



Bellydance with Nicola

Looking the Part: General Costuming Guidelines for Performance of Middle Eastern Dance

Phone: 957-7520

Email: nicolaraks@mts.net
OR belydans@mts.net

www.nicola-bellydance.com

Students of Middle Eastern dance find out very soon into their studies that this is a costly dance form, with a world of deliciously sparkly, beautiful choices of costuming, both homemade and imported. The average student of the dance is in it as a hobby, and would be best advised to keep her spending modest and her costume basic. You can put together an affordable, lovely, flattering costume for use in class and recitals, by making it yourself, buying pieces new or second-hand, or purchasing a full costume ready-made. You don't have to spend many hundreds of dollars, as semi-professionals and professionals should be expected to do in order to present the dance tastefully and artfully. You should, however, spend your money and time wisely. By doing so, you can present the dance and yourself to the best of your ability.



There are many resources available to students who are learning about costuming. Ask your teachers what they would recommend as a starting point. Spend some time online. There are a number of great books, videos and websites devoted to handmade (by you) costumes as well as ready-made imported pieces that you can order in your size and colour choices. Many of these resources may also provide you with advice and suggestions for flattering your particular body shape and size, as well as disguising concerns such as scar tissue or stretch marks (if that worries you). Ultimately, you should wear the costume; the costume should not wear you.

Generally speaking, when it comes to homemade costumes, take your time to make sure it fits perfectly and is sewn really well. Spend your money on the details that matter, such as authentic fringe, coins and well-made appliqués. Avoid buying costuming made outside of Egypt, Turkey and the Middle East, as they probably won't keep up with the wear and tear of all your shimmying and twirling. The details of constructing - and you should think of it as construction, not just creation - a bedlah (bra and belt) are best covered in a workshop setting, or by consulting a

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book. I won't be dealing with those details here.

The guidelines below are common knowledge and practice throughout the professional realm but are important for amateur dancers, too. They are in no particular order, and are chiefly concerned with your comfort and modesty. Most importantly, keep in mind that no matter where you are dancing or for whom, you represent other dancers. Present yourself with respect, consideration, intelligence, and knowledge so that the image of bellydance you leave people with is accurate. Dressing appropriately and beautifully helps you feel better and dance better.

1. Make sure your costume is appropriate for the music, style of dance and venue. Your teacher should cover this if it is her class choreography. It's your job to find out if it is your own dance.
2. WEAR A COVERUP, right before and after you dance. Change into regular clothes as soon as possible. It is important to maintain mystery about your dance, propriety about the difference between a performer and audience member, and to protect the investment you have made in your costume. You are dressed up to perform, so when the performance is over, the costume should be concealed or removed. You would not see Evelyn Hart mingling with her audience in costume.
3. Have appropriate footwear just in case - slippers, footies, or dance sandals. Have clean, well-groomed feet. People will look.
4. If you are wearing a bra and belt (bedlah), both should fit securely, without spillage and sliding around. No hooks, clasps, or fasteners should be visible. Regular bra straps should have been replaced with dance-worthy ones and be decorated. Bedlah should be in good repair, decorated front and back, and you should be able to jump, twist, bend, and lean without spilling, shifting, or straps popping off. The breasts should sit level with the back strap (no riding up the back). Check all trims and attachments, especially clasps and fringe, before wearing.
5. A decorated top should be decorated front and back, and a superbly fitting bra worn underneath. Sports bras are not appropriate or sufficient. Costuming bras and tops should be elegant, not casual. Sagging and bouncing are not comfortable nor are they appropriate.

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6. A hip scarf may be appropriate, but try to save one that you use just for performing. Or, dress it up by adding hip poufs or a veil swag. You can also layer more than one decorated scarf at a time. There are patterns available on the Internet that shows you how to turn scarves into decorated tops, sleeves and head-dresses.
7. Matching/suitable earrings, necklace, headdress, and other accessories may be added. Don't overdo it, keep your styles and metals similar and try them out dancing at home first. You don't want to have things catch, snag, fly off or distract you in any way. There are few things worse than an earring caught in your hair or a ring caught in a veil.
8. Your hair should be tastefully done. If you are performing you must put the effort into looking above and beyond your everyday style. If it tends to fall in your face, consider using a decorated headband, scarf, or decorated barrettes.
9. Cosmetics are important especially if you are dancing with special lighting on a stage or other dimly lit venue. Base, powder, blush, eye liner/shadow, mascara and lipstick (particularly red) enhance your features and draw attention to your eyes and smile. This will help with your expressiveness.
10. Do a full mirror check, front and back, or have a friend help you check. Remove all labels, wear low-slung, well-fitting panties, and make sure nothing is twisted, bulging, bunched, or showing when it shouldn't. Panty lines are not acceptable and are very distracting for audience members. If you are pinned in, make sure the pins are not visible.
11. Do the jump test. Literally! Adjust what moves or falls out. This should be done long before you arrive at the place you are performing. By then it's too late to deal with a top, bra, or belt that won't do the job. There are adhesives to help keep your breasts inside your costume (that's no joke!).



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12. Make sure your teeth are clean and your breath is fresh.
13. You may be nervous and will be working hard while performing. Remember to wear deodorant or antiperspirant. Be careful of too much perfume as many people are allergic, and it may turn funky as you heat up and sweat.
14. Shave.

Caring for your costumes is an art unto itself. Sweat is damaging to your costume. Hang it to dry in a well-ventilated place, before you store it. You can also blot with towels, spritz with highly diluted vinegar or vodka, and stuff with acid-free tissue to dry it, then store it for long-term durability. All fabrics should be spot-checked for washing before you sew. Test a small area of a bought garment before you wash. Occasional hand-washings in cold water are important. Do NOT dry clean - dry cleaning leaves toxic residues on your fabrics and trim that will destroy the garment and may cause rashes. Do not bleach or use stain-lifting or other enzymatic detergents. Use a gentle liquid detergent such as ZERO, or go to the Dugald Costume Museum and purchase their textile wash. Do not soak, scrub or wring. Drip dry after rinsing thoroughly. Stains from oils may be treated with shampoo for oily hair. Dampen the spot then work in the shampoo with your fingers. Let sit briefly before laundering. Candle wax may be removed by freezing the garment, then gently picking off the wax. If the garment is heat-tolerant, you can iron the spot between plain brown paper to melt the wax out. Do not let your costume sit in a hot place (like a car on a summer day) or in direct sunlight. Adhesives and finishes may fade or melt. Buy good hangers and breathable bags for storing costumes, to avoid smells, rot, mildew, and damage to seams and stitches.

With some time, effort, information, guidance, and yes, money, you can make a costume that is suited to your level, your body, your personality, and your needs. With care, it will last you several years.

Author: written by Nicola, based on a series of costuming workshops by Nicola and Shayera

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Last updated: 2005/10/10