

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Oct. 12, 2010

## Miami Shores belly dancing class gives a beginner an appreciation for the art

BY SAM STANTON  
The Miami Herald



DANIEL BOCK / FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

Mystika Palmer, from Tampa, and other students practice their moves during a belly dancing class at the Miami Shores Recreation Center, Saturday, Sept. 25, 2010.

I've wiggled in front of plenty of mirrors, seizing the opportunity to observe abdominal movement when no one else was around. But this was the extent of my belly-dancing experience until a recent Friday night, when I attended a class with Gamila Asfour. She was happy to correct me.

``It's called Danse Oriental," Asfour said. ``Not belly dancing."

When the renowned Egyptian dancer came from her home in Canada to teach a special weekend course at the Miami Shores Recreation Complex, she spoke to me about a growing problem.

Asfour, 70, described a new breed of teacher who starts charging for instruction after only a few months. Asfour warns those who want to learn the dance against going to just anyone's class. In Asfour's view, there are a lot of charlatans, and she said they're doing a disservice not only to their students but to the craft.

Before attending, I read that Asfour made her professional debut at the 1967 World's Fair Expo. Her three-part seminar was hosted by the Cocchis, ``Kahreen and Kira," a local mother-daughter dance-duo of Kismet Dancers.

The Cocchis, also seasoned Middle Eastern dancers, are supporters of the arts community in Miami Shores. In 2008, the pair was featured on the cover of Zaghareet, a trade magazine for belly dancers. They offer beginner classes at the recreation complex for \$11 a class (\$8.75 for village residents).

They're also preparing for their April Event, which runs April 29 through May 1, in the auditorium of the Miami Shores Recreation Complex. The event will feature California-based dancer ``Fathiem," and will celebrate the Cocchis' 25th silver anniversary of putting on shows.

According to my classmates, the perception of belly dancers has changed. One student said she remembered when the public looked down on ``the scantily clad dancers."

Another said it had a stigma of being a dance for "bad girls" when she started more than 20 years ago. But most agreed they've remained loyal performers.

"I don't like it," Asfour said. "I'm in love with it. I'm passionate. It runs in my veins."

But she spoke with an air of disgust about the modern perception and butchery of her craft. Asfour, a Montreal native, with French, Native American and Puerto Rican roots, and training in classical ballet, said she fell in love with Middle Eastern dance in 1961.

One of her first teachers and a great influence on her career was the Egyptian dance star Ahmad Jarjour.

"I dance of the eras," Asfour said. "I've been influenced by the dancers of the 1940s, '50s and '60s."

Many of the women were either teachers or performers. They said they appreciated the traditional style.

And Asfour has a cult following. The former performer travels throughout the year, teaching Middle Eastern dance instructors, enthusiasts and devotees how to "really listen to the music" and respond.

The ads for the workshop warned of having some prior experience. I believe I was the only one having blatantly disregarded this. Participants paid \$35 for the two-hour class on Friday night and \$65 a pop for the four-hour seminars on Saturday and Sunday.

Before the class began, the other women eagerly anticipated Asfour's arrival. One of the students, dance teacher "Zhaleh Fereshteh, Diva of Shimmies," traveled from Jacksonville.

"I used to take classes from her when I lived in Green Bay," said Joani Mullen as she unpacked a hip-wrap with little pieces of noise-making metal.

It suddenly hit me: I would be completely boring because of a lack of appropriate accessories.

"She really does dance in the old Egyptian style," Mullen said. "Not what the dance has evolved to now."

When the class began, Asfour had a more calming effect than expected. I was totally relaxed. We stretched. She reviewed some basic positions. I felt like I had succeeded at elongating my neck fairly well when I realized we would be moving to more complicated things.

Asfour might be 70, but if she has arthritis, you wouldn't know it. She moves with more grace than her students. She smirks, noticing the rest of us losing stamina and reminds us not to let our arms down.

I heard the words "abdominal roll" and my eyes circled the room. Somehow every single woman was doing something that I would now have to pretend to do. I tried to cheat, to copy. Nothing worked. In an attempt to roll my abdominal, I thrust another body part.

Oddly enough, when we moved onto something even more baffling, the rib roll, or the rib twist or something like that, I think I managed to accidentally do an abdominal roll.

At one minute, I would be performing a part of the routine and feel totally sensual. Within a split second, I would look in the mirror, remember my performance dyslexia, and feel like some sort of failed coquette. The experience was absurd but fulfilling.

Mullen, who first took classes with Asfour 20 years ago, belongs to her own South Florida based dance troop, The Rising Pheonix Dancers.

``It's a dance that any woman can do," Mullen said. ``Each dancer has a different way of doing each move. You are a visual representation of the music."

*Sam Stanton is a Miami Herald intern and a senior English major at Barry University in Miami Shores. She claimed not to have an ounce of coordination, but her editors didn't believe her.*

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