

The UK Tribal Scene - by Emma Pyke

Tribal hit our shores in a noticeable way just over 5 years ago with a few teachers, who had trained overseas, starting to advertise their classes as American Tribal Style. But more classes didn't erupt overnight - the comments that I heard at the time were what was so special about it, what's all that about sisterhood? People who had grown up learning in a choreography- group- performance background couldn't see the beauty of a group improvisation (does any of this sound familiar?!) And really at the time we only had a few videos to go on - from what I remember I wasn't that impressed with - all the dancers looked so solemn and not at all like they were actually enjoying what they were doing. So what changed things?

Weekend festivals such as Majma, started exposing more and more people to tribal, with Paulette Rees Denis (and more recently Kajira Djoumahna) being invited to participate. The workshops were very popular - but of course for those who had some knowledge it was frustrating as there weren't more advanced classes available. But throughout this time the Fat Chance, Kajira Djoumahna and Gypsy Caravan videos were being stocked by UK vendors. We also had Fat Chance trained Wendy Marlatt in Dublin, who is now a very popular and regular teacher here. The number of tribal workshops is steadily increasing - especially with international teachers and groups being invited to come and teach at most major events, and/or introductory tribal workshops by UK teachers. Of course the arrival of the BellyDance SuperStars with Rachel Brice has brought tribal to the fore but I don't wish to get into the ATS vs fusion debate here.

And the idea of using cues and set moves to lead group improvisation seems to be becoming more accepted, but the classes and indeed troupes are led in the main by teachers who have had little or no direct training from Fat Chance certified instructors and are directing their students by means of using videos, books and more recently YouTube and tribe.net as sources of information. As I have learnt a lot this way I'm not denigrating these as a source of information - I just feel it may take a few more years before more troupes use improvisation routinely in their performances. With my student tribal troupe TribalTastic we only do improvisation - but as the troupe has only been in existence for a few months our current movement repertoire is quite small. We have done a few performances so far - our first was to live drummers so there was no way we knew what was coming next, and to keep this anticipation alive for the past two performances I haven't told them what music they will be dancing to until they get out on stage! It means that yes we are out of time sometimes with the music but the reaction from the audience is very supportive.

So yes tribal is growing with performances in venues such as haflahs and shows, and it would be nice to be able to say I dance tribal style without having to explain it!! However I do have to add that I've been dancing at a particular charity event for 4 or so years now - up till this year basing it on traditional belly dance with cabaret costumes etc. This year TribalTastic did it - and we had more comments about our tribal costume than I have ever had about bedlah! And it wasn't too bad as we had a mention in one of our local papers - even if they got our name wrong (Tribalelastic anyone?)

As a primarily Egyptian style teacher and as a new tribal teacher this is an exciting time, as the latter is becoming more widely accepted as a viable alternative to Egyptian or Turkish classes.