

AN AMERICAN BELLY DANCER

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Dance
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

June 2012

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Title: An American Belly Dancer

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Degree awarded June 2012

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research was to investigate the creative process of six professional American Belly Dancers: Shannon Conklin, Elena Villa, Lila McDaniel, TC Skinner, Manny Garcia, and Cera Byer. I took a class with each dancer, witnessed each dancer creating movement, and witnessed each dancer perform. After each experience I held discussions with each dancer. I learned that, for some of the dancers, music is everything, but for others, Belly Dance can be performed to any sound. For some of the dancers, Belly Dance is highly codified, and for others it is experimental. For some of the dancers, Belly Dance is a solo endeavor, but for others, dancing with a troupe is essential. Following these findings, I created six movement explorations – one based on each professional Belly Dancer in my study. Supplemental video footage of these explorations can be viewed as a companion to this written document.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my chair, Steven Chatfield for believing in this project from day one, and for encouraging me and mentoring me throughout both the choreographic and writing processes. I wish to extend sincere thanks to the professional Belly Dancers who worked with me for this project: Shannon Conklin, Elena Villa, Lila McDaniel, TC Skinner, Manny Garcia, and Cera Byer. Because of your dedication to the art form of Belly Dance, I not only was able to pursue this project, but have been forever changed as a dancer and choreographer. Much love and thanks to my sisters in dance: Siobhan “Ruby” McConnell, Rachel Peterson, Tatianna Young, Anna Weaver, Haley Wilson, Adaora Nkwonta, and Sara Urzua for your hard work and dedication to the movement explorations that are at the heart of this thesis. Also, thanks to my thesis committee members: Shannon Mockli and Christian Cherry for encouraging me to prove through rigor that Belly Dance is an art form worthy of scholarly research.

Dedicated to my husband, Jeremiah Paul Polynone and my parents: Joe and Katherine (aka: "Nurse Kitty") Schermick, my brother Drew, and to all of the people in the world who are baring their bellies and shaking their hips in spite of and in contrast to the patriarchal society that we currently live in.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Orientation of Study

Belly Dance in the United States has been written about from two major standpoints – historically as well as theoretically. Scholars such as Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young have written about the history of Belly Dance in the United States. They have traced Belly Dance in the United States back to the 1890 Chicago World’s Fair during which a dancer known as, “Little Egypt,” shocked audiences with her pelvic isolations.¹ Paul Eugene Monty has written about how, later, Ruth St. Denis and Russell Le Meriweather would experiment with the form.² Priya Srinivasan reminds us that it was women of the Middle Eastern, Indian, and African diaspora who were the source for St. Denis’ and Meriweather’s creative endeavors³, while Shay and Sellers-Young concur by writing about the immigrant women from the Middle East and the Levant who were performing belly dance in restaurants and teaching Belly Dance to US born women in the 1970’s.⁴

Barbara Sellers-Young, Anthony Shay⁵, and Sunia Maria⁶ have investigated American Belly Dance as an Orientalist activity, while scholars Donalee Dox⁷ and Tina

¹Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers - Young, “Belly Dance: Orientalism – Exoticism – Self-Exoticism” *Dance Research Journal* 35, 1 (Summer, 2003): 16.

² Paul Eugene Monty, “Serena, Ruth St. Denis, and the Evolution of Belly Dance in America (1876 – 1976)” PhD diss., New York University, 1986: 221 – 226.

³ Priya Srinivasan, “The Bodies Beneath the Smoke or What’s Behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in American Dance History” *Discourses in Dance* 4, 1 (2007): 7-34.

⁴ Shay and Sellers – Young, p. 17.

⁵ Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers - Young, “Belly Dance: Orientalism – Exoticism – Self-Exoticism” *Dance Research Journal* 35, 1 (Summer, 2003): 13-37.

Fruhauff⁸ have written about Belly Dance as a subjective experience that celebrates non-Western values. Other research on present-day American Belly Dance that I have reviewed includes the research of Stavros Stavrou Karayanni⁹ and Rachel Kraus¹⁰ who have investigated American Belly Dance as a spiritual practice.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research was to investigate to investigate the creative process of six professional American Belly Dancers. Specific attention was paid to the creative processes involved in the teaching of Belly Dance, performing Belly Dance, and creating Belly Dance for performance.

Assumptions/Biases

As I am an American Belly Dancer I must disclose that I held certain assumptions about the dancers that I worked with before I started this research. These assumptions included an expectation that the dancers who worked within the framework of Tribal Group Improvisation, such as Shannon Conklin and Lila McDaniel might not be as creative with their choreographic endeavors as the dancers who experiment with a more

⁶ Sunaina Maria. 2008. Bellydancing: Arab-face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. empire. *American Quarterly* (2008): 317-344.

⁷ DonaleeDox. "Dancing around orientalism" *The Drama Review* 50, 4 (Winter 2006): 52-70.

⁸ Tina Fruhauff. "Raqs Gothique: Decolonizing Belly Dance" *The Drama Review* 53 (Fall 2009): 117-138.

⁹ Stavros Stavrou Karayanni. "Sacred Embodiment: Fertility Ritual, Mother Goddess, and Cultures of Belly Dance." *Religion and the Arts* 13 (2009): 448 – 463.

¹⁰ Rachel Kraus. "Straddling the Sacred and the Secular: Creating a Spiritual Experience Through Belly Dance." *Sociological Spectrum* 29 (2009): 598 – 625.

Fusion-Style Belly Dance such as Cera Byer and Manny Garcia. I also assumed that, because I am an American Belly Dancer, these dancers would easily open-up to me during our discussions. These assumptions were either confirmed or dispelled as the research played out. For example, though Shannon Conklin works with a codified format of American Belly Dance, she has a very unique way of using costume choice as the impetus to create movement in a creative way.

Delimitations

I delimited this research in two ways: geographic location and time. I would have liked to research Belly Dancers from all over the world, or at least from many varying locations in the United States. Instead, I decided to remain in the locations where I have previously studied belly dance: Oregon, Arizona, and the Belly Dance festival: Tribal Fest, in Sebastopol, California.¹¹ This enabled me easier access to the Belly Dancers in these areas, since I am familiar with all of these communities. I also delimited the amount of time that I had to work with each dancer (May 2011 – July 2011), as well as the amount of time that I had to work in the studio on movement explorations (July 2011 – December 2011).

Definition of Terms

American Belly Dance:

A style of dance that has emerged from the teaching and performances of dancers from The Middle East and the Levant who immigrated or traveled to the United States,

¹¹ Tribal Fest 11: “It Goes to 11!” <http://www.blacksheepbellydance.com/tf11> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

beginning in the late 1800's. This dance has since transformed to include many styles including: Cabaret, Tribal Group Improvisation, and Tribal Fusion Belly Dance. The basic foundational movements of this form include but are not limited to: pelvic isolations (i.e. shimmies and hip drops), torso isolations, snake arms (sequential movement of the arm from scapula to fingertips), and abdominal isolations. The geographic location of "America[n]" is added to the term in order to reject claims that this dance is an authentic reproduction of the dances from The Middle East and the Levant that lie at its roots. Because the dancers who are performing this dance [in this study] are from the United States,¹² I posit that there is no feasible way that Belly Dance can be performed as anything other than "American." In other words, by honestly calling Belly Dance that is practiced by Americans, "American Belly Dance," we admit that we have appropriated the idea of the form, and that we have taken it and are now making it something specific to U.S. culture [whether within or without the mainstream of that culture].

Raqs al Sharqi:

Middle Eastern/Arabic solo dance.

American Cabaret Belly Dance:

U.S. variation of Raqs al Sharqi.

¹² I use the term "American" here, not out of ignorance that the United States is actually specifically in North America, but with the knowledge that this term might also include those that live in South and Central America as well. As, American Belly Dance can be found practiced throughout the geographic "Americas." However, as I discuss in my delimitations, my research focuses on Belly Dancers who reside specifically in the United States. This specificity has not caused me to alter course with the label, as there is something innately honest, political, and interesting in the term "American Belly Dancer," that I hope resonates a bit throughout this research.

American Tribal Style Belly Dance:

Also known as “A.T.S.” A style of belly dance invented by Carolena Nericcio in California in the 1980’s. This format emphasizes belly dance as a communal activity. The lead dancer of a duet, trio, or quartet stands to the left of the other dancer or dancers as they follow her movement cues. Movement cues initiate motifs or phrases of movement that are known as a part of the A.T.S. vocabulary. Throughout the performance the dancers in the group can switch in-and-out of the lead position. The other dancers who are not in the group stand upstage in a crescent shape and act as a moving chorus. When the center performers are done, they join the chorus and allow for another group to perform in the center.¹³

Tribal Group Improvisation:

Inspired by Carolena Nerriccio’s A.T.S. format, Tribal Group Improvisation is the title given to any troupe of Belly Dancers that uses the idea of “leading” with cues, and uses a vocabulary of motifs and combinations that can be danced in any order during an improvisation session or performance.

Tribal Fusion Belly Dance:

Uses Carolena Nerriccio’s movement vocabulary without the group improvisational format. Can incorporate other form such as, but not limited to modern dance, jazz dance, tap, Hip Hop, African dance, and East Indian dance. Can utilize contemporary choreographic structures.

¹³ Carolena Nericcio. Fat Chance Belly Dance. <http://www.fcfd.com/CarolenaNericcio/index.shtml> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

Zills:

Finger cymbals played to accompany the drumming in Middle Eastern and Arabic music.

Beladi:

A Middle Eastern rhythm used in all styles of American Belly Dance music. When played on the drum (Tablah) it sounds like: DOM DOM TEKA TEK DOM TEKA TEK TEKA¹⁴

Shimmy:

A constant movement of the pelvis in which the muscles rapidly contract and release. There are several varying types of shimmies, one is known as the $\frac{3}{4}$ shimmy in which the hips move: up, out, and down from side to side rapidly. Shimmies can also be layered onto other Belly Dance movement.

Troupe:

In American Belly Dance the term “troupe” is favored over the term “company.” The Belly Dance troupe shares a common vocabulary and aesthetic, and is common, especially amongst those who perform American Tribal Style or Tribal Group Improvisation. The troupe is important to dancers of these genres who do not typically perform solo.

¹⁴ See Appendix B. for Elena Villa’s handout on Belly Dance rhythms.

Significance of Study

This research is significant because it looks at the creative process of American Belly Dancers and addresses the actual movement experiences of these dancers. While previous research has investigated American Belly Dance theoretically, this research has investigated American Belly Dance experientially.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Historical Overview of Belly Dance in the United States

Because this research is based on the investigation of creative processes, specifically looking at the form of Belly Dance in the United States, it is important that we start by first understanding how the form arrived in the United States and how it has emerged as the art form that it is today. Various authors such as Sellers-Young and Shay, Kraus, and Dox all agree on the same story that tells of how Belly Dance came to the United States.¹⁵ These scholars all credit an entrepreneur from New York City named Sol Bloom for bringing dancers from Syria and Algeria to the Chicago world's fair in 1893. According to this story, Sol Bloom "brought" these dancers to the Chicago World's Fair, and their performances of folk dances in the barely-there costumes that Bloom outfitted them in sparked the imaginations of burlesque dancers and vaudeville actors around the country. The people attending the faire had never seen such dancing before. They were shocked with the way that the dancers used their pelvis and shook their shoulders. As Dox writes, "The movements, which primarily utilized hips, stomach, and chest were considered offensive within the Victorian Age that dictated women's bodies should be heavily clothed and tightly constrained. Because some of the audiences found the dance disturbing, officials attempted to shut down the performance, which only

¹⁵ Sellers-Young and Shay, p. 16; Kraus, p. 600; Dox, p. 53; Wartluft, p. 53

attracted more visitors.”¹⁶ And thus, during this exposition, an American legend was born - a dance of undulations, shimmies, and bare bellies called “Belly Dance.”

Dance performances at a similar exposition several years after the Chicago World’s Fair in New York lead to the movement and choreographic explorations of American modern dance icon: Ruth St. Denis. The late scholar, Paul Eugene Monty held the opinion that, “Ruth St. Denis was an artist who was inspired by a highly romanticized view of the Middle East, and through her creative genius, brought about an American awareness of ethnic dance, with her own version of Middle Eastern dance interpretations, especially her world famous, Egypta.”¹⁷ However, Priya Srinivasan takes a 21st century feminist approach when thinking about St. Denis’ choreographic inspirations. Srinivasan writes, “Countless writers confine the historical record of St. Denis’ beginnings to a single moment of origin: an Orientalist poster advertising cigarettes depicting Egyptian Deities.”¹⁸ Srinivasan’s research has led to the discovery that, in actuality, Denis was mostly inspired by the dancers that she saw at Coney Island who were visiting from India in 1904, “known as Nautchi dancers or the natchwalis.”¹⁹ Srinivasan’s research reminds us that, though infamous white women choreographers may have taken part in the history of what is now known as American Belly Dance, we should not forget the diasporic women of color whose culturally inherited dances begat the phenomenon. Srinivasan

¹⁶Dox p . 600.

¹⁷ Monty, Eugene Paul. p. 221 -223.

¹⁸ Srinivasan, p. 7.

¹⁹ Srinivasan, p. 7.

writes that, “The labour of Nautch dancing women haunts American dance histories through the every basic dance principles of movement; spiral turns and whirls.”²⁰

It is important and interesting to note that there actually is another connection between Ruth St. Denis and early American Belly Dance, besides the “Egypta” of her creative, colonial memory. This connection lies with a woman that St. Denis shared studio space with: one, Russell LeMeriweather, or “LeMeri.” In 1940, LaMeri and Ruth St. Denis opened a dance studio in New York City that they named, “The School of Natya.”²¹ While St. Denis was famous for the “Eastern” dances of her imagination, LaMeri had actually dedicated much of her life to the study of “ethnic” dancing. According to Monty, LaMeri spent time studying dance in Spain, where she noticed the heavy Arabic influence on the hand gestures and arm movements, as well as Morocco, where, in 1929, she studied with a retired court dancer of the Sultan.²² Monty quotes a Belly Dance publication saying, ‘LaMeri performed the authentic version of an ethnic dance while Miss Ruth performed the “art derivative” version.’²³ However I make this sound for the purposes of this thesis, I do not favor the techniques of LaMeri over the techniques of St. Denis, I only present this as a part of the whole complex history of American Belly Dance, as we are still, currently in this 21st century debating the “authenticity” of Belly Dance in the United States. In fact, as I worked with the six professional American Belly Dancers in my study, I found that, though most of the dancers have experience studying some form of Raqs al Sharqi, for the most part, they,

²⁰ Srinivasan. p. 8.

²¹ Monty. p. 221.

²² Monty. P. 222.

²³ Monty, p. 225.

and their teachers have derived their dance styles from a combination of both study and creative imagining.

Returning to a chronological, yet non-linear history of Belly Dance in the United States, it wasn't long before performances by dancers like LeMeri and those who were dancing "dances of the East" during the early to mid 20th century, began to be emulated by actors in Hollywood movies. In fact, many of these actors were being trained to dance by none other than Miss Ruth St. Denis in her studio in Los Angeles. And, while this was happening, perhaps serendipitously, perhaps due to an influx of foreign tourists searching to find and translate the next hieroglyph, or perhaps inspired by the dances of Miss Ruth, Raqs Beladi (Egyptian Folk dance) was quickly being transformed into Raqs Sharki (Egyptian Cabaret Dance), in the nightclubs of Cairo, Egypt.

If American Belly Dancing can be traced back to Ruth St. Denis and LaMeri, the actual idea of American "Cabaret" Belly Dancing did not happen, according to Sellers-Young and Shay, until the 1940's. Sellers-Young and Shay, like Srinivasan, remind us that, "The first performers of actual [B]elly [D]ance, as it is presented in nightclubs [in North America] catering to people of Greek, Lebanese, and other Middle Eastern backgrounds, were primarily "ethnic women".^{24 25} It is from these women that other American women, who were not necessarily from the countries of origin of these dances, (or who could not even stake claims to having ancestors from the countries of origins of these dances), learned to Belly Dance during this era. By the 1970's, women throughout the United States were learning how to Belly Dance from other women, many of whom

²⁴Sellers-Young and Shay, p. 17.

²⁵ ("ethnic women" being a term (if I am understanding correctly) that I would, if I could, change to "hyphenated-American," or "women of color," with note that the appropriateness of these change as race and gender studies progresses in time.)

were first generation immigrants from places such as Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco, Persia, Egypt, and Uzbekistan.²⁶ And, as these women became Belly Dancers, they also became teachers of their own versions of the dance.

In the United States of today's 21st century, Belly Dance could be divided into two different styles, with several subdivisions or sub-cultures emerging from these two styles. These main two styles of American Belly Dance are known as American Cabaret Belly Dance and Tribal Style Belly Dance. American Belly Dancer Yasmina, from Phoenix, Arizona defines American Cabaret style Belly Dance as "glitzy" and "flamboyant". She writes, "We have taken the Egyptian style of the dance and made it our own. We incorporate the use of the veil during a section of a routine. Most U.S. dancers do not dance any pure form of the dance, but add other influences such as jazz, ballet, and Spanish [dance] and call it American Style Belly Dance."²⁷ American Cabaret Belly Dance is often danced in the context of restaurants or nightclubs. Cabaret style has become the style of dance that most Americans think of when they hear the words "Belly Dance." It has come to represent the Belly Dancer who typically wears the two-piece sequined costume, and who dances for tips at the Middle Eastern restaurant. It is also thought to be the most "authentic" form of Belly Dance practiced in the United States today, probably because it is the one style that has continued to be performed to Middle Eastern and Arabic musical forms.²⁸

²⁶ Sellers-Young and Shay, p 17.

²⁷ Yasmina. Website: <http://www.joybellydancing.com/bdstyle.htm> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

²⁸ I would consider the dance of one of the dancers in this study: Elena Villa to be mostly related to this American style, however, her personal aesthetic is actually not very "glitzy" or "flamboyant," but she does dance to Middle Eastern or Arabic music as a rule, and does sometimes dance in restaurants. Another dancer in this study: Manny Garcia was originally trained in American Cabaret Belly Dance. I would also call my own primary Belly Dance training "American Cabaret."

A new style of American Belly Dance was born in the 1970's as it swept the nation.²⁹ This style was generated by groups of American performers, performing their own take on "folkloric" dances at Renaissance Faires in California.³⁰ Dancer Jamila Salimpor is credited with developing a format of codified vocabulary for this style. Moore writes, "Drawing it's movements, costuming, and general inspiration from the tribal cultures of the Near East, Middle East, Northern Africa/Maghreb, and Spain, the then named, "California Tribal" was, and its current incarnations continue to be, a conglomeration of many different influences."³¹ This new "Tribal" Belly Dance style brought two new important aesthetics to Belly Dance. First to note was the costuming. Opposite from the "glitzy" and "glamorous" style of Cabaret, Tribal style dancers used, "earthy, ethnic textiles, coins, many layers, very full pantaloons, and head wraps/turbans."³² Another new aesthetic developed by this new style was the idea of the chorus, or the idea of dancers performing "back-up" to a solo performer either performing smaller, less-accentuated movements, clapping, or posing behind a soloist, duet, or trio of other dancers in the troupe.

Inspired by the format of American Belly Dance that was created by Jamilla Salimpor, American Belly Dancer, Carolena Nericcio created her own format of Tribal Group Improvisational Belly Dance in the 1980's. Nericcio's named her troupe, "Fat

²⁹Moore, Sharon. Website: Tribal Belly Dance.org.<http://www.tribalbellydance.org/about.html> (accessed March 5, 2012).

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Chance Belly Dance” (in honor of an onlooker who once asked her if they could have a private lap dance.³³) Neruccio’s website explains how she came to develop this format:

Being young and tattooed, Carolena attracted other people living alternative lifestyles. The Modern Primitives movement was underway. Tattoos and primitive styles of body adornment were the vogue. Carolena and her students performed at tattoo shows and conventions and became well known in the City by the Bay.³⁴

The use of improvisation and cuing came about because of the nature of the performances and venues that FCBD were asked to perform at. “There simply wasn’t a way, or a need, to choreograph because the dance space often changed at the last minute, and the dancers had to perform without any information about the performance space.”³⁵ In Neruccio’s style, which she named “American Tribal Style” (or “A.T.S.”), the lead dancer of a duet, trio, or quartet stands to the left of the other dancer or dancers as they follow her cues. The rest of the dancers stand upstage in a crescent shape and act as a moving chorus, as in Jamila Salimpour’s Tribal Style Belly Dance format. When the center performers are done, they join the chorus and allow for another group to perform in the center. Neruccio’s format is based around women dancing together as a communal whole. She writes, “Allow yourself to see the whole picture: women working together in cooperation; a group focused on presenting the dance as one entity.”³⁶ Neruccio has inspired many Belly Dancers in the United States to create their own vocabulary of Tribal Group Improvisation, and in the past ten years there has been an emergence of many new

³³Neruccio.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

troupes performing this style such as “Anaya Tribal” (Tempe, AZ)³⁷, “Hipnosis” (Philadelphia, PA)³⁸, and “BlackSheep Belly Dance” (Maui, HI and Sacramento, CA)³⁹ It is important to note that, while, there are many troupes performing and teaching their own style of Tribal Group Improvisation, only Nerricio’s format is referred to as “A.T.S.” and Nericcio has even gone through preparations to copyright this format.

While those dancers who may have been drawn to Nerricio’s format favor a dance experience that is based around a communal ideal that places the expression of the group above the expression of the individual, other Belly Dancers have sought to create forms that allow for individualistic expression and an open hybridization of ideas. These forms/sub-cultures include underground styles with names like: “Tribal –Fusion,” “Experimental,” and “Gothic Belly Dance.” Some pivotal dancers that have become particularly popular and have been setting trends amongst the varying American Belly Dance sub-cultural communities are Rachel Brice⁴⁰, Zoe Jakes⁴¹, Sharon Kihara⁴², Kami Liddle,⁴³ Asharah⁴⁴, Amy Sigil of the troupe, Unmata⁴⁵. However, due to the underground and technologically driven nature of this form at this time, this list of

³⁷ Anaya Tribal. Website: <http://anayatribal.com/> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

³⁸ Hipnosis. Website: <http://www.tribalbellies.com/> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

³⁹ Djoumahna, Kajira. BlackSheep Belly Dance. Website: <http://www.blacksheepbellydance.com/main.html> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

⁴⁰ Rachel Brice. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_Brice (Accessed March 5, 2012).

⁴¹ Zoe Jakes. Website: <http://zoebellydance.com/> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

⁴² Sharon Kihara. Website: <http://www.sharonkihara.com/> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

⁴³ Kami Liddle. Website: <http://www.fusion-bellydance.com/Kami-Liddle.php> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

⁴⁴ Asharah. Website: <http://asharah.com> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

⁴⁵ Unmata. Website: <http://www.unmata.com/> (Accessed March 5, 2012).

influential Tribal Fusion Belly Dancers will have greatly expanded by the time this thesis is completed.

Orientalism, Subjectivity, and Spirituality

Feminist scholar, Sunaina Maria has written about Belly Dance in the context of the globalized 20th and 21st centuries. Maria has written that; “These performances highlight the guilty pleasures of U.S. imperialism, revealing the difficulties of locating dissent in the face of liberal multiculturalism and the complicity of popular culture in the fissures of U.S. Empire.”⁴⁶ Maria wrote about the first time that she saw an American Belly Dance performance observing that she was, “...simultaneously amused, intrigued, and puzzled.”⁴⁷ She tells the story of being at an alternative music party in San Francisco when several costumed American Belly Dancers appeared as paid performers. She describes that her first reaction was to ask herself: “Why was such an Orientalist performance being staged at an alternative music party?”⁴⁸ Other scholars, such as Shay and Sellers-Young have also investigated Orientalism in American Belly Dance. Training their focus on 20th and 21st century issues of race, Shay and Sellers-Young look to Homi Bhaba’s definition of Orientalism. They quote Bhaba’s definition: ‘Orientalism...is on one hand, a topic of learning, discovery and practice: and on the other hand, it’s the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions, and requirements.’⁴⁹ Within the context of American Belly Dance, these ‘...images, fantasies, myths...’ can be dangerously

⁴⁶ Maria, p. 341.

⁴⁷ Maria, p. 317-344.

⁴⁸ Maria, p. 317.

⁴⁹ Sellers-Young and Shay, p. 18.

Orientalist. For example, if the American Belly Dancer imagines that by wearing a veil and shimmying seductively, they are somehow embodying the essence of the Eastern or Mid-Eastern woman, then this image of the “exotic other” becomes a requirement of all Middle Eastern women, or for any woman given the racist label of “Oriental.” Maria and Shay and Sellers-Young writing is an example of how much of the scholarly work of this current century has investigated Belly Dance within the theoretical context of Orientalism.

While American Belly Dance has been theorized through the lens of Orientalism, Texas A & M professor and American Belly Dancer, Donalee Dox furthers the investigation into the contemporary practice of American Belly Dance by stating, “While Western [B]elly [D]ance reproduces an aestheticized, imaginary vision of the East and its women, its popular practice warps that Orientalist frame by making the dancer the subject of experience rather than the object of a gaze.”⁵⁰ She continues to re-align our perception by writing, “Western [B]elly [D]ancers themselves often interpret Orientalist images as a celebration of alternatives to Western patriarchy.”⁵¹ From Dox’s experiential perspective, contemporary American Belly Dancers are not putting their idea of the “Orient” on display but they are, instead, engaging in a personalized subjective experience with the dance.

The topic of Orientalism is important to this study, because we are not yet living in a post-racial world, and because Orientalism still lives in some aspects of the performance of Belly Dance in the United States in today’s 21st century. However, there

⁵⁰ Dox, p. 54.

⁵¹ Ibid.

are trends that suggest that American Belly Dancers are working towards separating themselves from overt Orientalism. One way is by actually naming the dance as “American.” In this way no claims are being made to suggest that the dance being performed is authentically reproducing dances that are a part of a cultural legacy from The Middle East or any other place where Belly Dance could be considered a cultural legacy. Second, though American Belly Dance does at times contain an element of fantasy, some of the professional American Belly Dancers in this study are disassociating themselves from the fantasy that they are somehow connected to, or representing a culture other than U.S. culture when they perform. One way that the dancers do this is simply by not taking on an Arabic sounding name, or a “stage name,” which was once typical for American Belly Dancers.⁵² In fact, none of the professional American Belly Dancers in this study go by any name other than their own when performing Belly Dance. Third, by acknowledging the hybridized nature of the dance, such as when Shannon Conklin fuses prop-work into her dance, or when Cera Byer researches various forms of dance to create fusion dance, American Belly Dancers are beginning to move away from an Orientalized vision of the dance, into a more creative and open realm. Finally, I would agree with Dox’s focus on the importance of the subjective experience of the dancer as one that subverts the dance from an Orientalist experience. However, I would take the idea that, though, American Belly Dancers do, “...often interpret Orientalist images as a celebration of alternatives to Western patriarchy,”⁵³ further by suggesting,

⁵²See for example, the “dance” name of my first teach, “Angelique.” Or the “dance” name of the professional American Belly Dancer from Phoenix, AZ: “Yasmina.” Both came into the dance during the 1970’s/80’s during a time that I might describe as a time prior to the entrance of the U.S. Belly dance community into the discussion on Orientalism and race/nation.

⁵³ Ibid.

that some of the professional American Belly Dancers that I worked with, including myself, do not even see themselves as belonging to the mainstream patriarchal culture to begin with, and therefore do not need to use Orientalist images to celebrate alternatives, as they themselves are already the alternatives, and only need to perform as themselves in order to defy Western patriarchy.

Adding to the scholarly discussion of Belly Dance in the United States is the work of scholars, Stavros Stavrou Karayanni and Rachel Kraus, who have both investigated the idea of Belly Dance as a spiritual activity. Both authors have actually interacted with American Belly Dancers, which is the reason that they are reviewed in this document.

According to Karayanni, American Belly Dance, "...carries a strong mythical dimension in which the performing body is sacralized through movement, thereby gaining an intimation of goddess spirituality."⁵⁴ Karayanni has investigated the writings of American Belly Dancers, Carol Christ⁵⁵, Andrea Deagon,⁵⁶ Z-Helene Christopher⁵⁷, Donalee Dox, and Daniela Gioseffi⁵⁸. Karayanni examines how the American Belly Dancer Carol Christ expresses her take on the spirituality of American Belly Dancers as she says, "[American Belly Dancers] can piece together fragments of stories, rituals, and prayers, taking [our] clues from archaeological and historical records and from fragments of Goddess images, symbols, and rituals that have survived in Christianity and

⁵⁴ Karayanni. p. 450.

⁵⁵ Carol Christ. Website: <http://www.goddessariadne.org/carolwords.htm> (accessed March 5, 2012).

⁵⁶ Andrea Deagon. Website: <http://people.uncw.edu/deagona/raqs/> (accessed March, 5 2012).

⁵⁷ Z-Helene Christopher. Article: <http://www.zhelene.com/Papers.html> (accessed March 5, 2012).

⁵⁸ Karayanni, p. 451.

Judaism.”⁵⁹ Karayanni believes that some of the spiritual meaning of Belly Dance has been drawn from visual images of the Venus of Willendorf. Discovered in Austria in 1908, the Venus of Willendorf, has come to symbolize, “...female-centered spirituality as primeval expressions of womanhood untamed by patriarchal institutions and as repositories of eternal truths about human creation.”⁶⁰ Karayanni has theorized that, when American feminism and belly dance converge, the large-bellied, full-breasted goddess figure of the Venus of Willendorf becomes an important symbol for American Belly Dancers. In this way, Karayanni believes that at the heart of American Belly Dance lies both feminism, as well as a strong feminine based spirituality.

In another example of how spirituality has been researched in American Belly Dance, scholar Rachel Kraus sought to investigate how American Belly Dancers find spirituality in Belly Dance depending on their affiliation with, or disconnection to traditional religion, She studied the importance of spirituality in American Belly Dance by actually going out into the community and talking with American Belly Dancers about their spirituality. Kraus interviewed seventy-seven American Belly Dancers, asking open-ended questions related to religion, spirituality, and Belly Dance. She found that those affiliated with religions other than Christianity or Judaism, or with no religious affiliation, were more likely to find spiritual meaning in Belly Dance. She found that Belly Dance became a spiritual activity when dancers could lose themselves in the dance and find a place of introspection; and when they could feel like they were connecting with others, or with a power greater than themselves. Two qualities that Kraus found to

⁵⁹ Karayanni quoting Christ p. 451.

⁶⁰Karayanni p. 453.

be important for Belly Dance to be perceived as spiritual for the participant involved: (1.) the dancer must find a connection between Belly Dance and art, and (2.) the dancer must feel comfortable with the form during performance or improvisation. Despite Karayanni's suggestion that American Belly Dancers are connected in a spiritual way to their dance, Kraus found that twenty-five percent of the Belly Dancers that Kraus interviewed did not feel that Belly Dance was a spiritual activity. She found that the dancers that comprised the twenty-five percent were more likely to find their spirituality by attending weekly religious worship services. One of Kraus' informants told her, 'I just don't experience spirituality with it. It is a dance to me. I'm a Baptist girl. I go to church every Sunday, and that is my spiritual fulfillment.'⁶¹ Kraus's work reflects my research, as some of the dancers that I have worked with discussed the dance as a spiritual activity, but some did not. Both Karayanni's and Kraus's work are important to the research that I have done, because their research reflects academic research of American Belly Dance, that has actually investigated the lives, philosophies, and practices of the actual Belly Dancers themselves.

For the purposes of this research, I have not been interested in theorizing American Belly Dancers, but rather, have experientially engaged with American Belly Dancers and my own practice as an American Belly Dancer. Though, "American Belly Dancer," is certainly a cultural identity, this research has been about investigating creative processes and movement, using the form of American Belly Dance as the basis for movement creation.

⁶¹ Kraus, Rachel. p. 611.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Up until May of 2011 I was making dances based on my specific training and my ideas of what being a Belly Dancer in the United States meant to me at that time. It was in May 2011 that I set out to work with six professional American Belly Dancers: Cera Byer, Elena Villa, Lila McDaniel, Manny Garcia, TC Skinner, and Shannon Conklin. I took a Belly Dance class with each dancer, witnessed each dancer creating or rehearsing movement, and watched each dancer perform. After each of these three experiences I talked with these professional dancers, asking them questions that I hoped would give me insight into their dance and the philosophies behind how they do what they do, and why they do what they do. I used Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman's methods as outlined in their book, "Designing Qualitative Research,"⁶² to guide me through the process of holding these discussions, as I used an open-ended format for the interviews, which Marshall and Rossman describe as, a format that enables, "... the exploration of many topics but that could focus on cultural nuance, firsthand encounters, and the perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of others."⁶³ In this way I was able to dive into discussing each professional American Belly Dancer's creative process with them, and find out what things in their process are most important and unique to their own way of approaching Belly Dance. After the discussion, I went home and reflected in a journal

⁶² Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications, 1999.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 137.

about what I had learned, mostly comparing and contrasting my own ideas and philosophies about Belly Dance with the new ones that I had been exposed to.

The first part of my interaction with the dancers was to take a class with them. After the class I sat down with them (with the exception of Cera Byer, whom I later corresponded with via e-mail) and engaged in an open dialogue using my questions as topics to be explored. Each discussion was audio-recorded and then later transcribed by me. After each class I asked each professional American Belly Dancer following open-ended questions that included:

- What movement are you teaching?
- Why have you chosen to teach this movement?
- By the end of this class what would you like your students to be able to do/know?
If you could continue to work with these students what would you like them to be able to do/know?
- What kind of music are you using and why have you chosen this music?

After the class and the discussion with the dancer I reflected on the experience in a journal entry and asked myself these questions:

- How did the dancer express what they said in the interview through their teaching?
- How did I learn more about the dancer and their philosophy through taking class with them?
- What did I learn about my own Belly Dance practice by taking this class?
- How might I use what I have learned in this class in my choreography?

I next either observed, or discussed with the dancer, the art of creating movement. In most cases, I video-record this experience. Based on this experience, I engaged in a discussion with the dancer and asked the following questions:

- How do you work with the Belly Dance movement that you know in order to present it to your class?
- How do you work with the Belly Dance movement that you know in order to prepare for performances?

After this experience I wrote a reflection in my journal and ask myself these questions:

- What methodologies did I observe the dancer using to create movement?
- How do these methodologies reflect upon the things that the dancer said in their interview?
- How might this experience teach me even more about the meaning of Belly Dance for the dancer?
- How might I employ these methodologies in my own creative process?

Finally, I observed and video-recorded the dancer performing their own choreography. After observing their performance I engaged in a conversation with the dancer and asked the following open-ended questions:

- What was your artistic intention for this performance?
- What was your intention for choosing the particular movement that you used?
- What was your intention for choosing the music that you danced to?
- What was your intention for wearing the costume that you wore?

As a side question, that I hoped would give me further insight into each professional American Belly Dancer, as the final question, I asked each dancer:

- In the landscape of Belly Dance trends in the United States today, where do you see your self?

By recording the performance I was able to refer back to it while I was reflecting on it in my own journal. While reflecting on this performance in my journal I asked myself these questions:

- How does what the dancer said during our discussion reflect what I saw in their performance?
- How does this performance inspire my own desire to perform Belly Dance and create Belly Dance choreography?

Following the experiences that I had with the six professional American Belly dancers, I created six movement explorations – one for each dancer that I worked with. Beginning in July of 2011, I went into the studio armed with my journals, transcribed interviews, and videos of the experiences that I had with each of the professional dancers that I had worked with. My goal was to explore each of the six professional American Belly Dancer's creative processes, philosophies, and dance styles through explorations of movement. Before I started this research I was creating dances that represented what I knew about myself: I was a Belly Dancer and I liked to enter the studio with a plan, and I preferred to work with specific movement motifs. As I engaged with what I learned from each dancer, my dance began to transform. I began using more improvisational techniques; listening more deeply to the music that I dance with, and I began to try on new aesthetic possibilities.

From July 2011 until the completion of the movement project in December of 2011, I met twice a week with the dancers: Siobhan “Ruby” McConnell, Rachel Peterson, Tatianna Young, Anna Weaver, Haley Wilson, Adaora Nkwonta, and Sara Urzua. I had been working with most of these dancers over the past couple of years – teaching them my style and movement ideas of American Belly Dance, as well as setting choreography on them. In this way, the creative processes that ensued were as new to my dancers as they were to me. Each exploration of movement took a different shape, taking into account the creative processes, styles, and philosophies of the professional American Belly Dancers that I worked with. Before each rehearsal I would spend at least an hour in the studio alone as I prepared to engage with one of the professional American Belly Dancers that I worked with. During these times I would watch the videos that I took of my experiences; listen to music that reminded me of the professional American Belly Dancer that I was about to engage with; improvise using motifs that I learned from the professional American Belly Dancer, or simply improvise with the image of the professional American Belly Dancer in my mind. Once my dancers arrived, we would warm-up in a way that I felt connected us with the professional American Belly Dancer that we were about to engage with. For example: for the warm-up that we did while engaging with the Belly Dance of Shannon Conklin, we danced to an up-beat fusion of Spanish Flamenco and Hip Hop music and danced some of the phrases I learned from her, and, during the weeks that we engaged with TC Skinner’s dance and creative process we warmed-up in a circle to create a more welcoming and egalitarian environment. The actual creation of choreography was different for each exploration. For example: when working on creating movement that would engage with Shannon Conklin, the

choreography was inspired by the idea of the 25-yard skirts that Conklin uses in her choreography. When creating movement that would engage with TC Skinner, the choreography was inspired by rock n' roll music and a very specific movement motif that Skinner taught me, which we used as the impetus for improvisation.

Throughout this process I held three showings for my thesis committee. On December 2nd, 2011 I presented the six movement explorations in their entirety. For this final presentation, I layered costuming onto each movement exploration. Rather than viewing costuming as purely decorative, I found that costuming was an added layer that created a unified experience when combined with the movement. I did this because the importance of costuming is something that each of the professional American Belly Dancers expressed to me. Each costume was as varied and unique as the movement within each movement exploration. For example: for the exploration that engaged with the dance of Lila McDaniel we tucked in our 25-yard skirts to create a flower-like look, wore tops that were a shade of white and decorated with lace, and topped everything off with lots of jewelry and flowers. In contrast to that exploration, while engaging with the dance of Cera Byer, we choose a more minimal look, wearing simple black tops with black skirts, and black leggings.

Explanation of Evaluation

I set out to investigate the creative process of six professional American Belly Dancers as they taught class, performed, and created movement for performance. I also set out to investigate my own creative process as a professional American Belly Dancer. I will evaluate this research by reflecting on how my investigation has given me insight

into the creative processes of these six professional American Belly Dancers as well as my own creative process. I will also evaluate my research through reflecting on whether, and if so, how, my own creative process and outlook on teaching, performing, and creating Belly Dance movement has been transformed from the beginning until the completion of this thesis.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Experiences

Shannon Conklin

Class:

Shannon Conklin teaches a Group Tribal Improvisational format. She offered students a handout in syllabus form so that they could have something to refer to when practicing outside of class. Conklin sets concrete, physical goals for her students' learning. Conklin's class was specific, in that it was geared towards her students learning how to dance with double fans and 25-yard skirts. Discussing her goals for the day's class, Conklin told me:

...today it will be: how to hold the fan properly... and how to get the greatest range of motion with the fan. ...today [we will work on] some of those drills and then I will break it down into two combos."

In regards to her goals for the entire 8-week session of classes on the fan and skirt themes, Conklin said, "By taking the 8 weeks they should be able to perform the movement in a Tribal Style without the cues, and it should be completely improv[isation], and they could create a new dance every time...." Shannon Conklin's class was built around very specific movements that have Carolena Nerricio's A.T.S. style as their roots. Conklin works with movement using rules that Nericcio has formulated for a very specific group improvisational experience, these rules include: dancers must stay in the rehearsed spatial formations; dancers must not use "clocking" (simply traveling clockwise to replace the lead by pushing her into the next space in the formation) to change leads of formations; lead dancers must always dance on the left with all other dancers facing the left diagonal; and finally, a group chorus must stand in a crescent shape and dance simplified movements acting as "back up dancers" to

featured duets, trios, or quartets. As far as how Conklin works with her own movement ideas, specifically with using fans and 25-yard skirts, she described the movement in her class by saying:

Tonight I'm going to be teaching the skirt and fan with the influences of Flamenco, but definitely with the more Belly Dance Tribal movement. So our foot patterns are going to be similar to those and other tribal moves. It's more so to be an extension of the body - the fan will sometimes be showcased where sometimes the skirt will be showcased...

Another thing I noticed about the movement in Conklin's class is the way she teaches it, "...the way I teach is that I teach the footwork first, then it's skirt, the looks and gestures, and hips are always included with the skirt. But with this it's: footwork, fan, skirt, looks and gestures." I experienced this in Conklin's warm-up in the way that her class started with a very A.T.S. – style footwork combination, moved into fan work, and then skirt work.

Shannon Conklin's use of music is all about what works best with the movements and movement combinations of their Tribal Group Improvisation. When I asked Conklin about her music for the class, she told me:

Tonight is going to be very medium paced skirt-friendly music. I don't want to give them any off beats or anything. But it will be a lot of me just sort-of counting out loud before we go into any kind of music. So it will be very medium paced, no breaks... But when we do get into the music, we will get into a different style of music that I have chosen, which has a lot of guitar. The album is called "Guitar Beatbox," which is an amazing CD and collection, which is all Spanish guitars, but it has an edge to it because it has the beat boxing. It is the same guy playing the guitar and beat boxing so it kind of has that beat that Tribal usually has, but it has the strong presence of the Spanish guitar and the strength of that.

I responded in this conversation by saying, "So – fusion music for fusion dancing?" with a smile, to which Conklin replied, "Yes!"

Movement Creation:

Shannon Conklin's creative process is quite unique amongst all of the other professional American Belly Dancers that I worked with. She told me:

It's interesting because I go about it a lot differently than most dancers I know of. I'm not quite sure why I do it that way. But most dancers will select their song and then that will generate their theme, mood, and movements. Mine is costume, movements, and music...its more like costuming and what moods fits that.. I know it's backwards but that's the way I go about it. If, let's say, the studio is doing a Steam Punk show...in my head I will go through: appropriate costumes, then appropriate movement, then appropriate music.

Not only does Conklin's process start with choosing a costume, but she first thinks about the venue of the performance that she is creating movement for, she explains this by saying:

Now, if it were, say "Tribal Pura" with Carolena, it would be: choli and 25-yard skirts and our music and movement would be nothing but traditional. So I gage the theme, the costume, and also the staging depending on what is appropriate. If it is an adult 21 and up show, then we can do something that is a little bit more "edgy" for the costume, if we are on an actual stage we can do something a little more edgy. If we are at something like "First Friday"[downtown Phoenix's monthly art walk], we are 100% covered, bellies and everything no matter what because we are within touching distance of the crowd.

As I watched Conklin work in the studio with her dancers, I saw her process in action. Conklin started the session by sitting with her dancers and discussing their upcoming show – one with a "Steam Punk" theme (a popular theme in 21st century American Belly Dance). The discussion focused mostly on the theme of the show and costuming. They talked about creating a piece that would have two different "characters:" an "evil" character – which would represent the "mechanical" style of Steam Punk and a 'good" character that would represent the "circusy" side of Steam Punk.

Performance:

When I talked to Conklin about the movement that I saw in her performance she emphasized the importance of maintaining a connection to the American Tribal Style format and tradition. She talked about the movement that she uses in her troupe, ‘Divine Chaos,’ which she directs along with her fellow dancer Tammy Reynolds: “All of the skirt movements are improvisational so they are lead by cues. All of the movements are based on movements from FCBD.... and the rules that Carolena has put into place are maintained through all of it. One of the rules of A.T.S. is that your right foot basically has to be ready to step on the ‘one’ [of the music]...” However, because Conklin is also artistically a free-agent when it comes to the way that she presents her particular style of Tribal Group Improvisation, she admitted that, though she keeps herself constantly aware of the “rules” of Nericcio’s A.T.S., she does not feel bound by them. She went on to say, “But in “skirt” that’s a little different because we do an equal amount of right and left... So, there is some non-FCBD style movements, [and] those were actually created by Tammy and I.” Conklin discussed her troupe philosophy about creating original movement combinations by saying, “All of our combos are actually original. They’re not taken or cut up from any one else’s, they’re ours.” But then, she goes back to the idea of maintaining that connection with A.T.S. as well as basic Belly Dance by adding, “The rules that we set for ourselves were that: it doesn’t matter that we are dancing with the skirt - they must be derived from Belly Dance movement.” Commenting lastly on the basic tenant of her movement creation philosophy, she proclaimed, “What we were determined to do was [to ensure] that every step had to be Belly Dance. We weren’t

going to get out there with the skirt and just call it Belly Dance. (Because) fusion is going all over the place. We wanted to keep it true to Belly Dance.

Elena Villa

Class:

For Elena Villa, her Belly Dance class was all about teaching students how to relate to the music, and specifically, how to play the zills (finger cymbals) to very specific Middle Eastern rhythms.⁶⁴ When I asked Villa what she would like students to be able to do after taking her class she responded by saying:

I'm going to be passing out a handout with some drills and some basic patterns. What I want students to get from the class is for them to be able to expand beyond the basic '1-2-3, 1-2-3' triplet playing with their zills and to be able to incorporate some new simple patterns into their playing. [Also,] to be able to accentuate rhythms that they are working with in different Middle eastern pieces, different Arabic songs, for example, and to be able to have a list of rhythms to work with as well as a list of movements that they can combine with these Middle Eastern rhythms.

In the long term, say, if students were to take her class for the entire session (10 classes), Villa would like students, "...to be able to be a musician and to add nuance to your dancing and to the music with your zills."

Elena Villa's class was focused on the playing of the zills, but in order to play the zills as a dancer, one must dance, for this purpose, Villa explained that her movements were, "... going to be basic foundation movements because we're using them with zills." For Villa, the foundational Belly Dance movements of her class consisted of: pelvic isolations, chest isolations, arms movements, shimmies, traveling steps, turns, and folk movements (with their appropriate rhythm). Isolations always happened "down" or "in"

⁶⁴ For more on these rhythms, see Appendix B for the handouts that Villa presented during her class.

(contracted) on the “DOM” (bass rhythm). Slow movements only happened when the strings or flutes take over the drumming in the music.

Elena Villa is adamant about using music that is specifically Middle Eastern. For her, Belly Dance is a cultural tradition that comes from/ holds roots in the Middle East (albeit, not just one country, and not overlooking its transcultural properties). With this “base” philosophy, I would say that everything Villa demonstrated with the movement that she taught in her class shows her belief that the movement is always in service to the music. I believe that her purpose for teaching this class is to spread this philosophy – to bring 21st century “eclectic” Belly Dancers back to the roots of the Belly Dance, to teach them about the Middle Eastern culture behind the dance through the study of the music.

For this specific class Villa explained:

...we’re going to be working with some straight-rhythm tracks that various drummers have laid down for dancers to practice to. The reason for that is that we need to learn the rhythms. We need to have the straight rhythms to practice our zill patterns with. But we are also going to be working with several different pieces, mostly Egyptian, and the reason for that is because the Egyptian music has a lot of rhythmic changes in it, so its really good music to practice your zill playing to. So we’re going to work with a couple folkloric pieces: Saidi, Maqsoum, and Fallahi so people can practice changing the rhythm with their zills.

Movement Creation:

As I watched Elena Villa in her studio I saw her spending time sitting by the stereo, deeply listening to her music. As she went back to moving I heard her humming the music to herself. She explained to me:

...I am pretty much into that visual poetry thing, you know, harmony of movement. I try to translate the music as I hear it. So you probably heard me, I sing the music a lot as I am dancing with it... I try to focus on the feeling and the melody in the music and then I’ll use movement that seems to my mind and my ear that visual corresponds with that. So I’ll use things like height, you know – level-changes – so if something goes (sings several

ascending notes), you know what I mean, I'm sort of atonal (laughs), but I'll try to follow that. Or if something repeats I'll try to repeat a movement, and I'll use that a lot in choreographies because students like that.

Since the music is the impetus for her dance, it comes as no surprise that Villa's idea of a perfect performance is actually to live music. Villa confessed this passion to me by telling me:

I try to know how to dance to the classics that live musicians can play, because that's where I get my kicks, is dancing to live music. So, I try to know how to dance well to a lot of those well-known pieces in the Middle Eastern repertoire – Turkish and Arabic music. So, I guess in that sense I would say, I'm someone who works with live music, I'm someone who works with musicians. I'm a musician's dancer.

Performance:

Elena Villa's performance was at the monthly Middle Eastern Dance Guild of Eugene monthly showcase. After her performance she sat down with me and told me about her artistic intention for the performance:

I wanted to show something that was really kind of classic, that really had a strong feeling to it, so I choose music that was a little bit more laid back and relaxed so that I could really express a lot of emotion. My costume was vintage – vintage fabric, so I choose vintage music. So, I was trying to present something that was rich and kind of earthy and sensual/sensuous, and I wanted people to feel it. And hopefully I did that.

In keeping with her philosophy of dancing for and to the music, Villa spoke in detail of how her dance related to the music in the performance:

The first piece that I was dancing to was an old Egyptian piece, and I kind of wanted create some mystery, as well as show some really strong accents with the zills and hip work, basically translating the rhythms with my body. There's some really nice accents and breaks in the music, so I wanted to show that. The second piece was a Chiftitelli, and I really wanted to do zills with that because you don't really see zills with Chiftitelli that often. So, I tried to show both the violin, and also the Chiftitelli rhythm in my movements. So that required, kind of, a lot of isolations in different parts of the body at different times – working with the rhythms in the hips, and also

with weight transfers, and arm movements, and then undulations with the violin, and also veil work.

As I had already learned from taking class from Villa, for her – it’s all about the music, and so for the performance that I witnessed, it was no surprise that the music was really the baseline for creating the “classic feel” that she was her intention. Villa danced to two songs with very distinct rhythms. For the first piece she danced, to an “old Egyptian” song. She emerged from the dressing room surrounded by a gold sequined veil, walked lightly out to the performance area, dancing with the veil until the drums came in. I then witnessed Villa translating the drums with pelvic and chest isolations, shimmies, turns, and traveling steps – using the entire performance space. I saw her convey her intention of creating “mystery” in the way that she interacted with the audience: acknowledging them, but also maintaining an air of introspection – at times keeping her eyes cast down, or even looking at her own body as she initiated movements. For the second piece of the performance, Villa danced to a Chiftitelli rhythm with both a veil and zills. What stood out to me the most about Villa’s performance to the Chiftitelli, was the way that she used her movement to accent the final three beats of the rhythm, that sounds like: DOM DOM TEK. She did this by isolating her chest or hips, transferring her weight from one foot to the other, and often ending in a calm, still pose for a moment.

Lila McDaniel

Class:

Lila McDaniel of Luminessah wants her students to leave class knowing foundational movements, but she would also like to leave them with a sense of fun and of belonging to a new community. McDaniel told me:

For Luminessah...we don't look quite so much for technique. We are more about moving together, having fun, [and] enjoying it rather than a very precise technique. We do focus on technique when we do drills, but I don't think that that's our main focus.

This attitude of community building and creating a positive group experience is reflected in McDaniel's vision for a student that would study with her for a substantial amount of time. McDaniel told me that if she had a chance to teach someone for an extended period of time she would like them to:

... be able to dance with us [Luminessah] in an improv[isational] kind of format...hopefully you'd be able to lead a little bit, maybe just some basic moves and definitely be able to follow some of the more complex ones. If you were just a beginner [at six months] we wouldn't expect you to lead a ton, but maybe...just be able to follow along and know some moves...

McDaniel taught combinations for use in improvisation, but without the rules of Nerricio's A.T.S. However, McDaniel's movement combinations do contain some of the basic movements of A.T.S. For example, to transition from one combination to another, we used both the Turkish Shimmy (stepping forward on the right foot, picking up the left, back on the right foot, picking up the left – all with a layer $\frac{3}{4}$ shimmy of the pelvis), and the Basic Egyptian. Other movements that were part of McDaniel's Tribal combinations included: floreos; a basic Bhangra step (a movement from an east Indian folk dance form); snake arms; shoulder shimmies; cross and pointing of the feet; along with dynamic changes of rhythm, level, and facing. Overall in McDaniel's class, I learned six combinations from the Luminessah repertoire.

For McDaniel music is all about what works best with the movements and movement combinations of their Tribal Group Improvisation. She does this by working with tracks that are steady 4/4's and 8/8's and that are also represent a fusion of various

cultures, "...a mix of world music with some electronica, some Middle Eastern, some Balkan, some Flamenco, some Indian, and some re-mixes."

Movement Creation:

McDaniel starts her creative process with music, but more like, Shannon Conklin, McDaniel also starts with a basic repertoire of Group Tribal Improvisational combinations that may or may not work with the music that she chooses. When I asked McDaniel about her process she told me:

It starts with the music, we'll just pick some music and just dance to it a few times and just sort of get the idea of what's going to work with the music. If there's any dynamic spots that we want to choreograph [to] then we'll do that. But, mostly it's just dancing through it and getting an idea of what combinations we have that are going to fit into that music. It's pretty rare that we choreograph a whole piece, usually we will just choreograph little pieces, but mostly it's just really fitting our combos into it...we just listen to it a few times and dance through it...

When I observed McDaniel and her troupe-mate, Ali Armstrong working on creating a piece for an upcoming show I watched them listening to their music first, counting it and discussing their ideas. I watched them listening for specific dynamic changes in the music and talking about how they would approach these moments. I watched them choreograph an entrance and then start to work through fitting some of their combinations to music. I saw them using existing motifs and phrases from their repertoire and modifying them via trial and error to create phrases and transitions.

Performance:

I witnessed Lila McDaniel's perform with her troupe, Luminessah at a show called, "LaBoheime Reviere." The stage was small surrounded by painted tapestries, projected with psychedelic images, and graced by an emcee wielding a large floating

eyeball. Before they started dancing, Luminessah entered the stage to bring out their props, which consisted of: some small tables, a washboard, a teakettle, and some feathered boas. There was soft sitar music playing as they did this, and it all felt like some sort of ritual shrouded in mystery – as the three dancers were still covered in their “cover-up” veils, and the lights were still very dim. The dancers left the stage when they were done with the set up. As the lights changed to a red hue, they walked back on – this time without the cover-ups and posed facing away from the audience. Then began the trademark sound of the Gypsy Kings as each dancer spun around to face the audience one at a time – fists raised into the air. As the music picked up they took their places in a trio formation to dance their chosen combinations. When I asked McDaniel about the artistic intention behind this performance she revealed to me:

...being that this whole show is sort of Bohemian, we sort of went from there – with a Bohemian, European sort of theme. ...we just picked some music that we felt was, rather than Middle Eastern, was more European. Our third song is French, the second song is Portuguese, and the first one is Spanish. So that was what we were going for, sort of a European, Gypsy sort of feel... The first two songs are pretty much going to be improv[isation]. The third song is pretty much choreographed, although it is mostly using the movements that we would use for our improv[isation], we just have them in a choreographed set...the majority of the performance is going to be improv[ised].... [though,] there are a couple of choruses that we choreographed..some cute bits to go with the choruses [of the music].

TC Skinner

Class:

TC Skinner taught a class that was geared towards teaching basic movement, and allowing students to find self-expression in their dance. Skinner describes herself as a “facilitator” rather than a teacher. Her class combined the learning of Belly Dance

movement with movement invention by guiding students through basic movement drills and then teaching a motif comprised of arm movements that she had students use as a starting point for inventing their own choreography. When I talked to Skinner after her class, she emphasized that her intention for this class was to leave students with a particular sense of self and inner peace due to what she believes is the potent power of dance. She told me:

The whole thing is really about movement and dance...not to make it so much that you're going to leave here and be the next Belly Dance Superstar, but ... I want them to just let it be almost like a Monday night rebirth of you. You know, take care of yourself and handle your boss...your boyfriend...and just really love to dance. I would like students to say, 'Oh yeah, I really love dance, oh yeah, and I really forgot that this is about me.'

Movements that we did in Skinner's class included both Belly Dance movement as well as the Jazz/Contemporary Dance movement that she told me she was interested in as a dance artist. Some movement that I experienced in Skinner's class included: isolations; plies; lunges; work in flat back; a roll down sequentially through the spine; expressive arm movements such as: reaching, extending, pulling, pushing; hip drops; and arm motifs/ story-telling using the arms.

Skinner looks to music for inspiration, and holds an "anything" goes approach.

Skinner told me:

...The music we used tonight are just songs that are really, really dear to me. The things that I dance to are the things that we danced to tonight. Things you hear everyday, but also things that you've never heard before. I went back and found some old Donovan, which is really cool because they use those instruments [like] the hurdy gurdy and other interesting instruments... I definitely would like to dig more into the early 60's sound, like Pink Floyd with the Syd Barret sound. Very early rock, which is very acidic, very "trippy"... Never say no to any kind of music, even whip out some country tunes. A dancer can make it work. A dancer can dance to anything. I would like to dance in silence because dance is

movement and it doesn't always have to have music, just movement. A nice silent dance would be wonderful. So you know we will experiment with everything and say no to nothing...

Movement Creation:

For TC Skinner, creating dance and facilitating the learning of dance can be simultaneous. Skinner believes that each dancer that she works with has something unique and important to share. I would name her process as collaborative when it comes to movement, yet when it comes to conception of theme and overall idea, Skinner seems to be filled with her own ideas and starting points. For example, during one of our discussions, she brought up a few different ideas that she would like to see fulfilled in the future. In describing an idea that she would like to see materialize in the near future, Skinner said:

I have this one show in mind that I know I have to do, but we are not there yet, I have things written down that I know will get done. So we'll be working towards things that are stored in my head. One of the things that I really want to do is the "Major Lingo Ballet," ...[Major lingo] is that band from Jerome.... There is a song that I would do Gypsy skirt to, called "Lighthouse,"...Major Lingo is really into Tie Dye, so everything would be tie-dyed. And "Oblivion" is another one that we would do, with the Middle Eastern dance influence, of course. And then they have a song called "Killing Season," which would be perfect for tribal with sword. It's about hunting, so there would be dancers that would be hunters with the swords and then there would be the other dancers that would be the deer, and of course, the deer would win at the end... If you can hear music, you can hear the things you need to dance to and you can hit those [accents]... "The Major Lingo Ballet" – it just has to happen [!]

While I saw Skinner working to create uniquely individualized phrases with her dancers, she, herself, is really the creative mind behind her work.

Performance:

TC Skinner discussed the music as an important inspiration for her performance:

I love rock n' roll and what really inspires me is when I watch Carlos Santana play or [when I watch] The Eagles, or when... you kind of just see the artist kind-of leave his body and go away... the eyes are closed and they're in the zone, and you're kind of wondering where [they are]. That's what inspired me – when you just kind of see someone who physically, is there, but really isn't there - that high. I really love rock n' roll and you see that a lot in rock performances, and I just really love it, so yeah, I'm dancing to a rock song, a classic rock song.”

She went on to say:

I am going to take this rock song and put a lot of Classical Egyptian moves in there, so if you study that you will see that, and I kind of put a little bit of Jazz [in it too]. But since it is a fusion piece, and it is Middle Eastern themed fusion, I definitely wanted to make sure that there were some things that are Middle Eastern. And there are plenty of things that a Middle Eastern dancer will see and say; ok I know that...I know that...oops what's that...ok, she's back...and then I just really wanted to show that, YES, you can take these movements and put them to anything you want.

Revealing her choice of music to me before the show, and her reasons behind it,

Skinner told me:

I'm doing Journey... “Feeling That Way” “... when I first met my husband, Paul, he was really into Journey and classic rock, and that song was kind of the first thing he really turned me on to. He was like, ‘this is great!’ ...I was in seventh grade, and had never heard anything like that before. It was definitely a turning point for Journey, and that music just screams DANCE TO ME [!]

Equally important to Skinner's musical choice, for me, was her choice of costume: a basic bra and jeans. About this Skinner told me:

I'm doing what I do. I have to dance very comfortably. So even if it wasn't so hot there would never be caked make-up on me at all. I am wearing jeans and I have a little bra and belt that I made – kind of like that Cabaret/Tribal fusion, kind of like that ‘Tribaret.’ So that's my costume...and bare feet...

Skinner's performance felt exactly as she had described her inspiration – I literally felt as though I was at a rock concert – watching and enjoying the musician “rock-out” in their own “little” world, for their own pleasure, born out of their own

artistic impulse to engage in self-expression. The lights came up slowly after the music had started, and there was Skinner - in blue jeans and a bra. For most of the solo she did not move from her space in the center, instead she focused on isolations and shoulder shimmies, layered with phrases of arm movements that alternated between sharp and “jazzy” reaches and flowing snake arms. Isolations of the pelvis, torso, chest, sharp turns, and expressive arms accented the music as though it were literally moving through her.

Manny Garcia

Class:

Manny Garcia is interested in teaching students the basics of the Belly Dance tradition as he knows it. He told me, “...the traditional way is the basis for everything that we do and I really like to show that.” Garcia’s class was at the Phoenix YMCA and was open to anyone who wanted to try it, but that did not make it any less stimulating or challenging. However, with this type of student, the emphasis is on giving students a one-hour cardio-movement experience within the belly dance framework. Garcia described his goal for this class to me by telling me:

I am going to throw out a lot of different movements, but hopefully they will be able to do just a basic hip drop or a Maya...a Serena or a reverse Serena...any of this movement...even if they just leave interested in Belly Dance.... I mean this class it is at the YMCA, it is a community thing most of them aren’t really interested in continuing on with Belly Dance, they just want a work out. But, if that happens, if a student is like, ‘Oh my God, I’m so interested,’ and if they let me know, oh my God, I would be so happy. But movement wise, if they could do anything basic that would be great.

When I asked about the specific movement he would be teaching in class, he told me, “The movement I will be teaching will be basics – just hip drops, hip

locks, undulations, basic movements... basic undulations and working on muscle control.”

Throughout Garcia’s class we layered shimmies (pelvic) with arms or chest isolations, traveling shimmies, the Maya, the Serena, hip lifts, and alternating the speed of the movement. Garcia’s goal for his movement is that it be universal – meaning not necessarily tribal style or cabaret style, he told me:

Basically the movement that they teach you in Tribal Fusion, or any kind of A.T.S. [Tribal Group Improvisational Format], or any form of Belly Dance that has moved away from the traditional, is really all of the same movement. I feel that Cabaret is more focused on the basics and more energized... If I am doing any Tribal Fusion movement it’s basically the same but way more slower or with way more muscle control or instead of, ‘do a hip lift that turns into a shimmy,’ in Tribal Fusion it is more about isolating and focusing on that moment of isolation.

When I asked Garcia about the music he would be using in class, he told me:

I am not using traditional music. I have been listening to a CD that my friend burned for me, it has a swing feel to it, 1920’s, but is also very modern... I am also using Beats Antique, which is Belly Dance music, but not traditional. For the cool-down, I’m using very slow, very mellow, and calm music. Nothing traditional. I like to use music that not a lot of dancers use... Also to show them you can basically dance to anything... anything can fit if you like Hip Hop you can put it on and find a way to do a hip lift to it. You can use any kind of music...

Movement Creation:

For Garcia, the rehearsal process happens in the comfort of his home, where he starts by intimately getting to know every nook and cranny of the song he will be performing to. When I discussed his process with me this is what he said:

When I perform I listen to the song and, at home it becomes choreography because I repeat the same movements or do the same steps, and I just keep on drilling and drilling it. But once I’m on stage I completely blank out and I do remember the movement, I just use them in different areas of the song. Once again, I am just following whatever the song calls for. So, for example, if at home I am practicing a Maya, it could be a Serena, or a reverse Maya on stage, if I do a shimmy at home for a dramatic effect on stage it could be a shimmy and I could add a shoulder shake and just go up and down with the two or something like that. But it’s definitely more

improv[isational] on stage. I just drill the song at home, and I try to choreograph something, but it always ends up not happening. You just get all of this adrenaline on stage and you just go for it. You don't necessarily wing it, because you know the song and you are so used to the song, hearing it at the car, hearing it at work and in the car, and just drilling the hell out of it.... Once you're on stage and you're comfortable enough, it could look like its choreographed, but you could do it at one event and then do it again the next day at another event and it could look totally different because there are different movements happening. It could work or not, but that's how I do it. I basically just listen to the music and try to serve it, and do what it asks of me, and that's what I give to the audience.

Performance:

I was surprised to find out that, for the performance I was to see of Manny Garcia, her would actually be dancing with none other than Shannon Conklin. First, this was a shock, because when I had first asked them to be in my study, I did not know that they knew each other or danced together, and second because they are both very different dancers aesthetically, with very different processes. This performance was the first time that they had danced a duet together, and it was unique for both dancers, as well as for the central Arizona belly dance community. Explaining about the uniqueness of the performance, Garcia told me about the artistic intention of the dance, "Shannon and I wanted to do a lyrical very emotional piece and to mix ASL [American Sign Language] and Belly Dance which was never been done before..." He went on to explain that Conklin's husband is deaf, and that she wanted to incorporate ASL into the dance, part in tribute to their marriage, and part because it had never been done before in Belly Dance (as far as either Garcia or Conklin were aware). Garcia explained, "I was game for anything and Shannon as well, so that was the easy part. Shannon had heard the song before and got the idea of signing it so I said this is a challenge I'm going for it." As far as how the dance was conceived in a way that both Garcia and Conklin were able to work

together, he told me that the collaboration went quite smoothly, “Shannon was showing me the sign for the words and the movement would just pop into our heads.” However, he did tell me that, “ We did have to pick and choose which ones [movements] to use, because both of us are trained in two different types of Belly Dance but at the same time we wanted to show both of our styles.”

Amongst an evening of other Fusion Belly Dance performances, Manny Garcia’s performance with Shannon Conklin was the performance that seemed to show the most fusion of their own style with A.T.S. vocabulary and technique. However, what stood out to me the most was the way that Garcia and Conklin used the space completely. They moved around the stage with turns and traveled with movement like the Turkish shimmy and hip drops - creating not just straight pathways, but diagonal pathways, and spiraling pathways. Also, Garcia later explained to me that he and Conklin choreographed the movement to the lyrics of the song, as opposed to the beats, which is very different for a Belly Dance performance. Also compelling, was the way that Garcia and Conklin created dynamic energetic shifts in energy as flowing snake arms turned into sharp ASL signs layered on top of shimmies (pelvic) and traveling footwork.

Cera Byer

Class:

Since Cera Byer’s class was about process and invention more than learning specific steps of physical technique, I did not necessarily get a feel for her movement aesthetic in the class that I took with her. However, when students were given a task to create a staged exploration of movement Byer assigned them movement that was

pedestrian, but that also contained chest and pelvic isolations, as well as arm gestures. In her class Byer told us that she believes that, “There are tons of skills that go into making great dances, and only a small portion of those are physical movement skills.”

Movement Creation:

Cera Byer is a dancer who has worked in many different mediums and forms. When I asked her about her process for creating dances and movement she answered, “It depends upon whether it's an improvised or choreographed performance... I'm very much about working off of inspiration, music, and going with what's present.” In the class that I took with Byer she taught the class specifically about creative processes, sharing with us processes that she has used to create work throughout her career so far. She even gave the class several handouts outlining possible processes to use when creating dances. One way that Byer works when creating fusion choreography is to make a chart that compares and contrasts each form that she wishes to “fuse.” Categories that she looks at when comparing and contrasting forms include: “Style/Attitude,” “Musicality,” “Body Movements,” “Arms/Hands,” and, “Footwork.” One thing that she emphasized in her class was that, “Choreography and movement invention are two different things!” Explaining that, “Movement invention is how you develop vocabulary...” like creating the chart that I just described. She also talked about how important the physical act of inventing movement is – namely through improvisation. For Byer, the act of creating choreography with invented movement deals with, “...poetry, narrative, staging, and music...”

Performance:

Cera Byer's performance was at one of the world's largest and most attended Tribal/Tribal Fusion Belly Dance festivals: "Tribal Fest" in Sebastopol, California. Before the performance Byer spoke to the audience with a microphone. She asked them to choose three things at random which she would use in her improvised performance. These three things included: a shape, a gesture, and a traveling movement. The audience chose: a triangle, the "middle" finger, and a traveling grapevine step. For music, she had a friend choose a random track from a CD. Dressed in a purple off-the-shoulder dress, Byer put down the microphone and began to dance immediately as the music started. She started with the "middle finger," using it to trace a triangle in the air (making the audience laugh and scream simultaneously). Later this gesture would become the impetus for most of her arms movements. Hip bumps and torso isolations were danced as triangles. Byer used the grapevine to travel on her knees across the stage, staying there for a time to capitalize in the movement possibilities of dancing level to the floor. Responding to the music, Byer played with dynamic shifts in energy throughout the performance moving between gliding footwork and sharp isolations, quick gestures, and finally ending in a slow sustained pose.

Discussing the artistic intention of this performance, Byer told me:

Frequently in my classes about improvisation and performance I teach that improv[isation] is more about interpreting the movement and connecting with the audience than coming up with tons of movement. There's an improv[isational] game I play with my students where they're assigned a gesture, a shape, and a traveling movement by the other dancers in class, and that's all they're allowed to do for a full song. It's harder than it sounds, and frequently produces genius-improvised performances. I frequently tell them that they could do just 3 things, and have a great show. For this performance I wanted to show them that I meant it.

When I asked her about the movement vocabulary in the performance, she simply said, “The audience chose the movement, I was just following orders.” When I asked her about her costuming, I felt like Byer revealed her nature as a fusion artist, as someone whose philosophy of dancing involves dancing not just one form or style, but whatever form happens to materialize in her body at that point in time. Knowing that she was going to be improvising for this performance, she told me, “I chose a simple fitted dress that I thought would work no matter what kind of music or movement the audience selected, because I had no clue if it would be slow and lyrical, or upbeat, or traditional Belly Dance, or whatever.”

Movement Explorations

Movement Exploration #1: Shannon Conklin⁶⁵:

As Shannon Conklin was the first professional American Belly Dancer that I started with for my process of creating choreography based on the experiences I had with each professional American Belly Dancer, I did not really know what I was about to do. I had the interviews and the videos of her performances and rehearsals, along with the physical imprint of dancing her movement when I took class with her. I also had my own reflections on what she and I had discussed after each experience I had with her. I specifically went back to the way that Conklin described where she saw herself in the landscape of American Belly Dance several times throughout this exploration for inspiration and grounding.

⁶⁵ See Supplemental Videos: Movement Exploration #1 and Movement Exploration #1 w. 25-yd. skirt

Conklin told me:

If you were to pull out a family tree and see where I landed on that family tree it would be strong in the foundations of A.T.S. and Gypsy Caravan⁶⁶ for sure, and it would be slightly different because I feel that my dance style or what it is that I am bringing to the dance community is different. Because I honestly mean it when I say that I don't think that I've ever seen anybody do skirt and fan, and I honestly don't think I've ever seen anybody do double fan. So if that were to be my identifier, I would be completely fine with that. I don't want to be known as just a prop artist, because just true dancing is what I really enjoy. But...maybe just [for] opening up the aspect of fusion, but with that, having a great respect for the foundation. So taking what is there and respecting what is there and paying homage to those who have put that there, but then adding a layer that is still Belly Dance and still multi-cultural on top of it.

My immediate gut reaction after working with Conklin was to work with props, not necessarily fan or skirt, but to incorporate some prop work into the Tribal Group Improvisation work that I have been doing with my dancers. So, during one of our first movement sessions I brought in some of my props: fans, sword, skirts, veils, and parasols. I had the dancers improvise with these props using some of the Tribal Group Improvisational vocabulary that we have already developed. It was fun, but what we all realized was that, in order to bring prop work into Tribal Group Improvisation, you must really know what you are doing with the prop – and this involves a lot of study and dedication. Especially the fans – working with fans is really an art form in and of itself.

So, then I went home and really started to think about things, and I thought about Conklin's strong A.T.S. background. I thought about how strong her group of dancers were when they danced together. I realized that this was really what it was all about – at the root of what Shannon does were the tenants of Carolena Nericcio's A.T.S. Before the props, at the heart of Shannon's work is her dedication to Tribal Group Improvisation. So I went back into some of my own research on A.T.S. I read a quote of Nericcio's:

⁶⁶ Gypsy Caravan. Website: <http://www.gypsycaravan.us/> (accessed March 5, 2012).

Watch for interaction amongst the dancers, who always have their attention trained to the lead position, looking for the cue for the next step. When the dancers face each other and make eye contact, the lead is neutral, falling to the dancer who presents the next cue. But don't think too hard! Allow yourself to see the whole picture: women working together in cooperation; a group focused on presenting the dance as one entity.⁶⁷

I thought about how Conklin had told me several times that she has a system: start with the feet first, then the hips, then the gestures and props. I realized then, that I needed to start from the very beginning, and, that before I did anything with my dancers we had to refine and define our Tribal Improvisation. After this epiphany we spent an entire session just going over the basic movement motifs and phrases in our repertoire, which happens to have its roots in Gypsy Caravan-Style (just like Conklin's Tribal Style does) – we clarified what was going on in each movement and worked feverishly to maintain a tight formation (which I should add is VERY challenging) and to follow the leads every nuance. We took out any idea of “clocking” and followed Conklin's rule (an A.T.S. “always” rule), of “checking in” with each other before switching the lead dancer position.

As the group was busy working on creating a cohesive community with a set movement language, I kept watching the videos of Conklin and her dancers, thinking about our conversations, and thinking about what her movement felt like in my body when I took her class. I began to develop a sense of a certain aesthetic forming within my body and senses. An aesthetic that began to emerge from myself, but with Conklin's essence peering through, as though she were a ghost attached to my shoulder as I danced. This is when I started to create more of a choreographed/dramatic piece. It basically started with thinking about the flowing of the fabric of the 25-yard skirts, thinking about

⁶⁷Carolena Neruccio. Fat Chance Belly Dance website: <http://www.fcbd.com/>

both music and dance that would complement this feeling. I started in the studio with the idea of the skirt and a certain phrase that Conklin had taught in her class as a warm-up. I didn't try to replicate the phrase exactly, rather I allowed myself to get lost in the feeling and the flow of how I remembered the phrase, and then I allowed myself to bring my own movement into it and on top of it. The phrase was a grapevine that starts with the left crossing over the right foot, which makes the left hip appear to lift, and then end with a lift on the opposite hip – this repeats side to side, to the back and then turns to the front. I was inspired by Conklin's use of fusion – she uses a lot of Spanish/Flamenco – fusion music with her dance, I wanted to use music that was a fusion, and that gave the feeling of the fabric and the skirts, I ended up choosing what I might describe as a Steam Punk-Mariachi fusion, a song called “wereleaving” by DeVotchKa.⁶⁸ Creating this work was like weaving. As Conklin told me that everything she does has to come from Belly Dance, I would work with a Belly Dance – like phrase or motif and then intersperse it with something more dramatic, something non-Belly Dance, or something that might feel almost like a parody of Belly Dance.

This is where I should explain that during this process I was not always compelled to always work in ways that would complement all of Conklin's dance philosophies, in fact, at times I felt a push away from some of the things that I discussed with her. And I think this is true for many ideas that we, as students and artists take from our teachers or mentors. For example, at one point, when discussing her creative process, Conklin told me about one of Nerricio's rules in A.T.S:

...we were very specific with how we wanted things to look. For example, following Carolena's second rule is that all the movements should look attractive on the female body; there is not point in doing it if it is not beautiful, and that is

⁶⁸ DeVotchKa Website: <http://devotchka.net/> (accessed March 5, 2012).

how we have created movement for our Tribal skirt. If it's a move that is maybe not flattering, we're not going to do it.

I think that what Conklin meant when using the word "beautiful," was that all of the movements that are done in A.T.S. are supposed to uplift and pay reverence to the female form. However, I was struck by the idea that all dance must be "beautiful," and was not, and am still not sure what makes something fall into that category. I kept thinking about that part of our discussion, so I brought it up to my dancers. What resulted was a moment in the choreography during which we sit around each other in poses, moving our arms like synchronized swimmers and tilting our heads gently and demurely. When we do this it is interesting, because, while we are certainly invested in being in the moment, we are also fully aware of the almost-silliness of the moment, as though we are all trying just a bit too hard to be really "beautiful," which as a group has actually never been a priority over the physical sensation of the moment. In fact, as a group we actually enjoy themes that are more macabre and sometimes downright morbid. Though, to the outside viewer who has a trained eye for specifically gendering performance (since Belly Dance movement is so feminine and because femininity is linked to beauty) they might only see "beauty" in the form, which is a concept that I find very interesting.

Another thing that stood out to me when talking to Conklin was an idea that she brought up and referred to as "Tribalize," as in to "Tribalize" a movement. To explain: if she wishes to fuse some kind of movement into her repertoire she will ask herself if this movement can be "Tribalized." In other words, she asks herself: can it be danced in the Tribal Group Improvisation format (?), according to the A.T.S. rules (i.e. can it be danced: in formation, lead by a group leader improvisationally through an initiated cue that tells dancers what motif or phrase is about to happen, and danced without clocking to

change leader, using foundational movements, and a moving chorus)? From this thought, emerged the second half of the choreography that I created for this exploration. For this part, we broke down the choreography into “Tribalized” phrases that could be danced in the center in formation, with a chorus surrounding it. A very challenging venture ensued, as we negotiated space in this way.

Movement Exploration #2: Elena Villa⁶⁹:

Elena Villa is the only dancer in my study who is interested specifically in Raqs al Sharqi. In other words, for Villa, Belly Dance is very much something that she associates with Middle Eastern culture. The class that I took with Villa was part of a workshop that dealt specifically with the playing of the zills. For this solo, the playing of the zills has been my focus. The movement is simple and specific – the DOM is always to be accented with some kind of “downward” movement. This is honestly easier said than done, as the fingers are busy playing a rhythm to accentuate the dombek, (a drum that in some regions is called the “tablah”). For this solo exploration I entered the space by dancing with a veil until the drums come in – this is typical in Middle Eastern solo dancing post 19th century on the stage and the screen of both Hollywood and Egyptian films. For Villa, music is everything. Music is the impetus for the movement that she does, and is the reason that she dances. Throughout this exploration I have been asking myself the following questions: “How does my body respond directly to the music?,” and “How does the playing of the zills affect my movement?” As I have been working with these questions and engaging with the dance philosophies of Elena Villa, I realized that I

⁶⁹ See Supplemental Video: Movement Exploration #2

have entered into a different place with my dancing in relation to the music. I think of it as a place of “deep listening.” Prior to my work with Elena Villa I was always afraid of adding the zills to my dancing, I was afraid that it would take something away from my ability to express myself. Now I see this added layer as a way of further expressing myself and the art of Belly Dance as a form that can feature dance and music as equals.⁷⁰

Movement Exploration #3: Lila McDaniel of Luminessah⁷¹:

As I worked with Lila McDaniel, I realized that, even though she enjoys dancing solo, working with the members of her troupe – creating together and dancing together, is an important part of her Belly Dance experience. In fact, when McDaniel taught me, she actually brought along one of her troupe-mates: Ali Armstrong, to help her and to teach as well. So, my first thought about McDaniel is that for her, Belly Dancing is a communal experience. In this way, when attempting to make work that is inspired by her, I knew that my dancers would be integral.

McDaniel and her troupe mates work together very specifically: they have basic A.T.S. movements that they use, but the heart of their dance experience are the phrases of movement that they each have created, which, like the basic A.T.S. movements, have cues which initiate them, and can be danced at anytime in any order. These phrases include movements that are rooted in Belly Dance, but sometimes contain movements from other forms such as East Indian Dance, Flamenco, African Dance, and even

⁷⁰The author realizes that a full and thorough investigation of music for Belly Dance has not been undertaken here, and could be the topic of an entirely separate thesis. For more insight on music for Belly Dance see: Anne Rasmussen. “An Evening in the Orient”: The Middle Eastern Nightclub in America.” In: *Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Academic Publishers: Costa Mesa, California. (2005).

⁷¹ See Supplemental Video: Movement Exploration #3

movement created from the dancers imaginations. On their website, they define their style as “World Interpretive dance.”⁷² Luminessah’s movement phrases are distinct because they are very dynamic: using level changes, changing facing, moving between slow and sustained and quick and accented. The unique signature of the group seems to be in the way they use their hands and hold their arms. Their hands are always held soft and “feminine,” they are always framing the body, or held out from the body with the arms facing down. This gives them an aesthetic that is very different from A.T.S. or other Belly Dance forms. This aesthetic almost gives more of a theatrical/Eastern European feel as opposed to a Middle Eastern feel.

My plan for engaging with McDaniel’s movement and philosophies was to teach my dancers the phrases that Luminessah taught me so that they could get a feel for the aesthetic of the group. I also showed them the videos that I took of Luminessah performing. I then gave my dancers the “assignment” to go home and create two movement phrases (one of a fast/medium tempo and one of a slow tempo) of their liking – with the Luminessah style in mind. I told the dancers to take McDaniel’s style into account, but also to feel free to put their own style into their movement. I was excited to see what each dancer would come up with, and I thought this sharing would be a great way for us to get to know each other through movement, and I thought that having these longer phrases in our Tribal Group Improvisational repertoire would showcase the uniqueness of each dancer, as well as the group as a whole.

One thing that Lila McDaniel and her troupe-mate, Ali Armstrong emphasized when I talked with them is that they dance together for three main reasons: first, to have

⁷²Luminessah Website: <http://luminessah.com/> (accessed March 5, 2012).

fun, second, to express themselves through movement (in a space separate from their “real” lives and “real” jobs), and third, to spend time together as friends. When I invited them to use the dance studio at the University of Oregon for the movement creation session that I filmed, they told me that it was strange for them to be working in a dance studio. They told me that they usually share their dance, create new movement, and rehearse during the evening on a Friday while sharing wine and relaxing. It was during this conversation that I really got a sense of how “homegrown” Belly Dance is in the United States, that it is really about women getting together to celebrate each other and create art together, very outside of anything academic. I bring this up, because I think that, as much as I desired this relaxed, communal experience for my dancers, I don’t think I really achieved this. As, I am working with academic rigor in the University setting, and have a very busy and tiring schedule (as do my dancers), I could not find the time to have my dancers over for a leisurely evening of sharing and creation, so we have been doing all of our work in the studio, and there really is a different ambiance in the University dance studio from one’s own living room. In fact, I feel like, because of the timing of this work (we were working during mid-terms, I was pushing to complete my project), and the limited amount of time – we have actually been working under a bit of stress. I wonder what if things would be different if we were all working “day jobs” and this coming together was more of a stress-reliever? Though, I have to admit, despite our stress, I still believe that we have pulled through and I relish in the moments that we have shared laughter as well as heartache while creating and sharing during this work.

The last things that I would like to share about what transpired is that in this exploration, and some of the other explorations in this project, there have been themes of

spirituality, specifically Goddess spirituality, and this is something that I talk about in my literature review section of my thesis document. When I was talking to McDaniel and Armstrong after the class that they taught me, they brought up their belief that Belly Dance was originally a form of Goddess worship and a ritual to celebrate childbirth. I feel like this theme came up subconsciously as we were working with an idea based on what we saw in the Luminessah performance. As Luminessah transitions between pieces (or from one song to the next), they will typically improvise creating tableaus during which one dancer might move and the other are still, thus creating a picture around her, as though she were a Goddess being worshipped by the other dancers. As we were working on this I felt us creating scenes that were quite spiritual and ritualistic, as are many of the slower phrases. This feeling of ritual with a sense of spirituality almost just seems to be the nature of the slower Belly Dance movement.

Movement Exploration #4: TC Skinner⁷³:

From what I learned from the time I spent with TC Skinner, I have come to believe that her mission in life is to share her dance with anyone who is willing. Her most famous phrase, which myself and the dancers in my group have latched onto is, “why not?” As in: If you want to try something, why not go for it (!) Skinner grew up in Dayton, Ohio and this is what she told me about herself:

I was always a bit different when it came to dance. In my neighborhood, inner city Dayton Ohio you did what everyone else did. You only listened to top-40 Soul music and danced only the dances that were in style. Somehow I found my way into rock and roll. It was much freer and did not have the restrictions of how you could dance to it like the top 40 soul music. With this being my musical taste I learned to move my body in a different way to accommodate those rhythms. With having rock and roll as my favorite music it was as if I were gay, I could not tell any of my friends I liked Elton John and the Eagles. I heard hotel California

⁷³ See Supplemental Video: Movement Exploration #4

for the first time and that was the most amazing song I had ever heard.

When it comes to working with other dancers in class and in rehearsal Skinner is all about inclusion and finding joyful expression through dance. When she talked to me about the class that she taught she said that she preferred to refer to herself as a facilitator rather than a teacher. She said that she wanted her movement session to be like a, “Monday night rebirth,” for her dancers. All that said, when I went into the studio to work with my dancers my goal was to be more inclusive than I have ever been. I have always taken my dancer’s feelings into account, and have sometimes implemented their feedback, but I usually come into the studio with a mapped out plan – 100% teacher style. So, for this work it started with an investigation of Skinner’s movement, but was all based on improvisation. Everything that is in this work is rooted in movement inspired by Skinner’s motifs and created by my dancers. Much of the work is improvisational. In a journal reflection that I wrote after a discussion that I had with Skinner I wrote that I was struck by her focus on self-expression through dance. I wrote:

I think that lately I have been following in this trend that I really think has emerged from the Tribal Fusion Belly Dance community in the last five years – which is a focus on extreme technical skill in a dancer’s hip work and isolations...while I think that good technique is a necessary foundation, and I think TC would agree, taking this class really reminded me of my Belly Dance roots, and why I started dancing in the first place. Taking this class made me remember some 15 years, (or so) ago when, sure there was technique being taught, learned, and performed, but the dance was really mostly about self-expression through movement that emerged from the music...

As we danced with Skinner in mind, we have done a lot of day dreaming while improvising and coming up with our own personal stories about what were creating. We focused on how many ways we could use a specific arm movement motif that she taught

me (that her teacher taught her) to tell our stories. We also focused on sharing our stories with each other and building something together.

When I first thought of working with Skinner I had remembered her as someone who was a very important figure in the Belly Dance scene in the Phoenix, Arizona area. I remembered her as a “Cabaret” Belly Dancer, but I also remembered seeing her dance, once in the 90’s, to a Beatles song. I really had no idea how prolific she was until I saw her perform. Before she came onto the stage, another dancer, about the same age as Skinner introduced her by saying, “ The fondest memory that I have of TC was at this one cabaret show. Everyone was in their “nice” cabaret costumes and there was one person who dancing in jeans and a cabaret bra to Michael Jackson. That was my first introduction to fusion, she was doing it before anyone else in town ever did it, she was doing it before it even had a name...” It was actually quite ironic that this is the way that this dancer introduced Skinner because right before this she had just said to me,

... I remember at a festival, I had just gotten done dancing to [the song]“Purple Rain,” and [the dancer] Gazelle, gave me the name, “Goddess in Blue Jeans” and I said, yes I will take that, ok, that’s me – TC Skinner, “Goddess in Blue Jeans.” Because you know, I love the costuming and everything, but that just isn’t me... I’m still TC, you know sometimes in this dance, dancer’s take their dance name, but you know, I tried it and I just couldn’t do it...I’m just TC...

The exploration that we created based on Skinner’s movement and philosophies was quite simplistic, but we felt great joy when we are danced it together. We also had a great time dancing to rock n’roll music throughout this exploration as I whipped out old tracks by bands like LedZeppelin, Phish, The Rolling Stones, and The Beatles.

Movement Exploration #5: Manny Garcia⁷⁴:

Some Belly Dancers that know him, might refer to Manny Garcia as a “Fusion” Belly Dancer because he pretty much dances to any kind of music, and while, his technique is spectacular, there is something edgy about his dance, that goes outside the box a bit. When I asked Garcia where he saw himself in the landscape of Belly Dance in the United States, this is what he told me:

...I don't really like to put a label on [my] Belly Dance because at the end of the night, its [just] Belly Dance... in many cases I know that many [people] don't know what Belly Dance is, I know many people who think that Belly Dance is what Shakira does, and it is, that's Belly Dance... But for myself I would like to just be considered a Belly Dancer. Because I could, at one moment look very Cabaret in a Tribal Fusion outfit, or I could look very Tribal Fusion in a Cabaret outfit. I just like to be considered a Belly Dancer, or [really just] as a dancer on top of anything else. Because I am dancing a song on the stage and it could be anything, I am just showing Belly Dance as my thing as opposed to Ballet or Jazz...

What the onlooker might not realize when they see Garcia, a young and fresh new dancer who is up-and-coming on the Phoenix scene, is that he actually has a very strong foundation in Cabaret Belly Dance with roots in Raqs al Sharqi. In fact, Garcia was trained by the Arizona Belly Dancer, Samia, who was of the same generation, and actually friends with my own first Belly Dance teacher, Angelique. Garcia's training comes through in his dance, in that his technique is very clear. When I refer to Belly Dance “technique” what I am talking about is two-fold, first, you can see it in his sharp isolations of the chest, shoulders and head, in the precision of his shimmies (3/4, oblique, and full pelvic), and in the fluid articulation of his arms – from his shoulders to his fingertips which never seem to stop moving. Second, Garcia's technique is strong because of his relationship to the music. As Cabaret Belly Dance is a descendant of

⁷⁴ See Supplemental Video: Movement Exploration #5

various Middle Eastern folk forms of dance, the most important technical aspect of the dance is its relationship to the music.

When I talked to Garcia about his dance and the idea of the various forms of Belly Dance that are emerging today, he said,

...Belly Dance has grown, but if, for example, you keep on changing the names and keep on changing the style, if the people want to take the Maya and call it God knows whatever they want to call it, it [Belly Dance] is never going to evolve to where Modern [Dance] has evolved, or to where Ballet has evolved, or to where Jazz [Dance] has evolved... and I think that what we need to do in order to help the form evolve is to work on a format, to stick with that format, and not change that basic format, or it will never go higher than it is right now. Because so many people want to call it so many things you know: Gothic, Tribal Fusion... and you know its just not going to work in the future if we want to be teaching at the level that a Ballet teacher is teaching...

As I engaged with Garcia's movement style and philosophy I have been inspired to really think about a movement vocabulary. Every time I went into the studio I would watch a video of many teaching his class or performing and I started recognizing trends in what he was doing and the vocabulary that he was invested in. I came up with this list:

1. Serina (or reverse Maya): a vertical "figure 8" of the hips that moves down, up, and in towards the center of the body.
2. Maya: a vertical "figure 8" of the hips that traces up, out, and down away from the center of the body.
3. Omi: a small, articulate, and smooth circle of the hips.
4. Snake Arms: articulation of the arms flowing from the scapula out through the elbow, wrist, and into the fingertips.
5. Shoulders to fingers are constantly moving or gesturing, extending, or framing the head or body.

6. Body Waves (subtle articulation of the spine that ends at the hips) with Belly Rolls (articulation of abdominal muscles) up or down.
7. Side Winder: a vertical “figure 8” of the torso with coinciding Snake Arms and a slight lean of the head.
8. Cross turn: crossing one foot over the other with a full turn back to neutral.
9. Flat footed “chaineé” turns while spotting the arm.
10. Layering isolations on top of pelvic shimmies
11. Moments of pause or posing with levels, deep bending, or a swift drop to one knee
12. Sequential movement: (ex)
 - a. hand wave
 - b. torso roll
 - c. belly roll down
 - d. maya
13. $\frac{3}{4}$ Shimmy: Hips move right, left, right, left, right, left. Or up, out, down, up, out, down.
14. Dynamic changes: i.e. movement can be smooth or fragmented with a staccato quality

Besides thinking of the things that I have put on this list, while I was engaging in this exploration, more than any of the other professional American Belly Dancers that I worked with, I felt compelled to work towards embodying the essence of Garcia’s performance. When Garcia performs he has the air of royalty with his smooth and sharp technique, but the music flows through him and seems to create a direct link of pure and

unrestricted emotion. It seems almost like a contradiction, what I am explaining (to be both strong and alert, while allowing for the body to be loose and free), and this was my challenge as I went through this piece of my movement project.

Movement Exploration #6: Cera Byer⁷⁵:

Cera Byer is a fusion dancer, yet she has a very specific philosophy and process when it comes to creating movement and choreography. She fuses Modern Dance with Belly Dance, Indian Dance with African Dance, Hip Hop with Burlesque, and combinations of all of these forms. The class that I took with her was focused on the process of creating Belly Dance fusions: improvisational or choreographed for solos as well as groups. One way that Byer creates fusion work is to make a “compare and contrast” list of the forms that she wishes to fuse. For this exploration, I chose to fuse Belly Dance and African Dance. Following Byer’s suggestion I created a chart that compared and contrasted: the style/attitude, the musicality, the body movements, the arms and hands, and the footwork of Belly Dance and African Dance. Armed with this list, I created movement motifs. Next, I assigned each motif to each letter of the alphabet. I then spelled out the name of each dancer, assigning them the applicable movement. We worked with these motifs: improvising, creating phrases, and layering until we created an exploration of Fusion Belly Dance. When creating this exploration, I knew that we were doing something very different in the scope of American Belly Dance due to the unique nature of the movement that emerged from our improvisations which were a product of the motifs that I created based on the points where Belly Dance and African Dance intersected as well as diverged from each other. In fact, after experiencing the completed

⁷⁵ See Supplemental Video: Movement Exploration #6

exploration, I questioned myself as to whether what we were creating was, or would even be considered Belly Dance. As I found myself questioning my work, I returned to something Byer told me, when I asked her where she saw herself in the scope of Belly Dance in the United States today, she told me,

I'm not much of a 'scene' kind of person. All scenes have their waves of popularity and trends and who's hot and whatnot, and that can be overly engrossing. Honestly, none of that is why I dance. I like to focus more on training, creating, doing work I like that I can be proud of and feel passionate about and have fun with, and offering whatever I can to people who want to dance or train with me.

Reading Byer say this again, inspires me to be brave in my explorations and creation of not just Belly Dance, but movement in general.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

Self-Reflection

The first time that I saw American Belly Dance I was on a field trip with my senior class. It was an Earth Day festival in our city's downtown. As I stood witnessing the scene on the stage before me my life was changed forever.

I remember how the dancers moved in unison, watching each other, the musicians, and occasionally sharing a smile or a glance with the audience. Their legs were bent deeply, their torsos were held upright, and they stepped in time with the pulse of the drums, their hips accentuated each step that they took. Their torsos and spines articulated from their sternums to their hips in harmony to the pulsing rhythm, like a hum waving through the music. Their arms rippled from shoulder to fingertips. They also performed what was for me, recognizable dance movements such as; circling, grapevines, and spotted turns. All of the movements seemed to perfectly accentuate the music and costuming. I remember looking at the dancers and thinking, *who are these people?*, and then I also remember thinking – *who am I?* I knew that my life would never be the same. In a way, I was not unlike some of the women who saw and were inspired by the Belly Dancers at the World's Fair and other public venues during the late 1890's and early 1900's.

A few weeks after that fateful day, I started attending Belly Dance classes regularly. My teacher, Angelique (whose given name is Caryn Martinez) taught what she called, "traditional Egyptian Cabaret Belly Dance and folk dancing." She was not Egyptian

herself – but her teacher was. We were taught basic sets of movements which we drilled over and over again with rigor and respect for “proper” aesthetic to the cassettes of Egyptian pop music legends such as George Abdu and Hozam Ramzy. We were taught a vocabulary of movement including “hip drops”, “shimmies”, “camel walks”, “torso circles”, “hip circles”, “figure 8’s”, and “mayas.”

We were never given a “reading list” or any books to read about the history or the context of the dance we were studying. We did not have YouTube at the time, and there were not many workshops coming through town so that we did not see many varying styles of the dance. We learned by what our teacher told, or did not tell us. What she told us was that we were doing Middle Eastern Belly Dance. I did not question this, just as I would not question the fact that in my Ballet training I was doing dance that had European roots, or in Tap I was doing dance that had roots in African American Dance.

Outside of class, we learned about the dance at parties, (also called, “Haflas”) and at coffee shops by watching other dancers. We learned how to dance by watching each other perform, and then dancing together. In this way we were learning about the dance as interpreted through the movement of each individual and unique dancer. I learned new movements, and different ways to do movements I already knew. I saw unique costumes, and witnessed the different ways in which each dancer communicated through her, or his dance. This is what was so powerful about Belly Dance to me then, and still is to this day. I am constantly falling in love with the unique way that Belly Dance allows for each practitioner to use the vocabulary of movement to showcase their uniqueness and to communicate via this dance style with other dancers, audience members, and the music.

Over time the movement that I was learning then became a part of me and a part of my movement repertoire that, because of my dance training over the years, also included Modern Dance, Jazz Dance, Tap, African Dance, and even Ballet movement. By the time I entered the Masters of Fine Arts program in the Dance Department at the University of Oregon, I had a repertoire of dances based on these movements. My main motivation for creating movement and creating dances has always been music. I love music: both the rhythmic aspects as well as the lyrical. I attribute this to my early Belly Dance training with Angelique, in that, similarly to what I learned from Elena Villa, Angelique taught me that the impetus for the movement in Belly Dance should always be the music.

Besides finding inspiration in music, I have also longed to tell stories with my dance, and this has long been a starting point for my choreography. Often I would start with researching a story or concept that I was interested in portraying thorough my dance. For the purposes of self-reflecting on the research that I conducted for this thesis I kept a journal in which I asked myself the same questions that I asked the six professional American Belly Dancers that I worked with. When reflecting on my own processes of movement creation, I wrote about music, story telling, and researching concepts. One of my reflections read:

When choreographing...I almost always begin by researching a concept like the myth of the Siren, or the idea of the red curtain that David Lynch uses in his films. After I have an idea of a theme for the choreography, I will find music by flipping through my 35 days worth of music on my computer, until I find the right combination of songs. I like to choreograph to a combination of three songs: one for a fast-tempo Tribal Group Improvisation, one for a slow-tempo Tribal Group Improvisation, and one for a Fusion-choreography... Then, I will listen to the music on headphones over and over again, while I imagine the themes and aesthetics of the dance. Next, I will write in my notebook and break the choreography down into sections, depending on how I want to use the space....

After this I will work on movement motifs and phrases, again with my headphones on. My top priority when creating choreography is to weave the movement into the music and vice versa...

This journal reflection demonstrates how listening to the music that I am going to be dancing to has always been the initial impetus for my movement and choreographic creations.⁷⁶ This project has certainly challenged this aspect of my creative process. For example, when creating the choreography for the movement exploration of Shannon Conklin, my impetus was the idea of the 25-yard skirt, and how that skirt affects the movement, attitude, and presence of the dancers. After the idea of the 25-yard skirt, my impetus for creating this choreography was the idea of the rules ascribed the A.T.S. Belly Dance format. Another example of not using music as my first, and most important inspiration for movement creation was the choreography that I created for the movement exploration of Cera Byer. For this exploration, I did not add the actual music until after we had worked on motifs and created phrases, using improvisation as our impetus for creation, rather than music. This does not mean that music was not important for this project, and that it is not longer important to me as an American Belly Dance choreographer, but, rather, that I now have the tools to create movement via varying entrance points.

The next thing that has been changed in my creative process is the way that I would create most of the movement alone, wearing my headphones, and notate it into a journal, which I would then bring into rehearsals. During this research process, much of the movement was created in the studio, most times through improvisation – either my

⁷⁶I recognize that the study of music and Belly Dance is much more elaborate than I have described throughout this document. What I mean when I discuss music as my initial and most important impetus for creating choreography is that, rather than improvising or starting with a motif, I would always start with listening to music and then allow the instrumental sounds, tempo, lyrics, and overall ambiance of the music to inspire me to dance.

own, or through the improvisation of my dancers. For example, when we started working on the choreography for the exploration of TC Skinner, I introduced a motif based on arm movements that Skinner taught me, and then I had the dancers improvise using that motif. During that session, we created phrases and then danced them in the space for each other. While the dancers were sharing their phrases, I took notes about how this would all fit together, and then talked to the dancers afterwards to find out how they all thought it would fit together. Another example, of how, through this project, I have become more interested in collaborating with my dancers for the invention of movement and choreography is the movement exploration that was created based on the dance of Lila McDaniels. Since McDaniels and her troupe members each contribute to creating the troupe's repertoire by bringing their own Tribal Group Improvisational combinations, I had each dancer create two of their own combinations that could be used for Tribal Group Improvisation. What happened with this was quite miraculous – when we danced all of the combinations together one-after-another they created a choreographed dance! My work as choreographer, or a Skinner would say, “facilitator” was then, to work with spacing, aesthetic, and theatricality.

Another way that I would previously work to create movement was to build a storyline in my mind and then create the dance around that story. In my journal I wrote about a piece that I made a few years ago entitled, “Circus Dreams.” For this choreography I created a story that, became (second to the music by the band, “Beirut”), the impetus for the creation of movement. The story was about a family of circus performers that “performs” for an audience with a slow, and beautiful Tribal Group Improvisation, and then returns to their non-performance, eclectic personalities while

dancing together “back-stage.” In this piece the eclectic personalities were portrayed through the use of props such as: parasols, veils, hula-hoop, and a sword. Each dancer had a character and interacted with their prop according to the personality of that character. While story telling was one way of creating choreography that I have used in the past, it was not always prevalent in the choreography that I created during this research. In fact, for the solo that I created while exploring the dance of Elena Villa, I did not have a “story” per se, or a character that I was portraying, rather, my goal was to explore what it felt like to play the zills while I danced and to listen deeply to the music. During this exploration, I can say, that I did not have anything running through my mind except the music. Another example of my letting-go of the idea of creating choreography to tell a story is the choreography that I created while exploring the dance and ideas of Cera Byer. As I explained earlier, this dance was based on fusing two forms of dance: African Dance and Belly Dance, and on motifs and phrases that my dancers and myself created through improvisation. However, with this choreography, themes did emerge, such as themes of community versus independent autonomy, but these themes emerged as a result of the choreography, not because of a pre-meditated storyline.

Overall, the most life-changing discovery that I made happened during my exploration of the dance of Cera Byer. While I was invested in fusing African Dance and Belly Dance, the movement became very abstracted through improvisation. As I touched on previously, the choreography felt very organically, yet not very definable. I began to wonder if what I was creating would even be considered Belly Dance in certain circles, especially within the American Belly Dance community. It was at this time that I thought of what Manny Garcia said to me, “...I just like to be considered a Belly Dancer, or

[really just] as a dancer on top of anything else...” It struck me that, because I have so many varying forms of dance living inside of my body, and now have explored many varying ways to create movement, that, as I go on to create dances and work as a choreographer, I might not even need or desire to put a label of form onto my dance. However, Belly Dance will still remain important and paramount to who I am as a dancer.

Critical Evaluation

To critically evaluate this project, I might comment on a few things that could be done differently if the methods within were to be replicated. First, it is possible that the scope of the study might be limited to only observing the professional American Belly Dancers as they created movement, rather than partaking in the three experiences of: class, movement creation, and performance. If this were done, each dancer could be observed choreographing and rehearsing for several sessions. In this way, the research could be focused more on pinning down a specific and unique creative process for each dancer. (However, I do feel that by having the three experiences of taking class, witnessing movement creation, and witnessing performance, I was able to see how the creative process of each dancer worked its way into those varying forums.) Second, I would suggest that there would be a plan made to meet each dancer at a quiet meeting place to hold discussions either before or after each experience, as in many cases I had to hold these discussions in noisy restaurants or dance studios. Third, I think it could be valuable and insightful to include feedback and insight about the creative processes of the

dancers that actually danced in the final movement explorations. In this way, there could be more material for a self-reflection/evaluation on that specific part of this research.

Suggestions for Future Research

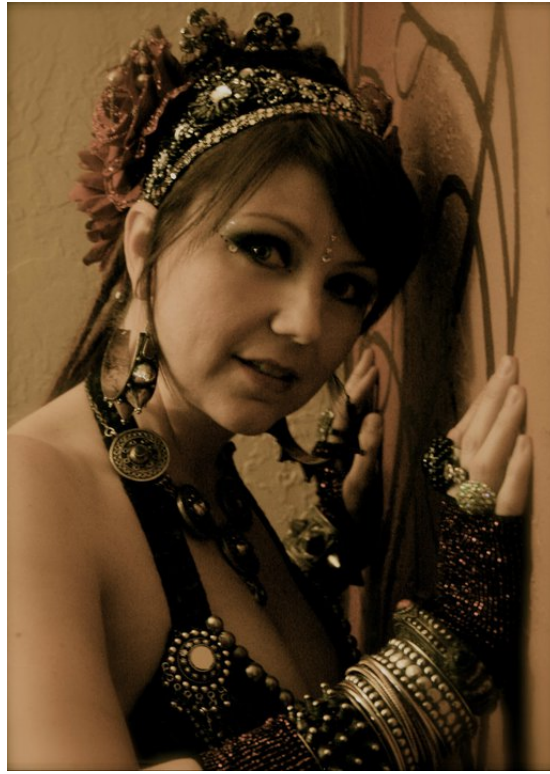
There is much research to be done concerning Belly Dance in the United States. Topics that I would suggest for future research include, but are certainly not limited to: Belly Dance in The United States as a cultural community, the transmission of ideas within the Belly Dance community via internet, the subjective vs. objective experience of the dancer and audience within the Belly Dance performance, and Belly Dance as it relates to/is intertwined with U.S. feminism. In the future, I hope to conduct research that investigates the training of American Belly Dancers and the transmission of ideas from one generation of teachers to another via an aural tradition. My hope would be to investigate as far back into the past as possible, so that I might create a kind-of family tree for Belly Dancers in the United States.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this research was to investigate the creative process of six professional American Belly Dancers. Specific attention was paid to the creative processes involved in the teaching of Belly Dance, performing Belly Dance, and creating Belly Dance for performance.

While previous research has investigated American Belly Dance theoretically, this research has investigated American Belly Dance experientially. Beyond the investigation, this research has been transformative for myself both as a professional American Belly Dancer, and as a choreographer of a fusion of many forms of movement.

APPENDIX A
BIOGRAPHIES OF PROFESSIONAL AMERICAN BELLY DANCERS



Shannon Conklin

Shannon Conklin began her formal Belly Dance education in early 2004 at the beautiful Domba studio in Tempe, Arizona under the direct instruction of Domba creator, members, and international instructors Heidi Alexander, Samantha Riggs, Elisha Tash, Haven Heffner, and Gina Zavala. Conklin continues to take classes at the Domba studio, which is now Plaza de Anaya, and is now an instructor herself. Conklin has taken over 100 hours of workshops from the very best in the industry: Unmata, Ariellah, Zafira, Deb Rubin, Jill Parker, Carolena Nericcio, Kassar, Bastet, Suhaila, Bellana Tana, Ethnophonica, and Silvia Salamanca are just some of the teachers with whom she has studied varying styles of belly dance.

As the co-creator and director of the troupe, *Divine Chaos Tribal*, Conklin is eager to expose students as well as audiences to a dynamic and energetic style that fuses a unique combination of technique, attitude, education, and experience. With eight years of dance education and a strong foundation in Improvisational Tribal Belly Dance, American Tribal Style, and numerous dance specialties, Divine Chaos graciously performs and instructs their signature style throughout the nation.



Elena Villa

Elena Villa first became involved in Middle Eastern belly dance as a young girl in the late 1970s in Big Sur, California. She took lessons with Lynn Condra (a Jamila Salimpour-trained dancer), and performed in a Middle Eastern music and dance troupe with her parents and other members of the community, performing her first solo to live music at age 10. In addition, Elena studied acting and performed at The Children’s Experimental Theater in Carmel, CA for five years, where she became a member of the Traveling Troupe branch of the theater which staged plays for elementary and middle schools throughout the Monterey Bay area.

In 1987, Elena returned to the study of Middle Eastern Dance in Santa Cruz, CA. She studied *raks sharqi*, folkloric, and interpretive fusion styles throughout the 1990s, with teachers such as Helené and Carolina Nericcio (director of fatchancebellydance), as well as with many international artists (Amel Tafout, Rhea, Leila Haddad, etc.). In 1988-9, Elena spent a year abroad studying language and literature at the University of Bordeaux, France and traveling across Europe, where she was exposed to live flamenco music and dance. She began actively studying flamenco in 1991 in the vibrant dance community of Santa Cruz, CA with professional instructors La Linda, Ladisla, and Andrea “la Canela.” Elena also received intensive instruction from international flamenco artists La Tania, Jose Galván, Belen Maya, and Teo Morca, among others. In 2004, Elena traveled to Sevilla, Spain where she participated in intensive courses with the respected teachers and performers Lourdes Recio, Felipe Mato, and Carmen Segura. Elena has also studied *cante flamenco* (flamenco singing) with accomplished artists from Spain and the U.S., thereby

increasing her familiarity with the different rhythms, forms, and emotional content of flamenco. Elena continues to take regular workshops in flamenco as well as in a variety of Middle Eastern dance forms with world-class international artists such as Oscar Nieto, Souhail Kaspar, Helene Eriksen, Amel Tafsout, Leila Haddad, and Aziza.

While living in Santa Cruz, Elena taught Middle Eastern dance and performed regularly. In particular, she co-founded and performed with the seven-member Middle Eastern fusion music and dance ensemble, Daleth. While studying flamenco intensively, she participated in numerous *juergas* (flamenco fiestas) and performed with Viva España and Los Flamencos del Pueblo. In a more alternative theatrical vein, Elena co-founded and performed with the experimental performance group, The Violet Skull Troupe, which featured live “electronica.”

Since 1995, Elena has been developing her own style of Arabic flamenco fusion based on her extensive experience with both dance forms and her research into the musical and cultural traditions of Andalusia. In June 2007, she was awarded first place in the Professional Alternative Music category at the internationally recognized Belly Dancer USA competition in Canyonville, OR for her original Arabic flamenco fusion performance. Elena gives regular workshops, classes in Arabic flamenco fusion, flamenco, and *raks sharqi* (“belly dance”). Past workshops include: include “Elegant Arms & Hands and the Art of the Dramatic Pose,” “Taqsım: Slow Improvised Movement in Middle Eastern Dance,” “Introduction to Flamenco,” “Las Sevillanas,” “Zills & Rhythms,” “How to Create a Belly Dance Routine,” “Elegant Veil,” “Mantón (Spanish shawl technique),” “*Zambra mora*,” “Spanish Fan,” and various levels of Arabic flamenco fusion technique and choreography. Elena has also taught flamenco dance through Lane Community College’s Continuing Education Program in Eugene and continues to teach and sponsor flamenco classes and workshops in Oregon.

Elena Villa maintains an active performance schedule, with a specialty in improvisation to live music. She has made guest appearances with a wide variety of musical artists, such as Sirocco, Americanistan, Brothers of the Baladi, John Bilezikjian, Souhail Kaspar, Ala Nar, The Flying Bokhara Orkestrah, Wazn al Sharq, Ricardo Diaz (flamenco guitarist) and Vanessa Alvarado (flamenco singer), Priyo and Gypsy Moon, Duo Flamenco of Ashland, Joseph Pusey and the Bedouin Spice Orchestra, experimental music and art group Onomatopoeia, Ancient Future—featuring Arab violinist Georges Lamman, Eliyahu Sills and the Qadim Ensemble, and the Yuval Ron ensemble. In addition, Elena is one of the principal dancers at the renowned Gypsy Caravan Stage at the Oregon Country Fair, as well as their Performance Coordinator. Elena has served several terms on the board of directors of the Middle Eastern Dance Guild of Eugene (www.medge.org) and has been instrumental in planning the Guild’s annual festivals and workshops.

In addition to her dance activities, Elena Villa teaches courses in literature, film, cultural and performance studies, such as *Gypsies in Literature and Film* and *The Politics and Poetics of Dance*. After receiving a Masters degree in literature in 1998 from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she

wrote a thesis on representations of dancers in French literature, Elena moved to Eugene, Oregon to continue her graduate work. She completed a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon in 2006 and is currently working on transforming her doctoral dissertation on performance and representations of dancers in literature into a book. She has presented papers on dance and literature at a number of international conferences and has also presented lectures and demonstrations on flamenco and Middle Eastern dance at universities and primary schools. Elena continues to remain active in spreading awareness about the importance of dance as a powerful tool for cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Elena Villa is available for private dance lessons, group classes and workshops, educational lectures, and performances for public or private events. To see photos and videos and read articles by Elena visit: www.elenavilladanza.net and www.americanistan.com.
studied varying styles of belly dance.

As the co-creator and director of the troupe, *Divine Chaos Tribal*, Conklin is eager to expose students as well as audiences to a dynamic and energetic style that fuses a unique combination of technique, attitude, education, and experience. With eight years of dance education and a strong foundation in Improvisational Tribal Belly Dance, American Tribal Style, and numerous dance specialties, Divine Chaos graciously performs and instructs their signature style throughout the nation.



Lila McDaniels

Beginning her dance career at the age of five with classical ballet, Lila McDaniels has always loved the expression of creative movement through dance. Trained in ballet for 13 years while living in Portland, Oregon, she has a great respect for many dance forms and enjoys fusing balletic movements into her Tribal and Egyptian Belly Dance.

Lila began studying Egyptian Cabaret Belly Dance in 2003 with the internationally acclaimed instructor and performer Razia in Eugene, Oregon. Soon afterward she re-located to southern Illinois where she continued her studies until leaving to travel, which eventually brought her back to Eugene. Having seen Tribal Belly Dance at the Shrewsbury Renaissance Festival she was immediately drawn to that style and began to immerse herself in the world of Tribal and Tribal Fusion Belly Dance. She has studied with Heather Stance of Urban Tribal, Zoe Jakes of The Indigo, and Amy Sigil of Unmata, among many other teachers of all styles of Belly Dance.



TC Skinner

“I never, ever thought I would have to write a dance bio, but here goes. I think my journey is really about music as well as dance. I was dancing around the house for as long as I can remember. I would have to say my 1st dance training came from watching all of those Gene Kelly movies when I was a kid. My favorite dancers to study were of course Gene, Donald O’Connor and Ann Miller. I remember seeing West Side Story and just being amazed. After watching a musical on TV I was up and dancing.

I had my 1st formal dance class in the 7th grade for a year. I remember being very shy and just loving it. My 8th grade year I did cheer because of my athletic abilities, but continued my dance “training” in my basement every Sunday after church. I would be in the basement dancing for many, many hours. Around that time I also did some little dance classes at our community center across the street from where I lived. My teachers name was Jamie, She was very pretty. But now that I look back on it she was not a very experience dancer. So those classes weren’t very good, because they just kept me in one format and with only one style of music, which was top-40 Soul music. It was free and it was dance and so I did that for a few years until the program stopped.

I choreographed my first dance for our Church youth group. It was so much fun and came out real well for not knowing what I was doing. During high school I would go to church

summer camp. I would dance at the Wednesday's night talent show and would tear up the floor at the dance on Thursday night.

I joined a little local dance group in Ohio before I moved to AZ. I had to audition to get in and was very nervous but I was good enough to make it. So I learned a lot while doing that project as well as got some experience performing in front of an audience. When I move to the Grand Canyon there were not dances classes to be had. I still danced a lot at home when I was not working and did a little dance group at the rec center for some of the teen girls who lived there. When I moved from the Grand Canyon to Tempe I had my first belly dance class. I loved the music and the movements. I did some classes for a few years and then found it to be a bit restrictive. I just started creating my own thing from there. I still dance every day and choreography a ton of stuff for my own dance ventures. I consider my self to be a creative movement artist.

I have a performance art group called Spell. Spell has no set style, format, or rules when it comes to our dances. We have been doing shows for about 11 years now at local art galleries and festival. I am still learning with the help of "you tube" and the millions of dance DVDs that are now out there. . I am still heavily into Middle Eastern style but will jazz it up with some lyrical and modern type movement and music. I still dance every day for the most part. My future plans are not to stop ever dancing, and to facilitate a creative movement group, I think everyone had a dancer in them in some way shape or form. I think they get intimated when they don't move like the kids on "So You Think You Can Dance". I think for most people that is how they define dance.....But a dance can be as simple as walking across the floor to music. So find "your" dance and do it well."



Manny Garcia

Manny Garcia is from Gilbert, Arizona. He has trained extensively in traditional Egyptian Belly Dance and American Belly Dance by the local Arizona belly dancing living-legend: Samia. Garcia has also studied other American forms of Belly Dance at the Plaza De Anaya dance studio with teachers and guest teachers such as Mia Donna (of troupe Boombahnique) and Zoe Jakes(Belly Dance Superstars, Beats Antique). He has been on the scene for several years now, and has recently started teaching Belly Dance classes at the Of The Earth Café in downtown Phoenix as well as the Phoenix YMCA . Garcia’s has performed at festivals, cafés, and on stages in the East Valley and beyond. Garcia’s fluid yet precise style of dancing has made him in-demand as both a teacher and performer. He has been a guest of well-known troupes and bands such as “Of The Earth” and Divine Chaos Tribal. Garcia’s dance is an example of style that is setting the precedent for many Arizona dancers who are working to be a part of the thriving Belly Dance scene in Central Arizona.



Cera Byer was born and raised in San Francisco's diverse performing arts community. With a background that spans Musical Theater, Jazz, Lyrical, Ballet, Hip Hop, Bellydance, Classical Persian, Indian, Flamenco, Afro-Caribbean, Samba, and more, she brings a unique fusion approach to creating choreographies. Known for challenging, inspiring, and bringing the best out of her dancers, Cera has been teaching workshops, intensives, classes, and seminars across the US and abroad for 8 years, and her classes receive rave reviews. Byer holds a degree in Dance Performance & Choreography, with a focus in World Music & Dance, from San Francisco State University.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Taken from Cera Byer's website: "Cera with a C": <http://www.cerawithac.com/> (accessed May 5, 2012).

APPENDIX B
HANDOUTS, FLYERS, NOTES

FULLY FUSION

4

TONIGHT'S PERFORMERS

Antheya & Zareen

Troupe Harmony

Ankestamen

Sonoran Rose

T C

Shannon & Tiffany

SiStars of the BoomBah

Fayza & Mahin

Desert Petals

INTERMISSION

Shannon & Manny

Sonoran Rose

Kamrah

Amonrat

Sonoran Rose

Zagharoot



Skirt & Fan Fusion Syllabus

In this class we combine our two most favorite and signature props into Skirt Fan Fusion, focusing on skirt technique and the grace of fan! We will cover basic fan holds and techniques that allow the fan and skirt to become an extension of the performer and not just merely a prop. As well as arm and hand movement with fan, dramatic poses, along with opening, closing and snapping fans. This class is suitable for all; skirt fan fusion can offer a fun way to liven up your dance. This class includes steps and combinations designed to fit any style with layered movements, spins, and beautiful lines to emphasize grace, power, and precision.

1. Fan Drills - Open/Close, Hand Placement, "Raver" Fans
2. Reverse Grapevine Combo
 - a. Version B: lead change
3. Ghawazee Fling
4. Choo Choo Combo
 - a. Version B: Fade
5. Salamanca Fan Combo Version A
 - a. Version B: Khashlama
6. Folkloric Fan Combo
7. Gypsy Touch
8. Pseudo Cha-Cha
9. Wrap Fan
10. Right Skirt Pick up
11. Gitana Step (Right Skirt Hold)
12. Snaps -dot-com (Right Skirt Hold)
13. Choreography

Zill Selection, Technique and More

Kymbala (Anc. Grk.), *zills* (Turk.), *zagat / sagat* (Ar.), *zang* (Pers.)

(Adapted from www.shira.net/zills-44.htm, Aisha Ahroosh [workshop], Saroyan, and personal practice)

I. Selecting finger cymbals

1. Try the *zills* before you buy them.
2. Listen for tone—is it pleasing to you? Not too much “after-ring”?
3. **Size.** Larger size = bigger sound. Consider where you will be playing the cymbals. For example, if outside choose a larger pair, if inside (e.g. a restaurant), choose a smaller pair.
4. **Weight.** The larger and heavier the *zills* are the harder they are to play; light weight, high quality *zills* are available. See the respected zill company **Saroyan Mastercrafts** at: <http://dwp.bigplanet.com/saroyan>. They have zills in all sizes and at all prices, plus sound bites of zill tones for customers to sample!
5. **Shape** is not as important as sound but generally good *zills* are circular with clean edges.
6. Buy *zills* with 2 slots on the top for elastic. Generally, elastics should be about ½ an inch thick.
7. Good student grade *zills* run about \$10-12 and large professional quality ones can be up to \$50, although good professional *zills* are often available for between \$26 and \$35.

II. Installing elastics and storing cymbals

Snip the ends of the elastics so they form a point and can be easily passed through the 2 holes on the top of each zill. Elastics should be measured to fit your fingers (index and thumb) and then sewn or fastened with small safety pins—whatever method works for you provided they fit firmly and do not slide around on the fingers. The last thing you want is for the zills to come flying off when you're dancing. Replace elastics regularly. Try not to drop your zills; it can compromise sound quality. Keep them in a small, soft pouch so they do not get scratched up.

III. PROPER PLAYING TECHNIQUE

1. The hand is lifted slightly through the wrist and the index and thumb form a C shape. Maintain the C shape while playing. Do not open hands all the way after each strike.
2. Strike position:
 - Ring—fingertip edges
 - Tick—mute with fingers and strike edge
 - Clack—mute and strike dead on
3. Dancers generally use a *right-left-right* pattern (RLR) for a number of reasons:

- Consistency of sound
- Right hand is often stronger
- Frame of reference for all patterns
- Point of reference when playing in a troupe (so dancers accent the beat in the same way)

IV. PLAYING BASIC ZILL PATTERNS You may practice either standing or sitting but be sure to stay lifted and keep your hands slightly out from your body, in front of you or out to the side, and above the waist to develop muscle strength.

- Start slow and build speed.
- The focus should be on evenness of tone, aim for strong, consistent beats.
- Add music when you feel you can maintain an even tone and pace. **Always complement the music.** It is not necessary to play **only** the rhythm or just follow the melody the whole time; try

alternating between the two and accentuating them with patterns once you build proficiency. Be a musician!

PATTERNS

1. Basic 3 pattern (3s, Longa, gallop, triplets): this pattern has 3 strokes/beats of music.
2. Strike R, strike L, strike R (third stroke has accent)
3. Say it and play it (this is good practice when you're first learning a pattern).

Basic 4 pattern (4s)

1. Strike R, strike L, strike R, strike L (there is no accent in this pattern)
2. Say it and play it.
3. 4s help to build hand strength and consistency of sound.

Some patterns with 4s in them:

- Continuous 4s (RLRL RLRL RLRL RLRL RLRL, etc.)
- 3,3,7 (RLR RLR RLRLRLR)
- 5,5 (RLRLR RLRLR)
- 7,7 (RLRLRLR RLRLRLR)
- 7,7,15 (RLRLRLR RLRLRLR RLRLRLRLRLRLRLR)
- 15,15 (RLRLRLRLRLRLRLR RLRLRLRLRLRLRLR)

PRACTICE HABITS: **Practicing 10-15 minutes a day** when you are first starting out is essential for building proficiency and speed (if making a lot of noise is a problem where you live, slip a sock over each cymbal while playing).

V. PLAYING BASIC PATTERNS WHILE WALKING

The underlined letter indicates when to step. Try these walking forward, backward, to the side and around in a circle.

1. **1's** – strike R, step on **R** foot / strike L, step on **L** foot.
2. **2's** – accent on second stroke. Strike RL, step on **R** foot / strike RL, step on **L** foot
3. **3's** – accent on third stroke. Strike RLR, step on **R** foot / strike RLR, step on **L** foot
4. **4's** – no accent, foot steps out on the 1st stroke. Strike RLRL, step on **R** / strike RLRL, step on **L**

VI. BASIC PATTERNS WITH ARM MOVEMENTS

For these drills you will be playing your cymbals **standing still**. Please remember that it is **extremely important to stay lifted** during these exercises.

While playing 3's (RLR)

1. Lift one arm up overhead then down; repeat with other arm (8 beats up, 8 beats down)
2. Same movement (4 beats up, 4 beats down)
3. Lift both arms overhead, palms facing outwards, then down to sides (8 up, 8 down)
4. Same movement (4 up, 4 down)
5. Same as #1-2, with **alternating arms** (one arm comes down as the other comes up)
6. Same as #s 1-5, but **start with arms out to sides at shoulder level**. Do not go below shoulder level when you bring arms back down.

7. Start with arms out to the sides at shoulder level. *Bring arms down, cross them in front of your stomach, and sweep up over your head and down to starting position.* Try this using first **16** then **8** then **4** beats. Using 4 beats will be quite **fast** so practice keeping the movement controlled and elegant. Stay lifted
8. Do the **same as #7** but **reverse the direction**.
9. Start with both hands together in front of the body at waist level. *Pull the hands apart and bring them together in back of the body at waist level.* Now reverse. Try this using **16, 8** and **4** beats for each direction.
10. Do the same movement as #9 using **alternating arms** (one arm moves forward as the other moves back).
11. Now try the above exercises **while playing 4's** (RLRL).

VII. COMBINING WALKING AND ARM MOVEMENTS

In this exercise, you will use the arm movements listed in VI, while walking forward, backward, to the side, and around in circles. This is a difficult exercise so do not attempt it until you feel comfortable with V and VI.

1. Play **3's while walking** (step on 1 and 3) and repeat the arm movement drills in VI.
2. Do the same as #1 while playing **4's**.

ZILLS and DRILLS

By Elena Villa

The basic exercises and steps listed below can be used in combination with zill patterns (see your handout *Finger Cymbals: Selection, Technique and More*) to build coordination, rhythm, and proficiency playing zills while dancing. The end goal is to accentuate the music with your zills.

I. Practice Exercise: Play the rhythm simultaneously with the cymbals and your body.

1. Stand in place and play the base beats of the *beledi* or *maqsoum* rhythm.

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +	1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +
BELEDI: D D T D T	MAQSOU: D T T D T
2. **Add the hips:** play the rhythm with your hips, accenting **down** on the **D** and **up** on the **T**:
 - Play all the **Duns** with **one hip**, then the other.
 - Now, split the rhythm in half and play half the measure (1-2) on one side and half (3-4) on the other. Alternate between sides.
 - Play the **entire rhythm** (Ds and Ts) with **one hip**, then the other.
 - Now, split the rhythm in half and play half the measure (1-2) on one side and half (3-4) on the other. Alternate between sides.
3. Now, do the **base accents** with your **hips** and play the **filled rhythm** with your **cymbals**.
 - Repeat the drills in #2.

Beledi filled: Dun Dun teca Tec Dun teca Tec (teca); **Maqsoum filled:** Dun Tec Tec Dun teca Tec (teca)

II. Ten traveling steps to combine with 4/4 Rhythms *beledi* and *maqsoum* while zilling

Try a variety of zill patterns (with 3s, 5s, 7s, etc.). Maqsoum is usually played faster than beledi.

1. *Traveling hip drops.* Drop R hip (1X on the 1 for maqsoum or 2X on the 1+ for beledi), step R, drop L, step L, drop R, etc. Go forward, back, in circles, side to side, add turns.

2. *One-sided hip drops (D) or lifts (T)*. Circle in place or make a larger circle.
3. *Egyptian basic*. Add turns, change directions, use different shapes (e.g. circles, diagonals)
4. *“Crossing walk”* with hip lifts. Step across R, extend leg L, lift L hip. Alternate. Remember to step on the **D** and lift on the **T**. Try combining arm exercises from the Finger Cymbals handout. Can be done going **forward** or **backward**.
5. *Chassées*. Step-together-step. This is perfect for covering distance and in entrances.
6. *Grapevine* (regular) or *8-count Grapevine*: Travels laterally. Grapevine step to R (starts L foot in front), **hip drop** and **lift** on “7, 8”. Go back the other direction, starting w/R foot.
7. *Camel & arabesque*. Nice for traveling forward and alternating sides.
8. *Forward/back hip drops*. Face front, travel backward, drop forward then back on one hip switch sides, continue.
9. *Egyptian traveling shimmy* – in relevé, step forward (1 2) and back (3, 4) with *same* foot while traveling laterally and maintaining a constant shimmy.
10. *¾ shimmy walk*. Easiest while playing triplets. R hip: up, down, up (1,2) / step L (3) / L hip: up, down, up (1,2) / step R (3) / continue to alternate sides. down, up (1,2) / step R (3) / continue to alternate sides.

10 ZILL PATTERNS TO PLAY WITH *BELEDI* (Masmoudi Saghir) (4/4)

+ 1 + 2 + 3 + 4

1) RLR RLR RLRLRLR (3-3-7)

2) RLR RLRLRLR RLR (3-7-3)

3) RLRLRLR RLR RLR (7-3-3)

+ 1 + 2 + 3 + 4

4) RLR RLRLR RLRLR (3-5-5)

5) RLRLR RLR RLRLR (5-3-5)

6) RLRLR RLRLR RLR (5-5-3)

+ 1 + 2 + 3 + 4

- 7) RLR R RLR R RLR (3-1-3-1-3)
- 8) RLR RLR R R RLR (3-3-1-1-3)
- 9) RLR R R RLR RLR (3-1-1-3-3)
- 10) R R RLR R RLR (Beledi: 1-1-3-1-3)

Recommended for practice: *Uncle Mafufo's Zils and Drums, Uncle Mafufo's 25 Essential Rhythms, Nourhan Sharif Presents Arabic Rhythms, Vol. 2: The Drums of Lebanon, Nourhan Sharif Presents Arabic Rhythms for the Advanced Dancer, Vol. 3 (feat. Karim Nagi), Issam Houshan: Dancing Drum, Helm: Tribal Dance Tribal Drums Vol. 1&2. Awzan: Arabic Rhythmic Modes* with master musicians Souhail Kaspar and Ali Jihad Racy There are many practice selections on i-Tunes as well. Look for solo rhythms, i.e. only the drum beat.

MORE ZILL PATTERNS WITH MIDDLE EASTERN RHYTHMS

Compiled by Elena Villa

Capitalized letters represent the base rhythm. The “teca” is the filled section, or embellishment. You may play the base or filled rhythm where appropriate, as well as any number of creative patterns using 1s, 2s, 3s, 4s, 5s, 7s, etc., or striking both zills at once (e.g. “both R R both R” for *maqsoum*).

4/4 RHYTHMS

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

Beledi (Masmoudi Saghîr):
Basic: D D teca T D teca T teca

Zills Patterns (filled):

1) R R RLR R RLR RL (1 – 1 – 3 – 1 – 3 – 2)

2) RLR R RLR R RLR (3 – 1 – 3 – 1 – 3)

Maqsoum:

Basic: DT teca T D teca T teca

Zills Patterns (filled):

1) RL LRL R LRL (RL)

2) RLR LL R LRL (or RLR)

Saidi:

Basic: DT teca D D teca T teca

Zills Patterns (filled):

1) R L RLRR RLR RL

2) RLR RLR RR RLR (3 – 3 – 1 – 1 – 3)

2/4 RHYTHMS: Here are a few options besides “triplets”; try them with your walking and arm exercises to build familiarity.

1 + 2 +

Malruf:

Basic: Dca T ca Teca

Zills Patterns:

1) R LL 2) R LRLRL or R LR LR 3) 4s, 7s, 15s

Ayoob:

Basic: Dca D T (or: D cDc

Zills Patterns:

1) R L R L 2) RLRL RL 3) 4s, 7s, 15s

Fallahi:

Basic: D ca ca D ca tec

Zills Patterns:

1) R LL R L (or RLR) (fast version of *maqsoum* base beats) 2) same as *ayoob* 3) 4s, 7s, 15s

Cera Byer's Class Handouts

The Welder

I am a welder.

Not an alchemist.

I am interested in the blend
of common elements to make
a common thing.

No magic here.

Only the heat of my desire to fuse
what I already know
exists. Is possible.

We plead to each other,
we all come from the same rock
we all come from the same rock
ignoring the fact that we bend
at different temperatures
that each of us is malleable
up to a point.

Yes, fusion is possible
but only if things get hot enough...

- (excerpt from "The Welder" by Cherrie Moraga from "This Bridge Called My Back")

What is “Fusion”?

Many people refer to their work as “fusion” – but what does that mean? What makes something “fusion” and something else “pure”? Can anything really be called a “pure” form of dance?

Even what is now “Egyptian Cabaret” Bellydance is a “fusion” of traditional Egyptian folk dances, Ballet, and the Westernized versions of bellydance that swept through orientalist fantasy as early as the 1800’s. Folkloric Haitian dance is itself a “fusion” of several dances from Africa mixed with the dances of the Natives of their New World Island and the colonial dances of the French slave owners. Old illustrations suggest that Tap is a combination of dances from Ireland and Africa, born on the docks of New York. Dances change as people travel, interact with other people and other environments. Fusion happens constantly, even in the most “pure” of art forms.

So what is “Fusion”?

- According to the dictionary, etymologically, the root of fusion is “a pouring out”, or “melting”.
- Your brain produces “binocular” fusion each moment as it processes the information from your two eyes into one image.
- Nuclear fusion occurs when nuclei combine to form more massive nuclei with the simultaneous release of energy.

These are the ideas of fusion that are most meaningful to me - Several solid things melting into one smooth liquid; multiple pictures from different angles being made into one clear image; small things joining together to create a larger thing as they build and create energy.

Before we go further, I offer a disclaimer: Some people are of the opinion that you must “master” the styles that you are fusing before you attempt fusion. I don’t necessarily agree on this point. I don’t think that you have to go spend 5 years in Spain to develop a Flamenco fusion piece. However, a moderate level of technical proficiency, coupled with an intimate understanding of why and how the styles you’re fusing work together, will help your choreography immensely. As with any artistic creation, the more you understand of your chosen vocabularies the more eloquently you can compose.

I have heard fusion choreography described as a “soldering together at either end” – for example, taking a phrase of modern movements, and attaching them to a phrase of hip hop movements, and attaching those to a phrase of flamenco movements. This is certainly one way to approach it, but for me, it does not yield a “fusion” experience. After all, when you go eat at a gourmet “Pan-Asian” Restaurant, you don’t get one bite that tastes Chinese, the next bite Thai, the next Mongolian. The chef has worked carefully to discover which flavors and textures from each region will compliment each other perfectly, subtly, and exquisitely. The flavors are fused from the inside out, rendering an entirely unique flavor combination. This is the same approach we can take in our choreography.

I prefer to approach fusion from an “inside out” approach, rather than “outside in”. I start by looking for what makes the two styles similar and what makes them different. How do they fit together? What draws me to want to fuse them?

As with all choreography, I begin fusion projects with writing (surprise)!

Creating a purposeful fusion of styles can seem huge and daunting. To make it more manageable, I begin a fusion piece by making lists of compare and contrast.

I like to begin my comparison with style. What are the fundamental styles, or attitudes, of the dance forms you are fusing? Where do they overlap? Where do they diverge? How?

Next I turn an eye toward musicality. How do these dance forms interact with the music? Do they employ the same approach, or are they different? How so? From where do you think these similarities and differences originate?

Now, how about body movements? Where are they markedly similar? Where are they markedly different? How?

Then I turn my attention to arms and hands: Where do these styles employ similar approaches to arm/hand movements? Where are they different? How?

Now I look at footwork. Where do these styles employ similar approaches to footwork? Where are they different? How?

Below is a compare and contrast list I've made of Bellydance and Hip Hop. It is just a general overview of the two styles, a "quick and dirty" run down – but it gives me a lot to work with!

Bellydance

Hip Hop

Style/Attitude:

Can be – Sensuous, sexy, flirtatious, fun, high energy, snakey, fluid, feminine, aggressive, playful, highly improvisational, spontaneous, elegant, earthy, grounded, light, airy

Style/Attitude:

Can be: Sensuous, sexy, flirtatious, fun, high energy, snakey, fluid, feminine, aggressive, light, playful, highly improvisational, spontaneous, elegant, earthy, grounded, masculine, hard

Musicality:

Married to music – one cannot be without the other. The rhythm and the dance are often called the same thing (i.e. Baladi, Saidi, Schikhatt, Zaar). There are regional beats with different sounds, and movements that accompany. Dancers play with the rhythm, play with the music, are driven by and drive the music in turn. Extreme connection between beat in the body and beat of the drum. Sometimes connection between lyrics and movement.

Musicality:

Married to music – one cannot be without the other. The rhythm and the dance are often called the same thing (Hip Hop, B-boy, House). There are regional beats with different sounds, and movements that accompany (i.e. Dirty South, East Coast, West Coast, hyphy, GoGo). Dancers play with the rhythm, play with the music, are driven by and drive the music in turn. Extreme connection between beat in the body and beat of the drum. Sometimes connection between lyrics and movement.

Body Movements:

Isolated

Grounded

Smooth

(play with contrast between isolated and smooth/snakey)

Muscular

Limited room for variation in arm, leg, and body position (mostly in home posture)

Floorwork often upright, smooth, sensuous

Body Movements:

Isolated

Grounded

Smooth

(play with contrast between isolated and smooth/snakey)

Skeletal

More room for variation in arm, leg, and body position

Floorwork often on the back, featuring the legs, aggressive, tricks

Arms/Hands:

Elegant, smooth, balletic curve to fingers

Flores

Snakearms – smaller, muscular

Pharonic

Limited room for variation in arm movements

Arms tend to be used to frame body, not as their own movement base

Arms/Hands:

Less concern for elegant, smooth, balletic curve to fingers

Snakearms larger and more skeletal

Pharonic/ Tutting

Unlimited room for variation in arm movements

Use of fists, blades, fast, intricate hand work has its own movement base

Footwork:

Small, sometimes minimal. (Dancers often stationary for large periods of time). Feet are often invisible. Light glides on the toes, or flat feet. Feet are base for hips, not their own movement base.

Footwork:

Big, more traveling.

Feet are often home of the beat.

Light glides on the toes, or flat feet.

Feet have their own movement base.

Now comes the fun part – Analysis! Based on the list above, it looks like we have a great basis for fusion. Since there is a lot of similarity, I'll take a highlighter and mark the places where the styles contrast, to make sure I don't forget them.

Then I'll go through the list, and circle the elements of similarity I most want to feature in my choreography.

For example:

- Sensual, Sexy, Fun, High Energy
- Isolated/Snakey
- Pharonic/Tutting
- Wedded to the music

Next, I'll circle the contrasts I most want to feature in my choreography.

For example:

- Use of traveling, footwork and unconventional leg movement
- Use of unconventional floor work
- Use of unconventional arm patterns, intricate handwork

I've gone from having a *huge* task, that might have seemed out of reach (Fuse Bellydance with Hip Hop), to having a much more approachable task! I know what I find similar and what I find different in the two styles, and which of those similarities and differences I want to use in my piece.

Hopefully I've already found a piece of music that allows me to explore these points, but if not, my list of things I'd like to feature gives me a great base for starting to select music!

Now that I have my list, I keep it with me in the studio. As I begin to create movements and phrases, I can refer back to it for ideas, and to keep me on track.

I want to use in my piece.
 Hopefully I've already found a piece of music that allows me to explore these points, but if not, my list of things I'd like to feature gives me a great base for starting to select music!

Now that I have my list, I keep it with me in the studio. As I begin to create movements and phrases, I can refer back to it for ideas, and to keep me on track.

Make a compare and contrast list of your own in the space below, or copy this form to create as many lists as you'd like!

<p><i>all ages</i></p> <p><i>feel energy</i> →</p> <p>Dance Form: Belly Dance</p> <p>Style/Attitude: water, fluid, flirtatious (subtle), feminine, community - dancers, recognize others, fierce</p>	<p>Dance Form: African Dance</p> <p>Style/Attitude: pedestrian flirtation, earthy, gender specific, gender fluid, community, fierce → <i>feel energy</i></p>
Musicality:	Musicality:
Body Movements: small articulation, internal, belly rolls,	Body Movements: large swooping external movements
Arms/Hands: waving	Arms/Hands: extended w. a swing
Footwork: no jumping, some little hopping, triplet	Footwork: triplets, nidge at the waist

Chance Choreography Game

- A – head circle
- B – level change
- C – hip drop
- D – hip lift

E – chest pop
F – touch face
G – reach
H – fall
I – turn
J – kick
L – snake arm
M – shoulder roll
N – arm wave
O – crawl
P – run
Q – nod
R – shimmy
S – maya
T – trace 1 body part with another
U – stop
V – knee circle
W – releve
X – chin slide
Z – jump

Using the letters above, spell your name (or any other word you'd like).
For added fun, do this with a group, and stage your new combos in groups. Teach them to each other, and build transitions and variations to create longer combos. Fun!

D - travel R-L-RR (crane arms)

E - yankadi abstraction w. triplet

V - jazz square w. kick

O - chainee w. jumps

N - chainee w. hip drops

R torso roll

U jazz square w. contraction
or kick

B crane arms

Y step diag. -

FWD, BK, BK, FWD
w. torso

R - torso rolls

A - head slide - BD style w. cross point
or still

C - deep swing (Zamba) arms - R-L-R-R...

H - stringing arms w. wrist articulation

E - yankadi abstraction weight shift w. torso/pelvis

L - mandjanni triplet w. torso/pelvis

S torso 8's

A Head Slides

R torso rolls

A head slide - BD style w. cross point
or still

T Belly rolls

A Head slide - BD style w. cross pointer still

T belly rolls

L Flat footed body waves (travel)

A Head slide

L chance w. hip drop

H ↓

A Head slide

H swinging arms

A Head slide - BD style w. cross pointer still

L "mandjanni" triplet step - torso -

E "yankodi" abstraction w. hip + chest circles

L step on diag. -

FWD, BK, BK, FWD

w. torso

CERABUER - phrase

- Yankadi abstraction w. hip & chest circles
- Flores
- Flat footed body waves traveling
- Body waves travel w. flat back
- mandjani R-L-RR...
- 3/4 Shimmy
- pelvic drops
- basic beladi
- Step FWD. R-BK-L w. articulated arm
- Large lunge step combo - R-L-R
L-R-L
- then turkish crawl

- 4 X's - mandjani, step body wave - FWD

- Face R. w. large lunge step L-R-L
large body wave down
- L-R-L torso circle R to L
- Shimmy - Shoulders FR-up-BK-down
1-2-3-4

- Face L. w. large lunge step
large body wave up
head flat-plane roll
large arm swing articulation
4 "spinkler" hips to open (R)

↳ Repeat - 2x CRAZIER

- Chaine R - jump
- chaine to face L - jump

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