



Ka Zena Blake-Owen

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Alpine Contemporary Bellydance Academy

WORDS JACQUI DURRANT

'I've been a dancer all my life,' says Ka Zena Blake-Owen, flamboyant owner of Myrtleford's Alpine Contemporary Bellydance Academy. 'And I've always been a bit "out there," so I'll blame that for my bellydancing.' Ka Zena learned this traditional Middle Eastern style of dancing six years ago after discovering an advertisement in a local paper. 'It just read, "Belly dancing" with a place, date and time. Nothing else. I was intrigued. Within months of starting, I knew I wanted to teach it. Bellydancing makes you feel good,' she smiles. 'You feel a certain amount of power in your own body. It's a lovely feeling of self-confidence.'

Ka Zena came to live in Myrtleford in mid-2009. She and her husband had purchased bare land with the notion of planning ahead for a tree-change retirement, but before long they'd hired a local builder to build a house. Still living on the Gold Coast, they'd intended to visit Myrtleford regularly to supervise the work, but the builder sent them regular photographic up-dates instead. The first time they stepped into their new home, it was complete, and clean.

A life-long 'beach bunny,' at first Ka Zena found the rain and fog of the alpine winter a rude shock to the system: 'I caught a cold and took quite a while to recover, but I think my body has adjusted now.' Meanwhile, she set about establishing the region's only professional Bellydance Academy, now located in Myrtleford's Body Basics Dance Studio. Ka Zena chose to organise classes into grades from beginners through to performance level. 'I felt that it was important to have graded classes. To go up a grade is a way of acknowledging a student's progression and commitment.'

There is a perception of bellydancing as harem dancing, but Ka Zena explains that she teaches the Egyptian style of bellydancing, as opposed to the less commonly taught, more 'suggestive' Turkish style. 'I blame Hollywood for associating bellydancing with the harem fantasy. I've done a dance of the seven veils with an 80-year-old woman. It's accessible to everyone.'

Bellydancing has many unexpected health benefits. 'It is like no other form of exercise in terms of strengthening the core muscles of the torso and the pelvic floor,' explains Ka Zena. 'Developing these strengths is protective, particularly as you get older. It strengthens the back and spine, improves posture, and assists in balance and coordination because it uses both sides of the body equally. Improving the pelvic floor muscles helps prevent incontinence, and it helps with childbirth: both the birth itself, and the recovery.'

With her advanced students, Ka Zena has formed the only professional bellydance group in the region, the Acba Dance Troupe. The Troupe includes one male dancer, Nepheris, who also happens to be blind. Quizzed on whether this poses any difficulties when the troupe performs their celebrated sword dance, Ka Zena laughs. 'Nepheris is a brilliant dancer. We just make sure we know where he is, and dance around him!'

Ka Zena describes her move to Myrtleford as 'a total life change for the better'. 'You see what Myrtleford's given me: my Dance Academy, and a new house with a big garden to be planted. I feel a much stronger sense of community here. I know that's a phrase that is banded about, but in Myrtleford, it's true.'

And in case you're wondering about Ka Zena's exotic name: her Gold Coast belly-dancing troupe thought that her strong stomach muscles made her look like Zena, Warrior Princess. 'Zena' was added to 'Kaz', and the name stuck. Now she's Myrtleford's own bellydance superhero.



The Acba Dance Troupe recently performed at Myrtleford's very own Casbah, Café Fez



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