

Reviews
Workshops Events

A week dedicated to classic American
cabaret belly dance

by Susan "Aila Zulema" Loving

Egyptian, tribal, tribal fusion, Turkish, folklore ~ these days whatever you'd like to study is probably being offered in multiple workshops at a dance studio within driving distance of your home. But whatever happened to American cabaret-style dance, so popular in the belly dance boom of the 1960s and '70s? It's alive and thriving in California's San Joaquin Valley, and recently Annette Federico of Fresno brought vintage American cabaret style to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.



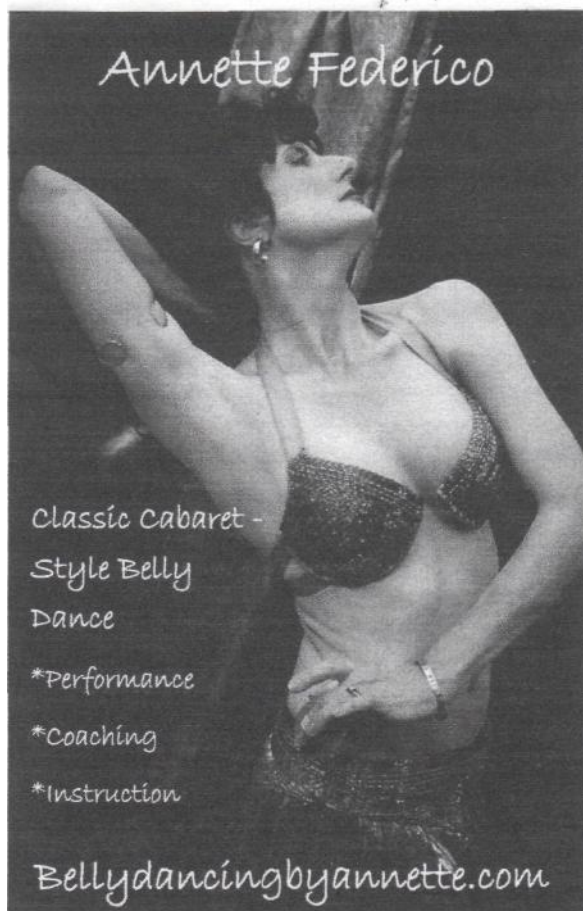
My teacher, Miramar I of Winchester, had studied I with Annette while visiting Fresno and thought she would be an excellent workshop instructor.

She talked Annette into visiting her for a week in order to teach a series of four workshops. I signed up for all four, plus a bonus lecture on the history of American vintage cabaret, and I'm glad I did.

Annette provided what I value in a workshop instructor: She gave clear instructions, was willing and able to answer questions, included (accurate, not fanciful) historical information and context, provided written notes and had reasonably-priced DVDs available for those who wanted to follow up on the workshop instruction. And, on top of all that, she gave us a good workout.

The workshops and a dinner show were held during a heat and humidity wave that was enough to dampen anyone's desire to shimmy, but Annette didn't seem to notice. At the first workshop, "Killer Ziller," she started*by talking about the history of zills/sagat and mentioned that it's going out of fashion for dancers to play zills, except in the San Joaquin Valley, of course. Playing zills is hard, she said, but if you practice, practice, practice, you can learn, even if you think you are rhythm-challenged.

The warmup was fun and seemed pretty aerobic for a zill workshop, but it turned out that's because Annette's zill workshop was pretty aerobic. After instructing us on how to





hold our forearms and fingers to protect ourselves from carpal tunnel syndrome and to be able to play faster, she proceeded to drill us on two patterns. That's right, only two. If you like an instructor who crams as much as possible into a workshop, going quickly from one thing to the next, she's not the teacher for you. On the other hand, if you prefer to drill until you've got something new into your muscle memory, Annette's style is perfect. Which is not to say that we stood around looking at each other and playing those two zill patterns.

Annette quickly added movement to the drills, since you can't learn to dance with zills by standing around playing them. Dancers with little experience were urged to concentrate on getting comfortable with the patterns — longa and baladi -- before trying to move with them. Annette regularly made her way around the room checking on progress and making corrections as needed, and without embarrassing anyone.

In the second workshop, Annette taught a choreography to George Abdo's "Raks Araby." I had sworn off workshops in which the object is to learn a choreography, having never actually learned an entire choreography this way. The last third of the choreography is inevitably taught in about the last 20 percent of the time, and then when you ask the teacher if she has a DVD of the material to sell, the answer is inevitably "no." ("But I've got these other DVDs you can buy ...")

So why did I sign up for this choreography workshop? Because Annette does have a DVD of the choreography she taught ("Raks Araby: Setting Steps to Music"). So why did I pay for a workshop to learn a choreography I could learn off a DVD? For the same reason I signed up for lessons in the first place, years ago. To find out if you're doing things correctly you need a real, live teacher. And, of course, it's a lot more fun being in a class with other people than being at home alone.



There was, in fact, too much material to cover in a two-hour class (including warm-up and cool-down) in a way that anyone but the most gifted student could have come away able to perform the choreography, which is what I expected. But I am glad I attended. Several of the moves were new-to-me, not just new-in-name, and they were all fun ones. Her other DVD, "Music Suggests Motion: Beginning Belly Dance," covers many of those moves, as well as technique and musical interpretation. Annette explained ways to make moves easier if they were too challenging for your level and practically begged people to take what they like and change the rest ~ "Make it your own!" — since she is herself an improvisational dancer.

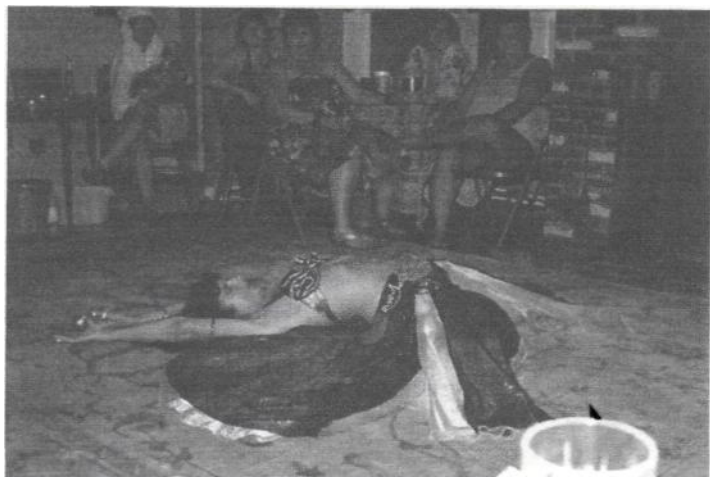
As in the zill workshop, she gave us a good workout. Even when the power went out in the studio, we kept on going, with the help of candles and flashlights, and without air conditioning -- whew! (This was one of those weeks when a cool day was one where the temperature stayed below 100 degrees.) Again, I did not learn the choreography from beginning to end, but I came away with not only the DVD (she brought some to sell) but also the written choreography notes she handed out at the end of the workshop.

"Valley Veil" followed the same pattern as the zill workshop. Annette taught and drilled only two veil wraps, as well as how to dance your way out of them. She also allowed Miramar to film her demonstrating those two wraps so that workshop participants would be able to review them later via a private YouTube video.

"Vintage American Cabaret," held immediately following the veil workshop, covered the classic multi-part routine. Annette taught a short choreography that used one of the veil wraps (and unwrapping) she had taught in the earlier workshop and that featured zills (she encouraged everyone to keep them on while doing veil work) and a drum solo. The choreography was less about getting us to memorize her moves than about showing us how you can perform a varied and exciting multi-part routine even within the time constraints common in haflas and shows.

The show for this week of workshops was held following a fabulous Middle Eastern meal cooked up by Miramar and served with the help of family and friends. Dancing by several of Miramar's students and Miramar herself was featured between courses.

Finally Annette danced onto the stage — in this case, an Oriental rug surrounded by tables, taking the audience back to the days when families flocked to certain night clubs to hear Middle Eastern music and see a belly dancer. She had



her zills on as she danced her way out of her veil wrap, and kept them on throughout most of her captivating performance, taking them off while she balanced a tray of oil lamps on her head. Annette intrigued everyone with her expert use of belly beads to accent her undulations and belly flutters, and drew gasps from the crowd with a perfectly executed Turkish drop. The dancing went on well into the night, with people young and old getting up to join Annette, whose joy and energy were contagious and seemed endless.

The San Joaquin Valley is a long way from Virginia, so I hope Annette will return to the East Coast sometime to offer more workshops in "AmCab," or as she

Susan "Aila Zulema" Loving has studied Middle Eastern dance with Miramar of Winchester since 1999. A professional writer and editor, she has written about and taken photographs of ME dancing for years, and currently performs with Miramar's Palace Pearls class.



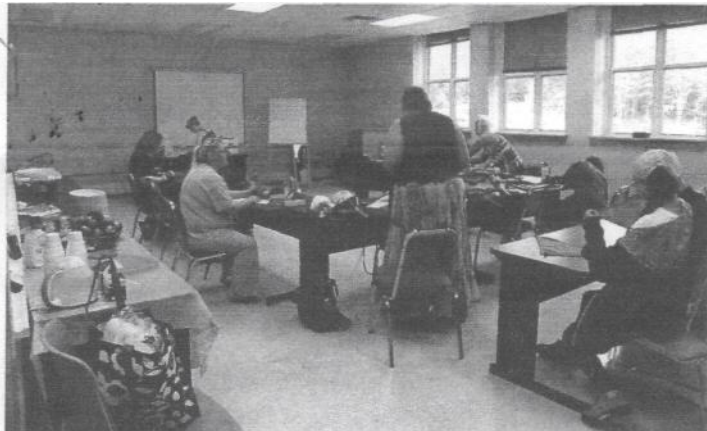
prefers to call it, classic American belly dance.

Peace is Imminent
by Rick of Rising Sun Tribe

So what happens when a bunch of 'uber-geeky' Bellydancers get together and start talking? Well they generally go even more 'geek' than before and begin discussing how Bellydancers are a lot like superheroes. After all, we always wear costumes, many of us have secret identities, and some of us seem to have super powers. In the end what you have is a group of Bellydancers who want nothing more than to be the super heroes they were born to be and to bring peace to the world! And that is exactly how the United Bellydance League and its subsequent convention, UBL Con was born!

This year the convention was held in Bryson City, NC and it is probably one of the most beautiful places I have ever been! I arrived Friday evening and drove into the woods to find our cabin to be very nice considering we packed 6 other Bellydancers into a room that sleeps 8 and only paid \$25 each for the weekend! Several friends also stayed in the Yurt Village nearby and I heard many good things about those as well! For those willing to pay a little extra for comfort there were also local hotels with competitive rates nearby and the venue was right in between which wasn't more than ten minutes for either route!

The next day's activities were going to completely dominate our time, so several of us decided to head into scenic Bryson City to see what we may find for a Friday evening dinner and perhaps a shop or two. The Station Restaurant satisfied our hunger with some really good food but the number of places to eat boggled the mind for such a small town. Many 'tourist trap' style shops were all over and The Cottage Craftsman really seemed to spotlight local artists and talent. They had locally made wine, baskets, honey, jewelry, soaps, lotions, and all manner of unique things that simply can't be found anywhere else. A word of warning however, the town of Bryson City is quaint and scenic, but it is a sleepy little place where pretty much everything closes around 8pm!



At a leisurely 10am the next morning the first class of the day was with Ani of Ancient Moon. This class was all about the tribal hip belt and I must say that I would have never thought to do much of what she taught in this class. By the end of the class most people had a hip belt that could only do with a few accessories but were basically complete. Ani provided all materials as part of the class fee and had a range of fabrics and colors that were pleasing to everyone. Lugging in two sewing machines for class participants to use was over the top and greatly appreciated for the small amount of sewing needed for each belt!

With the approach of noon we broke for lunch and while I appreciated the free spread of pita, hummus, fruit, veggies, and homemade chili, the thirty minutes time constraint didn't allow for any needed runs into town or any serious shopping. But to speak of the shopping is to speak of simply awesome. There were hip belts, skirts, fans, jewelry, hand crochet belts,