

REVIEW by MISHA 2008

Someone once asked me “If you could only have one DVD in your collection, what would it be?”

I think I’m going to have to go with this one.

“Secrets of the Stage” is quite possibly the best works I’ve seen. From the amount of material presented, to the clear and concise descriptions, to the exercises and performances, to the price, this DVD is a must-have for any dancer interested in performing. It’s pretty rare for me to define anything as a “must have,” but I can definitely say that this video can benefit **any** belly dancer, regardless of style, who wants to step out onto the stage. The tips offered by the dancers throughout this video are inspiring and encouraging, making you want to put into practice what they’re advising.

The DVD is divided into three sections: Calmness and Simplicity, You and Your Music, and Focus and Energy Protection. Designed to help you perfect your performance skills, several of these main categories are further divided into additional parts that complement each main topic. After these “discussion topics,” comes a section of exercises that help dancers not only learn from what is covered on the DVD but instantly put it into practice. My favorite feature, as others have mentioned, is that each concept is demonstrated by a clip of a professional dancer in a live, staged setting narrated by the dancer herself. This was absolutely invaluable! How often are you able to get inside the mind of another performer while she or he is dancing? This is such a wonderful addition to this and will definitely help viewers to find new ways to approach their own personal attitude towards performances.

Calmness: Michelle first offers a brief explanation of the topic. Then she provides a valuable discussion of why this topic is important for performers. In the Calmness Section, Michelle gives detailed reasons as to why it would benefit you to be calm on stage. She offers numerous tips such as the fact that an audience can pick up on nervousness and that calmness will help you manage any crises that arise. These elaborations were great and went beyond the simple idea of “be cool and collected” that we all probably know. Michelle’s clear descriptions and honest candidness are refreshing and I found myself really paying attention to what she was saying. The material is presented in such a friendly, open way. I confess that I watched this several times to review it – a few times first to take a ton of notes as I got because I wasn’t able to write the review until I jotted down all the juicy bits first for myself!

My favorite part of this section involved the inclusion of clips of herself and another dancer during live staged performances. Through each clip, the performer discusses what was happening (and, yes, these are actual clips of “could be disastrous” performances) and what her mindset was while dancing. During each of these sections, the narrators give so many great tips. They move beyond simply explaining what was happening and really give the watcher some excellent pearls of wisdom.

Fight or Flight: I'm notorious for having gripping stage fright before performing. I've never been sure where it comes from, but after watching this video I definitely know the basic mechanics of it! Michelle starts with a description of why the body is reacting the way it does when the nerves kick in. It's great that she included this, because *knowing* why your body is behaving in this manner can really help when trying to correct it. Along with additional exercises elsewhere in the DVD, Michelle next offers some excellent exercises to relive tension before performing.

Simplicity: Here Michelle talks about the idea of "over dancing." I was so glad to see this included, because this is something that seems to be creeping into our dances more and more with the luxury of so many wonderful ideas via the internet and so many great dance DVDs. If you're a dancer that feels preoccupied with the idea of doing as much as you can at one time this section will help you to slow down and appreciate the idea of simplicity in dance. Over thinking your performances? This part will certainly help. The two dance performances included are beautiful and clearly illustrate this idea and once again the accompanying narration traces the dancers' thoughts on the subjects. It is helpful to get their impressions, too, in addition to Michelle's thoughts. Here the idea that "less is more" is beautifully illustrated.

You and Your Music: This is a section that, once again, offers a number of valuable tips for those perfecting their performances and pros alike. "Your job as a dancer is to interpret the music for the audience," begins Michelle and from there she offers a different sort of approach to using the music. She explains the way she personally approaches musical interpretation and the different things that a dancer can listen for in each song. Everything from more basic ideas of the beat vs. the melody to more advanced concepts such as specifically selecting certain sections of the music to highlight is included here for the aspiring performer. Michelle also talks here about choreography versus improvisation, and offers tips on how to begin improvising for those who are not quite sure how to dance fluidly without a plan. Three clips are offered here – one performance where the dancer discusses how she improves and two wherein the dancers discuss how they choreograph and get ready to utilize movements.

Focus and Energy Protection: Have you ever seen a dancer that has "it?" That sparkle onstage that compels you to watch, regardless of how complicated her movements or how pretty her costume? If you're wondering how it is those dancers *do* that, this is the section for you. Here Michelle talks about different ways to project emotion and intent onstage. She talks about how to make a connection with not just the audience as a whole but each individual, describing ways to focus and captivate your audience. Here the two dances selected to illustrate the topic are quite different, giving two dramatically distinct examples of focus and emotion.

Exercises: Michelle includes resources to improve relaxing, improvisational skills, and one's focus. The relaxation exercises move beyond what was briefly covered in the Calmness section. Drawing from sports psychology, Michelle has created a very useful 11 minute long exercise for those dancers with pre-performance jitters. The next study focuses on improvisation. First comes a "chair dance" where dancers are encouraged to

sit down, focus on the upper body, and get creative! Michelle demonstrates how the exercise should go and then reminds dancers to do it on their own in order to get the most benefit from it. This was a wonderful way to see how another dancer would approach this challenge, while providing dancers with a wonderful improvisational exercise. The second improv exercise is truly designed to help dancers improve their ability to dance to music on the fly. Michelle encourages dancers to be uninhibited and enjoy whatever comes out in order to grow as a performer. During the exercise, the viewer has an opportunity to listen and then perform to the clip. For each of the clips the dancer can do this 4 times and must do something differently each time. Afterwards, there is an example of how the different featured dancers on the DVD interpret the same music. There are a total of 7 different clips that vary in style, giving a wide range of music to practice improvisation. The focus exercise is shot but sweet and once again perfectly illustrates the previously discussed concepts.

After watching this through once, I put it in again. And again. And again. This is definitely a DVD that will have you up and dancing and will inspire you to grow as a performer. Highly recommended!

What Worked for Me:

- Many of Michelle's points are concepts that are not often taught in dance classes; ideas that one often only learns through years of performance practice. These are absolutely invaluable and it is wonderful to have them all conveniently collected in one place.
- Michelle is a great instructor. Once again, it is clear that she really knows what she is talking about and can put it into practice.
- The inclusion of performances to illustrate each section definitely helped me to visualize the concepts Michelle explains. The fact that she included different dancers in addition to herself was also great – different styles are covered from several talented performers.
- The price for the DVD in terms of what you are getting is absolutely affordable. Michelle delivers a wonderful piece for an incredibly reasonable price.

What Might Not Work for You:

- Honestly, there isn't much at all. This is one of the few DVDs I've seen that is a "MUST" have for anyone considering performing. The only reason this might not work for you is if you didn't want to perform!

Stage fright and nerves – how to manage them

- When you're nervous, your audience is going to pick up on it! Relax! Enjoy the performance!
- If you're calm onstage, you'll be able to manage a crisis when it comes up
- Practice looking happy and relaxed! Don't wait until you get onstage to worry about actually performing!
- Practicing your happiness while dancing will really help to keep you from falling into a panic mode when a crisis occurs.
- Stretch before performing to relax
- Squeeze all the muscles in your body, fists, etc and then release
- Do the "football" run (run in place and squeeze fists really tight)
- Take a couple of full, slow, deep breaths

Simplicity

- "A professional knows how to showcase their WOW moments!"
- A professional can execute simple, classic moves completely and fluidly and knows when to use those movements
- Never forget the power of a simple movement
- Rely less on doing something that is "impressive" and more on doing things that look good and are fun to watch
- Take your simple movements and use them bravely and boldly!
- Don't worry so much about impressing with the mechanics, focus on the ability to impress with the performance and the joy that you bring to the dance
- When you have a movement that you feel comfortable with, go into it slowly and let people "savor" how good it is!
- It's wonderful to watch a dancer who doesn't feel pressured or rushed
- When a dancer stops dancing, it should be breathing with the music and just enjoying the pause
- It takes an enormous amount of discipline to believe that less is more

Focus and Energy

- Draw the audience in with your energy.
- Think about directing the audience's focus with your gaze.
- "Be amazed" with what you're doing!
- Be captivated with what you're doing.
- Think about drawing your body through space
- Internal focus is ok, but don't forget about your audience and reflect some of the energy back to your audience, too
- Focus on the part of your body where something is NOT happening (like a costume failure or veil issue) – draw their attention to someplace else
- Pay attention to shape, size, line design on stage, and pacing of movements to create a dynamic flow