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Puget Sound performers showcase belly dancing in 'Hathor Unveiled'

By Rachel Shimp

Special to The Seattle Times

March is National Women's History Month — what better place to observe the occasion than a belly-dance show?

In "Hathor Unveiled," named for the ancient Egyptian goddess of music and dance, dancers and teachers-turned-producers Suzanna Davis and Malia Mihailoff celebrate those who paved the way for Puget Sound's vibrant belly-dance scene. (Didn't know there was one? Search for classes online and prepare for a blown mind.)

Each "Hathor" performer is over the age of 45. Their experiences range from decades of dancing in cafes to organizing haflas (Middle Eastern dance parties) and inventing unique stylistic trademarks. You might respectfully call them the elders of their community, but there's nothing typically "elderly" about them.

"I think I'm the youngest, I'm 47, and these women were already seasoned dancers when I started," says Elizabeth Dennis, who performs a fusion incorporating flamenco and East Indian elements.

"When you see them on stage, I mean they are just amazing; some of the most dynamic ones are older."

Dennis has made her own mark by developing what Suzanna Davis calls a new dance vocabulary. She frequently uses props, like an orb, to illustrate transformative themes in her performance-art style presentations.

"It's the graceful, slow, meditative feel, almost like a tai-chi feeling that I like to get in my dancing," says Dennis.

"Very snaky, very smooth. I like the subtleties to be seen and have a calming effect."

Drawn in by creativity, Dennis also has remained involved for the strong sense of community. She likes that there's room for hobbyists as well as professionals.

"It's a very fun subculture to be a part of. I had a unique experience



MARCO PROZZO

Elizabeth Dennis performs a fusion incorporating flamenco and East Indian elements.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Sabura performs at an Arab Festival at Seattle Center.

in that when I had breast cancer five years ago, the community put on a big show and raised a ton of money because I had bad health insurance. So it's a very supportive, unusual sisterhood," she says.

Dennis attributes her "stellar recovery" to an increased body awareness, and as an instructor she finds lessons can complement physical therapy. Essentially, belly dance is about locating muscles you don't know you have, loosening them up and "educating your body to heal itself."

Not to mention that it's about shaking (and shimmying) things up.

"Belly dance as we know it, the Egyptian folk dances of the Middle East ... was a spectacle in 1893 when it arrived [at the Chicago World's Fair]," says Dennis.

"All the booty shaking was not in line with the Victorian corsets and covering everything up. It was quite the to-do."

Now, as producers Davis and Mihailoff attest, many people dance American Cabaret, a fusion of Turkish and Egyptian styles that has become its own animal. (Those interested in traditional, tribal or burlesque-accented belly dance can also find their niche).

Both producers claim to suffer shyness, which dancing helps them to conquer. They describe performers like Sabura, known for her veil dances, as "powerhouses." They tell how respected Besma is among the Arabic musicians who've played for her. To the Mideast, they say, Delilah is an icon of American Cabaret.

Each woman will have 8-12 minutes onstage to dance however she pleases. Davis and Mihailoff set no limits on what should be a showcase of delightful proportions.

"Hopefully nobody shows up with a cobra!," said Davis.

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'Hathor Unveiled: An Homage to Seattle's Bellydance Origins'

Featuring Aleili, Besma, Delilah, Elizabeth Dennis, Hasani, Rishi, Sabura and Saqra. Hosted by Elisabeth Squires. 8 p.m. Saturday, UW Ethnic Cultural Center, 3940 Brooklyn Ave. N.E., Seattle; \$22 (206-543-4635 or www.brownpapertickets.com).