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An Open Message to the Student Body of Longwood

When most people are asked to name a style of dance that they take part in or are most aware of, the answers are often styles such as Contemporary, Jazz, Ballet, Tap, Hip-Hop, or even the cultural dance of the Tango. This is true here at Longwood University, as well. On campus, many are aware of and are even excited about the Longwood Company of Dance, as they seem to hold a big presence on campus. Many look forward to the performance put on by them each semester, which showcases a wide range of dance, from the stricter style of Ballet to the more interpretive styles of Contemporary. Most also admire dance company members for the rigorous hours of training they put into learning the different and even abstract styles, such as the traditional African style. In addition to this, and on a less formal level, many of us Longwood students also anticipate the performances put on by the Blue Heat Dance Team during basketball games which showcases the styles of Hip-Hop, that they are most loved for. All of these groups and dance styles are to be admired. However, the style of Belly Dance rarely comes to mind as being a presence on campus, even though it should. Many students are not even aware of the rich background of Belly Dance, and what becoming a student of this style of dance can do for someone, or even that we have a Belly Dance Troupe on campus. Blue Heat and the Longwood Company of Dance are great; they are dedicated, hardworking dancers. But I also ask that you turn your attention to another group of students that are just as passionate about learning and expressing their love of dance: The Longwood Company of Belly Dancers. Even though we are lesser known, we are as historically relevant, diverse, and as disciplined as any other dance style

or dance troupe on campus.

The style of Belly Dance has been performed for thousands of years all over the world. Its origins derive from Turkey and Egypt, with influences from Indian styles of dance. Traces of Belly Dance can be found from up to 6,000 years ago in some pagan societies who used dance to worship a feminine deity who was said to grant fertility. In the Middle East, Belly Dance was also used as a social means at gatherings, in which women would dance in greeting, at weddings, for their dowry, or even for public entertainment (Shay and Sellers-Young 14-15). While it is the prominence of women in belly dance that has brought on the association of belly dancing with spirituality and feminine power within the past 40 years, men have a long history with this style, too (Kraus 435). In fact, men have taken part in belly dancing just as long as women have (Karam 86-114), as seen by the prevalence in male belly dancers throughout Istanbul, and even Brazil (Parkinson and Albayrak 1). Here at Longwood, our dance company would like to change the ideals that much of society has adopted about dance in general, Belly Dance in particular, and share this with the Longwood community.

In addition to our background history, the Longwood Company of Belly Dance is just as serious in learning our chosen dance style as any other dance groups on campus. Similar to other styles, such as Ballet, we are fully dedicated and rigorous in practice and are also as prone to injuries as other dance styles. We have moves and styles that we portray in our dancing, as well as basic standards of ethics that we learn as students of this unique style of dance. The style of Belly Dance has contributions from both the Egyptian and Turkish styles, each of which maintains separate rules and ethics and their own influences in the movement. For example, “In Egypt, the dance is largely focused on rolling, articulated movements of the abdomen and vibrations of the hips that can be rapid or slow. In Turkey, the *cifte telli* concentrates on both

rapid and slow shoulder and breast shimmies” (Shay and Sellers-Young 15). Here in the United States, most students of Belly Dance have adopted the style of Tribal Fusion, which takes on certain characteristics of each style, which is seen in our types of outfits and in our movements.

For example, due to ethical standards, we rule that we cover up our legs from knee up and make sure that our bras or vests are suitable as performance outfits and can be obviously differentiated from lingerie. Also, we do not touch ourselves during dance; touching any part of the body, in terms of Belly Dancing in its countries of origin, means that you are selling that part of you. Showing the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet to the audience during a performance is also frowned upon, as it symbolizes a rejection to those who are watching. Likewise, while we take an abundance of time in sewing our own costumes and customizing them to suit the theme of each individual dance, I am sad to say that it is unlikely for our peers to see them outside of a performance. This is due to the ethical standpoint of Belly Dance; it is a culture! To be sure though, Belly Dance has been known for being sexualized as a result of the reputation received through society in response to the “overtly sexual” movements that are compared to that of exotic dancers are not those that we showcase. As shown in a study by Rachel Kraus, the sexualization of those that belly dance in both the United States and Australia is highly prevalent; however, Belly Dance turn the “soft stigma” into “both a means of expressing one’s sexuality in a creative way (self as subject), as well as a means of enjoying sexualized attention” (Kraus 199). Overall, belly dance is a reflection of the countries from which it originated. The outfits we make aren’t meant to be worn in public, or as costumes for Halloween. Instead, we pour our time into the making of each piece, and proudly wear them during performance as we showcase the culture that we have dedicated ourselves to learning.

Similar to other styles of dance, we also have specific moves. Like ballet with its typical

pirouettes and arabesques, we have our undulations, chest and hip-shimmies, Egyptians, snake-hips or arms, chest and hip isolations, and more. Due to the manner of the moves that we learn, being students of belly dance allows us to gain a better control and awareness over our bodies. As we all work to choreograph and take ethics under consideration, we learn spatial awareness as well as a discipline for our body movements. For example, performing isolations makes you learn to move only one part of the body and keeping the rest of your body stationary, which has been proven difficult to many of our members, whether they are beginners or seasoned dancers. And, like the Longwood Company of Dancers, we, too, also strive to display these moves through a performance at the end of each semester. Over all, these moves can be just as hard to comprehend and as captivating as other dancing styles, and our company hopes that our fellow Lancers will join us in our admiration of this dance style.

Despite having to abide by ethical standards, you would be surprised as to what you might see or hear once the curtains are drawn at the performance. As we delve into creating our dances, we all are predominantly free to create any scenario, and choose any piece of music that could range from the iconic orchestral piece from *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, to the more expected traditional sounds of Indian and Turkish origins such as pieces made by the group Beats Antique. However, while we do incorporate the chosen themes of our songs, we still must dress in appropriate styles, and have our songs approved as being inoffensive to the culture of belly dance, which means no blatant curse words or negative connotations in the underlying meaning of songs. We put so much effort into creating new and completely unique pieces every semester, and we hope that you will be there to witness them.

Given all that you have already learned about us, it is also important to explain why we do it. Why is it that we take time out of our academic schedule to invest ourselves in this

seemingly unorthodox style of dance? One thing that some may be unaware of is that we sometimes struggle with the ignorance of others to the Belly Dance Company's scheduled studio time, and the occasional stigmatized remarks made by some of our peers. On the other hand, this doesn't matter. As seen in a study conducted by Marika Tiggeman, Levina Clark, and Emily Coutts, the embodiment theory of positive body image has been proven as present and even at a higher level within the context of belly dance. Within this study, were 213 women from Adelaide, South Australia, which was comprised of 112 belly dancers recruited from two belly dance schools, and a random sample of 101 college women who had no previous connection with belly dance. In this study,

participants completed questionnaire measures of positive body image, body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and enjoyment of sexualization. It was found that belly dancers scored higher on positive body image and lower on body dissatisfaction and self-objectification than the college students.

Even further, we want to share with you all the true rewards that one can receive through becoming a student of belly dance: the higher self-esteem, increased but enjoyable physical activity, and gratification that one achieves as they step further into the world and culture of belly dance. In fact, as stated in a study that focused on the participation of both men and women in the leisure activity of belly dance, "many women became involved in belly dance because they wanted to spend more time with other women and play with femininity...Both men and women had interests in music, theatre and dance and were seeking an enjoyable physical activity" (Kraus 570). As seen in these studies, there are many reasons that we participate in a pastime such as belly dance. While possibly a little outside of the norm, belly dance can connect you to others through a shared learning experience as you embrace its culture, and brings you to people who

share the same passions in dance, music, and even shared interests that go beyond the walls of the dance studio.

Perhaps what we are most proud to share is that anyone can join us and participate in belly dancing; we accept all majors, ethnicities, class year, body types, and genders. Even if one has no prior knowledge to belly dance, or believes that they don't have ability to dance, it doesn't matter. You would be very surprised as to how many of my own friends and peers have rejected the notion of joining the Longwood Company of Belly Dance due to not having a good enough body or being incapable of dancing. To our male student body, we say that belly dance is not strictly female, and having "no hips" doesn't matter. In fact, in some cultures, such as in Brazil or in Istanbul, male dancers are becoming very prevalent, and even preferred over the female belly dancers as males use the art of belly dance as a way to portray their higher standing in the social hierarchy (Karam 86). And to our female classmates, we say that body shape and size doesn't matter; your body is perfect the way it is. In fact, "If anything, a fatter and curvier body type is valued as more suitable for belly dance's shimmies, rolls, and undulating movements" (Kraus 198). You don't need to worry about any of that! Despite many people's claims to being unable to dance, we have found it rare that one is completely incapable of learning. We teach all moves, work with all new beginners on the breaking down of each move and techniques to properly execute them, and learn about the culture and ethics of belly dancing as a whole. Even more, we aim to remove the feminine label that belly dance has been attached to us by views of society and hopefully gain more male membership.

The Longwood Company of Belly Dancers deserves more respect and recognition than it is currently receiving. As we have noticed in previous semesters, many students are always excited to see the dance performance of the Longwood Company of Dancers or the Blue Heat

Dance Group. They are credited for their hard work and are known across campus, even as many of us in the belly dance company have gotten remarks from the students saying, “we have a *Belly Dance* company?” or even borderline stigmatized responses such as, “So you are *that* kind of dancer?” Ideally, we just want you all to realize that we are here and passionate about what we do, which we hope to show you in our end-of-the-semester performance. Next time we hold the Student Involvement Fair, please consider stopping by our booth. Also, while you are scheduling your attendance to the Longwood Company of Dancers’ performance into your calendar, pencil us in, too. In fact, if you like what you see, you can maybe even look into joining the company in the future. We look forward to seeing your faces in the audience, and hopefully as new members in the coming semesters as well. Give us a chance; maybe belly dance will shimmy its way into your heart just as it did with us.

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