



## Bellydance with Nicola

# Protocols and Expectations of Performing as a Professional Dancer, or, How To Avoid Stepping on Toes

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This is an opinion piece. I won't hide behind a pseudonym or pen name and pretend that the opinions belong to someone else. I also won't apologize for the opinions. The opinions expressed below are done so very candidly for the intent of informing intermediate level dancers who may be interested or intent upon performing publicly. I write and share this knowing full well that the reader does not have to agree with me, nor take what I write to heart. Take it or leave it. I have been accused of being uppity and controlling for sharing these opinions, many of which are held by other professional dancers out there. They work best in small to medium size advice communities, where it is smarter to be collegial than carnivorous.

Thank-you to my teachers and colleagues who were equally candid, generous, and guiding with me. You have helped me be a better dancer and a better teacher. I would rather emerging dancers know the best ways to proceed, and to avoid getting into trouble or worse, into a dangerous situation they can't handle. I don't believe the process of becoming professional should be cloaked in mystery.

In my career thus far as a professional dancer, I have witnessed and been part of a great many shows of cattiness, rudeness, meanness, disrespect, temper tantrums, blunders, and gossip. Much of my involvement in such antics has been unknowing or unintentional, or I have been the target of it. It is an unfortunate by-product of any human organisation or enterprise, especially those involving an art or craft. Unavoidable, probably, but worth getting informed about, so one can make good choices and try to do right by others. Of course, you don't have to choose that path. You can choose to "stay out of it", or operate as a rogue dancer, but the truth of the matter is, as soon as you think it's okay to put yourself out there in the public eye to dance, you've crossed over a line and into a world of politics, protocol, expectations, long-standing ways of transmitting expertise and knowledge, professional territories, and intellectual property rights.

For my purposes here, and in dance practice, I define a "public venue" based on the kind of audience one is dancing for. As soon as you move from an audience that is mostly bellydance students and teachers and their friends/relatives/associates, into a audience that is largely inexperienced, uninformed, and has no idea what to expect or how to watch MED, then it is a public

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venue. The accessibility of the general public to a show is not what defines it as public when it comes to professional codes of conduct and the protocols dancers follow.

The most sobering point I can make is that most people (at least in our city) have no idea what Middle Eastern dance should look like, and may harbour some very silly ideas about it. If the only show they ever see is one where a dancer or dancers misrepresented the dance, then an uninformed audience member is left with the wrong idea. What do you want someone to remember after seeing you dance? How do you want to feel about yourself? Do you want the respect of your teacher and other professionals?

Every dancer reflects upon every other dancer, be she amateur, semi-professional, or fully professional. When you behave or dance badly, people will generalize to all other dancers. When you behave and dance well, likewise. In North America, there is no widely-recognized, standardized process for people to become performers and teachers of the dance. There are various course offerings dealing with skills and protocols of the professional realm, but no certification process that is universally recognized or accepted. ([Hadia, Yazmina Ramzy](#) and [Suhaila Salimpour](#) offer training courses. ) Some cities have a dancer's guild or union that performers must work within, so that agreed-upon standards for performance, fees, and conduct are met. (It also has the function of protecting dancers from unsafe situations, harassment, and being jilted out of pay.)

The path to expertise in traditional knowledge-based arts and crafts is the mentor/protégé relationship. This has been true of Middle Eastern dance. Typically, your teacher would approach you and indicate your suitability and readiness to become a performer, then you would apprentice with her, attending her performances, attending other shows, watching her teach; she would share her experience, advice, wisdom, and teachings with you over a period of time, often over several years. You would be fully expected by her and her colleagues to pay your dues by opening shows, traveling to workshops, making or buying professional-grade costumes, investing in

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books and your own music, creating your own choreographies and getting feedback, and generally being guided and evaluated in your efforts along the way. If you hadn't worked up the ranks in this manner, you would not be taken seriously by other dancers, and you may in fact have been excluded from performance opportunities, or be unwelcome in the classes, workshops, and stage shows hosted by other professionals.

In recent years, this traditional path to knowledge and expertise has broken down and changed. Others by-pass this route for one reason or another. There are now more formal dance programs, including university studies and those at studios taught by master dancers. However, a number of "professionals" take short-cuts, and put themselves out there to perform and teach when they are neither qualified nor ready. Some portray themselves and the nature of MED inaccurately, or worse, dishonestly. Most audience members at shows and most students in classes have no way of knowing better, and are faced with a dancer who is less competent and has not been put through the variety of experiences over time that others may have. Some students are happy if their instructor is simply a nice person. Add to this that Winnipeg has a very small Arabic population, and has not had the Middle Eastern restaurant venue for some years, and we have a collection of dancers who have not been put through their paces by the rightful keepers of the dance, who know what it should look like. When there aren't a variety of Arabic peoples to tell you if and how well you meet the cultural standards and expectations, then it's easy to keep dancing in happy ignorance. Furthermore, with bellydancing being wildly popular, still cloaked in mystery, fantasies and assumptions about "The East", and with a general public who are curious but not necessarily wanting to become informed on the subject of Middle Eastern culture, some dancers will make the choice to sell a fantasy version of the dance rather than learn and carry on the tradition of the dance, in its proper, cultural form. (This includes understanding how innovation and creativity are expressed while still maintaining an authentic flavour and feeling.) For an excellent read on the subject of western stereotypes of the east, check out Edward Said's seminal book, [Orientalism](#).

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The question of dance readiness ("Am I ready to perform?") is best answered by your teacher, if she is a qualified and experienced performer, and by a few of her colleagues. (It's nice to hear that more than one dancer thinks you have it.) It should be posed as a direct question, in the context of private time booked with her to discuss the issue. Preferably, she has come to you to begin the process. It should be viewed that way, as a process of training, not as a moment that you suddenly are transformed, and have license to do what you want however you want. Do not take anything for granted. The process should be candid, direct and obvious. Ask direct questions and expect direct answers as well as feedback that may at times feel hurtful or embarrassing. Most teachers are not trying to hold you back; they are trying to help you get better.

Many classes, especially those outside of the formal studio context, are not the place for teachers to go into great detail about protocol and performance standards. Leisure or recreational program classes have a mandate for fun and education but they are not a training ground. Most students will only take beginning level courses, and don't care and don't need to know the process to follow for professional performing. Most students will only ever dance in a recital or bellydance community event, which is just fine and nothing to be ashamed about. A very small minority of students have what it takes to become performers. (Just like most boys who play hockey don't go on to be pros, and most folks in art classes won't see their art in a gallery.) In our city, most teachers and their students are very generous about watching other students work on their dance skills in performances for other students and teachers. That is the kind of audience most students should seek out. It's a safe, structured way to gain experience and seek feedback.

In other cities, students who put themselves out there to dance solo, duet or group, outside of the supervision and guidance of their teacher, outside of the context of an audience who is mostly bellydance affiliated, PAID OR UNPAID, would be reprimanded. Some teachers would tell those students not to bother coming back to class for the presumption that they are ready to be "out there", dancing. It may a teacher's only recourse, if, for example, some of her students try to

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use her choreographies without permission. Most of us can't afford a lawyer.

In our city, most of our local teachers and performers would be, at best, intermediate students in (for example) Minneapolis classes. Some of them would be put back in beginner level. Colleagues in other cities who tell us that we are too gentle, too lazy, not directive enough, and not demanding enough have criticized Winnipeg performers and teachers. A few of us know that when it comes to the wide world of dance, we are barely scratching the surface of ability and talent. A few of us are working on ways to raise the bar here and hopefully have a higher calibre of dance emerge. We don't always agree on how to do that.

The question of accepting payment is also controversial, and Winnipeg has not met the standards as compared to other cities. Some dancers consider it acceptable for emerging dancers to accept a lesser rate of pay because they are delivering a lesser quality of dancing. (Would you want to employ an inexperienced plumber, electrician, or mechanic, simply because they are cheaper?) In the dance world, some employers will only ever care about the cost. And most audience members DO NOT KNOW BETTER, so it's no difference to them. However, many assert that the dance is cheapened and lessened by dancers who are not ready to present themselves for performance, without being part of a show that also features professional-quality dancing.

I don't understand what it is about our dance form that invites such disrespect, not just from the public, but from within the ranks. Adult students would never emerge from a few sessions of ballet, thinking they were "good enough" to audition for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and start teaching. When we as teachers and performers have to deal with misperceptions, lewd behaviour and comments, outright ignorance, and potential employers who will pay \$110 for a DJ but not a dancer, we feel really betrayed by dancers who are out there dancing badly, for cheap or for free. Some of us have invested thousands of dollars and years of our lives to pay our dues, pursue formal training/accreditations, and gain our place in the dance world. It's frustrating and

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sometimes insulting to be faced with colleagues and students who do what they please and don't allow themselves to be guided appropriately in their development, or who don't pursue development at all. I can count on one hand the number of dancers who are so good that they no longer need to take more lessons.

I used to think it was okay for a dancer to promote herself as an emerging performer at a cut rate, as long as she was honest about her abilities. I don't anymore. If you sell yourself at a discount rate, you will be treated like a discount dancer by patrons and by your potential colleagues (who will likely feel unhappy with your choice to undercut). If an arrangement is made with a mentor, so that an emerging dancer opens a show or dances a bit in the middle, and is paid a portion of the fee, then that is much more acceptable. Patrons can then see that she is gaining experience, and will be much more generous, kind and understanding about a lacklustre or bad show. On her own, with no other dancer to show the professional standard, a dancer's inexperience may not be accurately communicated to an audience. More often than not, the audience will either think, "So that's bellydance? That's not hard!" that bellydance is cheesy or sloppy, or that it can be performed by anyone with a pair of harem pants and a coin scarf.

The perception that bellydance is just shaking one's booty is never going to change unless dancers themselves expect more from their own performing and teaching and establish clear criteria for students wishing to be trained as performers. Unless it's a show that has clearly defined criteria for the performers (who and what is being presented), with a programme and/or an MC, and with qualified dancers to demonstrate what it should look like, then a student is dancing on very thin ice. She is running the risk of alienating her teacher and other teachers/performers by sending the message that she doesn't respect them enough to bother asking for guidance. (When this kind of disregard for a master happens in the martial arts, a student is usually challenged to a fight. But bellydance is not a full contact art.)

One of the most important considerations should be that most dancers here in North America are

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not of Middle-Eastern descent. Many women of Middle Eastern ancestry grow up learning homestyle dance, but are never formally trained for performance-style dance. Many families do not perceive the dance trade as honourable or respectable work. Many fathers, brothers and husbands don't want to see their female relatives dancing in public. Women who choose to become professional dancers, who take the long road of advanced training, are breaking a lot of social rules about appropriate behaviour for women. (For an excellent reading on this, see Hossam Ramzy's article on [baladi-style dance](#) and in some of his CD liner notes Or, read [A Trade Like Any Other](#)). Racism has always been an issue - both the blatant kind that results in discrimination, as well as the "I-Dream-of-Jeannie/Halloween costume" variety that results in silly stereotypes of Middle Eastern cultures. But since 9-11, Middle Eastern culture has been a target of Western media, widely ridiculed, denounced, misrepresented and reduced to paranoid presumptions of warmongering, religious fanaticism, terrorism, maltreatment of women, and general backwardness. Dancers of Western heritage can take off their costumes after a show and blend right back in to Western society, and not end up the target of racism and daily discrimination (or government surveillance). We don't perform being Middle Eastern, we perform Middle Eastern dance. Be respectful and aware. The next time you want an interesting reaction, tell someone not that you bellydance but that you study Middle Eastern dance. Either they won't know what you mean, or they'll raise their eyebrows.

In the same way that most kids who take home economics will not become chefs, most people who learn the guitar will never be Eric Clapton, and most people who are crafty will never become designers, most students in this (and any other) dance form will never make it to a professional level. Particularly for bellydancing, because most students come to classes as adults with no previous dance training. Your time in the dance should not be about "going pro". Do it because it is beautiful, it's fun, you're learning, and you love it. In any craft, any art, there are so many things that will make some people stars, some very talented and adept, and most others, enthusiastic students: timing, the right teachers, discipline, dedication, investment of time and money, ongoing development, creativity, aptitude, natural inborn talent, learning style, luck,

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motivation, initiative, inspiration and genius. In dance, you also have to be flexible, strong, a visual and kinaesthetic learner, have a superb memory, have excellent command of your body, heal quickly, and have body confidence. How many people can meet those criteria?

Treat the dance as serious fun or fun seriousness. Embrace what you can do and let go of the rest. If you want to go pro, if you truly want to dedicate yourself that goal, then I encourage you to do it well and do it right. If you want to be taken seriously, take the dance seriously. If you do right by the dance and by your teachers and colleagues, you will enjoy support, community, and respect as you flourish in the art. The first step towards earning appreciation and respect is GIVING it to those who have gone before you.

Here's a list of protocols and expectations, in plain, candid, direct language. You won't find a definitive "rule book", but these are among the most widely followed and the most important rules, advice, guidelines, and unspoken agreements.

### When it comes time to start dancing in a show, DO:

- Participate at the invitation of or involvement of your teacher, at a recital or other belly-dance community event, where an audience expects to see students dancing.
- Ask your teacher for permission or consent to perform her dances ahead of time, especially if she is also dancing at the event.
- Approach your teacher for guidance and suggestions before you plan to dance.
- Master a dance or a prop before you dance by yourself--do you really want to be remembered as the student who dropped a sword on her foot, or lit her hair on fire, or whose teacher says "That's not my choreography"??.
- Make or buy the appropriate costume for your dance. It should fit well, look good from every angle and up close, and be a consistent quality and style with the others you may be dancing with.

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- Choose to perform at recitals, MED dance organisation events, and stage shows.
- Ask to accompany your mentor to some of her gigs - I learned so much from watching my mentor dance at private parties, at galas, at festivals, and on the stage. Much of what I learned I could only have done so by being there as an observer. There's so much a performer may take for granted, and not make explicit when she is showing you the ropes. Watching her might open you to ideas, skills, and factors you were unaware of.
- Know and be able to quote the going rate if you are asked about bellydance performers.
- Own and wear a cover-up when visible and not on the stage. Don't spend a lot of time socializing, and especially avoid eating or drinking in costume.
- Keep your stuff contained and organized backstage; be quiet, calm, polite, clean up after yourself .
- Have a back-up of your music. All tapes and CDs should be labelled clearly, and have only the music you are dancing to that day on it. If you are dancing with your teacher, this is her responsibility.
- Prepare an introduction to yourself and your dance for the programme or MC.
- Dress the right style for the venue and the dance.
- Smile and be polite. Be prepared to answer questions about MED in a pleasant, intelligent, accurate, and informative manner.
- Arrive on time (at least 15 minutes early).
- Be well-groomed, clean, nice-smelling, and dressed the part - never assume there is a change room. Always find out ahead of time.
- Talk to your teacher and/or a performer before you agree/choose to dance in public for the first few times, especially if it is a venue or kind of gathering you have no experience with. Do this for a while into your performing career. She will have advice that you need and deserve, even if you are a smarty-pants and think you know everything.
- Know ahead of time what music you might want to use, and have some other choices

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along. In a stage show, you want to avoid dancing to the same music as another person, and the professionals usually have first pick of choreographies and music. In a restaurant setting, it's nice to have some choices, in case someone dances before you and uses the same music.

If you are making the jump to dancing solo in public, for money (or thinking about it):

- Get your teacher's approval, support and advice. It is smart, respectful, prudent and practical to dance with her or other pros until she/they tells you that you are ready to strike out on your own. It may not feel like it, but she is doing you a favour to tell you if you are not ready yet. If you make plans and take actions without telling her, she has reason to wonder why. If you have valued her classes and what you have learned, why not talk to her? Don't give her reasons to feel that she can't trust you. Wouldn't you rather work with her?.
- Avoid drinking alcohol, smoking, flirting, and eating in front of or with patrons of your performances, especially while in costume.
- Avoid hanging out before and after shows with strangers.
- Ask who your audience is. Avoid accepting jobs for an all-male crowd. Avoid dancing in a bar or whenever a lot of alcohol has been served. Ask what your prospective employer expects of you and the show.
- Develop and use your own choreography. Avoid using dances by local performers. If you use choreographies, give proper credit. For more information about intellectual credit see this article on Abir's Casbah .
- Avoid using music you know to be a favourite of another dancer if you are going to be sharing the floor or stage with her - or talk to her ahead of time and work something out .
- Avoid bad-mouthing in public.
- Avoid passing on gossip.
- Have a variety of professional-quality costumes that fit beautifully, are flattering and

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suitable for the style of dance you are doing.

- Have business cards to give to people.
- Avoid undercutting or dancing for free (e.g. charity event) if another dancer has been or will be paid the going rate to dance at the same place or event. You should get paid, too!
- Avoid dating your employers.
- Consider taking an escort to private engagements at a house or club.
- Get directions and be early.
- Ask about floor surfaces, ceiling height; temperature and size of room/area to be dancing in; size, gender, and age of audience; nature of gathering (staff party, wellness expo, after-wedding party).
- Use shorter songs and a variety of songs.
- Avoid going to different cities and seeking out jobs without establishing rapport with dancers who already live and work there.
- Have several full (15-20 minutes) routines that include veil and perhaps cane or zills, ready to go at short notice.
- Look classy, act classy - you should come across as dignified and well-behaved; you should convey intelligence, pleasantness, and joy in your dancing.
- Avoid stealing moves that you know to be trademark of local dancers.
- Avoid dancing beyond your abilities (again, ask your teacher).
- Avoid giving "auditions" for employers--it's usually going to end up being a free show.
- Have a dressier outfit to change into after performing.
- Get your payment ahead of time if you are worried about being paid.
- Avoid approaching the owner of a regular dance venue - talk to the dancers first - especially if you live in a small city. It boggles my mind when dancers do things they know

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will tick off and alienates other dancers. You will make yourself unwelcome in classes, workshops and shows. You won't enjoy referrals from your colleagues..

- Throw out any dreams you have about glamour, money and stardom - performing is a job, a trade, a profession - love it, but know that it is a hell of a lot of work.
- Remember to rehearse and warm up.
- Bring first aid supplies, sewing supplies, a wash cloth and towel, lots of safety pins, water to drink.
- Make sure someone knows where you are and when you should return home.
- Leave without dancing if you feel unsafe.
- Consider giving a greeting card if you are dancing at a wedding or birthday.
- Avoid agreeing to wear silly things or write messages on your body.
- Understand what is appropriate for the audience.
- Consider a booking to be a verbal contract - consider asking for a deposit if you are traveling a long way or if it's a big job. Some dancers have written contracts they ask employers to sign ahead of time..
- When in doubt, and if you really don't know - leave the job to a better or more experienced dancer.
- Thank your host or employer .

**DON'T, DON'T, DON'T:**

- **UNDERCUT**--this is the single worst thing you can do to other dancers. Charge the going rate and you will get jobs on the basis of your talent. Someday, when you know and believe you are worth the going rate, all those patrons you danced cheaply for have no reason whatsoever to pay you more.
- Dance drunk or stoned.

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- Put up with being sexually harassed---leave!!.
- Depend on your teacher's choreography or music collection if you are going to dance as a soloist.
- Pirate your teacher's resources.
- Expect to borrow her costumes.
- Dance to pick up men.
- Accept tips down the front of your bra or belt.
- Accept tips if you are uncomfortable with it.
- Go to a job without back-up music.
- Be a backstage jerk: messy, grumpy, in the way, perfume-soaked, hairspray happy, loud-mouthed, complaining, someone who hogs all the space and won't share the mirrors .

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