



John Jacobson

# GOTHIC BELLY DANCE: *Raising Energy*



**I**n the ancient world, belly dancers raised energy, worshipped fertility gods and shimmied into states of ecstasy. Since those days, belly dance, like witchcraft, has travelled a rocky road of change. The earthy magick of ancient belly dance has all but disappeared, only to be replaced by the magick of sequins and spotlight.

Enter gothic belly dance. Upon the gothic stage, witchcraft and belly dance have coalesced like long-forgotten lovers. The result is a wicked recipe of belly dance theatrics, gothic glamour and witches' magick.

The experiences of five gothic belly dancers are included in this article. Aepiril Schaile, 'dances to make the dark feminine sacred again.' She lives in the witch city of Salem, Massachusetts, U.S.A. Deva Matisa is from Berlin in Germany – the home of gothic. Her name means 'a shining one' in Hindu or in Zoroastrianism, it means 'one of an

order of evil spirits.' Melbourne gothic belly dancer, Ma'isah, teaches her troupe to harness group synergy, as does Zariel in her troupe, Khandroma, named after a Tibetan spiritual energy who dances with wild abandon far outside the reach of humankind.

Brisbane-based Saahirah Ravyn is also a teacher. She explains the genesis of her name: 'My name has been conceived through meditation—"Saahirah" meaning "of the moon and stars" or "enchantress". "Ravyn" is an acknowledgment of my spirit guides, one of which is a raven. To the Druids, the raven represents initiation, healing and protection. The raven is also a misunderstood creature and, like the Gothic subculture, carries a stigma of fear and evil.'

These names are very different from the typical Arabic and Egyptian names used by cabaret belly dancers.

Among the belly dance community, gothic belly dancers distinguish themselves by the practice of witchcraft. Aepriil is involved in several communities that practise regular seasonal ritual. Saahirah Ravyn's private craft includes a dance ritual. She draws a protective circle to dance through and then reverses the direction to dissipate the energy. A favourite preparation for Ma'isah's troupe is a moving meditation connecting with the earth. Deva feels that Europe lost many wise people to the witch hunts. She uses gothic belly dance to revive the lost magick of her ancestors. These beliefs are not usually found among mainstream belly dancers.

Blending the Craft with belly dance begins with consecrating space and blessing items such as swords and zills (small finger cymbals). Ma'isah blesses her scimitar and her dance space. If the latter is neglected she can feel it in her performance. Aepriil sometimes opens her pieces with a call of the quarters. A picture emerges that a gothic belly dance is not simply entertainment but a mirror of witchcraft ritual.

Gothic belly dancers invoke gods, goddesses, spirits and archetypes during their performance. Ma'isah has called up goddesses such as Astarte, Lilith, Isis, Hecate and some without common names. Saahirah Ravyn raises the fae spirit and sometimes animal spirits. Aepriil has been working extensively with the goddess, the Morrigan, as 'the trickster/warrior/queen of death, sex, and victory'. She also created a piece called *The Passion of the Marys* invoking 'the goddess Mary as maiden, mother and crone/widow, fusing the split between Mary Virgin and Mary of Magdala.' Zariel works with Ereshkigal, Erzulie Dantor, Melusine, Anath and Atargatis and quite often brings them into her performance, either through music or specific movements. When a gothic belly



dancer invites a spirit or archetype to her dance, she discovers courage and daring that may not have been there before. Zariel tells her students: 'Susie in accounting might not shimmy, but Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, will.'

The dancer may use magical elements to add more fuel to the fire of the dance. The most basic of these is using the circle with magical intent. Aepriil explains: 'Belly dance is full of figure-eights, circles, undulations etc. already, so it's really a matter of doing the movement with intention and conscious energy building and releasing. That makes it ritual.' She also uses talismans. 'In *The Morrigan*, I danced with a skull on a staff. This prop was my familiar, a symbolic theatrical tool for communicating the presence of the Morrigan and a weapon for banishment.' Deva uses mudras to both give and deny power to her audience. She is careful not to harm anyone in the crossfire of energy. Saahirah Ravyn uses the opportunity in her performance to intoxicate her audience with scent whilst brushing past them. The more magical elements used, the more potent the spell.

The dramatic result of all of this magick is glamour – the projection of allure and charisma. Gothic belly dance

is a powerful synergy of both gothic and witch glamour. Gothic glamour is a rich emotive and visual tapestry that evokes the voluptuous, the vampiric, the primeval and the perverse.

Ma'isah describes it: 'Glamour, in goth terms, is the dark mystery of the unknown using the dramatic eyes that invite as well as provoke curiosity and a little [healthy] fear of the unknown. Drama, mystique and allure – to me, all women feel these things as naturally as they feel the moon turn. That captivation, that interaction and connection with the audience is a deeply spiritual and fleeting moment all at once. Casting the spell of suspended reality and one that allows freedom of the imagination for the audience, is the most important and successful part of my dance art.' Zariel adds: 'In a magical sense, we consider it to be using the energies of the darker side of the universe, of the dark goddesses, and projecting them with our dance, covering ourselves in that energy and radiating it to the audience. I personally feel it is more evocative of desires and mysteries than mainstream belly dance. Gothic belly dancers tend to develop personas, becoming ancient priestesses – conduits between the darker side of energies and the audience and even themselves. A gothic glamour can expose the side of magick that is secret, less spoken of, less widely accepted.' By the end of the dance, the audience is hypnotised under the double helix spell of gothic and witch glamour.

Gothic belly dance is a dangerous lullaby. It is woven from elusive and sometimes opposing forces that surge up through the dancer's feet. The audience are an accomplice of darkness. They are touched by a muse of the shadows.



JOHN JACOBSON HAS BEEN STUDYING YOGA SINCE 2001. HE TEACHES YOGA EXCLUSIVELY AT SAAHIRAH RAVYN'S BLACK WIDOW BELLYDANCE SCHOOL OF GOTHIQUE IN BRISBANE.