

By Sara Hodon

tahya

Belly-dancing is typically seen as something exotic and seductive—bidden, even. The word itself conjures images of sultry, mysterious women with a certain something—that strong sense of who they are and their own feminine power. Belly-dancing isn't something that many women can picture themselves doing, but Lehigh Valley-based belly-dancing instructor Tahya is determined to change that.

Tahya (pronounced "ta-hey-ah," an Arabic name meaning "greetings" or "welcome" that she adopted) has been teaching and performing Middle Eastern dance for nearly 30 years. As a girl, she wanted to learn to dance, but her small community didn't offer much in the way of formal lessons. Her choices were ballet, or ballet. "I was not built to a ballerina's size," she says, "so, it was not until after completing my 'formal' education and graduating from college in New York City that I began my independent study of dance." The seductive, rhythmic Middle Eastern music first drew Tahya to belly-dancing. "A chord deep within resonated to the very core of my being. I felt deeply compelled to learn how to move to the intriguing melodies and hypnotic rhythms and it was as though the tales of Scheherazade materialized for me," she explains. A lifelong passion for Middle Eastern culture was immediately born. She realized that her body was much better suited for the open, expressive style of belly-dancing rather than the structured, precise world of ballet. "I did not come into this world in a small size, rather

I am a full-figured statuesque woman and when I learned Middle Eastern dance traditions embraced women of all ages, shapes and sizes, I was delighted! Yes, this inclusiveness was most appealing to me!" she says. Tahya was determined to learn the dance and absorb all she could about the Middle Eastern culture. She was persistent and kept talking to people until she found someone who agreed to teach her.

"Belly-dancing is the cabaret style of a cultural

art form," Tahya explains. The dance is a combination of movements inspired by Middle Eastern culture. The styles vary from country to country, but there is a common thread—a deep-rooted bond of celebrating womanhood and femininity. Tahya uses a combination of styles in her choreography.

Tahya's passion for the dance is clear in everything she does—from her classes and workshops to dance DVDs. For her, belly-dancing is really a way of life. Her enthusiasm and knowledge touch her students, who range in age from young girls to senior citizens, many of whom have thanked her for bringing a new sense of joy and empowerment to their lives. "I get so many students who come up to me and say, 'Thank you for reminding me that I am a woman,'" she says. "Belly-dancing is really a celebration of our uniqueness. It will go away and come back every few years, but it's that underlying tradition and culture that keeps people coming back."

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Tahya says that belly-dancing is not usually recognized as an art form because there is no standard vocabulary. In other words, every teacher interprets the movements a bit differently. There are few "traditional" steps or poses as in other styles like tap or ballet, so it's not generally offered in dance schools. She explains that she is a teacher who has tried to standardize the vocabulary and create universally recognized movements within the dance. "I have a methodology for teaching and I'm trying to pass down my technique to those who are interested," she says. Part of the reason why belly-dancing has not been standardized is because the movements are seen as part of a culture, and like other great storytellers, most teachers pass down their tradition orally and visually.

Tahya strives to create a fun, supportive environment for those new to her classes, and starts slow to help the beginners build up their confidence. "We'll start in a seated position and I'll start doing mudra (hand gestures that begin to put fluidity, movement, and grace into our hands), so I want to entice people to try something they may not have done otherwise. It's non-intimidating." Tahya also offers drumming workshops. She learned to use finger cymbals during her early dance training, and now incorporates different African drums into various workshops. Belly-dancing is a great way to tone the body's core muscles, but beyond the physical aspects, Tahya says it creates even better results for a woman's emotional and spiritual self. She especially loves doing presentations with area Girl Scout troops and will often ask the girls to bring their mothers. "I'm so excited to go in and work with young girls and teach them that they can hold their heads up, stand tall, and be proud in the bodies they were given."

The Lehigh Valley is full of unique individuals and cultural groups with remarkable talents to share and interesting stories to tell. Meet them here and let them make our Valley colorful.