

Teacher training Intensive at Caravan Studios, Portland, Oregon, USA
Funded by The Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund

Steffi Colbert / Barefoot BellyDance

It has been a long time ambition of mine to develop and perfect my Tribal dancing and teaching skills. Being a Tribal dancer and teacher in the UK is challenging as the opportunities for learning and personal growth in this area are so limited. Of course one can attend as many weekend workshops as possible, some of which can be brilliant learning opportunities. However, I feel that learning in this way does not really give sufficient grounding, that really this dance form needs continuity and committed regular ongoing training and practice.

The other options available are to learn from videos and DVD, produced by teachers in the USA.

I have been doing both. I have hosted workshops by Paulette Rees Denis of Gypsy Caravan, attended workshops led by other teachers, and worked closely with Paulette's video series. However I have been aware of the limitations of learning in this way and was desperate to be able to immerse myself in the Dance.

The last time I hosted Paulette's UK Visit, in September 2005, she was really encouraging me to come to Portland and attend her teacher training programme, pointing out that it was what I needed to move forward with my dance. At the time I really couldn't see how I would be able to afford to do this. However over the winter I came into a very small inheritance and decided to spend the money on the course. Now I only had to fund the flight and living accommodation, which was when I realised I could apply for this scholarship.

I was delighted to be awarded the scholarship and flew to Portland in April for my two week teacher training intensive. I was accompanied by my wonderful husband Richard, who plays the drums and leads our band, and without whose talent, support and encouragement I would not have been able to set up Barefoot, and my youngest daughter Lily. Their role was to support me and to have a holiday!! Richard also had the chance to play with the musicians who support Gypsy Caravan, and work closely with Jeff who leads their band and I know he learnt a lot. Lily loved having one to one attention, and especially enjoyed the soaking pool in the hotel, the fact that everyone loved her English accent and the sea otters in Portland Zoo!

The first amazing impression was of the dance studio itself and what a wonderful space it was in which to dance and learn. I arrived at the studio, jet lagged and disorientated the morning following our arrival, after a 24 hour journey, a reservation mix up with the hotel and very little sleep. To actually be in the place seen in the videos I had been learning from, was inspiring.

First we were introduced to our fellow students. There were six people on the teaching training course, 2 of whom, Cheryl and Jen, were local to Portland and who regularly attend classes at the studio where they were being trained to teach. Irene was also from Oregon, but a considerable distance from Portland in our small island terms, and Samia who was from Alaska.

The sixth member of our group was Louisa who was from Kent. I had only met her once before in the UK and had had no idea there was going to be someone else from home. I felt very close to all the girls by the end of the course and miss them dreadfully. Their support really helped my learning. I am especially grateful to have been able to build a relationship with Louisa and we are continuing to keep in touch and to work together now we are home. Louisa is responsible for all the photographs accompanying this article.

Our weekdays were mostly structured with 3 hours of teacher training in the morning, followed by 3 or 4 classes in the late afternoon - evening. Saturdays we had 4 classes in the morning then were free, and on Sundays only one in the evening. We attended classes of all levels, level 1 and 2 which we were learning to teach, along with the more challenging intermediate and advanced classes. The classes were taught by Paulette and many of the other teachers she has trained and whom are in her dance company, Gypsy Caravan.

I found the teacher training very useful. Having been teaching Arabic dance since 1995, I feel I am an experienced teacher myself, and I found that ethical practice discussions very helpful in consolidating my ideas about what makes a good teacher, how to respect my students and to expect respect in return, and how to improve my teaching in order to improve their dancing, their strength and flexibility and their ability to understand and interpret rhythms and music.

We covered Warm Ups, and the individual moves taught in a level 1 course and in a level 2 course. We also explored the history of this dance style, costuming, Zil playing and rhythms.

Looking back I am finding it hard to identify which was most useful, the actual teacher training or attending the classes. I think both aspects were part of the huge and amazing learning experience I feel so lucky to have had. In the classes I gained the opportunity to have my dancing corrected. Learning from videos there were many small things I was doing wrong, and having no teacher to correct my posture, hand position or whatever meant that I never felt I quite looked right.

Now I had this exciting opportunity to really get it right and I loved it. Each person I learnt with gave me something else. The notes I had written in my little black book have been used over and over again since coming home. I am only sad that I can't have the opportunity to attend ongoing classes at the Studio, I would be so good!! Of course real life would make it impossible to dance that much on an everyday basis, but what a fantasy!!

By the second weekend we were all getting very anxious about the testing. I was especially struggling with learning the Gypsy Caravan names for the

rhythms as these ancient drum beats have evolved with various different names for the same rhythm over the years, none of which any of our generation could ever claim as right or wrong. For me, I always feel unlearning and relearning is harder than learning in the first place! I also had moves and combinations to perfect and lots of other information to revise and try to retain.

I have always suffered from exam nerves and was getting more and more anxious thinking how disappointed I would feel if I didn't pass having come all this way, worked so hard and been so supported by the scholarship.

There were occasional times before the trip when I wondered if I should travel without my family. Not having to think about anyone else would have been a luxury which might have allowed me to concentrate more, work in my room when I wished and to go out with the 'grown ups' on the course in the evenings, impossible with a small child. The reality though was the even the grown ups were too exhausted for much late night 'fun', and actually having Richard and Lily keeping me company when I was not dancing was really grounding and helped me not get too stressed. I especially found when coming back to the hotel, often frustrated and fed up after a difficult class, being able to off load really helped, and never more so than in the run up to the testing. I got very low and lacking in confidence and Richard listened and boosted wonderfully, pointing out that even if I didn't pass, nothing could take away all the learning I had experienced. Richard also organised trips and activities for my free time so that I come home exhausted from having done so much, but feeling like I also had a holiday, having found time to visit the volcanoes, waterfalls, and the coast.

Well, The day of the testing came, and following a night of very little sleep, three hours later we have been tested on our dancing skills, teaching skills and had completed a written paper. Then, the worst bit, being called in individually for feedback and to be told if we had passed! I think this was the worst bit of the whole trip! Paulette gave me a lot of useful feedback, and I have been working hard on the points she raised - then I asked her 'Well, have I passed or not?'. I had. Currently my certificate is my most prized possession!

After all the anxiety, my relief and jubilation was considerable. Although the testing put a lot of pressure on us as individuals, looking back, I do now feel that the Certification is meaningful, that I really have achieved something of worth. Paulette has worked hard to promote and enhance professionalism in Tribal dance, and I feel that by being certificated by her, she has shown that she really believes I am able to teach well this lovely dance form, the creation and development of which she has been so involved in.

Since returning home I have been putting all I have learnt into practice. In my weekly classes I have been using much of the structure I learnt at Caravan Studios, and I am encouraging my students to be much more improvisational in their dance. I have found that I have the confidence to keep what I teach simple, and to allow the students to really get comfortable with what they are learning before moving on. I realise that using complicated and complex choreographies might make me feel safer - if what I teach looks difficult they will be impressed - but it doesn't always give them the space to develop as dancers. Students have commented on a new level of intensity in the classes since I came home!

I will also be using the my new skills when teaching the workshops for which I have already been booked at various venues around the country this year, and am in the process of organising a series of dance and drum workshops in my own town for the autumn and spring. I am also aiming to have the first Barefoot Tribal Teaching and Performance DVD's out this winter, following the production of our first CD last year.

I feel that I have really enjoyed teaching more than ever since my return. My self esteem has taken a huge boost. I am also pushing the standard of dance forward in my performance troupe, Barefoot BellyDance. We have perhaps fallen into a bit of a rut, having been established since 2000 and I feel full of new ideas and am encouraging all the members to improve their technique, strength and flexibility. Personally I am enjoying performing with the troupe more and am looking forward to our summer when we have quite a full schedule performing at dance, music and folk festivals up and down the country.

I gained so much in both personal and teaching confidence from attending the course. I also now feel I really want to 'spread the word' about this wonderful dance form. So many people seem to not really know what true 'Tribal' means in the context of belly dance, how earthy, and powerful this simple, improvised community dance should be, and I hope that my experience will help to clarify peoples perception of the style.

I am very grateful for all the enriching friendships I made, both with those on the course and the students and teachers in all the classes at Caravan studios. I feel liked I learned from all of them.

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