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## Top bellydancer

A TAREE High School graduate received high acclaim in the first Australian Bellydance Competition held in Sydney recently.

As well as performing in an award-winning trio, Rachel Bond took out third place in the solo performance category.

The competition began in mid-November as 89 entrants from all over Australia performed to judges and audiences over four nights of heats and two semi-finals. By last week's final, the field had been whittled down to the top 13 individuals and six groups, making for a high quality performance. It was a rare opportunity for this ancient and elegant dance to be showcased in a theatre, making for a more dramatic experience for both dancers and spectators.

After being accustomed to performing in restaurants and function centres, Rachel found it "daunting" to be up on stage alone, "especially knowing that we were being judged on every move we made.

But performing in a theatre elevates the dance to a higher level and helps audiences to view it in the same light as ballet or contemporary dance.

"I believe this event has helped educate people about Middle Eastern dance."

Although Bellydance has been Rachel's passion for some time, she has only ever considered it a hobby, secondary to her studies.

She already holds two Bachelor's degrees from the University of NSW, and hopes to graduate next year with a PhD in Psychology.

Although she's determined to continue with her academic work, this accomplishment has made her consider taking her passion more seriously.

She currently learns with three different teachers in Sydney, and performs regularly at restaurants, weddings and functions.

'She encourages all women, no matter what age or size, to give it a try: "Learning Bellydance can be challenging, but it's also fun, beautiful and sensual.

"It gives you greater awareness of your body, and helps you improve posture and flexibility, relieve back pain, and even lose weight!"

