

# Cable view

## Belly dancer builds bodies on local show

By ANNE EATON  
Cable Writer

What's an alternative way to build your body, stay youthful, and at the same time, practice an ancient art form?

If you guessed belly dancing, then you must have been watching "Zohar's Exotica," a new program that airs on Thursdays at 9 p.m. on UA/Columbia's Channel 34 in Westchester.

Zohar, who is also known as Laura Spiegel, is not only a leading practitioner of the art of belly dancing, but she also operates an organization that delivers belly telegrams for special occasions.

"The program is broken up into segments on health, fitness and beauty," Zohar explained in a recent interview. "We show exercises to tone and trim different parts of the body, and there are interviews on each show with experts in various fields. We have had guests as varied as a holistic doctor, a female bodybuilder, and a teacher of yoga."

The thing that these particular methods have in common, according to Zohar, is that they are all more or less outside of the mainstream of the self-improvement business. "I would say that tennis, aerobics and jogging are still the standard methods. This is a little more offbeat. I take these specialists, who demonstrate what they do, and then I try and bring it around to the subject of belly dancing. A chiropractor will talk about exercise forms that hurt the back. For example, the constant pounding up and down of aerobics and jogging are very stressful. Belly dancing will never hurt the back, because it is more of a stretching action. It is more gentle on the body, but wonderful for developing the flexibility that keeps women looking young. It increases the flexibility and mobility of the spine, which prevents arthritis, and it develops balance and coordination. Like body building, it teaches you how to isolate your muscles and work on them, but in belly dancing there is a flow from muscle to muscle."

In addition, Zohar teaches potential dancers how to develop their own specialties. "In belly dancing, you can wear what you like. For example, Egyptian costumes are different from Greek costumes, because they have lots of sequins sewn



on them. The bugle-beaded costumes have a very Las Vegas showgirl look. I don't wear them myself. Personally, I prefer an exotic, ethnic look, with antique jewelry, and costumes that have old coins sewn on them."

Besides the service portion of the program, Zohar has guest belly dancers who perform. "The dancers run the whole gamut," she says. "I have one that's a scientist, and another is going for her doctorate in psychology. I'm an ex-fashion designer myself."

Zohar began belly dancing about five years ago. "I had contemplated a professional career in dance, but since I was a mother, I became a fashion designer instead. When I turned 30, I was feeling old and depressed. I had put on about 10 pounds, and I felt youth was slipping by. So I decided to take a cruise, and there was a belly dancer aboard to entertain. I had never seen it before. She looked extremely young, but then I found out she was 34 and had two teenage children. So I began studying, too. I set a goal for myself to be belly dancing within a year, and I commuted from Massachusetts to New York to take lessons. I would go down for three days at a time, and take classes, and I would take classes in Massachusetts also. After nine months, my teacher hired me to work on a boat, and the following summer, I gave up designing and started performing professionally."

One thing that belly dancing is definitely NOT, Zohar emphasizes, is a form of striptease. "I really have to fight that attitude," she says. "I hope that more articulate and business-oriented dancers will change all of that. That's why I don't like dancing in nightclubs. I don't like the nightclub atmosphere. It's just not at all for me. The nightclubs are just not an appreciative audience. That's why I prefer to work in homes, on happy occasions, like birthdays and anniversaries."