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# BELLYDANCE OASIS

Middle Eastern Dance

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Zahraa

Bellydance pain

The craft of teaching

Cairo festivals

Tribal Corner

Incorporating  
*The Palace*



# the bellyroles

## project & down under

by Hilary Giovale with an introduction by Devi Mamak. Photographs by Peter Giovale.



"I have noticed how confronting improvisational choreography can be for us in the West, especially when we turn and face in with a duet. We are so concerned with being in someone else's personal space. For this dance form to be truly successful, we must learn to trust our fellow dancers

*Devi Mamak, Chawazi Caravan*

*Earlier this year I had the pleasure of meeting Hilary and Peter Giovale, and their adorable daughter Gemma from Flagstaff, Arizona. They were spending some months travelling around Australia with a very exciting project in mind that had to do with tribal bellydance and photography.*

*Hilary has completed a qualitative research on tribal dance and body image for a Master of Liberal Studies degree at Northern Arizona University. This is an interdisciplinary programme on environmental and social sustainability. She combined feminist theory, history of dance, and sociology to write the thesis. Her research showed that tribal dance tends to make women feel good about themselves and their bodies as they are NOW, not 20 pounds lighter, with bigger boobs, 10 years younger, etc. She finished her thesis and graduated in December 2006.*

*In the process of doing that research and writing the thesis, she realised that there was much more to be explored so Hilary and Peter started thinking of other ways to keep working with this. That is how they came up with the idea of combining concepts from Hilary's research with Peter's photography. Here is what Hilary had to say about her experience with the BellyRoles project, Australia and the tribal dancers here.*

*"How does tribal bellydance affect the women who dance it? In January of*

*this year I left my home in Flagstaff, Arizona, to find the answer in Australia. My husband Pete, four year old daughter Gemma, and I ended up having a fantastic adventure; we met and photographed 20 Australian tribal dancers in New South Wales, Queensland, ACT, and Victoria over the course of a two and a half month trip.*

*Our adventure got its start when Pete and I decided to combine his love of photography and my love of tribal bellydance in one project. We called it The BellyRoles Project, not only because belly rolls are a movement known and loved by bellydancers around the world, but because our ambition for the project was to explore the role of women's bellies and bodies in their hearts, minds, and dance.*

*Upon our arrival in Sydney, we contacted tribal dancers and asked each to submit a piece of writing for us. We wanted dancers to share how tribal bellydance has influenced their perception and experience of their bodies. The written pieces we received were fascinating and ranged from very short to several pages long. Some of the dancers included art work or poems as well. We found inspiration in the writing to create a photo shoot for each dancer based on what she had shared. Regretfully, over the course of our trip we received more writing than we had time, and many of the dancers who submitted writing were not photographed, although their writing is*



“When I perform, I experience myself as a channel for female power, sensuality, and inspiration. Within this space, there is no room for negative attitudes about body size, shape, or age and this is communicated to the audience. In this lies the power of Tribal bellydance to transform the context in which we view women’s bodies, to something much more healthy and empowering than society’s current ideal, which excludes almost all of us.”

*Bianka Rich, Zaar Bellydance*

still included in the project. The writing and photos come together to form a unique portrait of tribal bellydance in Australia.

The project started in Sydney, where we did our first photo shoot with soloist Hilary Cinis. From there we worked with members of the following troupes: Ghawazi Caravan in the Blue Mountains, the Tribal Blossoms in Brisbane, Urban Qabila in Sydney, the Tribal Jewels in Wollongong, Tribalista in Canberra, and Zaar Bellydance in Warburton.

On the road we were offered incredible hospitality by the dancers. We were invited to their homes for meals, taken to local spots of interest, and attended classes, troupe meetings, and a community hafla. We were also introduced to the dancers’ families, partners, and friends (many of whom helped look after Gemma during the shoots), and were able to discuss their experiences at length. It was a wonderful introduction to Australia.

In their writings, the dancers shared many facets of their personal experiences as tribal dancers. One of the themes that emerged was how important tribal dance is in creating a sense of community among women. This connection is something that many women seem to

crave in the west, as we live in cultures that often value individualism much more than community. They appreciated how their tribes feel like family, with support, connection, and commitment to work through difficulties. They expressed that learning improvisational dance and shared leadership (cornerstones of tribal dance) have been important in building the trust that creates the foundation of their tribal families and communities.

Some of the dancers shared how feelings of alienation and depression preceded their discovery of tribal dance. The women described feeling discouraged about being unable to fit into other forms of dance, or even life in general because their bodies did not match the mainstream ideal. Women found that this style of bellydance enabled them to overcome feelings of inadequacy. In describing how tribal bellydance makes



Tribal Bellydance isn’t about embracing the artificial, it’s about grasping that which is natural, strong, and supportive.

*Dee Thomson,  
Tribal Blossoms*



Tribal bellydance has been many things to me: laughter, femininity, strength, creativity; inspiration, empowerment, friendship, intimacy; hurt, truth; beauty, presence; synchronicity. What a fortunate experience and earthly life immersion.

*Debra Napier, Urban Qabila*



I am entranced by the style's ability to transform the women who dance it in such positive ways, more so than any other style of bellydance I have so far experienced.

*Fiona MacPherson, Tribalista*



I love how the costuming flatters all ages and sizes of women. I have never seen a woman who did not look beautiful in makeup and Tribal costume.

*Jacqueline Peperkamp, Tribal Jewels*

them feel, the words 'beautiful,' 'strong,' 'powerful,' and 'graceful' were mentioned again and again. Some of them felt that this art form can act as a force for social change by changing the way women are perceived in their own minds and the minds of others.

Tribal costuming played an important role in how the dancers experienced their art form. Some expressed that the tribal costumes help them feel like a goddess - elegant, beautiful, and strong. Repeatedly dancers shared their appreciation for the way that tribal costuming flatters all shapes and sizes of bodies. Several said that they experience a personal transformation when dancing in a tribal costume, and that they feel revered by both their tribal sisters and by audience

members. For many this transformation has extended beyond the dance floor and given them dignity and poise in other areas of life.

These themes only scratch the surface of what can be gleaned from the writings that convey what tribal dance means to Australian women, while the photographs reflect the diversity, inclusiveness and beauty that endear this form of bellydance to so many women around the world.

We have many options for the continuation of the BellyRoles project. Our enthusiasm has definitely waxed in the process of working on it! We recently presented the work at an academic conference where it was well received. We are also working on articles for various

publications, continuing the project with other dancers in the United States, and getting a website up to document it all.

BellyRoles has been lots of fun because we get to work with these ideas, make images, learn more about people's experiences and share this with others."

*Hilary and Peter would love to keep up our dialogue with Australian dancers. Please feel free to contact them on [contact@bellyroles.com](mailto:contact@bellyroles.com).*

*I wish all of you a fabulous holiday season and look forward to hearing what you have all been up to in the New Year. Please don't hesitate to email those tribal party pics! Lotsa hugs. Devi.*