



Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

P.O. Box 1973

Newport News, VA 23601

www.chelydra.com

chelydra@mindspring.com

THE IDEAL SEMINAR

After five years of sponsoring seminars, I concluded that I should experiment with lower-stress methods of improving my technique and widening my dance horizons. Over the past three years I have tried both private lessons and public seminars, with mixed success. Before discussing that success (or lack of it), I need to explain what I consider to be the **Ideal Seminar** from the point of view of the student.

I am a perfectionist. I feel very strongly that you must be a perfectionist if you are going to perform the dance of another culture without insulting or demeaning it. When I go to a seminar or private class, I want to learn, and I want to learn it right. I want to immerse myself in the dance, and strive to make myself into a temporary clone of the instructor so that I can fully understand the what and the why of the dance or combination being taught. Then, and only then, do I feel confident in taking what I have learned and adapting it to my own particular style. I have discovered that if I do the adapting as I am learning, then I reinforce my own bad or lazy habits, and my technique does not grow.

It takes me between three and one-half and five hours of class to clone a four to five minute choreography. The oriental, or cabaret, dance style takes the shorter period of time because the underlying technique is more familiar to me.

With folkloric dances complete cloning (technical and cultural) is critical, or you risk distorting the very culture which we are trying to celebrate and preserve. Many folkloric dances require unlearning, or at least masking, the oriental dance techniques which dominate our movement repertoire. Folkloric choreographies should be learned completely and adhered to strictly until enough movement vocabulary is acquired to allow you to understand what is appropriate and allowed, and what is not appropriate.

I am not comfortable with creating an original folkloric choreography until I have learned at least two authentic choreographies for the cultural group or geographic region. It takes unmitigated gall (or colossal ignorance) to think you can perfect a completely new dance technique in one short class.

There are five overlapping phases that I go through when learning a new technique or dance. These are: *sequencing*, *technique*, *nuance*, *liberation*, and *autopilot*. The key to all of these is repetition (accompanied by liberal quantities of mumbling, sweating, cursing, and brow-beating).

For classes in oriental dance, I consider a seminar outstanding if I progress through phase four, good if I progress through phase three, and average if I only progress through phase two. For folkloric dance, anything below phase three is worthless without previous background in the particular dance style taught.

Sequencing is getting the order, number of repetitions, and spatial pattern of the steps correct. If you're spending all of your time worrying about what comes next (or looking over your shoulder), you can't concentrate on the current step, which prevents you from mastering the technique.

The *technique* phase consists of becoming comfortable with the basic building blocks of each individual step; the layering of the footwork, isolations (hip, chest, and/or head), and arm placement. My friend Brihana calls this *muscle memory*. All the notes in the world won't help if I don't get the mechanics down first.

The best instructors have a planned choreography, which they have broken into sets of three or four combinations of steps. The building blocks of each individual step are introduced, then combined. Each combination is added to the previous sequences and is repeated at least three or four times. Quality is not sacrificed for quantity. The truly

outstanding instructors provide class notes, which keeps the students on the dance floor where they belong, instead of off in the corner scribbling madly.

This planned, repetitive approach allows me to progress successfully through the sequencing and technique phases. As the day wears on, I become familiar enough with the early portions of the dance to start adding *nuance* - all of the little finishing touches, such as precise hand and head placement and facial expression. I start picking up on the little quirks and accents in the music; it begins to speak to me. Until you know your music, you are doing a choreography. Once you know and can respond to your music, you are dancing.

In the *liberation* phase, the complete dance is in short-term memory. I've got the choreography and the music down cold. I am no longer an earthbound student, I have become a true dancer. This transition often has to be accomplished at home during the process of working on the fifth phase, *autopilot*, which moves the dance from short-term to long-term memory. Cryptic class notes are rewritten to include all possible detail, and I video everything I remember (front and back views).

I have said in a previous article that I like a seminar that wears me out. I must qualify that statement. If I am exhausted because I have spent the day playing catchup or follow-the-leader with the instructor, who is frantically trying to pack five hours of class into a two-hour format, I come home with nothing but a feeling of inadequacy and frustration. If, however, I am exhausted because I have been challenged, and been allowed to meet the challenge, I am ecstatic.

I have had my best luck in progressing through my phases of learning with Cassandra (MI), Dahlal (MO), Habiba (PA), Ibrahim Farrah (NY), Jajouka (NY), Phaedra (NY), Riskallah Riyad (TN), and Suhaila Salimpour (CA). Cassandra, Dahlal, Habiba, and Suhaila have provided notes for some or all of their dances in past years.

Next issue, I will review the seminars that I have attended over the past twenty-four months, and assess how well each met my criteria for an ideal seminar.

THREE YEARS IN REVIEW

In the previous issue, I discussed what I considered to be the **Ideal Seminar**. In this installment, I will look back over the sixteen seminars that I have attended in the last thirty-six months. Using a highly subjective scale of one (*never broke a sweat*) to five (*total butt burner*) stars, I will discuss the classes I considered deserving of four stars and higher. And since I made up the scale, I reserve the right to cheat. I'll also give four stars to seminars which may not have been physically or technically strenuous, but were just plain fun, and expanded my artistic horizons (new ways of doing the same old thing).

- Habiba (PA)

Private lessons, May 1991. Tunisian dance. Five stars.

Anyone who is interested in Tunisian folkloric dance, and who has the opportunity to travel to Philadelphia and study with Habiba, go for it! I took the train to Philly, and between a Friday evening and a Sunday morning, we sandwiched in eight grueling and rewarding hours of private lessons. (We also discovered that eight is more than enough; do not try this at home!)

Habiba is the tops at breaking down the intricate Tunisian steps and making sure that you are getting the technique. There is a marvelous bed & breakfast just down the block, and smashingly good restaurants, delis, and bakeries at every turn. We didn't have time to visit the fabric stores. I'm saving that for when I go back to learn Andalusian.

- Habiba (PA)

Sponsored by Chandra (MD), June 1991. Sessions in Mahmoud Reda oriental, Tunisian, and Andalusian. Four stars.

The weekend seminars sponsored by Chandra consist of three separate two-hour class sessions, each presenting new material. This format requires the instructor to choose between teaching all of a choreography quickly, allowing little time for repetition and detail, or teaching half of a choreography completely.

Habiba has chosen the second approach, which I also prefer. She does an excellent job of fitting the material to the time available without rushing, insuring that all students receive a solid grounding in the techniques presented. She also does an excellent job of building on material presented at previous seminar sessions, which allows you to complete the choreographies over time. I am looking forward to continuing my studies in the Andalusian style.

As another bonus, Habiba provides class notes and costuming hints and supplies, and always has music available.

- Suhaila Salimpour (CA)

Sponsored by Kaharaman (NC), September 1991. Two all-day sessions in technique and oriental combinations. Five stars.

Suhaila is one of the most engaging, caring, and technically demanding instructors in the country. My previous two seminars with her (1987 & 1989) have been master-level seminars, consisting of a short review of basic technique, followed by the presentation of a complete choreography. At this seminar, Suhaila appeared to have changed her seminar format (perhaps in response to the needs of the majority of the American middle eastern dance community). She devoted a significant portion of her seminars to basic technique, emphasizing correct posture and the body mechanics of precise hip isolations, and teaches short combinations of steps instead of full choreographies. It is a sad fact that in many cases, Suhaila's classes are a student's first introduction to basic isolation technique.

I rated this seminar absolutely topnotch. I came home with a dynamite opening sequence for a problem choreography of mine, and Suhaila's wild and wicked warmup was a knockout (I almost couldn't get the clutch engaged to get off of the Interstate on the way home). Even so, I had a lingering feeling of disappointment. Far too many of the attending dancers lacked the stamina to complete the warmup session, let alone the remainder of the class.

- Dalia (NY)

Sponsored by Veda Sereem (MD), April 1992. Gypsy and oriental drum solo. Four stars.

Dalia is an enthusiastic, unpretentious, and upbeat instructor. I would have rated the seminar higher if it hadn't been so overcrowded. Dalia made a valiant effort, but there was simply no way on earth to see clearly or dance freely in the mob.

Dalia has responded to students' requests, and is now presenting a formal gypsy choreography (the juxtaposition of *formal* with *gypsy* is probably an oxymoron). Although I was very happy at having a choreography that I could touch and feel and examine, I missed the joyous spontaneity of the seminar I attended two years ago. I am very glad to have participated in both types of classes.

Dalia concentrates on the Turkish gypsy style, but whets your appetite for more with small snippets of the Kathak (India) and Spanish gypsy styles. I earnestly hope that in some future seminar, she will devote more time to each of these exclusively.

The seminar emphasized gypsy, which was fine with me because that was the reason I attended. Dalia also taught a snappy and mischievous drum solo.

- Zeina (TN)

Sponsored by Chandra (MD), June 1992. Three folkloric sessions (Hagallah, Khaleegee, and Benet Qibli). Five stars.

I had made the long trek to Hagerstown in April, and was hesitant to make the trip again so soon. I don't have cruise control, and I would have to travel alone this time. But I'm a soft touch for anything folkloric, and the description of the Benet Qibli sounded too fascinating to pass up. I wasn't about to drive a total of nine hours for one two-hour dance class, however. So although I had already attended two separate seminars in Khaleegee (Gulf states) dance, I decided to take the Khaleegee as well as the Benet Qibli session. I haven't made a better decision in ages.

Zeina is a wonderfully funny and personable instructor, and provides her students with invaluable insights into the cultural aspects of each dance. She is a veritable treasure trove of folkloric dances of the Middle East. Although the two-hour format did not give her quite enough time to maintain a consistent teaching level, I was impressed with her ability to break down each step from both a mechanical and emotional viewpoint.

If I had not had previous background in the Khaleegee style, I don't think I would have felt comfortable enough with the technique to perform the dance after one class. Having been lucky enough to have previous training, I found Zeina's interpretations fun, creative, and inspiring.

The Benet Qibli technique was completely new to me, and I was doing my best imitation of super-dunce. One more hour would have been invaluable. However, I came home with the basic building blocks and an approximate sequence. After a little work, I may resort to long-distance video critiques before I feel comfortable in performing the dance.

Overall, I had a marvelous weekend. In addition to the classes, Zeina also treated us to a premiere showing of the newest in her Mahmoud Reda video series, *The Reda Troupe: Back at the Balloon Theatre*. The Saidi stick dance alone is worth the price of the video just for creative inspiration, and the tape also includes a priceless Arabian horse dance (the men of the company, dressed in black spandex unitards, are the horses). The trip home flew by, my head bubbling over with ideas and possibilities.

- Conchi (OH)

Sponsored by Chandra (MD), April 1993. Four stars.

Since my area is awash with Greek restaurants, I thought it would be appropriate to study with a Greek-style dancer for a change of pace. Another good decision on my part! Conchi is an energetic and down-to earth instructor, and classes were focused and well-paced. We learned a variety of unusual combinations for the never-ending karshlimar played by every Greek band the world over. We also learned a lively choreography to the song *Prosefhi*, which challenged us to create a variety of floor patterns in our limited dance space.

Conchi also provided some thought-provoking insights on the issue of dance safety. She has had to get an injunction prohibiting one overattentive fan from continuing to follow her at work and home.

- Vashti (TX)

Sponsored by Aegela & Soroya (GA), May 1993. Four and one-half stars.

I had been looking forward to studying with Vashti ever since I first saw her perform in 1989. I wouldn't spend twenty hours on the road in one weekend for just anybody! And I wasn't disappointed. Vashti had fun during the morning session tying us in knots with a series of layered combinations emphasizing elegant placement and movement of the arms. If I could do an arm ripple half as graceful, I'd be satisfied.

The afternoon session introduced, among other things, what I call the "rotating grapevine from hell" step, complete with Pharonic arms. Fortunately, the class was being videotaped, so I could concentrate on the footwork and get the arms later. I could have used another half an hour of class to really set the choreography.

- Habiba (PA)

Sponsored by Chandra (MD), March 1994. Four and one-half stars.

You just can't miss with Habiba. At least I can't. She taught a marvelous Nubian choreography - simple steps, but hellacious floor patterns. And I could have kissed her (maybe I did) when I found out that the proper attire was Egyptian fellahin dresses. Another use for my five troupe fellahins!

I wasn't quite as lucky with the Tunisian/Andalusian segment (which is why this wasn't a five-star class). There wasn't enough time to complete the full choreography, and I never quite mastered the timing on one of the opening combinations, but I have been stashing away cash for another trip up to Philadelphia for fine tuning. (Maybe in November, where my calendar is still empty.) It will give me a chance to tune up my classical Tunisian, too.

- Aegela & Alima (GA)

Sponsored by Kaharaman (NC), March 1994. Four stars.

Whichever way you look at it, Aegela and Alima are just plain fun, as teachers and performers. My good friend Nancy, who hasn't been able to attend a seminar in years, was absolutely captivated by Aegela's Alexandrian dance. Alima's ghawazee hints have inspired me to re-think (and juice up) portions of our troupe ghawazee, and I'm still extracting combinations taught by both instructors for my newest solo.

- Litani & Miraj (PA)

Sponsored by Litani & Miraj (PA), May 1994. Four stars.

This seminar was a first-time effort by the sponsors, and they managed it well. The entire weekend was thoroughly enjoyable. Their approaches to the dance (jazz oriental for Miraj, and latin oriental for Litani) were thought-provoking, and I'm trying to adapt some of their perspectives and techniques for my newest choreography. York is a charming town, the Chateau Motel is small-town wonderful, the facility was above-average, the vendors were fabulous (dance shopper's heaven), and I'm looking forward to going back again.

- Conclusion

Whew. I may have to start sponsoring seminars again just to stay off of the road. But not yet! Carmen is in Bethesda, MD, in June. I'm working on troupe lessons with Laurel Gray in July, and in August, I'm between a rock and a hard place deciding between Dahlena (Richmond, VA) and Zeina (Columbus, OH). September brings Bert Balladine back to Greensboro, and I have to attend a Bert seminar at least once in my career. October will find me in Nags Head, NC, teaching and learning at Beach Blanket Beledi. Perhaps I'll get a chance to rest in November and December. But somehow, I doubt it.