

## Turning a Colour-Blind Eye? Canadian-Style Racism in Oriental Dance.

By Jocelyne Khan

Over recent months I have had some fascinating discussions in person and via email on a topic that surprises me we are not more willing to face openly. When I posted a message on the doCod chat group, back in early August, there was some brief discussion of the issue of racism in Oriental dance, but somehow it died off and I and other dancers who had an interest in the subject were left feeling somehow disappointed in the (lack of) outcome.

I think one of the reasons why we might be reluctant to discuss the issue at length without allowing ourselves to get pulled off-topic (inevitably, the link between discrimination based on colour leads to someone raising the question of discrimination against plus-sized dancers, or a discussion of racial attitudes predominant in certain Middle-Eastern countries, or some other topic that's slightly off the mark), is that at the basis of it, the very idea that this actually happens here in Canada embarrasses us. It challenges our notion that we are *the* model of success in multicultural acceptance. Racism is the stuff of toothless hillbillies in our superpower neighbour to the south, but here in Canada, we're above all that. Don't people remember after all that the famous Underground Railroad to freedom from slavery lead to our borders here in Canada? Not here, in our country, we're not capable of such practices. We deny; we ignore; we justify. Sadly, we don't seem able to boldly face the issue head on. In Canada, our brand of racism is of a different variety; polite, subtle, covert, deniable. Those of us who are offended by it don't want to admit it can happen here; those who aren't offended have learned to quietly sustain the status quo.

Interestingly enough, even though my friend who is an accomplished dancer who also happens to be Black and can't get one restaurant to hire her based entirely on her colour, she has never had a problem or complaint as a participant in our dance troupe, as a soloist at weddings and private functions, or as a dance teacher. Does this problem rest only with a few small-minded restaurant owners? I had been thinking it might be the case until I started connecting with other dancers of colour and hearing about their experiences.

I've tried to look at the issue from various perspectives. We're in the "entertainment biz" after all; I think most of us are prepared to accept a certain choosiness on the part of clients. I'm willing to agree that there is a certain criteria beyond just skill-level of dancing that a professional dancer needs to fulfill, and I'm certainly not naïve enough to think that looks don't play a part in that criteria. Where I lose this train of thought, however, is in accepting that a dancer's skin colour should come into play in that criteria.

In my various in-person and online discussions, I've heard about out how other dancers have played a role in perpetuating the acceptability of this discrimination. Teachers who tell their students "when the public thinks of a Bellydancer, they just don't think of a Black woman" and then failing to provide a support system to change that fact aren't helping a prospective student to better understand the barriers they're up against, they're contributing to keeping those barriers in place. Dance colleagues who won't pass a gig along to a fellow accomplished dancer because of her colour aren't protecting her from

potentially rude clients, they're helping to perpetuate the myth that all Bellydancers are white.

If someone could prove to me that clients only want dancers who look like they're actually of Middle-Eastern descent, I might buy it, but we know that this simply isn't true. Why would a dark-skinned Bellydancer be any more strange to the stereotype than a blonde one? We're blessed with an artform that accepts a broad definition of beauty; this definition should extend to include variety of race as well.

If nothing else, we can all agree that this is a complex and difficult topic. I'd like to think that we're up to tackling it, but first, we have to admit it exists....

