

CT BellyDance Salon Shimmies To The State House

by **KAREN PONZIO** | Feb 20, 2020 1:23 pm

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EMILY TORLA PHOTO

Elisheva performing at The State House in December.

Belly dance: the phrase alone is usually enough to elicit a variety of reactions — often from those unfamiliar with its extensive history and endless variations. Two dancers are hoping to make belly dance more familiar, offering a setting where both the seasoned performer and the emerging student can share an experience in a safe and fun environment with those who already appreciate the art form, as well as those who want to learn more about it.

The CT Bellydance Salon, which made its New Haven debut at [The State House](#) in December, is hoping to continue, and even expand upon, the success of the first one [when it returns to the State House on Sunday, Feb. 23](#).

“When we were planning this, we wanted to have students in a supportive environment,” said [Joy Herbst](#), dancer, teacher, and co-curator of the Salon. “We wanted it to be a very special experience, where the art form is shown for its capacity both therapeutically and as entertainment.”

Herbst is presenting the new series along with dancer, teacher, and co-curator Elisheva of West Hartford. It’s similar to one Herbst ran a few years back at the former Outer Space in Hamden.

“She and I have worked together,” said Herbst. “We orbited each other and wanted to collaborate.” The State House proved to be the perfect setting for this new endeavor. “We’re so thrilled with State House,” said Herbst. “I knew Los” — Carlos Wells, one of the owners of the State House — “from Firehouse 12,” where Wells worked before opening the State Street venue. “The space is awesome and he is super supportive. He just rocks.”

For this particular show, the venue is set up more like a club, with tables, chairs and lotus lights creating a more intimate atmosphere — one that is warm and inviting to supporters of the dance as well as students and other performers with a goal of enriching the dance community and celebrating its diversity. To that end, performers hail not just from Connecticut, but from all over New England. There is also a “sister event” called Cairo Cabaret in Chicopee, Mass. that, according to Herbst, has been running for a few years now and will be rotating dates with the Connecticut show.

“Our first time out, we wanted a strong representation of the community at large,” said Herbst. “We asked long time dancers and teachers in Connecticut. Some could not make it and will hopefully come another time, but there was a strong showing of teachers,” including Herbst and Elisheva. For the show coming up this weekend, the two have decided to focus on more soloists.

“We’re mixing it up and also letting it have an organic development,” said Herbst. “Having people able to see groups, duos, soloists ... they get different blends, different experiences.... Elisheva and I wanted to curate it and be thoughtful, keep it dynamic and engaging for the audience, and rotate throughout the community. We want to support the work, but keep it dynamic and have the overall experience be enjoyed by the dancers and the audience interested in the art form. We want to try to share how interesting and exciting the dance is, including how empowering it is for women to come to class and share space, to be connected in a physical sense to themselves.”

“If it’s dynamic, it attracts people to it, and they stay with it. Then they begin to see how therapeutic it is for them,” she added.

Herbst began belly dancing in 2004 and was Connecticut’s first American tribal style certified teacher and studio sister. Herbst now calls her style of dance “contemporary fusion” belly dance, which she says comes from her background of ballet, jazz and modern dance as well as hip hop, noting that it “describes the modern development of the dance but it is still largely belly dancing.”

Joy Herbst performing at The State House in December.

Herbst is also a nurse practitioner and spoke about her own experience in the therapeutic uses of belly dancing, specifically as someone who will be sober six years this June.

“I had previously intertwined alcohol use with dance and a party atmosphere,” she said. That is no longer the case for her, as she’s worked on being “present in her body with the dance and being sober,” as well as being “connected to the physical body.”

“We all have trauma and numb out with our substance of choice, whether its alcohol, TV, whatever we use,” said Herbst. “When we start to connect to the physical body intimately, we develop trust and intuition and a deeper appreciation for self and sense of gratitude. We say ‘look at what my body can do’ instead of focusing on what we can’t do.”

Herbst wants to help others focus on what they can do and their connection with self and community. To that end, she is working on opening a woman’s wellness center with movement incorporated into its programs.

Meanwhile, Herbst and Elisheva also want to educate the public as to what belly dance is and isn’t.

Herbst noted that many Americans’ first encounter with this type of dance originated with performer Little Egypt at the World’s Fair in 1893, when writer Sol Bloom wrote about her and used the term “belly dance” to describe what she did.

“We still recognize belly dance as belly dance because that’s what it has been called,” said Herbst. But the dance itself incorporates the entire body. It also has an extensive history and background, with different styles and approaches — many that have been combined with other forms, leading to a more fusion style of dancing and performance, but with a basis in its most traditional forms.

“Dance serves as a celebration and can be storytelling too,” Herbst said. “Often there is a theatrical telling as well, that also brings in a contemporary feeling.”

“Greek, Egyptian, Turkish: each has a different style and skill set,” Herbst continued. Finger cymbals are often used, and are, as Herbst said, “an instrument, not a prop.”

Some dancers use canes, swords, and veils as part of their performances, and whether a dancer is performing solo or as part of a duo or troupe, each has a unique take on a traditional style.

Herbst gave examples of such dancers, including Suad of Hartford; she performed at December’s show and leads the Desert Dancers, a folklore troupe created and based around scenes of life around folklore. Kelvia, of the Middle Eastern Dance Academy in West Haven, incorporated her experience as a ballroom dancer at the December show and had tango and salsa elements mixed in to her performance while dancing to Middle Eastern music, telling a story “of love and loss.”

“We see on all these television shows [in dance] where you have 90 seconds and it gets a little washed over,” Herbst said. “There’s something to be said for nuance, for drama and pausing. Connecting with the movement: It’s special and extraordinary.”

Herbst hopes this new venture at the State House attracts more people eager to learn more about this type of dance as well as be entertained. “Connecticut needed this and we’re happy to step forward and do it,” she said.

The CT Bellydance Salon holds its next performance at The State House this Sunday, Feb. 23, with doors at 4:30 p.m. and show promptly at 5 p.m. Tickets and more information about the show are available through [The State House website](#) as well as the [CT Bellydance Salon Facebook page](#).

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They should perform at the LOB in Hartford - they're all doing the kabuki dance over tolls and it isn't pretty. Maybe you can teach them a thing or two.