

What Not To Do

Avoiding Common Bellydance Performance Blunders

An article by Jewel

(Incorporating the many in-opportune experiences of the Bhuz online bellydance community)

It is Mustafa's law that anything that can go wrong in performing bellydance quite probably will. From costume malfunctions to flying props, bellydancing in public can be fraught with danger. It's hard enough getting everything to work smoothly in a controlled classroom environment, let alone where scurrying waiters, uneven floors and dodgy CD players enter the mix. Here, then, is a guide to common performance blunders and mishaps, written with the intention of helping dancers avoid them. Preparation is key, but remember, a dance performance will rarely ever go exactly as planned, and so the dancer may ultimately resort to this: a big smile, a laugh with the audience, and sharing your story with all the other bellydancers so they can enjoy it, too.

Costuming

Ensure Your Costume Fits Properly

A costume that fits properly when standing still does not necessarily remain that way when you dance. Lycra skirts need to be very tight at the top to stop them creeping down, especially if they are heavily beaded. Hip belts also need to be tightly fastened to withstand shimmying. It is incredibly annoying (and common) to see a dancer tugging up their skirt during their performance. If necessary, pin everything together at the waist (skirt, belt, underwear).

"I lost my skirt in front of 400 people (mostly women, thank goodness) at a Yemeni wedding. Showed my backside to the bride and groom. Beat that!" ... Kharis

Make sure an ill-fitting bra does not turn your bellydance from tasteful to disgraceful. Your cup should not runneth over, and be careful that your bra is tightly fitted under the bust, lest it ride up and cause peek-a-boob out the bottom. Always sew in bra pads, as they are inclined to work their way out. Never rely on a single hook to fasten the back or straps of your bra. Use multiple hooks or safety pins, or you may risk flashing the audience as countless dancers have unwittingly done before you. Crop tops can also lift up over your chest as you raise your arms, unless pinned down or elasticized.

Always practice your performance in full costume beforehand, so you can identify any potential issues. And if you haven't worn a costume for a while, check that it still fits snugly the day before your performance, as a slight weight change can be enough to have you accidentally bearing butt-crack.

"At a student show, the dancer had those silicon pads that sit inside your bra. Sure enough, in the middle of her performance, one fell out of her bra and sat there, in the middle of the stage. I'm sure it was mortifying to end her performance, take a bow, and then lean over and pick up her plastic bra padding from the floor!" ...Fatima

Don't Let Your Costume Finish At The Neck

It's such a let-down to see a beautifully costumed bellydancer who has not paid similar attention to her hair or make-up. A glamorous costume demands glamorous hair to balance it out. A hair piece or wig can really help out here - just make sure it's firmly secured and you've practiced any spins, dips or head-tosses beforehand!

"Vigorous head tossing + one fake ponytail = what has henceforth been referred to as the flying muskrat incident."... Christine

Make-up also needs to be heavier and brighter than normal, especially when you are under lights. A session with a make-up artist can be a good investment if you're unsure how to create a dramatic look. You'll also need to use waterproof products and a non-smudge base (such as concealer or special fixatives) to ensure sweating doesn't leave you looking like a racoon.

Always Wear Appropriate Underwear

Never, ever go 'commando' under a bellydance costume, and always wear a skirt that ensures your modesty. Your audience will feel acutely embarrassed, not entertained, if they think they are about to catch a glimpse of your private parts. You can bet they won't remember anything else about your dancing! If your costume has cutouts in revealing places, make sure they are filled with opaque stocking. Matching your underwear colour to your costume is also a good idea in case your skirt does slip down and expose an edge.

Be Careful Of Catchy Jewellery

"I pranged an earring into the audience doing my very first double veil performance - it was a 3 inch hoop. A veil or a finger caught it and off it flew! It bounced off the chest of a gal in the front row and landed noisily on the stage." ...Zorba

Jewellery is particularly good at catching on veils, mesh gloves and in your hair. Avoid large earrings, bracelets or sequined armbands if you are doing veilwork. Anklets can catch on skirts and pants, earrings and tiaras can fly off. Armbands also like to fall down arms. They need to be super-tight, possibly elasticized, to stay up. If you happen to have fleshy upper arms, this might produce a look best avoided. Once again, the golden rule is to practice in full costume – including all jewellery – before your performance.

Maintain Your Costumes

As tempting as it may be after an exhausting performance, don't just throw your costumes back in the wardrobe. Air them and check them for loose beads, hooks or snags, and do your repairs in a timely manner. Before your next performance, try your costume on and check all these things again.

If You Are Hired As A Professional Dancer, Dress Like One

There is nothing wrong with performing as a student in a hand-made or bargain-priced costume. However, when people pay good money for you to dance at their restaurant or party, they are paying for both professional level presentation and dancing. A stretch-knit top with hip scarf tied over a skirt, or cut-price beading just isn't going to cut it.

It is also good professional behaviour to cover up your costume before and after your performance. It completely spoils the surprise if you wander in to a gig in full costume, and diminishes your glamorous aura if you stand around eating hummous in it afterwards.

(FYI: The following cheap costume trends, which can be readily purchased on e-bay, never represent good value-for-money: dinner-plate-shaped bra cups that don't actually fit real breasts; target-shaped circles or tassels on the nipples; large sequined motifs on the crotch which could be mistaken for a decorated muff; crotch tassels.)

Look After Your Feet

Some dancers prefer to dance barefoot, but really are taking a health risk to do so. Outdoors, shoes are absolutely essential. You can pick up a nasty foot infection (I have). Beads that fall off costumes become instruments of torture when ground into the foot. Outdoors, grass can be thorny, and if you're onstage in summer, you may suddenly find yourself hopping about with burnt soles.

Always practice dancing in your shoes beforehand, and preferably on the same surface as the performance. High heels will subtly alter your posture, and you may need to compensate for that in your movements. Grippy soles are not good on carpet, but not enough grip on a polished wooden floor, and you may end up doing some unplanned floorwork (ouch!). Be careful of high heels on uneven surfaces. If you're not sure of your performance area, pack both heels and flat shoes. And if you must perform barefoot, pack a first aid kit!

"Practiced new move--check. Practiced dancing in shoes--check. Practiced dancing with new move--in shoes? Um, no. A circle with a level change takes on a different dynamic when you're wearing heels. I lost my balance and landed on my tush in a roomful of people. I did a little impromptu floorwork and slowly danced my way up again. Argh!"
...Diana

While Performing

Enter And Exit Like A Dancer

Your performance should start from the moment you enter the audience's sight until you have completely left it. Stomping on and off stage like a sullen teenager completely spoils the effect of your beautiful dancing. And make sure you take a bow – it gives the audience a chance to show their appreciation, and they may feel disgruntled if you don't allow this.

Recalcitrant Props

"Lebanese Festival. Enthusiastic, overhead twirling cane. Somehow leaves my hand. Becomes slender, deadly missile that is launched into the crowd. Lands across the laps of 2 dancers and does not poke anyone's eyes out. Every time I turn to the band thereafter, they duck." ...Azhia

Zills are apt to fly off during performance if the elastic isn't fairly tight. This elastic will stretch over time, so be sure to replace it as needed. Canes also make great missiles, especially in sweaty palms. Wrap a rubber band around the end of the cane to provide extra grip. Never spin a cane near your audience if you are short-sighted and not wearing corrective lenses!

Veil work outdoors is fraught with danger and best avoided. A sudden gust of wind can have the veil wrapped around your head in no-time. If you must do veil work outdoors, be prepared to improvise (not good for troupe choreography), and use a heavier or stiffer veil. Also be cautious indoors – don't forget to look up and avoid ceiling fans or chandeliers!

"I did a big dramatic toss of my big silk veil, and found that the potted tree that had appeared so innocent minutes before decided to grab my veil. I shook my finger at the tree as if to scold it, and resumed veil work as normal. Now, I make sure to keep my movements subtle and use a small organza semi-circle veil in tight spaces....and I always keep an eye out for bystanders, furniture and foliage!" ...Lisa

Watch Where You Drop That Veil

When you've finished your veil work, it's easy to just drop the veil where you stand. If you do this, your audience will probably spend the rest of your performance wondering when you're going to slip on it...and then you just might do that. Drop your veil at the back of the stage, or go place it off to one side. When picking up your veil, don't bend backside-up to the audience. Legs together and bend from the knees, please!

Avoid The Crotch-Revealing Backbend

The rule is simple – never perform a backbend with your crotch facing your audience. Also, if you are going to bend so low that the audience can see your chest, ensure your bra fits well enough that they will not cop an eye full of nipple.

Beware Of Wandering Waiters

Perhaps it's a power-play, perhaps they really do need to traverse that path...one thing is for sure, waiters are likely to cross the dance floor in a restaurant or reception centre while you are dancing on it. These waiters usually have impeccable timing, and can be counted on to stride across with a plate of dips just when you choose to spin across the floor. Treat these waiters as you would a taxi in downtown Cairo – keep right out of their path or risk being flattened!

"A couple of weeks ago I was dancing in a Turkish restaurant. When I was doing some spins, a waiter passed by me with a plate full of snacks... Wham! My hand landed right in the middle of the plate! The feta cheese and olives were flying all over the place. Everybody had a good laugh." ...Soraya

Performing in Unfamiliar Venues

Beware The Burnt CD And Other Music Issues

If you have burnt your music set onto CD, always bring the original CDs as back-up, in case the sound system won't read burnt disks. Burn onto a CD-R disk, not CD-RW, as the latter are more likely to be problematic. When you arrive at the venue, get the DJ to test if their player will read the CD. If at all possible, get them to play a bit to check that it doesn't jump. If the DJ is bringing in their own sound system, check whether they even have a CD player, as some DJ's nowadays use electronic files on a lap-top or an mp3 player.

If you are dancing away and the CD keeps skipping, put yourself and your audience out of your misery – smile, take a bow, and go get the problem fixed. Then start again afresh. No-one wants to watch you suffer through a whole stop-start performance.

Get the DJ to turn the music right up. There is nothing harder than getting an audience excited if the volume is boringly low. Once again, see if you can check the volume beforehand (NB: burnt CD's often emit lower volume, so check with your own disk). Zills are also good for creating a buzzing vibe if the music is lacking.

It is always a good idea to check stereo arrangements well in advance of the performance. But be aware that, while the venue organiser may assure you that their CD player will play your burnt disks, and will have ample volume, they are sometimes wrong. A good portable stereo that you can take as a back-up may be a worthwhile investment.

Finding The Birthday Boy

When you arrive to perform for a guest of honour, have them pointed out to you. If this is not possible, collude with an audience member to have them point him out very visibly when you enter. Don't believe their assurances that "Oh, he'll be obvious" or "He's the one with the blue shirt". Chances are, Uncle Nick will have had too much to drink and will be behaving like *he's* the birthday boy, or there will be several men in blue shirts. It is extremely embarrassing if you single the wrong person out for special attention, and leave the real V.I.P. feeling not-so-special!

"At a surprise gig at an anniversary party, the hostess didn't clearly specify what the celebrating couple looked like. "Oh, you'll notice right away". Yeah right. I congratulated the wrong couple (they were in the spotlight!). Lesson learnt. Now, I prefer the ones who are forced to wear a crown. Can't miss". ..Queenie

And Finally...

When Mishaps Occur, Smile

Don't let a mishap derail your whole show. If you can cover it up and keep on dancing, do so. But if that isn't going to work, win your audience over with a big smile. A good dose of humour helps, too – laugh and make a joke out of the situation, and the audience will enjoy the joke with you.

Thank you to all the dancers of the Bhuz online community who were brave enough to share their experiences. To participate in the highly enlightening Bhuz Bellydance forum, visit:

www.bhuz.com