

Food for thought.

Following the Teacher and Using the Breaking it Down Methods: The Facts.

Introduction

This is something that is very much food or thought. Here in Birmingham, and around the Midlands, there are many of us who bellydance, teach and attend workshops, where there are a variety of teaching styles. Below is a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of these teaching styles to show technique.

People are often divided into two camps about what is the best method to teach Middle Dance techniques.

This short essay will look at two teaching techniques with advantages and disadvantages of both following the teacher and the more Western approach of breaking movement down and using set choreographies.

1 Follow the Teacher

This technique, in bellydance, is a very traditional method, used in many cultures, where dance is an integral part of life. Examples: salsa, flamenco, regional folk dances, African dances, dances from the Indian sub-continent and Middle eastern dances. Children from an early age, watch and copy at social events where dance is found: weddings, festivals, and television, videos and DVDs. Adults discover new moves from one another, experiment at dances at social events. There is a clear context in terms of dancing certain moves and expressions with specific types of music and song.

In fact, in terms of Middle eastern bellydancing, such as Egyptian Raqs -el Sharqi/classical dance (in Egypt etc, it is "taught entirely taught by the ' I dance and you follow' method (Leila , www.gildedserpent.com/art38/LeilaldanceUfollow.htm <<http://www.gildedserpent.com/art38/LeilaldanceUfollow.htm>>).

Leila , a North American Middle Eastern dancer comments that many Western bellydance students are thrown by this method, given Western dance's tighter teaching structure, which we will explore later.

She quotes Egyptian dancers and teachers who simply, as explained in the first paragraph, watched and imitated dancers on TV at parties and weddings :

"He said,'One doesn't learn Oriental dance in the same way as ballet. When we were kids, and a Belly dancer appeared on TV, we always jumped up to imitate her. Also our mother often danced at family parties and we stood behind them and tried to copy her. Dancers learn steps from copying other dancers, and then they adapt them to their own dance style. If you learn Oriental dance by counting '1,2,3,4', you will dance like 1, 2,3,4."
(Leila, iibid.)

Often, some non-Middle Eastern dancers look stiff, rather than fluid, on account of having to count themselves into the dance.

So, the technique is copying and, in this process, picking up the feeling and energy of the dancer and his or her moves.

The idea, it seems that by continually copying, in a particular context (specific music, dance event, social gathering) one will adapt it to one's own style. It is an intuitive way of learning, almost like learning a foreign language in its own native surroundings, without a focus on the grammar or the structure, in the initial phases, only repeating certain phrases, which are appropriate and useful.

The student learns by repetition, muscle memory: he or she also learns from the teacher how to transition from one movement to another . (Leila), rather than explore that, his or her self . The student will also understand over time, from the teacher, "subtleties and nuances of the dance, as well as its technical elements"(Leila)

The greatest advantage is probably a dancer who is better able to interpret the music, rather than rely too much on choreography and methodology.

The teacher will intervene, only when there are "major problems in technique, but not correct minor differences between her movements and those of her students"(Leila).

In other words, students are given the scope to be individual and expressive with this framework. It is about surrendering control and learning from an experienced dancer.

Most Egyptian dance teachers, even if they use choreography, use the follow method, says Leila. Many use the break-down method with foreign students, and there has been a stronger emphasis on choreography , in recent years (Leila).

However, the disadvantage is clearly this: often outside the context of a Middle Eastern country, or a group of teachers who are Middle Eastern in origin, a student, who is not Middle Eastern, may not be able to connect with the movements- they may not feel the music, or feel very stiff and dance with a very heavy "foreign accent". It doesn't take into account too, some people's different learning styles, in or outside the Middle East : Auditory (where students respond to spoken instruction),, reading/writing style, where students may want to read or write down notes to consolidate understanding. It is no less disciplined than Western dance training, it is just a different approach

Kinesthetic learners (those who learn from movement) may fully benefit, as may Visual learners. This is why some dancers can pick dance moves in workshops, very quickly. It just means that other learners will take longer to learn and employ other techniques (writing, taping the lesson, reading up on dance styles etc) to consolidate learning. It is not necessarily a negative thing to learn something outside your learning preference, for it can be positively challenging and help the learner appreciate something from another culture or perspective.

There may be a risk of injury, if the dancer is not executing the dance move properly ,which is why the dance teacher must always be on hand to correct alignment/posture and movement and that the movements are coming from the correct set of muscles.

2. Western Dance: Breaking Down technique and Using Choreographies.

Western dance , such as ballet and contemporary are more structured and methodical, says Leila.

Added to this, there is a beautiful wealth and depth of adding on sciences to dance, such as anatomy and physiology, nutrition, sports massage, and strength training, stretch exercises, as well as drilling, essential barre work, music studies/analysis,(" a dancer must be familiar with the way in which music is composed in order to understand and anticipate its content" , Najia Marlyz) choreography, theatre studies and so on. A dancer must have a different kind of discipline, here.

With this disciplines behind him or her, the dancer has a foundation in which to build a

vocabulary of dance. Muscle memory and training will help the dancer to understand the components of Middle eastern/belly dance- where the weight is placed, how muscles are contracted and so on. Western dance training can be compared to that of an athlete in training.

A professionally Western trained dancer can, for the most part learn choreographies effectively, because they may have to dance in a show in a couple of weeks. Learning a choreography can in many ways help train the memory, teach transitions and help the student see and feel how a combination of moves can create a dance and even transform one.

With breaking down movements, there is scope for all types of learners to absorb dance instruction. Those dancers who have higher levels of anxiety, won't feel they have to get it first time, whereas if they were using the follow the teacher method, they may give up or become confused, if they cannot understand the move.

For non-Middle Eastern beginner bellydancers, this method might be ideal, as they could work towards the follow the teacher approach which must be excellent for developing ones' spontaneity and skill in the dance.

The main drawback is the control featured in Western dance. If one is used to choreography, one cannot be able to improvise or be spontaneous, which this dance (bellydance) really calls out for:

"Much of our Middle Eastern music is improvisation, and consequently, of necessity, our dance must be an improvisation. Even within familiar song tunes, a great deal of instrumental and vocal improvisation can make the presentation a challenge for those dancers who rely on preset choreographies for their dance. However, I'm not advocating mindless, or wildly abandoned dance to unfamiliar music."

(Najia Marlyz <http://www.gildedserpent.com/art38/NajiaBasics.htm> Back to Basics: a long over- due swing of the pendulum begins)

No matter, how disciplined, controlled and precise,(and these are great dance qualities to have,) a Middle eastern dancer must be fluid, expressive, at one with the music and to be able interact with the audience.

Conclusion

In fact, there is a case for using both techniques in the dance classroom.

Both styles of teaching can complement each other, giving a rigour and structure to the follow the teacher technique, and lending a fluidity and spontaneity to the western technique. A Western beginner could do with a more structured approach (but that depends on his/her own experiences too) while the more advanced dancer can enjoy the pure challenge of following another teacher, and becoming connected to their perspective of dancing.

Hopefully, this article will give students an awareness of the different styles of teaching technique, used by teachers.

Birmingham and Midlands bellydance teachers use many different techniques, many obviously influenced by the Western "break it down" technique. Many have travelled to workshops here, in the UK and abroad and learned technique, by following the teacher.

Both ways have their advantages and usefulness. With this awareness, I hope that students can enhance their learning experience to the full, and for teachers to be creative in using both the spontaneous and broken down, more structured approaches.

Bibliography

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Reference

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