

Belly Up

Women discover belly dancing as a fun, fit alternative to the drudgery of the gym

BY MAKAYLA SILVA

How unbearably boring is running on a treadmill? No matter how many Lady Gaga or Fergie songs you may have on your iPod, that seemingly endless set of 200 crunches never actually gets easier.

While it may be fairly obvious that exercise is indeed beneficial in more ways than one — with 29,750 U.S. health clubs retaining 45.3 million members this year according to the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association — most of us simply do not use our gym memberships as often as we'd like to say we do.

Why? Perhaps due to the mind-numbing monotony of running on a moving belt of rubber for what seems like an eternity. Or perhaps it is the knuckle-draggers in the weight area who spend more time preening in the mirror than lifting actual weights.

Either way, New Haven offers a fun alternative to a gym membership: belly dancing. While most people may have some exotic idea of an Aladdin-like fleshpot in harem pants and coin skirts (and they would be right), belly dancing is an entertaining form of exercise.

Yes, a gym membership at Planet Fitness is less expensive than a class card at a belly-dancing studio. But looking past the price difference, if you aren't using your gym membership as much as you'd like, you may wish to weigh your options.

Typically, belly dancing costs between \$10 to \$18 for a per-session drop-in fee. The dance studios or fitness centers sponsoring the classes also generally offer a class card, which lowers the per-class cost. You can get a full-body workout once a week and learn the basic techniques to practice on



Belly dancing is such a good workout, explains Aleenah Flit, because it isolates individual muscles and muscle groups.

your own outside of class.

Adaptability and flexibility, core strengthening and a phenomenal cardio workout are just a few health benefits of this ancient art. Belly dancing — *raqs sharqi* in Arabic, *oryantal dansi* in Turkish or *danse du ventre* in French — is many centuries old. With countries all over the world claiming the dance form as their own, belly dancing has immigrated to the United States and is practiced as a form of exercise all over the country.

While belly dancing is a celebration of the female form, the archaic form of exercise will tone muscles you did not even know you had — for example, in your armpits. And the results are immediate.

Lydia Picco, who teaches at Revive Wellness Center on Whalley Avenue and Your Community Yoga Center in Hamden, says belly dancing is an all-in-one fitness regimen anyone can do.

“With belly dance, it’s like an alternative to Pilates,” she explains. “Sometimes Pilates or other forms of exercise is too much for certain people — they can’t handle it.”

A health educator for the Cornell Scott-Hill Health Corp. in Fair Haven, Picco says belly dancing can supplement your daily exercise regimen.

“I don’t work out — I just belly dance and do yoga. That’s it,” she says. “I am the strongest that I have ever been in my life.”

Picco explains that different movements in belly dancing that require the use of multiple abdominal muscles can replace traditional crunches. “Certain types of undulations [or full-body rolling] require the entire use of your body and chest movements require you to lengthen and contract your abs,” Picco says.

Picco explains that belly dancing was originally used as a form of strength training for women during pregnancy.

“It was a woman’s dance,” she says. “And they named it ‘belly’ dance because it prepared the body for childbirth and strengthened the body for that.”

For anyone who simply refuses to purchase an Ab Circle Pro, regardless of how many infomercials you may watch at 2 a.m., or simply cannot fathom lying down for another set of 150 crunches, Aleenah Flit, a New Haven dancer teaching at Let’s Dance in the Rhythm Studio in Branford and at the University of New Haven during the school year (you don’t have to be a student), said no workout is more fun than belly dancing.

“It’s almost like a yoga meets Pilates meets an aerobic exercise all in one,” she says. “It takes a lot of concentration but at the same time if you got some basics down and you can speed it up a bit you are going to sweat. You are going to work for sure.”

It’s not all coins and hip-scarves?

“It builds your core like a fitness regiment but you won’t find anything more fun than belly dancing,” says Aleenah (who professionally uses her first name only). “It is very strenuous but it’s cool because you can customize it to your level — how far you want to take it or how hard you want to work. You can make it into whatever you want it to be.”

She says belly dancing is unlike any other form of dance.

“In comparison to ballet or ballroom, belly dancing is a little bit more challenging because it is more isolation-based, which means you’re moving different body parts independently of one another, unlike just learning footwork or steps,” she says. “Here you almost have to have a heightened awareness of your body in order to do all of the isolations that are very much a part of belly dance.”

For example, the neck might move to influence a chest movement followed by a lift of the diaphragm and finally a pelvic lift. Each movement is carefully orchestrated in tune with folkloric Middle Eastern or Turkish music.

“To tone or to shape the muscle you need to isolate it most of the time,” she says. “That’s kind of the present-day wisdom of fitness training.”

“Belly dancing has such a different aesthetic and just the whole philosophy of it and technique that you almost have to relearn everything and throw everything out the window that you knew before,” she says. “It is almost like starting new.”

That means if you have absolutely no background in dance, belly dancing is perfect for you to begin with.

“It isn’t more or less difficult than doing anything else, if you really were to do it properly and do it well — all of that takes time,” she explains. “No matter what you do it takes some time, some effort and some determination.”

Aleenah, who also teaches sessions with North Haven Adult Education, says belly dancing can be liberating for women in the sense that they gain more and more body confidence with each class and with each performance (something likely

impossible between über-tan blondes surviving on lettuce alone and Mr. Universe-wannabes at your local gym).

“The aesthetic of belly dancing — what’s beautiful, what’s acceptable, what’s the right body type for a dancer — is much more democratic,” she says. “Body types, looks, shapes and sizes — it’s a non-issue, whereas in ballet you cannot dance if you weigh more than 120 pounds because someone has to lift you.”

After taking Aleenah’s class for two years, Heather Dostert has been performing professionally for five years as Hedasa. She says belly dancing, while a fun way to exercise, is not as easy as it looks at first.

“The dance was as challenging as I expected it to be. I knew I was up for a big challenge when I decided to take the dance on,” she says. “I was in a lot of pain the first six months of study, but it was well worth it.”

Dostert says the movements of belly dancing are very particular, which help to build strength and flexibility and can also be repetitive, imitating cardio.

“It’s a much better alternative to the gym,” she says. “I’m 37 years old with an eight-year-old daughter, and have never been stronger and more toned in my life.”

Dostert compares belly dancing to other forms of rigorous exercise adding it is a fun and rewarding way to get into shape and stay in shape.

“Belly dance is close to martial arts where it’s almost like a discipline, which builds strength and flexibility,” she explains.

Joy Herbst, an American Tribal Style (ATS)-certified instructor, teaches a modern, non-traditional style of belly dancing at the arts center at Christ Church on Broadway.

Incorporating electronica music with a darker style of dance, Joy says ATS is “much more dramatic than the sequins of cabaret style that’s more common.”

Herbst says her classes focus on enhancing students’ dance vocabulary, often involving hip-dropping in the form of drills and combinations. The focus on technique rather than routine allows a beginner to drop into a class at any time and keep pace.

Herbst explains that her small-sized classes include everyone from teenagers to women in their 50s who may or may not have any background in dance and

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READINGS

The Theatre 4 collective presents a reading of **Peace Warriors** by New Haveners Doron Ben-Atar and Debbie Pollak. Set on St. Roman Street in the City of Elms, *Peace Warriors* brings together four sharp-tongued academics and a precocious adolescent for a night of sparring over politics, adultery and unfulfilled dreams. 8 p.m. August 24 at Whitney Humanities Center, 53 Wall St., New Haven. Free. 203-432-5239, t4ct.org.

ONSTAGE

Theater Camp

The summer camp of the **Madhatters Theatre Co.** will stage the 1920s musical comedy, song-

p.m. Fri.-Sat., 4:30 p.m. Sun. (doors open) through September 12 at Consiglio's, 165 Wooster St., New Haven. \$54.95 (includes prix fixe dinner). Reservations. 203-865-4489, consiglios.com.

Opening

The original Broadway production of **Finian's Rainbow** ran for 725 performances. With book by E.Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, lyrics by Harburg and music by Burton Lane, *Finian* is a much-loved stew of whimsy, romance and political satire. August 11-September 5 at Ivoryton Playhouse, 103 Main St., Ivoryton. \$38-\$15. 860-767-7318, ivorytonplayhouse.org.

The Elm Shakespeare Co. mounts its 15th annual summer production, the Bard's **The Winter's Tale**, directed by James Andreassi. The play contains one of the most famous Shakespearean stage

Acquitted of a horrible crime six years ago, Constance Blackwood lives with her devoted younger sister Merricat and their uncle Julian in what was once the home of the richest — and most envied — family in a small New England town. Constance tends to the house and garden while Merricat invents magical charms to protect the surviving Blackwoods from the townspeople's prying eyes and vicious gossip. But talismans may not be powerful enough to keep the sisters together when their handsome cousin Charles comes to visit. A Yale Repertory Theatre production. September 17-October 9 at the University Theatre, 222 York St., New Haven. \$67-\$35. 203-1234, yalerep.org.

Ella: The Musical, by Jeffrey Hatcher. Conceived by Rob Ruggiero. Featuring more than two dozen much-loved songs, *Ella: The Musical* weaves myth, memory and music into a stylish and sophisticated journey through the life of Ella Fitzgerald, one of the greatest jazz singers of the 20th century. Tina Fabrique, hailed by *Variety* as "must-see," stars in this joy-filled and nostalgic musical, performing such unforgettable tunes as "A Tisket, A Tasket," "That Old Black Magic" and "They Can't Take That Away from Me." September 22-October 17 at Long Wharf Theatre, 222 Sargent Dr., New Haven. \$40. 203-787-4282, longwharf.org.

Continuing

Radio Girl is a brand-new musical based on *Rebecca* of *Sunnybrook Farm*. Rebecca is a spunky ten year-old with a can-do attitude and enormous talent. She doesn't let anything get her down — not even being an orphan, or growing up during the Depression, and especially not her cantankerous Aunt Miranda. Through August 22 at the Norma Terris Theater, 33 N. Main St., Chester. \$45.50. 860-873-8668, goodspeed.org.

Subtitled "A Musical Love Story," **Carnival!** is the heart-warming tale of a naive young woman who eagerly joins a traveling circus. Surrounded by a riot of acrobats and jugglers, music makers and clowns, she is dazzled at first by the troupe's manipulative magician. In the end she finds happiness with a disillusioned puppeteer who can express himself only through his puppets. Based on the film *Lili* and featuring such songs as "Love Makes the World Go Round" and "Her Face." *Carnival!* casts a romantic spell over audiences. Through September 18 at Goodspeed Opera House, 6 Main St., East Haddam. \$70.50-\$35. 860-873-8668, goodspeed.org.

directions: "*Exit, pursued by a bear*," presaging the offstage death of Antigonus. 8 p.m. daily except Mon. August 19-September 5 at Edgerton Park, 75 Cliff St., New Haven. Free. 203-393-1436, elmshakespeare.org.

Blood Type: Ragu is a hilarious and occasionally poignant ride through the Italian immigrant experience based on the life of writer/performer Frank Ingrassciotta. This one-man show features more than 20 characters, who live, love and laugh as they struggle to thrive in a new culture. It's a fast-paced coming-of-age story that is not just a comedy, not just a drama. It's family — and we all have one. 8 p.m. August 21, 2 p.m. August 22 at Seven Angels Theatre, 1 Plank Rd., Waterbury. \$35-\$28. 203-757-4676, sevenangels theatre.org.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is a haunting, lyrical, and darkly humorous new musical based on the 1962 novel by Shirley Jackson, author of *The Lottery* and *The Haunting of Hill House*.



Photograph: Ed Krieger

Hailed by *Variety* as a 'must-see,' Tina Fabrique channels a certain song-styling legend in *Ella: The Musical* at Long Wharf.

and-dance extravaganza *Charleston*, with roles for 21 females and 11 males. The camp will take place at the Lymes' Youth Service Bureau with two performances at Andrews Memorial Town Hall in Clinton. Camp is open to age nine and older. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays August 9-20 at Lymes' Youth Service Bureau, 59 Lyme St., Old Lyme. \$500. 860-395-1861.

Cabaret

Consiglio's restaurant continues its Outdoor Garden Theatre season with **Nonna's Summer Wine Party!**, a musical by Elizabeth Fuller, who also penned last summer's popular production of *The Luigi Board* on Wooster Street. *Nonna's* is an interactive Italian entertainment that tells the amusing love story of twin girls (of a certain age) and their feisty Calabrese mama played by Gary Cavello. The audience is drawn into joining the fun as they sing, clap and dance along to Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Connie Francis, Louie Prima and others. 6

BELLY DANCING

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eventually work their way to performing at places like the Kasbah Garden Cafe on Howe Street during summer months.

"I have some students [who] come into my classes and just with their stature or posture of flow of the movement, you're like, 'Oh, you must have studied dance,' and it's not always the case," she says.

Connecting with every part of your body is one of the most important benefits of belly dancing, Herbst asserts.

"Proprioception, or knowing where your body parts are in relation to other body parts and having a mental mirror of seeing what your body is producing as you're moving, is crucial," Herbst explains. "It definitely awakens muscles that you either probably forgot about or haven't been in touch with for quite some time."

More often than not, women are turning to dance as an alternative to hitting the gym.

"Because I focus a lot on posture, which is always very grounded, you're engaging from the floor up, from your ankles to your calves to your quads, up to your arms, which are always very lifted," Herbst says.

"Just drilling movements and holding your arms up to the side — it's a workout you're just engaging so much," she adds.

Though not explicitly a "cardio-belly" class, Herbst says you will absolutely get your heart rate up in her class.

"Even in our belly dancing classes, which aren't titled cardio-belly dancing, you're going to work up a sweat," she says.

Work up a sweat in costumes you might find in a dress-up trunk at age five.

"Twenty-five-yard skirts that are big — because it is very much a part of the movement, having all of the fabric moving with your hips — are very much a part of the culture," says Herbst. "It's definitely fun and you definitely get more confident."

Joy says self-consciousness disappears with the sounds of the rhythmic clanking of the zils and beat of the drum.

"You may not have a 26-inch waist or a six-pack carved out — I definitely don't — but they're very flattering. Just being in your own skin — it builds a confidence where you might not have been comfortable before wearing that top and exposing your abdomen," Herbst says.

"It just makes you feel happier." ❖