

dressed all in black, Donna Carlton stood in front of her class demonstrating slow, controlled movements.

With rounded-out feet, she tilted her pelvis with her abdominal muscles and

showed the students moves they later would practice at home in front of a mirror.

"Like your pelvic bone is scooping, pulling in," Carlton said.

The class — of eight intermediate-level belly dancers — mimicked her, facing a wall of mirrors at the Lynda Mitchell Yoga Studio in Bloomington.

Student Emilie Johnson, with Henna-painted hands outstretched in fluid movements, wore a jangling coin scarf around her waist. Others wore beaded or fringed scarves, which accentuated their hip movements.

Ask anyone why the sudden surge in popularity of belly dancing, and they will tell you two things.

First, that it's not sudden; belly dancing popularity goes in cycles. And second, popping belly dancer Shakira has brought it into the limelight this time around.

"Her moves are authentic," said instructor Katya Faris.

Carlton, author of the book *Looking for Little Egypt*, became interested in the dance about 20 years ago, when she worked full time at a desk job and sought a recreational form of exercise.

"It's become a really special thing for women, to feel really at ease with their bodies — any body type and any age," she said.

And, regardless of trends that bring the dance in and out of popularity, that's the main major reason women are drawn to it.

"A lot of women come to me looking for a way to exercise that makes them feel it's OK to have curves," said Faris, who teaches two courses at the Student Recreational Sports Center.

"They see, 'Oh this is something I can do. I don't have to be 16 and 90 pounds,'" offered Bette Lucas, a longtime instructor at Arthur Murray Dance Studio.

Johnson, a former ballet dancer, started taking classes with Carlton last year.

"I felt like, 'Why didn't I do this sooner?'" said Johnson, 29.

She said the moves were much more fun than other dance forms she tried.

In belly dance, it's all about the hips, and dancers get to make up dances and improvise when performing.

"In ballet, you're not supposed to move

your hips at all," Johnson said.

WHAT IS IT?

Belly dance is the common term for Middle Eastern dance based on a woman's solo improvisation to music, Faris said.

Cairo, Egypt, is the capitol for staged performances of belly dance, but it's actually a social dance found all throughout the Middle East, Carlton said.

In the United States, it has gone through changes over the years, since it first grew popular in the 1970s.

Lucas began teaching 15 years ago, when Egyptian cabaret-style belly dance was popular. That's the kind performed in nightclubs in Europe, she said.

"Now a new movement is tribal (belly dance). In the last few years it's very popular," she said.

Tribal is different from the stereotypical idea of finger cymbals and scarves; it incorporates full skirts, turbans and layers of earth-toned clothes.

Lucas, who is performing at 7 p.m. Friday at Greek Islands restaurant in Indianapolis and sometimes dances at Casablanca in Bloomington, teaches folkloric dances. Faris, a former principle dancer with the Middle Eastern ensemble Salaam and an instructor at Serenity, teaches classical and folkloric.

HIP TIPS

Wanna get started bellydancing? Listen to these local experts.

Donna Carlton:

Become acquainted with your hips and how they move. "To really get good, you really have to practice."

Angie Dintaman:

much history. Take it a little bit at a time." Remember that good Egyptian dancers don't hit their peak until their 60s, so don't be discouraged.

Bette Lucas:

Find a teacher, watch a class. There are a lot of videos on the market, and they are a good tool, but feedback from teachers is necessary to get good.

See it

The Pangaea belly dance group will be performing at 8:30 a.m. Saturday at the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market in Showers Common. For more information about the group, call Angie Dintaman at 320-0235.

More

■ Katya Faris' Web site: www.katyafaris.com

■ Donna Carlton's Web site: ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/IDD

■ Bette Lucas' Web site: www.angelfire.com/biz2/bette

■ General belly dance information can be found at www.shira.net.

group's biggest fans are children and older women.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE DANCE

Thinking the routines are planned from start to finish is the least worrisome of misconceptions about belly dancing.

"Some people equate belly dance with strip tease performance," said Carlton.

Lucas said some people regard the dance as a "carnival side show thing," which is frustrating for those who consider it an art form.

In trying to change its image, some people even oppose the term "belly dancing," Lucas said, but the name sticks because most people are confused by the term "Middle Eastern dance."

And attempts to get more respect are making progress.

The magazine *Habibi: Journal of Middle Eastern*

Dance and Arts can now be found on bookstore shelves, instead of just through personal subscriptions, Faris said.

Carlton added that today, people are more and more accepting of foreign cultures. "People are more educated and have been exposed to the real thing," she said.

Faris hopes that belly-dance teachers come together to get their dance codified and to create a formal certification process.

"We want respect just like ballet has respect. I don't see why we can't be given that. We work just as hard," she said.

Reporter Nicole Kauffman can be reached at 331-4357 or by e-mail at nkauffman@heraldt.com.