

Featured Articles - Choreography's Sister, Inspired Thought

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Choreography's Sister, Inspired Thought Written by Leyla Najma



Years ago I realized that a good choreographer will surprise the audience with the unknown. It's a move that captivates an audience into an anticipated silence but with a catch. A fulfilled expectation is the greatest gift any dancer can give to her audience. What makes choreography come to life is the dancer herself. Each dancer has her own special ingredients that make her stand out from other dancers. This magical brew seems to be a mixture of individual interpretation plus how a dancer places movement within the music.

How can we know the dancer from the dance? ~William Butler Yeats

A combination or move taught in class is just a move; that is until a student becomes comfortable with her own interpretation and extension of her body. Inspiration is the light bulb illuminating the desire to dance

that precedes the courageous enthusiasm to undertake choreography head on. My analogy is equivalent to a bird coming out of its nest, it must instinctively have the desire to fly but like all of us it still needs encouragement.

My thoughts on choreography have changed through out the years mainly because of restaurant performing. This surprised me but made sense because years ago I realized the pay scale especially here in Albuquerque versus other cities I lived in was pretty much like biting the dust. So I hunkered down and decided on a way to enhance my pay scale. The obvious choice was to look at my dancing and alter it to fit with the space limitations and atmosphere. I realized this change had to take place because like Dorothy I wasn't in Kansas anymore where live bands and stages were the norm. I had a fountain, separate rooms that were small and multiple chairs trying to trip me waiting for me each weekend. It was going to be home for a long while so I made the best of it and learned a few things along the way.

Inspired thought can be a subliminal signal that comes from many things. The inside of the restaurant in Albuquerque was a tent design that was striking so it was easy to imagine dancing in the glow of moonlight beside a campfire. The reality was I danced around a fountain, cascading water that took up most of the space in the middle of a room. As beautiful as that sounds, the choreography aspect of my dance did an about face and I had to come up with a dramatic change that complimented my new surroundings. Invariably the unintended blooper happened, spraying the customers with water because my veil would occasionally take a dip.

This is where the light bulb went off for me because the inspired thought aspect of my surroundings started to connect the dots for my new choreography. I realized I couldn't spin with my veil like I traditionally did on stage and the straw that broke the camels back was when I knocked a bottle of wine off a table with my veil. I panicked, spun around and in one swoop, grabbed it before it hit the floor. I received a wonderful applause but decided I wasn't the acrobatic type. The old ways of performing in restaurants was a thing of the past. This is where my, "Hip Phyllosophy" curriculum was born.



Choreography can be many things but I have found the most important is impact. I think the technicality of a dancer's performance comes in a strong second. It became obvious that the dichotomy of the two had to do with the audience. In restaurant performing the audience needs to be considered because they are in closer in proximity to us but our performing has to be stage quality. It's a mind-set that puts restaurant dancers in a different category because they have to deal with the reality of being in the audience's space. It can be an uncomfortable, sharing experience, which can make restaurant dancing for the newcomer dancer; well to put it simply, weird.

The art of restaurant dancing has to do with a dancer's choreography and the personal relationship he or she wants to have with the customers. This is where inspiration comes in to inspire those specific moves that receive the most reaction from customers.

The customers inspired me to create dances that worked within the space we shared. We all have to care how our audiences react to our inspired creativity. They are the mirrors that reflect back to us what does work and what doesn't. I know there are dancers out there who will say that if you dance for an ignorant or uneducated audience, how can they assist us in our creative process.



When I danced in the restaurant here in Albuquerque, I would create mini-choreographies that were loose in structure. This allowed me to change at a moments notice especially if kids were running around or people walked by. I then created a more stylized version of my choreography that pulled movements into an in-place dance method that worked better for small spaces. My new surroundings inspired me to rethink the box of in the box choreography. This new version of dancing was really spontaneous and in the box choreography mixed together. It was my new drink of inspiration. Once I realized what the customers needed a low-key version of my dance form, then I was able to give them what was more comfortable for them to watch. I think a dancer who listens to her audience will ultimately be a dancer who follows her gut more. The end result was my tips definitely made up for the drop in my pay scale. This was a great learning experience and I was able to pass on what I learned in my on-line instructional videos.

The bottom line is if we aren't inspired, we won't come up with those choreographies that are creative masterpieces or on the other hand, we won't challenge ourselves to dive into creative change. Choreography is the visual testament to each dancer's ability to hear and move to music but it's inspiration that leads the way. They are two sisters that not only work well together, but they are as old as the language of the ages. Fortunately for us, they are a combined language belly dancers instinctively understand and create from.

"I am a dancer. I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living.... In each it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God." ~Martha Graham, c.1953

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