

Coins on hip scarves glitter and jingle in the spotlight as eleven girls show us skills of isolation and synchronization- two things belly dance is famous for. This dance, Sanguinity, is one of the more complex and popular dances of Sihir's Spring 2016 show. The music is Pasion Turca's "Heartbeat", a mix of intense beats with intense focus. It's a good song choice to emphasize the different types of moves Sihir knows how to captivate us with so well. Some of the ones whose Sihir's eyes are catching aren't fans, though.

Sihir Bellydance Ensemble is a group on University of Rochester's campus that teaches belly dance to their members. According to their Campus Community Connection page their goal as a club is to, "Spread body positivity, and it is because of this accepting community that we have members from a wide variety of backgrounds, sizes, and dance training." While they accept everyone, most of their members are white. That's the problem. Some on campus are concerned that the lack of participation from belly dance's original demographic means Sihir is participating in cultural appropriation.

Belly dance is the Westernized form of various Oriental dances. Influences have been found in dozens of countries and each location has different uses and beliefs about belly dance. Saudi Arabia considers belly dance sacred between women and not to be seen by men at all. Egypt, however, has always had belly dance be a public and celebratory form. In America, belly dance was introduced at 1893 at the Chicago world fair. Belly dance is an amazing workout and feminist movements started stressing the celebration of womanhood in such dances, which increased popularity and participation. Fast forward to 2016 and belly dance is still a popular dance form, especially on college campuses.

Where can you explore and learn new things if not a college campus? Many schools have belly dance classes or clubs to help spread knowledge not only of the dance but of the cultures and history behind it. Shay Moore, a troupe leader from Seattle explains that art forms grow and multiple in spaces other than where they're originated, "Dance today is now a conglomeration of a lot of different cultural sources so even if we could pinpoint the one source it came from, what it looks like today wouldn't resemble anything like what it was that day." She, and others likeminded, believe that they're only helping the art from grow and evolve. Alessandra Green, another Middle Eastern dance teacher agrees, "Regardless of where an art form may have originated from, I don't believe that any one country or culture has an exclusive right or ownership over that art form. Art is universal and an expression of our humanity. As such, I personally believe that all humans have an equal right to appreciate and engage in all art forms." On her website, Moore also speaks about some of the positive response she's had, especially from Middle Eastern people. "We will have people from the Middle East in the audience who will come up in tears and saying 'that felt like home, I am so excited to see people outside of our culture, taking an interest in our culture.'"

Not all view white belly dancing this way. A recent and popular article in *Salon* deemed this very clear. Writer Randa Jarrar wrote, “Arab women are not vessels for white women to pour themselves and lose themselves in; we are not bangles or eyeliner or tiny bells on hips. We are human beings. This dance form is originally ours, and does not exist so that white women can have a better sense of community; can gain a deeper sense of sisterhood with each other; can reclaim their bodies; can celebrate their sexualities; can perform for the female gaze.”

This is where the different localized communities at U of R start making sense. We have Sihir, the group that support the idea of celebrating and spreading information about a culture and history through dance, and we have the people that deem this highly offensive and appropriative. So the question is: is other culture belly dancing appropriation or appreciation?

Sihir promotes body-positivity and community, so they accept everybody that applies. There are no cuts and no auditions. This is also partially because of the fact that Sihir is SA funded (Student association, means the University itself pays some money to keep the club going) and as a rule must accept everyone. They can't focus on a particular group and they can't ask Middle Eastern people to join, that would be completely inappropriate. Considering this, it makes sense that a lot of members are white considering 51.4% of UR's undergraduate population is white, according to CollegeFactual.com. While there are some minority students in Sihir, it is mainly white and that poses its own problems.

President Sophia McRae and her vice, Hannah Tompkins inform me that Sihir makes conscious decisions to make sure this art form isn't abused. They educate members every week about culture and belly dance in their emails, they make it a point to include information in their performances, and they encourage members to take the Middle Eastern dance and culture class. Sihir has also made it a point to try and get into Columbia University's Middle Eastern Dance Conference (MEDC). MEDC is a program your groups has to apply to and if you get accepted you go to workshops, lessons, and exposés to learn about rhythms, history and more. Another vital aspect, and one that's repeatedly stressed is to respect the costume and dance and it's only to be performed in recitals and in practice. **Never** as a Halloween costume or at parties.

Sophia and Hannah agree that it's not fair to say they're appropriating Arabic culture, since they're not claiming belly dance as theirs. They give credit to the culture, the musicians, and the original choreographers. They do their own choreography, but they don't make up new moves- they use traditional established belly dance technique and they keep traditional costumes. Students choreograph the dances, but eboard highly scrutinizes every submitted idea to make sure it's not too sexual, it's traditional and appropriate, the music and lyrics are appropriate, and to limit Western music. They will occasionally use Western songs to appeal to a wider audience, though, but they still keep traditional dance moves.

They also stressed that members of Sihir don't benefit from belly dancing other than community and exercise. They charge only enough at shows to float the performance and club costs and

have fundraisers and dues for things like communal costumes and to go to MEDC. Sophia closed the interview with, "If something legitimizes or degrades a culture, I think it's problematic, but I don't think we're doing that. Our costumes are appropriate the way we dance is appropriate."

Senior student, Nico Hoyt volunteered his objective opinion. He agrees that Sihir is doing a lot to stay on the "appreciation" side of things and really likes that members learn the basic belly dance steps and simply reuse them in different routines instead of making their own steps and claiming their dance is unique. However, he points out that if the point of Sihir is for everyone to enjoy belly dance and the culture more people need to be included. Sihir needs better diversity, not just of race, but of body-type and gender. However, with this dedicated fix, Nico agrees that Sihir doing more good than harm, as long as they keep their dedication to the authenticity and credit. Some Middle Eastern students, like Farida Elhefni, on the other hand, disagree that Sihir is doing any good.

The first thing Farida pointed out was that Sihir's translation is actually Sahir, which translates to "black magic" in Islam and she feels that this is deeply offensive and would like to know how this name was chosen. "White people shouldn't belly dance because it's not their culture to appreciate and to be a part of. Practicing Egyptian culture comes from an imperialist identity and idea that if white people want to do something, they just can. It gives them the ability to fetishize it while shitting on us. White women do not need belly dancing to celebrate their bodies and do so at the expense of stealing and twisting someone else's culture. The exoticism of it makes Westerners think it's sexy, but it isn't supposed to be. Then they try to take credit for it. Some famous Western dancers take Arabic names and are the first things to pop up if you google belly dancing. Where's the credit for the music, the people that invented this? It's not your thing"

She argues that Western people can't appreciate the music and artists they didn't grow up with and don't learn the rhythm. If the intent really is to teach about Arab culture, it should be lead by Arabs. But Arabs are unlikely to join, "I thought about joining, but then they're all white girls. Imagine learning about your own culture from white people. That also discourages people from joining." There really aren't that many Middle Eastern women to join the group. Farida expressed that she knows all of the Middle Eastern students because "there's only a few of us" and counted only five women. Farida's proposed solution to the controversy is for white women to "just create their own thing, it's not like it's real bellydance anyway".

Western belly dancing is a hot debate subject, but disagreement on campus hasn't led to an official complaint. Yet. Now it's just watch-and-see, but if Sihir is called into question there isn't much room for compromise. Dean Burns will have to ask himself: appreciation or appropriation?