



Laura Selenzi and the Art of Belly Dance

Serpentine Moves

by Amanda Leslie

The far right wall of Café Istanbul in downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia, is adorned with colourful veils hanging from ceiling to floor, a shimmering display of orange, purple and gold. When the front door opens, a gust of cold night air stirs the delicate fabric. It's a small space, crowded with tables and eager guests, and there's a sense of anticipation tonight. They're waiting for the belly dancer.

At half past seven the lights dim for the show. A hush falls and the music starts. In time with the lively percussion, a woman dances gracefully into the room. She shimmies her hips, twirling amongst the crowd. Her arms and hands act as an extension of her body, elegantly conveying the feeling of the song. The woman's red skirt has ornate gold jewelry draped across the hips. A red bra crisscrosses her back, her long dark hair hangs loose to the

shoulders. Every time she moves, the jewelry on her skirt chimes. She manoeuvres around the restaurant with ease, holding a green veil and allowing the material to billow out from her hands. She pulls several patrons up to dance and the customers break into a rhythmic clap. Her performance ends with a final bow and she disappears through the back door as mysteriously as she arrived.

Laura Selenzi doesn't usually tell strangers she's a belly dancer. She doesn't even like the word. Selenzi sometimes describes her work as Middle Eastern dance, but the term belly dance is more familiar to the public and she uses it for convenience, though it doesn't fully describe all the different components of the dance. Belly dancing is an art form requiring control of not just the hips and belly, but the entire body.

Selenzi fell in love with belly dancing when she was a teenager living in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. Her mother took her to see a play in nearby Chester, and Selenzi couldn't take her eyes away from the dancer performing onstage.

"It was amazing," she says. "I talked to one of the girls after the show and decided to start. It just felt natural to me. I took ballet as a kid, but it felt too restrictive."

After studying photography at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Selenzi decided to pursue her dance interest full time. She travelled to Toronto to study under Yasmina Ramzy, who she credits with taking her from a recreational belly dancer to a professional.

With a desire to learn more about the cultures that gave rise to belly dance, Selenzi spent several months in late 2003 and early 2004 travelling around India and Turkey. Many of the people she encountered considered belly dance an important part of their history, even though it wasn't something they were comfortable seeing their daughters perform.

When she returned to Halifax, she reconnected with Monique Ryan, a dancer Selenzi had met years before. Taught by competing instructors, the two women once nicknamed themselves the Romeo and Juliet of belly dance.

As women file into the studio for the start of the class, they gravitate toward the lounge in the corner. Bundled up in scarves and coats, they don't look like belly dancers. But as they shed their outer layers of clothes, the atmosphere in the room begins to change.

Soon, the room is full of students rolling their hips in front of the mirror. This advanced class is learning the drum solo. The routine consists of sharp, isolated movements in time with a heavy percussion beat. Selenzi manages to keep the women laughing, even as she guides and critiques. It is a difficult balance between commanding respect and inspiring the class.

Selenzi attributes her teaching style to Sahra Saeeda. Originally from California, Saeeda spent six years working as a dancer in Egypt. The two women met at the International Belly Dance Conference in Toronto, when Selenzi signed up for two of her workshops.

"We respected her knowledge, but she still treated us like we were all scholars of dance."

borrowed heavily from other influences. "Some of the most well-known belly dancers of the golden age, from the mid-1920s to the 1950s, were fusing in elements such as Latin dance and ballet. People are afraid of losing the beauty of traditional belly dance," she says. "But like any art form it's just evolving."

As well, people today have mixed perceptions of belly dancers. Selenzi says some people focus on the seductive, rather than the cultural side. "There is a flirty and glamorous aspect to it, but that's not only what it's about." She's careful not to pay more attention to men during a show, especially those sitting with a woman. Selenzi doesn't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable. "[Men] don't always know how to act. Sometimes they think they have to ignore me entirely out of respect to their date."

Women can occasionally feel threatened by her performance as well. "Preconceptions can colour what they think is going on. They can't always see it through my eyes," she says. "[Seduction] is not my aim."

"A good crowd is giving you all this energy; you can feel it. And then you give it back to them. I almost burst into tears at the end of every show."

After 12 years of serious study, they were disappointed to see amateur performers representing the art form in inauthentic Halloween costumes and lingerie. Selenzi and Ryan decided to introduce Halifax to professional belly dancing and the idea for Serpentine Studios was born.

Serpentine Studios faces down onto Barrington Street. At night, purple lights shine up toward the windows, occasionally catching the eye of a passerby below. Tucked away in a corner of the studio is a small lounge where brightly coloured veils drape around a trio of lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Benches against the walls are lined with beaded pillows and a pot of tea waits on a table in the centre. The only wall not covered in veils displays a collection of vinyl records. The music is Arabic, with album covers showcasing elaborately costumed dancers.

In the early afternoon, sunlight streams into the windows of the studio, streaking across the wooden floor. Leaning against the pillows in the lounge, Selenzi recalls how the idea for a permanent studio came about. "We wanted to teach dance without running from place to place," she says. Serpentine Studios opened in September 2011.

In addition to Selenzi and Ryan, five other belly dancers teach classes ranging from Tribal Fusion to Aziza Veil choreography. The differences between Tribal Fusion and classic Egyptian belly dance are the most pronounced. The latter must look easy, soft and expressive. Tribal Fusion is meant to appear as an impressive show of skill, with muscular belly rolls and back bends.

Some proponents of traditional belly dance are wary of the growing popularity of fusion style dances. Selenzi understands these concerns, but says our modern version of belly dance already

Selenzi strives to show her audience how the music makes her feel. "It's a high," she says. "I like transporting people from the mundane reality of life to something more exotic. That's how I feel when I dance. The music carries me away."

When she choreographs, character is key, and she often plays a more glamorous version of herself. But the best part of a performance is always the reaction of the audience. "A good crowd is giving you all this energy; you can feel it. And then you give it back to them. I almost burst into tears at the end of every show."

For the second year in a row, the Lord Nelson Hotel has served as a venue for the Night of Inspiration, an event recognizing the contributions of individuals within the Turkish community in Halifax. Selenzi performed for free last year. Tonight she is getting paid, but only half her usual price. Three communities,

Turkish, Arabic and Persian, have come together under one roof, and this is a chance to introduce herself.

There are no chairs in the long hallway where Selenzi waits backstage, but a few empty equipment trunks serve as a table on which to lay her coat and belongings. She keeps busy with a few pre-show rituals. Selenzi moisturizes her hands, demonstrating how she uses her wrist and palm to create the illusion that her fingers stay elongated, which is a trademark of Egyptian belly dance. Next are the facial exercises: wide smiles and long frowns to help relax her muscles so she can keep smiling throughout the show.

Selenzi fidgets with her costume, a sparkly black ensemble with matching turban and purple veil. The rhinestone necklace pinned to her headpiece was a present from her grandmother, one of her biggest fans.

When Selenzi hears her cue from an announcer, she enters the main ballroom and dances beautifully underneath a ceiling of crystal chandeliers.

Afterward, she waits for her second performance of the night. To pass the time, Selenzi practises a few steps of her routine, moving gracefully down the length of the carpeted hall. In the restaurant across the street, a handful of customers sitting near the window take notice. Selenzi stops dancing when she sees she is being watched.

"I don't like to be the girl at the party who's always showing off," she says.

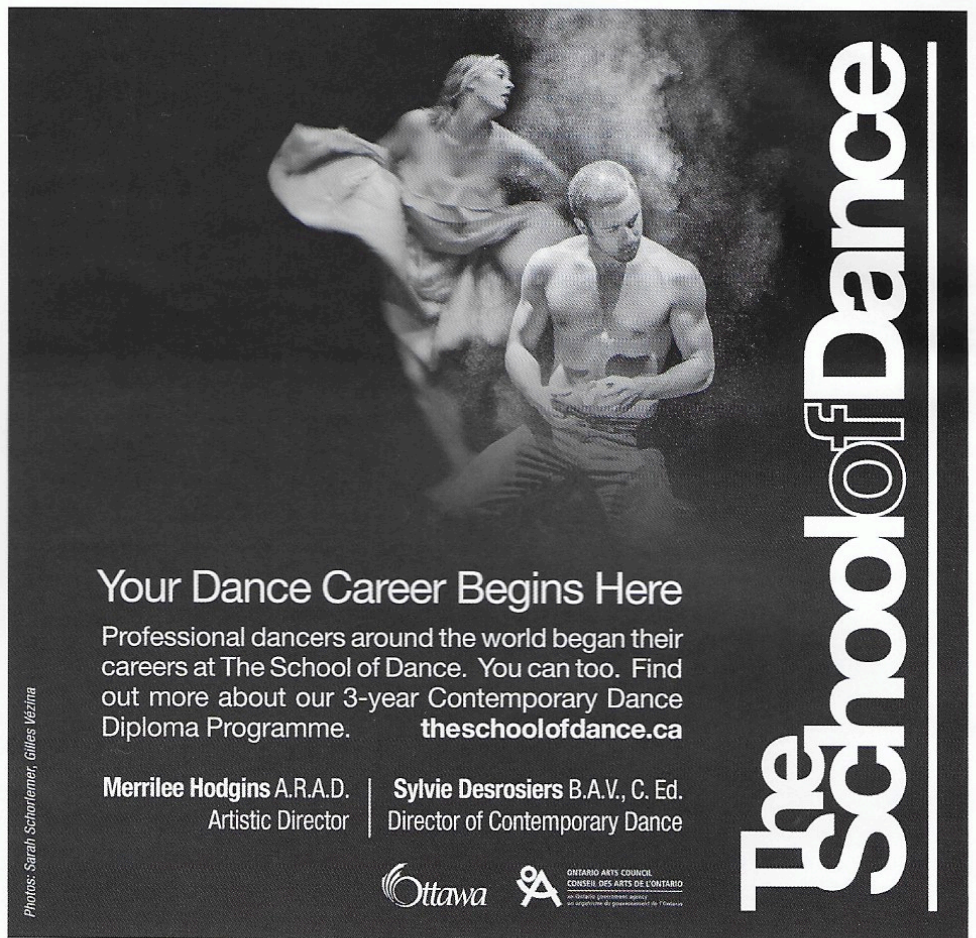
By 10 p.m. the cue for her second set is more than 20 minutes late. The band plays on and Selenzi continues to wait. Finally, the sound of the band stops drifting down the hall and she hurries back to wait for her cue.

She performs a drum solo to a percussion piece written by the Egyptian composer Hossam Ramzy. The music gets a few members of the audience on their feet.

Selenzi finishes her routine to applause and as she steps backstage, she can hear one of the announcers compliment her on the show. When the praise ends she sighs. They forgot to say her name.

At the World Tea House, Selenzi sits at a table with a cup of pumpkin herbal tea.

"When I was little my favourite game was dress up. I wanted to grow up to be a princess," she says. "I think I got pretty close." ▼



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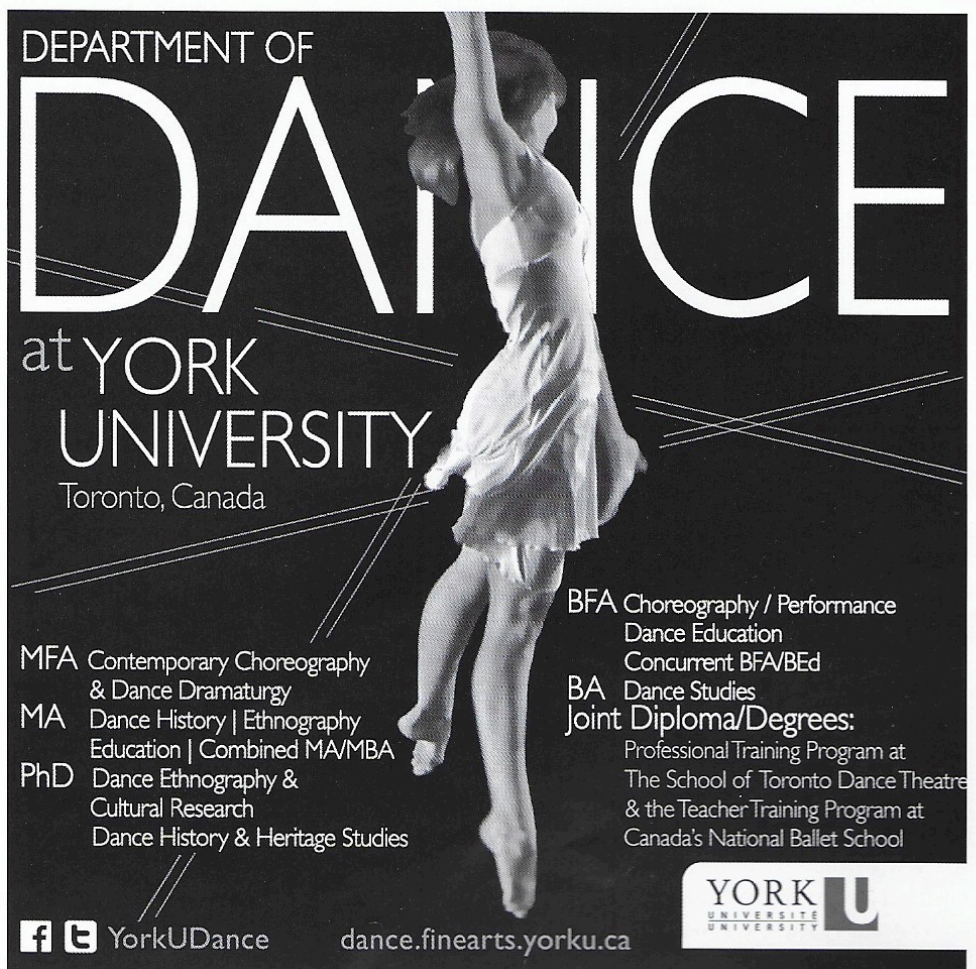
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