



Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

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THE TEACHING CONUNDRUM

I defaulted into being a middle eastern dance instructor. I was primarily interested in folkloric dance, which meant that I needed a troupe to be able to present such dances effectively. In order to have a troupe, I needed a continuing supply of dancers. In order to have a supply of dancers, I had to teach.

I was not comfortable with the idea of teaching, even after six years of study. I was confident that I had the ability to teach, but I was not convinced that I was technically prepared. I compared myself with the instructors I had taken seminars with (Jajouka, Phaedra, Ibrahim Farrah, Riskallah Riyad, and Suhaila Salimpour) and felt myself woefully inadequate - barely up to the level of advanced student.

Then I compared myself with the instructors I had encountered locally, and decided that I could certainly provide students with a better basic foundation, and bring them up through what I considered the intermediate level (an average of two years of class to reach initial performing status). I didn't make up my mind, however, until I had a series of private lessons with Suhaila Salimpour in California, and she told me that I did indeed have an adequate technical background for teaching middle eastern dance.

So it was time to get down to business. First on the agenda was locating studio space. The sister of one of my co-workers owned a dance studio barely a mile from my home. We worked out an arrangement where she would provide studio space and liability coverage, and we would split class advertising expenses and tuition revenues on a 50-50 basis. We set a night, a time, and designed an initial ad campaign.

Time constraints (only two class slots per week) and market pressures dictated that I emphasize the cabaret style of dance in classes. I designed four foundation choreographies to be taught (in theory) over the span of one year. Each dance builds upon the techniques of the previous one, and each introduces a different aspect of the dance - zils, veil, tambourine, and drum. The most painful part of the creative process was to constantly remember what it had been like to be a beginning student, and to resist the urge to embellish. I wrote full notes for each dance, including the footwork, body isolations, arm placement, focus, and zil pattern for each step.

I also made a conscious decision to treat each and every student as a potential professional dancer. I knew that this approach would result in a high student dropout rate, and I accepted that fact. It was (and still is) more important to me to produce a small quantity of quality dancers than a large volume of what a friend terms *wigglers*.

So there I was, fully prepared (so I thought) to meet the budding middle eastern dancers of

southeastern Virginia. As always, the world has a few surprises in store for those who think they know all the answers.

Lesson One

The first lesson I learned as a teacher was that I was not going to be able to be just a middle eastern dance instructor. I was going to have to be a basic dance technique and music theory teacher, then a middle eastern dance instructor, plus cultural anthropologist, costumer, choreographer, and booking agent. And all of this must be accomplished without benefit of a standard dance terminology or any type of teacher certification program. How on earth to fit it all in, and also make class interesting and fun?

I have taught for seven years now, and I'm always trying to find a better way. My foundation choreographies have evolved to adapt to my greater understanding of the abilities of the beginning student. I have moved the intermediate class to the hour preceding the beginner class; the intermediate students work harder because they have an audience, and the beginners get to see their future.

To address the issue of music theory, the warm-up session now also serves as an exercise in rhythm recognition. We will stop momentarily, clap out the rhythm, and name it.

To avoid the clone syndrome, I teach my intermediate students choreographies of other instructors - both East and West Coast styles (there is a definite difference).

Last year I introduced quarterly video parties, presenting both good and bad examples of the cabaret style, and also introducing students to the rich variety of folkloric dances of the middle east.

This year I plan on re-introducing class videotaping. This has been a double-edged sword in the past. On the positive side, video can be a limited substitute for a live audience, reducing self-consciousness. On the negative side, video can magnify minor defects and discourage the less skilled students.

One important area I have always had trouble approaching is costuming. Most students do not sew, so a class in costume construction is pointless. Most students also do not typically have hundreds of dollars to spend on a custom-made ensemble. I try to stress quality over quantity, and I show my students my mistakes as well as my successes. I try to address this issue in the first four to eight weeks of class in the hope that I will help my students avoid the usual first-costume blunders. Fortunately, in the last few years there has been a proliferation in the number of vendors offering custom-made or pre-fabricated costumes at all price levels.

I provide each new student with a list of addresses for the major middle eastern dance publications, and a variety of costume, music, and video vendors. This represents a passive approach to both costuming and the cultural aspect of the dance. This year I plan on taking a more active approach, establishing a magazine and catalog lending library in the studio.

Lesson Two

The second lesson I learned as a teacher was that not all students approach the dance with the same dedication that I did. My estimates on how long it would take to complete each foundation choreography were based on the assumption that students would attend class regularly, and would practice outside of class.

In most cases, I was wrong on both counts. Adult students are very fickle. A parent who will bend over backward to get little Susie and Johnny to class on time in the worst weather conditions will play hooky from their own class at the drop of a hat. The student who practices during the week is the exception, not the rule. A teacher must walk a continual tightrope between moving slowly enough to prevent discouraging occasional students without alienating the students who attend regularly.

I have also had to battle my tendency toward being too intense. My efforts to lighten up have included the introduction of video parties, field trips, and informal discussions of any television documentaries pertaining to the middle east.

Maintaining a student's interest and dedication is directly related to the teacher's ability as a coach. Because of my tendency to be too focused, I have always been very careful to be upbeat and positive, praising small achievements loudly and often, and parceling out correction in small doses. A student who is having trouble with all aspects of a combination is corrected over a period of weeks, not all in one lesson.

Lesson Three

The third lesson I learned was that some students will never be dancers. I have a button on my dance bag that proclaims "*Those who dance are thought mad by those who hear not the music*". There always seems to be one student in every class group who simply cannot hear music; I categorize them as rhythm-challenged. For these students, dance is a sequence of steps executed to some incidental background noise.

I have consulted with several nationally prominent instructors on how they deal with this situation. Most deal with it by no longer teaching beginners, a luxury that is not available to me. No one seems to have a good answer except to just keep trying, and maybe someday a miracle will occur and the light will dawn.

I am uncomfortable with this approach, but as yet have failed to come up with a successful alternative. On one hand, I feel guilty at continuing to accept money from someone who is not progressing. On the other hand, if that student really and truly loves the dance, enjoys class, and is willing to keep working, who am I to destroy their dream?

So, like others before me, I continue to plug away. I clap the rhythm, I hum the melody (I do a great Egyptian nose flute); I explain why the choreography pauses here, and floats there, and lifts, and releases. I savor each tiny breakthrough of understanding.

Lesson Four

People are creatures of habit, and dance students are certainly no exception to the rule. Class

eventually becomes a comfortable, relatively mindless, weekly cocoon, with me continuing to spoon-feed choreographies into a bottomless pit of complacency.

A bit melodramatic, perhaps, but I am still searching for a good method to transition a dancer from passive student to active choreographer and soloist. A few make the change naturally without prompting, some can be pushed from the nest, and most have never made the transition at all.

In January of my second year of teaching, I had seven beginner students. I merely mentioned to them that they might want to consider being in the studio's annual recital in June. Five students voted with their feet and never came back to class. The remaining two students stayed, but also voted against participating in the recital.

I tried a new approach for my next group of students. After progressing through the four foundation choreographies, I provided each of them with a tape containing a variety of three- and four-minute musical selections. They were sent home with the assignment to choose a selection which interested them, and to come to class each week with another segment of choreography completed.

That approach didn't work either. My students would come to class unprepared, and I would have to improvise something to fill the time.

I also try to break students out of their rut by encouraging attendance at dance seminars. I have had little success in this area due to monetary considerations, family obligations, work schedules, and distant locations (1.5-4 hours travel time). Short of paying the fees myself and chartering a bus, I don't know how to fix the problem.

This year's new approach is going to be the pseudo-seminar. I am going to occasionally bring both classes (and possibly my troupe) together for an evening, and teach a new, short choreography at seminar speed. I hope that this will encourage students to attend seminars, and also prevent them from being overwhelmed by the atmosphere.

Conclusion

I started teaching to generate new members for my dance troupe. I have had only moderate success in meeting this goal. Over a period of seven years, five students have achieved probationary troupe status, and three of the five have achieved full troupe membership.

In spite of my mixed success in gaining troupe members, I continued teaching because it became a crusade. I describe myself as suffering from the *Don Quixote* syndrome (a gentleman who fruitlessly jousts with windmills), but perhaps the *Superman* syndrome would be more appropriate - I crusade for truth, justice, and the middle eastern way.

My crusade, however hopeless it seems at times, is to raise the image of middle eastern dance above the American stereotype of young nubile bodies with heaving bosoms and big hair undulating in skimpy chiffon costumes, to a realization that middle eastern dance is truly an art form worthy of respect.

Two friends, who started in this business at the same time that I did, went on the same crusade. It burned them out. Both have retired from the dance, and do not look on the experience as a joyful one.

I have battled through three serious burnouts in fourteen years. Each of them lasts about twelve months. (I'm eight months into the current one, and it's the worst yet.) I've made it through each one because, for a variety of reasons, I haven't been willing or able to quit.

I recently lost a beginner student after three classes because I had the audacity to correct her when she performed a forward pelvic thrust instead of a stationary tightening of the *gluteus maximus*.

The following week she was replaced with a student who listens, practices, and is filled with natural grace and beauty.

Someone must be looking out for me after all.

Postscript

The four basic choreographies mentioned in this article are available as a part of the **No-Frills Video** series produced by Chelydra. Each tape includes a performance of the choreography, an abbreviated dance warmup, a breakdown of each step filmed from the front and the back, a set of strengthening and toning exercises, and written instructions. All tapes (beledi with zils, veil, tambourine, and [almost] shimmyless drum) are \$25 (shipping included).