



Ballet Costume Design: the Ultimate Challenge in Function and Sustainability

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Ballet costume must portray a character through aesthetics and expressive elements of the garment, while at the same time be perfectly fitted to the dancer to enhance her movement not hinder it. Lamb and Kallal's (1992) FEA consumer needs model provides the theoretical framework for ballet costume design. These garments necessitate a perfect balance between the three components of the model and incorporate sustainability within the design. The goal of this paper is to share the design process and the growth of functional design skills and knowledge of the author, as applied to costume design for ballet performances. Sustainability aspects of design are highlighted.

When building a costume the designer must work with the artistic director/choreographer to create a design that completes his/her vision for the dancer's character through the aesthetics (particularly choices of color and line) and expressive qualities of the costume. Functional design for ballet costumes is imperative and multidimensional. The costume is initially made to fit a certain dancer; however, the design challenge is that sustainability must be planned into the pattern design and construction. The design must be planned to be effective for multiple dancers over a number of years. Each season a new dancer will be cast in the role; however, a new costume cannot be made each year because of time and budget issues.

This paper provides a case study analysis of the author as ballet costume designer as an example of research through practice as defined by Bye (2010). The overarching research question is: what are the best methods to design and construct a ballet costume? This paper focuses on the functional design criteria for designing a sustainable ballet costume.

Bye (2010, p. 214) states "Research through practice is initiated based on a problem or question that is derived from practice." In the context of ballet costume design, this designer's research through practice began while volunteering in the costume wardrobe doing minor fitting and alterations for a local ballet company. A professional costume manufacturer had originally constructed some of the ballet costumes. Thus, the designer had the opportunity to study the construction techniques utilized for those pieces and to gain experience altering those costumes to fit various dancers. In most ballet companies the same costumes are used year after year. For example, *The Nutcracker* is an annual holiday season performance for many companies. In a pre-professional ballet company, children and teenagers are cast for the most of the parts. Therefore, every year the shape and size of the person cast in a particular part may vary by several inches in

circumference, or height. By gaining experience altering costumes for these varied body shapes, the designer learned that designing with alterations (and thus sustainability) in mind is a key factor in meeting an overall functional component of the costume design.

“An artifact or artifacts result from the practice, and an analysis of the practice is completed” (Bye, 2010, p. 214). Over a span of three years, the designer designed and constructed classical tutus for three different parts for *The Nutcracker*. On reflection, the initial invitation from the artistic director to design costumes may have been the most challenging. Four identical costumes would be needed for dancers with different body types dancing together; two were slim, while the other two were more voluptuous but different heights. Images of costumes for the Mirlitons (dance of the reed pipes) were researched to obtain design ideas, sketches of design ideas were completed, and the artistic director was consulted on color and styling. The other two costumes were designed for solo parts; the Dew Drop in Waltz of the Flowers, and the Sugar Plum Fairy. A similar research process was followed in the design of these two costumes with the incorporation of progressively more decorative elements for the solo dancers.

In addition to fitting different body types, fitting a tutu to the dancer’s particular tightness preferences and needs is an important factor contributing to the need to design with alterations in mind. Especially for dances with partnering, the fit must be exacting and tight so the costume does not shift on the female dancer’s body when the male dancer has his hands on her waist.

Sustainable and functional solutions to the costume designs were incorporated into garment patternmaking and construction. Underlining and boning were used to support the bodices. Seam allowances were all at least 1” in depth and pressed open rather than serged together, as in a ready-to-wear garment. Edge finishes were completed before some of the vertical seams to allow the bodice to be “let out” more easily. Back bodice closures consist of hook and eye strips that may be moved; center backs have wide extensions that overlap or fold under as needed for fitting purposes. Analyzing design options for different sized young women for the Sugar Plum Fairy costume gave the designer the idea to make replaceable bust sections of different cup sizes.

Ballet costumes must be functional, expressive and aesthetically pleasing. These criteria connect with the dancer, the artistic director/choreographer, and the audience at different levels. Planning for functional and sustainable options during the design process is key.

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