



Bellydance with Nicola

Arm Movements and Ideas for Middle Eastern Dance

This was originally written as a supplement to a workshop held for intermediate students. Exercises described were demonstrated in workshop and thus are not described in detail here.

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

In General

If shimmies are the spice, hand and arm poses and movements are the sugar of the dance. They partner well with the eyes and face to lend emotional nuance and expression. They tell with complete honesty our true feelings and energy level. (Think of Lady Macbeth wringing her hands, someone with their fists balled up, another with their arms crossed over their chest.) The position of the hands, in particular, can produce very strong reactions in other people, by being inviting, confrontational, aggressive, or playful. In a worst-case scenario, they may even be offensive.

All hand and arm movements must have enough energy, else you look like you are flapping, flopping, and flinging yourself through the dance. Many dancers rush their hand and arm movements, or try to make them too elaborate, resulting in a busy, overly distracting presentation. If the hips or any other part is doing something complex, the arms should be simple. It is the difference between having arms that behave with intelligence and grace, or two pieces of overcooked pasta. You decide. The first option requires time, work, and patience. Beautiful, supple, graceful hand and arm movements are based on (like all other movements in the dance) strength, flexibility, posture, the ability to isolate the correct muscles, and the passage of time. Persistent, daily practice is important, as well as a healthy dose of patience. This tends to be the last area of the body that students acquire confidence with, and the first to get silly and floppy when nervous. Hands and arms may store stress, may cling to illness injury, and may require therapeutic intervention (massage, acupuncture, etc.) to release or heal these.

Egyptian style arm movements tend to be less showy, and are intended to show off beautiful posture, highlight hip movements and frame the body in a pleasing way. They are not nearly as stylized or elaborate as American style ones. I personally think it is best for most dancers to go with Egyptian arms, as they tend to be more flattering for most bodies, and do not take away from more difficult technique.

Props

Veil can be used to develop the hands and arms provided you think of and perform the movements with consistent muscle energy, resistance, and flow. Veil movements should look

(Continued on page 2)



Bellydance with Nicola

Arm Movements and Ideas for Middle Eastern Dance

(Continued from page 1)

nice with or without a veil. Canes can be used to isolate shoulder muscles in particular--you can find the groups needed to power your accents and shimmies by using the cane braced against a doorframe or wall. Canes can also be used to stretch the shoulder joints and teach the hands to be happy, relaxed and awake. Twirling the cane will build hand strength and dexterity.

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

Games & Related Skills/Activities

Learning to play an instrument, hand massage, working with Chinese chime balls, tai chi, and playing "game show hostess" can also help you see, learn to use, and feel your hands in a more dance-like, less work-like way. We depend on our hands, but we don't often thank them for the work they do. Teach them to dance and they'll repay you with grace and beauty.

Exercises for Strength and Flexibility

These are best done slowly, as slowly as you can muster. There are many small muscles between the shoulder joints and fingertips--strengthening them and increasing flexibility can often be done with the same movement because these muscles are small.

- cane isolation
- cane stretch
- fan hands/fingers
- hand circles--usual, plus adding the finger fan; arms down, then raising up
- chest opening exercise
- small hand ripples
- hand ripples--together/mirror, parallel; in different positions
- bend F and close arms in, let yourself flop, float arms up and open, lifting the chest
- using the nonwriting hand for everyday movements to improve muscle and brain balance--toothbrushing, hairbrushing, opening doors, using cutlery

Poses & Positions

- to frame the body and its movements, add variety, focus the eye, begin and end a dance, and direct energy.
- 6 basic arm positions--symmetrical and assymetrical, moving between
- open-close pattern

(Continued on page 3)



Bellydance with Nicola

Arm Movements and Ideas for Middle Eastern Dance

(Continued from page 2)

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

- basic poses
- Turkish poses
- prayer
- "lightning bolts"

Movements

Specific designs you create by moving your energy and the life energy around you. The movement becomes the focus and will tend to draw attention away from whatever you may do in the rest of the body. Movement may highlight a partner movement in the body if the hands are brought closer to the body area in motion, and move in a compatible, similar way. The busier, more stylized arm movements tend to be seen more often in American style bellydance.

- -ripples
- -circles
- -flutters
- -slices and chops
- -4-part Egyptian arm combo
- -snake; 16 count snake
- -figure 8 (3 variations)
- -lotus
- -incense bearer
- -circular/parallel
- -turning Turkish
- -corkscrew (w/ turn)
- -decorations--same, different side; front to back/back to front

Concepts

These are things you can do to combine movements in new ways and to create more variety for yourself. Choose wisely and conservatively--it is a common mistake for developing dancers to cover up flaccid or unenergetic arms with a lot of movement. Simply moving the arms and hands around will not lend them more vigour, strength or intelligence.

(Continued on page 4)



Bellydance with Nicola

Arm Movements and Ideas for Middle Eastern Dance

(Continued from page 3)

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

- -framing & highlighting
- -mirroring vs. paralleling
- -energy in vs. out/ give & take
- -"helping"
- -covering/concealing
- -transitional

Music

I strongly recommend that dancers practice arm and hand movements as slowly as possible, to build strength, allow yourself to find and use all the many small muscles involved (which will not at all be used to working together in these ways) and create the smoothness that many of us covet. Pick a nice, slow chiftitelli or takisim and give yourself enough time to relax.

Illness & Injury

If you are suffering from arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, torn cartilage, broken bones or any other affliction involving your hands, arms, elbows, shoulders or neck, take great care to follow your caregiver's advice. The last thing you need is to inflame your tissues further, cause further injury or increase your pain level. Work at a more gentle pace, for less time, and listen for any twinges of discomfort--"feeling the burn" is never a wise path. This is not about being "tough"--is easy to injure the hands (and feet) for life. There is not a lot of muscle tissue or fat to cushion bones, nerves and tendons, so when one structure becomes inflamed, it tends to swell and rub against the others, making matters worse. Don't be reckless or negligent about your health.

Suggested videos

Sahra Saeeda's *Hands and Arms for Orientale Dance* (available from her website) is excellent. Katia's *Arms and Hands* (American style, available from <www.dahlal.com>) has some interesting exercises, but is not suitable for Egyptian style. Hadia's instructional videos don't deal specifically with hands, but you can see her do very authentic, very lovely hand work. <www.hadia.com> Cassandra's performance videos are recommended for sheer brilliance, grace, creativity and nuance. <www.jawaahir.org> Madame Denise Enan is also known for

(Continued on page 5)



Bellydance with Nicola

Arm Movements and Ideas for Middle Eastern Dance

(Continued from page 4)

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

her lovely hands and arms, but you will have to go learn with her at her school or attend a workshop--she currently has no instructional videos out. The more you watch and try to dance along, the more you will feel the typical patterns these dancers choose.

Author: Nicola

Copyright: © October 2003 Nicola, Last updated: 2008/03/01