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Belly Dancers See Growing Respect, But Tipping Is Still a Ticklish Issue

BY CHRISTINE HAUGHNEY

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A dancer calling herself Aziza Nuwal, her pumpkin-colored curls flowing down her back, mesmerizes the crowd as she rolls a sword across the small folds of her belly.

Admirers place dollar bills into the waist of her \$800 hand-beaded costume.

Linda Beeler watches the scene at Atlanta's Casbah restaurant with a mixture of awe and disapproval. She loves the increasing attention belly dancers like Aziza are winning. But she's not crazy about the way the diners express their appreciation...

Ms. Beeler is a belly dancer on a mission: She wants to elevate the current popular view of the dance as performers just "getting up and shaking their stuff," to that of a classical art form akin to ballet. "We're trying to take it to the theater level," she says.

Bouncing Back

Her bid to boost belly dancing's image comes as the ancient art is enjoying a resurgence of local interest. Ms. Beeler's Atlanta Danse Orientale Society, which gives seminars on the dance, has doubled its membership to 300 in the past three years, she says. At Emory University, two belly-dancing classes attracted 40 students on the first day of fall registration last month, says instructor Isabel Crunk, who is bring 11 of her students to Ms. Beeler's event...

The history of belly dancing is somewhat murky. Depending on whom you ask, the dance's origins might be found in Phoenicia, Babylonia or ancient Egypt. Its inspiration is open to debate as well. Carolina Varga Dinicu, a New York City teacher-historian who prefers her stage name Morocco, says that while some believe belly dancing originated as a fertility dance for women, because its strengthens muscles used in childbirth, only two moves involve the abdominal muscles. Most of the moves involve the hips and torso.

Known in Arabic as Raks Sharki, which means "eastern dance," the term belly dancing didn't come into wide use until the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, when a promoter advertised "danse du ventre," or dance of the abdomen.



Aziza Nuwal

The dance's acceptance in polite U.S. society has been slow, particularly in the Bible Belt. When Shalimar Serene, who studied belly dancing in San Francisco, moved to Atlanta in 1985, she received several obscene phone calls after promoting classes, she says. Yvonne Bieber of Warner Robbins, Ga. Says she gave up belly dancing for 10 years starting in 1978 after her mother said it violated the teachings of her church.

But as the Southeast has attracted a more diverse and fitness-conscious population, belly dancing has become more main-stream. "I've met a NASA scientist...and a doctor who do this," says Ms. Beeler, 45, who is the director of operations of an Atlanta space-planning firm ...

Aziza, the performer with the pumpkin-colored curls, is perhaps typical of Atlanta's belly dancers. Her real name is **Dee Boyd**, 31, who by day is a network administrator for a furniture catalog. While growing up in Decatur, Ala., she became fascinated with belly dancing after seeing it in movies and finding it "sensual and athletic." But there wasn't much call for belly dancing in Alabama outside novelty services that offered what she calls "cheeseball belly-grams" for birthday parties or more bawdy occasions.

"I'm an Artist"

When she moved to Atlanta in 1992, it was a different story. She performs twice a week at the **Casbah**, earning about \$50 in tips and up to \$70 in fees from the restaurant per evening. And she has become a devotee of Ms. Beeler's crusade to bring about a more refined image for the dance.

"I'm an artist trying to create something here," says **Ms. Boyd**, her deep Alabama drawl quickly belying her Middle Eastern attire. She dislikes being confronted by the inevitable "young guy who sticks a dollar bill in his teeth" while attempting to tip her. She responds by "rolling my eyes and walking off." She refuses to perform at bachelor parties and is trying to find a way to accept tips less suggestively, such as placing a hat on the floor or accepting tips between dances.

But with the dance dating back centuries, breaking the tradition comes slowly. After all, even Ms. Beeler notes that showering dancers with money is part of the dance's Middle Eastern heritage.

And when **Ms. Boyd** finally got up the nerve to invite her parents to watch her perform at the **Casbah** in 1998, her father proved himself very much a traditionalist. "He was just clapping," she says, "and throwing down twenties at me."

*Aziza Nawal is a featured guest-performer at the **Casbah** Moroccan Restaurant in **Savannah, Ga** and co-sponsors Atlanta Danse Orientale Society's annual Egyptian Nights dance event with founder, Linda Beeler.*