



# Bellydance with Nicola

## What to Expect from a Bellydance Class

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It is important to understand and accept that each teacher, of any dance form, will have his/her own set of priorities, methods, philosophies, techniques, and personalities that will strongly affect your learning, not just because of how effective, trained, and experienced that teacher might be, but also because of your needs, traits, and priorities as a learner. This will also be affected by the dynamics of each learner in the room and the dynamic created as a group.

**However**, a good-quality class should meet a certain set of criteria for a valuable, worthwhile experience:

- clear explanation and CORRECT demonstration of authentic and widely recognized styles, techniques and movements -- broken down CORRECTLY into their proper alignment, isolation, meaning (if applicable), combinations, flavour;
- use of imagery and sometimes hands-on help to illustrate movements;
- cultural, historical, musical, rhythmic information/context as it applies (This is a cultural dance - one cannot learn it properly without understanding the "cultural" part.);
- no pressure to buy or make costuming, buy props or music, or perform before you are emotionally and technically ready (at least a year, for most students -- and in a student recital);
- guidance and advice to spend your money and time wisely on reliable, quality, authentic music, video/DVD, props, costuming, books, teachers and shows;
- handouts, as deemed necessary. This may include choreographic notes;
- information on local events and dance organisations, as well as nearby workshops with master instructors;
- honest, specific, clear feedback about where you are at, and the higher the level, the more feedback you should receive
- generalized corrections and tips for correct technique; one-on-one correction as necessary;
- honest, realistic presentation of where the instructor is at in her/his own training and experience level.

Be wary of teachers who say "But I only teach beginners!". This is the number one excuse made by teachers who are not ready to be teaching, for lack of training, experience, and talent. It is much, much harder to unlearn poor habits that have been instilled by an incompetent teacher, than it is to learn it correctly the first time around. She may be very nice and class may be fun,

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but you may find yourself starting over when you change to a better teacher. That can be a very frustrating feeling.

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Be wary of any teacher who pushes or flatters you into performing right away. It demonstrates a lack of respect for the complexity of Middle Eastern dance and towards the time, effort, talent, and training good performers have put in to their craft. It also demonstrates a proprietary attitude towards you as a person--you are not someone else's creation, you are you. Any art or craft or sport requires training and time before any one of us can say we are proficient. Some teachers treat their students like feathers in their caps -- the more students they have out there dancing, the better a teacher they think they are. I know of no other dance form where women are considered "professionals" so quickly, and many of them self-declared. No wonder that this art form is disrespected and misunderstood!

**No** teacher can teach you to be talented. That is something you come to class with.

### ***What To Expect Of Yourself:***

- to progress steadily, at your own pace, in your own time -- provided that you are practicing, attending regularly, applying what you are learning in class, and have some ability.
- to gain strength, flexibility, gracefulness, confidence, body awareness, and expressiveness, over time.

In my experience as both a student and teacher of this dance, it is reasonable, appropriate, and realistic to expect to:

- practice often (at least 3-5 times per week) if you think you want to perform and you want to become competent and proficient (which is not the same as being good or being artful or being professional-grade);
- take your own notes in class, including choreographic ones. Hand-outs are a luxury and are very unusual in dance classes--don't expect them;
- attend 2-3 times per week if you want to keep progressing or get over a plateau;
- cross-train in other dance forms or exercise classes to attain sufficient strength, flexibility, and body awareness;
- try different teachers;

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- find that there are things you can do well and some that remain very challenging;
- feel elated, motivated, challenged, overwhelmed, frustrated; a sense of accomplishment, new respect for your body and its abilities;
- spend money, over time, on lessons (including private ones), workshops, shows, videos/DVDs, props, music, books if you plan to continue beyond a beginner level and really understand all that Middle Eastern dance is;
- have breakthroughs in a moment, slowly over time, or both;
- feel sore, tired, energized, "on fire", relaxed, and/or sweaty during and after class--you never know how you are going to react or perform on any given night;
- pursue your own research from a variety of sources -- internet sites, talking to other teachers and performers other than the one you are in class with, buying and reading books, subscribing to newsletters.

What would you expect from yourself in an adult ballet class, or tap, or flamenco?

Middle Eastern Dance is like any other dance form. It takes time, talent, discipline, and fitness to become proficient at it. Becoming artful and expressive is a whole journey beyond just learning the movements.

### *So you want to go further?*

Expect that it will take at least 5 years of dedicated group lessons (2-3 times per week), private instruction, and workshop attendance to acquire the knowledge, ability, experience and training needed to get to a **minimum** standard of the professional level of dance. Many dancers rush this process, and put themselves out there before they are ready. I personally do not encourage this. MED is a traditional, cultural art form, and it takes a long time for anyone (regardless of ancestry and place of birth) to become masterful, artful, and beautiful at it. If you want to try performing talk to your teacher. She should be honest about your readiness and help guide you to become a successful and professional performer. Or, she should refer you to someone who can.

The best dancers see themselves as life-long learners, constantly learning more and pushing themselves farther.

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I hope my students emerge over time as dance enthusiasts who demonstrate respect and appreciation for Middle Eastern dance as an art form and as a tradition, with the attitude that there is always more to learn, with the openness, humbleness, and dedication to do so.

ADDITIONALLY, and to reinforce my points, here are some guidelines and protocols for your long-term participation in dance classes, with anyone.

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### **When attending lessons:**

- Expect to get out what you put in -- money, time, effort, discipline. However, you could work your heart out for years and years, and you still might not have what it takes. Go to class because you love it, not because you think you'll tour with "The Superstars".
- Attend workshops at least once a year, preferably in another city, so you get a sense of the wider world of the dance and learn what upper level content is.
- Attend a variety of shows, locally and elsewhere.
- Invest in regular private lessons.
- Ask direct questions regarding feedback on your dancing.
- Expect your teacher to be honest about her abilities, to identify her style, to describe her path to training, to be continually pursuing professional development, to participate regularly in hosting and dancing in events such as stage shows and workshops, to refer you to people and resources.
- Get second opinions if you are not convinced your teacher is right.
- Demonstrate patience with your teacher, other students, and with yourself - it's not her job to turn you into Shakira, nor will everyone in your class be the same as you in learning style or needs.
- When switching instructors, talk to the new one to find out which level you should be in. Levels are inconsistent. It is polite to drop down a level with a new teacher.
- Be on time and attend regularly.
- Keep quiet and listen while your teacher is instructing.
- Be polite in your regular class and when dropping in or trying a new instructor.
- Avoid asking to borrow materials from your teacher.
- Avoid smoking or intoxicants before class or recitals.

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- Avoid wearing lots of fragrance.
- Drink lots of water.
- Avoid chewing gum or sucking candies -- it's distracting and dangerous.
- Focus on your long-term learning.
- Realize that you can't and won't get a lot of individual attention in a group class (that is the purpose of a private lesson).
- Attend classes in studios -- Winnipeg is one of the only cities where most classes are subsidized, large, and city-run; in many places, qualified teachers will only teach out of studios. But, not every studio class is taught by a really qualified, experienced instructor. Anyone can rent a studio and run a class.

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Last updated: 2008/04/03