

# Unveiling the myths of dance

■ Raks sharki, a dance native to the Middle East, is known for its enchanting expression and ambiance

By Mason West  
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The term "belly dance" carries a variety of emotions with it. While it's filled with mystique and intrigue, it also carries a certain taboo. When people see dancers moving their hips and shaking their shoulders, certain associations can't help but be made.

"A lot of people have misconceptions about the dance," said Kathy Forrester, a member of the Middle Eastern Dance Guild of Eugene.

"Most Americans think that what I do is seedy in some way," Traci Lea, another guild member, said.

While the dance projects are of an obvious sexual nature, it is meant to be beautiful, not dirty. Even the name "belly dance" has

## Raks sharki

Who: Middle Eastern Dance Guild of Eugene

What: Mideast Festival

When: Saturday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Where: Hilyard Community Center

beauty of the dance and the music.

"I figured I have a belly," Rae Kimball, a freshman dance major, said. "Why don't I use it!"

Kimball said this only half seriously, however. Belly dancing is much more than gyrating hips and shaking chests. Members of the guild get frustrated, or even dismissive when people declare, "I can belly dance," and start wiggling their bodies around. Dancers work very hard to hone their skills. While dancing, the women will often watch their hands move to the music, as if those hands are not attached to their bodies. Because of the physical labor of the dance, some people are actually beginning to practice the dance as a form of exercise.

Dancers take their art form so seriously there are competitions that occur all over the country. Lea recently won Miss Olympiques Orientale 2000, a contest for raks sharki dancers.

Competitions occur frequently because people who study raks sharki take pride in their abilities and want to show them off. Since the beginning, the dancing has been exceptionally flashy. The focus drawn to the performers by their adorned — and sometimes revealing — clothes is intentional. However, if audiences have trouble staring at peoples' midriffs and hips, they will not be able to fully appreciate the performance.

Dancers can become frustrated with audiences that don't participate in the presentation. It's the audience's place to get excited and shout and clap with the music. Dancers hope quiet audience members will follow the example of other performers or audience members who are involved and the sort of whooping and hollering in the style of Xena, Warrior Princess is always welcome.

To actually be on stage performing requires a great degree of confidence. Not all of the women in the Guild fit the American stereotype of a beautiful woman, often young, thin, blonde. But this doesn't make them ashamed to show off their bodies and abilities.

"I used to be really insecure, but being in classes with women of all shapes and ages made it OK," Kimball said.

To show the public what it can do first-hand, the Guild is holding a Mideast Festival on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the Hilyard Community Center. Aside from the dancing, the fair will host a fashion show, a henna tattoo artist, vendors and demonstrations. The event will serve to educate the public about Middle Eastern culture. Ticket price is \$3 for adults and \$5 for families.

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Rea Kimball  
freshman  
dance major



a tone of impropriety when compared with the actual title: "raks sharki," translated as "the dance of the East."

Most Americans will go their whole lives thinking that "belly dance" is the legitimate title of this art form. The Guild was formed in 1991 to change that. It is comprised of people who love the music and dance of the Middle East and seek to promote their art form to the public as well as help eliminate inhibitions about raks sharki.

"We're trying to let people know it's not really what you think," Lea said.

According to Forrester, the dancing is something anyone can enjoy.

"It's family entertainment."

Family entertainment or not, it requires gusto to take up the dance. Forrester started because she became intrigued with the

