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gender: Undeterred by strange looks, the West's sole male belly dancer has gone pro, started a new fitness craze and wears the "freak" label with pride

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Byline: Steve Lillebuen

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / C'mon, give it a whirl: Viraj encourages diners -- like Olga d'Entremont, above -- to join in his live performances at local Greek restaurants.

Colour Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / So, I was eating my souvlaki when all of sudden, this guy shows up and As Edmonton's sole male professional belly dancer, Viraj Wanigasekera is used to getting strange looks from the fellas.

Colour Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / (Viraj Wanigasekera)

Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / Viraj and one of his students wear traditional belly drapes as they discuss their moves.

"I feel like a freak," says Viraj Wanigasekera, thinking aloud with a mischievous smile. "But I think I like it."

A few years ago, Viraj set up a spot on Whyte Avenue, hit "play" on his CD player, and began to move to the Middle Eastern music. An East Indian woman soon walked by and told him, "very nice dancing, darling -- but you're dancing like a woman."

"That's such a cut," he remembers, shaking his head with a bit of a shrug. "I was a struggling dancer and wondering if there were moves that I wasn't supposed to do and here my home audience was laughing at me.

"It was really intimidating."

What's interesting about Viraj is not that he's a dancer, but that he is one of a very few who are professional male belly dancers -- going against the grain of an artform famous for the gyrations of the female hip. He's the only male belly dancer between Vancouver and Toronto, and there's precious few further east.

"It's been an evolution for him," says longtime friend and former roommate Sunil Barran.

"It's not like Viraj set out to become a male belly dancer from the start. He took classes, got more and more interested, and made a professional leap that was a bold step for him."

Viraj's story begins six years ago when a friend invited him to a charity dinner to watch her dance class perform. It was there that he was introduced to belly dancing, also known as oriental dance or Raks Sharki (Arabic for "dance of the East"). He was charmed by the performance, and later told the female dancers that he was jealous he wasn't a woman so he could belly dance with them.

"They said, 'Well, guys can do this, too,' and I was totally surprised."

With the gender barrier gone, Viraj started his experimental hobby while he finished his biological

sciences degree. He worked as an insta-loan cashier and a telephone market researcher to pay the rent while one performance led to another; he soon found himself in love with the dance form and decided to pursue the hobby full time.

"Dance is the worst girlfriend I ever had," he jokes with his usual honesty. "When she walks in the room, that's all I can focus on. Nothing else matters."

Although the moves he learned originate as female dances, the male body makes them appear masculine, he explains.

And while he enjoys the novelty of being a male belly dancer, he wasn't quite prepared for some other reactions -- including shock, disbelief and occasional hostility.

"Whether I liked it or not, I soon realized that I had become an ambassador for what I was trying to do; I couldn't just dance," he says.

"There are some that love you and they're cheering for you before you even get on the stage, but there are some that won't even look at you because they're afraid. They don't know what I'm about."

Hundreds of years ago, Viraj says, male belly dancers were not unusual -- but they were so disruptive to society that they were eventually banned by rulers, paving the way for belly dance to become a female-dominated art. But men haven't been totally forced out. Today, some of the top instructors in the world are men, including Horacio Cifuentes, a Colombian-born male belly dancer now living in Germany.

Upon realizing that he was a male drop in the female-belly-dancing bucket, Viraj headed to Toronto to gain professional certification. "I was a freak seeking legitimacy and I wanted to get as good as I could get to prove that I had the utmost respect for this art and music."

By 2003, he'd found legitimacy and accomplished some massive goals: he was a certified dance professional, had secured regular performances at a

Greek restaurant on 124th Street, and created an innovative belly dance-based group fitness program.

The latter, he says, was inspired by his athletic background -- he was a sprinter in university, has a brown belt in karate, and has experience in kickboxing and Tae Kwon Do -- and aimed to create a head-to-toe workout for people of all ages.

Now in its fifth revision, Viraj's Occidental/Oriental (VO) belly dancing fitness program has been taught at the YMCA and the University of Alberta. It's where East meets West, he says, with a fusion of fitness and dance.

"I saw that women were wanting an opportunity to express themselves in an environment that wasn't so rigidly structured," he explains. "It's like the belly dancing form of Tai Bo."

He says that his program improves flexibility, core stability, muscular endurance and has cardiovascular benefits as well. The program is proving to be popular with women of all ages -- especially college students.

Sara Berkel, a chemistry and biology student, is one of a dozen women in his current fitness class. "His classes keep you fit and sexy," she laughs. "It's a great workout and it's fun too because I'm learning new moves but also working on areas that I want to work on."

Viraj's genuine passion proves to be contagious to his students, but he's quick to point out that he considers belly dancing more than a sexy dance that happens to be a great workout: it's a confidence builder.

"Belly dancing is a great form of personal development. For some people it's even a spiritual journey."

Viraj, now 30, is living proof of those powers, having blossomed from a self-described "super nerd" in high school to becoming a world-class belly dancer.

His latest step saw him audition for Cirque du Soleil. "I find out in April if I made the cut," he says. Next up is a tour of the Middle East to participate in dance festivals and workshops; he also plans to network with other male belly dancers to form an international community.

Has his hard work paid off? Has he gained legitimacy as a male performer in a female profession?

He seems to think so.

"I've had some Arabic men tell me that I've got a lot of guts to do this," he says, pride seeping through. "They say, 'I know I'm a tough guy, but after I saw your performance, I told my wife that I couldn't be paid any amount of money to go on stage and do what you did.'"

"When you get that kind of respect from a big Arabic guy, you know that people respect you and my quest for integrity has definitely paid off."

LIVE PERFORMANCES WITH VIRAJ:

- Grub Med Greek Ristorante,

17 Fairway Drive, 436-1988. Fridays, 7:15 p.m.

- Cosmo's Restaurant,

10810 124th St. 455-7474

Fridays and Saturdays, 8:00 p.m.

- Midnight at the Oasis student and instructor Middle Eastern dance recital, presented by Isis Dance Productions

Saturday, March 26, 8 p.m.

Myer Horowitz Theatre

Tickets \$15, \$7 for students, from Ticketmaster, 451-8000