



Colourful celebration of joy

Anne Vermeyden's
love for belly dancing
runs deep – not just as
an artform but for its benefits
to both her physical
and mental health

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Anne Vermeyden was photographed at the Haft Vadi Belly Dance Studio in Kitchener.

Anne Vermeyden successfully defended her PhD thesis at University of Guelph on the subject of belly dance

The image is stunning. A billowy veil floats high above the dancer's head, her outfit is richly coloured, and her face reflects the joy she feels as she moves.

It's that joy – and fun – that dancer Anne Vermeyden wishes people would envision when they hear the words belly dancing.

The Waterloo resident says it is time to set aside the “harem fantasy,” generated by the highly sexualized popular images from the past, and see the art form for what it really is: a way to celebrate.

Some people raise an eyebrow when they learn she is a performer – and teacher – of belly dancing.

She says belly dancing brought her joy right from the time of her very first lesson.

“I was infected with belly dance.”

ANNE VERMEYDEN

“My dad had a hard time coming to terms with it,” says Vermeyden, 29. “Those were the ‘naughty images’ from the past.”

Her academic study of this dance might just raise the other eyebrow. This spring, at the University of Guelph, she successfully defended her PhD thesis titled “Hybridization and Uneven Exchange: The Popularization of Belly Dance in Toronto, Canada (1950-1990).”

But her husband, Pim Vermeyden, didn't bat an eye when she took her first belly dance class in the fall of 2011. In fact, he was relieved.

“We had taken ballroom dancing before we got married,” he explains. “It was the hardest thing we ever did together as a couple. I was happy she didn't need to rely on me for this.”

Pim, a 28-year-old software developer at Vidyard in Kitchener, did not anticipate just how much his wife would enjoy it. “She was so passionate about it. Her interest in it grew more and more . . . and more and more,” he says with a laugh.

And if friends tease him about his wife's work, he takes it in stride.

“He is totally supportive,” Anne says. “He finds it kind of boring. It's just my job.”

Vermeyden says belly dancing brought her joy from her very first lesson.

“I started going a lot, about twice a week,” she recalls. “I was going to workshops in Mississauga and I met my teacher's teacher. I was infected with belly dance.”

A tireless student, she also learned Arabic so she could interpret the music and understand lyrics. Having heard stories about performers choosing music that would not be appropriate for dancing, she wanted to avoid that same mistake.

“I couldn't learn enough,” she says.



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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DIANE SHANTZ

Vermeyden's introduction to belly dancing was unusual.

While growing up, she struggled with obsessive thinking patterns. In the early fall of 2011, while working on her master's degree at the University of Guelph, she felt herself growing worse.

After seeking help from a therapist and a physician, she was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, or OCD.

"(My therapist) said, 'Get moving. You need to do physical activity. I don't care if it's Zumba, or yoga, or whatever.'"

While walking home, Vermeyden noticed a woman practising belly dancing outside her building. Intrigued, she stood and watched for a while until the woman approached her.

"She held my hands and said, 'You need to do this.' She gave me a pair of zills, or

finger cymbals. I had never met her before."

Vermeyden took the dancer's advice and set out on a path that not only helped her cope with the symptoms of her disorder, but also shaped the topic of her graduate studies.

However, the seeds for her interest were planted during her childhood in Brantford.

"I had a friend in elementary school from Palestine," she says. "She was trying to

teach me some moves; it was really hard. I gave up."

She may not have been able to master the dance, but she didn't give up her love of the music.

"I remember going to the library and looking for Middle Eastern music," she says. And her favourite movies were "Road to Morocco" and Disney's "Aladdin."

In high school, Vermeyden discovered the

music of Shakira and, along with friends, tried to imitate dance moves from music videos.

“Pop culture was the draw,” she says. “I danced to Shakira and Beyoncé. I wanted to make my abdomen move like that.”

Vermeyden discovered there was much to learn in 2011 when she met Dharlene Valeda of Haft Vadi Belly Dance Studio in Kitchener. Vermeyden affectionately describes Valeda as “nerdy like me.”

“As luck would have it, I had a very academically minded teacher,” Vermeyden says. “She is a librarian and is into books and the academic side of dance.”

Belly dance is common in the Middle East, Turkey, North Africa and Greece. “In Turkey there’s different stylization than in Egypt,” Vermeyden explains. “The movements could be similar, but there’s no

prescribed way to dance.”

Vermeyden politely tolerates interruptions for translation when she effortlessly inserts Arabic words, such as “raqs sharqi,” “dabke” and “baladi,” into conversation. But what she won’t accept are the stereotypes of the women who dance and assumptions based on popular images from the past.

“I think that as an academic, we fail if we see a stereotype and don’t look deeper,” she explains. “I am bothered by the mixing of the religious imagery, and the cultural appropriation.”

Vermeyden endeavoured in her PhD dissertation to set the record straight.

She does not deny there is a sensuality to the dance but, as she repeats often, context is key. And so is understanding the history of the dance.

Rarely seen outside of the Middle East

prior to the Chicago’s World’s Fair in 1893, the belly dancing performances at the fair were an instant sensation and North American performers quickly began appropriating and imitating the performances of those Middle Eastern dancers.

Even the term “belly dance” is problematic, as Vermeyden explains in her thesis: “The French danse du ventre, ‘belly dance,’ bears no resemblance to the Arabic, Turkish or Greek terminology for these dance forms.”

Belly dancing enjoyed a resurgence in North American popularity in the 1960s. Vermeyden says this was fuelled in large part by immigration to North America from the Middle East, and popular Orientalist stereotypes that made the dance attractive to North Americans.

Vermeyden bristles at the racist attitudes of the time that created what she referred

to as “the harem fantasy.” It distorts what belly dancing actually is, she says.

“It is a dance of celebration. Men and women dance it at weddings and anniversary and birthday parties.”

Belly dancing, however, is not storytelling, Vermeyden says. “The movements have no inherent narrative meaning.”

She says the beauty of the dance is what happens when musicians and dancer come together to perform.

“You might have a drummer from Iraq, a violinist from Turkey. Everyone is coming from different places to make new music and the dancer is learning new movements. It all comes together to create something new.”

Barbara Sellers-Young, one of Vermeyden’s thesis committee members, agrees belly dancing is about improvisation.

“The dance is a unification between the

dancer and the audience and the music,” Sellers-Young explains. “(The dancer) is the choreographer.”

She praises Vermeyden’s academic achievements.

“She did a thorough job looking at all the primary information she could find on the dance in Toronto bringing it all the way up to the 1990s,” Sellers-Young says. The finished work could be published as a book, or broken into smaller articles, she says.

Success in her academic and dance careers could not eliminate all the symptoms of Vermeyden’s OCD. In January of this year she found her obsessive thoughts spiralling out of control.

“I became physically ill,” she explains. “I ended up in hospital.”

Along with starting on medication, Vermeyden began cognitive behaviour

therapy and has steadily improved but says it will always be a struggle.

She feels it is important to speak up about mental illness.

“If my story reaches someone, and maybe helps them, it’s worth it,” she says.

Both she and her husband of nine years believe dance has helped in her healing.

“Belly dancing has been so constructive,” Pim says. “It keeps her mind focused on something else.”

Chatting with Anne about recent performances proves the point as she pulls costumes out of the closet for display. Her face is animated and she laughs often when she describes her gigs.

“I can dance with live music, and I bring my own music,” Vermeyden says. “I ask people to tell me what they want.”

It’s all about sharing in people’s celebrations. And it’s about joy, and fun. 

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