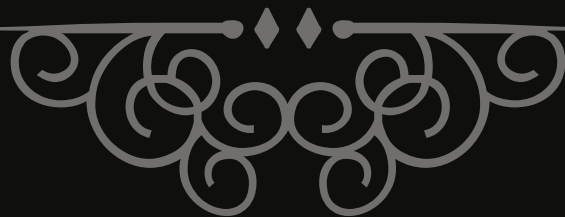


COSTUMING 101

by John L. Baker
photography courtesy of Southeastern Performance Apparel



Costuming has come a long way since I started teaching in 1981. Long gone are the days of blue jeans or T-Shirts and sewing parties where moms got together to fashion smock dresses for the swing choir.

In today's world of "High Fashion," choirs are expected to look amazing. In this article I hope to answer some important questions and offer some insight about things I've learned and mistakes I've made over the years.

IS COSTUMING IMPORTANT?

YES. I have found that students perform and behave at their best when they feel good about how they look. Whether we were performing for the local senior citizens organization or in the East Room of the White House, we always tried to wear our formal attire. Costuming is expensive, so make sure you get your money's worth. Your choirs will look their best, and your audience will appreciate the effort.

IS COSTUMING AN ILLUSION?

In my opinion, YES. Like most props and scenery, costuming is an illusion. I have seen show choir costumes that look fantastic from the audience only to find out they were a shell of what I thought. Set designers wouldn't attempt to construct an entire building when only the façade is needed to create the effect desired. Money is tight! Why buy a \$300 show choir dress when you can spend \$75 and create a façade? Allow your students and parents to be creative. It can be fun, and the students might actually learn the value of a dollar as well as the importance of using their imagination—not to mention getting your parents involved in a worthy project.

THEME COSTUMING: YES OR NO?

YES. I think choirs and choir directors in particular have become too sophisticated over the years. Everything has to be "slick" and professional. I agree that we should always do our best in preparing our choirs and make sure that the performance is of the highest quality. I said "high quality," not boring. You can choose a theme whether it be for your concert choir or show choir. Again, give the students an opportunity to be creative and take ownership in the program. Let the students choose a theme for a particular concert, as well as colors to be worn. Having the students wear different outfits with the same color scheme is very effective. A great example of this is Albertville High School and CenterStage. The group closed their competition show several



years ago wearing different combinations of black and white. It was very effective and allowed the students to take ownership in the program.

CUSTOM OR CATALOG?

Both. There are excellent companies that offer ready-made costumes at an affordable price as well as those that offer custom design. I would encourage you to contact and use both. Do your homework! Custom garments can be rather expensive and can take 6 to 8 weeks or more for delivery. Some ready-made dresses are less expensive and can be delivered in a matter of days.

START EARLY!

Please start early! Your students work hard and deserve the opportunity to look their best during performance. Give yourself plenty of time to choose costumes and get them ordered. Costume companies are under a lot of pressure in the fall months to complete orders. You need to realize that when you place your order you are at the back of the line. An emergency for you doesn't necessarily constitute an emergency for your costume company. There are no excuses. Start early! I would suggest that you start finalizing your ideas for your costuming in May. Have your students measured before school gets out. If that's not possible, have the measuring done the first week of school. Place your order before Labor Day at the latest. START EARLY!

ASK FOR HELP!

Don't be afraid to ask for help! Use your resources: Fellow choir directors, friends, parents, and your costume company. One of my biggest mistakes as a young teacher was not asking for help.

I had plenty of willing helpers, but I was embarrassed to ask. Parents want to be involved. Parents can be among your greatest allies. I always had sign-up sheets for our volunteers. If you haven't recruited the help of parents, give it a try. You will be pleasantly surprised. Also, allow your students to help. As wonderful as parent-helpers are, we need to remember our job is to teach our students. Give them opportunities to organize costumes. You might even have a future costume designer on your hands. It's also important to give your students an opportunity to fail. They might not "get it right" at first. Allow them to "learn" from their mistakes. Be a teacher that encourages "do-overs."

RECYCLE

What do you do with the costumes after you are finished with them? Do you let the students take them home? Do they stay in the closet and collect dust? Why not help a choir that may not have the budget for new costumes? Have the dresses and suits cleaned and offer them to a choir in your area at a discounted price or better yet FREE. As music educators we need to share with our fellow choir directors. Maybe have your students pick a choir in a different state and share costumes with them. In 2007 our school was destroyed by a devastating tornado. Choirs from all over the country pitched in to help—whether it

was sending music, money or used costumes. It was all needed and appreciated. Make it your business to look for programs and people in need.

IN CLOSING

I hope this article will help you in some small way. Please remember, our job as music educators is not about music. It's about people. Work hard to encourage your students to be their best—not just in your classroom but throughout their daily schedule. I believe that choir can foster a sense of pride in working with others that students will carry with them long after the last note has been sung.

Thank you for your dedication and work. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John L. Baker recently retired as the choral director at Enterprise High School in Enterprise, Alabama, where he taught for 27 years. Baker is the Past President of the Alabama Music Educators Association and the Alabama Vocal Association. He serves as a clinician for Show Choir Camps of America and keeps a busy judging schedule during show choir competition season.



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