

The History and Development of Tribal Style Bellydance

by Kathryn Whittington

Tribal Style bellydance is a modern and Western phenomenon. It takes the movements of Middle Eastern dance and combines them with movements, posture and aesthetics of other ethnic dance forms, such as North African dance, Flamenco and Classical Indian dance. It also has a unique costuming style using rich and heavy textiles, tribal jewellery, metal adornments and many layers of clothing. The costuming does not aim to reproduce any given genuine tribal group (1), but instead conforms to Western notions of ethnic fantasy using a range of different elements from many areas to create a look that is overall cohesive and unusual.

American Tribal Style

This particular style of dance developed in California on the West Coast of the USA as early as the late 1960s. The foundation format for most of the Tribal bellydance that can be seen today is American Tribal Style (ATS) which developed over time from the influence and artistic vision of three main dancers. The 'American' part of this title aims to acknowledge that the dance has developed away from its original homeland and has been modified by American artistic sensibilities (2). Further to this though, American Tribal Style bellydance is a reflection of the mix of cultures and interests that can be found in California, San Francisco in particular, and also the socio-political circumstances of the time of its inception.

The founding influence of this style of dance was Jamila Salimpour, a largely self-taught dancer in San Francisco. Jamila's dance training came from observing her Sicilian father's imitations of the Ghawazee that he had observed when stationed in Egypt with the army, watching Egyptian films with her landlady and observing the dancers in the clubs in North Beach, San Francisco, who came from all over the Near East. When Jamila started teaching she had to eventually develop a format, as having never been taught the dance she was presented with problems with teaching it to others(3). The dance that Jamila taught was a mixture of various styles of Cabaret dance that she had picked up in her time working in the clubs, however in the late 1960s it became apparent that some of Jamila's students were dancing spontaneously at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire(4) in Northern California. In response to the Faire's organiser's pleas for her to control them, Jamila founded a dance troupe called Bal-Anat to allow her students to perform at the faire, but in an organised manner(5).

Bal-Anat tended towards folk dance in appropriate costuming. The aim was to present a variety show with different members of the troupe representing dancers and musicians from different areas. The dances were not 100% accurate, Jamila had never visited the Middle East or North Africa, and much of the costuming and general aesthetic were based on images from photographs, Orientalist paintings or magazines such as 'National Geographic'(6). Like the Renaissance Faire itself, the aim was not to be 100% accurate but to reflect an idea of the past in the Near East. The audience frequently thought that they were seeing something that was realistic, but Salimpour herself admits it was 'half real and half hokum'(7).

Masha Archer was a student of Jamila Salimpour's and a member of Bal-Anat. She was an artist by training, studying in New York though later moving to San Francisco where she came across Jamila's studio. Masha is a controversial figure, she tried to distance herself culturally from the roots of bellydance and felt that the people of the Middle East did not deserve to be the keepers of bellydance as they were ashamed of it and that instead American women were more deserving to adopt it. She strongly disapproved of dancing in bars and restaurants and was mostly concerned with the look of the dance and experimentation to create a personal artistic expression through movement and costume. She wanted to move the image of a bellydancer away from being an entertainer in those sorts of venues, and to change the look of the bellydancer away from that image as well as she felt that it was degrading. As a result she covered the legs with pantaloons, the hair with a turban and replaced the decorated bra with a modified Choli(8). She founded the San Francisco Classic Dance Company which existed for 14 years from the early 1970s(9) and performed using group synchronised improvisation. The posture was tall and lifted and she did not use floorwork. Masha felt

that it wasn't necessary to use Middle Eastern Music and so would often use modern, Classical and folk music from the West. Masha no longer dances and instead focuses on Jewellery design.

One of Masha's students and a member of her troupe was Carolena Nericcio. She started taking classes when she was 14 years old and found Masha's personality and strength captivating. In the late 1980s, after studying for 7 years, she started teaching herself and developed the troupe FatChanceBellyDance (FCBD)(10). Carolena had studied with Masha exclusively and somewhat obsessively(11) and so a number of Masha's dance element went into Carolena's teaching. She retained the lifted posture the costuming ideas, but expanded on them. She modified the number of steps used and developed a format that could be taught to all of her students, of set moves and steps associated with cues that would indicate which moves were to come next when they were dancing together. This allowed them to dance entirely improvisationally as a group but with constant communication.

Although she retained Masha's ideas of beauty and presentation, Carolena was more interested in the native culture of bellydance and so the movements she chose were nearer to those that were from the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly she limited the musical choices to those that were appropriate to the area and normally in a 4/4 time for ease of improvisation. Carolena had been a fashion student and used her knowledge of garment construction to develop patterns for the individual costume pieces. Initially the costume and staging of FCBD were quite eclectic, but over time the costume developed into well known uniform look of pantaloons, a '10 yard skirt' hip scarf, tasselled belt, opened-back long-sleeved choli with a coin bra worn over the top, the hair covered in a turban and numerous jewellery adornments.(12) She also worked with Masha's ideas of presentational beauty and felt that the steps didn't need to be complex because 'the form of the body and costuming are beautiful enough'(13). It was during this period that this style of dance was named 'American Tribal Style' though not by the dancers themselves. Carolena says that she wasn't aware that she had a unique style as she had only studied with one teacher(14) It seems likely that a mixture of this and Carolena's desire to continue Masha's work to create something that was beautiful that bought about the creation of this new style and as more people became aware of its existence there was the need to give it a name, so that it could be understood and distinguished from other forms of bellydance.

FatChanceBellyDance have been in existence for over 20 years now, and although they still work with the same format, modifications and new developments have obviously occurred most recently culminating in a new volume of their instructional video series. However the dance retains the same idea and presentational aesthetic. Some original or early members of FCBD, or former students of Carolena have since started their own. Most well known are Kajira Djoumahna who founded United We Dance and Black Sheep Belly Dance now based in Hawaii. Paulette Rees-Denis founded Gypsy Caravan, and like FCBD, has released a number of instructional DVDs with their format. These troupes have all kept to the same idea of a group of individuals dancing together improvisationally using a prelearned language of movements and combinations (15). Jill Parker, who was an early member of FCBD left to form her own troupe Ultra Gypsy, who have changed a great deal and now consider themselves Dance Theatre, although their roots are still within Tribal Bellydance. Ultra Gypsy has been part of the inspiration for some of the newer forms of Tribal Bellydance, discussed below.

Other Tribal Lineages

The term 'Tribal' is not just limited to American Tribal Style, there are other dancers and dance groups who's lineage does not go back to Carolena Nericcio but instead to other students of Jamila Salimpour. It does seem that, although it was not deliberate, and the dance was never at the time described as 'Tribal' (16) the show format and use of traditional style costumes and music that was chosen by Jamila was the inspirational spark this genre of bellydance. The ATS format that grew out of this via 2 other dancers was one way of interpreting it, however other students have had their impact in other ways.

Probably the best known of these people is John Compton, who was a member of Bal-Anat and who's dancing is often described as 'Tribal' though his philosophy of dance and performance are totally

different to that which exists in ATS. Sometimes it may be better to describe this as 'Folkloric' instead (17), he often refers to himself as a 'Khawal'(18). John now co-directs his own troupe Hahbi 'Ru and despite the differences between his own troupe and at ATS he believes that 'Tribal' has more to do with the bond between the dancers than the presentational style.

"To me Tribal has to do with a family unit, and surely ATS, Maila's Bal Anat, and Hahbi 'Ru all have that in common."(19)

Unlike FCBD, Hahbi 'Ru is a troupe consisting of both men and women, musicians and dancers, like Bal-Anat their aim is to be entertainers. They present themselves in a semi-circle as is common in ATS and their aim is to be more regionally focused than ATS is and often more choreography is used. Their look is more folkloric than ATS is, though again it is an earthy look. Other students of Jamila's have gone on to form their own groups which again are often described as 'Tribal' despite not being ATS. Sometimes the term 'California Tribal' was used to describe these groups who were all quite similar in format to Bal-Anat. Groups such as Bou-Saada directed by Shelley Muzzy/Yasmela who was a former student of Jamila(20).

Tribal Today

It would be too confusing to list the lineages of every single dancer and troupe in existence today, however over the last 20 years Tribal styles of dance have become very popular and the style has developed a great deal. There are still ATS groups, and other tribal groups who use a group improvisation format, yet differ slightly from the FatChance format. More recently 'Tribal Fusion' has developed and become extremely popular. This is a means by which dancers can dance in a Tribal style on their own, or in a group using choreography and movement vocabularies which are influenced by other dance forms. Ultra Gypsy, as mentioned before have been hugely influential to dancers interested in this style, as have other troupes such as Urban Tribal, directed by Heather Stants or The Indigo directed by Rachel Brice and Mardi Love. Although not a Tribal dancer in her personal style, Jamila Salimpour's daughter, Suhaila has continued her mother's teaching and developed a technique format which allows dancers to engage the muscle groups required for dance which is very popular with a number of Tribal dancers. Tribal Fusion has a more paired down look than ATS, the movements are often more athletic, and require a large amount of flexibility, they may be complex and fast and so fewer layers of clothing are required to execute it properly.

There is much conflict over how best to describe different forms of Tribal dance, and the reading of any online forum on the topic will uncover many different ways of seeing the dance and opinions on how is best to categorise and describe it. It is still a new dance form, and so is still finding its feet in many respects, and it remains to be seen what elements will be retained by the dancers of the future and which will be left behind. However the popularity of 'Tribal' overall seems to indicate that in some form or other it will most likely be around for some time to come.

Notes

- (1) See the Chapter on Costuming in *The Tribal Bible* by Kajira Djoumahna and [The Lineage of American Tribal Style](#) By Rina Rall published in *Tribal Talk* in August 1998, now available as a compendium of selected articles.
- (2) See [The Lineage of American Tribal Style](#) above.
- (3) See [Body Image Identity: American Tribal Style Belly Dance](#) by Barbara Sellers-Young in *Belly dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism and Harem Fantasy* edited by Barbara Sellers-Young and Anthony Shay for a fuller discussion on the history of Jamila Salimpour and the social climate in San Francisco in the 1960s.
- (4) The Renaissance Pleasure Faire is an historical re-enactment event indirectly linked to the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism). They are held all over the US, and some other countries also though the bulk of their popularity is in the United States of America. The aim is for participants to adopt a persona appropriate to the time period and geographical location that the faire is representing. Bellydancing is still a very popular occurrence at these events, even though they

tend towards a Medieval European focus. Participants often go to great lengths to make a story for their character that can justify them performing bellydance at the event.

- (5) See The Lineage of American Tribal Style above.
- (6) See Body Image Identity: American Tribal Style Belly Dance by Barbara Sellers-Young as above
- (7) See The Lineage of American Tribal Style above.
- (8) See *The Beginning of ATS: (American Tribal Style) A Series of Women Artists* by Fleur Frascella in *Benny* Vol.5 Issue 2.
- (9) See The Lineage of American Tribal Style above
- (10) See Survival of the Fittest by Nadia Khastagir published in *TribalTalk* in spring 1997, now available in a compendium of selected articles.
- (11) See the interview Ignorance is Bliss conducted by Kajira Djoumahna printed in *The Tribal Bible*
- (12) A sort of full tiered skirt, originally called the 10 yard skirt because it was made of 10 yards of fabric. More modern patterns call for less fabric but at instead 10 yards at the hem.
- (13) See Survival of the Fittest details above.
- (14) See Kajira Djoumahna's interview with Carolina in *The Tribal Bible*.
- (15) For a full discussion of FCBD spawned troupes see chapters 2 and 3 of *The Tribal Bible*
- (16) See interview with John Compton in *The Tribal Bible*.
- (17) See *The Tribal Bible*.
- (18) A 19th century male Egyptian dance, see Body, Image, Identity details above.
- (19) See interview by Naija El-Mouzayen <http://www.gildedserpent.com/articles6/northbeach2/johncompton.htm>
- (20) See *The Tribal Bible* Chapter 2