neither of us are right or wrong. This will probably be your first encounter with the personality type conflicts discussed in installment three; don't fret - there will be more.

Once you have made contact with a warm body, the first and most obvious question to be answered is whether or not they're interested. The next vital question will be whether or not you can afford them.

- the fee

The instructor's fee will usually be dependent on the number of hours of instruction, the number/length of show performances, and perhaps how interested the instructor is. Most instructors work on a flat fee basis ($500-1100 per day, $200 per performance); some will work on a percentage basis (usually 60-70% of profits after expenses).

You will find yourself under a lot less direct stress if the instructor agrees to work on a percentage (or minimum fee plus percentage) basis. You will, however, be subject to what I term indirect stress. The instructor has placed their trust in you when they work on a percentage; they are trusting you not to go hog-wild with expenses, and they are trusting you to deliver an adequate number of students. An embarrassingly low attendance can cause grave loss of face.

From the point of view of the seminar sponsor, I resent having to take all the risks. I feel that in the act of sponsoring someone, I am furthering *their* career and reputation far more than mine, and I feel that the instructor should shoulder some of the risk as a consequence. It's a little like biting the hand that feeds you; if sponsors keep losing money, they'll stop throwing seminars and you (the instructor) won't have any income. Mine won't be a popular view, but I warned you in the beginning that I was probably going to tick off every side of the dance community somewhere along the line.

- auxiliary expenses

In addition to the instructor's fee, you will usually be reponsible for footing the bill for transportation and room & board for the duration of the instructor's stay. You may be able to persuade the instructor to lodge with you for the weekend; while this reduces out-of-pocket expenses, it can also create additional stress on your part. Planning meals, cleaning house, sharing the hot water, privacy, ... and you've never lived until you've had two or more dancers getting ready for a show at the same time. Only you can decide if the cost savings are worth the extra effort required on your part.

- format

As a part of your preparation in installment five, you decided on your preferred format. Now it is time to communicate your wishes to the instructor. Your plans and theirs may not agree. Some instructors will work with you and custom-tailor your event; others will not - your choices will be limited to their current seminar repertoire. Some instructors are incapable of committing to a fixed format (these are usually the strongly *perceiver*-oriented personality types discussed in installment three). That can lead to real heartburn.

Do yourself and your prospective students a favor here. Try to insure that the instructor will either use currently available music (and give the vendors plenty of advance notice what to bring), or will bring a number of prerecorded cassettes with them for sale. If people have to wait six to twelve weeks afer the seminar for the music, you might as well never have held the seminar in the first place; momentum is lost.

- formalization

Once you have decided on a fee and a format, it is in your best interests to place the mutually agreed-upon terms in writing, signed by both you and the instructor. I say that it is in your best interests; it may never happen. We're back to that personality conflict again. A formal agreement (all right, *contract*, but that's a red-flag word to some) is just too much structure for a *perceiver* personality to handle. Many is the time the instructor has just "forgotten" to sign the agreement and mail it back, even if a self-addressed, stamped envelope is provided.

To be truly complete, any agreement/contract should contain terms and provisions for the protection of both parties in the event the seminar is cancelled. The seminar sponsor shouldn't be left holding the bag if the instructor is a no-show; the instructor should be eligible for some compensation if the sponsor cancels. In practice, however, this is rarely done. Trying to force the issue may scare your *perceiver* instructor off permanently.

Next issue: The Great Facility Search.

Part 7: Finding a Facility

Author's Note: This is installment seven of a series of articles which appeared in Middle Eastern Dancer magazine beginning in May, 1991. Interestingly, very few changes have been required to bring the series up-to-date.

I mentioned in installment five that there is more to finding a seminar facility than meets the eye. This month I will elaborate on that topic.

Personally, the facility can either make or break a seminar. A great facility can make up for a lackluster instructor. A poor or overcrowded facility can overshadow even the best of teachers.

If you are like me - not a business, not a charity, not a non-profit organization - just an ordinary, everyday private citizen trying to do something special and not lose money at it - you already have two strikes against you in your search. The world is not set up for nice people just looking to break even. Especially if they are (gasp!) Middle Eastern dancers.

One of the most difficult parts of your search will be explaining exactly what a dance seminar is to the people you contact. You will explain it over and over again. And no matter how often or how well you describe it, people really do not understand until they actually see the event in operation. The issues that I have found to be the most critical for people to understand are: the vendors are for-profit organizations, we are moving around (not sitting down), we leave glitter litter all over the floor, and we need loud music.

One **essential** item to factor into your decision regarding a facility is the necessity for liability insurance. Dance is an athletic art form; as such, it often requests the body to place itself in what aerobics instructors call *contraindicated* positions. In plain english, people can get hurt. Liability insurance coverage is not always included in facility rental fees; you may need to purchase what is called an *event insurance* policy. That expense may push an otherwise affordable facility out of budget range. Event coverage can be difficult to find. I only located one insurance underwriter in my area that provided it

A second important consideration is your costume bazaar. You will need to decide whether you will locate the bazaar in the seminar room, or in a separate adjacent location. If you are co-locating the bazaar and class, keep in mind that the vending tables and garment racks take up considerable space, and will cause some level of noise and distraction during class. Not surprisingly, vendors prefer to be in the same room as the students. If you must locate them in a separate area, make sure that it is close and convenient. It is a fact of life that many dancers prefer shopping over learning. It is in your best interests to provide a well-stocked, easily accessible bazaar, and to do everything in your power to ensure that your vendors turn a profit. You also need to ensure that the vending area has adequate lighting, or at least adequate power outlets to allow the vendors to set up their own lighting (don't forget to tell the vendors if they need to furnish their own lighting). Keep in mind that the vending area still needs to be lit, even if the house lights are turned down. And have a heart – **never, ever** create a situation where the vendors must move once they are set up.

There are a number of choices of where to look for a facility - dance studios or fitness clubs, public and private schools, churches, hotels, and restaurants. Some of the pros and cons of each are:

- Dance studios and fitness facilities

At first glance, dance studios are the perfect seminar environment. They have bright lighting, mirrors, obstruction-free dance space, sound systems, and smooth tile or possibly suspended wood flooring. Who could ask for more?

You may have to. Most dance studios do not provide the square footage necessary to handle 25-75 active dancers. Parking for such a large number of students is often a problem, and studios often do not have any additional space available for vendors to set up a bazaar.

Fitness facilities often have the same advantages of dance studios without the size and parking problems, but are subject to different drawbacks. Flooring is usually padded and carpeted for aerobic exercise - not always the best dance surface in the world. They tend to be more expensive, and vendors may be a problem (that darn glitter litter).

And even if you find a good studio, you will still have to find a second facility for the show.

- Public and private schools
Many public and private schools allow members of the community to rent their cafeteria, gymnasium, and auditorium space. The terms vary from area to area. In my area, I am prohibited from using public school facilities because I charge a fee for attendance. Private school facilities are either too expensive or have insufficient space.

Review the facilities carefully and be sure you understand any restrictions on their use. Cafeterias often have a number of center poles and sometimes come complete with roaches and a residual stale food smell. Gymnasiums usually have rigid footwear restrictions and terrible acoustic characteristics. If you are having a two-day seminar with a bazaar, make sure there is adequate overnight security for the merchandise.

Be sure you understand all of the charges involved in renting the facility. There are often required charges for janitorial support, security, lighting technicians, sound engineers, and use of classrooms as dressing facilities.

- Churches
Some churches will rent their facilities to the general public, usually at very reasonable fees. Churches with associated schools often have combination gym/auditoriums and a supply of tables and chairs to support the bazaar and show. Parking is generally ample.

There are some diplomatic and logistic drawbacks, however. You will probably be treading on eggshells. Belly dancers and conservative members of the congregation don't always mix. Some students and/or performers do not consider their surroundings when choosing their attire and eyebrows are raised. If you are planning a two-day seminar, you probably won't be able to start Sunday classes until services are over. This may wreak havoc with the dancers who have a long trip home in the evening. And if a member of the congregation wants the hall on the date you reserved, you may be out the door and out of luck.

Physical drawbacks may also exist. Flooring may be carpeted. You may need to supply the labor to set up and break down the facility for the bazaar and the show. The sound system and/or acoustics may be inadequate.

- Hotels
Hotel conference facilities are a popular choice, and it's easy to see why. Accessible location, builtin accommodations and dining facilities, and everything done to your command. If you use a hotel, the amount of work you have to do the day of the seminar is minimal. No setup, breakdown, or cleanup worries. So why would you use anywhere else?

Hotels are expensive. And if you are a no-meals "day function", as opposed to an overnight function with a large block of guest rooms attached, the hotel may not be willing to confirm your date until three months in advance. That is not enough lead time to market your event.

You can often get a break on the room rental if you guarantee a minimum number of lunches or dinners. That sounds good, until you find out how much the meals cost. $12 for lunch and $24 for dinner (plus 17% gratuity and state sales/restaurant tax ...) - add that to the price of the seminar or show ticket and soon the cost has skyrocketed out of range for most dancer's budgets.

Hotel facilities also rarely come in the right shape or size; they're designed for static groups of seated people, not dancers. When you talk to the sales office, the first question they ask is how many people you expect. When you tell them 50, they immediately try to plop you into a 1200 square foot room. When you tell them you need 3600 square feet (minimum), their minds boggle. Many hotels also place a clause in the sales agreement that reserves the right to move you to a smaller room. Read the agreement carefully!

When you've managed to find an affordable 3600+ square-foot facility that will allow you to book your event far enough in advance, be sure you actually go and look at it. Door placement and free wall space are critical when fitting in vendor tables, perimeter chairs, and a stage. Make sure that a dance floor or raised staging is available for the show. Carpeting absolutely, positively will not do. Check out the lighting and sound system. Both are notoriously inadequate in most hotels. Also consider the availability of dressing facilities. The ladies' room just won't cut it. Find out if you are allowed to sell show tickets at the door – some facilities or community regulations prohibit this.

- Restaurants
Restaurants will welcome you with open arms - on off nights. Business is usually good enough on Friday and Saturday that they don't need an extra draw. Many restaurant owners are also chauvinists. They consider belly dancers a draw for the drinking and leering crowd, not the family dinner clientele. Some sponsors have been successful working a deal with the management for a small percentage of the gross receipts accumulated during a show, but I have not had any luck in my area. You could consider using private banquet space, but you will have all of the headaches of providing advance head counts, staging and sound equipment, and last minute clientele.

The watchword for your facility search is flexibility. Decide what is most important to you (convenience, simplicity, amenities, etc.) and then find the best fit. Allow yourself plenty of time and bushels of patience.

Once you've found your facility and reserved it, and decided on your instructor and format, it's time to get down to business.

Next installment: Entering the hard, cold world of dollars and cents.

Part 8: The Business Aspect

I hate the business side of sponsoring. The *intuitive* and *feeler* tendencies of my basic personality preferences (see installment three) are in conflict with the necessity to think solely in terms of "the bottom line". As I mentioned in installment seven, I am just trying not to lose money. That concept is worlds apart from trying to make money, and it gets me in trouble every time.

I have a problem with the business side of a seminar because my sense of fair play keeps getting in the way (oops - all you *sensors/thinkers* out there just got huffy). I cannot bring myself to take what I consider as unfair advantage of other people's generosity. That may make me a nice person, but it sure isn't any way to run a business enterprise.

What am I talking about? The problem of keeping costs down without appearing to be either cheap, money hungry, or both. The problem arises in setting the class, show, and vendor fees, and in compensating performers and the support crew.

- class and show fees

Setting fees is difficult. There are always two sides to the coin. You can easily price yourself out of the market, or into the poorhouse. I start by dividing the anticipated number of registrants into the estimated expenses (be sure to be liberal on expenses and conservative on registrants). That gives me a basic rate for seminar plus show (since most registrants also purchase a show ticket). If it's a two-day seminar, I then subtract the show ticket price, divide the resulting number in half, and have a starting point for the one-day price. That's when the real fun starts.

Decisions, decisions. The two-day package has to cost less than both one-day packages together. How much less is enough? The late registration price has to be more than the preregistration price. How much more is too much? Set the price too high and you discourage late registrants; set the price too low and people won't bother to preregister (causing you major heartburn). Then it's time to add in the price of the lunches if you are providing catering. I only add the actual cost of the meals. I make no attempt to turn a profit on catering - it's already too expensive. Adding in the meals usually throws the package discount amount out of whack, so then it's time to tinker again.

The same process applies to the show ticket. Advance reservations should cost less than those at the door. How much less? If you're having dinner or hors d'oeuvres, things get even messier. You have to provide the caterer or hotel with a head count 48 hours in advance of the event. So tickets sold *before* the catering cutoff include food; those *after* the date do not. I can't charge someone $25 at the door to watch other people eat. If the dinner cost $15, should I charge latecomers $12? $15? *Arghhh!* (The same dilemma occurs with late registrants for the seminar - I cannot bring myself to charge them for a lunch they do not get.) Conversely, if people know that they can pay less at the door (even if it's less for less), you will lose any incentive for preregistration. And even if you figure out the pricing dilemma, how do you make sure that only the people who paid for food get food? In the end, I usually rely on the honor system.

- volume discounts

It is common to give some kind of volume registration discount. This shows up most frequently as "*Teacher with five or more students attends free*". You get people doing some really weird math on this arrangement. (Seven registrations divided by the seminar fee times six, and does the discount apply to the show ticket …?) I give a flat discount per person ($5 for a one-day seminar, $10 for a two-day seminar) if there are five or more registrations in the same envelope. It makes life a whole lot easier for you and the registrants.

- vendor fees

My philosophy on vending is this: If you don't have good vendors, your attendance will suffer. If your vendors do not make a profit, they will not come back to another event. It is in your best interests to keep your fees reasonable. I charge the vendor the same fee as a seminar attendee. For that price, they get three tables, room for a garment rack, permission to participate in the seminar if desired, and permission to perform in the show if desired. There is no additional charge for the show. If there is catered food, the vendor has the option of purchasing food at cost. (By the way, you should make sure that meals are delivered to the vendors, since meal time is also shopping time for everyone else.)

Be generous and kind to your vendors. Theirs is a tough life.

- performers
I believe that performers should not have to pay for a show in which they perform. In addition, if the show is an invitation-only concert, a performer should receive some additional compensation for their professional services. That philosophy may not make good business sense, but I believe that it is the right thing to do.

Conversely, if I gave every performer a free seminar, that could amount to one-quarter of the students attending for free, with me footing the red ink. (And what about a troupe - are they worth less, just because there are more of them?) Then there is the issue of performers at a one-day seminar and show versus a two-day seminar and show. A free two-day seminar is obviously worth more. Does that mean I should pay out hard cash in the one-day case, or only give a 50% discount for a two-day seminar?

I thought I was going to go nuts trying to figure out how to be fair and consistent. I ended up compromising my principles just enough to live with. Every performer gets a discount on the seminar, plus free show admission (if food is involved, they pay cost), plus a graduated mileage allowance based on distance traveled. I also provide performers with copies of the show video at cost. The discount amount on the semimar is the going rate in my area for a five-minute bellygram. It hasn't been a perfect solution. I still wish I could pay everyone $200 for their appearance and support, but until I win the lottery, this will have to do.

- the support crew
My friends are perfectly willing to help, but again, I can't ask for something for nothing. Fortunately, they will follow me anywhere for pizza and brownies (not just any brownies, mind you - only raspberry sin chocolate truffle brownies). They also get free show admission. Ditto for all the family and friends and students and spouses that get roped in, too. I probably average 10-20 free admissions per show. It helps fill out the crowd, but it doesn't do much for the bottom line.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because way back at the beginning, when you are figuring out whether or not your area can support a dance seminar, you need to subtract out the "freebies". That may make a significant enough dent in your anticipated support base to put you into the red.

In installment four, I asked you to decide how much money you could afford to lose. That decision will be the cap that you set on your up-front, non-refundable expenses. It will determine the extent of your advertising and direct mail effort.

The possibilities for spending yourself into the sewer on a seminar are endless. All of those little expenditures and freebies add up over time. The more work you can do yourself, the less money you will have to pay someone else. You need to decide what is most important to you (your time or hard cash) and compromise on the rest to fit within your budget.

Next installment: The sales pitch.

Part 9: Getting the Message Out

If you're going to get anyone to attend your seminar, you need to mount some kind of marketing campaign. You have to convince members of the dance community that your event is worth spending their hard-earned money on.

The extent of your marketing plan will depend on your budget. There's an old saying: "you have to spend money to make money". I'm not that brave. The brunt of my marketing plan relies on direct mail (the flyer), calendar listings, and my website (www.chelydra.com), with the occasional display ad thrown in for good measure. For a concert show that is advertised to the general public, I also utilize local radio and newspaper coverage, and local web sites.

The content of each of these advertising items is a matter of personal style and creativity, but there are certain basics you will need to adhere to. Keep things brief, easy-to-read, and logically laid out, and have at least one friend proofread everything for errors and readability/clarity before the final printing.

- flyers

The flyer is your main point of contact with your customer base. It must both persuade and inform. It creates that often-critical first impression of you, the seminar sponsor, and your event. I set great store by a finely produced, well-constructed flyer. To my mind, a poorly designed, confusing flyer implies a poorly planned, disorganized seminar, and I shy away.

The well-dressed flyer contains a class outline and schedule, clearly defined preregistration and cutoff dates, easy-to-understand pricing, space limitations, a list of special items to bring (veil, zils, skirt, sword, cane, etc.), addresses and phone numbers for the sponsor and the facility, and a map and directions. Hints on hotel accommodations are appreciated, and *don't* forget to warn people to brown bag it if there are no nearby restaurants or fast food outlets.

I do my level best to make the classes sound exciting, informative, and interesting without going overboard. You will get a better response (and fewer phone calls/emails) if your flyer describes the subject(s) being taught.

Make sure that your flyer meets the basics of good journalism - who, what, why, when, and where. It is a kindness to provide a phone number that will be functional the day of the seminar for emergency messages or providing directions to lost souls. (If more than one phone number is listed in the flyer, make sure each is clearly marked with a description of what it will be used for, and when). The advent of cell phones has made this task much easier.

It is also useful to provide a map in addition to textual directions. I hate making maps, but they are lifesavers to out-of-towners who may have taken a wrong turn. You don't have to put in every single secondary road (the simpler the better), but make sure a few landmarks are present. (It's helpful to know that if you've just passed the cemetery or the Food Lion, you've gone too far.) And try to maintain a modicum of geographical and to-scale accuracy. When limited-access roads are involved (such as Interstates), provide both exit numbers and road names.

Your flyer should clearly state if the show is sponsor-invitation-only, or voluntary-self-invitation. If there are time limits, deadlines, or special instructions for performers, or forms that should be filled out and returned, don't forget to include them in your mailing.

Visually and conceptually, I find the double-sided brochure-style flyer easier to read and understand. Each section of the brochure serves as a separate virtual page and contains a description of a different aspect of the seminar - cover, teacher bio/class description(s),

schedule, show, registration, accommodations, map, and address page. The brochure format is slightly more time consuming to lay out, but the resulting product is worth the trouble.

I have found it extremely convenient to put the registration form and the address page back-to-back. The address page is of no use to the registrant, and might be helpful to you if the registrant's handwriting is illegible. ***Don't*** put the registration form back-to-back with the map, schedule, or hotel information! You'll get last-minute calls and emails requesting the missing information.

Try to avoid multi-page flyers. They are overwhelming and confusing, and the pages become easily separated.

Limit your use of fancy fonts (styles of characters) to headers and important items that need to stand out. While visually interesting in small doses, it can be tiring to try to decipher large amounts of text in an ornate font. Remember, the idea is to communicate information clearly and efficiently, not produce a work-of-art.

- advertising
I rarely do what is termed "display advertising" - boxed advertisements. For one-time events, I have not found it a cost-effective technique for generating registrations. If you are going to be a frequent seminar sponsor, display advertisements will help you establish long-term name recognition.

I indulge in a small-to-medium display ad when I'm working on a percentage basis with the instructor. The rest of the time I can't justify the expense. It is vital, however, to get your event in all of the available calendar listings. And don't forget online calendars and e-Zines!

Needless to say, the smaller the ad, the less information you can convey. Use creative minimalism, and don't forget those journalistic basics - who, what, when, where, and "how" [to get more information]. Also use the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid), and, in the words of a close friend, "white space is nice". Don't try to cram in so much information that the result is visually unappealing, confusing, and hard to read.

- mailing
Bulk mail is enticingly cheap, but fatally unreliable. I have heard too many horror stories from other sponsors to trust using it. Bulk mail has absoutely no priority; it gets attended to when there is nothing else for the post office to work on. Even using the classic phrase "time-dated material, please expedite" does not ensure the timely delivery of your brochures. There are also restrictions on the use of bulk mail. Check with your local post office for details.

Since direct mail is your main source of registrants, I recommend that you use first class. Some dance associations will mail your flyer with their newsletter for a small fee. Your savings could be far greater than the cost of membership.

To simplify the process, I print the return address directly on the flyer before it is reproduced. In addition, I put the phrase "Return Service Requested" on the address page. Flyers which cannot be delivered as-addressed will be returned with an address correction (if available), at no charge to you. This is a marvelous and cost-effective way to keep your address database up-to-date. (Note that a similar postal endorsement, "Address Service Requested", does much the same thing, but is not free of charge to you.)

I also use computer-generated mailing labels for the addressing, and small stickers as brochure closures. Staple closure is also acceptable to the post office - I just don't like them because I either tear

the flyer getting it open, or break my fingernails taking the staple out. (The staple puller is never nearby.)

- local publicity

If your show is open to the public, you will need to take advantage of all of the free publicity you can find. This will vary from area to area. As I mentioned earlier in this series, if you're not a charity, non-profit organization, or bonafide business enterprise, you will be at a disadvantage.

In addition to the primary newspaper in your area, there are likely to be a number of small community gazettes, newsletters, and specialty publications that will list your event. These are usually found at grocery and convenience stores in your area. I usually provide two types of listings - short and long. The short format resembles a classified ad; the minimum necessary facts are listed, along with a number for obtaining more information.

The long format is intended for use in cultural calendars and upcoming events listings. Several paragraphs in length, it describes the show and programme in more detail. I also try to include a photograph of the featured performer if possible. The old adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words", is tired but true. Exercise some caution with photos, however - community standards vary. If the photo is too steamy, you may do yourself more harm than good, or not get into print at all.

Performers appreciate it if you identify their home base (city and/or state) in publicity releases whenever possible. There is frequent duplication of dance names, especially the more popular ones. Providing specifics helps avoid misunderstandings.

Local cable and radio stations, and the public broadcasting network (TV & radio) often provide on-air cultural calendar listings. Check them out. I'm a little leery of local radio announcers; they tend to go bonkers when presented with a Middle Eastern dance event and often get carried away into the realms of bad taste and frivolity. If that possibility bothers you, avoid deejays like the plague.

- show programs

Show programs are an indirect form of marketing. A well-constructed program helps create an air of planning and professionalism around your show. You have the opportunity to spend as much or as little as you like in this area. You can even forego the program entirely, but the audience seems to miss it.

If you want to go first class with a glossy, catalog-type program, you need plenty of startup time. This type of program is also expensive; chances are you'll have to sell advertising to try and cover the cost. That can be time-consuming. I have usually found it impossible to set the lineup in concrete far enough in advance to allow me to produce a professionally printed program.

Show programs give me heartburn. Out of nine shows, only *one* managed to get on the boards with the initial lineup. Things just keep happening. Drop-outs, drop-ins, illness, injury, technical difficulties, ... whatever. I try to be cheerful and resigned, but the only thing that I hate more than no program is an incorrect program.

There is also the decision as to the content of the program. If you can get everyone's bio ahead of time (this won't be easy), you can put the bios in the program and greatly simplify the announcer's

duties. Of course, this makes the program larger and more complex, which increases printing fees (or printing time, if you have access to a high-quality printer or copier).

- online advertising

The Internet has boomed since this article was first written. If you are serious about becoming a seminar sponsor, you should post your event on your own personal/professional website, or a website dedicated to your event. The procedures for establishing a website, and making sure that it is accessible through the major search engines, are widely available through your Internet Service Provider, or on the web itself.

Most metropolitan areas also have community-based web sites listing happenings in your area.

- email

You can also advertise your event through email, using your address book or other mailing lists. Make sure that whatever you send is small in size so that it will download quickly. Use a text version of your flyer instead of the original word processing file, and don't attach large pictures. As with your flyer, it is not a good idea to use fancy fonts. The font you choose may not be available on the destination computer, and your flyer will lose its carefully-crafted pizazz.

Don't be seduced by the fact that email is free, and overuse it with repeated multiple unsolicited mailings. You risk getting the reputation of being a dance-spammer. Personally, I find unsolicited email more intrusive and annoying than postal junk mail.

Next month: Your support network.

Part 10: Role Playing (or, Versatility is the Order of the Day)

It is physically impossible for one person alone to produce a seminar and show (the seminar, maybe, but not the show). You simply cannot be in the audience, backstage, and out front in the lobby all at the same time. You will need help, whether it be from family members, friends, or paid professionals. There are a number of tasks to be performed. If you plan on producing a seminar and show on a regular basis, I suggest you limit people to one role apiece to avoid burnout.

In addition, to harken back to the personality type conflicts discussed in installment three, I recommend that you avoid placing *perceiver*-type personalities in any of these jobs. A seminar, and especially a show, requires planning, structure, and attention to detail to function smoothly. Although the support crew needs to be able to roll with the punches delivered by technical glitches and last-minute emergencies, perceivers are easily distracted from the task at hand and often a little too laid back. You'll have more than your share of perceivers on the performing side; give yourself a break on the technical end.

Below is an abbreviated list (me and my lists again) of the minimum tasks involved in producing a seminar and show, along with some hints on what to look out for.

- bookkeeper
This is so obvious I almost overlooked it. If you're working for yourself, record keeping is a personal choice. If you have a partner, or you are working with the instructor on a percentage basis, or you are sponsoring a benefit, you are obligated to keep an accurate record of all income and expenditures. You don't have to be an accountant, but you should at least appear fiscally responsible. I maintain two separate record sheets, one for expenditures and one for income. It's what works for me.

Itemize expenses in a log book as they occur, entering the date, type/description, and amount. If the dollar amount is not known immediately, at least enter the date and type of expense, adding the amount at a later date. For example, I enter long distance calls as I make them, then fill in the actual cost when the phone bill arrives. Try to label and save all receipts as a confirmation of the expense. Pay by check wherever possible, entering a description of the expense in your check register. The description will serve as a reminder when you transfer the expense into your log.

Enter all income as soon as it is received. Deposit checks on a regular basis. Number your deposit slips and enter the deposit number next to each registration in the income log; this provides you with a cross reference to verify that all funds were indeed deposited, and when the deposit was made. Make sure that you have enough money in the seminar account to pay all bills due on the seminar weekend. Money received at the door cannot be deposited in time to cover checks written during the event.

Store all of your records in one location, not spread out all over the house. (That old standby, the shoebox filing system, is better than nothing at all.) Save all registration and reservation forms until the seminar is over; mistakes can happen when transcribing information from the registration forms to the master list. Omissions and errors can be cleared up immediately if the original data is available for reference.

- travel agent
Chances are good that you will be flying the instructor into town for the seminar. Unless you have unlimited funds at your disposal, you're going to be on the lookout for the best deal possible on airfare. You may have to purchase the tickets several months in advance to take advantage of special promotional rates. At the very least, you will have to purchase the tickets

two weeks in advance to get a decent discount. (That's always a fun decision when registration is low - you have to buy the tickets before you're even sure there is going to be a seminar.)

The drawback to getting a really good deal on the airfare, of course, is that the tickets are non-refundable and non-exchangable. The term non-refundable is actually a misnomer; you will be able to get *some* of your money back, but new rules have just gone into effect in October 2002. Check with the airline to be sure what the ground rules are.

With this in mind, check, and then double check the flight plan with the instructor. Emphasize the fact that the expense is non-refundable, and that you will hold them responsible for both the penalty fee and the fare increase if the reservations need to be changed. It sounds harsh, but it's necessary for your own protection. After the instructor's fee, transportation costs may be your next-highest expense item.

Unless the instructor is adamantly opposed, I recommend that you make the ticket reservations. Otherwise, they just might not get done (the *perceiver* personality at work again). I also recommend that you avoid using the last available flight of the day except in cases of absolute necessity. To prevent ulcers, leave yourself a backup flight. I will never forget the day I went to the airport and no one was there. It is not an experience for the faint of heart.

- chauffeur
At the very least, you will have to make arrangements to transport the instructor to and from the airport or train station. Unless your event is in a self-contained facility such as a hotel (or the instructor is lodging at your house), you will also have to provide transport to and from the seminar and show. This doesn't sound like much until you have eighty million things on your mind and you're running behind.

- hospitality hostess
Also *gopher* and *complaint department*, but they don't sound as nice. Someone needs to be around and visible to get things to start and stop on time, answer questions, interface with facility staff, make sure the performers know when to be where for the show, and deal with countless other little odds and ends.

- registration steward/ticket agent
You will need one or more warm bodies at the door for both the seminar and show to handle checkin (for those with preregistrations or show reservations), at-the-door registrations and show ticket sales, and show program distribution. You will need to provide your staff with registration and reservation checklists (clearly marked paid and unpaid), the show programs, and enough cash to allow them to make change for cash payments. If you have a policy on payment by check, make sure your registration crew understands it completely.

The amount of seed money to provide as change is dependent seminar and/or ticket price. Try to provide at least enough change for two one-day registrations, two two-day registrations, and five show tickets paid for by twenty-dollar bills. You should provide all of the denominations necessary to make change for payment in bills of five, ten, and twenty dollars. For example, if the ticket price is a multiple of $5, you will not need to provide any one dollar bills in change, but should provide both fives and tens. If your ticket price is $8, you will need ones and tens. If your ticket price is $12, you will need ones and fives.

I don't mess with reserved seating, even at dinner shows. I advertise loud and long that seating is on a first-come, first-served basis, and cross my fingers that everything works out. Reserved seating causes a lot of administrative hassle that I prefer to avoid. The seat-yourself approach also eliminates the need for ushers.

- announcer
The announcer is the most consistently visible member of your show. The announcer can have more influence on the overall tone of the show than the individual dancers. A poor choice can adversely affect the entire evening.

The ideal announcer has some knowledge of, and respect for, Middle Eastern dance. You need to be able to trust in their good taste. They don't have to be a walking encyclopedia of dance history, but you also don't want any extemporaneous, lewd, or juvenile jokes about legs, cleavage, cold sweats, shaking your bootie, or any other of the tacky comments you have heard from the public at large.

In addition, your announcer needs to be relaxed, assured, and rehearsed, with a clear and pleasant speaking voice. You will also have better results if you provide them with the introductory text for each performance in advance, including phonetic spellings of all Middle Eastern names. Make sure you include all musical and choreographic credits (with phonetic spelling if appropriate). Have cue cards ready during the show, but try to avoid having the announcer reading from cards onstage. Make sure they arrive in enough time to familiarize themselves with the equipment, setup, and any special requirements or last minute changes.

- sound engineer
A fancy name for the dude running the tape player. This job is a lot harder than it looks, and is critical to the success of the entire evening. The sound engineer has the thankless job of trying to please two groups of people with different needs - the performers and the audience. The engineer also has to deal with the technical difficulties of poor acoustics, cheap and unreliable tapes, wide variations in audio levels, and possibly unfamiliar equipment.

Ideally, like the announcer, your sound engineer should have some knowledge of music, preferably Middle Eastern music. Most of all, the engineer needs to pay attention to the music, not the show, and you need to arrange some signal or messenger mechanism to keep them attuned to the quality of the sound and the need for any adjustments. An aware sound engineer will turn the volume up for the drum solo and reset it for the finale. Avoid embarrassing glitches - warn them in advance of false endings, or a need for quick kills if there is an insufficient pause at the end of a particular segment.

Try to pre-screen all music, noting necessary bass and treble settings for optimum audio quality, and flagging variations in volume between different tapes. Dancers who are truly interested in the quality of their performance will understand and cooperate with the need to provide you with their music in advance. Pre-screening can make marginal tapes usable, and can allow you the time to make other arrangements if the quality of a recording is unacceptably poor. On at least one occasion, I have re-recorded a dancer's solo because I had a better master copy.

There is no better way to torture an audience than to make them sit through ten minutes of barely-audible or horribly distorted music.

- stage manager
Somebody has to keep the performers abreast of what's going on, and run interference between the stage and the dressing room. I make sure that the show program and approximate performance times are posted in the staging and dressing areas. Time has a way of expanding and contracting contrary to the physical laws of nature during a show, so constant reminders of the show's progress are necessary.

The stage manager can also expect to act as dresser, emergency seamstress, mother hen, diplomat, and nurse. An island of calm in a sea of frenzy.

The well-equipped dressing facility should provide chairs, garment racks, a full-length mirror, a nearby fountain or water station, a sewing kit (scissors, elastic, needles, thread), a travel iron and/or steamer, fan, and anything else you needed last time and didn't have. KEEP FOOD AND DRINK OUT OF THE DRESSING AREA, If you don't, there's going to be a tragic spill sooner or later.

- videographer
The penalty that you, the performers, and all of your support crew pay for producing a show is that you don't get to see it. Having a video record of the event will partially make up for that sacrifice. Resign yourself to the fact that a live show video will never be truly "professional" quality. The production values required for an ideal video (lighting, sound, camera angles, etc.) are not suited to a live show. You often have to compromise the ideal camera placement to accommodate the paying guests. Whether your videographer is family member, friend, or professional, try to convince them to avoid a large amount of panning and zooming.

You must also realize that the act of having a video camera present obligates you to provide copies (free or on a fee basis) to the other members of the show. You'd better figure out in advance how you're going to do it and how much it will cost (don't forget packaging & postage).

- photographer
I like to have a photographic record of my shows. I take advantage of local "2 for 1" processing specials, and mail the duplicates to the performers in the post-seminar thank-you letters.

The seminar and the show are now history. Your job is almost done. Next month I'll discuss wrapping up the odds and ends.

Part 11: Wrapping Up

The seminar and show are behind you at last. You're not through yet, especially if you want to do this again. It's time to thank all of those kind (and often reluctant) friends, relatives, and dancers who supported you, and time for you to toot your own horn a bit.

Hopefully, you managed to avoid being tagged as audio and video cassette duplicator. If you did get backed into this corner because the instructor volunteered your services in front of fifty desperate dancers, you have my sympathy. I hope you are at least lucky enough to have been left the music - if the instructor went home with it "to be mailed later", you're in big trouble.

The thank-you correspondence is straightforward. Just be sure you don't forget anyone. As I mentioned before, I like to send copies of any photos I have of a dancer's performance with the letter. It's a small gesture that seems to mean a lot.

Your final task is to send blurbs out to all of the dance news columns. Everyone gets a kick out of seeing their name in print, and you need the exposure as a successful sponsor. Now, I always take these blurbs with a grain of salt, since I know it's usually the sponsor who writes them. In the dance news world, there's never such a thing as an unsuccessful seminar and show. Superlatives are the order of the day. I don't gush well. I settle for a reasonably factual description of the events and leave it at that.

If you're lucky, someone will write a positive review of your effort. I appreciate positive comments. All of those minor catastrophes and brush fires you fight all weekend may color your view of the event adversely - it's always nice to know that you've succeeded from the point of view of those on the outside.

Well, you've done it. Time for a well-deserved vacation, right? Wrong! If you're going to do it again, it's already past time to start the whole cycle over.

In theory, you would expect things to get easier with repetition. In practice, it never seems to. You do manage to get into a groove concerning the technical details, but the truly high-stress areas (negotiations, missed deadlines, the how-many-will-attend tightrope) just don't go away.

And believe it or not, after eleven installments, there are still topics I haven't covered. Seminars are like icebergs; only 10% of your effort is glamorous, exciting, rewarding, and visible. The remaining 90% of hidden effort is what hurts you.

This series turned out to have a life of its own; once I got started, I just couldn't stop. There was too much to talk about, much of which is never mentioned in *How To* articles. I have a talent for making work for myself. I never intend to, it just happens. I'm sure some experienced seminar sponsors are aghast at what I put myself through.

There are successful sponsors out in the world who seem to have found the magic recipe for success. Year after year, I see seminars featuring multiple teachers and numerous top name artists in the show, a live band, and full page ads in every dance publication. After four years of trying, I failed to find the secret combination of ingredients to duplicate their product. Maybe I don't think big enough, or maybe I didn't try long enough, or maybe I'm just in a bad area. I don't know. Perhaps, after reading this, someone will be kind enough to enlighten me and the rest of the small-time sponsors who are struggling to keep their heads above water.

At the time of the original series, my career as a seminar sponsor was a closed chapter in my life. Those of you who know me also know that I am once again a seminar sponsor. The final chapter in this series addresses what I decided to do differently the second time around. (After all, experience allows you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.)

Part 12: Starting Over

I don't like to be defeated. After several years of overcoming "sponsor burnout", I took a good, hard, look at what caused my burnout, and what was successful, and came up with an approach that would allow me to remain a seminar sponsor while retaining my sanity.

My goals were to:

- minimize monetary risk
- eliminate dependence on others
- showcase instructors for whom I have great respect
- provide a friendly, welcoming environment for new dancers

The most influential decision that I made was to only do as much as I, personally, could accomplish without undue stress. There would be no multi-night shows, no high-maintenance personalities, no concerts, no professional lighting, no programs, no egos, no politics, and no pretense.

My philosophy is: Do you want to improve your dance? Come and have fun. Do you want to just shop or "be seen"? Attend another event.

This reassessment effort resulted in two very different approaches:

- the multiple mini-class seminar for all levels of dancers
- the master seminar for advanced and professional dancers

Beach Blanket Beledi (BBB) is my annual multiple mini-class seminar and dance party, held in October in Nags Head, NC. I chose the mini-class format because it seemed to be the most popular all-around format. I chose the Outer Banks of North Carolina because I like the ambience (or lack of it), and the remote location ensures that only dancers who really want to participate undertake the effort to attend.

The *Butt Burner* series of seminars fulfills my need to receive intensive, focused, master-level instruction. The Butt Burners are limited-attendance, preregistration-required classes held at a local dance studio. The subjects taught are those that I am most interested in learning. There is no show, and there are no vendors. This reduces the publicity requirements, fixes costs, and is just about as simple as it gets. It is amazing how much more you learn when you're not worrying about that night's performance.

Neither event is risk or stress-free, but it's a level of stress that I can handle. Although I still occasionally struggle with the temptation to sponsor on a grander scale, I have accepted my limitations, and am at peace with the result.

I hope that this series has been helpful to those of you who are thinking of becoming a seminar sponsor, and that it will help you to avoid some of the pitfalls of the process.

But I also hope that it has opened the eyes of all of you who attend these events as to the amount of planning, preparation, and risk involved, and I hope that you will have more patience toward, and respect for, the brave and hardy souls who - in the face of all odds - continue to provide you with the opportunity to study and learn and grow with this wonderful dance of ours.