

What shall I wear? Advice on belly dance costuming

Costuming is so important to belly dance that the subject is almost talked about among dancers and on discussion boards more than dance styles and specific moves. When beginners start to dance they often get allured by the “bling” and the “sparklies”. Many dancers spend hours discussing costuming, perusing the swap boards, or constructing their own designs. It can be an addiction in itself. Because belly dance styles are so diverse, costuming is as well.

When it comes to belly dance costuming trends, it is important to note that styles differ among the different belly dance genres, i.e. Oriental, Tribal Fusion, American Classic, etc. However there are some constants that remain the same. Almost all of the dancers I interviewed suggested that regardless of trends, fit and flattery are the most important aspects of costuming.

Eshta Amar, a dancer and costume designer in Los Angeles said, “Fit is key.... It has to be cut well and the bra has to be generous and built correctly. I can fix pretty much anything that is wrong but having a well fitting base is essential.”

Samira Shuruk, a dancer in the D.C. area agrees. “I only buy ready-made designer and custom-order costumes that fit me well, or that will with proper adjustments. I see a lot of costumes—there are a lot of strangely made and fitting costumes in the lower price ranges.”

Because of the escalating enthusiasm for belly dance, dancers have more choices than ever before to find a costume that fits them. Dancers can now commission other dancers or seamstresses; buy ready-to-wear costumes; order custom haute-couture fashion costumes; or one can design and create their own.

Costume choices usually come down to three criteria: time, budget and taste. Christine 'Azhia' Millan of Montreal likes to make her own costumes so that they are sure to be unique. “My costume criteria: Must fit well and proportionally, and no one else must own anything similar to it!”

Eshta is a small business owner who makes costumes for other dancers. She prides herself in the originality of her custom costumes. According to her Web site, “Each costume is custom designed and fitted.... No two costumes are alike!”

Purchasing costumes from designers abroad opens another dimension with a broad range of options. Eman Zaki, Pharaonix of Egypt, Noussa, Hannan, Mamdouh, Sahar Osaka and Joharah International, all from Egypt, and Bella, Sim Moda Evi, Legend and Paganini of Turkey are among the most popular foreign costumers.

Prices range from \$100-\$300 for the cheap brands, which are made by private costume manufacturers who sell costumes made of low-quality materials, but are made to look like the designer version. The more expensive designer brands range from \$400 to over \$1,000 per costume, and are usually high quality.

People who are not belly dancers may balk at these prices, but there are reasons why dancers pay top dollar. Eshta believes the prices are justified. "[They're] worth every penny. They will hold their value and are made well. You cannot scrimp on your costumes. They are just as important as your dancing and you wouldn't go to a crappy teacher just to save a couple bucks right?"

According to Jesennia of A'Kai Silks, "If I could go back in time I would have resisted the urge to buy lots of cheap, mismatched, and different pieces and [I would've] just focused on a few classic well made sets and of course designer costumes."

Samira agrees, "For most designers their quality is a reflection on their years in [the business], there are exceptions with a couple newer designers whom I don't buy from. Quality costumes last longer, are fashion forward, flatter more; all things important to someone presenting this dance form to the public and all things noticed by someone with experience and education in the dance."

However, not everyone agrees. "I have seen both ends of the spectrum, from expensive costumes by no name designers which are great quality to high end designers where you are left wondering what you paid for," said Tahira of Los Angeles.

Azhia agrees. "I think these days many production houses are just trying to crank out as many costumes as possible to fulfill orders. The quality to price ratio has suffered because of this, in my opinion. For example, Eman Zaki's and Pharaonix costumes used to be better-made and less expensive. Now they're more expensive but one can expect lower-quality materials, unfinished edges, fringe that easily falls apart, etc."

Samira sees the price and quality changes, yet still considers Eman and Pharaonix to be great quality for the price. "They still offer what I am looking for: quality, fit, flattery and they hold value," she says.

However, as belly dance gets more popular, the demand for these costumes goes up and it can be difficult to keep up. Sue Furman owns the Hobby Shop in Wilson, NC. She says, "So many dancers have a very specific need or look they are trying to achieve and it's difficult to have all their needs and wants met."

It is time-consuming and difficult to cater to all shapes, sizes and styles. Shahrzad of Bellydancestore.com finds this important. According to Samira, Shahrzad "is looking for something for everyone at a price that makes it affordable for her to sell at affordable prices for customers. She gets very excited at beautiful costumes and wants to find that 'one special thing' that will make a dancer feel absolutely beautiful and be totally inspired."

With all these aspects in mind: quality, price and availability, it is probably most important to consider your audience. A \$1,000 designer costume with no fringe and a minimalistic design might not go over well in a conservative Southern town, but the same costume may work in major metropolitan areas. Location and type of audience should be taken into consideration for each performance or venue.

Anna Maria Cancelli of Tara Sophia Belly Dance, located in New Bern, NC, offers this insight. "It depends on the geographical location. Audiences who are unaccustomed to Tribal or Tribal Fusion most likely want to see sequins and beads and more traditional costumes where as people that live in areas such as San Francisco may be more familiar with all styles of belly dance and expect a variety of performances and costumes."

For example, "In Montréal, from what I've heard from the restaurant dancers, restaurant owners expect dancers to perform in 'high-end', attractive, sparkly costumes," said Azhia.

When Eshta was asked if she saw a disconnect between what dancers wear and what the audience expects, she agrees that there is a discrepancy but says, "That bridge is easily crossed by wearing something flattering and gorgeous."

Tahira agrees. "My experience is that the general public is happy with looks which were popular ten plus years ago, because that is what they expect to see. I am not saying that the minimalistic costumes are not lovely or not understood by the general public, but I believe that the general public is less concerned about the latest fashion than many belly dancers."

Samira gives insight on how to know what your audience will like. "Americans like full skirt costumes. Some Americans are confused by dresses; 'She can't be a belly dancer, I don't see her belly.' I do wear some swirly Lycra skirt costumes with Americans, but that inhibits my sword work, so it's just not practical for me with how I do American shows.

Arabs like the 'old-fashioned' full skirts, but they love the fashion forward Lycra skirt costumes."

So, while much of the fun of belly dancing may be hunting for exciting and unique costumes, remember that fit, flattery and the audience's expectations before you spend too much money. Trends may come and go, but the audience should remember the dancer for how well he/she dances.

Jesennia sums it up nicely. "Personally, if I were to start dancing again and I needed a stock of costumes, I would stay away from the season's hottest styles and the new trends. That's because I like to sell costumes and I wouldn't want to get stuck with something that is hot this season (and probably pricey) but [will be] passé next season. I try to buy with resale value in mind and I usually try to stick to color schemes that I know other dancers will like."

For more information about the dancers quoted in this article please visit their Web sites.

Anna Maria Cancelli – www.myspace.com/tarasophiabellydance

Christine 'Azhia' Millan - www.azhiadance.com

Eshta Amar - www.eshtaamar.com

Jesennia - www.akaisilks.com

Sue Furman – www.thehobbyshopofwilson.com

Samira Shuruk - www.samirashuruk.com

Tahira - tahirabellydancer.com

*Special thanks to Bud Rudesill for the fantastic editing. This article is part one of a series. Stay tuned for more.