

GET HIP TO AN OLD DANCE

By D.W. Hirsch

It's okay to stare, even whisper; Maya and Nefertiti are not your average dancers. Peer into their world where music twists from a strong downbeat to a wheezy high-pitched warble as the dancers slide barefoot onto stage. Hips shake in controlled rhythm beneath a gauzy jeweled skirt as they slink across the stage. Light bounces off the shimmering sequined bra tops. The audience purrs with pleasure as arms snake forward and snare viewers into a dizzying trance with their undulating stomachs. What the uneducated eye might see as ladies of the night in the throes of a striptease is really the art of bellydance.

Bellydance has straddled stereotypes since its introduction at the 1893 Chicago World's Exposition. When Sol Bloom paraded the clothed but loose bellies before corseted Victorian sensibilities, it was scandalous—and a huge success. Despite a rich heritage from countries like Africa, China, Egypt, Turkey, Spain, and Morocco, the dance was foreign and sleazy. Today numerous opportunities abound for Americans to appreciate the dance's diversity and you don't have to look far.

The proper term is "Oriental Dance," and exotic training isn't required to perform its moves. This is a dance of muscles, not of the belly. Muscle isolation produces rib cage slides. Solid thighs and buttocks create the base for shimmies and hip drops. Strong abdomens contribute to undulations. Such signature movements date back to the dance's purest roots in childbirth rituals when women gathered around an expectant mother and encouraged her to imitate their muscle movements. Rather than perching in fear of anticipated birth pangs, the mother relaxed into her contractions and danced her baby into this world. The "pelvic rocking" and "deep breathing" techniques taught in natural childbirth Lamaze classes are known in the Oriental Dance community as "stomach undulations" and "belly flutter."

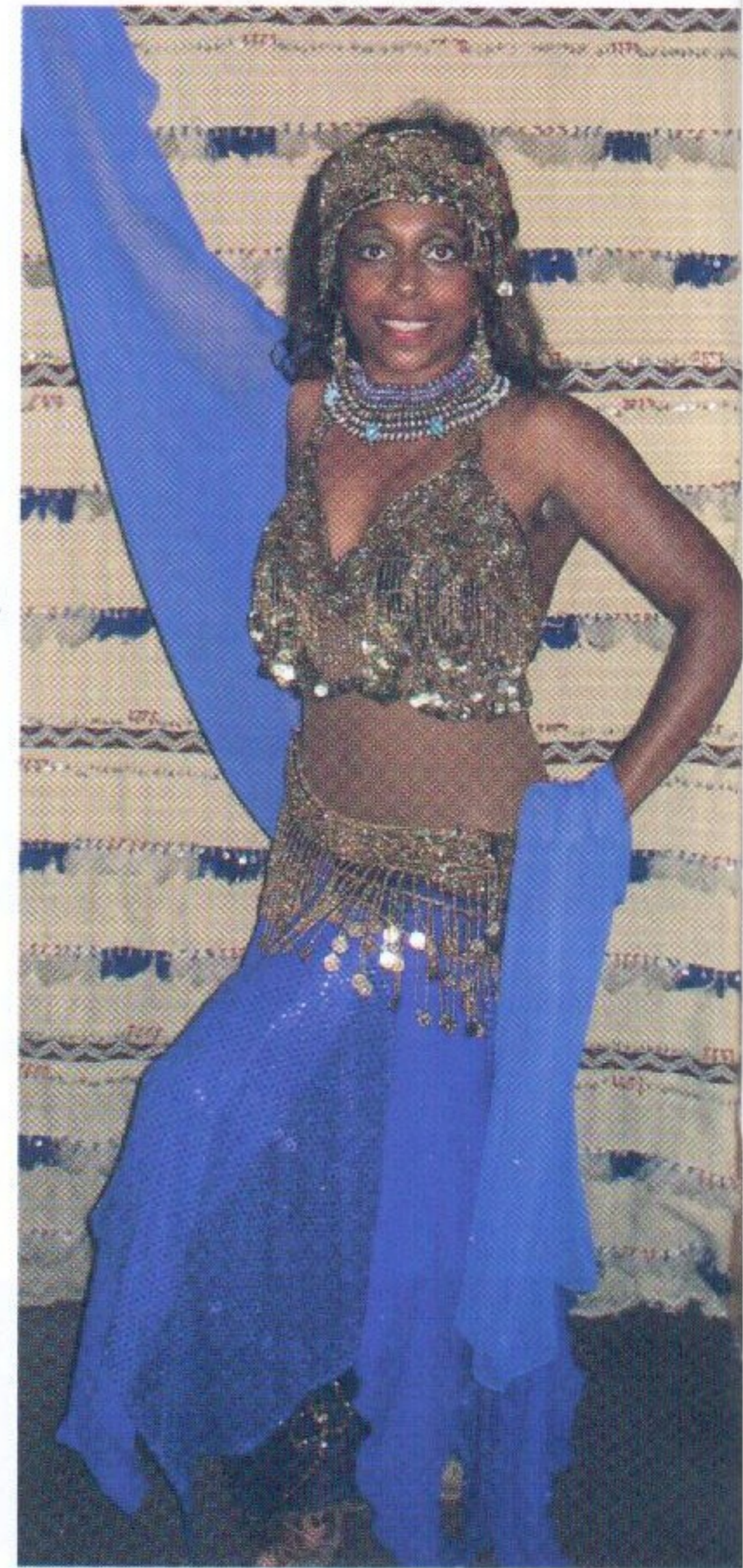
No one imagines a pregnant oriental dancer, but this dance is full of surprises. "Some of the moves can be soothing for the baby," says Philadelphia's Marcella

Smith. This 34-year-old veterinary technician began dancing 5 years ago through a continuing education class at Main Line School Night and maintains that activity at 7 months pregnant. "There're certain moves you don't do because they're expulsion movements, movements that will help you in labor. "You can still do veil work and that can keep you toned because eventually you're going to be holding this baby all day."

Body shape, male or female, has no bearing on a dancer's ability. Dispel those preconceived images of what an oriental dancer looks like. Stomach rolls look better on a rounded woman than one with a tight tummy. Despite its early beginnings, this dance is not gender-specific. Women's hips are perfect for side-to-side sways, while men's hips are better built for forward-and-back movements. A controlled muscular male dancer is no less a delicious sight.

This dance appeals to a melting pot of African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Arabs, and Indians, yet stubborn stereotypes still plague dancers. Teachers of the dance do what they can to educate the public who are not often open-minded. Maya, known as Delaware native Maria Gladstone, is one teacher of the dance striving to educate her mother-daughter classes, age ranges from 10 to 70, and troupes of performers. Despite more than 15 years of experience, apprehension sometimes creeps up on her.

"Our society would rather see skinny beautiful women and I don't think that I am. I'm definitely overweight but that makes me feel more self-conscious," says Gladstone, a medical secretary by day whose addiction for the dance settled in after a continuing education course at A.I. DuPont High School in Greenville. "Sometimes I see the looks on people's faces when I come out and they just see my



weight. I can see it in their faces. But when I start dancing, I see them change and they sigh, 'Ooohhhh.' That makes me feel better."

As dancers feel the moves and explore the adventure, an awareness of the body captures them. There is a grace to your steps when you dance and you move taller in the world. Self-esteem through increased presence is obvious. After all, how many 41 year old mothers are described as "a very sexy mom" by their son?

Valerie Hue of Allendale, DE is one, flattered that his friends like to hit on her. The woman known in dance circuits as Nefertiti began dancing to overcome tragedy. "After 9/11, there was such stigma about Arab world and the community and I believe a lot can be spoken through by music and dance," says Hue. "In a very weird, corny way, it was me bridging a gap because to me it's art not just a dance. I did my first routine with a sword on my head and a veil. No one clapped, no one moved, they just had this look on their faces. Then they stood up and gave me a standing ovation. They were in awe, they said, and I thought they were disappointed."

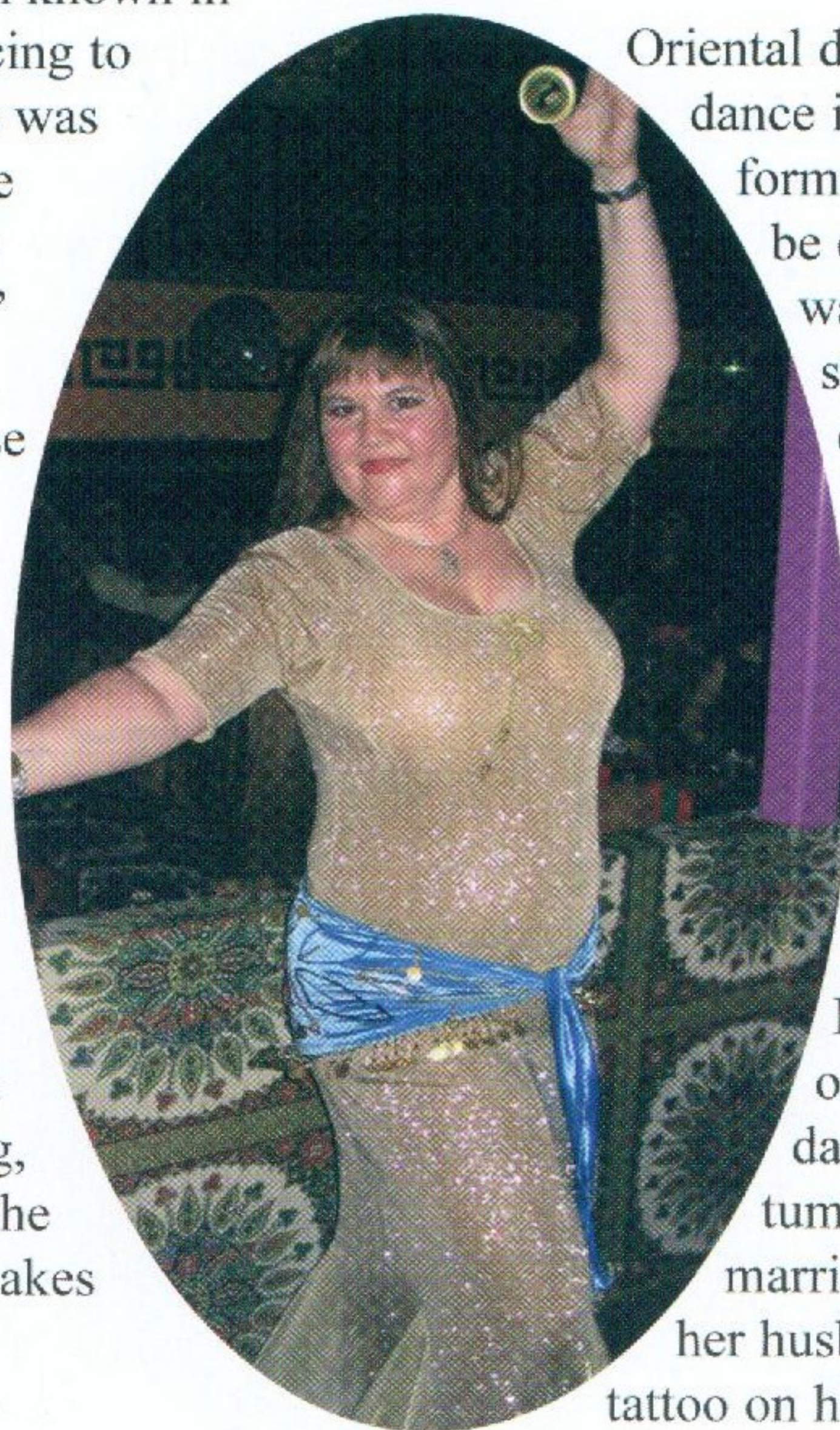
Oriental dancers want to dance. That may seem obvious, but by performing, explore other aspects of the dance. The challenge of interpreting the music makes these dancers magicians of rhythm.

Smith recalls stretching her boundaries the first time she danced to a local band. "Live music is different because you are not allowed to practice; you just go. It's you and the musicians working together...and you have no idea what they're going to play," she says. "It's everything your instructors have taught you, everything that you've ever learned and you're trying to apply it to that music right then."

While oriental dance can sweep you off your feet, it can also knock you down if you're not prepared. It appears easy to pose and shake when you watch it, but a properly-trained dancer possesses martial arts strength dressed in sequins and silk. The muscular

stamina required to maintain a routine that lasts 15 minutes or an hour is equivalent to an aerobic workout with strength training built in. Too often, all people see is the costume, or lack thereof, and that's what Hollywood hopes.

Movies and television portray a myth of nubile nymphs lounging on plush pillows swirling amidst veils for some sultan's pleasure. To tantalize audiences with forbidden flesh, Hollywood invented bejeweled bellybuttons to circumvent the 1930 Hays Code which restricted showing the bare navel in American movies. Given the infusion of sex, the mental leap to a striptease performance is not far.



Oriental dance is seductive, no doubt. However, the dance is not about tempting males but is performance with thought. This is an art form to be enjoyed by the entire family as you would watch a ballet. Dancers recount numerous stories of dancing with children while parents take pictures. There is etiquette to the moves, but American society can't separate sleazy from sensual, especially men.

"A lot of times the guys are jealous," says Gladstone. "Because it's a sensual dance and the American Society thinks differently of it, has the wrong idea I guess connecting it with the stripper. Most guys don't want their women to go out and flirt." Still, men can appreciate the dance without simply staring at skimpy costumes, as demonstrated by her husband. Her marriage of numerous years is far from danger; her husband honors her with an oriental dancer tattoo on his arm.

Understanding the dance is as simple as understanding the options available. You can dance, you can watch, you can study the food or music or clothing. Seeking ways to make oriental dance more respected is important, especially for the African-American community.

"I am usually the only person of color in the group," says Hue with a sigh. "They receive me beautifully, but their perception is, 'Oh, we didn't know you were black,' because you don't see many of us out there at this level performing or learning more about it."

If you want to participate, there are numerous workshops

and seminars available in the area to meet with others of like interest. If you just want to watch, you can visit restaurants like Casablanca where dancers perform on weekends. In Delaware, public performances have occurred at the Christiana Mall, the Salisbury Chicken Festival, American Legions, the Delaware Agricultural Center in Dover, and various art shows. Private performances in nursing and retirement homes are common as well. Regionally, the swords and snakes are only dance props at the Rakkasah Middle Eastern Dance and Music Festival which is held every October in Somerset, New Jersey and in March in Richmond, California, both events drawing international performers and vendors.

Remember that this environment encourages play. It is good for the dancer and it brings joy to the audience. Hue recalls dancing for a group of rapt seniors at a retirement home. "The kindest words I've ever heard while dancing," Hue recalls with a smile, "They said I had so much energy that it made them feel alive again."

That is what oriental dance can do for you.

Where to go for more info:

Classes/Workshops in the local area:

Newark Arts Alliance - 302-266-7266 - www.newarkartsalliance.org

West Chester, PA - 302-652-5344 - www.philadelphiatribalbellydance.com

Yorklyn, DE - 302-239-2434 - www.philadelphiatribalbellydance.com

Instructors in the local area:

Almaaza (Wilmington) - 302-633-0604 - almaaza@aol.com

Amany (Georgetown, DE)- 302-853-0018

Habiba (Philadelphia) - 215-925-5436 - www.habibastudio.com

Maya (Wilmington) - 302-636-9343, www.mayababe.com

Najia (Philadelphia) - 610-449-7201 - www.najia.org

Other oriental dance websites:

Casablanca restaurant - 302-652-5344 - www.thecasablancarestaurant.com