Austin Belly Dance Convention article

Attending My First Belly Dance Convention (But Not My Last)

by Jennifer Garner

Austin, in addition to being the “Live Music Capital of the World,” also has quite an impressive number of talented and committed belly dancers. Every week performances, showcases, and meet-ups can be found around town, and accomplished instructors are available nearly every night of the week for classes.

For years, I had heard my teachers and fellow students talk of the Austin Belly Dance Convention, but I had never attended it. I had mistakenly thought it might be too advanced or too expensive for me. Fortunately, with a little research, I discovered that each dancer can easily tailor her experience to her style, skill-level, and budget.

I knew I needed to be selective about what I signed up for. So, I first reviewed the workshops and performances online, noting the ones that sounded interesting to me. It was fun too to daydream a bit about how each session might help me take my dancing to the next level.

I then consulted my teacher Amara to ask her about the workshops that would challenge me as a dancer. We discussed my goals and which sessions would be the best fit. It was exciting to think I would have the opportunity to learn from a master dancer like Aziza, a woman who taught and performed at an international level!

Of course, I also wanted to see one of the evening shows. Not only had I heard that the Friday and Saturday performances were of a very high caliber, I suspected that seeing such amazing dancers would inspire me and give me new ideas for my own practice. Though it was hard to pick just one, I finally decided on Saturday because it would mean that I would see Amara and Aziza dance.

I arrived very early to the Saturday show, so I would be assured of a good seat. While awaiting the show, I saw many fellow dance students from past classes. It was a great chance to catch up with them, some of whom I had not seen in almost a year.

Badrawn, a Dallas-based acoustic band who plays Middle Eastern music, performed for every dancer in Act One and kicked off the evening shows. It was such a treat to hear live music for these dancers. Jamie Lynn was a stand out in this portion of the show. She began with a lyrical veil piece and seamlessly and confidently transitioned to playing zils along with the band.

The Gala performance began with the hypnotic tribal fusion group Pomegranate Vibrato dancing to Solace’s “Blood, Oil, Gold.” Magical and unique, these four dancers created beautiful lines and shapes as a group and used the space in a dynamic way. At times, all dancers would move in sync; other times, two and two would dance together, emphasizing different formations that kept it engaging. I was also very impressed at how they incorporated the zils into this performance, initially playing with the song and later using them percussively without accompaniment.

I had not had any ATS or tribal belly dance instruction in the past, but I was simply so inspired that I just had to know more about it. A friend encouraged me to take classes from Lily, a dancer who favors tribal fusion style in her own work. Since then, I have loved every moment of it. Draconis, one of the performers in Pomegranate Vibrato, will be an instructor at the ABDC 2015 convention, so I have added one of his workshops to my list for 2015!

The next performance that grabbed me was remarkably different from Pomegranate Vibrato, Vanessa and Sa'diyya. Their high-energy performance, which drew from many cultures, was glamorous and humorous. All of their numbers were fun to watch, including a flirty tambourine duet, but my favorite was the Bollywood-inspired one to “Sheila Ki Jawani.” Wearing eye-catching, matching bright pink costumes, they dazzled me with sharp, bold arm and hips movements punctuating the beats of the song. So fun!

It was a pleasure to see one of my instructors Amara dance too. Dancing to a song by the underground Lebanese singer Yasmine Hamdan, Amara’s performance ranged from gooey movements with dramatic pause to an energetic drum solo with zils, shimmies, and slinky undulations.

Aziza, the headliner of the show, was amazing to experience in person. Not only is she an accomplished, talented dancer, Aziza seemed to reach out to every person in the audience with her smile and expressive eyes.

In an elegant, all black costume and a contrasting lavender veil, Aziza’s second performance was the complete package, beginning with an entrancing veil entrance piece. I noticed that Aziza completely used the space and incorporated playful touches of little kicks and hops and arm movements that interpreted the music exceptionally well. It was an exciting preview of the workshop I would take on Sunday with her.

The *Hands, Arms, and Poses with Aziza* workshop was truly the highlight of the weekend. I have had the pleasure of taking classes with a number of accomplished dancers, but I had never taken an intensive workshop like this. As a fledging intermediate student, I rarely have had the brain space let alone the physical ability to do much with my arms and hands. I had always wanted to but just was not sure where to start. Aziza taught us the importance of using all the muscles in our arms to give life to this expressive part of our bodies.

By the end of the workshop I felt elated and challenged by learning so much. I also was moved by the feeling of community, of being with so many people passionate about belly dance. Dancers of many different levels and styles had come together to learn from one of the most-noted dancers in the belly dance world.

Since then, I have continued to see some of those dancers from the Austin Belly Dance Convention at performances, in classes, and gatherings. The ABDC provided a great opportunity to connect with others and to make new friends who share my love of dance.