

I Wrote a Book!

The JWAAD Book of Belly Dance

By Josephine Wise

The idea of writing a handbook for belly dancers didn't come out of the blue. I had had it in the back of my mind for a year or two, but wasn't getting round to it. I thought it would be a good exercise in putting to paper the bones of my method for describing the dance moves, partly for posterity, and partly because I wanted to be clear about what I do. I am passionate about passing on and teaching middle-eastern dance to younger generations, and thrilled at the innovations they are already creating.

We had also had students on the JWAAD Teacher Training Diploma saying it would be great if there was a written resource they could keep to hand, that included the names of the moves and something about the technique levels used within JWAAD. Our Personal Development Programme uses these levels in some detail, and we have found them incredibly useful for dancers wanting to progress.

I realised a handbook would be an invaluable tool for teachers to refer to when unsure of teaching a particular move, and also essential for students who don't always have a reliable teacher to go to. I know we have done our best to fill the UK with well-informed and qualified teachers, but what about the people who can only get to a teacher who is teaching in a way that may injure or misinform them? I still get students coming to my Improver/Intermediate classes who have spent years learning something so far from the real thing that I am amazed.

I also thought it was high time there was a book with some detail, not just about background history and the different styles of the dance, but also the basic rhythms used, costume styles and how to manipulate your props. I tried to include some of everything, including helpful hints on how to memorise choreography, improvisation tips and more. I couldn't include all of these in huge depth, because the book would have been too heavy to lift, but I put in many of the most important points I have used over the last 34 years teaching dance, 29 of them teaching belly dance.

But I also wanted to write a book because I was missing my beginners' classes. I was worried I would forget all the ways I used to pass on the moves and technique.

I stopped teaching beginners in 2008, because I no longer had time to do everything. Every time I start a new project I have to pass on something I have been doing to others. I gave away all the admin duties and practical running of the Summer School that I had done for ten years, in order to concentrate on the first Fantasia Festival, and I gave up one of my biannual Fantasia Festivals to run the Bellydance Congress. Now I have given up teaching beginners partly so that the Teaching and Performance Diplomas can develop further. But that's not entirely true. The bigger reason is that I have inherited a form of Ehlers Danlos, or hypermobility syndrome, and the repeating of basic moves over and over again to demonstrate them was hurting too much to continue. I used to love teaching beginners - they are enthusiastic and fun, and they haven't become neurotic about their dancing yet! I really miss them.

So, in the summer of 2010 I came home from the Summer School unable to walk. My condition had affected my feet on and off for several years, but this time I couldn't even get round the corner to buy a newspaper. For the first time in my life I sat still for long enough to write, and I managed about two-thirds of the book. Luckily my feet got better and I went back to teaching – much more fun than sitting in front of a computer. I taught for the whole of the next academic year, and in the summer of 2011 I got back from the Summer School with no pain and completely fit.

The problem I could see was that the book would never be finished. I decided I couldn't wait until the next time I was out of action before finishing it, so I gave myself a deadline. I had to work on it in my spare time and be finished by Christmas. I hadn't looked at the book for a year, but I was pleasantly surprised by how much was there, and I set about finishing and rewrites. By January 1st the whole book had been written.

I looked through the book, and although I was happy with what was there, I was a little worried about the technique section. It is very different explaining a move without being able to demonstrate and say "look, like this!" every time someone needs clarification. Had I described them accurately? I asked Yvette Cowles and Margaret Krause, two of my three closest dance friends (yes, the other one is Kay Taylor, but she lives really far away from me), to spend a couple of hours in a studio. I read out the directions for each move and they followed them exactly, trying not to use any previous knowledge of the moves. I thought there would be a couple of corrections to make. There were a couple - on each and every page. It was a long process but I got there in the end.

The next stage was to get the book designed, and here I have a secret weapon – my husband. John is a professional artist/designer who has worked in illustration, advertising and animation all his working life. So I had an unfair advantage there. First I asked all the members of Johara Dance Company, Tarab, Morai Tribal and others to send publicity photos to adorn the pages. Then I asked Johara Dance members whether they would spend an inordinate number of hours being photographed doing the dance moves. John took all the photos and then painstakingly cut out the figures (digitally of course) and placed them all on the pages.

When we looked together at the first version it took my breath away. It looked so gorgeous! I could see dancers buying it for one another at Christmas or as birthday presents. I was thrilled. Then the editing process began - wow, that was an eye-opener. Sophie (my assistant and sister) looked for toping errors (sic) and Yvette did the complete edit, combing it through for everything from misspelling of names to grammatical and historical weirdnesses. Then John and I went through and lined everything up – the right picture next to the right description etc. Between us I think we went over the book at least seven times - the design and edit took as many hours as the writing had.

But look at the effect! Hundreds of hours have been lovingly put into the book and it shines with the buffed perfection of something beautifully constructed. I may be a little biased! But I don't care! I am proud of the book and thrilled that so many people

have said lovely things about it. I hope dancers find it useful as well as beautiful, and I'm happy to have put all that information out there for posterity!

To buy a copy of the book please go to www.jwaad.com and click on the 'shop' menu to find the page. If you have any questions about the book or want to send a copy overseas please email jo.wise@jwaad.com