



**Chelydra**

*"Dancer With An Attitude"*

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## **EVALUATING AN INSTRUCTOR**

The responsibilities of being a middle eastern dance instructor have heightened my sensitivity to the wide variety in the competency levels of instructors. Over the past several years, I have become increasingly perturbed by the number of middle eastern dance instructors whom I have encountered who lack even the most basic isolation technique, and who have little or no understanding of musical structure or body mechanics.

I dread the arrival of a student who has had previous instruction. More often than not, this supposedly advanced student (sometimes even a "professional") cannot even meet my standards for an intermediate student. This leads to an unhappy, and usually brief, relationship. No matter how hard I try, there is no diplomatic way to tell someone that they need to start over from the beginning.

Unfortunately, beginning middle eastern dance students have little recourse available to them in determining the competency of an instructor. I certainly didn't, and I wasted three years learning incorrect hip isolation technique and the wrong way to shimmy, followed by another two years of relearning the correct methods.

I have written this article in the hope that it will assist others in avoiding the same costly mistake. It is a sad fact of life that it is easier to shop for a qualified aerobic dance instructor than for a qualified middle eastern dance instructor.

There are two areas of instructional expertise that I am going to address; basic dance technique, and specialized middle eastern dance technique. In addition to discussing how to evaluate an instructor's technical expertise, I will also provide pointers on how to evaluate an instructor's ability to teach. Performing ability is no indicator of teaching ability; some of the most marvelous dancers in the world are rotten teachers. Patience, repetition, dedication, and communication are the keys.

### **Basic Dance Technique**

Before you learn middle eastern dance, you need to establish a basic generic dance foundation, which includes an understanding of both music and movement. It is a distinct advantage if your instructor has had formal music and dance training. This training provides the theoretical and physical background necessary to understand and teach rhythms, body mechanics, and the physical, mental, and three-dimensional spatial aspects of dance choreography.

**Class Format:** A good instructor will lead the class through a complete warm-up every session, combining slow stretches and isolations with (over time) an increasingly difficult series of strengthening exercises. These should emphasize the arms, shoulders, chest, abdomen, and especially legs (thighs, knees, calves, and ankles). As Suhaila Salimpour says: your ankles are for support, your knees are for speed, and your thighs are for stamina.

The format of the remainder of the class is the personal preference of the instructor. Some instructors teach only steps and short combinations of steps, leaving the assembly of a complete dance to the students. Some instructors teach complete choreographies.

Whatever approach is chosen, there should be a logical, ordered, progression of technique, not a helter-skelter hodgepodge.

It has been my personal experience that students retain the movements better, and feel that they are making more progress, if they learn a choreography. For that reason, I have carefully designed four choreographies as my beginner series. Each expands on techniques learned in the previous dance, progressively establishing a basic dance foundation for the beginning student.

**Body Mechanics:** Aerobics instructors shudder at what dancers do to their bodies, and middle eastern dance is no exception. Dance can be good for you, and dance can hurt you. A good dance instructor should know what to watch out for, and warn students when extra care needs to be taken to avoid injury to the neck, back, or knees.

A good instructor should understand and be able to communicate the physical components of each dance step, teaching each individual component first, then combining these components into the completed step. This layered approach takes time and effort on the part of both the instructor and the student, but is invaluable in building a flexible dance vocabulary.

I teach the footwork first, followed by the footwork in actual time to the musical structure, followed by the footwork and music with the pattern of the move in three-dimensional space.

The remaining components of the move (arms, hips, torso, head, and zils) are each taught separately, then combined with the footwork, music, and spatial pattern.

Finally, all of the pieces are layered together into the complete movement, and the intangibles are added - like where to breathe effectively to enhance the movement, and where to focus.

**Choreography:** Nothing screams "*beginning dancer!*" louder than a choreography that never stops for a breath. A good instructor will emphasize the importance of occasionally doing absolutely nothing. Doing nothing with confidence is something many dancers have never learned. For that reason, a standing pose is the fourth "step" in my very first beginner choreography.

A good teacher should also emphasize the whole body/whole music approach, and present even the most simple dance as more than just a sequence of steps. Instruction should include stage presence, focus, and mood and level changes. Both the rhythm and the melody should be used as the creative basis behind sequences of steps. When teaching a choreography, your instructor should explain why a particular combination was chosen, and make sure that you can identify the musical nuances that shaped the decision.

## **Middle Eastern Dance Technique**

In addition to these generic dance basics, I have identified a minimum of three areas which distinguish middle eastern dance from other dance forms: precise hip isolations, the use of finger cymbals, and the unique middle eastern musical rhythms. I have also included undulations as an additional measure of an instructor's isolation technique.

These are the most important areas in which to evaluate your instructor, and also the most difficult for the beginning student to determine an instructor's competency. I'm going to climb on my soapbox and try to give you an explanation of why these particular issues are important, and provide a few pointers on what to look for (good and bad).

**Hips:** Precise, clockwork hip isolations are the heart and soul of middle eastern dance. You've either got, or you haven't got, hips. And if you've got hips, you stand out a mile. (Sorry, I couldn't resist.)

There are two keys to the basic mechanics of hip work, body stance and muscle isolation. Your instructor should continually emphasize and check that your torso is lifted, your pelvis is centered, and your knees are flexed. (My students automatically go through the *lift, tuck, pli* drill periodically without even thinking.)

Sharp, crisp hip isolations are created through use of your *gluteus maximus* (butt) muscles, not your knees! If your instructor doesn't start teaching you to isolate your *gluts* (one bun at a time) almost from day one, I recommend that you find another instructor.

Poor hip work is the most common shortcoming in a majority of the dancers and (sad to say) instructors in the middle eastern dance field. Fortunately for the beginning student, it is relatively easy to identify.

If your instructor's upper torso bobs up and down when performing hip drops or other hip isolations, I recommend that you find another instructor. She or he is using their knees, not their *gluts*, to do hip work. The upper body should not move during a hip drop, lift, down, or up.

**Undulations:** Body undulations are not a distinguishing feature of middle eastern dance. Many dance forms use the movement, including jazz and modern dance. I mention undulations here because they are a common feature of the dance, they are a measure of the instructor's overall isolation technique, and there are two poor habits which are easy for the uninitiated student to identify.

A full body undulation is a movement of the chest, torso, and hips. It involves a full forward, upward, and backward chest/torso extension, followed by a torso contraction. The entire movement should be fluid.

The most common flaw in undulation technique is to bat at the floor with the ball of the foot to assist the torso in extending out and up, instead of using the chest and abdominal muscles. Weight should only shift to the front foot as a natural consequence of the forward movement of your torso.

This habit of batting the floor is fairly easy to identify, and is an indication of poor isolation technique.

A second common flaw is what I call the "diving dolphin" approach; the arms and/or head are used to drive the movement, and the body ducks down, up, and out with little or no use of the chest and torso. An undulation should never appear to be a downward movement. It is a lifted movement with the emphasis out, up, back, and center. The head may move forward parallel to the floor, leading the outward chest extension, but the top of the head should never move down toward the floor.

**Finger Cymbals (Zils):** This is an area I feel very strongly about. Zils are magical, even hypnotic; watch a dancer perform with and without them. The difference in energy level and audience appeal is amazing.

Besides being able to amaze and astound your friends, learning to play zils also teaches you the basic middle eastern rhythms. And zils have one major advantage - they give you something to do with your hands!

In addition to learning the zil patterns which accompany the basic middle eastern rhythms, your instructor should also emphasize the importance of variety and creativity - when and how to use the different tones (ring, clack, or click) for changes in musical mood or accents, and how to occasionally play melody instead of rhythm.

If your instructor does not teach zils, or at the very least play them in performance, find another instructor - even if you're convinced you will never play zils yourself. Climbing on my soapbox again, it is my personal opinion that any middle eastern dance instructor who does not teach or play zils is either lazy, or doesn't understand music theory well enough to play a musical instrument. In either case, you don't need that person as a teacher.

**Musical Rhythms:** Your instructor should be able to recognize and technically explain a minimum of three basic middle eastern dance rhythms - the *beledi*, *chiftetelli*, and *karshilima*. If you are not introduced to one or more of these rhythms in your first series of classes, find another instructor. The more rhythms you are introduced to, the better your instructor's background.

I realized within the last year that I was expecting my students to learn these rhythms by osmosis. I assumed that everyone had been provided with basic music technique during the course of their general education, and knew how to evaluate musical measures and hear drum accents, and I assumed that students could translate the rhythms practiced during zil exercises to recognition of those rhythms behind the melodies of the music used in class.

Not true. I realized this at a seminar where a young student (not mine) was having trouble with the timing of a particular hip movement because she had no knowledge or recognition of the underlying beledi rhythm. After that, I started asking my students to name the rhythms we are exercising to, and we clap them out periodically as additional reinforcement.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that this series has provided the beginning middle eastern dance student with a method of

evaluating a potential instructor. I also hope that the results of your evaluation will be positive.

What should you do if your evaluation is not positive? I recommend a good basic video, such as the excellent *Beginning Belly Dance* by Bedia, or the video series by Suhaila Salimpour. Mary Ellen Donald provides an superb series on finger cymbal technique and middle eastern rhythms through both book and audio cassette. Another good instructional source for middle eastern dance rhythms is the audio cassette *Uncle Mafufo's Basic Rhythms, Vol 1* (Volume 2 is also available for the adventurous or masochistic student).

Subscribe to one or more national middle eastern dance magazines (the most well-known are *Middle Eastern Dancer* and *Arabesque*) and any regional dance newsletters. Find out if there is a middle eastern dance association in your geographical area and join it.

Combine all of this with attendance at any seminars in your area, and you will be better off in the long run than if you were attending classes with a poorly qualified instructor.

Even with the best of instructors, how much you get out of the dance is up to you alone. Perfecting any dance form requires hard work, and middle eastern dance is no exception to the rule. Making the dance look easy takes hours of sweat and practice. If you're not willing to invest that time and effort, you should find another form of exercise.

### **Postscript**

Chelydra has just completed production of the **No-Frills** video series, a group of four instructional videos on middle eastern dance (beledi with zils, veil, tambourine, and [almost] shimmyless drum). They may be purchased through Chelydra for \$25 (shipping included).