

To the Beat of a Different Drummer

by Kirsten Clark

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Minutes before the Different Drummer Belly Dancers were scheduled to perform at the 2005 Allerton Belly Dance Festival at a small town in Illinois, one thought ran through the mind of Margaret Lion, the troupe's founder and director: "Oh my God, what if everyone's going to be offended?"

The troupe had decided to perform their signature number, a belly dance version of Sir-Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back", whose chorus ("I like big butts and I cannot lie") is an anthem for lovers of well-rounded rumps everywhere. There was usually no cause for worry since their usual audience consisted of Bloomington, Indiana residents—namely college kids—but in the middle of rural Allerton, Illinois (population: 350), Margaret and her troupe were concerned that the song choice may not have been wholesome enough for the small-town atmosphere.

Lion and her troupe, made up of herself and three of her dancing buddies, took the stage, dressed in the traditional layered outfit that complemented the troupe's American Tribal style of belly dance—cropped shirts underneath bras sewn with coins and tassels, jingling hip wraps over top of floor-length skirts (as Margaret described it, "Take everything in your closet, stick it on yourself, and then go.") She grabbed the microphone. "How many of you think your butt is too big?" she asked. All the women in the audience raised a hand.

"How many of you love belly dancing? Because it doesn't matter how big, or small, or what shape you are, or color, size, or age. You all look good belly dancing! Well, this is our ode to the backside."

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It's difficult to make generalizations about belly dance. The term "belly dance" encompasses many styles of traditional dance estimated to have come onto the scene about 6,000 years ago, used for a variety of reasons in many different parts of the world—entertainment (mostly by-women, for women), celebration, and worship. Fast forward to America in the wake of the feminist movement of the 1970s: women began encouraging each other to reclaim their bodies, and belly dance, with precise isolation and disciplined movement of muscles in the stomach, hips and arms did just that. Thus, a revival of belly dance occurred in the U.S., and women have been jumping aboard the belly dance bandwagon ever since.

Today, it is not uncommon to see at least one belly dance troupe or studio in every major city in the U.S.. Bloomington just happens to play host to at least five troupes and many solo dancers. Different Drummer Dancers, composed of three local women, has taken

belly dancing and, with innovative music and choreography choices, made a foreign dance form more accessible to a to a Midwestern audience.

In 2003, Lion organized a group composed of herself and three friends out of her initial desire to combine her love of belly dance with her love of rock and roll. A performance opportunity arose in the fall of that year, and Margaret ran with it. “I have a lot of performance needs,” Margaret said with a laugh. “I thought, ‘I really want to perform at this venue, and I want to do something fun, but I don’t really want to perform by myself. I want a troupe there with me.’”

With a mother on faculty at Indiana University, Lion grew up in Bloomington. Her belly dance background, much like the rest of her childhood, is grounded in her small college town roots. “I think I’ve always wanted to belly dance, and when I was twelve some friends of mine took a class, and they showed me some moves.” Lion recalls. “It came pretty naturally to me, so then years later—many years later—I actually took a class.” She started taking formal lessons in 1989 with Donna Carlton, who teaches Middle Eastern dance at Indiana University. Now a faculty member in the Indiana University kinesiology department, Lion has been shaking and shimmying ever since.

Though originally organized as a one-time gig, the troupe continued to dance together, rehearsing every Sunday. Even though the members have changed since that first performance (and many times since), the idea behind the troupe is the same now as it was eight years ago—expression through the art of belly dance. “If there’s a style we like, we do it. If there’s a move we like, we do it... my troupe is not limited,” said Margaret.

One of the challenges of having a belly dance troupe in a college town is the constant flow of people in and out of a closely-knit group of performers. Lion, however, is optimistic about the frequent turnover, saying that change is what fuels the overall flow of creativity. After multiple turnovers, the troupe is composed of Lion and two of her friends.

The newest member is Irina Shishova, a Moscow native who is rounding out the first year of her MBA program with the Kelley School of Business. She stumbled upon Lion’s troupe after a drawing class in 2005 and has been dancing ever since.

Jeana Jorgensen is a doctoral candidate at Indiana University, pursuing both folklore and gender studies. Having grown up in Southern California, she began belly dancing in high school and joined Different Drummer upon moving to Bloomington six years ago. “I was always a tomboy growing up... I was stick thin, and then when I went through puberty, I got hips, and I hated it. I hated my body and there was no way for me to feel good about who I was,” Jorgensen said. “And then I took a belly dance class on a whim when I was sixteen. It made me feel good to have hips because you used hips a lot in belly dance.”

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Although often referred to as an ancient dance, belly dance as we know it—the sensuous and exotic art form performed by scantily clad women in smoky hookah bars—is really quite American, a Hollywood hybrid of many different types of Middle Eastern dance. The belly dance recognized by the average person actually evolved from regionalized and traditional dances from much of the eastern world.

The origins of belly dance cover a lot of ground: India, through the Middle East, and into northern Africa and parts of southern Europe, each with their own distinct styles of dance. Most styles incorporated undulating belly rolls and sharp hip shimmies that survived the tests of time.

As art tends to do, belly dance evolved—drastically—into the form practiced today in America. The 1893 Chicago World Fair saw the beginnings of an exaggerated derivative of Oriental and Middle Eastern dance, perfect for drawing crowds who were looking for something truly exotic and overtly seductive to gawk at.

And this marked the beginning of a stigma that has never really parted ways with belly dance: *It's meant to seduce men. It's too sexy.* Belly dancers are aware of the stereotypes, and the members of Different Drummer are no exception. Jorgensen, who completed her undergraduate studies in California prior to moving to Indiana to pursue her Masters in folklore and gender studies, has decided to deal with these misconceptions constructively.

“I had this problem when I was coming out to Indiana: my professor back at Berkley, who had done his graduate work at Indiana, he was like, ‘Well, don’t tell them you belly dance. That’s a little too risqué,’” Jorgensen said. “But I’m ‘out’ as a belly dancer... I try to be very open about it because hopefully teach someone something new either about Middle Eastern culture or the way the dance is practiced here.”

And the same goes for the troupe as a whole. Different Drummer’s performances are colorful and lively, but also relatable to the Midwesterner who is more than likely somewhat unfamiliar with belly dance: the culture, its intentions, or the music. For these women, belly dance is about being inclusive—as Jorgensen describes it, “It’s something that is family-friendly and that anyone can enjoy and anyone can learn.”

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Different Drummer, as the name suggests, has never been a troupe to abide by conventional Middle Eastern music, which focuses much more on rhythmic complexity than Western music. Heck, they’ve never been a troupe to abide by convention. Period.

“We don’t dance to a lot of straight-up Middle Eastern music. Middle Eastern music is beautiful. I think it’s some of the most beautiful music in the world,” Jorgensen explains. “But one of the things we do in the troupe is try to connect with our audience, and a lot of Americans just don’t know how to relate to Middle Eastern music.”

This is how it has been since the very beginning, since their debut October 13, 2003 at Stimuli, an annual event hosted by Jake's nightclub in downtown Bloomington that later became known as "Eroticon". "It went over really well because we danced to modern rock and roll," Margaret remembers. "'Sympathy for the Devil' opened up, and then we did Aerosmith's 'Sweet Emotion', and every one just could not believe it. Everyone was singing along in the crowd."

And since then, they have danced to the likes of Marilyn Manson, Insane Clown Posse, and even the Star Wars theme song at their annual appearance at the Gencon Gamers' Convention in Indianapolis. These songs allow them to relate to the audience right from the get-go. The audience can immediately identify with a culture with which they are not usually a part of, and from that moment, they are captivated.

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There is a strange but comfortable juxtaposition in the rehearsal space as Different Drummer warms up prior to its last practice before the annual Bloomington Belly Dances. There is hardly any extraneous conversation—for now, at least—as Jorgensen and Shishova quietly incorporate yoga into their pre-rehearsal routine.

The venue itself, Lion's living room, on the other hand, is neither quiet nor focused. The walls, painted bright blue, provide the background for a Celtic tapestry. The multi-color twinkle lights bordering the high ceilings lead the eye to random knickknacks strategically (or not) placed throughout the room. A stuffed porcupine-looking animal sits atop a shelf. A toy sword dangles from the mantle. A cartooned "happy birthday" banner is slung above the couch. But perhaps most telling: a colorful stained-glass lion that guards the window overlooking a wooded backyard. How appropriate. Just like its owner, the room is not without ample personality.

The members of Different Drummer wrap up their stretches as Lion calls for a group hug. Encouraging words are exchanged, and everyone takes their place to begin the routine.

Jorgensen hits the "play" button on the iPod, and the penetrating remixed rhythm of Banco de Gaia's "I Love Baby Cheesy" fills the room.

The three women meet center stage, arms waving in the air fluidly, as if through molasses. The emphasis is on the hands as they bend backwards, forming a lily with their bodies. The tempo changes, faster, prompting sharper movements: deliberate hip shimmies while maintaining the grace in their arms. Layered practice skirts and shawls tied around the waist accentuate every swing and shake of the hips—the choreography must be clean, and it must be together.

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Every seat in the John Waldron Arts Center represents a different face—the old, the young, the seasoned belly dancer, the belly dance novice, and (yes) some of Lion's students who attend the show at the offer of extra credit.

After performances by nearly 30 dancers, a mix of solo performers and troupes of varying styles and difficulty, Different Drummer takes the stage. It is the same exact routine—the same choreography and music—practiced endlessly at rehearsal the week prior, but combined with the elaborately layered costumes, aboriginal makeup and dim dramatic lighting, it has transformed into something much more mysterious and tribal.

There is much more emphasis in the arms and hands than one might expect from a “belly” dance. With every movement of the hips, whether staccato or slow and controlled, the arms maintained a consistent softness and grace, as if it were the hands, not the hips or belly, that were telling a story through the choreography.

After the final bows, Lion calls the audience up to the stage.

“It doesn’t matter how big, or small, or what shape you are, or color, size, or age. You all look good belly dancing!” Lion had said nearly six years ago to the people of Allerton, Illinois. Turns out she was right.

The Bangles begin blaring over the speaker as audience members trickle down the aisle onto the stage, dancing among the performers. Two young girls receive an impromptu lesson on the hip shimmy from Lion herself. An elderly, bearded man in a baseball cap dances towards the back. Jorgensen and Shishova improvise choreography around a red-headed girl in her twenties. The room is full of energy as the Bangles instruct everyone to “walk like an Egyptian.”

And, indeed, they all look good belly dancing.

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