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## **"Effective" Costume Design In Relation To Minnesota's Costuming Restrictions**

by Deborah J. Nelson  
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For this article, I was asked to write about how to design for an "effective" costume, adhering to Minnesota's costuming restrictions. And also, what can be done with existing costumes and uniforms to make them more "current".

If you are coming from the world of Dance Studio, yes, you may feel that Minnesota High School Dance Teams have many costuming restrictions, for the sake of modesty and an appropriate school image. Within the world of High School Dance Teams across the country, though, our state's restrictions are within the norm. These states may allow more skin to show, but may restrict other design or fabric options. Most states also restrict hair, jewelry and makeup applications. The costuming issue is a current concern for many high school dance teams across the country.

I travel extensively around the country to attend other states' high school dance team clinics, conferences and competitions. North Dakota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Illinois, Arkansas, and Oregon are all talking about these issues. I continue to network with these organizations to discuss costuming, as it affects what we design and produce for our clients. Other high school dance team clients of ours without dance team organizations raise the concerns of their school boards, athletic directors and parents about suitable modesty for their dance team performers. With the immodesty of dance studio costuming and the proliferation of skimpy costumes on today's young entertainers, I continue to see a trend towards enacting costuming rules and regulations (yes, restrictions) in almost all of the states that have high school dance team organizations.

Personally, I feel this is a positive endeavor. Professionally, I feel that yes, it does curtail some creativity. But all in all, this is not a problem. Keep this in mind: when the entire body needs to be covered, you have a much larger pallet to design with!

I have attended every Minnesota State High School Dance Team competition since 1984 as a spectator! Additionally, I attend many other invitationals, sectionals and dance studio competitions to stay current on all the trends. I continue to watch all of the costuming to see how effective they are during performance, what works, and what doesn't work.

I started working with Minnesota dance teams in 1981, on creating "effective" competition costumes and uniforms. Twenty years ago, we had one style of competitive dancing – High Kick/Precision. Everyone bought into the idea that visual costume "effects" enhanced the presentation of their team's performance. It gives that visual "spark" that is very appealing to the audience. If you have a good team who is working up to their ability, but you feel their talent is not state tournament quality, your team can

still dazzle your audience with all of the visual effects that good costume design can add. Think what this will do for your top-notch team!

During High Kick's popularity peak, the different "effects" that were used included front-to-back color changes, side to side color changes, and many variations of those. Underarm color changes were also a great visual effect. Some teams even used surprise color changes on skirts. Geometric asymmetrical designs were incorporated as well as the increased use of sequins of all types. All of these visual "effects" were very crowd-pleasing, as well as judge pleasing. Think 3-Dimensionally!

With front to back color changes, the best option is to have the most pleasing color on the front, and then go for the shock value with the bright contrasting color on the back. Those underarm color changes are so effective. This design feature is so easy to do, and works so well, when used. And BIG is better! Bold is what you need. Keep in mind that you may not want to wear the uniform out shopping, but as part of a High Kick team it can be very effective. Then, USE the color changes by incorporating choreography that will emphasize the visual effects. Many teams that we saw perform at State this year did not fully utilize the visual effects that they had on their High Kick uniforms. I challenge you to use every means at your disposal to build up the excitement in your dance team's High Kick performance!

Several years ago, the trend was to downplay the traditional color visual "effects" for High Kick. The costuming was really starting to blur between High Kick and Jazz/Funk. But, this year, we had a resurgence of these traditional color changes that create visual excitement in the High Kick routines. Why? I believe that many of our best High Kick teams were continuing to use their color-change uniforms to spark up their routines! The most exciting High Kick performances still include fabulous dancing, great choreography, sensational music, and fun surprising visual "effects" caused by utilizing great costume design. It's a package deal!

When Jazz-Funk came on the scene, at first, no one really knew how to costume this new dance category. Teams started with emulating the "hip hop" fashions that were worn by the music makers, as seen on MTV. Teams threw together jeans and T-shirts or jackets to look "funky". As this dance category grew in popularity, more dance studio style jazz costuming has taken over. It has been a challenge to stay with the costuming regulations, when trying to introduce the flavor of the generally immodesty of dance studio costuming. It may take some additional creativity, but seeing bare body parts isn't always that attractive!

What makes an "effective" Jazz/Funk costume design? The main difference from High Kick costuming is that Jazz/Funk has now become "pretty". Generally, the costuming does not have many geometric or color "effects". What makes a great "pretty" design? Eye-pleasing bright colors, sparkle created by rhinestones, beading or sequins, interesting fabrics, and stylish design features. The A-line silhouette is currently popular, either done as a dance dress or leotard and A-line skirt combination. Again, a few color "surprises" can spark up your Jazz/Funk costume. The lining on a skirt, some semi-removable features (no removable ones, please!) are some ideas. Try to come up with a different cut of the skirt or sleeves to be different from everyone else.

Now teams are spending as much effort (and money) on their Jazz-Funk costuming, as for their High-Kick uniforms. And in the last few years, teams have gone to more "theme" oriented costumes. This is something that many other high school dance teams from other states have been doing for years. To save money in the long run, be creative on

altering a more basic costume to tie it into a specific musical theme. Brain storm with creative team members, Moms or your costume professionals to come up with fun ideas!

Another thing that I watch for, in determining if a costume or uniform is "effective" is how the costumes work "en masse" instead of just looking at one costume. Twenty or thirty costumes all the same can have an entirely different look than one of the same costumes as a solo. Also, lots of money is sometimes wasted on design features that are costly to produce, that are totally lost from performance distance. Always imagine how close-up minute details will look from 20, 50 or 100 feet away. If you really can't see them - drop them from your costume. Save your money. When you order a costume, hopefully you will have the opportunity to see the prototype on a dancer before the costumes are produced. Always view this sample on a dancer, from performance distance, before approving it.

Look to the expertise of your professional costume design company in helping to determine what effects are worthwhile. One of the most common mistakes of the amateur design of performance costumes is to over design - to place too many, and conflicting design features on a costume. Keep in mind the visual "flow" of a design. When you look at a costume - where does your eye go first, and where does it go from there. Having too many "focal points" on a design causes visual overload and is distracting. Focal points on a costume should generally avoid the tummy, waistline, and butt area. Focus on the upper bodice, flowing down the body. Diagonal lines are both flattering and visually "effective".

Rhinestones continue to be very popular. They are expensive, so they should be applied with the same scrutiny as sequins. If their effect is not noticed from performance distance, they are unnecessary. A cost savings option for teams is to have Moms or team members apply their own rhinestoning. This is great; if they are applied so that they will not fall off, and that they are applied so they look the same on all costumes. It is best to have one talented individual do all of the costumes, so that they will all look the same.

Where do we get ideas? Ideas can come from previous costumes seen at all types of dance competitions, or from current costume manufactures' catalogs. Fashion magazines, awards shows, skating competitions, movies and television shows are all great influences for coming up with costuming ideas. Start sketching or jotting down ideas. Work with a professional designer to expand on your ideas. Get a prototype made and view it from performance distance and work out any "kinks" in the design, determined by what you see on the prototype that wasn't noticed in the original sketch. Then keep the costume in mind when you are working out your choreography to utilize the costume!

Because teams are spending more money on Jazz/Funk costuming, and especially with all of the budget cutting that is necessary in today's world, one of your team's greatest resources is your closet of old uniforms. Transformations are stretching many dance teams' budgets. Both varsity and junior varsity have been working with their old passe` High Kick uniforms to help curtail spending, but still have something new and stylish to wear.

Since color change and visual "effects" are back in style, why not update the costumes in your closet that already have these "effects"? Transform your old "fluffy" dresses into sleek, new leotards that you can wear with your basic black, boot-cut pants or with a new A-line pull-on skirt. Depending on the waistline design of the original uniform, a simple reattachment of the original panties from the dress will do the trick. With front to back

color changes, and a high, natural waistline on the original dress, you may have to add panels of the original colors to the hip area, so the color lines continue to your lower slung pants.

Even a fully sequined A-line dance dress can easily be turned into a leotard and give you a new look. Save the skirts - maybe in a few years, they will be back in style! Shoulder pads? They can easily be removed. But, keep in mind, they aren't distracting, and give everyone a uniform look. Rhinestones can be added to a minimalist bodice design, for some sparkle. I always recommend trying your ideas on one uniform before proceeding with the entire group. If you don't like the look, you still have the others to experiment on!

If you have a sequined covered bodice on your old uniforms, they can be turned into a jacket by finishing off the waistline. This can be done by adding a facing, or by simply adding a row of sequins over the raw edge. Wear the jackets over a matching leotard and pants for a jumpsuit/unitard look. We have been doing this with old costumes for several years, for both varsity and junior varsity teams. Our perennial High Kick State Champion, Burnsville has been wearing their "dress to jacket" uniforms for years, now!

Not all transformation ideas are cost effective. A general rule of thumb is that if lots of ripping is involved in a project, the less cost effective it is. If the addition of trim, either sequins or rhinestones can be accomplished without ripping apart the uniform, it can be cost effective. It is when you wish to remove design features or change features that involves lots of ripping time, the transformation is not generally cost effective. Contact us with your idea and we can give a preliminary idea of the costs involved. The exact costs can be determined only when a transformation is done to one costume. We recommend this option, as you can see exactly how it will look before proceeding on all of your costumes.

And consider the simple addition of costume accessories such as collars, cuffs, vests, ties or skirts to transform an existing costume into something new and different! Remember that they will need to be firmly attached, but if they are hand sewn, you can then easily remove them to transform your costumes to yet another design!

Creativity with color, shapes, and the use of trim can transform your tired old designs into something new and exciting, that will give that added spark to your team's performance.

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In addition to being the Founder, President and Head Designer of Satin Stitches Ltd., for 25 years, Deborah is a charter member of the Editorial Board of Dance Spirit Magazine. Deborah has written numerous articles pertaining to costume design issues that have been published in several national and regional dance magazines. Additionally, Deborah has presented many costume care and design seminars across the country.

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