



## **Chelydra**

*"Dancer With An Attitude"*

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### **ETIQUETTE, ETHICS, AND MIDDLE EASTERN DANCE**

This article started out as a letter to the editor after a particularly disagreeable experience at an excessively overcrowded seminar. It took on a life of its own, however, and I realized that the issues that I was raising concerned the dance community as a whole (students, performers, and instructors), and all aspects of the dance (seminars, shows, and public performances).

The following sections address five areas of dance etiquette (seminar, audience, performance, costume, and video etiquette), and also dance ethics (copyright, choreography, and publicity etiquette).

#### **SEMINAR ETIQUETTE**

Everyone who attends a seminar should take three things with them that won't take up any room in your dance bag: courtesy, common sense, and general awareness of your surroundings.

To start with, let me discuss *stuff* - your street shoes, dance bag, coolers, and other assorted paraphernalia. Be considerate of others - put your *stuff* on or under the chairs on the periphery of the room, not on the floor in front of the chairs. Don't take up valuable floor space, or create a safety hazard for your sister dancers.

Next, pay attention to both your surroundings and the instructor's directions. Teachers often request that everyone move to one end of the room, and travel across the floor in small groups performing a combination. For example, an instructor might ask everyone to perform a combination "four at a time (four abreast), a couple of measures apart". When this happens, resist the urge to rush. Follow instructions, take your time, and give the dancer in front of you enough lead time and room for the both of you to safely execute the moves.

When you get to the end of the room, move to the back and sides quickly and quietly. Use the same principles you use (or should use) when you drive your car - don't speed, don't tailgate, and don't brake without warning.

Instructors will also frequently divide the room into groups. This is usually done when space is at a premium. When this happens, there is always one active group on the dance floor, and one or more observer groups. When it is your turn to be an observer, use the time to add to your notes, mentally review the combination, or just absorb the material by osmosis. Keep quiet and keep off of the dance floor. If you must converse or practice, leave the room.

At most seminars, it is difficult to see the instructor if you are more than two rows back. This

drawback can be overcome by using the principle of *down in front*. Students in the front rows should kneel down or bend over when the instructor is demonstrating a movement or combination. This allows everyone in the room an equal opportunity to view the instructor.

Try it at your next seminar. You will get a double benefit - the dancers behind you will appreciate your courtesy, and you will get some good exercise!

In summary, be considerate of your sister dancer. Be aware of your surroundings. Treat others as you would like to be treated. And make seminars a more pleasant experience for everyone.

### AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

The lack of audience support and participation at middle eastern dance shows never fails to amaze me. I expect the zombie audience from hell at shows for the general public - Americans have been taught from the cradle to sit quietly and observe and not let on that they're having fun - but an audience of dancers should know better.

You've all been there: a sea of blank faces (or stony, disapproving ones), and dead silence. Each of you knows how tough it is to maintain your energy level in that situation.

So, knowing how miserable it is to dance in a vacuum, why do you do the same thing to your sister dancers? I'll let you in on a secret - you can smile, clap, and take in every detail of a performance at the same time. Really! You won't miss a thing being a good audience member. You might even gain something.

Good dancer or bad dancer, give them a break while they're performing. Smile. Clap. Trill. Zaghareet. There isn't a dancer on earth who doesn't get better when the audience is behind her.

And cut out the favoritism. I performed in a show once where a small enclave in the audience did their best zombie-prune-face imitation until their friend came out. All of a sudden they learned to clap and zaghareet. When their friend was finished dancing, they lapsed back into a coma.

I will be the first to admit that being a good audience member can be exhausting. I am often more physically drained after watching a show than appearing in one. Especially if the quality of dance is mediocre, and the programme has so many segments that it should have been billed as an endurance contest. But I also believe in "do unto others as you would have them do unto you".

I'm not an idealist. Far from it. I believe in calling a spade a spade, and I dislike the proliferation of "sweetness and light" show and seminar reviews. (Have you ever noticed that there are no bad seminars?) However, save all of that for afterward. Be polite and supportive during the performance.

All of us will be better dancers for it.

## PERFORMANCE ETIQUETTE

Consider this point-of-view: You are not doing the show sponsor a favor by appearing in the program. The sponsor is doing you a favor by providing you with a performing venue.

Even (perhaps especially) if you are the featured dancer.

The life of a sponsor/producer is not an easy one, and you should do your best to help things to run as smoothly as possible. If you are requested to submit material in advance - background information, a photograph, description of your dance, costume selection, or music - do it! Don't make the sponsor have to play telephone tag and hunt you down - the amount of time that takes may seem insignificant to you, but if you multiply it by the number of performances in a typical show, it mounts up quickly.

Share the dressing room. Arriving first doesn't give you open season on the lion's share of the facilities. Don't appropriate all of the vanity table, or all of the garment hooks, or hog the mirror, or monopolize the only chair. If the space provided is inadequate, make the best of a bad situation.

Remember, the ideal combination of stage, seating, and dressing facilities is the exception, not the rule. Grin and bear it; be gracious; save your energy for the show, and save your gripes for later.

Arrive before the show starts, even if you're in the second half, and check in with the sponsor when you arrive.

If you are going to join the audience and watch part of the show, wear an opaque cover-up, and keep a low profile. Cover-ups, by the way, should do just that - cover up your costume, neck to ankle. They are not a fashion statement. They should not be flimsy, noisy, gaudy, or distracting to the audience as you move around, drawing attention away from the current performer.

And last, but definitely not least, if there is a time limit for performances - honor it! Even small overruns should be cleared with the sponsor. There is nothing ruder to both the sponsor and the other performers than exceeding your allotted time. In addition to being rude, it's also a good way of shooting yourself in the foot. Word gets around, and the invitations stop coming.

Time limits are not imposed for arbitrary reasons, and they should not be resented as limits to your artistic expression. Respect them. Edit your music, choose an alternate piece, or decline the invitation if it's "just too restricting".

In summary, treat your sister dancers as you would like to be treated. Playing the prima donna won't get you very far in the long run. Most of us may never be famous - but we certainly don't want to be infamous!

## COSTUME ETIQUETTE

Your performing surroundings should determine the appropriate costume to wear. Sounds perfectly obvious, doesn't it? In practice, however, it never ceases to amaze me how little care and thought some dancers put into polishing and maintaining their public image.

As Shalimar Serene once said, the sequins and beads that compose a dynamite stage costume can appear garish, tawdry and tasteless in the bright light of day.

And the costume (or lack thereof) that is acceptable in a nightclub can be shockingly inappropriate at an outdoor festival.

What harm does it do? One whole heck of a lot, I can tell you. We may think it prudish and silly of someone to get upset at the sight of a little bare skin, but we do our image more harm than good by ignoring the issue.

Use a little forethought. Showing up to perform on the family stage of an outdoor festival at two in the afternoon with cleavage from your chin to your navel, and a bra cut so low your nipple is a mere hair's breadth from introducing itself to the world, and a split skirt that has the audience guessing whether or not you have underwear on (was that a full moon?), is not the way to get invited back next year.

There are three costuming "areas of offense" to the general public:

- 1) Cleavage
- 2) Bare leg
- 3) Bare abdomen

Before every performance, I assess the expected audience, and use a rating system similar to the one used by the Motion Picture Association of America:

0 of 3 (PG): Maximum coverage. NO cleavage, leg, or abdomen.

1 of 3 (PG-13): One of the troublesome trio is allowed.

2 of 3 (R): Two of the three are allowed.

3 of 3 (NC-17): Go for broke! (Maybe even use that Turkish costume.)

Silly? Perhaps, but after years of consistent effort, I and my friends now perform regularly on a number of family stages, and we always get invited back. It's been a long time since I've seen an audience member leave in a righteous huff.

Too much trouble? Not really. To camouflage cleavage, tuck a small scarf into the top of your bra

to raise the level of the cups. If your harem pants are open down the side, pin them together temporarily at the knee. If you don't have any harem pants to match your skirt, pull the corners of the front panel up under the back panel and pin them to your belt at center back. Cover your bare abdomen with a body stocking, coordinating leotard, or an infinite assortment of veil and scarf tucks.

You should take extra special care when reviewing your costume if you will be performing on a raised stage. Ask yourself: What will (or won't) the audience see when they look up my skirt?

In summary, think before you dress. When in doubt, dress more conservatively, not less. Don't become a parody or a caricature. Remember, when you dance, you don't just represent yourself - you represent all middle eastern dancers everywhere, struggling to get and keep some respect.

### VIDEO ETIQUETTE

Never, in all my dance experience, have I encountered a video camera that has paid admission to a dance event.

Why, then, does the camera seem to get the best seat in the house?

Don't get me wrong. I am a videographer myself. I understand the desire to get a good, clean field of view. However, that field of view should not be obtained at the expense of the paying customers, unless they know and agree to the limitations and inconveniences in advance.

Seminar and show sponsors need to make up their minds, and make it clear ahead of time, whether their prime market is the day-of-event customer, or the video consumer. If the "quality of being there" is to be sacrificed for the sake of the video, then the cost of "being there" should be reduced. If the student/show environment is of primary importance, then the camera should take a back seat and stay out of the way.

Some suggestions for improved co-existence of dancers and video cameras:

- Cameras in the classroom

The videographer should keep the camera out of the dance area (especially the front of the room closest to the instructor), and keep the lens on the **teacher**. The teacher knows what she's doing. Chances are the students don't. A video tape of a large group of confused dancers stumbling through a new choreography is not a useful learning tool, and the knowledge that they're being filmed often inhibits the students themselves.

- Cameras at the show

Most dancers tend to focus to the center front of the audience. It is very distracting to the dancer if the center front is a wide, empty aisle occupied only by a video camera. This situation makes it more difficult to maintain contact with the audience, and to give and receive energy. Video cameras don't smile very often.

Always have an audience in the center front. If aisles are necessary, offset them to the side. The small amount you will lose in video field-of-view will be more than made up for in the improved comfort and quality you will get from your performers.

Just these few small changes can lessen the intrusive effect of the video camera, and make a world of difference in the comfort level of the dancers (students, teachers, and performers). In my opinion, the dancer should always come first.

## **DANCE ETHICS**

The final installment of my Dance Etiquette series digresses from the areas of politeness and good old common sense, and enters the more controversial realm of ethical behavior. Three areas of dance ethics are discussed:

- copyright etiquette
- choreography etiquette
- publicity etiquette

### Copyright Etiquette

Most people, dancers included, treat a copyright as a trivial nuisance to be ignored. After all, who's going to know you copied that show video, instructional tape, or album? What harm does it do?

It takes a significant investment in creative energy, time, and money to produce video and audio tapes. Pirating tapes is a little like shoplifting - in the long run, everybody pays. The producer has to charge more because of low volume. This is a vicious circle - the more the producer charges, the more likely people are to "share". In the end, many producers give up the effort entirely, and everyone pays the penalty.

Middle Eastern dance is a tough business, especially for those few courageous individuals making it their sole means of support. I have several friends who have taken the time and effort to produce instructional and performance videos, and they deserve respect and encouragement. Copyright infringement isn't harmless, it endangers the roof over my friends' heads.

There is one overwhelming advantage to an ethically assembled video and audio library - quality. Clear, clean pictures and sound. In the long term, a few good tapes can beat a closetful of smeary, smudgy, noisy fifteenth-generation bootlegs.

And you have the added advantage of knowing you are supporting the effort to improve Middle Eastern Dance.

### Choreography Etiquette

An issue closely related to video and audio piracy is choreography piracy: the tendency of some

dancers to use other dancers' choreographies (in whole or in part) without attributing the creator's artistic effort. While this is not patently illegal (unless the choreography is copyrighted), it is certainly unethical to take credit for someone else's creative work.

Many dancers will not allow their performances to be videotaped because of both choreography and video piracy. In the long run, this hurts all of us in middle eastern dance by limiting our access to the infinite variety and creativity of the dance community.

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but using someone else's choreography without attributing it is inexcusable. You do not diminish yourself when you are honest and open, you enhance your credibility as a performer. (John Q. Public in Podunk, USA, may not give two hoots who Dalia Carella of New York is, but they respect you for mentioning it!)

### Publicity Etiquette

Truth in advertising. Nowadays, that is an oxymoronic (meaningless and contradictory) statement.

However, I think that a little more truth in advertising would be beneficial to the middle eastern dance community. I am reminded of a quotation from P.T. Barnum: *"You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."*

In a nutshell, if you are not honest with people, you are going to be found out. And it won't just hurt you, it hurts everyone in the dance community. Middle Eastern dance is especially sensitive to public perceptions, since it is so frequently misrepresented and misunderstood.

There are several areas where truth in advertising is sorely needed:

- publicity photos
- business logos
- professional biographies

*Publicity Photos:* It is a fact of life that your appearance changes over time. Your publicity photographs should reflect the current you, not the you of ten or twenty or thirty years ago. Be honest with yourself and your public. Students and concert goers will never forget their first surprise when the artist who appears bears little resemblance to the promotional photograph. And if the disparity is truly glaring, you can even end up the subject of some pretty cruel jokes.

The trouble and expense of a photo session is trivial when compared to your credibility and reputation.

*Business Logos:* Everyone has an idealized vision of themselves. It is human nature. Your internal vision may be very different from the external reality, however. And unlike photographs, it is easy

to rationalize that your business logo is just art, and doesn't have to represent hard reality. Again, you should be honest with yourself and your customers. When your logo is a dancer, people expect the delivered product to resemble the artistic representation. If it doesn't, they can feel misled.

If you are uncomfortable or unwilling to use a realistic artistic representation, then choose artwork that can be ambiguous. Instead of a full-body drawing, choose a recognizably stylized motif or hieroglyph.

*Professional Biographies:* Beware the glowing biography that leaps off of the page. Bios are frequently filled with unsubstantiated claims such as "**Country's Third Best Choreographer!**" (says who?), or exaggerations such as "**Danced Across Egypt!**" (she danced in the aisle of the train while it crossed the country). Taking advantage of the gullibility of the general public (she wouldn't write it if it weren't true) is tacky. Matter-of-factly stating your qualifications will lead to less disappointment, and, ultimately, more respect in the long run.

### Summary

The whole issue of ethics reminds me of the saying: "Nice guys finish last." In a dog-eat-dog, bottom-line, bean-counting world, you usually won't come out on top monetarily by being ethical.

But you will feel better about yourself, and perhaps you will inspire others to follow your lead. The dance community as a whole will benefit from your honesty, integrity, and forthrightness.

