



Dress for Success... The Search for the Perfect Costume

By Chris Casteel

In last week's article I wrote about music selection and the importance of choosing the perfect piece of music as a vehicle for your competitive show. This week, I am moving on to the next step in the ladder of show creation - costume choice. I must warn you...I may be a bit long-winded this week; there is a ton to say on this topic. So you may want to sit down as you read this one.

I was recently fascinated by an article in the Los Angeles Times written by Elizabeth Snead entitled "With all Her Materials" (Nov. 7, 2008). It was an interview with the Oscar-nominated costume designer Ruth Myers. Her credentials in costume design include the films 'Emma', "L.A. Confidential" and most recently "The Golden Compass". When addressing her latest work in "The Golden Compass" (specifically her choice in fabric), Ms. Myers said this...

"I didn't want to work with expensive fabrics. We used very ordinary fabric and then we painted it, dyed and appliquéd it. Each fabric was created on the costume. We would start with blue velvet, then pour paint on it or burn it. We slashed in bits of netting and string and other elements. As you can imagine, it was the most incredible fun."

I have to tell you, that as I read this my thoughts were absolutely spinning with the unlimited possibilities of creativity when designing a costume! The beautiful thing about the design process is it does not always have to be elaborate, extravagant or expensive to be viewed as an effective costume for the chosen genre. In fact, in the case of "The Golden Compass", I am relatively certain that the budget was quite beyond that of a color guard; however, Meyers chose the simplistic to reflect beautiful artistry. Awesome!

At any rate, it is essential that you really evaluate your choice in costuming on multiple levels. This is due to the fact that in performance, we measure the success of a presentation not only by what we hear (as in our music discussion), but also by what we see (the costuming, stage, props, etc.). Oh yeah, there is that 'little' aspect of technique and performance that we have not discussed yet – but we'll save that for another article!

So let's get down to the business. The purpose of a costume is to enhance the performer's body and the concept of the choreographer. It is interesting that costumes are clothing, but in our activity they can also be considered art. They have the ability to make the invisible concept of our show suddenly become visible and alive for the audience.

In an effort to condense this information, I have compiled a 'short list' of items for consideration when designing the perfect costume.

Function:

- Be sure that performers can move and the body can breathe.
- Avoid binding of the body or restriction from movement.
- Are you designing this costume for one season's use, or will you be using it again.

Texture:

- Be aware that the use of texture and patterns can emphasize or minimize parts of the body.
- When creating texture think: shading, patching, dying, appliqué, paint, stitching, fabric pens, and stencils – really the possibilities are endless.

Color:

- Always consider visibility to the audience.
- Color creates mood.
- Is the color a reflection of the music?
- The audience's emotions are often affected by color.
- Colors can either absorb or reflect light waves.
- They can be symbolic (ex. Green = envy, White = purity, Purple = passion).
- Darker colors make the performer appear slimmer, and lighter colors look better on a slim body.

Design:

- Costume should be designed according to the movements of the performer, the budget of the program, and comfort of the performer.
- A costume's purpose is to support the concept/theme of the show.
- The props/sets/equipment and costumes need to work together for a total show concept.
- Always consider the varying body shapes and types of your performers.
- Remember the age group that you teach.

Fabric:

- View a fabric swatch under fluorescent lights to make sure that it looks the same in a gym environment.
- Determine the type of material that will flatter and add to the dancer's movements.
- To a high degree, performance is about movement, so the way the fabric moves is very important.
- Light weight material moves faster and easier.
- Natural fabrics tend to breathe and move more freely with the performer.
- It is best to choose fabrics with stretch to them, because they tend to have few movement restrictions. Examples = jersey, silk, chiffon, georgette, and Lycra.
- If the costume is going to be dyed, then cotton or silk are your best bet for success. Natural materials take the dye better.

Performer Perspective:

- Determine how your group feels about wearing the design. If they are not comfortable, it will be a difficult sell to the audience.
- Will they be able to understand and adopt the spirit of the character that is in the costume?

Footwear:

- Shoes should be chosen to harmonize with the costume and to the comfort of the performer.
- Safety and avoiding injury is most important in all footwear choices.
- In most instances, shoes should not draw attention to the foot; they need to blend with the outfit/skin.
- Heels are not allowed in a gymnasium due to damage that can be done to the gym floor.
- The lack of footwear can also illustrate theme/concept.

Inspiration:

So where can a show designer get their inspiration for costuming??!! First and foremost, you need to look to the music you have selected. Your music should produce a mental image from which you can start to brainstorm regarding visual interpretations. Just in case you are still a bit fuzzy, here are a few more suggestions for clarification:

- Movies
- Television – pop culture (I love award shows – they are a great place for ideas!)
- Broadway musicals
- Museum costume collections
- Fashion Magazines
- Catalogues from dancewear companies
- Costume rental stores
- Fabric stores

Finally, there are several really great costume companies out there who would be happy to share in your vision and construct your perfect costume. In addition, other instructors can be a great resource in terms of recommending costume companies that they have had success in partnering with.

Whew!!! Well, I think I am done with this topic. Believe it or not, I really did try my best to condense it, but really...*people write manuals on this subject!!!* Yikes! If you are so inclined to read one of these manuals, I have included the citations for the books that I used in this article below. Happy Reading!

As always, if you have any questions or need clarification regarding any of my articles, please contact me at CCasteel@wgasc.org. I may not always know the answer, but I will do my very best to point you in the right direction!

Happy Costuming!

References:

Kent Harrison, Mary. *How to Dress Dancers: Costuming Techniques for Dance*. Princeton N.J.: Princeton Book Co., 2003.

A Guide to Dance Production "on with the show". Reston Va.: National Dance Association of the American Alliance for Health Physical Education Recreation and Dance, 2007.

Dance the Art of Production. 3rd ed. ed. Hightstown NJ: Princeton Book Co., 1998.