

Zills: An Endangered Species by Annette Federico

About a month ago, I had the privilege of working with 14 dancers at my annual "Be a Killer Ziller" workshop. As an American Cabaret-style dancer (dare I say "vintage"?), my perspective on zill playing is steeped in that tradition, yet I acknowledge that dancers hold varying opinions about how zills should be incorporated into one's dance. My performances usually consist of a multi-part routine and, unless one of those parts involves a prop requiring their removal, my zills stay on my hands throughout the performance (yes, I leave them on during veil and play them through my drum solo, too). Since finger cymbals are percussion instruments, I've never been one to "pick along" randomly with the music, but there's certainly nothing wrong with that. As percussion instruments, zills can contribute to the musical foundation without detracting from it while adding an extra, live "color" to the performance. I play them as a drummer would play the rhythmic pattern, whether it's a longa (4/4), beledi, 9/8, or any other. To

clarify, the longa would be right hand - left hand - right hand consistently, not altering the pattern in any way. Since they are percussion, I've always played them through the piece of music as the drums are played, following the changes in rhythm and honoring any stops or breaks in the music. Sometimes, however, music affords some "free styling" on the zills in those stops or a percussion tacit. During the drum solo, depending on the music (and whether it's recorded or live) the dancer's zills might need to provide the steady foundation of the beat while the drummer shows off, or the drum music might provide that for a dancer to "cut loose" with her zills.

I believe zills are exciting and add an element of artistry to dance; in fact, their sound and the flourish they added to the dance was one of the things that drew me to Belly Dancing! I cannot imagine dancing without zills on my hands, and moving them in rhythm as I dance is as natural to me as my own pulse.

But that isn't so for everyone. In the last 10 years, I've noticed a disturbing trend away from playing finger cymbals. This could be for a couple of reasons; for example, if one doesn't see belly dancers playing zills, then one might not seek out instruction. Or, perhaps it's due to the rise in popularity of fusion styles and Modern Egyptian dance, which don't feature zill playing as prominently as AmCab. As those styles gain

popularity and garner more "fans," I fear that playing finger cymbals will become a lost art.

"Not while I live!" says the intrepid belly dance instructor! Back to the workshop: I am here to offer encouragement to those valiant souls who will take up their zills and devote at least 10 minutes per day to increase proficiency and just plain *get better* on them! Aside from the "practice makes perfect" aspect, I wish to offer a few things I've learned over the years from teaching my talented and determined students how to play their finger cymbals.

Number 1: Buy good equipment. Nobody wants to play zills if they don't sound good, and if they aren't brass of a reasonable weight, they won't sound good! Resist the urge to buy cheap ones and plan to spend about \$20.00 for 2.5" zills (Turquoise International) or pop for Zildjian Professional, my personal favorite. A set of Zildjians will cost about \$40.00, and they're well worth the investment.

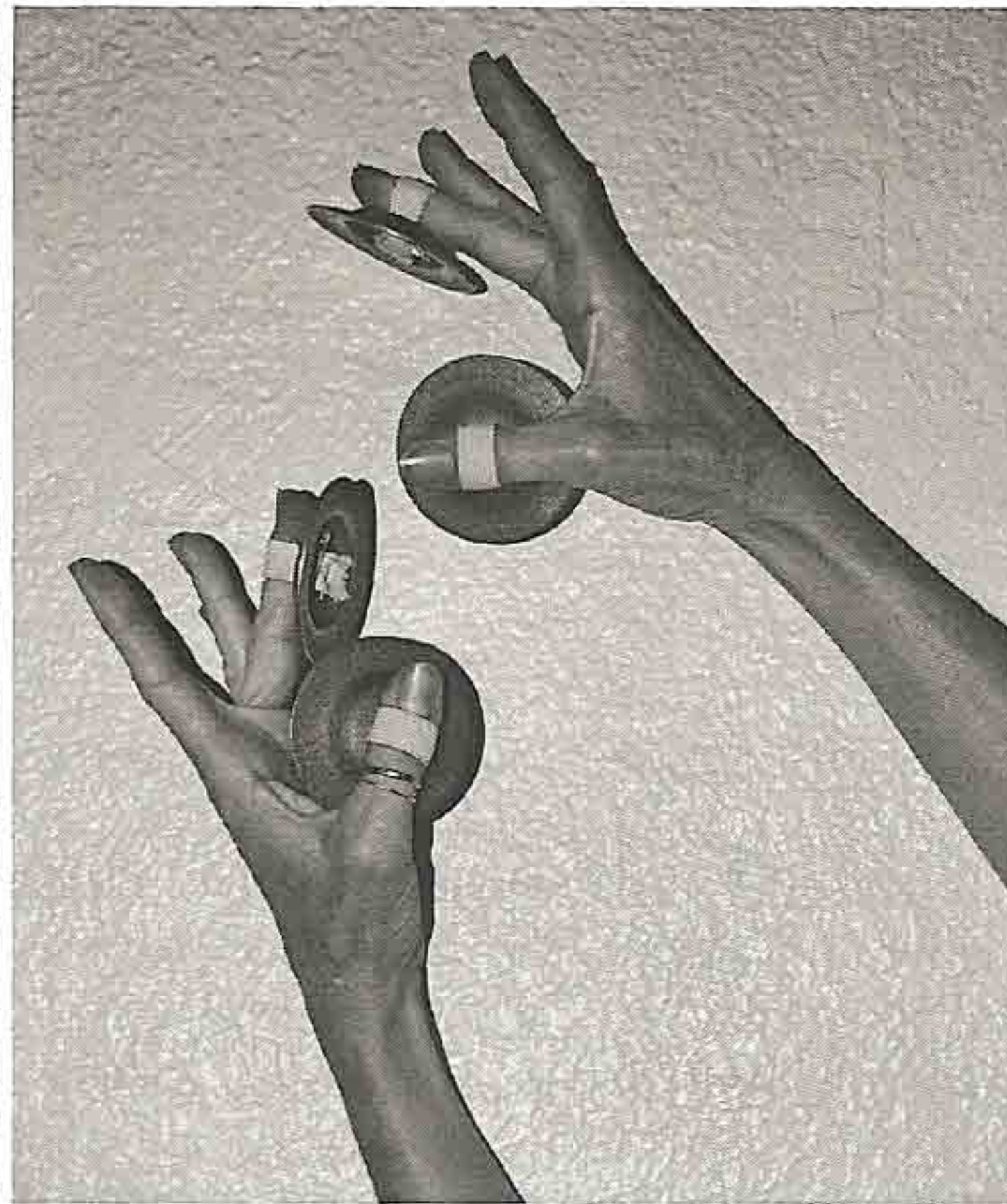
Number 2: Use flat elastic passed through two parallel slits in the top of each zill. Those cute little zills your Aunt Lucy brought you from her trip to Turkey are darling, and brass, and make a pretty good sound when tapped together, but the round elastic shoved through the single hole in the top and tied in a knot will not afford you adequate control to play a zill rhythm consistently. Oh, and while we're on the subject, use elastic; not ribbons, not leather straps. Fasten the elastic with safety pins, don't sew it together; safety pins can be adjusted at a moment's notice (such as moments before your music starts) and sewing, well, requires *sewing*. I've known dancers who've differentiated the zill for the thumb from the middle finger with nail polish, beads sewn to the elastic, rhinestones glued to the zill, etc... I learned a very simple trick from my teacher: use white elastic instead of black and with a marker, make a little dot on the elastic under the thumb zill. And while we're on the subject, remember to *change* the elastic! One can become frustrated with one's finger cymbals because they don't stay in quite the right spot on the fingers and thumbs if the elastic has deteriorated or has torn, and if you're frustrated, you won't want to play them!

Number 3: Practice good technique to achieve the greatest facility and prevent injury, and here are a few pointers. Keep your arm in a straight line from the elbow to the tip of



photo by Carolyn DeAnda

the middle finger. Resist the urge to bend, rotate, or “wag” the hand. Keep the thumb down relative to the hand; that is, the position of the thumb and hand should be as if one were reaching to pick up a bottle so the zills face each other. Do not hold the hand out flat so the thumb is raised up. Play lightly to get the best ringing tone from the zills. Even your little brass “bottle caps” will sing sweetly if you play with proper technique. Tap the zills together lightly, as if they were made of the most delicate crystal, and emphasize popping the hand open as opposed to merely hitting them together with the emphasis on them closed. Playing them lightly will spare your hands and give you more facility with them. Keep the middle knuckle of the middle finger straight; operate the finger from the top knuckle of the hand and bring it to the thumb. The zills will meet off-center, allowing them to ring.



Number 4: Oh, and practice (did I mention practice?) at least 10 minutes per day; first stationary, then walking, then coordinated with dance moves. In my workshop, I teach a progressive “practice drill.” Make sure to use music when you practice; however, when a student is really struggling with finding the beat, I like to begin with a metronome. If you are a beginner, I would stick to a longa, or 4/4, that right-left-right pattern mentioned earlier. It’s counted like this:

Right	Left	Right
And	a	One
Right	Left	Right
And	a	Two
Right	Left	Right
And	a	Three
Right	Left	Right
And	a	Four

Please note that “and a” refers to the *upbeat*, the numbers refer to the *downbeat*.

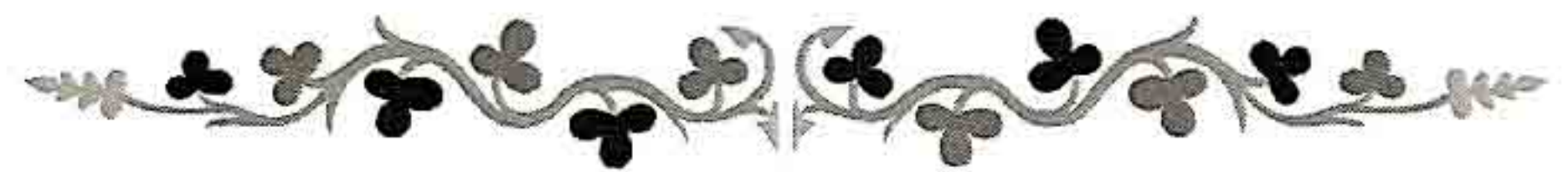
Once you find the rhythm and can move and play, I strongly recommend practicing with dance music. Music keeps your playing consistent with the tempo (as long as you listen carefully) as well as providing the opportunity to internalize the music and hear the phrasing the way you must hear in order to dance to it... but I digress. Since I have a musical background, zills came fairly easy to me, and I learned to play beledi by watching a Delilah VHS tape and practicing (“Delilah’s Belly Dance Workshop”). Her instructional tape (from which I’ve learned much) is now available on DVD.

Momo Kadous, the Egyptian zill virtuoso, has a DVD that I have found helpful (“Finger Cymbals with Momo Kadous”), but if you are a beginner, I don’t recommend it. Also, I have produced a DVD of my own with a beginning/intermediate choreography that includes a zill lesson as well as discussion on basic musical theory, like upbeats and downbeats (“Raks Araby: Setting Steps to Music.”) But here is my disclaimer, and it’s especially pertinent if you are struggling with your zills: working with a skilled teacher, along with your DVD, is my best recommendation. An instructor can spare you the cultivation (and subsequent un-learning) of bad habits culled from a DVD if you don’t quite grasp the musical concepts needed to play zills.

Fifth and Final: Don’t give up! Yes, playing zills while you dance is difficult, but every time one of my dance

students makes the leap to include zills in her performance, it makes my heart happy on so many levels. I consider zills a Rite of Passage for the dancer who has crossed over to the Sisterhood (and Brotherhood) of Thrilling Zilling. But beyond that, there is that beautiful, luminous smile which radiates a sense of a challenge met, of accomplishment and joy! Go get some! Put them on! *Save the ZILLS!*

Annette Federico is a dancer and instructor based in the Central San Joaquin Valley of California; however, she has danced and taught workshops on both coasts! To read more about her, visit www.bellydancingbyannette.com.



Annette Federico

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