



Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

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The Complete Costume

As any middle eastern dancer knows, the phrase "completed costume" is a contradiction in terms. No costume is ever complete - just in various stages of "usable". From the first wearing to patching the shreds and tatters together for one more show, there is always an idea on how to improve it remaining in your head.

However, over the years, I have noted a number of trends that detract, rather than add, to the impact of the well-formed costume.

Remember, the audience frequently spends the first few minutes of your performance looking at your costume, not your dance. A costume that extends this period is self-defeating.

The trends are:

- the "preferred body parts" effect
- the "mix-and-match" effect
- the "suit of armor" effect

The "Preferred Body Parts" Effect

This type of costume directs the audience to concentrate on specific anatomical regions (those deemed most interesting to approximately half of the world's population), not the dancer as a whole. I know you've all seen it - the costume bra with five pounds of beads on each cup, and hardly a stitch of trim across the back (and sometimes the straps!). The belt with fringe at the center front, and not much anywhere else (because all of it was used on the bra cups). Add the Egyptian habit of large, prominent appliques smack dab in the center of each cup and the belt, and you compound the problem. This type of costume always makes me wonder how the dancer manages to keep from falling over forward during her performance.

With your costume screaming "*This is where the action is!*" to the audience, just how much time do you think they're going to spend looking anywhere else?

Proportion is everything. Honor your other body parts, and remember that you have at least two sides - front and back - and both of them are usually visible to a portion of the audience at any point in time. We rarely dance in one dimension, and we shouldn't costume that way.

One common reason for this costuming effect is lack of funds. Resist the urge to skimp on materials. Plan your costuming for the long haul, not the short run. One well-planned, well-constructed costume will provide you with far better service than a series of partially completed,

poorly constructed ones. You don't have to have something new every time you hit the stage - it's your dancing that's important, not the depth of your wardrobe.

The "Mix-and-Match" Effect

This effect occurs most frequently in the incrementally designed (built over time) costume. The individual accessories are purchased over the life of the costume; each item coordinates with one other item, but the overall effect is one of disorganization.

For example, a beautiful rhinestone pin is used as the centerpiece for a pearl belt. A second pin, slightly different in design and clarity, is found for the bra. Aunt Hannah gives you her pearl choker and bracelet. They're a different size and shade than the pearls on the costume, but no one will notice. A year later you find those "to-die-for" pearl and rhinestone earrings you've been dreaming about. They're a teeny bit different, but blend very nicely with Aunt Hannah's choker. And then you run across that great deal - a rhinestone necklace that looks great with the bra, and can be used as a belly drape. (It doesn't quite match the belt, but you'll be moving most of the time anyway.)

For a second example, you find an embroidered and coined vest that has the same design as your favorite beaded panel skirt. Then you locate a lovely chain and coin belt that coordinates with the vest. Your next addition is a fringed scarf that matches the panel skirt like they were made for each other. You'll just put that under the coin belt. And then there's the great deal on the lurex scarf that blends with the vest embroidery and would make great sleeves. Those garage-sale brass cuff bracelets that you knew you'd be able to use some day go nicely with the coin belt, too. And you can't believe your luck when you find that antique beaded headband (the beads are black instead of black iridescent, but what the heck)!

For both of these situations, the overall effect is a costume hodge-podge that gives the audience the impression that you just threw something together for the day. And if you just threw your costume together, you probably just threw your dance together too, so the audience will check to see if you have a nice body, or go back to their coffee and dessert.

The incremental costume can work, but only if each addition is chosen considering the whole costume, not individual units.

The "Suit of Armor" Effect

A friend of mine in New York described this trend as the "*more is not enough*" syndrome. The symptoms of this costuming habit are:

- more hair (if you haven't enough of your own, buy as much as you can afford)
- more sequins and beads
- more accessories (matching headband and necklace, epaulets, two wristlets, two anklets, ...)

I call this the "suit of armor" effect because it gives the impression that the dancer is hiding behind a wall of sequins and beads.

The drawback in overdoing your costuming is that the costume, not the dancer, becomes the center of attention. If your audience spends the entire performance deciding if your hair is real, or your costume is so complex that it overpowers you, the audience will miss the experience of your dance.

In the excitement of a new design - possibly your first real professional costume - it is difficult to keep your eye on moderation. A few suggestions for pairing accessories:

-*Proportional pairing*: Pair an elaborate accessory, such as a headband, with a simple accessory, such as the neckpiece (or vice versa).

-*Spatial pairing*: Separate the matching accessories by a horizontal, as well as vertical, distance to draw the eye along, not just across, the body. For example, use a wristband/armband or wristband/anklet combination instead of two wristbands.

-*Asymmetric pairing*: Use slightly different designs for each element of a pair. For example, a fringed wristband or anklet could be paired with a non-fringed version.

-*Alternating usage*: Alternate which set of accessories you wear, accentuating the strong points of the choreography you will be using. Wear the wristbands when you will be emphasizing arm movements, and the anklets when hip and leg isolations are dominant.

Summary

In summary, when designing and assembling your costume, remember to consider it as an integrated, three-dimensional unit with you inside. The purpose of a costume is to showcase you and your dance, not to distract from it.