



# Hints & Tips

for the  
Belly Dance  
Costumer

by  
Dawn Devine Brown  
and  
Barry Brown  
Not for Resale

# Introduction

There are a tremendous variety of costuming styles available for the contemporary Middle Eastern dancer. From sleek and sexy evening gowns to flirty bra and belt sets; from loose and flowing kaftans to tightly fitted scoop-necked gawazee coats, the possibilities are limited only by the imagination of the designer, the budget of the dancer and their preference in dance styles.

No matter if you have been dancing a lifetime, or have recently started your first class, this booklet is designed to not only informative, but inspiring as well. Though filled with valuable hints and tips, keep in mind that each illustration is only one variant on the described style and should be used as a springboard for developing your own unique costuming style.

This booklet was first published in 1999. At that time, Ibexa Press had just released its second book, *From Turban to Toe Ring*, our tribal themed costuming book. *Hints and Tips* was a trial publication, to see if dancers were interested in a smaller, more focused product. Feedback was overwhelming, and we have since gone on to release an entire series of booklets and a third book, *Bedlah, Baubles and Beads*.

This document has been reformatted to accommodate easy printing. There have been several illustrations added, and a few removed. The text has been enhanced slightly, and we've expanded the bibliography. It is only with the continued support of the dance community that I have been able to share my knowledge of costume history and design through my publications. This free version of *Hints and Tips* is our gift to readers everywhere.

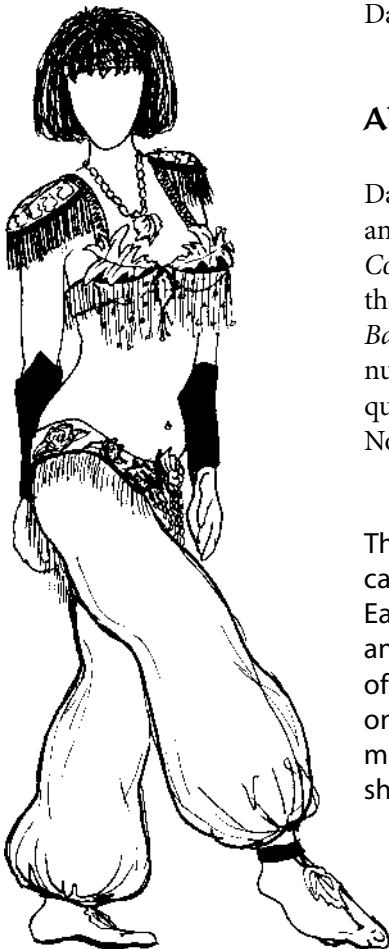
Good Luck and Happy Costuming!  
Dawn "Davina" Devine Brown

## About the Author

Dawn Devine Brown is the Author of several books on the subject of designing and making Middle Eastern belly dance costume. Her acclaimed first book, *Costuming from the Hip* has been a continuing international best seller among the dance community. Other titles include *From Turban to Toe Ring*, *Bedlah, Baubles and Beads* and her latest booklet, *Style File*. She has published numerous articles in dance publications and maintains a website with a quarterly newsletter called *Costumer's Notes*. She performs and teaches in Northern California under the dance name Davina.

This style is commonly known as "cabaret" style but is more appropriately called bedlah, Arabic for "suit," and is the typical uniform of the Middle Eastern dancer. The elements that define this style are the matched bra and belt set worn with a skirt, pants, or both. Although the bra and belt offer a rather small surface area to design in, the possibilities are limited only by the imagination of the designer. Not only can myriad of embellishments be applied to the surface of the bra and belt, but the edges can be shaped to create a wide variety of different looks.

This illustration first appeared in the 1997 version of *Costuming From the Hip*.



# The Classic Cabaret

**If you can only afford one set, purchase a bra and belt set in gold or silver.** These metallics can form the basis of numerous combinations with changes in skirt, pants, and accessory pieces such as scarves, arm decorations, or vests.

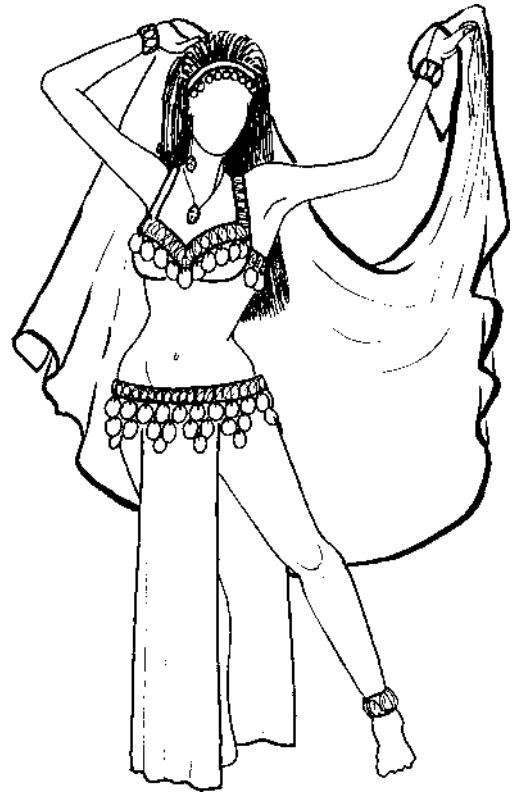
**For more possible variations in costuming, purchase a belt that does not have a skirt attached.** This will give you the opportunity to pair your set with an infinite number of skirts and pants.

**Create a core wardrobe.** One way to extend your costuming budget is to form a core wardrobe of skirts that can be worn with all of your bra and belt sets. Adding pants to the equation multiplies the possible number of outfits. When you buy a bra and belt, think about all of the skirts and pants you already own.

**Pick a signature motif.** Select a design element to appear on many of the numerous costume pieces in your wardrobe. A floral motif or a geometric pattern repeated throughout a costume can link unrelated pieces together and help to define your style. Start with a piece of jewelry, a striking patterned fabric, or use nature as your source. Recently, some motifs that have been popular are butterflies, roses, and geometric patterns such as the paisley.

**Buy classic colors.** Costumes will be more wearable and have a better resale value if they are made in “classic” dance colors such as black, red, blue, and green rather than in trendy colors like neon orange or lime green that will quickly become dated and out of fashion.

**Avoid halter straps.** While halter straps can tip the bra cups and create enhanced cleavage, the halter puts a great deal of strain over the neck. An alternative is to take conventional straps and move them close to the center back.



Classic 1970s style coin bra and belt set with rectangular chiffon two-panel skirt and veil. Image from *Beldah, Bubles and Beads*.



**Make sure it looks good from all angles.**

Consider not only the back and front views of your costume, but your side view as well. Many designers make costumes that look beautiful front and back but are plain from the side. Remember, dance is three dimensional and you will be seen from every angle.

**Bring color up.** The simple addition of a matching hair ornament will give you a more complete look, elongate the body, and draw the eye up to the face and hair. Other ways to bring color up to the face are by wearing large eye-catching earrings or using dramatic make-up.

**Don't let your costume be the center of attention!** *Practice* in your costume before you perform so that you will know how all of the parts and pieces will behave. You will find out how long it takes to put on the entire ensemble, that each piece is in working order, and last but not least, that it covers what it needs to! Avoid the "belt fit perfectly, until I put on the skirt!" syndrome. Test everything, even if the pieces were worn previously with another costume. One untied bow, one skewed arm puff, and the audience will fix their eyes on the offending piece waiting for something to happen to it.

**Plan ahead for shopping trips.** Don't head off to your next festival, competition or swap meet without planning ahead. Putting together a belly dance wardrobe is like planning a work wardrobe, only it's much more exciting and usually more costly. So here are some tips to know before you go:

**Establish and stick to a budget.** Worrying about bills is never pleasant. Costuming should be fun, not a burden financially or psychologically.

**Know what pieces you need to fill holes in your wardrobe.** Are you missing a pair of elbow length gloves? A set of mozuna ropes? A Hand of Fatima necklace?



**Develop a relationship with a good vendor.** Select a few principle vendors and get to know them. Find out what kinds of personalized shopping services they offer to cherished customers and repeat shoppers. Let your dealers know what you are looking for. On their next trip overseas, they may spot the exact thing you need.

**Write down your wish list** and share the information with your circle of dance friends. You never know if someone has a costume piece languishing in their closet awaiting a new life.

**Know your skill level!** Don't invest in a "fixer-upper" costume if you barely know how to thread a needle and have no friends that sew. A bargain is only a bargain if you use it!

**Inspect all costume pieces before you buy.** Even new costumes could have weak or broken threads, strings of beads that are about to go, or appliques that are applied incorrectly. On used costumes, look for excessive wear, stains and dirt, and, if it is in need of repair, that its complete and all of the pieces are present.

**Try it on.** It should fit, or be close enough to alter. Avoid buying costumes that are too small. While taking in a costume can be complex and tricky, it's at least possible. Letting out a costume is not only much more difficult, but it means finding fabrics and decoration to match colors from other seasons.



For dancers who have a greater modesty level, an alternative to the classic style is to wear a long dress. Known by some as the “evening gown” style or as a Beladi dress, this look can run the gamut from casual to glamorous, depending on the fabrication of the garment. The basis of this style is a long dress that can be loose and flowing or tightly fitted with a zipper up the back or the side. These dresses are worn with a hip belt or wrap or has a decorative design built into the hip area. Frequently, the bra is either eliminated or is built into the dress. Many of these styles can be adapted from evening dress patterns available at your local fabric store or purchased ready-made from your favorite vendor.

There are many different ways to decorate a bra and belt set but there are three principle ways in which these garments are embellished. The least expensive and easiest to apply are coins and rayon fringe. This style has a definite informal or gypsy styling to it. Another way is to use a dramatic fabric or a series of appliques that cover the field of the piece with just an edge of beaded trim along the bottom. Since most beaded fringe is imported from Egypt, using a single layer along the edge of a garment can keep down costs and is easy to apply. A more complex option is to encrust of the surface with beads, stones, and sequins with fringe hanging from the belt and bra in luxurious waves. These bra and belt sets are opulent and can cost a small fortune to construct and even more to purchase pre-made.



# The Tribal Look

**Make sure your choli fits.** A choli is a backless blouse worn by women in India since the Mughul period. The tribal style uses the choli as one of its distinctive elements. Today, cholis come in a variety of different styles but fall into two categories. Stretch knit cholis look very much like the top of a leotard and are quite comfortable to wear. Traditional cholis are made out of cotton or silk and tie in the back (see illustration to the left). A poorly fitting choli will not provide enough support for the bustline and could limit the movement of the arms. In a traditional choli, look for large gussets under the arms to accommodate the expressive gestures necessary for dance.



Three Tribal-Fusion Dancers wearing cholis, hip-wraps full skirts and turbans. Illustration first appeared in *From Turban to Toe Ring*.



**The tribal bra.** Some tribal groups choose to wear a vest and bra combination. The base of these bras is constructed in the same manner as a cabaret bra. However, it's decorated in a style that will fit in with the tribal look. Commonly, the bra base is black, which acts as a plain field for the application of ethnic jewelry pieces.

**Forget about matching your bra and belt.** Tribal style bras are frequently combined with belts composed of embroidery elements. Cholis are sometimes worn with chain and metal coin belts. In this style, it is important to coordinate your look through repetition of color and design elements, rather than exactly matching.

**Tie your look together with color.** One way to pull a tribal look together is to repeat color throughout your costume. For example, if you are wearing a pair of orange pants under a black skirt, wear a black turban with accent scarves of orange and make sure that your choli and hip wrap include orange accents in either embroidery or appliqué. This will keep the tribal look from appearing too scattered and unfinished.

**Don't be afraid of color!** The tribal style achieves its distinctive look through the intricate layerings of color. Move beyond the common color schemes popular here in the U.S. Look at examples of Indian embroidery for ideas for potential color schemes. Yellow with orange and red, green with pink and blue, or all of these colors combined together will create a look that is distinctly non-Western.



**Practice putting your ensemble on.** Because of the layered nature of the tribal style, many items may be tucked to keep them in place. By putting your costume on and actually dancing in it, you will discover how deeply to tuck and also where to use safety pins if necessary.

**Build a wardrobe.** There are many similar features shared by Tribal and Gypsy fusion styles. Full tiered skirts, lots of rich color and big jewelry are a few of the shared design elements of these two styles. You can save money on your costuming if you build a mix and match wardrobe.

**Temper color with black.** If you find that five or more colors together is daunting, remember you can temper any costume with the liberal application of black. An investment in a plain black skirt to act as a neutral field upon which to layer bright scarves and tassels will be money well spent.

**Turbans are a must.** Nothing says “Middle East” like a complex head-dress. A few hints to get you started:

**Use enough fabric.** Start with a piece of fabric 12 feet (4 yards) long, or enough to wrap around your head twice. Longer lengths can be challenging to tie and shorter lengths can leave the novice turban wrapper frustrated.

**Practice, practice, practice.** Nothing beats practice to get your turban-tying skills up to par. Classes, workshops, and rehearsals are great places to wear a practice turban. There are many ways to tie a turban, so be experimental and don't forget to dance in your turban. One deep backbend in a poorly tied turban can spell disaster during a performance!

**Don't tie it too tightly.** If your head is throbbing, your turban is too tight. Turbans should not be uncomfortable to wear. Start with natural fiber cloth, or cloth with a texture. Friction keeps a turban tied together, so cloth made from cotton, linen, or textured silk will keep its form without putting too much squeeze on your head.

**Decorate your turban.** Random pieces of broken ethnic jewelry and small decorative scarves can be woven into your turban to create a myriad of different looks. Start with a turban cloth of a neutral color and build your look with distinctive jewelry.



# Performances

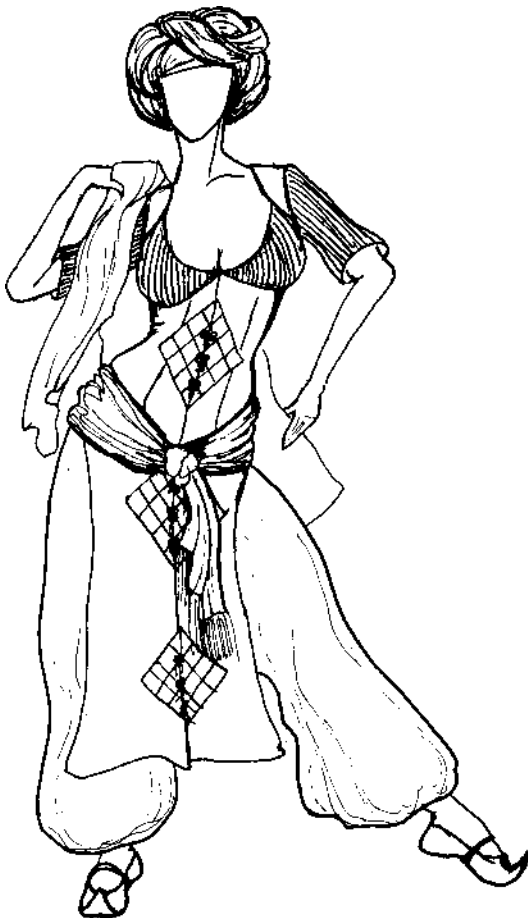
**Make a list, check it twice.** Create a master list of all of the items you need to take with you to performances. Buy a bag and use it religiously to carry your items. In this bag keep an emergency kit stocked and ready as well as a bottle of water, a towel, a hand mirror, an emergency change of clothes (especially if you plan on arriving in costume), and a coverup. Before you close your bag, run down a mental checklist to be sure that you have everything you need.

**Plan for the unexpected.** Always have an emergency kit with you when you go out to a performance. Include in this kit safety pins in assorted sizes, a spare pair of stockings, bandages, basic cosmetics, and cosmetic wipes for cleaning up accidents. Some dancers include a small sewing kit, a backup tape of your routine, extra shoes, and a backup set of jewelry that goes with most costumes.

**Wear a coverup.** Wearing a simple coverup, before a show or between sets will help to keep your costume clean. In addition, it will help maintain the mystery surrounding your costume and allow you to create a level of drama. If you are in the back of a performance in a flashy costume, you might inadvertently upstage fellow dancers by catching the eyes of the audience. If you don't have an actual coverup garment, use a veil to disguise your costume.



India-esque costume illustration first appeared in *Bedlah, Baubles and Beads*.



Based on older coat designs from the Middle Ages, the Gwazee coat was worn during the nineteenth century and is the most familiar style for historical re-enactors and some tribal troupes. This style, which is based on the Turkish *antari*, could be found in every country under Ottoman rule. The hallmarks of this style are the low scooped neckline that frequently cuts under the bust, long sleeves that open along the length of the arm, and a center front opening with buttons or ties. This style can be made of elegant fabric or inexpensive cotton. The bottom can be full or straight and it is generally worn with pants, a chemise, and a turban.



# Hip Wraps

**Hip Wraps.** Accentuating the hips is an absolute must during dance instruction and during practice, it can focus the eye and attention to this vital region. Hip wraps that contrast with the leotard beneath will stand out clearly. Here are some ideas for quick hip wraps:



**Shimmy wraps.** These chiffon hip wraps have rows of coins that hang freely from the surface of the scarf. Cut in rectangular or triangular shapes, these scarves are available from most Middle Eastern dance wear vendors. Hip wraps can be easily made with squares or rectangles of decorative fabric and rows of fringe.

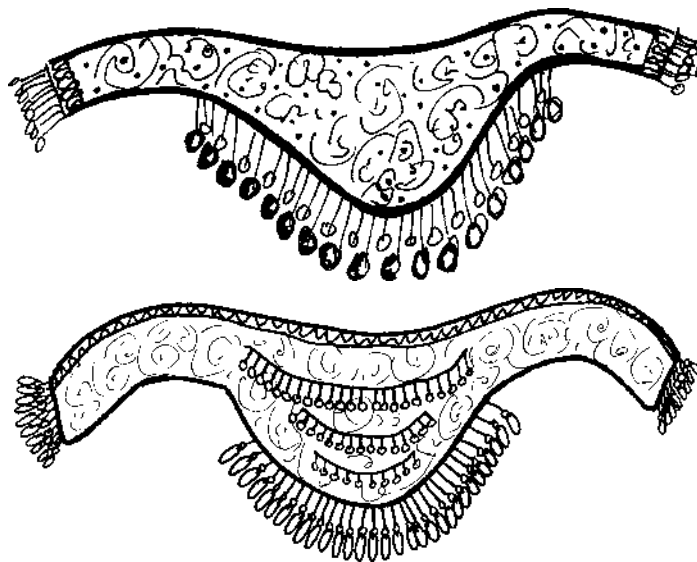
**Scarves.** There are tons of scarves available that make exciting hip wraps. Scarves come in all sorts of shapes such as oblong, square, and triangular and are available in all sorts of places. Keep an eye out on every shopping adventure for useful and beautiful scarves can be found in such places as the local mall, flea market, or rummage sale. Nice scarves can be used not only for practice but as hip accents with costumes during performances.

**Practice belt.** Many dancers like to practice in a belt that has the same weight and movement as their performance costume. Frequently, the practice belt is from a retired costume or is an orphan, a belt separated by time, from its companion bra. Making a practice belt is a good idea if your sewing skills are good and you have scraps left over from other projects. It's also a good way to practice sewing a belt before committing to a full costume. Keep the first one simple. Two easy options are a simple rectangle of sturdy fabric with a row of chainette fringe and coins, or a length of belting from the roll with a length of beaded fringe.

**Shimmy belts** are an excellent investment for every dancer. While they can be used for practice wear in a class environment, they can also be integrated into performance costumes. They look especially good with Gypsy and tribal costumes, and if you have a matching pair, you can create a super easy costume by pinning one to a bra with safety pins.

## **Wear a quiet hip wrap to class.**

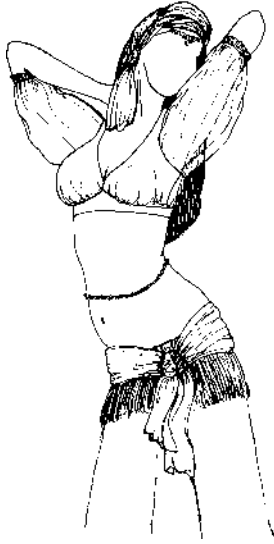
Although these hip wraps are lovely, sparkly additions to the wardrobe, they can get noisy during large classes and in workshops. If you have several to choose from, select the quiet style to wear in a class-room environment.



Two examples of hip wraps. Illustrations first appeared in *Costuming from the Hip*.

# Practice Wear

Today there are many vendors who carry costume pieces that are designed to be worn during workouts. With such a vast array of options available, finding an ensemble and building a wardrobe of practice pieces is fun and easy to do. Dressing up for dance class can be enjoyable. Practicing in a rehearsal costume is essential. So here are some ideas for costume pieces to wear at classes and rehearsals.



**Leotard and tights.** This classic ensemble of dancers makes a great foundation for Middle Eastern dance practice. To extend the life of your cotton/lycra blends, machine wash on a gentle cycle and hang to dry. Lycra or spandex is a heat reactive fiber and running them through the dryer greatly diminishes the ability of the fibers to bounce back and to hug the body.

**Stretch cholis and leggings** give all the comfort of a leotard, but expose the torso. Choli's are an excellent costume investment. They are perfect for practice, but can be worn in performance as well. Buy a color you love or a basic hue that will coordinate with your growing costume wardrobe.

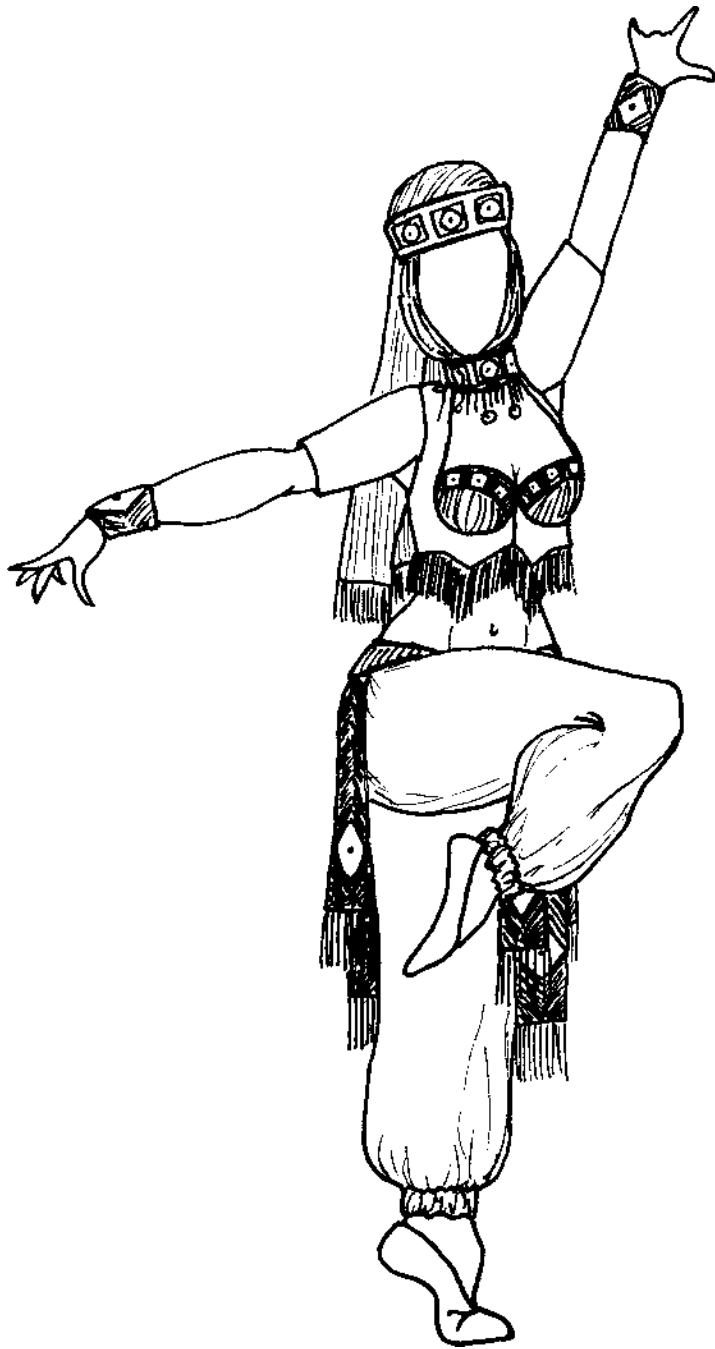
**Add pants.** The addition of loose and flowing pants to the basic exercise foundation can add color, flowing fabric and fun to your practice regimen. Pants made from lightweight cotton will be easy to clean and breathable. If you are practicing floor work, pants are great for hiding knee pads. Many dancers who prefer folkloric or tribal style costumes can use their costume pants to practice in. If you are going to wear pants during performances it is important to practice in pants with the same amount of fullness.

**Add skirts.** If you are planning on performing in costume, you should practice in a skirt. Skirts will frequently act unpredictably and having a practice skirt will allow you to experiment not only with the way it moves and handles but in getting out of any awkward situations. In an ideal world, a dancer would have a practice skirt cut along the same lines as her performance attire. A wardrobe of skirt styles such as a circle skirt, straight skirt, and tiered skirt will provide the freedom to experiment with different moves and effects without risking damage to an expensive costume.

**Add veils.** Veils are a wonderful multifunctional tool. It is one part prop and one part costume. A veil can be tied around the hips to take the place of a hip wrap. Instead of a skirt, a veil can be tied about the hips like a sarong.

**Practice in your shoes.** If you have special shoes that you wear when you perform make sure to get plenty of practice time in them. If you can, try to practice on different styles of surface. Carpets, tile, wood and laminates all have different friction levels and your shoes will respond differently. Also be sure to test drive any skirts in combination.





The illustration left demonstrates the use of repetitive design motifs. Notice how the box with dot motif is repeated throughout the garment. It appears on the hip belt and the bra and is then repeated on the wrists and on the head and neck treatments. The repeated design element brings what could be very disparate elements together and unifies them. This costume would look completely different if the headdress and vest was removed and the skirt changed to pants. Go back and look at all of the illustrations and consider how they would look with different accessory pieces.



The best way to pump up your enthusiasm for class, practice, or troupe rehearsal is with a wardrobe of costume pieces to wear to dance class. There is a vast array of exercise wear available commercially in major stores, dance wear shops, and through Middle Eastern dance vendors. Bodywear comes in all sizes and colors, patterns and prints. Something as simple as a spandex choli and a pair of pants can become the basis for an informal dance costume.

# Care and Handling

**Don't hang circle skirts or items that are cut on the bias.** Gravity pulls items on the bias which can ruin the shape of a hem line in a matter of months. This effect is intensified if there are appliqués or beaded designs or if the skirt is made from loosely woven fabric such as chiffon.



**Develop a cleaning ritual.** After wearing a costume, before you put it away take steps to ensure a long life for your costume.

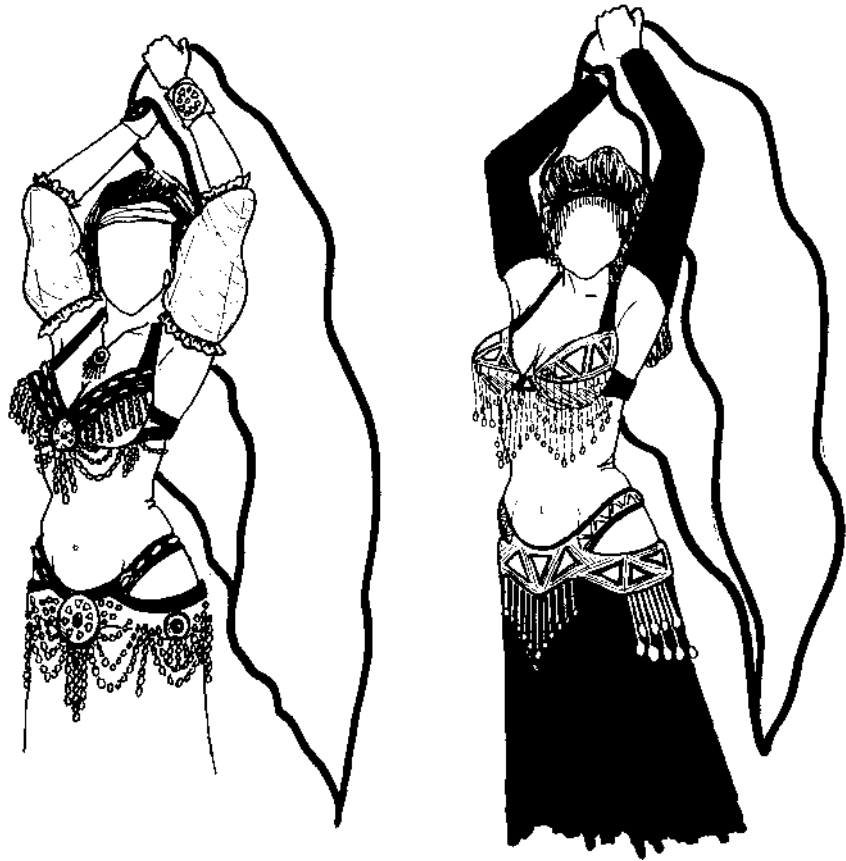
Lay your costume out to dry. Never put a damp costume away, especially into a sealed container, as perspiration can eat away at synthetic fibers.

If your costume has launderable pieces, wash them so your costume will look fresh next time you pull it out.

**Inspect for needed repairs.** Take the time to inspect for loose beads and frayed edges. Making repairs now means being able to just pull the costume from the closet and wear it immediately.

**Store costumes in a dust free, yet ventilated box.** Store as many costume pieces flat as possible, especially elements with complex and heavy beadwork and garments that are cut on the bias.

No matter if you have a collection of cabaret costumes or an ensemble of tribal clothes, one thing that all dancers have in common is the complex task of keeping their garments clean. The amount of time, money, and effort that goes into making or acquiring a beautiful costume makes their care and upkeep critical. Not only do well-maintained costumes look better and perform well, but they have a higher resale value when you are ready to get rid of it.



Two cabaret costumes. The same bra and belt decorated to create two very different looks. Illustrations from *Costuming From the Hip*

**Take steps to avoid the unpleasant scent of perspiration.** There are a few techniques you can try to eliminate moisture and odors. By preparing a storage box and always putting your costume into it after you have cleaned and inspected it, you will lengthen the lifespan of the pieces.



**Fill a fabric bag with cornstarch** to help absorb odors. Baking soda will also absorb scent as well. There are many products available through sporting goods stores that are designed to absorb sports odors. Generally these products contain charcoal and will pull moisture from the air and neutralize the offending scent.

**Use a desiccant** to eliminate moisture. Silica gel will remove excess water from the air. Those little packets you find in shoe boxes contain silica gel and you can often get a supply free from your local shoe store. A natural desiccant is dry uncooked rice.

**Use a little vodka.** One old theatre trick is to keep a spray bottle with a mixture of equal parts water and vodka. Spray this on the insides of your bra and belt to help remove odors.

**Burn incense or light a fragrant candle.** To eliminate the odors of stale cigarette smoke, a traditional method is to hang your costume on a rack and burn incense below it.

**Chemical deodorizers** are now available in the fabric cleaning aisle of your favorite department store. These products are sold in spray bottles and will freshen up fabric without having to launder it. Experiment on a hidden area or sample swatch before you spray your entire costume.

**Construct your garments with ease of care in mind.** If they have launderable and non-launderable parts, make the washable parts removable so they can be put in the washing machine. In particular, use a lining and make it removable. Linings will absorb perspiration. Change them frequently to extend the life of your costume.

**Make a repair kit.** When buying accessories for your costume, buy extras to include in your repair kit. This includes coins, tassels, beads, and so forth. If you lose a piece during a performance, you'll have extras.

**Hire a seamstress** if you cannot do repairs or alterations yourself. Appearing on stage in costume that shows signs of wear and age could reflect poorly on your image. Developing a relationship with a skilled seamstress will ensure that your costumes look their best when you step onto the stage.



Illustration right from *Costuming from the Hip*.



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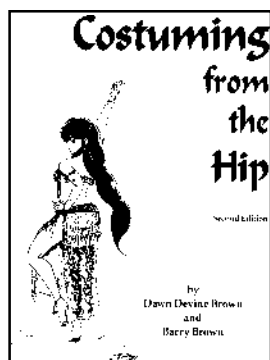
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## Vendor Resources

There are many excellent dealers in the Middle Eastern belly dance world. For a more complete list of resources, visit our links list at:  
[www.costumersnotes.com/links.html](http://www.costumersnotes.com/links.html)



Illustration of reclined dancer first appeared in 1997 version of *Costuming From the Hip*.



## Books by Ibexa Press

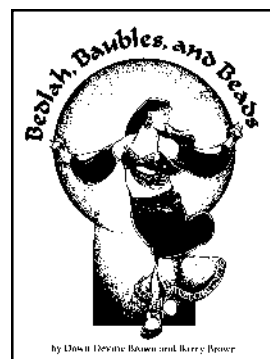
### Costuming From the Hip

This book is a comprehensive reference for all types of Middle Eastern belly dance costuming. Dancers, costume makers, designers and historical re-enactors will like the over 200 illustrations, historical patterns, construction techniques and hundreds of hints and tips. This book will take you step by step through measuring your body, researching your costume, laying out the patterns, fitting and accessorizing your creation.



### From Turban to Toe Ring

This book explores the various layers and elements that compose the tribal fusion style costume. From jewelry and cosmetics to cholis, skirts and pants, this book is loaded with directions for designing and making the garments described in the book. With over 300 original illustrations and step-by-step diagrams, this book is an essential addition to the reference libraries of costumers, teachers and tribal style dancers. Not just for tribal costumers, *From Turban to Toe Ring* also contains costume parts and pieces that can be used to create ensembles suitable for dancers who want a more folkloric, historical, fusion or Gypsy look.



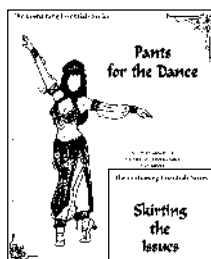
### Bedlah, Baubles and Beads

This book focuses exclusively on the “cabaret” style bra and belt costume. This book has three major parts. The first part is about history and design of the bedlah set, covering topics such as how to design for your body type, using the principles and elements of design and a brief history of dance wear from the 1890s to today. The second part focuses on construction of the bra and belt and surface design. Detailed directions for beading supplies and techniques are included. The final section addresses the use of accessories, skirts, pants and other garment pieces to create the total finished high-glamour look.



### Style File

This is a concise visual guide to Middle Eastern belly dance costuming. Lushly illustrated, this forty-page book identifies the garments and accessories unique to our dance form. From bedlah to folkloric, tribal to historic, the most common styles, parts and pieces are identified and defined through images and text.



### Pants for the Dance

Part of the “Costuming Essentials Series,” this booklet addresses the exciting design possibilities for one of the most ubiquitous but unsung garments in the dancers wardrobe: pants! Go beyond the basic harem style and explore a variety of options for creating pants for male and female dancers alike. *Pants for the Dance* provides pattern layout diagrams and directions for taking your body measurements and developing a pattern that fits perfectly.



### Skirting the Issues

This forty-eight-page booklet from the “Costume Essentials Series” is devoted entirely to skirts. From standard panel and tiered designs to more unique *godet*, gored and pieced styles, this book has something for everyone. Over a hundred original illustrations complement the text. This handy reference includes layout directions, body measurement guides and directions for developing a perfectly-fitted pattern.