

Belly up to the latest dance craze Down Under

By MEGAN LEE

First there was ballroom, then came tango, then swing and now it is "belly."

The ancient art of belly dancing is the latest dance craze, both locally and beyond. Besides the intrinsic sensuality of motion, it is touted as an effective exercise regimen. Classes are offered everywhere from the downtown YWCA to your neighborhood Pilates studio.

Professional belly dancers perform in clubs and restaurants all over Seattle nearly every night. For enthusiasts there is no better place than the Market's Pharaoh's Treasures, Down Under on the lowest level, to get started, learn more and find everything for that perfect outfit, or *bedla*.

"We are one of five or 10 specialty shops in the country, offering unique handmade belly outfits and accessories," said co-owner Hesham Elhouchy. "People like Egyptian history and culture, and the ancient art of the Egyptian belly dance. It is amazing."

Elhouchy and his brother Essam opened Pharaoh's Treasures on the third floor of the Market's Down Under in 1990, but the shop hasn't always been as bustling and diverse as it is now. Initially, it was predominantly an Egyptian import shop, proffering trinkets, incense, scarves, statues, papyrus and jewelry.

"I had no idea what Americans would like," explains Elhouchy. "When we first started this [import business] everyone thought we were crazy. I am an accountant and my brother is an architect."

At first it was trial and error. For the first three years the two brothers and a friend were working various jobs to pay the bills and import merchandise. They delivered pizzas, drove taxis and discovered what fickle Seattle shoppers wanted. They cultivated suppliers and eventually started their own factory back in Egypt.

Then, about 10 years ago Elhouchy began specializing in belly dance merchandise. Now they have everything for aspiring dancers; the entire *bedla*: skirts, belts, bras, bangles, flowing scarves, and *zells* (brass finger cymbals). And they have everything to complete the mood: jewelry, aromatic oils, instructional videos, a wide range of music, perfumes, sequined canes, etc. Walking into the shop feels like being in Egypt.



Hesham Elhouchy displays some belly dancing paraphernalia. Photo/Bradley Enghaus

Over the years Elhouchy has become a renowned specialist. He spends several months per year in Egypt, "renewing" the collections. He visits trade shows around the world finding innovative styles and fabrics. He attends competitions and is aware of who and what is hot.

Anything that jingles is always the most popular. People like the ethnic look: the colors, the sound, the fabrics and the feeling. Feeling is important for the dance. It is culmination of mood, fabric and feeling. Dancers need to feel sexy to properly become a captivating belly dancer.

"Now, women throw their bras at me," Elhouchy jokes, but he is serious. Women from all over come to him have their ensembles designed, specifically for them. There is a plethora of bras, skirts, and dresses available in the store, but Elhouchy says women come to him wanting *bedlas* designed specifically for them, especially women (or drag queens) who are smaller or bigger than average.

Elhouchy orchestrates a team of specialists in Egypt who do all of the designs, beading and adornment by hand. Dancers want tops that fit

just like their favorite bra, and Elhouchy can make them.

Pharaoh's Treasures has developed a collection of regular customers. Elhouchy keeps customers interested with his continuous new designs, fabrics and accessories. Every year he has at least two new designs. In addition to the array of belly dance attire, Pharaoh's Treasures has begun carrying one-of-a-kind beaded ballroom gowns and dresses for specialized dance competitions.

"A lot of people, from all over, come here to buy their outfits for belly dancing. They tell all their friends. Instructors and performers come here, we offer very good merchandise. I really

like working here," said Omar al Halaby, cousin and sales associate, his dark eyes sparkling like a mirage.

Elhouchy and his flirtatious, Mediterranean staff charmingly remind clients that the ancient art of belly dancing is not only a good workout, it also builds grace and confidence. They suggest outfits, appropriate instructional videos and Middle Eastern music. They talk about local and international dancers and recommend everything from earnings to musical instruments. They are all versed in the ancient art and are full of stories. Elhouchy recalls one little American girl who started taking lessons around the time Pharaoh's Treasures opened. She is 21 and now gets paid to belly dance.

The rest of the family is proud of what the brothers are doing, as importers of culture. Though belly dancing is seen differently in Egypt. Elhouchy explains how in America belly dancing is considered more of a hobby; it is usually doctors, lawyers, students and housewives who are learning the art of belly dancing. In Egypt it is different. Elhouchy says it takes girls who are "poor and pretty." It isn't respected quite the same in Egypt, although the richest woman in Egypt, Fifi Abdu, is a well-known belly dancer.

Abdu is also a movie star who admires and follows the styles of the legendary belly dancer Tahiya Carioca. She wants to make a movie about the legendary dancer, who was under recognized during her career.

The ancient art of the belly dance, sometimes referred to as Oriental dance, may be the oldest form of dance, according to the International Academy of Middle Eastern Dance. It has roots from India to the Middle East. They say it is a popular misconception that it was developed to entertain men, though that is what it became

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