

THE WOMEN'S CIRCLE

Story by Donna Olmstead

In step with yourself

'Fall back in love' with your body through belly dancing



COURTESY LEYLA NAJMA

Belly dancer Leyla Najma says she has seen again and again that women come alive when they learn the dance. "It makes your outside match with your inside," she says.

Belly dancing brings women alive again, says Leyla Najma, a Middle Eastern dancer, choreographer, performer and teacher. "It makes your outside match with your inside," says Najma, who has been dancing and performing for more than 25 years. "In our society, we get so disconnected from our bodies that we don't know who we are. Belly dancing says you are who you are. It makes you fall back in love with yourself."

The illusions that the unnaturally thin body is the ideal all fall away when women learn the ancient movements, says Najma from her West Side studio.

Dancing transports women beyond those illusions because it allows emotion, spirit, body and mind to become present and meld together.

Fat or thin, young or old, women who belly dance

come to appreciate the bodies they have because it allows them to express their innermost truth, Najma says.

"In belly dance, you're telling a sacred story with your body — with body language. You can't do that

and hold part of yourself back. You have to let these restraints go and be honest and passionate about your dance," she says. "It's that freeing."

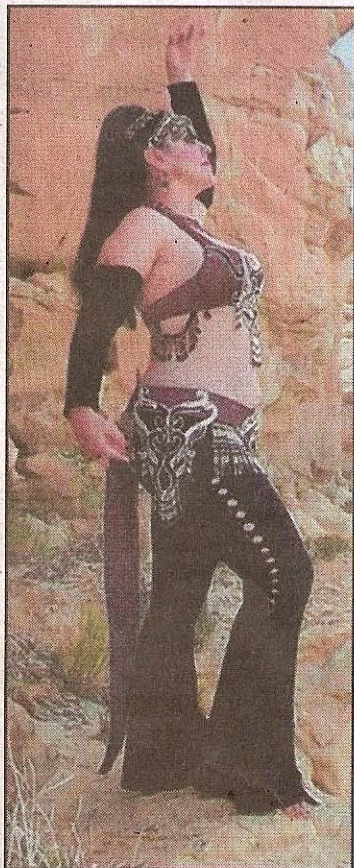
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COURTESY LEYLA NAJMA

Leyla Najma describes belly dancing as telling a sacred story with your body.

'Fall back in love with yourself' through belly dancing

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'Feel alive again'

Najma first observed the life-enhancing changes in herself but has come to see them even more clearly in her students.

Eileen Padilla, 28, says that after having two children, her world was a little upside down.

Learning belly dance helped her "feel alive again," she says in a phone interview. "I felt like I had my body back. Belly dancing helps me be the best I can be."

Padilla says she had never studied any style of dance but knew that belly dance was what she wanted when she watched a video. She has been studying belly dance with Najma for about six or seven years.

It didn't matter how difficult it was to learn, Padilla says she was determined to get it. Najma was instrumental in that. "In her class, she makes sure I

get it."

Not only has she increased her self-confidence, Padilla says she has also strengthened her back and reduced the chronic pain she had after several traffic accidents. "I'm fortunate to have Leyla in my life."

Julie Grace, another of Najma's students, will debut early next year as part of a duet, *Las Reinas Dramaticas*, or the *Drama Queens*.

After she saw Najma dance, Grace says she knew she wanted to learn what Najma had to teach.

"She stood out among all the other performers. I didn't know what kind of teacher she would be; I just liked what she did. So I tracked her down and found her," Grace says.

Unlike Padilla, Grace, also 28, has studied belly dance with other teachers and other styles of dance.

"She's unlike any of the other teachers I've studied with. She's always encouraging. ... She's really

true to the art form. You can feel that she's in love with the art."

Celebration of women

The dance has survived through the centuries because it was passed down from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter, Najma says.

"That's what kept it alive through the ages. It's about women supporting women — standing strong together," she says.

The dance remains true to its origins, perhaps as far back in time as Egyptians who danced to honor and celebrate Isis, the goddess of motherhood and fertility.

Gypsies spread the dance form throughout the world as they traveled, and various cultures adopted and changed it, she says.

That belly dancing is an oral tradition is good for people inclined to intellectualize it, Najma says. "The only way to know the dance is to experience it."

Belly-dancing classes

Although belly dancing takes years of training, Leyla Najma says women begin enjoying themselves after they reach an intermediate beginning level. She teaches individuals or small groups in her Albuquerque studio at a rate of \$180 for six weeks. Classes meet once a week for about 90 minutes, two hours or longer if necessary.

Najma offers online classes at her Web site, Leyla-Najma.com, which also offers a sampling of DVDs and video clips. Najma has students from as far away as Australia and Taiwan. Online students e-mail her video clips or use YouTube.com. Live online streaming classes also are available.