

SHAKE THAT BODY

Jennifer Hoover

Writer's comment: The quarter I took English 104C (Journalism) I was also taking my second six-week class in beginning belly dance. I was just learning to do belly rolls and showing my new talent to everyone I knew. The first reaction was always “Eew, that’s so weird. Do it again.” I realized that a lot of people are fascinated by belly dance, but also a little repulsed, and I wondered how performers felt about this ambivalence. So when it was time to write the profile, I interviewed my dance teacher and learned all about the history of belly dance, as well as her own belly dancing history.

— *Jennifer Hoover*

Instructor's comment: The personal profile is a standard assignment in most journalism courses, but students often struggle with it since it requires that they not only interview someone who is generally a stranger to them but also become an instant expert on their subject’s particular talent or expertise. In this particular instance, Jennifer Hoover was perfectly situated for this assignment: she had been taking belly dancing for a couple of months and in her teacher Belinda Pate-Dunbar she had a perfect subject. In writing the piece, Jennifer resisted the impulse to talk about her own experience and focused squarely on Pate-Dunbar. In doing so she presents a vivid portrait of her subject and demystifies belly dancing.

— *Eric James Schroeder, English Department*

In the picture, Belinda Pate-Dunbar wears a satin bra with sleeves and a split skirt that reveals the entire length of her leg as she lunges on the ground. Her eyes are swept in dark makeup, and on her lips sits a seductive smile. The Belinda holding the picture is decidedly non-exotic, wearing glasses, a sweatshirt, and two layers of workout pants. She scowls when a young man accidentally walks in to the just-ending belly dance class. “I don’t like to have men in here at all,” she says. This, from a woman who spends her evenings shaking her hips at restaurant patrons.

Although she doesn’t like men ogling her classes, Belinda Pate-Dunbar does not shy away from the sensual aspects of her dance. In fact, that’s what attracted her to belly dancing as a teenager. “I really liked the sensuality of the dance and even the blatant sexuality,” she says. She had been taking traditional dance classes in Los Angeles in hopes of becoming a performer but thought belly dance seemed more interesting than the styles she was learning. She finally switched to belly dance after injuring herself in a ballet class. The accident convinced her that ballet is unnatural: “It distorts the body and torments it. That is still my feeling on ballet—it’s horrible.” She started belly dancing right after the injury, delighted to find a dance she could perform without hurting herself.

Now thirty-three, Pate-Dunbar still finds belly dance an “earthy, natural dance” that celebrates and nurtures the female body. “It fits into any lifestyle and any body shape—fat, skinny, whatever.” Describing some performers she saw at a showcase, she says, “These women were really large. But they could still dance. They were beautiful.” Many women belly dance even while pregnant, with the help of special classes and videos. Overweight or pregnant dancers may seem incompatible with such a seductive, sensual dance. But while the dance is closely linked to sexuality, it is not necessarily seductive. According to Pate-Dunbar, the dance moves originated as a way to ease childbirth. “I danced through two pregnancies, and both were short, natural childbirths. The moves strengthen your reproductive system,” she says. Belly dance evolved into a ritual dance for childbirth, performed for women, but emphasizing the effects of the motions on the dancers’ bodies. “Only in the last seventy-five years has it been performed for men,” she says. “It was not created for men’s entertainment.”

Unfortunately, Pate-Dunbar finds that this distinction is frequently lost on American audiences. When Americans go to see a belly dancer, she says, they usually expect a “hootchy-kootchy, burlesque” show. “Others think the dance is very sensual and are curious about it,” she admits. But these people still have difficulty understanding such an exotic dance. Belly dance is spontaneous, allowing the dancer to interact with the audience and express the passion of the moment. That requires the audience to participate as well, becoming engaged rather than just watching. But audiences frequently can’t relate to an art form they are not used to. They often have difficulty understanding Middle Eastern music, with its complex, layered rhythms and unusual instruments. To such audiences, the music is “just noise, and the dancer is something interesting to watch while they’re eating.” Pate-Dunbar doesn’t like dancing for audiences that she can’t engage. She says that sometimes, though, there are good nights when the audience seems to move with the music. Laughing, she describes her performance of the night before: “There was hardly enough room for me to move. The audience members were really drunk and they all got up and danced with me.”

Despite the difficulties of connecting with her audience, Belinda Pate-Dunbar loves to perform and does so as often as possible. She lives in Sacramento, where she has performed in almost all the restaurants that feature belly dancers. She has also performed in Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Los Angeles. She performs regularly at a Moroccan restaurant, sometimes also dancing in Indian and Greek restaurants. “Moroccan restaurants are the ultimate setting for a belly dancer,” she asserts. The decor provides a lush background that accentuates the dancer’s sensuous movements. Pillows are strewn on the floor, and patrons sit at a brass table eating a six-course meal. Pate-Dunbar especially enjoys the intimate, “up-close-and-

personal” atmosphere at Moroccan restaurants, which allow her to interact with the audience. She dislikes performing at Greek restaurants, which tend to have more of a nightclub atmosphere: “Belly dance is not meant for the stage.” Indian restaurants are just too quiet, she says. “I don’t even know why they hire belly dancers at all.”

Cultural differences and inappropriate venues are not the only causes of the widespread misunderstanding of belly dance. Pate-Dunbar attributes the problem partly to the large numbers of performers without good technique: “People take a class for three months, buy a flashy costume, and go out and start performing.” Of her own first performance she simply says, “it was bad.” Her teacher pushed her to perform before she was ready: “I was seventeen, and I was out there in this very skimpy costume.” Such inexperienced dancers are common, and audiences often can’t distinguish between them and good dancers. She feels that dancers should study a minimum of a year before they start performing, although she allows for differences in individual talent and dance experience. Even now, teaching beginning belly dance classes, Belinda Pate-Dunbar studies under other dancers in classes and workshops. “I’ve been really lucky,” she admits. “I’ve studied with almost every great teacher in American belly dance.” Her teachers range from “unknown gems” to Suhaila Salimpour, daughter of the woman credited with founding American belly dance.

Because even such talented dancers are frequently associated with strippers and exotic dancers, many belly dancers try to downplay the sexual nature of their art. Some choose to call it “Middle Eastern dance,” feeling the term “belly dance” has too many negative connotations, focusing the dance on the performer’s bare torso, rather than on her dance technique. Pate-Dunbar used to agree, but now feels the belly is vital to the dance. She points out that even moves normally considered “tasteless-cheap parlor tricks” require amazing muscle control. Lying down on the floor to demonstrate, she describes a dancer who can flip quarters off her stomach. “She puts a little brass bowl here,” Pate-Dunbar says, patting her abdomen right below her rib cage, “and a quarter down here.” She lays down a coin just below her navel. She begins to roll her belly in a motion that would make a fish seasick, then stops with a snap. The quarter jumps off her stomach onto her legs. “I can’t get enough tension in my muscles,” she apologizes. But she can make the quarter flip up and land in the bowl.

Belly dance looks seductively easy, but it takes perseverance as well as passion to succeed as a performer. Even after sixteen years, Pate-Dunbar is still learning new dance techniques and refining old ones. She says belly dancers have to love the dance, because for all that work, dancers get little money—workshops with master dancers usually cost around seventy-five dollars, costumes average five hundred dollars each, and dancers are usually paid only fifty dollars for two and a half hours of work. But Belinda Pate-Dunbar cannot imagine her life without dance: “I’ve gone through so many careers, but I’ve always stuck with belly dance. I’ve just been doing it for so long.” From dancing, she has found freedom in being in touch with her body and the healing powers of movement. She is now working as a massage therapist, helping others free up their bodies as well. For her, dance is about enjoying her body and expressing her sensuality, not entertaining others or making money. So she is not at all concerned about making it to the top. Besides, she says, “in belly dancing, there is no top.”