

Belly dancers rewarded with strong core muscles

BY SUZANNE WINTROB, POSTMEDIA

MARCH 2, 2011



Belly dancer Heather Freeman, her dance name is Iona, pose for a portrait at her studio in downtown Kingston, Ontario.

Photograph by: Lars Hagberg

Heather Freeman knew what her next career move would be the day she picked up a sparkly scarf while travelling through Turkey.

Freeman, who taught highland dance for many years, is now teaching belly dancing at Kingston's Oasis Dance Studio and performing under the name Iona (Arabic for purple jewel) with the Veils of Isis Middle East Dance Troupe. When weather allows, she travels to Toronto every weekend to hone her skills at Arabesque Dance Company, where her daughter Haley dances with the ensemble.

As well as providing good exercise, she says the experience has earned her a smaller waist, straighter posture, and fewer reasons to indulge in chocolate. "I love belly dancing because it takes my life out of the ordinary into the extraordinary," says Freeman, 53. "It makes me feel confident, strong, honoured and joyful."

Over the past few years, belly dancing has been gaining ground as a surefire way to get fit. Classes abound at community centres, school boards, and

studios dedicated to the ancient Egyptian art form, where the mostly-female crowd dons jingling hip scarves and move to the music. Their rewards: tighter bodies, stronger core muscles and an intense workout.

Yasmina Ramzy, a former ballerina, has been dancing, teaching and choreographing for 30 years and organizes the biennial International Bellydance Conference of Canada featuring lectures, workshops and performances. She opened Toronto's Arabesque belly dancing school in 1992 and today her 10 teachers run 40 classes each week.

The blond Canadian – who says she has "no Arabian blood" and won't reveal her real "totally WASPy name" – is fascinated by the wide variety of people who attend Arabesque's classes. Her students range in age from eight to 80, she says, and come from all walks of life. Some saw a show and then signed up for lessons while others "want to move like Colombian pop singer Shakira." She has male students, too, including one in her dance troupe, and all are expected to wear hip scarves in class.

Though many students join for the physical benefits, some come for emotional and spiritual reasons, too.

"A movement that was once taboo, or a body part like your pelvic region that was once taboo, you now go into a class and concentrate on that area and do it over and over again," says Ramzy, 50, who spent 15 years dancing before kings and presidents throughout the Middle East before opening her studio. "And when you do it well, you're congratulated. That completely rewires your way of thinking about your sexuality and your body."

While classes vary according to school and teacher, most include a warm-up and basic movements "to isolate the body in ways you've never done before," says Aurora Ongare, a chiropractor and the owner of Edmonton Bellydance Academy. Some might include a bit about Middle Eastern history and culture, and all classes give ample time to dance as a group to rousing music. The intricate movements target the body's core muscles, build quads and a strong midsection, and improve posture and balance. While there's no requirement to expose the stomach, adds Ramzy, hip scarves make it easier to define isolations and watch the hip line.

Be forewarned: belly dancing is anything but easy. It takes weeks of muscle memory, says Freeman, yet many would-be dancers expect to master the moves in no time. She suspects that's why a third of students drop off halfway through a 12-week course.

"Be open, be patient, relax and enjoy," says Freeman. "It's not a class of instant gratification, but it has the potential for endless strength and enjoyment."

