

Evolution of a Costume

Salome - the character, the costume and the Dance of the Seven Veils

Samarra has been dancing for over three years and is a belly dancer and costume designer in the Boston area. Samarra has been interested in costuming since childhood, when she often dressed up as Jeannie (of "I Dream of Jeannie"), using all of her mother's chiffon scarves. She went on to study fashion design at Chamberlayne Jr. College/Mt. Ida College, and has contributed costumes to several theatrical productions, including Johara's "A Gypsy in Cairo." She also owns a small dance studio, Samarra Oriental Dance & Design Studio, in Allston, MA. She produces belly dance shows at the All Asia Cafe in Cambridge, MA, specializing in themes. She can be reached at samarrastudio@yahoo.com, 617.782.7553, or visit her Web site at www.samarradance.com.



Photo: Charles Ruberto

By Samarra

Salome, so the story goes, danced her last dance in the court of King Herod with a full moon shining down. The king, her stepfather, enticed her to perform by offering her anything she desired, including half of his kingdom. Salome, princess of Judea, daughter of Herodias, performed her sensual dance of the seven veils at the banquet that night. The king was indeed pleased with it. In exchange, Salome found something she desired above anything else: the head of their prisoner, John the Baptist. Herod was repulsed. As subversive as the baptist's preaching was, Herod feared that he would die a painful death if he were to kill the prophet - if he was the prophet. But Herod had given his word, and was persuaded to keep it. The dancer's reward was given to her on a silver shield. After showing much appreciation for her gift, the king commanded, "Kill that woman!" and Salome was promptly crushed by the shields of the guards. - Written by Samarra for the "Sacred Women II," a benefit for tsunami victims, held on March 5 of this year)

The 'It' girl of the Bible

This winter, I took a trip to the local library to see if there was anything new on belly dance. I found an interesting new book, took it home and dove right in. It was *Sisters of Salome*, a study of turn-of-the-century interpreters/performers of the dancer in the Biblical tale. The book focuses on Mata Hari, Ida Rubenstein, Colette, and Maud Allen. There was a Salome craze during that period. These performers were considered scandalous and, at the same time, extremely sought-after. In 1891, one of my favorite writers, Oscar Wilde, transformed a few Biblical passages into the most popular version of the story. He also created the concept of the dance of the seven veils.

I was hooked. Someday I would also be a "Salome dancer," when I had time to conceptualize dancing with seven veils and make the perfect costume. In the meantime, I would start collecting more material. It didn't take me long to find the 1923 movie on DVD, an old boxed-set of records that included the original music "Dance of the Seven Veils," from the 1905 Strauss opera, "Salome." The boxed-set included a booklet with pictures and more information. I also ordered a hardcover illustrated copy of the Wilde play from Ebay.

I then noticed an upcoming belly dance show that would feature performances portraying women in religious history. The organizer, Diosa, was looking for more dancers. How could I pass up this opportunity? I quickly e-mailed Diosa. I'd wait to see what she said before I started panicking. The show was a month and a half away, and I had a pretty busy schedule ahead of me with other performances and costume jobs.

Diosa welcomed me into the "Sacred Women II" show. I was thrilled. I had already been thinking about some basic ideas: I would use the original 8.5 minutes of music from the opera, use seven veils, and make a Mata Hari-style costume. Because I was using the music that was written for the dance before John the Baptist was decapitated, I thankfully had no reason to use the traditional prop of a severed 'head' on a platter. Getting myself in and out of seven draped, wrapped and tucked veils gracefully would be enough to deal with.

A sea of pearls

I wanted the costume to be of my own design, not copied from a picture of one of the early Salome costumes. Although I was inspired

by those, I was also inspired by a beaded costume that Lana Turner wore in the 1955 movie, "The Prodigal" (also where I got my dance name from, three years ago).

I bought about 70 yards of champagne-colored pearls molded on string. I sewed the trim in a circular pattern on the front of the bra, which was covered in flesh-coloured silk. Then I made new straps out of the silk and sewed a row of pearls on them. I draped some old pearl necklaces of varying sizes around the bottom, and bought some clear, dangly beaded trim and sewed it to the bottom edge of the bra. I finished it off with an earring with similar beads to hang in the center. I also added strings of pearls to drape over my shoulders, and one string of large pearls that was connected to the center of a bra and then came up to a "V"-shape to the straps at the tops of my shoulders.

For the skirt, I made a tiny miniskirt out of the flesh-colored silk and hung about 50 yards of the pearls to the hem, which went down to my ankles. I used two different size pearls, since a third of the way through, I realized that the skirt was getting heavy and I needed a lot more beads than I thought. Next I shirred the sides of the skirt a little for a more flattering look and draped beads across the front and back, tacking it down at the sides.

I draped some loops of pearls on the sides as well to fill in the empty spaces. This would also match the decoration on the tiara. I had some space to cover at the top of the skirt, so I took the leftover clear beaded trim and draped it across, tacking it down at the sides, front and back for a tiny belt. The beads were sewn to 1/2 twill tape-not meant to be seen. This was the night before the show, so I had to figure something out quick. I happened to find flesh-coloured velvet ribbon in my studio, to cover the tape. It's worth it to be a pack-rat!

I made Salome's crown out of a thrift store rhinestone tiara, draped with vintage pearl necklaces hanging down the sides and across my forehead. I made two giant loop earrings from an old pearl bracelet. I wore silver and rhinestone jewelry. My entire costume was hand-sewn - I'm not a big fan of glue. The overall look is very unusual, sultry and exotic, which is exactly what I wanted it to be when the last veil was dropped!

Seduction in seven parts

I wanted the veils to be light pastel colors. When I dropped the bolts of fabric on the counter in the fabric store, they reminded me of the colours of a hand-tinted 19th-century Mata Hari photograph - it couldn't have been a more perfect solution. Since my costume wasn't very glittery, I decided to use one of my own veils, in addition to the plain chiffon ones, that matched the concept pretty well: a beautiful brown Indian veil with multi-colored sequins all over it.

The music was daunting at first, but since it was writ-

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ten for this type of dance, I easily found seven sections. The music is filled with powerful emotional contrasts: it's fast, it's slow, it's sweet, it's menacing. There are sounds like thunder, and sounds like a pin dropping. I tried to match the dynamics of the music with the veils. It told me what to do. Wrapping myself in the veils took a few tries to find the right solution. When that was set, it basically gave me clues as to how to dance with each one. I folded one veil and wore it like a straight skirt, tucked into my costume.

The next one was wrapped like a toga and tied at the neck. One was narrowly folded lengthwise, wrapped around my waist and tied in the back. Another one was folded the same way and draped around my neck, hanging in the back. I used the sari-wrap for another. And one was placed just under my eyes and tucked into the tiara. The last one was carried out in a dramatic entrance.

For the rest of the dance, I basically was playing the character that Oscar Wilde developed - a playfully seductive teenage princess who would do anything to get what she wanted.

Salome's debut

The "Sacred Women II" benefit went extremely well, and was filled with beautiful dancers depicting all manner of women of faith in history.

My performance went off without a hitch, and I received lots of compliments on the costume and the dance. I have since started booking Salome around town.

Just as the early Salome dancers, I have received enthusiastic invitations and disappointing rejections. (I didn't really expect the church to go for it!) Maybe things have not changed all that much in a hundred years. ❖

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