

# The ancient art of bellydancing

By Raylene Bliss

**I**N its purest form, bellydancing is one of the most beautiful dances in the world – and it is also a great way to keep fit, according to Despina Yiannoukas, who is offering classes at Daceyville.

Despina said oriental dance, or bellydance as the Western world named it, was originally part of ceremonies to celebrate the birth of a baby and women as mothers.

She was immediately drawn to the ancient beauty of its music and movements – though she admits the desire to get into one of the traditional costumes had been spawned years earlier by the television show *I Dream of Jeannie*.

"I was at a Lebanese Restaurant and I was awe struck," she said of her first encounter with a bellydance performance.

Despina was enchanted by the "old Arabic music with an ancient, mystical sound" and amazed at the "incredible muscle control" of the dancers.

"Another thing that struck me about the dance, unlike aerobics and whole gym world, was you did not have to kill yourself to do it," the former fitness instructor said.

"It is very strengthening in terms of muscle endurance, but it's not no pain, no gain."

There are many oriental dance studios in Sydney, but Despina's Academy of Oriental Dance is the only mobile studio.

Despina has taken oriental dance into the universities, schools and kindergartens where she is working with children as young as two and adults as old as 70.



"This ancient art is becoming very popular among women in many Western countries, including Australia, for various reasons," she said. "It keeps you fit, centred, teaches excellent posture and develops strong muscles."

It can also ease back and menstrual pain and help pregnant women's muscles for childbirth.

Despina has studied oriental dance for eight years and has seen, through oriental dance, women who have learnt to appreciate their bodies and what shape they are.

"The more women can appreciate themselves, the stronger their self-confidence becomes and the more likely they are to succeed both with career and relationships," she said.

■ The classes will start on Sunday, June 27 at the Police and Community Youth Club, Bunnerong Road, Daceyville. Enrolments are essential. Telephone 9314 7427.