



## TURKISH BELLY DANCE - NIPPLE TASSLES AND BEADED UNDERWEAR

A comparative overview of the Turkish Belly Dance style



Turkish style belly dance, also known as Oryantal, has a unique place in Middle Eastern dance representations. It is energetic, often with significant skill and dexterity required. With the help of internationally recognised dancers such as Asena and Tanyelli the style is growing in both popularity and levels of professionalism.

So after recently returning to New Zealand from Turkey where I have been performing and researching the dance I have been disappointed to discover some negative and misinformed attitudes about the dance form from members of the dance community here.



These attitudes are I think are partly based on some of the poorly produced DVDs and videos that are widely available depicting Turkish dancers in tiny costumes and often not demonstrating advanced levels of dance expertise. For example one DVD in particular that I purchased while in Turkey features dancers who seem to have forgotten to put on their skirts and are dancing in bra and belt with some very compromising camera angles. There is also a lack of quality and in-depth literature offering a modern perspective on the dance compared to other styles.

However one international dancer and researcher, Elizabeth Artemis Mourat who has spent significant time researching both the Egyptian and Turkish styles of dance has this to say about the Turkish belly dance style: "the Turkish dance style is less refined than its Egyptian sister. It is less elegant but not less articulate. What it lacks in composure and predictability, it makes up for with spontaneity and passion. Neither style is inferior to the other. Both styles are expressive, playful and sometimes introspective. The Turkish dance is aggressive, passionate and sometimes arrogant or indifferent." (A comparison of Turkish and Egyptian Style Oriental Dance, Elizabeth Artemis Mourat, 2001)

Perceptions and stereotypes are also not helped by the large number of foreign dancers that are currently performing throughout Turkey. Sometimes coming from Russia and Eastern Europe they are often paid very little to perform and although they may have visual appeal they do not always have high levels of dance experience. Some of these young dancers unfortunately are encouraged into situations where they are required to dance in very skimpy costumes and attract as many tips as possible.

Costuming has also played a key part in perceptions of Turkish belly dance and styles certainly can at times be revealing in comparison to the restrictions sometimes placed on performers based in Egypt or other parts of the Middle East. However I believe that this in itself does not mean that the dance form is any less valid or well executed. An example of this is the well known Turkish dancer Princess Banu who is noted for her original and at times revealing costume designs but also widely respected for her great command of the dance. There is much crossover with both the Egyptian and



Turkish costume designs influencing each other and dancers such as Asena are following Egyptian styles of costuming as well as creating her own unique and original designs which are then in turn replicated.

Historically too the context for Turkish style belly dancing has been in depicting sensual and earthy moves. Thrusting hip lifts and powerful pelvic motions have reference back to childbirth and older styles of gypsy dance still practiced in Turkey today. Certainly the dance form at times can be sexual in its representation however this is only one of the many expressions and interpretations of the dance form.

As dancers and students of Middle Eastern dance there is much therefore that we can learn from the Turkish style and also by observing dancers such as Asena, Tanyelli and the earlier dancers of the 1970s and 1980s. Many of these dancers are extremely professional, presenting physically demanding dance moves and superb costuming. While in Turkey I saw a wide range of representations of Turkish style belly dancing; from the scantily clad young foreign dancers through to a more restrained style that those who are more familiar with Egyptian belly dance will be more comfortable with.

From a personal performance perspective and indeed as a foreign dancer in Turkey I was keen to offer a style of dance that incorporated elements of both Turkish and Egyptian dance styles from a strongly professional basis. This means that I did not include nipple tassels, lap dancing or flashing of underwear in my repertoire however I was still able to present shows that had a strong audience appeal for both Turkish audiences as well as tourists from throughout Europe and the Middle East.

I also observed that belly dancing in Turkey has been undergoing somewhat of a renaissance largely due to the appearance of more dancing in music videos as well as increased television appearances and performances by well known dancers. Local gyms and exercise classes are now offering courses in belly dance style based moves for Turkish women. While still retaining the wonderful passion, exuberance and athletic ability that are hallmarks of the dance, it is certainly broadening its appeal.

So on the basis of tacky videos and dated stereotypes, Turkish style belly dancing can easily be dismissed as the cheap cousin of the Egyptian style. From the perspective of a close involvement in the dance form, yes there are cheap versions of the dance to be found as in any country where the dance form is represented but there are also stunningly executed, highly professional and very skillful performances as well, while still retaining the powerful and unique essence of this dance form.

As Elizabeth Artemis Mourat concludes "As a fully educated, well rounded Oriental dancer, it is important to be familiar with all of the Oriental styles of dance as well as the folkloric dances that appear on the same ethnic stages. There is no reason to assume that the Turkish and Egyptian styles of Oriental dance should be the same. The differences should be celebrated rather than used to foster erroneous claims of inferiority of superiority. The Turkish style has a long and legitimate history and it has a right to be respected."

