



Bellydance with Nicola

About Restaurant Dancing

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Ah, the restaurant gig.

Fun, unpredictable, often ill-paying, it's regular, bread-and-butter work, yet is often also tiring and tedious. It tends to be the last bastion of bad dancing. On occasion, it is the secret stomping (shimmying?) grounds of diamonds-in-the-rough. I know I cut my performance teeth and learned the hardest way possible the year I danced 2-4 times a month alongside other dancers at an upscale bistro. We were lucky enough to also be friends, which by-passed some of the usual cattiness that dancers can abuse each other with. I was also lucky enough to be mentored by 2 of the dancers working with me, who saved me from a host of other mistakes I could have easily and innocently made in my inexperience and general ignorance of the inner workings of restaurant dancing.

Restaurant gigs can be a working dancer's milk money, if you can get these gigs regularly; but when danced regularly, they can easily become annoying, boring, and frustrating.

The restaurant owner that typically hires "a bellydancer" (as opposed to a specific person, e.g. YOU) may have little regard for the art or craft of bellydance, s/he may simply want someone cute, young, and scantily clad to traipse around and drive up liquor sales.

Restaurant dancing is not for sissies. So below are some helpful hints and things to consider if you choose to take this kind of work.

General Information

Restaurant dancing tends to attract inexperienced and unskilled dancers yet, like busking, requires a tremendous amount of skill, experience, and stage presence to do it well and properly. It tends to objectify the dancer as much or more so than busking--you become "The Bellydancer", without your name or specific traits/abilities/talents recognized.

Good belly dance that will be appreciated as good dance is best done in a restaurant, lounge or cabaret-type setting where: the food is the focus (not drinking); the ambience is compatible and is slightly upscale (classy); everyone is paid the going rate; the crowd is mixed; and the crowd knows to expect a belly dance show. The venue should be somewhere where you would eat and take your friends and family, not where the locals are going to get wasted.

Sometimes, more than one dancer may be booked in an evening, and can often alternate who goes first, or "warm up the crowd". At the Fat Angel Bistro, Shayera, Jamiila, Za'ina and I took turns-- sometimes we danced one set each, sometimes 2, sometimes one of us had 2 sets and the other had one. I believe in making every effort to be fair and considerate, even if the other

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dancer is not. I like to sleep with a clear conscience.

You may surprise patrons who came for the food, not the dancing. People don't always react well, and may be ticked off that their meal is being disturbed. Not everyone reacts with "OOH! Bellydancing!" . I have heard many, many stories of folks not going back to eat at local places due to the timing, quality, and duration of the belly dancing.

This may be the one and only time someone sees bellydance--make it count. Do at the very least a classy, competent job, and strive for better. Restaurant dancing exposes your costume to a lot of wear and tear, candle wax, flame, spills, poor air, dirt, smoke, and more hazards. Keep on top of maintenance, cleaning, and drying of your costuming. Check it frequently. Consider having a set of veils and other props that you only use in the restaurant.

There are many pitfalls stylistically and for propwork--you will be very restricted by ceilings, doors, chairs, tables, coatsracks, serving people, patrons, light fixtures, plants, and more.

This is not the place to do ultra-folkloric costuming or dancing--best to stick to American cabaret or Egyptian raks sharqi styles (costuming and dancing). A little veil, a little zills, and some balancing goes over well. This is NOT the place for artsy, highly emotional, fusionastic or wacky stuff. You can safely hint at folkloric aspects much as a dancer in Egypt would do-- it's a part of a drum solo or longer piece, a little cane, a little sword, a little zills, and so on. People want to connect with you--meet them halfway.

Personal Safety and Well-being

You may be asked to do inappropriate things, such as having drinks with owners or customer. For your own safety, refuse any drink you have not watched prepared from beginning to end, unless it comes out of a sealed bottle.

There are certain personal risks and dangers--keep tabs on what is happening after closing, especially if you are the only dancer there, and be aware of your surroundings when you leave. Make sure someone knows you are working that night, where, and when you should be getting home.

Decide in advance how you could and would deal with someone who is drunk, or inappropriate (comments, touching, leering, etc.). Not sure? Talk to the owner in advance to find out if they have a procedure, or talk to the other dancers about what they usually do.

Consider the message it may send if you sit down and eat or drink in costume without a

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coverup. Are you a concubine or otherwise for hire? This was and is common practice in burlesque houses, to lead to other, more lucrative transactions. Consider also the effect on your costuming--it is really hard on it to sit, and spills are often the death of a costume. After you have changed, it is okay to join a group of friends, but be aware that you will still be watched--conduct yourself politely, with class, and discretion.

If you injure yourself, make sure you tell the owner. Carry first aid supplies. Write down the details of what happened, in case there's an issue over liability. Your lawyer, insurer, physician, and certain government agencies may need these details if you are involved in an insurance or worker's compensation dispute, lawsuit, or longterm disability benefits that you may apply for if the injury is really serious.

Before You Dance

There may be delayed starts --there's no telling precisely when you may dance, or, you may be asked to switch set times with another dancer. It is not uncommon to add another set for a host of reasons--a dancer does not show up, there's a late rush of patrons, people really like you, and so on. Bring extra music and costuming. Extra music is helpful when dancing with other performers, in case someone uses the same music. People do notice.

You should consider a change of costume if there is more than one set. Often you will have no place to change, rest, or wait. You may be crammed into a broom closet or bathroom stall--plan for it! I have on more than one occasion dropped costuming, money, and props into a toilet, because public toilets often have no lid, and that was the only place to change. I learned to change in a very small space, and to bring a large plastic bag in the event of accidents. I also made a cover-up roomy enough to change inside of.

Dress tastefully. Consider that many imperfections and details not visible on stage will be visible here--everything from your teeth, your split ends, your blood-shot eyes, your back zits, your underarm stubble, you name it! Ditto for costuming--stains, pulls, pins, holes, raggedy edges, and unfinished details will be visible. Wear a body stocking if you have scarring, a lot of loose skin or belly fat, or are at all bashful about being looked at and possibly touched at close range--folks may be so distracted with small imperfections they may not notice your dancing.

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While You are Dancing...

Restaurant dancing requires you to adapt moment-by-moment, as you will be manouvering around and through people, chairs, spilled drinks, dropped food, staff, tables, plants, lighting fixtures, countertops, candles, changes in flooring, puddles, dirt, slush, dropped cutlery, broken glass, and more. I have been burned by careless smokers talking while waving their hands around. There's nothing quite like putting a foot down into ice cold, filthy boot slush, or better yet, getting a tiny piece of glass in your big toe. Consider wearing dance slippers, heels, or if you are die-hard for bare feet, consider tetanus and hepatitis vaccines.

Move back and forth between pleasant, delightful, beautiful ambient music/movement, and full-blown all-out entertainment that demands to be looked at. In such close proximity, many people must and will look away and look back, and/or may only watch you once your back is turned--don't be a vampire or get pouty if that happens. Variety in your sets, and remembering to move around, will provide the emotional space some people need. Attempting to aggressively make a table full of bashful people pay attention may backfire on you. If someone looks offended or uncomfortable, do not directly face their table and look at them, dance nearby and partly/halfway turned away. Look at them with a sweet and friendly smile as you pass by. Maybe you can change their feelings by coming across as friendly and cordial.

Try to convey a sense of ease, friendliness, pleasantness, intelligence and good humour--you are kind of like a hostess, kind of like a storyteller, and definitely entertainer--you are like the piano player at a jazz lounge, the guitarist at a coffee house--people are eating and still trying to enjoy each other's company, so you don't want to be too in-your-face , provocative, suggestive--the goal is to engage without being aggressive, to dance in a way that allows people to look away and chitchat without feeling like they are misbehaving. You are there for them, not for you!

Your dancing will probably involve moving a couple of feet, stopping and doing a little something, moving a little more, etc.--it may not feel like you are "really" dancing, there is usually very little room to turn, spin, do travel steps, and you may only be visible from the hips up--find interesting combinations that can be seen at close range and others that are upper body based.

You can get away with dancing very simply e.g taking a couple of steps, shimmying, stepping, camel, stepping, shoulder rolls--but don't get lazy and bored with what is happening--every

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show deserves as much of you as you can give in that moment, and set the bar higher for yourself-- just because you can be half-arsed does not mean you should be. You may have photo and video taken without your permission or knowledge, at desperately unflattering angles and moments. Don't be too shocked if you find yourself on YouTube.

Payment

Know, quote, charge, and EXPECT the minimum going rate for your city. If you don't know, find out. In these days of the Internet, you have no excuses.

While many of us typically expect payment upon arrival, restaurateurs may request that you wait until the end of the night so they can pay you with the night's revenue. That's up to you. Usually you are dancing sets of 15-20 minutes with 15-30 minute break in between. Your second set, or ones booked and danced within a time span (usually a month) will be often be paid at a discounted rate. We commonly make such volume discounts if, and only if, the commitment is made to frequently host and pay dancers.

There may be tips and it's up to the dancer to decide if and how that is done. A dancer with integrity shares 10-15% of her tips with the serving staff and/or musicians--please refer to the articles on my site about tipping.

Dancers are paid out the night of and with agreed-upon terms. You decide and say ahead of time if it is cash or a cheque.

Payment-in-kind, such as a meal, may be offered, but this should be on top of earning the minimum going rate in your city.

Best of luck with your restaurant gigs. Do your best, do right by other dancers, and you can hope to enjoy many future gigs and referrals.

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