

# Belly Dance? Fat Chance!

An Interview with Carolena  
Nericcio, Creator of American  
Tribal Style Belly Dance

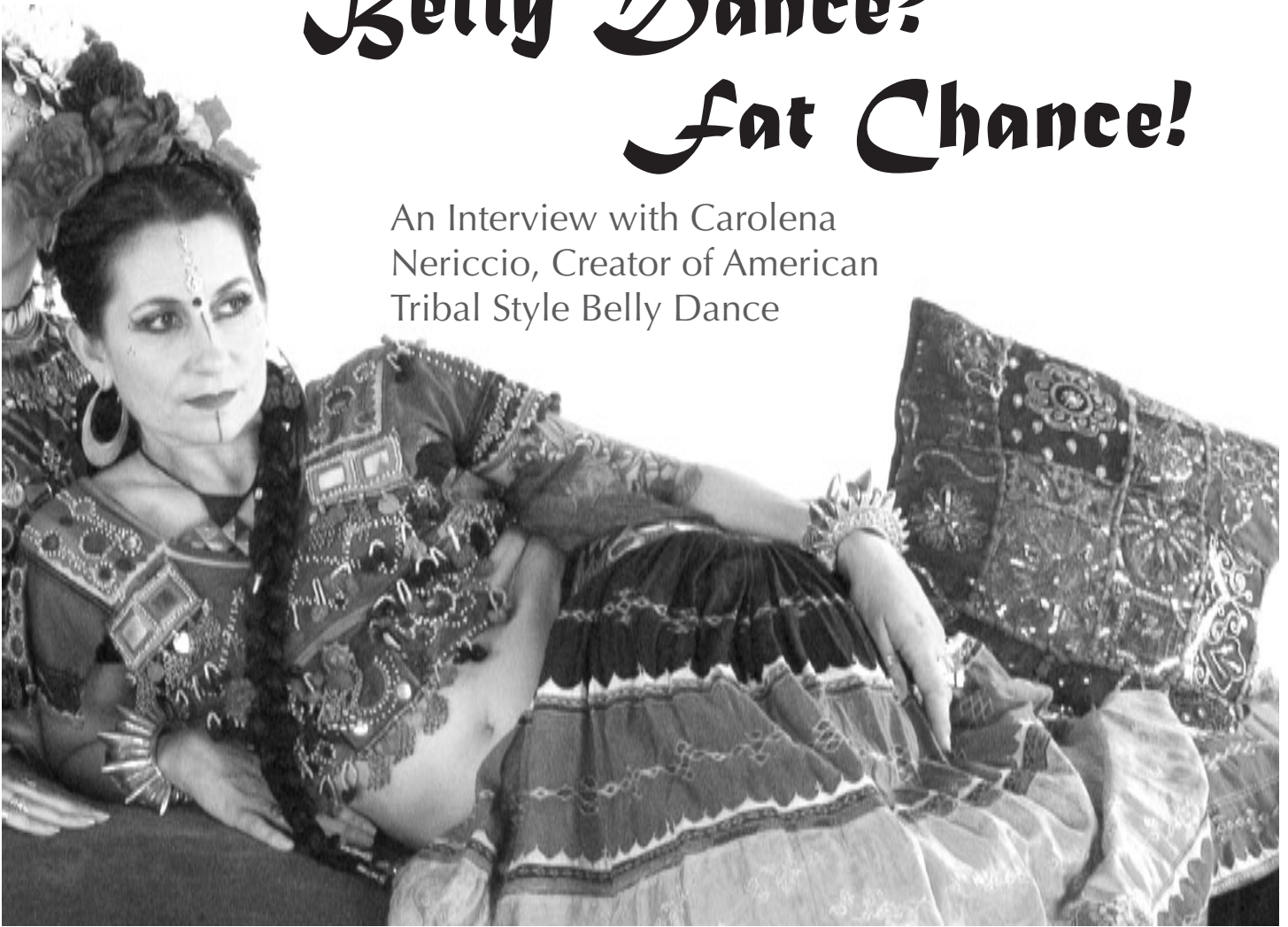


photo: Carolena Nericcio

by Keith Waller

**B**elly Dancing has a special appeal to women looking for exercise and social time with friends. It's an art, an exercise, and a form of communication that makes its practice fun, and it is a very non-judgmental and accepting way for women of all sizes, types and ages to come together with a common goal: To learn the vocabulary of dance and the unspoken language of cues for its improvisation.

Carolena Nericcio created the popular dance style of American Tribal Style Belly Dance (ATS) in 1987 in San Francisco, and formed Fat Chance Belly Dance troupe, the largest group of the style. The troupe was named for the silly rhyming response given to onlookers who came in thinking that belly dance was exotic entertainment just for their pleasure. Today, ATS has a devoted worldwide following.

This past April, Carolena traveled from San Francisco to the Grand Strand in order to teach a special advanced training session of ATS with our own Roxanne Roundtree, director of HipNotic Rhythm dance troupe in Myrtle Beach and spoke with *Natural Awakenings*.

**NA:** How would you define American Tribal Style Belly Dance, especially the term "tribal"?

**CN:** The name American Tribal Belly Style Dance was assigned to us by the traditional belly dancers, because they wanted to set us apart from them. I know it sounds confusing, suggesting something like American Indian dancing plus belly dancing, but the word tribal actually means dancers working together – dancing as a group.

**NA:** How does Fat Chance Belly Dance stand out as an American Tribal Belly Dance group?

**CN:** We are the creators of the American Tribal Style Belly Dance. I'm the originator, and developed the style over the years I was teaching with the intent that it be improvisational. I watched how a lead dancer would angle her body to send cues; not big cues that could be perceived by the audience, but set cues. When you're moving with another person, your body will make slight gestures before you move or turn, and the other person will pick up on that. I wanted to broaden that in a way that dancers could send cues to dance improvisationally, communicating with a vocabulary of steps.

**NA:** Can any woman belly dance? Is there a particular skill, age or body type necessary?

**CW:** There's no age limit, no size limit—the dance itself is very gentle and easy to learn. If you want to get into advanced technique, it can get a little more taxing on the body and fitness level becomes important, but 75% of what you can do with the dance is accessible to everybody.

I really like the idea that what the audience sees is a beautiful thing happening on stage—an unspoken communication. I don't want cookie cutter dancers, something homogenous, so you don't actually see the dancers but only the dance. I like to have a range of bodies and sizes, working in harmony in a way that what the audience sees is beautiful movement on the stage, and they realize, 'oh, there are individuals involved.' One of the things about memorized choreography is that, unless everyone is spot-on and looks exactly the same, it doesn't look right – and matching dancers is impossible, I find. With different types of dancers on stage, you see that different bodies do things in different ways. With improvisational dance, whoever is in the lead at the time takes the dancers through the movement. Then the leader changes, the dancers move through it and it changes again—it's constantly evolving.

**NA:** How does the tribe/class develop? Is the cohesion of the group critical to the success of the troupe?

**CW:** Actually, it doesn't matter. Often, when group of dancers are friends, they intuitively have a sense of how things should go. But as they get more advanced, more professional, more evolved, they start to work with everybody and begin to understand that the main goal is to get the dance on the stage.

**NA:** What do women express as the joy of belly dancing? As the biggest reward?

**CW:** The biggest comment we hear is that women feel more comfortable with their bodies, whether they thought they were too thin or too fat, too awkward or such. They get into the vibe of the group and feel more comfortable with themselves. Many dancers speak about the camaraderie of the tribe, too, and really enjoy the fact that they meet with friends in a common interest – a kind of playground with structure. Many love the costumes, even in dance practice class where they don't wear fancy costumes, but the full skirts, small top, and a scarf around their hips. That kind of pretty, flowing costume is kind of exotic and fun, and it isn't what's happening in regular fashion. It's forgiving and flattering, colorful and different. It lets you get out of work clothes and do something fun and non-judgemental after a long day of conforming. The teacher keeps everyone to the vocabulary of steps and presentation, but other than that there is a lot of freedom of expression.

**NA:** Do you design the costumes for everyone or do

the costumes evolve independently with other dance troupes across the country.

**CW:** I designed the original costumes, based on what I found universally flattering. That is, a pair of pantaloons: billowy pants in a stiff taffeta; a full skirt with 8 to 10 yards of fabric; a hip shawl with tassels and coins; and a little chili top, like a little T shirt with the back cut out, but over that goes a coin bra for more ornamentation and support. We used to wear a full headdress, too, but these days there are so many things you can do to expand color at the top of the head, and there are so many kinds of bracelets, rings, and necklaces. That's the classic costume I advocate for my troupe and for Roxanne's group.

**NA:** Is there a formal hierarchy? Is there a "chief?"

**CW:** I would be the Ultimate Highest Tribal Chief (laughing). Seriously, every group is not affiliated with me. I began certifying a network of ATS teachers to refer students to, and every group has a troupe leader. They say they want to work democratically, but every group has a natural leader and natural followers. It just happens.

**NA:** Who will carry on the Fat Chance Belly Dance troupe and ATS after you decide to pass the torch (or the veils)?

**CW:** Actually, that is the plan, and why I'm in Myrtle Beach doing teacher training. I've created what I meant to create, and the certified teachers will carry on, take the idea and go with it. There won't be one person with a legacy, but there will still be a headquarters in San Francisco and others teaching around the world.

**NA:** You began a program promoting Veganism, right?

**CW:** Yes, I have such a forum with the organization. I can use my influence to pass along the concept of kindness to all living things. If people are interested, I lead them to it.

**NA:** What have you liked best about Myrtle Beach and your time here?

**CW:** This is my first time here, to do this special advanced training for Roxanne. It's lovely, and a very different climate from San Francisco. I'm looking forward to doing more workshops here in the future.

*For more information on Roxanne Roundtree's HipNotic Belly Dance Troupe, see [BellyDanceRox.com](http://BellyDanceRox.com), or call (843) 438-4465. See ad page 39. For more information on Fat Chance Belly Dance and American Tribal Belly Style Dance style founder Carolena Nericcio, see [FCBD.com](http://FCBD.com).*