



Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

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The Caravan East Princess Dress (Teamwork Costuming)

It's amazing what an album title, two tiaras, and a photo in a costuming catalog can lead to. In the case of Chelydra and Zahia, the result was four beledi ensembles nicknamed "the princess dresses".

The choreography which inspired this joint costuming effort was by Suhaila Salimpour of California, to a selection from the album Princess of Cairo. The photo which provided the design basis was of the Galaxy dress, one of many outstanding designs in the Dalibo's International catalog. The tiaras already belonged to Chelydra and Zahia.

It was going to be so easy. We would use widely available fabric and trim, a basic sheath pattern, and a built in belt. We were supremely confident that the costume would be easy to make and easy to wear.

Nothing is ever as it seems. For starters, the classic basic sheath pattern had disappeared from every pattern catalog in town. We purchased the closest approximation we could find, and then set to customizing it for our purposes, including sizing it up and down for the four dancers involved. (The biggest problem here was guessing what size Zahia would be at the actual performance, since she was pregnant with twins at the time.) Because of the extremely fitted nature of the sheath, and the fact that the dress was a one-piece unit with inset belt, four separate mock-ups had to be made.

Fabric selection was the next hurdle. Crepe back satin, the first choice, could not be located in four coordinating colors. We innocently chose polyester charmeuse as an alternative. For the collar and belt, we chose a loosely woven silver lame which had a high degree of texture and shine.

Next came the search for our beaded trim. Because of the large amount of yardage required, it had to be inexpensive, yet flashy. Our initial choice, a fine-gauge flat faceted trim, could not be found anywhere in the country at the time - except in gold. We, of course, needed silver. Our final choice was the old standby, 6mm faceted round beading from Sidney Coe in New York.

Fortunately for us, when construction began, we were working as a team. Between the two of us, we had three conventional sewing machines and two sergers. We needed every one of them to get us through. When one machine refused to sew a particular fabric, we had a backup that behaved.

We used the "design by failure" approach to assembling the dress. Whenever our first attempt failed, we tried something else until we got it right. Dealing with the loosely woven lame, which tended to disintegrate even while sitting still, was our biggest problem. I also discovered (the hard way, unfortunately), that it melts at the drop of a hat. A serger capable of a wide four-thread safety stitch proved to be an absolute must for maintaining sanity when working with this fabric.

I cut, and we both sewed. Since it was my serger that produced the wide safety stitch, I assembled the collars, belts, and bracelets. All were accordion pleated to provide extra visual texture. The lame was pleated, then anchored to a lining for stability. The belts were sewn directly into the dress; the collars, which had to custom fitted for each dress, were made separately and tacked to the finished neckline. Zahia assembled and hemmed the dresses, and spent untold hours gathering the lame roses. Both of us shared the finishing details.

After the basic dresses had been completed, we each breathed a sigh of relief, thinking we were home free. Ha! At that point, we discovered that the fabric rose, the focal point of the belt, was far too heavy to be supported by the flimsy lame and charmeuse. Undaunted, we just kept on tacking the darn things down in ever increasing circles until they stayed upright.

Hems were another nightmare. It is virtually impossible to hem charmeuse without puckering. Zahia came up with the idea to use stitch witchery to fuse the hem. Worked like a dream - just be sure you get it right the first time! We were surprised at this point to discover that a straight skirt required the hem to be 1-1 1/2" longer than the normal dance skirt length. This was almost fatal for our tall costume; what we had thought was a generous allowance was barely enough. Zahia saved the day by facing the hem.

Last but not least, it was time to attach the trim forming the fringed back drape. In the original design (as on the Galaxy dress), the fringe was to fall almost to the floor. The first time we pinned it and attempted a spin, that idea was flushed. Flying three-foot faceted trim can be dangerous to your health and the health of anyone nearby. The trim was shortened by half to a manageable length. This also had the advantage of giving us twice as much fringe. Leftover trim was used on the front as accent fringe under the rose to balance and complete the overall look. As a part of final preparations, we also created coordinating neck bands and fitted sleeves, one of which incorporated a pleated silver inlay to provide the appearance of a bracelet.

As is always the case, a design is never proven until it's used. During our debut performance, we noted that the collars had a tendency to curl up at the point (what we termed the erectile effect). This has since been solved by that old standby, the safety pin.

We achieved most of our objectives. Together, we created a costume that was showy, reproducible, and easy to wear. Like most costumes, however, it is not easy to clean. So we just make sure we don't sweat. Zahia and I are proud of our creation; if we hadn't had each other to keep ourselves going, it never would have happened.

The Caravan East Persian Court Costume

In June 1990, Brihana and Chelydra of the Caravan East dance troupe had the privilege of performing at a Persian wedding with Mohamed Khordadian of California. We were present at the invitation of Bedia of Vienna, VA, and the group also included Anthea of Boston, VA.

One of the choreographies we studied and performed was a Persian court dance, created by Mohamed based on ancient miniature paintings of Persian court dancers. Mohamed provided the costuming, and of course took them back to California with him when we were through.

So there we were, a choreography without a costume. Brihana and I set to work creating a set of Persian court costumes based on the design used by Mohamed in his show. Since Bedia had requested that the four of us perform in her fall dance spectacular, four costumes were required. Another consideration was that the costumes would be retained by Caravan East, so the "one size fits several" philosophy had to be employed. Fortunately, the distribution within our group of four fit the average - one petite, two mediums, and one tall.

The costumes upon which our design was based consisted of a long-sleeved, scoop-necked underblouse and tapered pants. Over this was worn a V-neck, drop-waist dress with bell sleeves and gathered skirt open down the center front. A hat, head veil, and hip veil completed the outfit.

Our design was constrained by the amount of fabric available; we had 10 meters of 32" wide Moroccan fabric, black with green metallic paisleys. The decision was made to use the paisley print for the skirts and bell sleeves. To save fabric, the illusion of an underblouse was provided by using a double sleeve; this illusion was reinforced by the use of a paisley inset in the point of the V neckline. Close inspection and a little thought would reveal the impossibility of this combination to the discriminating seamstress, but we relied on the fact that we would be dancing too well and for too short a period of time to allow such detailed examination. A green metallic knit was used for the bodice, long undersleeves, and hat. In theory, the green knit should also have been used for the pants, but aesthetically, black was the best color. Again, a metallic knit was used.

To offset the overall dark tone of the dresses, brightly colored lurex veils were divided in half lengthwise and used for the head and hip veils. Since middle easterners have never been afraid of color, we used sunflower yellow, mandarin orange, orchid, and turquoise green. When completed, we realized that the turquoise green had been a poor choice for contrast purposes. However, because we rarely use all four costumes at the same time, this has not been a problem.

The hats are anchored with chin straps of half-inch elastic, dyed in tea to approximate skin tones. Our original intent was to use peacock feathers - again, very middle eastern, especially for the Peacock throne of Persia - but the contrast was so poor that we once again opted for color. Each hat sports a cheerful pair of sunflower yellow and hot pink feathers.

The entire creation is held together with that indispensable costuming staple, the safety pin. We have achieved a personal best of eight required pins with this costume; four for the hip veil, two to anchor the head veil on the right shoulder, and two to anchor the head veil to the hat.

The costumes passed their trial by fire with flying colors in October 1990 in Fairfax, Virginia, at Bedia's celebration of ethnic dance. For the first time ever in my costuming career, Mr. Murphy was not working overtime - nothing bagged, sagged, dragged, drooped, fell off, or ripped out. Even the hats stayed up and on - and for those of you who are familiar with Brihana's and my luck with headpieces, that was the biggest accomplishment of all.