

Happy Hips: A few practice techniques for great hip work

By Michelle

Flexibility First

Everyday movement does not really require that we move our upper body separately from our lower body. However, as belly dancers, such isolation is not only beneficial, it is crucial! To gain this isolation, you must practice, practice, practice. But you must also stretch, stretch, stretch. The muscles which help or hinder your isolation are primarily the obliques (the muscles along the side of your torso) the psoas (connecting your pelvis to your torso) and the hip flexors. Stretch one arm over your head, leaning over (but keeping your chest straight—i.e., not twisting it forward or back). You should feel a nice long stretch along your ribs and even down across your hips. There are many variations of this stretch—find one you like and that seems to give you a nice long stretch. (Better yet, do all the variations. You'd be surprised how they build on one another.) Now keep your chest lifted and slide your hips to one side. Really push it out there—feel the stretch across your hip bone. Use hip circles and loose shimmies to warm up your hips and your side muscles. Do these stretches EVERY DAY! When these muscles are long and flexible, they allow you to move your hips without involving the upper body and vice versa.

Layering Shimmies

My favorite moves are shimmies and my favorite shimmy drill goes something like this: begin with single-time, soft shimmies. Increase to double-time. Now progress to what I call jello shimmies. These are shimmies in which your knees are working frantically, but your quads, gluts, and torso are soft—they shake like jello. It takes a while to embrace the jiggle, but once you do, you'll own the move. Now, maintaining that jello shimmy, shift your weight onto the balls of your feet. You'll probably notice that your shimmy changes, becoming smaller, a little tighter and sharper. Now shift your weight back to center and then shift back to your heels. The shimmy becomes earthier, more bottom-centered, even bigger. Come back to center. Now push through your hips, sliding your hips (keep shimmying!) to the right, then left. From the center, push forward, now back, side to side. Push forward, side, back, side. Smooth it off into a circle. KEEP

SHIMMYING! Mastered that? Now shimmy through a twisting figure 8. Still want more? Add a vertical pelvic roll, or a pelvic undulation. Don't forget to shimmy through all this! How about layering a shimmy on top of a maia or a guishi. If you're still shimmying, you've probably hit six or seven minutes and are feeling pretty good, aren't you?

Isolating Hip Moves

One of my favorite drills for working on isolation comes from the amazing and exquisite (not to mention downright friendly) Aziza. First, begin with my technique for separating the upper body from the lower: take a deep breath, feeling your ribs lift, expanding the distance between your lower ribs and your hips. Now exhale, but leave your ribs lifted. With that elongated distance between ribs and hips, you will be able to move one without moving the other. On to Aziza's drill: twist your right hip forward and then slide the hip out. Bring it back to center, then slide it to the right side. Back to center, then twist the right hip back before once again sliding it out and back to center. Repeat several times on the right, and then the left hip. Next twist the right hip forward and effect a sharp hip pop. Continue to side and back as with the hip slide. Try this technique with maias, guishis, virtually any hip movement. The key here is to extend the movement as far out as possible without pulling the upper body into the movement. Make sure you repeat each exercise at least a minute per hip per move. Each time you do this drill, try to make the hip movement longer, larger, and more precise, while keeping the upper body completely immobile.

Egyptian Downs

Over the last few years, I've been trying to make my style more distinctly Egyptian. I've studied the dance from many regions of the Middle East and have learned their "cabaret" as well as folkloric styles, but what I've always wanted to nail was that tight, crisp, yet endless shimmy of the Egyptian dancer. Here is a drill to help with those Egyptian hips: To get what I call "Egyptian downs" where the move does not require any step or over-exaggeration to accomplish a crisp, definite down, you begin in proper posture. Bend the right knee, straightening the left. This drops the right hip. However, you'll probably notice that the move could just as easily be a left hip lift, right? Ok, to give it that sharp, obvious down, return to center. Now slide your right hip ever so slightly to the right and

drop it down. Make sure to contract your gluteus, quadriceps, and lower abdominals on the right. Repeat to the left. Now do it again, but initiate the slide and the drop at the same time. Imagine that you are drawing a triangle with your hips—you belly button is the top of the triangle and each hip is going to draw one of the sides. The more limber you are through your obliques (side of your torso) and over the hips, the more definition you'll get in your downs.

Egyptian Shimmies

At this year's Ya Halla Y'All, Jillina introduced me to the best drill to perfect those straight-legged Egyptian shimmies. Sit on the floor with your legs extended out. Now flap your knees up and down as fast as you can—this is what the Egyptian shimmy will feel like when you're standing. It matters not if you sit up straight or rest on your arms, but if you do rotate forward on your pelvis, you get a great lower ab workout as well!