

Designing Experimental Middle Eastern Dance Costumes

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Each time I design an experimental Middle Eastern dance costume it is a unique experience. Sometimes costumes are fast and easy to create. On other occasions, I have to hunt and search for them on long quests. I may find them in my closet (or someone else's) or have them handmade. As a way to honor these costumes, I would like to share with you some of my favorites.

Sometimes in experimental Middle Eastern dance, traditional costuming is the way to go. I have worn on many occasions cabaret and folk dance costumes in order to present a certain culture. Or as with "Inverse," I wore contemporary clothing. In this particular piece, I employed the chador to make a political statement about the repression of women towards other women over what one has to wear in public. Lynne Tepper, one of my costumers, skillfully reproduced the chadors from patterns I found on the internet.

Many of my costumes play with the bedlah design, like "The Jelly." Inspired by the undulating movement of the Jelly Fish, the multi-colored coral colored strips evoke the tentacles while the veil connected to the headpiece, the fluid body. Hallah Moustafa, who designed this costume, constructed it out of various thick textured fabrics that she then hand-painted and encrusted with jewels. I choose to keep the bedlah reference in order to help accentuate my body movements. And also because of the amount of money I spent on the costume, I wanted to make sure I could wear it (minus the headpiece of course) in other shows.

The costumes I designed for "Ditma" were not based in Middle Eastern dance at all. I choose white velvet body suits. This design allowed me to show the mechanics of the body, especially the legs, which layers of material often covered up in Middle Eastern dance. I also thought white would reflect the lighting design I had imagined for the dance. The dancers' faces were covered in a sheer white veil. As a choreographer, I wanted to erase the dancers' identity and to focus the characters' personalities in their movements and not on their faces. Though the costumes were the same for all three dancers, their hair was bound in different ways, giving each a slightly different shape to the head and adding to each dancer's individuality.

Some dances are thankfully easy to costume, as we already owned the pieces. "The Hole and the Willow" was one such work. The main character wore a garland of flowers and a flowing white dress purchased at a Renaissance Faire long ago. The romantic feel of the material flows and extends the character's movements. The Gardner's outfit was also bought long ago, found in a going out of business costume store sale. Its heavy wool accentuated with strips of dark colors and the long black fingered gloves disguised and drowned the human body underneath. Parts of the "Man's" outfit - pants, shoes, and earrings - were from my everyday

clothes. The shirt, a lace midriff, and the red and gold vest came from my “gypsy” collection. I bought the hat along with most of the masks to add to the fairytale quality and look of the dance.

The costumes for “Transference” took a lot of mall shopping in order to look like they were from our closets. This dance was about my personal struggle between the demands of a professional dance career and doctoral schoolwork. Because I wanted a pedestrian feel to the piece, the characters wore everyday clothing: pants, shirts, and matching watches. This was perhaps the most comfortable costume I have ever worn. Each dancer was given the same clothes but in reverse colors: one wears green pants and a pink shirt, the other pink pants and a green shirt. The color scheme of the costumes reflected the relationship between two sides of the same person.

Sometimes it is all about the hair. In “Part 1 and 2,” the hair was a rememberable addition. Anaheed showed me some hair attachments that she bought. And I was sold. They added the Dr. Seuss look that I wanted for the quirky movement style of the dance. The costume itself took a while for me conceive. Members of Ya Helewa! hunted through various costume, lingerie, and dance stores both in person and online to get an idea of what we wanted. We decided on the base from L. Rose designs. We then covered the shiny, metallic silver boy shorts and tops with bright fishnet tops and bottoms found at Trashy Lingerie, a staple in LA culture.

The nice thing about working in a black box theater is that it is black. The bad thing about dancing in a black box theater is that it is black. Often if costumes are black and need to be seen, one has to add a lot of color accents in order to stand out from the background. However, when one needs to disappear, as we wanted to in “Unknown,” it is fairly easy. Here Ya Helewa! members dressed completely in black clothes with white masks that eerily glowed under black light. Our heads floated in space as we danced and created a strong illusion of anonymity and spatial distortion.

What else would Vampira from “Plan 9” wear but a black tight corset over a thick netty lace dress with a long train and sleeves? Inspired by Ed Wood’s movie “Plan 9 from Outer Space” and Tim Burton’s “Mars Attacks” the dress has a 1950s sensibility. It was made by Paulette Russell, mistress of costume and prop construction. I took the collar from a cheap Halloween costume and added some sparkle to it. Her beehive and outfit were adorned with fiery red spiders that accented her otherwise black and white look.

“The Story of Laurel” is another character driven costume. I based the dance on a Greek myth about a nymph, who being chased by Apollo, was turned into a tree with the “help” of her father. For the costume, I wanted to refer poetically to a tree without looking like a tree. Therefore, I spent quite a bit of time searching for costumes ideas and at a Middle Eastern dance festival I happen upon crochet hip scarves in green and brown. I played around with them until figured out how I wanted to wear them. Paulette once again, constructed the two scarves on top in such a way that they would stay on while I danced. The ivy crown was something I had to

dwell upon, as I was tentative about wearing leaves and looking like a tree. But I took solace from the story, in which Apollo makes the nymph's leaves into a Laurel crown to wear. The rest of the costume (minus the neck and face) comprises of henna tattoos, which took a solid twelve hours to put on and over a month to come off.

The inspirations for my experimental Middle Eastern dance costumes come from many sources and much research. They are as unique as the process by which they are created and the dances they are employed. I treasure each of them.

Amara has performed as a soloist and in Middle Eastern Dance companies all over the United States. She is one of the most versatile dancers in the United States as her repertory includes traditional and experimental improvisations and choreographies. Her pieces, designed for specific contexts and venues, draw from and include Middle Eastern dance, American improvisation, Modern, and Ballet. Amara has held long-term dance engagements at several Middle Eastern restaurants and nightclubs including Pars (LA), Elbasha (LA), and Mamounia (LV). She has also been highlighted in several IAMED's videos including "This is Belly Dance," "The Art of Belly Dance," "Belly Dance Revolution," BDTV, and the EEMED series. Furthermore, Amara has taught accredited courses on dance appreciation and Middle Eastern dance at UCLA UCR, and Cal Poly Pomona and workshops at a number of universities and colleges. She also teaches on-going classes at several dance studios. In addition to teaching, Amara is the Director and Choreographer of Ya Helewa! Dance Company and Producer of An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance concert and videos. Amara holds a degree in Music History and Literature and a certificate in Ethnomusicology from The Florida State University and worked towards an M.A. in Dance Ethnology and an MFA at UCLA. Currently she is a doctoral candidate at UCRiverside's PhD program in Dance History and Theory and is writing her dissertation: "Dancing on the Fringe. Connections Forming An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance."