

Crafty Costuming



By Wendy Garofoli

Experts in dance design weigh in on making careful costume choices.

Have you ever sat down, jittery with excitement to watch a dance routine, only to be distracted by an ill-fitting or ill-conceived costume? Has one of your dancers had trouble concentrating on her performance because she's too worried about falling out of her top? Not to worry. *Dancer* spoke with three costuming experts on how to avoid these common slip-ups so that on performance day, your students look and feel their best.

Know What You Want

When beginning to make costume decisions, dance teachers and studio owners should think carefully about the style, mood and choreography of the pieces they are outfitting. Many times, dance directors are so overwhelmed with making orders for recital and competition seasons that they end up choosing generic costume designs. Yes, there are constraints, such as cost and parent demands, but knowing the song and the general idea first goes a long way in helping to select a premium costume. "We don't pretend to know what everyone wants," says Deborah Nelson, President of Satin Stitches, a custom costume company for high school, collegiate and professional dance teams. "We ask people to send some sort of sketch, and then we ask questions. 'What age group is this for? What is the style of the performance? What is your budget?'"

By the same token, it's also important to have an open mind, especially when dealing with a designer. "It's very

frustrating to have someone come to you and say, 'I want blue vests with black pants' and that's all you can do," says Jeannette Look, the assistant costume shop supervisor at Brooklyn College, who has also done wardrobe for Alvin Ailey. "It's much better if there's a discussion about the general ideas of what the choreographer wants to express. That gives the designer a chance to put their voice in it and enhance the choreography."

Of course, when you're dealing with catalogs, you don't have as much freedom to create a look for a dance routine. Use these same theories—flexibility, coupled with a sense of the dance number's overall storyline—in order to select a costume that most closely resembles what you had in mind.

Seek Advice

If you are stumped on selecting the perfect costume for your piece, don't be afraid to seek counsel with fellow teachers, choreographers or designers. Dance companies who have more leeway with costume choices may invite some of their colleagues into rehearsal to discuss possible ideas. "Get other dancers to come in, and talk to them about your intentions and goals with the piece," says Michelle Ferranti, a costume designer on faculty at Marymount Manhattan College. "Get a variety of opinions. It's a little dangerous to ask your own dancers, though, because they'll be concerned about what they want to wear." And when in doubt, keep it simple. "Less is so much more," says Ferranti.

Look agrees. "The trend in dance costumes right now is not so flashy. It's a deconstructed look," she says. "It's thinking more about emotion and feeling rather than the obvious."

Styles and Fabrics

Breaking down costuming choices may seem like a daunting task, but one obvious starting place is with the style of dance. A jazz dance may require a look with more pizzazz, while a lyrical piece demands something

much softer. "Different choreographers have different styles," says Ferranti. "If you look at Martha Graham, she's partial to silhouettes. She has a lot of costumes where the fabric functions to enhance the movement quality. A lot of other modern choreographers don't want the body obscured at all." Meanwhile, ballet costumes are a whole other consideration. "The audience wants something magical," Ferranti says. "So you should give them what they want. You couldn't go see 'The Nutcracker' and have dancers in unitards."

Different styles also require different fabrics. "If you're doing a lyrical costume, you usually want something that has a better drape, as opposed to fabrics that are stiff and don't have that soft, flowy movement," says Nelson. "There's a fabric called charmeuse, which moves very nicely, versus a bridal satin which is stiff. Then the colors of fabrics should be soft, too." A jazz costume, meanwhile, might warrant a fabric that's much more ostentatious. "One of the most popular fabric types is the surface-printed fabric," says Nelson. "They are a base Lycra spandex with holographic prints on top. They are really showy and look wonderful on stage."

Body Issues

A hot-button issue when it comes to costuming is fitting for different body types. When it comes to top-heavy dancers, girls with mushy midribs, or tall and lanky boys, how can a teacher find a look that works for everyone? "If teachers are paging through costume catalogs thinking what they should get for a particular group, they should not imagine the costume on their perfect dancer," says Nelson. "They should think about the one with the least [easily flattered] body.

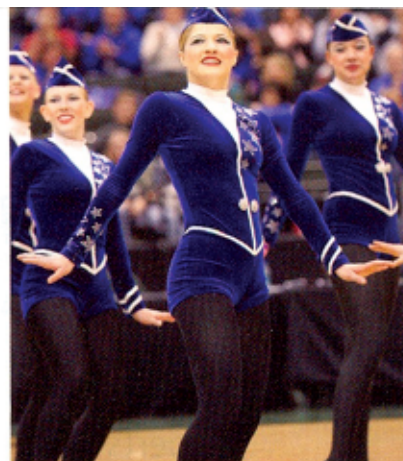
I am a large person and I've always been sensitive to that. Don't put the skimpy outfit on the girl who might have a little extra skin on her tummy. Cover it up." Erring on the conservative side will prevent dancers with body image issues from feeling self-conscious on stage.

The cut of the costume can go a long way in complimenting varying body styles. "I've had some of the most specific discussions about dancer bodies, which is necessary," says Look. "If you know you're trying to mask a larger butt on somebody, you might choose a shape of a skirt that will be flattering." In addition, costume lines can either improve or detract from a dancer's appearance on stage.

"Diagonal lines are the best. Horizontal are the least attractive," says Nelson. "A lot of people use belts on costumes, but it just ends up emphasizing the waist. The best place to have interest is the upper bodice because you want to see their face. Another great place is a hemline on pants, because you want to see legs. But, you don't want too many focal points." Finally, the fit of the costume can make or break the look. "If a girl's costume fits her well, she's going to look okay. If it's way too tight or too short, she's not going to look good at all," says Nelson. "Your eyes are going to be drawn to her because she's got an ill-fitting costume. Teachers, make sure you have the size range available for the costumes you want."

Budgeting

What to do with a limited budget? Studio owners can supply creative costumes on tight purse strings by shopping for street clothes, having a parent sew, putting the rhinestones on the garments themselves or simply taking extra care in selecting catalogue costumes that



Costume by Satin Stitches

are budget-friendly. "The other thing to do is inquire with the local theatre department. There are a lot of students who would be interested in designing," says Ferranti. "Studio owners might also consider just putting up an ad saying they need costume volunteers or offer an hourly rate for sewers."

For dance teams or companies that need a costume to last, think about certain kinds of fabric that are more durable. There might be a higher cost up front, but it will save the director money over the course of time. "If teachers want to invest in costuming that they can use another year with a slightly different theme, then they should consider a costume that would have the essence of the style, and not a blatant one," says Nelson. "If someone says they need a Latin style, I think skimpy, bright colors and ruffles. But, you could do something in hot Latin colors with no ruffles, and then use it for something else later."

Whether you're an artistic director, coach of a dance team or studio owner; whether your students are busty or bottom-heavy; whether your dance is contemporary or tap; one theme remains the same—you want your dancers to look great and feel even better so that when they're on stage they can shine brighter than the sequins on their costume.*