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For the Elderly, the Benefits of Belly Dance



Zohar teaches belly dancing to Rose Greenfield at the Country House in Westchester,

By CYNTHIA MAGRIEL WETZLER

HER gold coin belt jingled around her hips as she walked to face a group of more than 35 elderly residents at the Country House in Westchester, a retirement home here. As strains of Middle Eastern music and the fragrance of frankincense filled the room, Zohar, a belly dancing instructor, performance artist and Katonah resident, began to spin and shimmy, cutting graceful circles and moving in rippling undulations.

The many layers of her shimmering coral costume flowed softly around her and her finger cymbals, known as zills, sounded a heartbeat. Zohar and seven of her dance students, the Casbah dancers, entertained the residents in a presentation filled with silky veils and sacred blessings. And when she invited the residents to dance with her and her troupe, they let their bodies sway to the exotic music. Some tied fringed scarves around their hips, "to wiggle better," one resident, Bea Sabel, 82, said.

Others set canes aside and shook tambourines. As the music intensified, smiles grew wider. "When I see the dancers moving, I feel like moving my stomach that way," said Marie Mastriano, 88. "If we just sit here in chairs we get stiff."

William Freese, 79, said: "It does a lot for your body. And, of course, the attractive girls are so expressive — my goodness."

Zohar, who chose her adopted name, which means light, from the Kabbalah, an ancient Jewish religious text, said, "I wanted to create a playful and joyous mood." Her aim, she said, is to bring to light the true significance of belly dancing and to present it as the sacred prayer and meditation it was originally meant to be.

Zohar said she works to erase the tawdry notions associated with belly dancing, to take it out of the nightclub and back into the temple. Thousands of years ago, she said, it was the dance of the temple priestesses of the ancient goddess religions. "In the old paradigm, belly dancing is viewed as a seductive dance for the pleasure of men," she said. "Women are sexual objects. In the new paradigm the dance is a graceful prayer filled with passion: a dance of renewal."

For Zohar, the dance connects

Performance is seen as a form of meditation.

women with their archetypal feminine energy. "When I dance I feel the power of the feminine as the energy rises through my spine, my arms, up toward the heavens, a fluid, mystical surge framed by a veil, which floats about me like an ethereal cloud," she said. "When I perform this dance, it is with sensitivity and good taste. In this manner, the dance can once again be appreciated as the art form it truly is."

At the residence, Zohar placed her palms together over her head and said to her audience, "These are prayer arms and signify the body as the temple of the soul." She raised one arm and at the same time lowered the other in a sensuous flow. "These are snake arms and can signify giving and receiving love," she said. "Now wiggle and vibrate your

hands." Many hands went up, stiff fingers unbending. "This is fire energy and will break up stuckness," she said. "Now imagine you are kneading bread and undulate your hands and wrists. This is water energy."

Rose Greenfield, 77, who is partly blind, said, "It's so exciting, so exciting." A Casbah dancer, Cai McPhee, a nurse specializing in head trauma who has been studying with Zohar for a few months, said: "The energy in the room was very low before we began. They were waiting quietly. But as the performance progressed I saw them light up and come alive."

Zohar has been performing dance for more than 16 years and has been teaching belly dancing for 10 years. "Women of all ages from maidens to crones, in almost any condition, can benefit physically, emotionally and spiritually from belly dancing," she said. She pointed out the flexible backs and spines of her dancers, strengthened from the graceful serpentine movements.

"You don't have to be 20 and thin," said Louis McConnochie, a nanny who studied with Zohar for a year. "It works with the shape of a woman's body." Another dancer, Bina Bora, said, "It makes me feel like a woman."

Besides the belly dancing classes she teaches in the Katonah area, Zohar gives workshops for women interested in the history and relevance of dance in the goddess religions.

In a recent workshop at the Unitarian Church in Mount Kisco, Zohar introduced women to belly dancing, which were the movements of the ancient priestesses who danced circles, spirals and figure eights. There were gasps when Zohar took the cover off a small basket and lifted her two pythons, Yin and Yang, onto her wrist and shoulders and began to dance.

"Since Paleolithic times," she said, "the serpent has been considered the benevolent power animal of the goddess." She gently placed one of the snakes around a participant's neck like a necklace. After a moment of alarm crossed her face, the woman danced with the snake and said that she felt "a new sense of empowerment."

Zohar is artistic director of a professional dance troupe, the Aladdin Dancers, and coordinates Arabian Night theme parties for galas and fund-raising events and other occasions.

"When women learn this dance, they get back in touch with a part of themselves which our culture hasn't fostered," Zohar said. "You can be powerful and feminine, strong and soft, enticing and modest, chaste and voluptuous. This dance embraces all these aspects of being a woman that we don't have a chance to explore through regular means." For information on classes, the number to call is 232-3451. ■

For more information call Zohar at