

Getting the 'All Clear' from Breast Cancer and the fabulous world of Wigs!

You may have read my article in NADA at the end of last year on dealing with Breast Cancer from the perspective of a Bellydancer. The good news is that there is a happy ending which I would like to share with you all. I've been given the 'all clear' and just had my final piece of reconstructive breast surgery. I am the proud owner of a new pair of boobs and now I'm getting used to them I think they're rather lovely!

One of the reasons for writing the original article was to address the taboos that seem to surround the subject. Although it differs for each diagnosis my treatment involved; a biopsy (to diagnose), an operation to remove and analyse some lymph nodes from under my arm (to see if the cancer had spread, which thankfully it hadn't), chemotherapy (to make sure it hadn't and reduce the size of the cancer in my breast), a bi-lateral mastectomy operation and insertion of breast expanders (removing all of the breast tissue in both sides including the nipples), a permanent implants operation (to remove the expanders which had been used to stretch the skin and put in my final implants). There was also the option of having nipple reconstruction but knowing that you will never have the risk of popping out of a costume is a definite plus!

So now that the treatment is over how has it affected my life as a Bellydancer and why is it relevant to other dancers?

Emotionally the whole process has been trying. It's taken me away from dance at many points but the joy of the dance and the support of the ladies I dance with has always driven me on, got me through the tough times and most importantly helped maintained a healthy connection to my body. This dance form gives me so much I'm determined more than ever to spread the word and inspire more ladies to try it by teaching and performing. I would urge you to do the same. Don't be afraid of expressing your love of the dance to others and inviting them to come and try a class or attend a performance!

My biggest fear is still something happening that means I won't be able to continue to dance, so I've decided to try and stop worrying about it and get on with dancing!

Aesthetically I have also discovered that there's nothing like faking it! I lost hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, boobs and nails and by some miracle (as I'm not a naturally highly groomed woman) I managed to fake them all without it being too obvious to the casual observer in an audience. Ladies, weather it's ageing, illness or simply wanting to glam up it's possible for anyone to use whatever canvass you have naturally and present yourself as a beautifully wrapped dancing goddess! All you have to do is put a little time into presentation and first impressions, making the most of what you have. Then simply let your personality and emotion shine through the dance and no-one will waste time trying to pick apart the image you present... or if they do they certainly won't tell you about it! My dad always says 'it's the way you tell em' and in this case it couldn't be truer!

Specifically when it comes to faking it hair is an incredibly powerful tool, if you haven't got naturally gorgeous flowing locks then wigs are the way forwards and I've learnt a lot about getting it right and wrong with them that I'd like to share!

I would recommend spending a decent amount of money on a wig and going for something middle of the market. Cheap ones are very obviously fake and uncomfortable to wear. You can get real hair wigs but these cost a fortune, don't last long and are difficult to look after. If you have some hair you can also get some fantastic hair pieces to add length and body.

A decent wig will cost anything between £70-£200 and a good brand to look at is www.hothair.co.uk. Hot Hair also has a brilliant page recommending which wig styles will suit your face shape. For a realistic effect wigs with fringes or bangs are good as they hide the sharper hairline you get with a wig. Also try to get one with a monofilament parting which is a strip of mesh that runs along the parting so that it looks like you have a natural hairline at the parting.

To put a wig on properly you start at the forehead then pull it on over the head and line it up on your temples. To keep a wig on for dancing if you have no or very little hair is easy. Wig Tape liberally applied to your scalp will do the job. If you've got hair, lots of hair pins front and back are key. For shorter hair, if you can find some tiny springs (about 1-2cm long with a loop at each end) then you can stretch these out, let them spring shut over the hair, and then pin through the loops at each end of the spring as you pin your wig on. Wearing a fabric headband is also a brilliant way of giving extra security and hiding a fake hairline so always try and get a costume that has a headband. You may have to avoid some rigorous head flicks with a wig (especially if you have short hair underneath). The best thing to do is play about with it on before you perform to see what you can get away with.

Most wigs are quite thick when you get them and if possible it's better to get them thinned out a little and shaped to your face. If you buy your wig from a boutique you should be able to book this in with them and get it styled whilst you are wearing it (which is essential). If not a good place to look for people that can cut wigs is your local theatre's wardrobe department. They may not have someone in house but often recruit freelancers. If you do go to a boutique many of them will expect you to make an appointment for a consultation to try things on and if it's for medical reasons you may also get a discount.

Caring for wigs is fairly simple. Don't use regular hair products or any kind of heat. You just need to buy a wig shampoo and spray in conditioner. Your wig will need shampooing and leaving to dry naturally about every 8 wears, or more frequently if you get very hot and sweaty! You can also buy hair spray and brushes designed specifically for wigs. If used regularly your wig will probably last about a year before it starts to look a little fuzzy underneath as the fibres eventually get damaged as they rub against clothes/skin. At this point you can take them to get them re-styled and try to lose some of the damaged hair to try and get a bit more wear out of them.

So from Cancer to faking it I guess the moral of my story is share your love of the dance, count your blessings and make the most of what you've got!

This once again brings us back to the women of Egypt. They have blessed us with this dance. It's our turn to give something back! These women are also terrorised by Breast Cancer and don't have access to the early screening that we do to help them get diagnosed in time to survive it. As dancers I urge you to get out there and use your dance to help raise money for Just Because so the charity can get one step closer to buying a mobile mammography unit for the women of Egypt.

www.justbecause.org.uk

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