



Chelydra

"Dancer With An Attitude"

P.O. Box 1973

Newport News, VA 23601

www.chelydra.com

chelydra@mindspring.com

Confessions of a Costume Addict

I can't find my sewing machine. When most people say that, it's because it's buried in a dark corner under the laundry and the ironing and the summer clothes that haven't been put away yet, forgotten and lonely and ignored.

Not so with my machine. It gets plenty of use - bordering on abuse. I can't find it because I have so many piles of fabric and patterns and unfinished projects stuffed into my sewing room, I can barely open the door, let alone fight my way to the sewing machine.

I have no qualms about admitting it - I'm a fabric addict. It's in boxes under the bed, drawers in the spare bureau, trunks in the attic - you name it, I probably have fabric stashed there, waiting for me, calling to me, haunting my thoughts from day to day.

And like many addicts, I have placed myself in a situation which feeds on and reinforces my addiction - in this case, middle eastern dance. The prime opportunity to work with every kind and type of fabric under the sun - every project a challenge. Just being a belly dancer wasn't enough for me. I had to become a troupe director, opening limitless vistas of costume design and execution. If you don't get it right the first time, you have a second (or third, or fourth ...) chance. I'm no dummy, either - my costume is never the first one off the machine.

Have you ever noticed that the majority of dancers don't sew? Talk about a codependency relationship. All those helpless dancers hanging on me, wanting me to turn them into visions of graceful loveliness.

It isn't a pretty addiction. The first costume is a challenge, the second identical creation is fulfilling, and after that, it's sheer agony. Let me get on to something new! I have just finished the fourth and last of the Persian court costumes from hell. Before that, it was the four princess beledi dresses from hell. Before that, it was the eight satin cabaret ensembles from hell. Before that - well, you get the picture.

I don't learn. Before the last hem stitch was placed in that fourth Persian dress, I was already sneaking time out at work to sketch the next two projects, poring over reference materials, estimating costs and yardages, and haunting the fabric stores for sales. I am now the proud owner of sixteen yards of cotton sheeting (in four beautifully coordinating colors) for fellahin dresses, and I'm carrying around the shopping list for the Persian peasant tunic and skirt, waiting for the just the right sale (thirty-two yards of black twill doesn't come cheap), or just the right blend of flowered prints (ever tried to find four different flower prints that don't fight with each other tooth and nail?).

Fabric addicts are selfish, egotistical, and clever. I may grow to hate every costume I make, but I'll be darned if I'll let anyone else touch them. It's quite simple, really - noone else could possibly sew as well as I do. They lack the skill, the drive, the creative edge. But if they insist - well, you just can't make anything worth its salt these days without a serger (don't overedge lame without it), and I'm the only one in my troupe with a serger. So there. It's mine, all mine.

My 1990 New Year's resolution was to complete two projects for every one I bought fabric for. The laws of mathematics say I'd have to get caught up eventually. Alas, I must admit that I failed miserably. By the end of the year, it took me at least two hours to uncover the guest bed when company came. And you couldn't open a closet door after that without taking your life in your hands. Shades of Fibber Magee.

My New Year's resolution for 1991 was to either complete, or make significant progress on, one sewing project per week. Three weekends have passed so far, and I have succeeded. Week one I made my husband a pair of pants (before he got arrested for indecent exposure). Week two I made my mother-in-law a wool plaid jumper (I gave her the fabric for Christmas). Week three I progressed on a drop-dead beledi dress for a friend; it took me a year to get up the nerve to cut into the fabric. Only forty-nine more weekends to go. If I keep this up, maybe I'll even run out of fabric - but somehow, I doubt it.

Costuming Tip

Can't find a veil in quite the right color to match that new costume? Check out the Rit dye display at a local craft house or discount store. I am now the proud owner of a mandarin orange lurex veil - courtesy of Rit and my kitchen sink.

The most predictable results are obtained by starting with basic white - I used a white rayon lurex veil from Chandra's Dance Extravaganza. I filled my extra-deep stainless steel kitchen sink with the hottest tap water available, mixed in two packages of mandarin orange dye until dissolved, chucked in the dampened veil, stirred for twenty minutes, rinsed well with cold water, and then let it dry and ironed it with a cool iron. Presto changeo! Just what the doctor ordered, with a minimum of fuss and bother.

Keep in mind that the color will lighten slightly as it dries. If the result is a shade too dark, don't fret. A run through the delicate wash cycle with a little Clorox bleach should fix the problem.

The Well-Dressed Troupe

For some years now, I have suffered from feelings of inadequacy concerning my troupe's costume wardrobe. I was never quite ready to term us a "well-dressed troupe". I reserved that distinction for the Women of Selket in Richmond, VA. Next to their numerous, heavily beaded, and glitzy ensembles, I always felt like we were the poor relation.

Well, not any more. We may be low on money and short on sequins, but that doesn't mean we don't look good. The troupe now specializes in folk dances of the middle east - Bedouin, Ghawazee, Bandari, Saidi, and Saudi Arabian. We may be low on reflectivity, but we're high on color, variety, and durability (very important for a troupe).

It has taken me several years to realize that costumes for your basic performance repertoire need to be owned by the troupe, not individual dancers. Too many times over the years, dancers have left the troupe, taking irreplaceable costumes with them.

Maintaining a troupe wardrobe really isn't as impossible as it sounds. For most shows, no more than three or four dancers perform a particular number at any one time. That means that three or four costumes will outfit even a troupe of ten. You will find that members usually fall into three basic sizes - a few petites, a large number of mediums, and a few tall. Hemlines for most ethnic costumes aren't critical; the "one size fits several" theory is easily applied.

I impressed myself the other day with our costuming range (it also made me very tired). A new troupe member asked for a list of costumes that she needed to consider making, so I sat down and started filling one out. I discovered that: a) we have more costumes than I thought, and b) there are three basic categories - troupe-owned costumes, individually-owned required troupe costumes, and individually-owned optional troupe costumes.

The troupe-owned costumes are those that fell into the "one size fits several" category, or were made from fabrics or materials that cannot be replaced (and therefore cannot be removed from the troupe). In our troupe, the Bedouin, fellahin, Saudi Arabian, and Persian costumes are in this category. The troupe-owned costumes are subsidized by a fixed allotment in the monthly dues. (Usually, that works out to "I buy first and get paid back slowly later"; other troupe directors can probably identify with that.) For budgetary reasons, we try to limit ourselves to one new troupe costume per year.

The individually-owned required costumes are those costumes needed to support frequently performed choreographies, but which are either too closely sized to fall into "one size fits several", or of general enough use that everyone wants one. Our ghawazee and bandari costumes fall into this category. Ghawazee tunics are closely fitted; the basic bandari caftan can be used in a number of ethnic dances.

The last category, individually-owned optional troupe costumes, consists of two types of costumes; those which are used in infrequently performed choreographies, and those which are fairly expensive to make. Examples of these are our Ancient Egyptian costumes (infrequently used), and our Princess beledi dresses (\$75 cost). I realize that our definition of "expensive" raises some snickers with the \$1100 Madame Abla crowd, but \$75 is a lot of money to a young, budding dancer or parent who can barely manage \$5/month dues.

The most important thing I have learned over the years, however, is that all troupe-owned costumes need to reside in the troupe director's costume closet. Remember Murphy's Law of Costume Distribution: a needed troupe costume will be distributed over the widest possible geographical area in the closets of every dancer unavailable for the next performance. Keeping the troupe wardrobe can also save you money; there's no room left in your closet to add any costumes of your own!