

# My First Bellydance Teacher

By Nikki Livermore

After a particularly uninspiring gym session, and a karate class which left me bruised mentally and physically, I decided to ring up my crazy friend Odette (everyone has a crazy friend) and see if there was something we could do which would be healthy exercise, fun, involve dressing up, and have a night out together thrown in...well the most exciting thing we could come up with was a belly dance lesson!!

I got a baby sitter booked, to look after my then 3, children under 4, and off I went. The excitement and trepidation I was feeling was quickly replaced by anxiety and shock when Odette answered the door wearing a cute little dance number, I managed eventually to persuade her to change into something more comfortable, in fact we both did!! But Odette was from South Africa, she knew what she liked, and she was no “duffle coat” by any means!

We trotted off to Wallingford, and were greeted by the renowned Tina Hobin, a pioneer of bellydance in the UK. She had been established here as a professional bellydance Teacher since the early 1970s. Tina advocated bellydancing as a holistic way to health and fitness, from the soft sensual moves, to the female bonding, to the therapeutic sewing of beautiful costumes for ourselves, to the excitement of preparing for a performance. Tina has written numerous books on bellydance and made many TV appearances over the years.

Tina glanced us up and down in her Northern matter of fact way, and declined to comment on our black basque outfits (Well, Tina did say wear something comfortable, and Odette was “my crazy friend” at that time. We soon learnt that Tina could speak volumes with one glance, so we didn’t come dressed like that again!

From the moment the class started to the finish I was intensely absorbed, and, knowing myself to have a low boredom threshold, I was delighted to have found something which could captivate me so completely. Tina was demonstrating the moves so beautifully, and explaining them in a fun and clear way, I just loved the music, it was so funky and sensual, and all the ladies in the class were doing really clever things with their bodies. I was transfixed. One lady called Phillipa had hips which just seemed to have a life of their own. To Phillipa, I know you are out there; I can do a mean version of the Egyptian walk now!!

Tina was very encouraging, she could see that we were trying hard, and concentrating and seemed to have forgiven us for the costume “faux pas” She must have had a good old laugh with her husband that night though!

The first lesson we learnt figure of 8s, circles and forward step back steps. I was doing them beautifully when in the class, or so I thought, but driving home I became aware that I couldn't remember what the names of the moves were let alone which direction to move my body in. By next week it was back to square one again, but this time when I got home I found that I could remember a few moves, and made my very patient husband sit and watch while I hoofed my way across the room like a donkey, with an attitude problem, believing myself to be so clever!! **No** comments here please!!! The music I “danced” to was a version of “Enta Omri”, from a cassette I'd bought from Tina that night.

Tina encouraged us to be graceful in the class, and to use our femininity when moving. She would often bark at us to stand up straight, not look at our feet, or anybody else's, and constantly corrected our posture. Tina herself had a back injury, not from bellydancing, but that meant that posture for her was all- important and she attempted to pass this onto her students. “Walk like dancers”, was favourite expression of hers. We tried in the class to “walk like dancers”, but soon slumped back into our ungainly assortment of walks when we left to go home!

As I progressed slowly, (Odette had by now left to move to Dorset), I had to deal with learning which step was from which Middle-Eastern country. “Never in a million years” was a thought which crossed my mind frequently. The Moroccan twist step, Turkish hip lift, Egyptian hip drop.....the others all seemed to know it??

Tina also gave us gentle relaxing goals, such as one which sticks in my memory” remember ladies, BBC Berkshire will be at the class next week to film you for a documentary they're making, and **no ladies!** The English Jaw drop is not a technique I teach in my class!!

We performed at school fetes, and spent days worrying about it, those were the days. There weren't many haflas around then, so performance opportunities were few and far between and the adrenalin felt leading up to them was almost unbearable. Sad eh? Well, I was at home with 3 young children, and the most excitement I got, was when one of them reached a milestone, such as becoming potty-trained!!!.

I practised hard and was eventually moved up to Improvers class, which meant that I could do both classes, and it made the 3 hour round trip much more worthwhile. There weren't many Teachers around then either!!

In retrospect Tina was the perfect Teacher to start off with, as she was relaxed, encouraging, had a sense of humour about the whole business, she made her students feel positive about themselves, and was always in great demand as her class sizes testified. She always had at least 30 women in her class, with a waiting list.

When Tina left Wallingford to move to Mamble, I was gutted until Elaine Denton came and took over, but that's another story. Tina still teaches in Mamble and recently celebrated her 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday. It must be the "flora" Tina.