

COSTUME BASICS

PLANNING THE NEW COSTUME

Good costuming, makeup, choreography – all visual elements of your performance should be an integral part of the entire musical performance, rather than a fragmented, uncoordinated addition. Our goal should be to have the performance remembered as totally integrated rather than the separation of its parts.

Following is a checklist to assist in costuming decisions:

Discuss with the director the characterization(s) the chorus will portray as they sing - cute, elegant, pretty, colorful, high fashion, specialty costume, ladylike, old fashioned, city girl, country girl, some other character?

Decide if presentation calls for a "costume" or regular clothing such as a long dress or pantsuit. NOTE: If the garment is planned to coordinate with a song package, such as "Dixie" or "Western" theme, or a musical such as "The Music Man", do not be concerned with cost or versatility at this point. Plan the desired costume design, AND THEN determine if it can be used with other parts of the repertoire and if the cost is acceptable. Adaptations can be made at that point.

Determine how your group feels about wearing a "costume" as opposed to regular dress – comfortable, silly, in the spirit of the character, or otherwise? If very conservative, branching out a little might be enjoyable.

Character driven costuming can be both exciting and challenging. Imagination and creativity can draw the audience inside a beautifully composed picture of the music or it can lead to a jumble of color and style that detracts from the primary goal of augmenting the music. Research and carefully designed balance are prerequisites to achieving visual success. It would be very easy to invite chorus members to just bring something that has a Dixie, western, or Music Man look. Unfortunately, people have vastly different ideas regarding the look of any particular music/character and you would very quickly have that jumbled look where the audience is not at all sure of your intended focus, the time period, or the main character(s). Order and planning is needed. Along with the director and choreographers, start with the following choices:

- **Who** will be portrayed
- **Focus** character(s) and gender
- **Where** the action takes place
- **Time** period
- **Appropriate** color scheme for each character and overall picture
- **Basic** style design for each character
- **Possible** accessories and/or appropriate props (may be alike or not)

Once these basics are planned specific assignments may be made and shopping can begin. You may decide at this point whether to invite chorus members to participate in providing accessories, shoes, etc. If so, they should be given fabric color samples to match and require them to bring such accessories or props to you, early in the process, to see how well they work, or do not work, into the overall picture. You may also decide at this point that you have a finished product or you may see that additional touches are needed. At all times keep the music central to your planning and stay in control of the overall picture.

To find ideas watch movies and TV of the time period and music style you'll be using. Attend plays, and go to the library for books containing color pictures by costume designers for stage, movies, and TV. From the movies section of the library, books about MGM musicals are particularly useful.

Comedy costuming: Must be well planned, well coordinated with the personality portrayed, script, and music, paying attention to detail.

When designing the costume, picture the group as a whole rather than how individuals will look.

Consider the size range needed for patterns. Determine if the pattern can be EASILY converted to fit larger and smaller sizes. Try to find a pattern with a photograph on the front rather than a drawing. A photo will give a more accurate idea of the finished product where the drawing will exaggerate the skinny model look. Determine if the pattern is too difficult to be worth the effort.

It may be wise to consider having the costume professionally made. Keep all sizes of patterns on file for future use.

RED FLAGS:

Overall fit:

- **Not too loose or baggy (does not help with figure flaws)**
- **Not too tight (highlights both age and figure flaws, and inhibits movement)**
- **Critically assess proportion from head to toe**

Waistline: Be sure to have one somewhere, even if it's around the hips, as in a flapper costume. Otherwise the chorus will have the overall appearance of a large, rectangular box. This is especially noticeable when using an over-blouse with no discernible shape.

Sleeves: The right choice can be important to the overall design. Correct fit, of course, is imperative. Avoid puffed sleeves in a chorus of predominantly middle aged and above women. A softer version will be a better choice. Be VERY selective in choosing to wear a very short sleeve or sleeveless garment. The majority look best when not calling attention to that upper arm flap of loose skin.

"Faded Cinderella": This is the look to avoid that says: "these women are too old to be wearing that style". Apply to fit of pants, fit and length of skirt, neckline, etc. The look you want to achieve can be adapted to most age/size groups by using your good sense of style and decency.

Jumpsuits and pants: Because of the variety of sizes and shapes, jumpsuits generally are not flattering unless a jacket is worn and/or the fit is exquisitely correct. Stage lights have the nasty habit of hitting at the most unflattering parts of bodies, which become dramatically highlighted while wearing a jumpsuit.

Attention to fit and correct length of pants is critical. Tailored pants should touch the instep of the foot and cover the top of the heel. Soft fabric pants should be a bit longer. Too tight (the smiling crotch area, pleats or pockets that pull), too loose (blousy at the hip) use of pleats, flat front, or gathered – all elements should be evaluated with an honestly critical eye.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Check for comfort and ease of movement. Be sure choreography can be executed with ease in this garment, shoes, jewelry or other accessories. Note whether garment falls back into place when arms are raised and released. Note if lining is seen when arms are raised.

Costume design, fabric, color, and trim should bring the attention to the singer's faces.

Remember that the hot, white lights used in contest may drain color from both costume and makeup. Plan accordingly, using enough color to do the job. Color combinations should match the mood of both songs. Work with makeup Chair in coordinating the most appropriate makeup color and design.

When planning for each member of the chorus or quartet to wear different designs, or color combinations, be sure to look at them under lights to see if colors, fabrics, and trim are complimentary to each other: different shades of black, fabrics that shine as opposed to a dull finish, amounts of trim, etc. If the chorus is told, for example, to wear primary colors, bring samples of those colors to match so there will be little, if any deviation that might destroy the overall look desired. In order to maintain unit, keep differences in the same family of fabric and color designations, as well as style and trim.

Chosen fabric should do what you ask of it (Taffeta and gabardine will not drape, chiffon and soft silky fabrics will not take structured fitting). Some fabrics, such as taffeta and satin have a strong tendency to pucker at the seam. Some are slippery and difficult to handle while cutting or sewing. Any fabric with a nap has to be turned the same direction when cutting all pieces and extra fabric allowed to accommodate this need. Plaids must be matched.

Check carefully with the vendor for fabric availability in the future, and assess what color variations could be expected in new bolts of cloth. It would be wise to order extra yardage and trim to accommodate five, ten or more expected new members, according to your own chorus growth patterns. If garments are made professionally, find out if they can be duplicated easily over the amount of time you expect to use the costume. It may be best to order an extra range of sizes from the beginning.

Garment should be fitted while wearing the desired undergarments (all-in-one and/or "falsies", both highly recommended). It should allow for ease of breathing room without looking like a nightgown, and avoid the too tight "stuffed sausage" fit.

Shoes should coordinate with the costume in both color and style without bringing the attention to the feet with special trim. NOTE: Capezio style dance shoes are generally accepted with most costumes in taupe or black if they coordinate reasonably well. Gold, silver, or platinum may be used, with platinum being the best choice, as it will cause less attention to the feet than the bright gold or silver and is equally dressy. Avoid white shoes unless used for a specific costume. Certain costumes call for particular footwear, such as boots, moccasins, tennis shoes, etc.

If possible, make up the costume in three diverse sizes to see if all members will look reasonably good in the design. Put it under stage lights to check for color reaction/interaction, focal point, proportion of design, costume pieces, length, trim, color of hose, makeup, shoes, etc. – the total look. Note where the eyes go and if any part is overdone or underdone. Proportion!

Watch TV programs, movies, and look through magazines for ideas. Make sketches, jot down color combo and trim ideas. Note design detail as much as possible. Consider how the idea can be adapted to your particular needs and capabilities.

Read the Judging Category Description Book for additional information and guidelines.