

Being a Bellydancer with Breast Cancer

The world of Bellydance is a strange one. For those of us that get truly addicted... which is constantly growing mass of women throughout the world, it becomes an all encompassing source of joy, friendship, ambitions and a true journey of self discovery. When you become a bellydancer it becomes a key part of what you are and how you perceive and express yourself and your body. It doesn't matter if you go to class once a week or you perform and teach. However far you take it the passion for it can still be the same.

Bellydance is a dance designed for women, it makes us more in touch with what being a woman is about, it also gives us power, strength and belief in ourselves and there is always more to learn and very rarely a reason or desire to stop dancing! Our bodies gain a new focus away from the latest media pressure of whatever the perfect figure is. They are there to dance, to be decorated with costumes, to be seen and to bring happiness to others when we perform. We may still fantasize about the perfect figure but we also learn how what moves compliment how we actually are, how we can use what we have and move beautifully in our own way.

With the need and desire to dance, learn and get our fix comes a new fear. The fear that something will happen to get in our way and make us stop dancing. Have you ever had that conversation in your head? Wouldn't it be awful if you broke a leg... I know I'm not well but maybe I can still make it to class... my friends been signed off sick from work, wouldn't it be awful if I was in her shoes and couldn't dance!

I found out I had Breast Cancer earlier this year. It wasn't a complete surprise. My mother and her mother were both diagnosed young and sadly died from it. I however was lucky enough to get on an early screening programme because of this family history and it was my first MRI scan that found the lump. I'm undergoing treatment and with the improvements there have been over the years there is every reason to hope that by the time they've finished with all my treatment I will be rid of it and able to turn my back on the whole experience. Despite all of the fears that go hand in hand with such a diagnosis however it is the changes that it has made to my life of dancing that sadden and anger me the most. Perhaps it is because of the advancements in treatments in curing the cancer that allows me to focus on the shorter term implications of the situation.

The treatment prescribed for me comes in three parts. First there was a lymph node biopsy operation under my arm to see if the Cancer had spread. Following that I have completed chemotherapy which was given every 3 weeks for 6 treatments. The final stage is a double mastectomy and reconstruction which is due to start in early November. The effects of these treatments are scars (under my arm from the lymph biopsy), needle marks (from taking blood and drips), weak and unsightly veins, hair loss (my long hair was eventually shaved off and is looking like it will grow back grey but hopefully curlier!), fatigue, aching bones, sickness, a low immune system, the scars and changed shape from the mastectomy and all the things that can potentially go wrong with the reconstruction (similar to the dangers of having normal breast implants).

Many of the effects were unpredictable, as the effects of chemo differ from person to person and the drugs used vary, but my body is a mess inside and out even though I've found many ways to hide it. For the last half of this year my life has been difficult to plan and changed drastically from being packed full of energetic activities and of course... dancing.

I've had to pull out of performances that have been planned in and looked forward to for months. My weekly class is being covered till Christmas. Even attending the class I go to is no longer a regular thing. I'm lucky that all of this does not mean cancelling gigs and losing students. Several close friends have stepped in to fill the gaps and keep things going but equally it is saddening to be the one who has to sit back and watch. The world of bellydance is carrying on at its heady pace and for now I am a much smaller part of it. At times I will have good days and weeks. I've been particularly lucky on when some of them have fallen meaning I could attend Raqs B, the Congress and JOY. I have however found out that planning and cramming things in for the expected good days often means rearranging at short notice when things don't go as hoped (no Farha Festival for me this year – Kay please will you arrange another one!).

I still want to perform and do when I do have a good patch, I'm still addicted, and my kind friends are keeping opportunities open to me. The additional problem however is my self image. My body is not what it was at the beginning of the year, I don't see the person I expect to in the mirror but I can't quite remember what I expected to see... anyone who's simply had an extreme change in hair cut will know how that feels. I've been unable to practice as much and there are all the signs of treatment that may only be obvious to me. Bellydance invites people to look at you and although a good wig and some make up can conceal some of the evidence I'm not sure I want them to. I don't feel like a dancer at the moment and what if they see through it all and sense the cracks? At the same time I have a set list planned and everything prepared so the next time I'm well enough I can take the next gig offered and do what I love.

The additional fear is of the final operation. Bellydance makes us love the parts of the body that make us women! A fantastic bra and cleavage on show are deeply tied in to performing the dance. What if the reconstruction takes that away? I know several dancers who have been through a similar journey and come out of it well and of course dancing but to get there you must first live through the battle and in my case eventually decide if I want to have my nipples reconstructed (weighing up the pro's and cons of this are the amusing side of things). If it all goes well perhaps all you will see are the signs of a good boob job!

This is not just a situation that could happen to a dancer because of Breast Cancer but it is something that is more likely to affect a woman's perception of herself and feelings of femininity and as such fights against the very things that dance gives back to us. With so many women likely to develop Breast Cancer at some point in their lives it cannot be an uncommon dilemma for dancers. Yet it is still a lonely place to be. Despite my family history and the press attention it gets I knew little about the details until I started seeing

my doctors. The gory details of the subject still have an air of taboo and every woman's experience is potentially so different from treatments to side effects.

I'm slightly outside of the vibrant world I crave. Waiting to return to it properly and missing it dreadfully when I'm forced to sit on the sidelines. The flipside is that it is that very world that has driven me through my treatment. The desire to get well for the next event or simply looking forward to attending class has been powerful and given me short term goals. The adrenaline high from dancing is also a wonderful way of feeling better mentally and physically in the short term.

I hope that by writing this I have given some insight and would like to encourage other people to talk about their experiences and offer my support to anyone who finds themselves in a similar situation. I've been lucky to have people like Sara Farouk talk openly to me and give me a realistic idea of what to expect from her experiences. For me this was particularly important as she had a dancer's perspective. Following that it is an incredible source of strength just to know there is someone out there to talk to if I need to.

It has also highlighted to me how important it is to help raise funds for the charity Just Because. The women of Egypt may not all be dancers but they are also terrorised by this disease and currently don't have access to early screening to help them identify and survive it as I can. As dancers we can use the dance skills we have learned from the women of Egypt to raise money for the charity and have fantastic fun in the process. I hope that some of you will join us in Leeds for Walk Like an Egyptian next summer, support fundraisers of friends, set up an event of your own or simply donate some cash!
www.justbecause.org.uk

Anna Bisco (AKA Loveday)
Written in June 2007