

OTTO'S EMPIRE BRINGS BELLY DANCING TO SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

By: Kristen Wong

SYRACUSE, N.Y., Feb., 15, 2018 – As the crowd sat in the audience, musicians on the piano started enchantingly playing the music to welcome the long-awaited dancers in. Members came out one at a time, dancing into the aisles and skimming close to the audience as the fog machine gave off an aura of mystery. The audience watched in awe as the members skillfully swayed to the music up close and personal. The show was Otto's Empire Belly Dance Troupe's first showcase, "Welcome to the Empire," performed in November 2017.

Belly dancing is an activity known for its shimmying of the torso and its noisy coin skirts. Usually seen only on TV or in Shakira music videos, it is now thriving at Syracuse University, revived by the student-run organization Otto's Empire Belly Dance Troupe.

Otto's Empire became a student organization during the spring of 2016. It was started by Lorena Kanzki, who belly danced at home in Miami. It initially began with ten girls, but now has a thriving membership of over twenty girls looking to pay tribute to belly dancing and its roots in Middle Eastern culture.

Dasha Foley, a junior who joined Otto's Empire last semester, commented on how Otto's Empire is an unparalleled force on campus because of its take on dance. She said, "I think it's important because I haven't seen any Middle Eastern presence on campus. We learn about the origins and the techniques, so there's education there. There are many dance groups on campus, but there aren't many groups like Otto's Empire."

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Otto's Empire 2

Danielle Ozols, president of the group this semester, similarly emphasized the specialty of the dance group. She said, "We want to educate the community on Middle Eastern culture and dance. We want to spread the joy of dancing to the members and to the surrounding Syracuse community. Belly dance is relatively rare to find in general, especially on college campuses. It is unique because it gives diversity to the campus."

It does give diversity to the Syracuse campus. When a Syracuse student thinks about dancing, the first thing that comes to mind is probably raving at a fraternity party. Otto's Empire Belly Dance Troupe brings awareness to a special activity, and it does it in a respectful way. Ozols said, "Feedback is usually positive. People like that it's different and unique and there's nothing else like it."

Ozols noted, "We try to keep the dances as traditional as possible. We perform them in traditional belly dance attire, which consists of a bra top, skirt, and coin skirt wrapped around the waist, and we dance barefoot."

Although Otto's Empire is a relatively new organization, it has already performed at many events, including the UNICEF Snowflake Ball and Relay for Life. Its most recent performance was on February 8 at Café Con Soul Food, hosted by La Lucha and the NAACP. Otto's Empire had its first showcase in November 2017, bringing an excited group of friends and students ready to see the beauty of belly dance and the hard work of the group.

Otto's Empire 3

“My favorite performance was the opening act of our first showcase,” concluded Ozols proudly, recalling Otto's Empire's first major performance. “It was great to do the first performance for our first show. All the hard work and time we put in culminated in that dance. We could finally show everyone what we were working on for an entire semester.”

The group puts in hours of hard work, going to practice twice a week and collaboratively choreographing the intricate dances. Through the sweat and diligence, the girls maintain a strong bond with one another.

Ozols fondly remarked that the girls are her favorite part of Otto's Empire. “There's a large variety of people from different backgrounds,” she said. “We have international students and students of different ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. They are all super sweet and lovely. We all enjoy dancing. We're like a dance family.”

Foley gushed about how unique the group is because of the members. She enthused with a smile, “I like that everyone is super nice and super diverse. Everyone is really fun and has a good sense of humor. There are a lot of different personalities, so there's always someone to talk to.”

As president, Ozols is aware of her position in the organization and her bond with the dancers, especially because the group is an integral part of her life on campus. She acknowledged, “It is an honor to be trusted with the responsibility of this troupe because it is such a big part of my life. To be trusted by the other dancers is uplifting and motivating.”

Spreading awareness of belly dance and Middle Eastern culture isn't Otto's Empire's only goal. Because Otto's Empire Dance Troupe embraces the shimmying and fluidity of the body during its complex moves, the group actively promotes body confidence and body positivity. Ozols upliftingly said, "We run a body confidence campaign, and we partnered with Ophelia's Place, which helps people struggling with eating disorders and body confidence issues. Anyone can belly dance. Any body type, any ability; it just takes practice."

Foley also expressed how Otto's Empire is breaking down barriers and encouraging girls to be at peace with their bodies. She said, "I really liked Otto's Empire's body confidence aspect. Every time you think of belly dance, you think of a certain body type, like Shakira's body. Seeing a variety of girls in the campaign is empowering, and it's breaking the stereotype. It's good for building body confidence in general and making Otto's Empire a safe space. No one is ever judging you."

Otto's Empire Belly Dance Troupe is doing better than ever, and it is only going up from here. Ozols thoughtfully remarked, "Hopefully, we have more performances. We want to get out into the community and do more outreach. We want to grow it into an even bigger troupe."

The members' commitment to this unique organization will keep it going forward because of their love for belly dance. "I feel happy when I dance," proclaimed Ozols fondly.

Foley also expressed her bond with dancing and how she is able to connect with others through the art form. She said, "I've been dancing for a very long time, so every time I dance I feel like

Otto's Empire 5

I'm telling a story without talking. I've never really liked talking in front of people, so it feels like I'm speaking without actually speaking."

Otto's Empire encompasses a melting pot of positivity, confidence and respect through its dedication to the dances and the girls who join. It just goes to show that although the group is small, it is a force to be reckoned with.

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