



In Focus

FILM, BOOK, MUSIC, & VIDEO REVIEWS

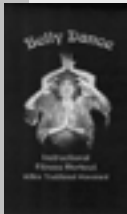


Bellydance for Body Shaping: Abs

Produced by 2004WorldDance New York, 2004, 48 mins

Contact: www.instantbellydancer.com

Rating: Recommended



Belly Dance. Instructional Fitness Workout Within Traditional Movement

Produced by Tess Fillmore, 2001, 60 mins

Contact: www.arabiannights.ca

Rating: Average



Belly Dance Workout with Rayzahna and Dancers of the Harem

Produced by Rayzahna, 2004, approximately 60 mins

Contact: www.rayzahna.com

Rating: Recommended



Flex Appeal: A Belly Dance Workout

Produced by Sony Music, 2004, 68 mins

Contact: www.kathysmith.com or www.sonymusicvideo.com

Rating: Average



Dance Stretch and Hip Energy, Tape One

from her series, **Bellydance: The Secret Desire**

Produced by Aszmara, 2001, 73 mins

Contact: Aszmara Raks Production, www.Aszmara.com

Rating: Highly recommended

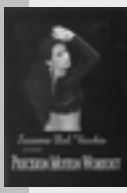


Nourhan Sharif: Introduction to Bellydance Technique

Produced by Sharif Productions, 2002, 90 mins

Contact: www.Egyptianacademy.com

Rating: Highly recommended



Precision Motion Workout

(Also see **Dances From the Heart I and II**)

Produced by Suzanna Del Vecchio, 1996, 90 mins

Contact: www.suzanna.vecchio.com

Rating: Highly recommended



Ultimate Oriental Belly Dance System

(Also see **Hadia in Performance**)

Produced by Hadia, (4 disks), 2004

Contact: www.hadia.com

Rating: Highly recommended

Fitness and Bellydance VIDEO AND DVD OVERVIEW

by Nina Costanza

Oriental dance has been gaining popularity as a healthy and appealing form of exercise. It employs all parts of the body in “soft” movements requiring control and strength, and becomes aerobic when one layers, mixes—and dances. Looking at the options available to our readers, we found that most videos and DVDs fall into two categories: those that emphasize exercise and those that are instructional, using fitness as a foundation for dance, much like a musician practices scales.

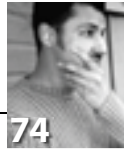
For a dancer, most recommended are those videos/DVDs produced by professional dancers: Aszmara’s *Dance Stretch and Hip Energy*; Nourhan Sharif’s *Introduction to Bellydance Technique*; Suzanna Del Vecchio’s *Precision Motion Workout*; and Hadia’s *Ultimate Oriental Belly Dance System*. Aszmara, Nourhan, Hadia, and Suzanna Del Vecchio are respected performers/instructors, each with over 20 years experience. With unadorned settings and simple costuming, these productions tend to be less glamorous. With concise narrations, Middle Eastern music, and different viewing angles, they also tend to be more content oriented. Fitness and dance are indelibly linked as form and content. For those seeking to develop an exercise regimen, without necessarily aiming to be a dancer, Neon’s *Bellydance for Body Shaping: Abs* does the trick. *Belly Dance: Instructional Fitness Workout within Traditional Movement* by Goldean and *Belly Dance Workout with Rayzahna and Dancers of the Harem* focus on fitness with basic instruction. *Flex Appeal: A Belly Dance Workout* with fitness guru Kathy Smith is for those looking for an exotic new workout.

Bellydance for Body Shaping: Abs incorporates an innovative on-screen presentation of graphics, offering a three-dimensional geometric rendering of dance moves as practical visual cues. Neon includes commentary by Andy Troy, a certified strength/conditioning specialist. She does not convey the nuances and “feel” of Oriental dance, but her work is neat. Her DVD has taste (aside from the techno music) and substance with regard to fitness. It is beneficial for pure exercise and for perceiving a general idea of what bellydance may/could be. Neon has organized her presentation with three 15-minute exercise sessions of abs-toning and shaping moves. Each session has a three-minute warm-up; a nine-minute exercise session; and a two-minute dance sequence, which coordinates 2–3 repetitions of each combination from the exercise into a simple



Bazaar Istanbul:
Music of Turkey

71



Rashed Juma:
Arabesque

74



Youssou N'Dour:
Egypt

76



Rayhana

80

choreography. Neon has a great knack for keying in on those integral elements that communicate skillfully to nondance viewers.

Goldean's *Belly Dance: Instructional Fitness Workout within Traditional Movement* claims to "combine fitness principles with the beauty and benefits of traditional Middle Eastern movements." The intention is noble, but the video is amateur. Goldean conveys movement principles with some imprecise information and sloppy demonstrations. In a lush, Persian setting, Goldean is accompanied by two students who detract. She includes a warm-up, cardiovascular exercises, spatial movements, coordination, and stretching. With the support of an expert in therapeutic exercise, she offers gentle, kinetic moves to "awaken" energy flow, raise/sustain the heartbeat, cool down and lower the heart rate, and challenge new muscle development. Goldean emphasizes lengthening muscles, making the lower back spacious, and breathing to release tension. These are comfortable suggestions, but she also advocates keeping the stomach loose. Her posture reflects this; she has a loose stomach and an unlifted torso, and her legs are usually apart. *Belly Dance: Instructional Fitness Workout within Traditional Movement* is not the best representation of fitness.

Belly Dance Workout with Rayzahna and *Flex Appeal* are modeled on sports workout routines. *Belly Dance Workout* consists of a warm-up with isolations; cardio with combinations to 9/8 rhythms; lower body with *beledi*; abdominals with combinations to a 4/4 world beat; and a cooldown/stretch to *chiftetelli*. Rayzahna, like Suzanna Del Vecchio, is fit and strong. Like Kathy Smith, she excels in her exercise portions. She does a good job of intermixing exercise with dance. Each section begins with stretches of the parts of the body that will be employed in the forthcoming combination. She works on training specific muscle groups, and her stretches are terrific. Her dance moves are easy to see and executed like a fitness instructor. While her isolations and shimmies are stiff, her body alignment, weight changes, and foot

placement are perfect. Rayzahna and her group are charming, shirking pretentiousness or silly innuendos. One feels like a member of the class. Rayzahna advocates bellydance as a fun way to achieve a low-impact cardio and toning regimen. With highly charged, positive energy and upbeat Middle Eastern music, the DVD is perfect for beginners to learn basics and to get an enjoyable workout.

Well scripted, Kathy Smith's *Flex Appeal: A Belly Dance Workout* is entirely geared toward fitness; dance is an appendage. The DVD includes a 20-minute slow routine to introduce basics; a 20-minute fast routine to burn calories; a 10-minute stretching routine combining yoga, Pilates, and gentle movement as a cooldown to restore and rejuvenate; a 3-minute choreography; a tutorial; and a bonus performance by Ansuya. *Flex Appeal* shows how to limber up; burn calories; tone abs, legs, hips, and arms; and get a hint of what bellydancing is. Professionally produced, the exotically gorgeous set encompasses an airy space divided by four arches. Within each arch, a professional dancer simultaneously mimes Smith.

Smith is not a dancer. Experienced in yoga, Pilates, meditation, and weight lifting, she has been at the forefront of wellness/fitness since the '80s. She continually explores new methods of movement. Respectful of the art and aware of her limitations, she incorporates professionals who exhibit the "exercises" as dance. The dancers are as eloquent as Smith is flat. Next to her dancers, Smith is not well isolated, is off rhythm, and has little connection to the music. But she is an athletic instructor with plenty of valuable knowledge of aerobics. Smith is in her element in the yoga segment. Her stretches are applicable to bellydance and challenging. This DVD is sufficient for those who want bellydance exercise, but it lacks soul. Perfect abs are not as sexy as feelingful movement. Smith has plenty of good energy, but no life in her movements. Fortunately, her dancers in the back do.

The contrast between how Kathy Smith *does* a move and how



Ansuya *dances* it is a good analogy between the fitness productions and those that provide grounded dance instruction with the option for advancement. It is the professional dancer who best imparts dance elements, the context and application of exercise, and the feel of Oriental movement. This “feel” must be seen and *felt* in the teacher’s body. Dance exercise shows the best results when this feel—that intangible source of movement energy—is communicated. It is as much a part of technical execution as muscle movement.


In *Dance Stretch and Hip Energy*, Aszmara (New York) has produced an in-depth exercise video, which introduces students to more advanced works. It is a smart, copious production. Aszmara concentrates on technique and the “heartbeat” of the music; rhythmic hearing and execution are inseparable. She demonstrates in front of angled mirrors to show front, back, and side positions. She explains from where the movement exercise is generated and accompanying weight changes. Her system is organized around key movement components and energy sources. She builds on these foundations, always returning to center, adding more layered isolations and combinations. She introduces improvisational technique to illustrate her eventual direction and to keep the student inspired. With excellent music by New York’s Haig Manoukian, Michael Hess, Souren Baronian, Elias Sakar, Lee Baronian, and Tomer Tzug, Aszmara presents stretches, hip work and shimmies (“hip energy exercises” and a “hip energy routine”), spatial movement at different levels, and a routine repeated with variations. Aszmara is energy. She is intense and incredibly rhythmic (an excellent *zill* player). Her video, appropriate for all levels, will make you sweat.

Nourhan Sharif’s *Introduction to Bellydance Technique* is another exceptional production, revealing a solid understanding of the dance. Nourhan (New York City) bases her teaching on the Yousry Sharif Technique, an Egyptian-style *raqs sharqi*. She includes a solid warm-up, which stretches all parts of the body; posture and body alignment based on the five positions of *raqs sharqi*; isolations; hip work; traveling steps; and four combination patterns. Nourhan is one of the few, like Aszmara, who has organized a system for exercise and education—a program based in real dance and not some spiritual hoopla. Her explications speak to one’s intelligence, and her demonstrations are cleanly Oriental. Using different camera perspectives, she provides various viewpoints for each illustration. An ingenious extra segment replicates combinations at slower speeds. Music is used sparingly so that one can hear counts and explanations. Valuable for beginners, advanced dancers can also use it to clean up technique and absorb good teaching skills. The fitness aspect of the exercises is invigorating and feels good!

Suzanna Del Vecchio (Colorado) is the epitome of fitness expert and dancer in one. Her body is strong *and* supple. Her per-

formances exemplify Oriental expressiveness and intricate technique. With expertise in Hatha Yoga, Iyengar style, she emphasizes alignment and weight placement to refine and expand expression. Foot patterns precede movement demonstrations. Del Vecchio includes nearly all possible isolations (some rarely seen); two series of dance combinations, entitled “Egyptian” and “Oriental”; yoga stretches; and a 30-minute continuous workout incorporating previously taught isolations. Her guidelines are a fine distillation of basic facts and practical philosophy, such as: Relax all tension spots in the body; The air is thick, and the quality of weight is necessary for a fluid look; Be in the moment. Like Neon, she uses diagrams to complement her demonstrations. Unlike most presentations, Del Vecchio does not talk while moving: She explains first, then demonstrates. *Precision Motion Workout* is a great exercise companion and an exhaustively comprehensive practice for dancers. Because of the producer’s in-depth kinesiological knowledge, it may be a little vigorous for beginners.

Hadia (Canada) is an artist of Oriental, flamenco, jazz, African, Brazilian, and Polynesian dance and a registered practitioner/instructor of massage. Hadia applies knowledge of anatomy to create concise and disciplined breakdowns. Her understanding of Oriental dance allows her to demonstrate fitness technique with the nuances and textures of Oriental music. With four discs in this *Ultimate Oriental Belly Dance System*, Hadia has completed an immense undertaking. Disc 1, a ten-point alignment check, is based on therapeutic exercise principles. A challenging warm-up is followed by exercises that build into bellydance. Disc 2 systematically develops basic steps and sequences, culminating in an Egyptian choreography. Disc 3 introduces complex combinations, concluding with a choreography to Hakim’s “Talakik.” Disc 4, pure fitness, consists of a warm-up; cooldown; and yoga, Pilates, and jazz exercises for flexibility and balance.

Bellydance engages both body and brain. As a “bare-bones” exercise routine, learning isolations and the coordination of muscle groups requires energy and concentration. Following an intensive, educational program—applying technique to music/rhythm—can be more physically demanding and exhilarating. Whether one chooses fitness or a dance art approach (or both) bellydance is a natural form of exercise that satisfies heart, mind, and body. 

DANCE EXERCISE

shows the best results when this feel – that intangible source of movement energy – is communicated. It is as much a part of technical execution as muscle movement.

Get In Focus!

To submit a review or material for review, please contact Nina Costanza at ninaamar@aol.com or 212-362-0725. Submissions can be mailed to: Nina Costanza 31 W. 88th Street, #4B New York, NY 10024