

The Beauty of Common Ground
By Hilary Giovale, © 2009
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In my first bellydance class, the rib cage slides, hip circles, and snake arms reverberated with my unconscious memories. It felt as if I had danced this dance in another life. I was smitten. A year later, two of my best friends and I shared this blossoming love of bellydance, a curiosity about Tribal Style, and a desire for a girls’ weekend. So off we went to Portland in August, 2004 for Tribal Quest Northwest.

A couple days later after some great workshops, lots of laughs and desserts, we sat in the Hollywood Theater, prepared to be entertained. But what I saw there was more than entertainment: it set my soul on fire. The auditorium was packed with all variety of women, some bedecked in their clothes from class, some wearing the most delicious clothes for an evening out. The mood was high and festive. One by one, we watched the gorgeous groups of dancers on the stage. With each performance I felt my heart fill with joy and admiration until I thought it was full, but more and more dancers kept coming. I remember the amazing colors of Circle Dance Company, Black Sheep Belly Dance’s enormous chorus line with multiple duets, the charming and beguiling solo of Colleena, the fire of Rina Rall’s flamenco, the high-energy performance of Gypsy Caravan and their amazing musicians, Rachel Brice’s solo that was like liquid sex, the mysterious allure of FatChanceBellyDance, and the incredible reunion dance with the original members of FCBD, all wearing their costumes from their own groups but dancing together in unison.

Watching them, each soloist or group with their own unique flavor of music, costuming, and movement, I frantically tried to take mental notes for the troupe I was part of back home. There was such passion here, I wanted to hold it and mimic it, so I could recreate it at home. But as the swirling skirts, rhythmic zils, colors, headdresses and tattoos enveloped me, I had no choice but to surrender to sheer delight. My note-taking agenda was out the window as I clapped and zaghareeted with abandon.

Pretty soon, my throat was hoarse. But a voice had formed in my head and was repeating itself over and over, like a drum beat: “THIS IS WHAT WOMEN ARE CAPABLE OF...THIS IS WHAT WOMEN ARE CAPABLE OF...THIS IS WHAT WOMEN ARE CAPABLE OF...” I was suddenly overcome by this realization and in a flash I understood the power of Tribal Style dance. Contrary to my original perception, it was not just about learning dance steps or memorizing combinations to take back home, nor was it about having a costume replete with cowrie shells, tassels, skirts and flowers. There was not a “right way” to do it that had to be mimicked.

Tribal Style was here in front of my eyes – the passion and deep beauty that women are capable of when they come together in a common creative endeavor. I suddenly understood it as the synergy that occurs when women move in unison, when they unite in a visual representation of heartfelt self-expression. It is about loving our individuality even as we connect to our collective roots. I realized that its strength is in a return to the tribe – whether that group is a family, class, group of friends, or a larger worldwide sisterhood – to celebrate ourselves and create our own vision of beauty in the world.

Each woman has her own body, and the bodies I was seeing onstage were as varied as could be: younger, older, rounder, thinner, and in different colors. These bodies reflected the women's diversity; so did their dance. I noticed the subtle differences in styling and movement that each group or soloist had developed and made her own. I loved to see how the bodies interpreted these movements differently – how a woman with wide hips seemed so earthy and grounded, and one with a round belly looked like she was rippling with internal flames when she shimmied, and one who was lean undulated as though her body were made of snakes.

Imbedded in the performance was also the commonality we have as humans, as women. To see the beautiful faces, the curves of every body, the feminine voices raised in mutual admiration (both onstage and in the audience), and the universal movements that were echoed by every group was grounding. In the performances I saw our shared history of bodies that breathe air and birth babies, whose ribs have slid and whose hips have circled since the beginning of time. I was awed by how the dance, this Tribal Style bellydance, takes us back to that circle of friends, sisters, mothers and daughters to help us find our true power and worth. Just as importantly, it gives us an art form with which to communicate our power and worth to a world that has devalued us for a long time.

Sitting in the raucous auditorium, blessed by this new insight, I listened raptly as the dancers communicated their power and worth to me. They did not need forceful words, weapons, or superior logic to make themselves understood. All it took was skill, grace, and the beauty of common ground.