

What makes a Costume a Costume

Intro to costuming by Selimah of Mystic Hips Belly Dance

A costume makes your dance work. It completes your style, your personality, and your performance. It is an effort to look and dress in the professional style of that particular dance, be it Cabaret, Tribal, Goth, Ethic, Fusion, or even a special themed event.

Your costume should not be your underwear, or your workout clothes.

The quality of your costume can depend on many things, availability, time and the big one... Money! But I believe we grow in our costume style as we grow in our dance. We learn to make and make do. Or we have to buy something that may not be exactly what we want or who we are. But I can show you many ways to accomplish a polished look you can be proud of.

I always suggest you start with a bra and belt that you can wear with many other color skirts, pants, or beledi gowns. Pick a metal that is good with your coloring or your favorite like silver, gold, or copper. It can be a bright metal or one that has been tarnished. You will use this many, many times.

Then add skirts or pants in colors that are good on your skin tones, and that mix or complement each other to mix them up a bit. Remember dark colors do not show up on stage well. Navy Blue, Dark Green and other very dark shades can look Black on stage. But of course Black is Black. Remember to step back, even go across the room to see how it looks.

Start with fabrics that you can prewash and dry before making your costume.

For your first attempt at covering a bra I suggest Lycra, or stretch velvets. Some knits may be too bulky or too loose a weave and may snag on other costume pieces, like jewelry or beads or sequins. Then it will be a mess.

Be sure to buy *more than enough fabric when making your bra. You may want a matching belt. Or in my case I had to make a larger bra and still had enough fabric to do just that. Also when buying beads or whatever baubles to put on your bra/belt set always buy more than enough at one time. I also do this when making a dress or skirt. Great skirt fabrics can be washable chiffons, satins, silks, or cotton. You may go back to find them discontinued or just out of them. Also the color lot may be different and mess up your whole design.

Recycled garment/fabric I love doing this but again it may not be enough for your project, but it is worth a try. I have found beautiful fabrics in old garments in thrift stores and the goodwill stores. I take it home wash and dry it and start cutting it apart carefully. I will have an example in my bra workshop.

Your costume should fit your body. It should have good proportion to your frame. I have seen people buy a used costume made for a plus size person to fit a petite. It just won't work. The overall shape is way too large to size down. Sometimes you cannot alter something to fit no matter how much you want it to.

So be sure the bra you want to make into a costume fits you well, get one that is padded or for larger women at least slightly padded. Also for larger women be sure straps are a little wider for more support. No pinching or pulling be sure the cup size is adequate. No spilling over or too large and gapping. Try it on before you buy it. Adjust it to fit then reach up over your head as far as you can do you fall out from underneath the bra? Then bend over touch your toes and shake. If you don't fall out doing this you should be ok. So if you pass these tests... Buy it. Do not buy a gel or water bra, sewing will poke holes in it and it will leak out and ruin your project. You can always add inserts to enhance if needed.

My strongest opinion is right here, right now. Ready? Deep Breath! Do not cut the straps off of the cups despite what you have read anywhere else. In my over 35 years designing costumes I have never had one hold up well or fit well doing

this. (Unless we are doing the circle ring criss cross tie) If you are a 36 C cup or smaller you can cut the back of the shoulder straps off and tie or hook behind the neck for a halter style. I highly/strongly recommend that for 38 D's and larger you keep your shoulder straps intact. This saves you from headaches and neck aches.

Skirts can be full circle skirts, trumpet skirts, straight skirts, tribal style many yard skirts. Find the style of skirt that is flattering for your body type.

I prefer to wear a beledi gown with the bra area cut out and sometimes the belly button area cut out. I feel with my size this is a more modest and flattering style. It suits me, but can be for any size.

How durable should my costume be? Well that depends on what and how you make it. I use heavy upholstery thread to do my beading and sewing on embellishments it holds up better and lasts much longer. I bead one strand at a time tying off each one and after done beading I use clear nail polish to dot each knot. Yes that is a lot of knots. But after hours of beading I do not want them falling off. I also hand sew all of my bras.

Many of my bras and belts cannot be washed, so as soon as I am finished dancing I lay them out to dry and I do not put them away till I am sure they are completely dry and aired out. You can save the little silicone packets that come in shoe boxes and put them in with your costume as well. I keep mine in storage drawers or plastic tubs in a cool dry place. Hanging some fabrics may stretch them out and when you put them on you find the hem is 3 inches too long! So you may need to gently fold them and put in a drawer as well. If you have prewashed your skirt/pants/dress fabric you should be able to wash and dry them after wearing them.

My biggest rule about costumes and my pet peeve is how many times I have been in a dressing room and had dancers spraying cologne, hairspray, or glitter body spray while others are getting dressed. **This will strip color from your beads and sequins and ruin your costume in seconds! Ask other dancers to please not spray anything near your costume.** If you must spray anything on

yourself, do it before getting dressed in a different area or the restroom away from others. Be a thoughtful dancer.

So why make you own costume? Because it will be one of a kind, you will not see it on anyone else unless you give it away or sell it. You will love that it is something you made and it will express your personality. You will complete your dance by wearing your own personal style, color and flair. And best of all “You will feel whole in your dance.”

Selimah of Mystic Hips Belly Dance

***There is no such thing as more than enough fabric.**