

Shake, Shimmy and Stamp

Cultural dance is a family affair

Louise Julig

I recently witnessed a remarkable scene of joy and exuberance.

At the end of a flamenco dance performance, the encore turned into a free-form flamenco jam session. The band kept up a rollicking Gypsy beat, and one after another, each of the dancers gave an impromptu solo. Then the lead dancer summoned one of her former teachers from the audience and coaxed her to come out on the floor.

After only a few moments hesitation, this older woman, dressed in a very un-flamenco outfit of a pantsuit and sandals, came to the floor and delivered a knockout turn with style and confidence to the cheering and clapping crowd, now on its feet. Then it spread to other friends and supporters and even the band members, each of whom took a turn on stage and was celebrated with cheers, whoops and a standing ovation.

I couldn't help thinking how fortunate I was to be witnessing this rich cultural expression unfolding before me, where all ages and abilities were welcome to contribute.



Juanita Franco, a flamenco dancer and instructor from the Academia de Baile Española, was there and took a turn that night. Franco started dancing in Spain, when she was 6 years old. She took a break from dancing while raising her children, but returned to it as they got older. She is a firm believer in the power of dance for all ages, and now offers classes to both children and adults.

“Flamenco is a very physical dance, very powerful in the legs and upper body,” she says. “And as long as you have the power you can dance.”

At her studio, children learn the basic steps until they understand the combinations, and then progress on to harder steps. “Children pick up the complex combinations very quickly,” she says.

But flamenco is hardly reserved for the young. A highly expressive dance form, Franco says flamenco is related to the blues in that it is a way to express emotions about life.

“And like a good wine, the older you get, the better you get, because you have lived. In Spain, all the best dancers are in their 50s,” she says.

All in the Family

Cultural dance classes offer opportunities for multiple generations to learn and celebrate together in a way that is sometimes hard to come by in our society.

Kathy Gore Stanley, the Kumu, or master hula teacher, of Heali'i's Polynesian Revue, teaches all ages and levels of students as well.

“I think the youngest student we have now is 2, and the oldest is 88,” she says. One of the reasons hula appeals to all ages is “because it's a dance that every age group enjoys watching.”

Another reason for hula's multigenerational appeal is its family orientation. Heali'i's classes can involve the whole family.

“I'll teach a dad and the children, and they go to shows together,” says Stanley.

There are currently 12 men in the

kane, or men's class, and 15 male drummers. In addition there is a keiki kane, or boys' class.

"They are usually all in football also, but hula still shows their masculinity," says Stanley.

Many moms take classes and perform, and Heali'i's offers two "Hula Honeys" classes, for moms who come to hula for recreation. When hula involves the whole family, it shows younger dancers that it's not something they have to give up as they get older.

"It really is a lifestyle," says Stanley.

Cultural Dance Resources

Centro Cultural de la Raza

www.centroculturaldelaraza.org

Flamenco Dance Classes

[members.aol.com/
sociedadflamenco/classes.htm](http://members.aol.com/sociedadflamenco/classes.htm)

Halau Hula (Hula Schools) locator

www.mele.com/resources/hula.html

Heali'i's Polynesian Revue

www.healiis.com

International Dance Association of San Diego County

www.hofshi.net/idasdc

MeYoMa and Shimmy Dance Studio

www.meyoma.com

Coming to Your Senses

Teri Arenz, of MeYoMa Alternative Health Therapies and Shimmy Dance Studio, has also seen the benefits of cultural dance instruction for both young and old. Arenz came to Greek and Turkish dancing as a girl through a friend's Greek family restaurant, which became almost a second home to her. She lost touch with the culture after moving away, but years later was drawn back through the Bird House Grill Turkish restaurant in Leucadia, where she often performs.

Her new studio is directly behind the restaurant, where she offers a variety of yoga, yoga/dance fusion, and belly dancing classes for kids and adults. Arenz notes that belly dancing is often mischaracterized, and stresses that it really is all about “knowing how to move, about mastering your body. It has nothing to do with some Western ideas about what belly dancing is ... it teaches ownership.”

For the youngest girls, Arenz emphasizes femininity and carrying themselves “like a princess. I tell them, ‘This is your movie. You can be the princess of your dreams.’” For older girls, Arenz’ intention is to teach them how to be comfortable in their body and have presence. A friend who helped host a prom recently lamented to her that the girls were dressed and made up perfectly, but didn’t know how to carry themselves, looking self-conscious and awkward.

“My classes are about owning your body,” Arenz says. “For teenagers, having that body awareness teaches them who they are and also helps them to know they have boundaries.”

When the moms from her girls’ belly dancing class wanted to join in, Arenz realized she needed to offer adult beginning classes as well. In addition to being a great workout, belly dancing “gets you in touch with your senses, and your senses are what feed your spirit,” she says. “For some of the women I see in their 50s and 60s, sometimes they have given up. I tell them, ‘You’re going to do something that you really want to do.’ It’s wonderful seeing them open up to new possibilities.”

The best dance instruction does more than teach choreography; it imparts a sense of place and tradition, and makes dance accessible to all. Cultural dance lessons can be a great way for people of all ages to connect with themselves and with each other in beautiful self-expression. ❖

Louise Julig is a freelance writer in Encinitas who so far has tried salsa and hula.