

TEATOS ZUZANNI PRESENTS **Bonsoir Liliane!** Directed by *Maya and Tony Award™ Winner* Tommy Tune **NEW ORIGINAL SHOW!**

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Belly Dance Off! gives amateurs a chance to shake and shimmy

An "American Idol"-style competition kicks off its third installment in Seattle, called Belly Dance Off! at Amore Restaurant.

By **Marian Liu**
 Seattle Times staff reporter

Belly dance conjures up images of genies, Shakira and faraway lands — not Seattle.

But veteran belly dancer Suzanna Davis hopes to change that.

"People think it's a hoochie-coochie dance, but it's not," said Davis, who has belly danced for the past 14 years. "My goal is to captivate the general audience with belly dance."

So Davis created an "American Idol"-style competition in Seattle, called Belly Dance Off! There have been three matchups so far, and one more is coming up Sunday.

Contestants have about five minutes to show off their talents, supported by a live band.

"You really have to practice," said Bothell's Lisa Wood, August's contest winner, who appreciated the feedback and live band. "I loved the atmosphere."

The audience votes, guided by judges, who are belly-dance experts from the community.

"People think belly dancers are showgirls, but that couldn't be further from the truth," said contest judge Deleah Flynn, who has belly danced for the past 38 years and heads a studio in Fremont.

"Compared to other dance forms, there's an interesting difference. ... We don't need a partner. And anybody can belly dance, even men. ... It's wordless expression."

Davis has studied all kinds of styles of dance including ballet and African, but prefers belly dance.

"You are a one-woman show," said Davis, who performs regularly in Seattle-area restaurants. "You are entirely responsible for your production ... and you manage the audience. I love the creative possibilities."

But that freedom can be problematic. Venues are typically not theaters, but restaurants without proper sound systems. Proprietors sometimes care more about the entertainment value of the dance, rather than its artistry.

So Davis took things into her own hands and started a company to produce the contest and other shows.

Belly dance often doesn't get the respect it deserves, she says. Even where the style supposedly started, in the Middle East, the dance is sometimes looked down upon.

Seattle has a growing, yet pretty insular, belly-dance community. There are often haflas, or parties, within the community, but the public often never hears of them.



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 Suzanna Davis, organizer of Seattle's Belly Dance Off!

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6 p.m. Sunday, Amore Restaurant, 2301 Fifth Ave., Seattle; \$5-12 and under, \$10 advance, \$15 at door (www.brownpaperickets.com).

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