

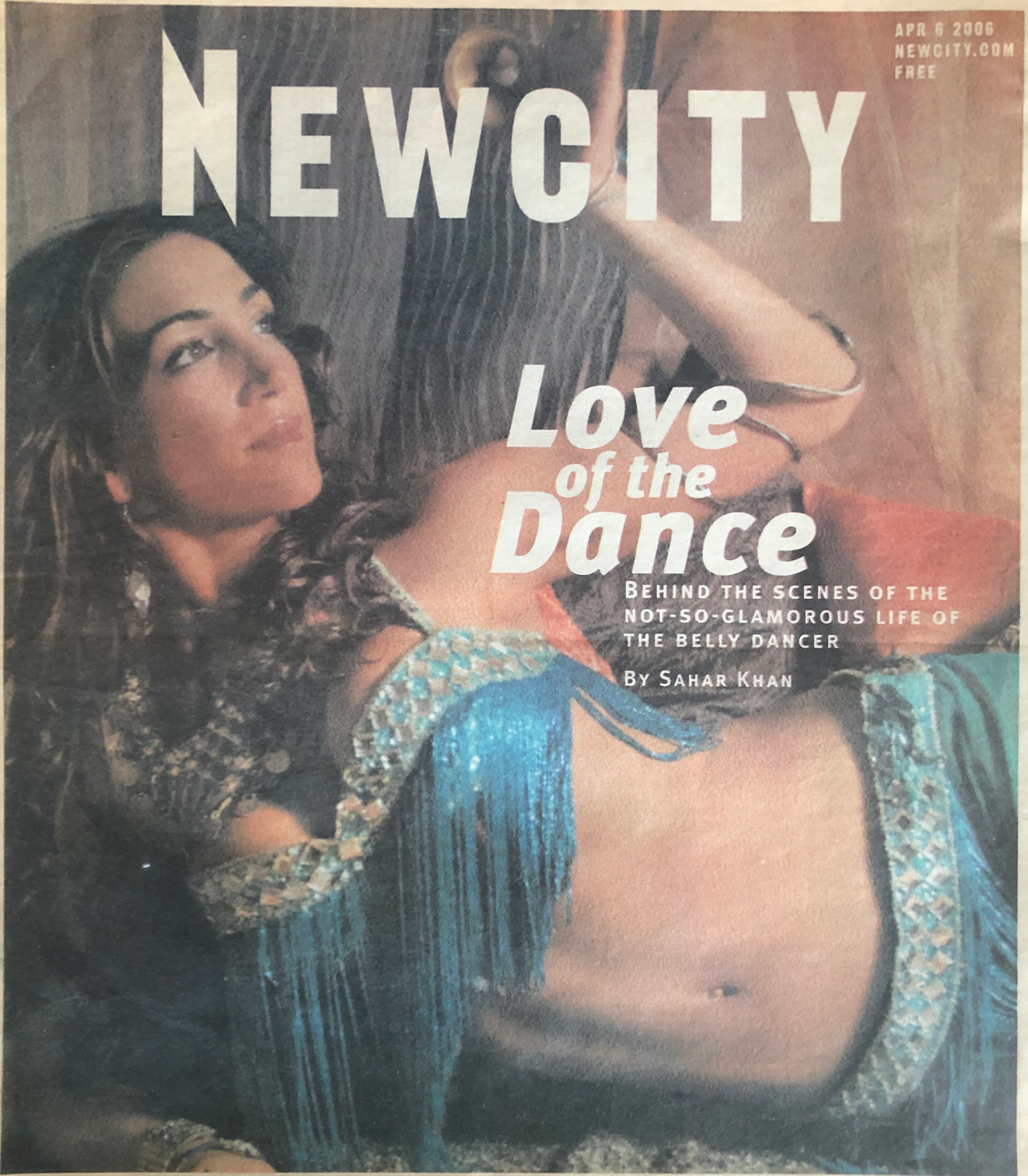
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## Love of the Dance

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NOT-SO-GLAMOROUS LIFE OF  
THE BELLY DANCER

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**IN THE SMOKY RECESSES OF A DIMLY LIT RESTAURANT,** a young woman dances. Her body slithers, clad in a black sequined bra and skirt with slits cut to the top of her thighs. Her hips swivel, her arms invite, her breasts shake alluringly. She arcs a shoulder, bends a finger, and smiles suggestively at two young men seated at a corner table. They take out dollar bills. One of them gently tucks a dollar into her bra; his hand lingers, grazing her skin. The other man stuffs a few in her hip belt; the tops of his fingers disappear inside the belt. She smiles and dances away.

**BELLY DANCERS ARE COMMON FIXTURES IN MIDDLE EASTERN CLUBS AND RESTAURANTS IN CHICAGO.** They consider themselves to be entertainers and purveyors of culture. The allure is obvious; these women are paid to dress in bright, glittering costumes, dance on a stage under flattering lights and use the beauty and supple agility of their bodies to entertain.

But not all professional belly dancers are glamorous seductresses, paid to entice. For them, the glitz and glamour ends at the stage. Behind the scenes, dancers cope with sexual harassment, stiff competition for a handful of good jobs and a persistent stigma that in the hierarchy of women entertainers, they're just one step above strippers.

Caryann Wood, a local belly dancer who goes by the stage name Karima, says that once while she was dancing at a night club, a man implied that he could buy her for the night. The next week he sat close to the stage and threw money at her. Wood handled the situation by not dancing near him; a friend of hers chose a different way to deal with harassment.

"[She] was grabbed on stage and at the end of the night she went up to him and slapped him. She got fired for slapping him," says Wood.

"Club owners are generally jerks that don't understand what sexual harassment is," says Sonya Hohmann, belly dancer and owner of Arabesque, a belly dance school at 3703 North Elston Avenue. "They always seem to want to give you that, 'Oh, you did a great job. Oh, I love watching your ass move.'"

She says that if dancers don't stop the flirting in the beginning, "it gets worse every time and you can't laugh it off after a while. You have to say, 'Look, that's very inappropriate.' Sometimes that can cost you your job but it's that or you fend off."

Hohmann says she takes her boyfriend to certain venues when she dances.

"They call him my heavy," she says. "He just comes in and all he has to do is be there."

For women without male companions, the attention can become excessive. Wood says she's been followed to her car by drunken customers late at night and harassed to go home with them.

And the threats aren't only physical. Wood says she's had male customers tell her to wear her hair differently and lose five pounds.

"Men are idiots," she says. "[Some] think that when you come to a party and you're performing that you're supposed to be taking your clothes off, that they can yell out vulgar comments about your breasts and that it's normal."

Wood says that many women think belly dancing is good for their self-esteem, which it can be when they are dancing in a class with a teacher and other dancers to encourage them.

"But when you are performing in front of absolute strangers who are getting drunk and they've got nothing better to do than insult you.... It's very hard not to listen to people when they tell you what's wrong with you."

Belly dancers have the same insecurities as other women and, when faced with constant criticism and competition, many turn to plastic surgery. Fake breasts, flattened stomachs and carefully carved noses abound in the profession. Even club and restaurant owners demand a certain look.

"Sure the look is important," says Yagmur Sahutoglu, owner of Arkadash Café at 5721 North Clark Street. "Because can you imagine [a] very fat woman belly dancing?"

"There's the clichés," says Tipsuda Bahri, a local belly dancer. "'Oh, she looks Arab, we'll hire her. If she's blonde and has big boobs, we'll hire her,'" she says of club and restaurant owners.

One owner of a Middle Eastern restaurant, Bahri says, likes his dancers skinny. Others, she says, "will hire really curvy girls."

Competition can result in a lack of jobs. Because of the limited number of venues that feature belly dancers, many women teach dance to supplement their income. Most teach at health clubs, but a few have opened their own schools.

Job competition, however, doesn't affect part-time belly dancers as much as it does career dancers. Most belly dancers, depending on their talent, experience and popularity will charge \$150 to \$200 for a fifteen- to twenty-minute show. Some dancers charge less to get more jobs, which drives down the rates. There are expenses that many dancers say aren't, but should be, included in their rates. Most women, before dancing professionally, spend thousands on dance classes. They also invest in costumes, which cost \$200 to \$400 for used outfits and \$500 to \$1000 for new ones. Dancers say they must have at least five to ten costumes because club and restaurant owners don't want to see their dancers in the same costume every night. Repairs for costumes are an additional expense when the beads and sequins fall off.

The cost of circumstances isn't figured into the price either. On occasion, venues go out of business and the belly dancers are the last to hear.

"I had one restaurant where I would dance every Saturday and every Friday," says a local belly dancer who goes by the stage name Arianna. "I was calling one night to see if they wanted me to come in and the phone had been disconnected."

Private events like weddings, bachelor and birthday parties, which make up a large part of a belly dancer's job range, also get cancelled at the last minute. Hohmann has a contract that states that if for some reason an event is canceled, she keeps the deposit, if there is one. But that is rare. Private events usually include long drives at night to homes and conferences in hotels, where men sometimes get drunk and rowdy. The gas and driving time is included in the price; the harassment isn't.

Undercutting a dancer's rate isn't the only tactic some women use to steal jobs. When newcomers claw their way in, the competition turns into a catfight, say the veterans.

"There are dancers who are really nice to you to your face and then they're trying to get your dance job behind your back," says Arianna.

Some dancers work their wiles on club owners to steal jobs from regulars. Wood says she lost a job to another dancer this way.

"She was sitting there, talking to him [club owner], flirting and I see his hand go around under her shirt and grab her boob," says Wood. "I didn't dance that night."

Says Sahutoglu, the restaurant owner: "They do flirt with me, some of them. Some of them, they are going to use their sexuality for some work, for jobs."

However, there is some justice in the belly dancing community, says Surayah Al-Muddaris, who runs Surayah and Sadiya's Dance and Exercise Studio on 5106 North Cicero Avenue with her mother, a former belly dancer. Those who use flirting as a means to get jobs eventually lose them to dancers with more talent, she says.

"There's nothing you can do to keep someone else from getting a job. There's nothing you can do to hold your job," she says. "If someone better comes along and the owners want that person, they're going to have that person."

**THE ORIGINS OF BELLY DANCING ARE OBSCURE.** Some scholars believe the dance originated in prostitution, an art form created out of poverty. Others argue that it was first performed as a ritual for expecting mothers who were taught to gently swivel their hips to help with contractions and ease pain during delivery.

Rachel Kuhr, a local belly dancer who goes by the stage name Sabah, wrote her college thesis on the culture of belly dance in Chicago when she was a student at Columbia College Chicago. She agrees with the latter theory.

"In the ancient times, it was more of a ritual," she says.

However, by the time it was introduced to America in Chicago during the World's Fair in 1893, it had become entertainment. The dancers at the fair caused a controversy in polite society; they were dressed in skirts that exposed their ankles and had their midriffs clad in shiny fabrics, a brazen getup for the conservative Victorian era. However, many women of lower classes took to imitating belly dance in theater productions and circuses. Over time, imitations of the dance form became more risqué.

Forms of the dance were called "the Hoochie Koochie, which in turn turned into burlesque, which in turn turned into stripping," Kuhr says. "Those were American knockoffs."

Soon, Hollywood took an interest. In the 1930s and forties, movies featuring belly dancers dressed in bejeweled bras, hip belts and slinky skirts became all the rage. The cabaret-style costuming commonly worn by belly dancers today was taken directly from Hollywood costume designers and planted in nightclubs and restaurants throughout America.

"When it got into Hollywood, they ultra-glamorized it," says Jasmin Jahal, a well-known Chicago belly dancer who runs the Jasmin Jahal School of Dance at 4037 North Milwaukee Avenue. "They changed the costumes to work with very luxurious fabrics and jewels. They exposed the midriffs, they created the vamp image."

Hollywood also inspired Middle Eastern movie producers to take notice of the seductive twist Americans brought to their tradition. During the same period in Egypt, known as the Hollywood of the Middle East, American-inspired musicals became popular. The movies, however, often portrayed the dancers as wicked, scandalous women.

"In [Middle Eastern] movies, what Americans miss is that every time a belly dancer is on, she's a slut," Kuhr says. "She's causing all the trouble. She's the one who is cheating on her husband or marrying five times, this conniving woman dancing around, sleeping around."

Kuhr says that in America, venue owners of Middle Eastern descent still view belly dancers in the same unflattering light.

Chelley Reitsma, a local belly dancer and dance instructor at Tango Chicago at 1043 West Madison Street, agrees. Dealing with Middle Eastern employers can be a problem because they are conflicted about belly dancers, she says. In one way, they appreciate that white American women are practicing their art form. "But then in another way we are not necessarily the most respected because we're showing skin, we're out there dancing, we're wearing flashy costumes, we don't have on a burqa," she says.

Kuhr thinks Middle Eastern girls are less likely to dance in Chicago now than in the 1960s, the peak of belly dancing in America, because Arab communities are larger and more well-settled. Unlike the first wave of belly dancers in America, these second- and third-generation Middle Eastern women aren't desperate to establish themselves in any way they can.

Kuhr says Arabs are ambivalent about belly dancing. They'll hire dancers for weddings and festivals because it is a tradition.

"But it's not okay for your daughter to say, 'Hey dad I want to be a belly dancer.' It's not okay for it to be close to home."

A belly dancer, who wishes to remain anonymous, says her Middle Eastern boyfriend, whom she met while dancing at a Middle Eastern nightclub, tells people she is retired, even though she dances full time.

"He says that we met through it but now I should give it up," she says. "It's a cultural mentality. But this is what I do. He'll have to understand."

Some Middle Eastern dancers are disowned by their Arab families for becoming professional dancers, because they think it's a sin for a woman to show her skin and dance for men. Al-Muddaris is known in the belly dancing community as the best belly dancer in Chicago. She is half American and half Kurdish and was disowned by her Kurdish father for becoming a belly dancer.

"He wants nothing at all to do with the whole thing," she says. "He didn't raise me, so it really wasn't his business. If he had supported me and raised me growing up, I might have thought differently."



sion is grueling. These women never have weekends off, always entertain others and don't get to spend much time with loved ones.

"I'm out of town performing evenings and weekends," Hohmann says. "It makes it very hard to find that time to go to my niece's birthday. It's a bummer but in a way you can do this job forever, I'm sure, but you have a certain amount of years where you're more marketable due to your youth."

Dancing venues aren't exactly posh. Dressing rooms are largely unheard of; dancers usually have to change in cold, dirty public bathrooms or utility closets. Arianna recalls a time when she had to change in a storage room in a Middle Eastern club.

"There was maybe a square-foot radius to change," she says. Says Hohmann, "You're usually changing in some dark, smelly basement in an office somewhere that smells like food."

**Some Middle Eastern dancers are disowned by their Arab families for becoming professional dancers, because they think it's a sin for a woman to show her skin and dance for men.**

Anywhere there's food, you're looking at other things too, like vomit."

Al-Muddaris, a regular dancer at Souk Restaurant on 1552 North Milwaukee Avenue, has her own "dressing room"—an inelegant space outfitted with crumbling plaster and an old couch that doubles as an office. There is no door so cooks and waiters walk in and out while she is changing.

**SO WHY PUT UP WITH THE LONG COMMUTES AND LONG HOURS,** the harassment and backstabbing? Why devote yourself to a career that's viewed as just this side of stripping in the eyes of much of the world—including many within the dancing community?

Whether they are seen as artistic performers or artful enchantresses, belly dancers say it's all about the love of the dance. Being in the spotlight is just one of the perks.

"I love all the costumes and the glitter and the sparkles," says Reitsma, who also teaches belly dancing.

"I've had a lot of students tell me that I've taught them how to be a woman and that it's okay," Reitsma says. "I let them know that it's okay to be a girl and you can still have power without giving up the sparkles."

Some dancers find love. Bahri met her husband Najib, a musician, through work. She converted to Islam because Najib is Muslim. Now when she dances, she covers her stomach on his request. They work together; she dances with Najib and his band.

"With him around, no one's fondling me or disrespecting me," Bahri says.

"When your show is good it's a natural high," says Al-Muddaris. "When everything is there, the music is there, the people, when everyone's into it, you really feel like you're doing something. You feel this connection with people. You love this dance."

Says Bahri, "The moment I stop dancing is the moment I'm not breathing."

Dancers who do venture into this world have to deal with customer's misconceptions about appropriate behavior, like tipping. Bahri says that most dancers want tipping eliminated. "Having customers just stuffing our bras with money is not how we want to be known."

"Don't touch me. Don't give me money. Don't try to stuff it in my bra," Hohmann says. "We work so hard against that image to begin with."

Many belly dancers say that the public generally ranks them as somewhere between showgirls and strippers, a hybrid of the costumes of burlesque and the sexuality of stripping.

Though they get many requests to dance at bachelor parties, most don't accept.

"Among us belly dancers, we're always trying to educate the general public that this isn't just burlesque or a strip-tease dance," Bahri says. "It's a centuries-old art form and those of us who are belly dancers are because we feel a sense of passion for it."

That passion is strong. Many Chicago dancers say they fell in love with the world of belly dancing unexpectedly after taking classes for fun.

"I had never at the time heard Arabic music or seen a belly dancer dance," Hohmann says. "It sounded really intriguing and [friends and I] went to a class together and I was absolutely hooked."

And hooked they are. Dancers must be, because the profes-