



## Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

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### A Journey to The Green Village Square

Seminars can be dangerous to your health - if you're the troupe costumer! Four members of *Caravan East* (myself included) attended a seminar in fall 1990 featuring **Cassandra** (MN). One of the dances presented was a coquettish shawl dance choreographed to the music *El Ataba Hadera* (translation: *The Green Village Square*).

The seminar itself was a rewarding experience (another stellar effort by **Bedia**). Cassandra had proved to be an excellent instructor, and both choreographies presented (a drum solo and the shawl dance) would be useful to me in my solo and troupe repertoires.

Still, I drove home with mixed feelings. Because I knew that a new choreography meant a New Troupe Costume. Oh joy, oh sorrow. And so it begins - three hours of class and three hundred hours of costuming. Not to mention the continual battle between authenticity and necessity.

In my continuing tradition of buy first and design second (any other method wouldn't be half as much fun), I began the phase known as the Great Fabric Hunt. Once again, I haunted the local fabric stores for the best deal on the least fabric in the most colors.

I needed at least four dresses; two tall, one medium, one short. A sense of *deja vu* enveloped me as I searched for four colors that didn't fight each other in the same fabric. At last, one lucky day, there it was - 100% cotton crinkle sheeting in a carousel of colors, and (wonder of wonders) *On Sale!* It's amazing how many troupe costumes can come from the **Piece Goods Shop** if you're patient.

I commandeered my good friend and cohort **Brihana** to help me choose the colors. So, in January 1991 the unused armchair in my living room became home to sixteen yards of cotton sheeting - blue, lavender, coral, and teal green. Now for the shawls.

Another lucky day in a different *Piece Goods Shop*, again with my friend *Brihana* (we were actually looking for Persian Peasant fabric); away back in the rear of the store on the unwanted remnants table - the absolute ugliest, gaudiest flowered chintz slipcover fabric you ever did see (at *Clearance Prices!*). A match made in heaven. March 1991 - eight more yards of fabric on my armchair. (Not counting the Persian Peasant fabric, which will be next year's New Troupe Costume.)

It's sew time! I borrow a copy of *Reveal and Conceal* from my friend **Zoheret**, and read the chapter on fellahin (Delta) dresses, which are basically cotton Granny nightgowns with regional details. I choose the styles of Boheira, Kalubiya, and Sharqiya because full-length line drawings (frontal view only) are provided. Of the four remaining partial drawings, three are Sharqiya dresses. Eliminating them, that left the Gharbiya style (a rather nasty crenellated yoke, but that's the breaks).

Time to start pattern making. An authenticity crisis arises immediately. Do the back yokes mimic the front yokes, or are they plain? My one available example, *Zoheret's* cut velvet Sharqiya dress, has a plain back yoke. Hmmm. One of my pet costuming peeves is having a highly decorated front and a plain back. After all, we dance in the round. So I decide, in the absence of sufficient data, to make the back yokes match the front yokes.

I spend a weekend or two making yoke and sleeve patterns. At one point, I felt like a Japanese origami artist, with

all the pleating and tucking. Next came the infamous paper dresses - full-size fitting shells, since everything had to go right the first time. My sister-in-law is an operating room nurse, and she provides me with the 54" X 72" sterile paper sheets used (once only) to cover the instrument tables prior to surgery. They make great fitting shells - also known as sauna suits by the troupe.

Roadblock! The dresses need trim. Lots of trim. Into the costume closet to find all of those garage sale bargains. The copper braid and rickrack will work for the Kalubiya dress, but nothing else will do. Oh darn, back to the fabric store. This time, however, I don't mess around. I kidnap my friend **Scherazade**, and off we go across the water to the local fabric store of stores, **The Fabric Hut** of Norfolk.

If you have the money, *Fabric Hut* has what you need. However, the word *sale* is not in their vocabulary (if you're ever there, check out the imported sequin & ostrich feather black lace for only \$399/yd). Again, it's our lucky day. We find some nice half-inch gold braid with multicolor accents that will work for both the Boheira and Gharbiya dresses. And miracle of miracles, it's only 89 cents/yard. April 1991 - all eighteen yards goes home with us. After fondling every bolt of fabric in the store, a half-yard of royal blue cotton velveteen goes home as the trefoil collar for the Gharbiya dress.

We're not so fortunate with the Sharqiya dress. The right trim at the wrong price (\$12.95/yd), scalloped gold teardrops on black voile, which turns dark teal green over the fabric. But what the heck, we only need 5/8 of a yard for the neckline. So what if it costs as much as the four yards of cotton sheeting did? If it's right, it's right, so I swallow hard and home it goes.

Well, I've put it off as long as I can. It's June, and a big show, our annual fund raiser, looms large upon the August horizon. Now it really is sew time. I begin with the dress with the fewest tucks, the Kalubiya dress, in lavender with copper trim. (Of course, the real reason I chose the Kalubiya dress is that it's not one that I was going to wear. You may remember from last year's troupe costuming article that I never make my own costume first.)

The first test was cutting the dress out. I still didn't know if I'd bought the right amount of fabric. I had - with no room for error. Other than encountering some difficulty in matching thread to the copper trim (none of the available metallics was even close), and uttering a few choice expletives when applying the rick rack, the dress assembled like a dream. My serger even cooperated.

I took a break when I got down to the ruffle and started the Sharqiya dress. I succumbed to weakness here, and sacrificed authenticity for glamour. Of all of the dresses, the Sharqiya has the least trim - only the bodice is trimmed; the cuffs and the ruffle seam are plain. I decided to be a rebellious village woman of doubtful virtue and trim the cuffs. Heresy! Well, I'd already stretched the rules by making the dress green; the Sharqiya dress is "*usually found in black only*". In for a penny, in for a pound.

July 1991 - I kidnap *Scherazade* again, and back we go across the water to the *Fabric Hut*. The infamous \$12.95 trim is nowhere to be found - panic time! But the costuming gods were smiling upon us; there, tucked away in an unopened package in the middle of the black trim (it was filed with the gold trims on the previous trip), is the right stuff. Another half a yard makes its way home.

I also make the mistake of visiting the **Fabric Market** while I'm in Norfolk. Four yards of pink crinkle cotton sheeting comes home with me to make my own, personal Delta dress (one of the Sharqiya's has a really neat bodice that keeps haunting me).

After adjusting the cuff width for the depth of the trim, the Sharqiya assembles smoothly. Well, there were a few more expletives uttered while easing the trim around the neckline, but nothing extraordinary. At least, I thought things had gone well until I tried it on; I still don't know where I misjudged and cut it too long. So there's one extra

tuck above the ruffle seam. Another small authenticity burp.

Troupe member **Jelena** had offered to help with the project in a moment of weakness. Evil being that I am, I allowed her the privilege of putting on the ruffles for both dresses. She took it well.

Two dresses down and the show looming ever closer. No problem - two costumes doth a duet make. The pressure is off. Except that we need at least one shawl. Out with the gaudy chintz and the tape measure. How wide? How deep? How trimmed? We took the measurements from *Jelena's* practice shawl (adding a little depth). Back to the costuming closet for trim inspiration.

Eureka! Six yards of six-inch chainette fringe in red, yellow, and orange (two yards each). Bought in 1985 for a rainbow fringe beledi dress that was never started. Sacrificed for the good of the troupe in 1991; the show must go on.

One benefit, two dresses, and one shawl down; two dresses and three shawls to go. Six-inch fringe goes for \$4.99/yard, minimum, in area stores. The shawl trim would cost more than the fabric and trim combined. But luck is still with us in our endeavour; my good friend **Judi Fields of Judi's Costume Shop** mentions that she has a ton of fringe tucked away from the days when she made go-go dancer costumes.

And so she does - in all of the wrong lengths. I scrounge enough six-inch royal blue fringe for two shawls, and enough two-inch in hot pink and chartreuse for one shawl each. I trade all of my remaining six- and four-inch fringe (from the unmade costume) for hers. Even steven; such a deal. *Jelena* whips up two more shawls.

I check with my wholesale connection, **Sidney Coe, Inc.** in New York, for their price on rayon fringe. Good news abounds; it's only \$2/yard. In October 1991, I order two yards each of red, yellow, and orange for shawl number four.

Another important show looming, the Williamsburg **Occasion for the Arts**. Our sole remaining prestige performance. Two dresses left, the Boheira and the Gharbiya. Left until last because of the intimidating amount of yoke detail. Many an expletive was forcefully uttered while inseting yokes, edging trefoils, and negotiating a seemingly infinite number of acute, obtuse, and right angle turns with unyielding mylar braid. Followed by an unending series of tucks, pleats, and gathers. Authenticity is hell.

The two new dresses debut at the Williamsburg performance. And before my unbelieving eyes, **Elaina, Khadija**, and *Jelena* decide to dance in the street instead of on the stage. The damp, dirty, cobblestone street. My shawls! My dresses! *Brihana* and *Scherazade* restrain me from committing grievous bodily harm to half of my troupe.

The dresses survived. The troupe received a lecture on justifiable homicide and the care and feeding of troupe costumes. I sent my serger in for cleaning and maintenance and took a break from sewing for a month. The pain of creation receded once again.

Four dresses and four shawls completed. We could have stopped there, but the authenticity demon reared its ugly head yet again. We needed the finishing touch - beaded triangular head scarves. I had already donated one of mine to the troupe, coral with black iridescent beads. But we knew exactly where to go to get the rest - from **Scheherezade Imports** in Richmond.

Another performance loomed (December 28). The Christmas buying frenzy was upon me. I talked the troupe into a field trip to Richmond. And as I anticipated, Lucy Smith (*Scheherezade*) had exactly what I needed. As with the rest of the project, taste and authenticity reached a compromise. Two of the head scarves match their dresses (to make the American side happy), and two contrast (to make the Arabic side happy).

Shawl number four was completed on December 26, and all four village ensembles were onstage in all of their resplendent glory on December 28 for *Family Fun Day* at the **Waterside Festival Marketplace** in Norfolk. Only one year and three months after that fateful seminar with *Cassandra*. All good things take time.