

How Much Should You Pay for a Costume?

Or, Wear Your Costume, Don't Let It Wear You!

By Michelle

It did not even occur to me to buy an Egyptian or Turkish costume for my first performance. I was a beginner with only six months of classes under my hip belt and I had in mind an updated "I Dream of Jeannie" style for my first costume. Internet shopping was unheard of at the time and there were no local vendors of bra and belt sets, much less beaded dresses, fringe, or skirts. The only resource I had was a small vendor who sold pretty Indian scarves and bags of lightweight coins and bells. I made my harem pants and belt (which I wore way up around my waist!). I covered a black bra with some basic embroidery, a bit of trim, and some really bad black rayon fringe.

A year later, Audreena came through Albuquerque and I purchased my first Egyptian costume-bra, belt, and fringed skirt and vest. Even by today's standards, it was a pretty good deal and even though the skirt and vest had fringe, the overall line of the costume was simple. Nonetheless, I was terrified of the costume and wore it only for special performances. The right to wear such a costume had to be earned.

Clearly, those days are long gone! Now, some students will buy a costume within the first month of signing up for classes. They will drop \$500 on a costume and look askance at me if I suggest they go for a simpler, less expensive costume.

Perhaps I am old fashioned, but I still think you should not buy a costume that can dance better than you can. There is something to be said for owning the costume of your dreams, but there is also something to be said for allowing your costumes to progress with your talent. In other words, you should wear the costume-it shouldn't wear you. A costume wears you when you feel like you must parade the costume on stage, rather than express yourself through your moves. Now I don't mean that you should go for an "I Dream of Jeannie" look! Trust me, I wish my first teachers had offered a little more advice on costuming before I made my performance debut (which is why every six months, I offer a costume class for my students!). A simple bra and belt set with matching skirt/veil/jewelry will help you look professional and will show off your moves. What I strongly suggest a beginner avoid sinking \$800 into a costume that is lavishly decorated and comes with fifteen accessory pieces.

First of all, as you progress as a dancer, you will discover which styles really flatter your figure and your style of dancing. The second bra and belt set I purchased was a fabulous silver set, encrusted with Austrian crystal rhinestones and heavy with endless strands of fringe. I kept it

for years, and wore it often, but when I look at pictures of me in the set, I see that the excess fringe on the bra made me look even bustier than I already am and the long belly drape was better suited for someone with a longer torso. The belt was an ok design for my hips, but it was really molded for someone with more backside than I'll ever have. I finally forced myself to sell it a few months ago!

Second, unless you have wads of cash to blow, why put all your eggs in one costume basket? Why not allow yourself several costumes? I like my costume to reflect the mood of my music, or my mood when I'm dancing. Once you are dancing more often, you'll appreciate having a little variety to rotate through.

Finally, even if you do get a regular performance gig at a restaurant or even performing at birthday/retirement parties, consider your venue--do you really want an \$800.00 costume waiting around in a greasy kitchen? Or do you really want to subject it to sitting in a car, mashed by a seatbelt because there won't be a place to change at the company party you've been hired for? Sometimes, these costumes take some abuse--it would kill me to ruin a really expensive costume because someone dripped yogurt sauce on my belt or (this really happened) several strands of fringe got caught in the seat belt buckle and the only way I could open the buckle was to break the strands!

In my opinion (and you know exactly what opinions are worth in this era of internet posting), REALLY expensive costumes are best kept for professional dancers who perform at least monthly in venues other than restaurants and living rooms, who travel to perform in shows, and who earn money from the performances where they wear those expensive costumes. Does this mean I think you should sew some rayon fringe on your store-bought bra and hang a few coins from a hip scarf? Absolutely not! In fact, my love of the dance is about 70% actual dancing and 30% dress up! (And when I have a new costume, that ratio falls to 50-50!) A good costume enhances your moves (nothing shows shimmies like beaded Egyptian fringe) and more importantly, makes you feel GOOD. It always amazes me how my self-image improves every time I put on one of my costumes. It also amazes me how my tribal belly dance costumes give me a completely different sense of empowerment than my raks sharki costumes.

What I suggest, rather, is that you take your costumes like you take your classes--one step at a time. Choose a less expensive, basic costume when you are first beginning. As you progress to an intermediate level, you'll have a better idea of what your style of dance is and what style of costume best fits your body type. Think of the rite of passage you will experience when you are asked to dance in that big workshop show and purchase your first professional-level costume!

A final note on costumes-The audience will ooh and aah over your costume for about 20 seconds after you enter the stage. After that, they'll be watching YOU and your dancing. A costume enhances your dance. It adds to the emotion you are seeking to evoke and adds to the moves you choose to present. Ultimately, the performance is about you, not your costume.