

Multifaceted Muse

Rachel Brice

Words by R. I. Nagy Photography Kacey Baxter (Acorn Studios), Sol Crawford & Rachel Brice

There are many reasons why individuals turn to dance as a form of creative expression. For Rachel Brice, dance proved to be both life-changing and life-affirming. She is a dance practitioner whose sheer love of dance – in all its sensual, spiritual and empowering manifestations – has inspired her to embody 21st century modalities to communicate her passion across the globe.



If you are not the kind of person who follows belly dance or moves in fringe arts circles, you may not know who Rachel Brice is, or be aware of the impact she has had on the international belly dance scene over the past few decades. Rachel's style of belly dance – known as Tribal Fusion Style – is instantly recognisable, thanks to a number of elements, including its serpentine movement vocabulary, astounding physicality, commanding stage presence, atypical music choices (a dizzying range spanning everything from traditional Arabic beats to electronica, glitch, and drum and bass), as well as a signature “look”, consisting of intricate costumes, layers of chunky tribal jewellery, and smoky eye make-up. While Rachel's hypnotic performances continue to dazzle audiences wherever she goes, it is her teaching that has helped open up this powerful form of self-expression to generations of belly dancers across the globe.

Beyond belly dancing, Rachel Brice is also a yoga teacher, artist, filmmaker, scholar, musical collaborator, and business owner. As I also discovered during our interview, she is intelligent, honest, generous with her time and knowledge, passionate about empowerment through learning, and a self-confessed “hippie”. During our talks, something that caught my attention in particular was how she has been able to successfully nurture a thriving creative practice while remaining mindful of the principles of sustainability.

When we caught up, Rachel was relaxed and happy after her Melbourne tour, despite having just finished an intensive three days of teaching, combined with performances at the final Assuit and Tie belly dance event. Her contentment was partly due to her fondness for being in Melbourne again, as well as the fact that the dancers attending her workshops were focussed on learning while not taking themselves too seriously. “Let me say that I love this town so much and I never want to leave”, she says. “Every place is so different, though. It's been amazing to see how much people have grown in the style here.”

No one could have predicted that a chance encounter with a belly dance troupe at the 1988 Renaissance Faire in Los Angeles would ignite a passion that would allow Rachel to channel her excess energy from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) into creative activity and pioneer an exciting new style of belly dance. “If I hadn't had that ignition, I'd probably be in jail, because I would be so miserable that I hadn't found my purpose in life.” Reflecting on her life and her achievements to date, she says, “All of it came from me wanting to dance, and being really open, because I was so in love with the dance and everything about it”. It was her enduring love of the dance, plus a string of fateful occurrences, that set her upon the path to the unique life that she leads today.

At its core, Tribal Fusion Style belly dance is about empowering dancers (both in their dance, as well as in their everyday lives), fostering strong communities of like-minded souls, enhancing physical and mental health, providing an outlet for personal expression, and channelling one's own inner warrior (as opposed to purely providing entertainment). Tribal Fusion Style's darker, edgier aesthetic and more urban contemporary feel has always tended to attract dancers and audiences from the fringe; resourceful, creative individuals who consciously shape their lives around their belief systems rather than forcing themselves to fit the mainstream. Rachel is one of these people. Through hard work – and some would say, a healthy dose of good fortune – she has been able to fashion a lifestyle that has given her the freedom to teach, tour, perform, and pursue creative interests without having to abandon her “hippie” ethos.

Rachel's need to travel locally and internationally for teaching and performing was one of the biggest challenges she faced early on in her career. “I try to be as conscious as possible when I travel, but I finally realised that I had to minimise it”, she says. Once she became aware of the carbon footprint associated with flying she started limiting her trips abroad, opting to focus on visiting different time-zones in four to six week blocks. “Flying is not ideal”, she says. “So I'm only going out once a year ... Basically I used to spend almost my entire time on the road, so having the online school has been beneficial in ways I didn't anticipate.”

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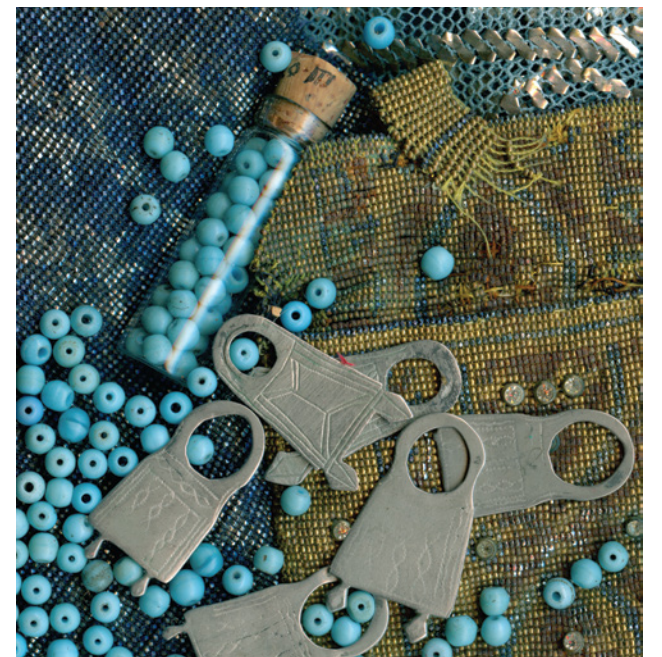
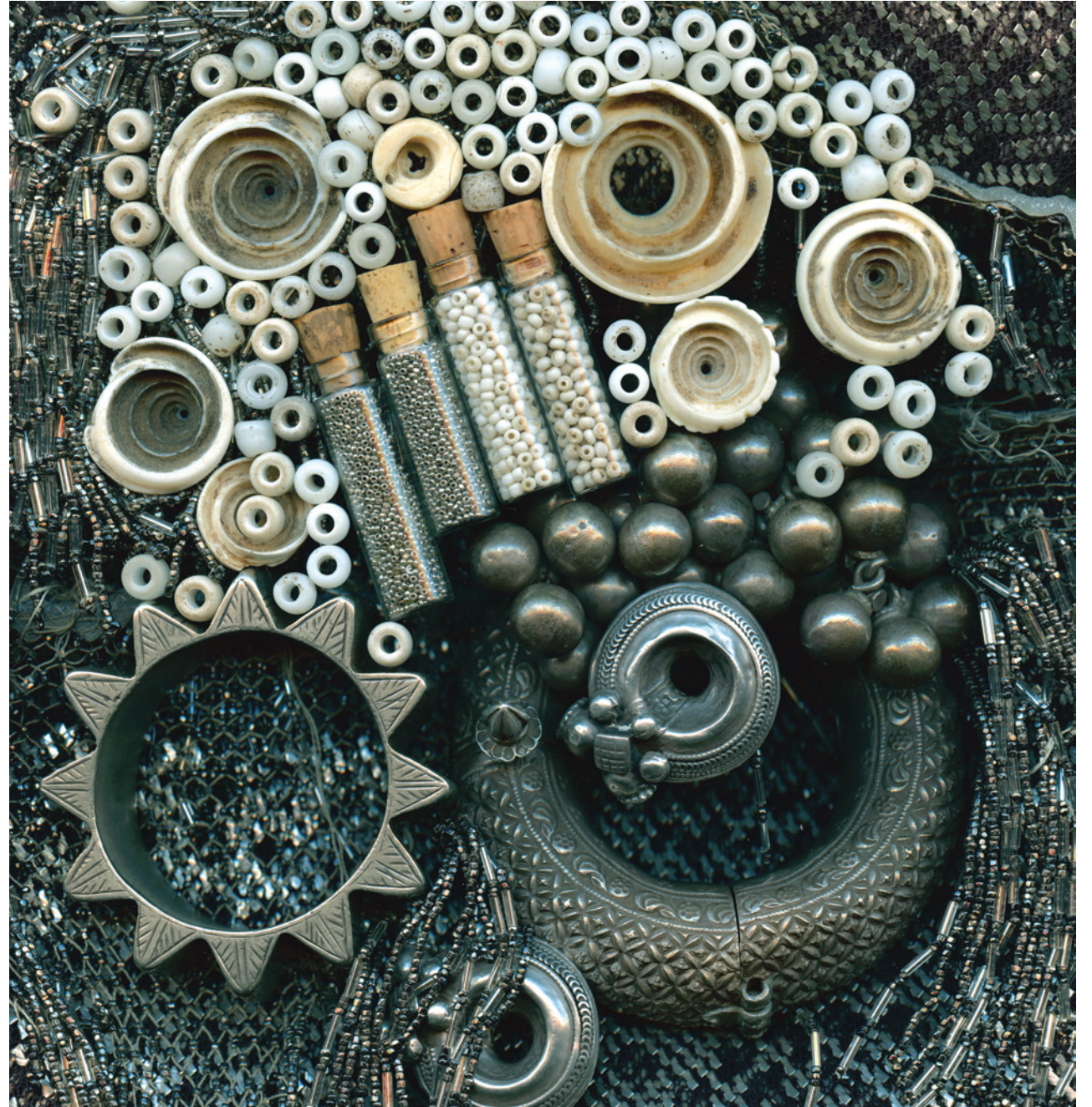
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Datura Online is Rachel’s online belly dance school, conceived in 2012 to give dancers across the world access to high-quality video resources aimed at strengthening and clarifying the fundamentals of Rachel’s Tribal Fusion belly dance style. The videos, filmed by Rachel and accessible through a paid membership system, cover subject areas such as body conditioning, dance technique and movement, musicality, improvisation, choreography, and adornment, and feature a range of experienced and diverse teachers. Designed to fit the budgets, schedules and interests of anyone with an internet connection and a desire to learn, Datura Online’s open format allows students to work through various modules at a steady pace, gain skills in specific areas, or dip in and out of subjects according to interest.

The concept for Datura Online was partly developed as a direct result of Rachel’s experiences with ADHD, which made traditional forms of learning difficult. Her struggles and subsequent successes inspired her to structure her teaching materials in a manner that supports several different learning styles. Shifting to online distribution also had the extra benefit of eliminating the need for making instructional DVDs, which date quickly and are commonly discarded after a few years of use.

Costuming is an important part of Tribal Fusion Style belly dance, and Rachel’s aesthetic – inspired by a rich range of influences, including traditional tribal dress and ‘20s flapper culture (the latter inspired by friend and dance collaborator, Mardi Love) – has coalesced from a combination of research, practicality, what she finds beautiful, and the tireless hunt for components. She delights in quoting one of her dance heroes, Masha Archer, in relation to costume creation for American Tribal Style belly dance: “Costuming in this way requires a certain amount of wit – and a rapaciousness to acquire, of course.”

At the beginning, Rachel’s outfit ideas are collected and organised on a web-based project management application, then once the look has been created she starts pulling all the individual components together. Virtually everything is resourcefully acquired or recycled in some manner: old jeans are repurposed for belt bases, new bras are sourced from thrift shops to be covered and embellished, recycled vintage saris are transformed into pantaloons and bra coverings, old thread and old fishing wire are used for sewing and bead work (“because it won’t break”), and interesting textiles, jewellery, buttons, and other bits and pieces are unearthed while scouring thrift shops, flea markets and eBay. Rachel now keeps three suitcases of bras, leather, and belts to mine for costume components. There are only two things that she buys new – special waxed thread used in leather-making, and stainless steel nylon-coated braided beading wire – as these are easier to sew with and are strong enough to withstand the rigours of performance.





All the pieces Rachel has collected can be easily disassembled and mixed and matched again. “There are very few pieces I love enough to keep. Probably in my twenty years of making costumes I’ve kept four things”, she says. She retains a preference for items that are vintage, weathered, and pre-loved, and says that dancers don’t need to spend huge amounts of money to create memorable costumes. “Look for beautiful vintage sheets, shisha belts, old coins, and 1970s rickrack at thrift stores”, she suggests. “Visit a hardware store for items like washers and chains. Pick fresh flowers for a headdress. Draw from your immediate environment.”

Tribal Fusion Style belly dance is renowned for the layers of exquisite tribal jewellery dancers wear as part of their costuming, and decades of collecting have seen Rachel amass a substantial collection. When she started out she stuck to affordable costume jewellery. But, as her career progressed, she was quickly seduced by older, authentic pieces due to their durability, comfort, beauty and rareness. “And with that rarity comes a steeper price”, she says. She is now more focused on the source and meaning of the tribal jewellery when searching for new pieces. “It used to be ‘Buy anything pretty!’, and now it’s like ‘OK, what is that used for, and what does it mean?’”. These days Rachel only truly feels comfortable when she’s purchasing jewellery second-hand.

At present, Rachel is busy running her business, having taken on more back-of-house duties after her business partner moved to another country. Current plans include making some exciting usability-related changes to Datura Online in 2019, and trying to find – or create – her ideal performance and creative venue in her hometown Portland, Oregon.

In terms of teaching, her next goal is to learn how to best teach “tarab”, a concept that has no equivalent in English. Tarab is a word used in Arabic music to describe the emotional effect of music. It primarily centres on the bliss of connecting with art and shifting into a trance-like state. “It’s a more sensual than spiritual kind of bliss”, she explains.

Another thing that has been on Rachel’s mind lately is the idea of becoming a good example of ageing – something that should not be difficult, considering that Tribal Fusion Style belly dance has always been very accepting of mature dancers. “I’m 46 and I feel stronger than ever – my body can do more now. While I continue to improve, I will keep working. But I have no desire to do it while trying to look young – I want to respect my age.” She adds, “To do this in a dance form that is largely prized for its sensual draw will be really interesting”. She names Helen Mirren, Dame Judi Dench, and Diana Vreeland as women she looks up to for being examples of strength, resilience, elegance, and all-round fabulousness.

Rachel has always maintained a consistent stage persona throughout her career, but at present she feels as if she is undergoing a process of personal transformation – largely brought about by the current state of the world – although she does not yet know how this will manifest in her dancing. “I’m feeling like the warrior needs to come back, but that version I did in 2002 doesn’t feel like me anymore”, she says. “I am currently waiting for the muse. It’s happening, it’s getting there, and I think in the next year I’ll know a little bit more once I play with it and dance it.”