

## Competing in the UK's first ever international bellydancing competition.

*Hipsinc director Charlotte Desorgher, outlines the experience and discusses the pros and cons of dance competitions.*

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Dance competitions are high profile these days. Millions tune in to watch professional dancers and celebrities compete in programmes such as Strictly Come Dancing and Dancing with the Stars. And around the belly dance world, from Cairo to California, Stockholm to Beirut, professional bellydancers and amateurs alike compete for titles with titles such as Bellydancer of the Universe or Cabaret Dancer of the World.

In the UK, the subject is one of fierce debate between those who believe competitions will raise standards and those who believe they will undermine creativity and individualism. We have resisted bellydance competitions as a result. But in October 2007, a major international event was held in the UK, the International Bellydance Congress ([www.bellydancecongress.com](http://www.bellydancecongress.com)) and the organisers decided to hold a competition. Charlotte Desorgher, hipsinc director, entered the professional soloists category. Here are her experiences, written for NADA (Northern Arabic Dance Association) magazine.

When I received the email from Jo Wise saying that Bellydance Congress was going to hold a competition my heart sank. I've always hated the idea - I don't think that dance is a competitive sport and I can't see how something as varied and individual as bellydance, can be judged objectively.

So what changed my mind?

Well, I get annoyed at the number of people within the UK bellydance world who say that the standard of dancing in the UK is poor. I thought about the international nature of Congress, with its world stars and visiting foreign dancers, and it occurred to me that if everyone sat on their hands and refused to enter, the spectators wouldn't be saying 'gosh, the UK has such high principles; see, no-one's debased themselves to enter this competition.' They'd just think we didn't have any decent enough dancers. And I couldn't bear that.

So, dear reader, I took it upon myself to personally ensure the reputation of UK bellydance on the international stage. An overdeveloped sense of responsibility or incipient megalomania? Whatever, it was one of the most frightening experiences of my life!

The nerves from the moment I put in my application were pretty constant. As several teaching friends said to me 'why put yourself in a position where you could be badly judged when you currently have a good reputation?' To which I could only gulp, and then point to my reason for entering.

But in fact I gained much more from the experience than I could have imagined. Once I had decided to enter, I realised that the opportunity to have the undivided attention of some of the very best dancers and teachers in the world, even for five minutes, and to gain feedback from them on my dancing, was an opportunity too good to miss.

Now I'm very used to dancing in high profile events - I've shared stages with international stars such as Aida Nour and Aziza. And I prepare for such events with great thoroughness; aware of the need to show my very best. But this was different. I realised the judges would be looking at me with a clarity and coolness that an audience member rarely does. They would be marking me. And giving me honest feedback. Help!

So I set about preparing for that dance like I've never prepared before. We had been told what the judging criteria were and how many marks would be allocated to choreography, presentation, technique etc. So we had guidelines to work to and the judges had objective tests to mark us on. Of course, I knew that subjectivity would still come into the reckoning but at least we had an idea what the judges would be looking for.

The result was that I upped my game enormously. I choreographed my dance, I practised it, I videoed it, I refined it, I practised some more, I videoed it again, I canvassed opinion, I refined it again. I listened to every nuance of the music - every dum, every tak - aware that the judges were looking for excellent musical interpretation. And I worked on my technique with a focus that, as a teacher, I rarely have time to do. Yes I know that I should do that for every performance. But I live in the real world, a world of conflicting priorities, of needing to earn money to pay the mortgage. A world where my students' needs usually take precedence. But this one was for me (oh yes, and the reputation of the United Kingdom!)

On the day, I gave my best and was pleased to be placed third. A Belgian girl and a Spanish girl were placed above me - the UK didn't beat all comers. But at least I put in a good fight, as did the other British dancers. And no-one could moan about the standard of UK dancing, watching our collective performance.

Immediately after the competition I went up to each judge and asked them for feedback – yes it was frightening and a bit embarrassing, but after all that work I wasn't going to miss out on that opportunity. I was lucky enough spend time with Jim Boz, a great dancer from America and one of the judges. He generously gave me an hour of his time talking about my performance - what was good and what I could improve. Priceless.

But what saddened me was how few professional dancers entered. And only four Brits. In Germany, Beata and Horacio Cifuentes and Leyla Jouvana receive hundreds of entries for their competitions which go on all day. Countries as different as Sweden, Lebanon and the US run high profile competitions, with numerous categories and attracting great attention. Even Egypt now holds regular belly dance competitions, with dancers entering from around the globe. And many people say that those competitions have helped raise the standard of belly dancing worldwide.

As I said above, I gained far more than I had expected from the experience. My focussed preparation meant I danced better than I have danced before (a fact backed up by several dance friends) and that experience, coupled with the judges feedback, has contributed to a continuing improvement in my dancing. It's also raised my own profile - I'm amazed at how many people I've never met before have come up and congratulated me. And finally, I met some lovely dancers and shared an hour of real camaraderie with them. I know some people say that competitions create cattiness and bad behaviour, but in fact we were all very warm and supportive to each other – I think our collective nerves made us cling together for support!

So, should you enter a competition? If you are a young dancer looking to make a name for yourself as a professional I would definitely say yes. It will help you improve your dancing and raise your profile like nothing else. As a locally-known dancer, Aziza of the US made a conscious decision to win a competition because she wanted an international career. She is now one of the most sought-after performers and workshop teachers in the world. And Salwa, the Belgian girl who won our competition, has gone from being little-known to being one of the top dancers in her country - hotly challenged by Khalida, her compatriot who won Leyla Jouvana's competition in November.

But if you suffer badly from nerves or react badly in competitive situations then don't put yourself through it. It was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences of my dance career.

Would I do it again?

No. But that is only because I'm not young, and I'm not looking for an international career.

Were I both, I most definitely would.