



Belly Dance

New England

We are not impromptu dancers

by Amy Smith

I am not an impromptu dancer. I improvise.

I need to make this distinction because it has been called to my attention that lately belly dancers are referring to themselves as "impromptu" dancers. This is most distressing. I myself was trained to *improvise*. I am not *impromptu*. These are two vastly different things. From Wikipedia: "**Improvisation** is the practice of acting, singing, talking and reacting, of making and creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings." That is a lovely and spot-on description of what belly dancers do when they perform to live music.

Impromptu, however (from dictionary.com), means "made or done without previous preparation: an impromptu address to the unexpected crowds"; also "suddenly or hastily prepared or made." I believe that the majority of dancers who perform to live music are not unprepared. On the contrary, there are usually years of preparation: music, technique, stage presence, costuming...a lot of work goes into your average nightclub show.

Improvisation does not mean haphazard. On the contrary, in music (jazz and Middle-Eastern), there is structure to improvisation. (Not going into it here - ask a musician.) Similarly, we dancers may be "making it up", in that we are not using choreography, but this does not mean our dance lacks structure. The routine you choose to perform has structure, whether it is the classic American 5-part routine or an Arabic-style routine. The music has structure - rhythm, call-and-response, chorus. Your technique has structure - for example, you have staccato moves for heavily rhythmic music, soft and slinky moves for taqsim and more lyrical pieces.

What is improvised is the vocabulary we choose to use in a given moment, or with a given song. That vocabulary is informed by our experience with the music, with the venue, how we are feeling (or not), and by our immediate environment.

A good example of an impromptu dancer is the person you might get up to dance with you during your performance. This poor soul has no idea what to do. Most likely, they follow you. They have no preparation, no training.

I used to work with an editor who was a former ballerina. In fact, she had been an apprentice in the Boston Ballet. I'll never forget our conversation in which I explained how a typical belly dance performance in a club would go. She turned white as a sheet when she understood that we improvised performances to live music (as opposed to using choreography). I confess that on that day, I felt like I struck a blow for respect for belly dancers everywhere. To improvise - nay, improvise well - is challenging and rare in the world of dance. It is a skill at which we excel.

So please, dancers, own this. Do not call yourselves impromptu dancers - you are doing a disservice to yourself and your colleagues. You work too hard not to get it right. You improvise, and that is something to be proud of.

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