

Transforming

OFF-THE-RACK GARMENTS FOR DANCING

By Deborah J. Nelson





Let's face it -

Custom gowns and costumes can get expensive. Whether you enjoy ballroom dancing as a social activity, or relish it in competitions, you may want to purchase an off-the-rack dress, top or bottom and transform it into something that is danceable. You may see a dress with that “wow” factor on the clearance rack, and wonder, “Can I make it work?”

Generally, smart alterations to a ready-made garment can be much less expensive than creating a costume “from scratch.” The key to making smart alterations is that you are adding to a garment, rather than taking away from a garment. If you have sewing skills or work with a seasoned costume maker or alterations specialist, you will be able to decide what will work, and what won't. Ripping apart is costly and often counterproductive.



This is a very contemporary style with the sheer lower skirt. There is a full back detail that would need to have supporting straps of the decorative variety to secure the bodice for rigorous dancing. (The dress won't stay in place when dancing without adding straps to secure it to the body).



With short dresses, attaching a leotard under it at the waistline will help turn this dress into a dance costume. More secure straps will also give more danceability to this style.

What you may find on the rack might include some of the following possibilities:

Tops

When you see a beautifully bedazzled top, try it on and raise your arms into dance position. Does this top have enough underarm "give" (if it has sleeves) so that the top stays down in place, or does the entire top raise up and create an unattractive look? If the top still looks great (from front, back and the sides) with your arms raised, you have just found a great addition to your ballroom wardrobe. Maybe you have a skirt or pant that will coordinate beautifully, creating an elegant dance ensemble. If not, finding or creating a coordinating piece will be less expensive than an entire outfit.

If you have or find a danceable top and can picture it as one part of an ensemble, consider if finding or creating that accompanying pant or skirt makes sense. It's always difficult to find a matching fabric, so consider a coordinating colored piece (such as pairing a burgundy skirt with a pink top, or black with nearly any colored top). Coordinating textures is also important. Perhaps you simply need to accessorize or add some glitz to this top.

If you find a beautiful top and you can picture it as part of an ensemble, will you need any alterations to make this a reality? You may need a gusset (an extra section of fabric, most likely shaped like a football) to be seamed in between the sleeve and the bodice area of the top. You will need to find matching fabric to do this, and then you need to determine if this addition will not detract from the beauty of the top. Another option would be to separate the sleeve from the bodice, in this underarm area – binding off both sections, so you see your bare armpit instead of fabric. You will need to consider if you can be happy with this look.

Pants or Skirts

Palazzo pants are popular, once again, and can be the perfect accompaniment to a fabulous top. As mentioned, always view yourself in a mirror to be able to see ALL sides of yourself. (The rear view is very important with Palazzo pants!)

If a found skirt isn't full enough to dance, consider adding in several "gores" (triangular or pie-piece shaped sections of fabric) that can add lots of volume to the hemline of a skirt without increasing the width through the waist or hips.



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Gores are easily inserted into seams, but if there are none, you can cut slits where you wish to add fullness. These slits need to be carefully marked and cut in order to achieve a professional look. These gores don't need to match, so that you could add solid red gores, for example, to a red striped or floral printed skirt.

Dresses

For dresses, as with tops, you need to do the "sleeve check" to determine if the dress is workable as a dance garment or costume. The additional determination will be if there is enough "skirt" for the style of dancing that you plan to perform. Maxi-dresses are very popular, and if you find a beautiful long dress, perhaps it has enough swing to it to dance beautifully.

Most special occasion dresses have very skimpy skirts—prom, bridesmaid and mother's dress manufacturers keep their costs down by minimizing the skirt fullness. Many times, there may be enough fullness in the top layer of the skirt, but there



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A critical eye can help you determine if an off-the-rack garment can be turned into a show choir costume.

is a slim-cut lining, which is fine when you're standing still, but you can't dance in it! If there is enough fullness in the outer skirt, you can simply replace the skirt-lining layer with a lining with fullness that matches the outer skirt.

If the outer skirt—or only skirt, if it's unlined—doesn't have enough fullness, determine if you would be able to find matching (or suitably contrasting) fabric to gusset in the gores as discussed with skirts. One option would be to split the side seams and incorporate a full skirt or pant under the skirt panels of the dress, creating a tunic look.

Something else to contemplate when figuring out if you can use an altered,

off-the-rack dress is if it stays in place when you dance. Many dance costumes (and gowns) incorporate an attached leotard or panty in the costume, so that the costume stays smoothly and sleekly attached to the body when dancing, and doesn't shift up or twist with movement. Of course, no special occasion dress comes with a built-in leotard though you can add purchased dance briefs for modesty when dancing, but generally these can't be anchored to the costume to keep the costume in place; however, a talented designer or dressmaker just might be able to make it happen.

Finally, there is the "Glitz Factor." Any purchased off-the-rack garment may be

perfect, or perfectly altered for you, BUT you just might need to add a little glitz. Rhinestoning takes practice, so if you are a practiced rhinestoner, create a plan and go for it. You can refer to my previous blogs and articles with many tips on how to determine a design, and then determine the best ways to achieve your design plan.

The main thing to keep in mind is to go minimal first, all over your garment, to see if you like it or if you need more. Gradually add more, again, all over your garment, until you are happy with the outcome. NEVER start an intricate design on your garment (especially on the front), as you may change your mind, or run out of time or rhinestones, resulting in an unwearable garment. If you start minimal, you will be able to wear your garment, add more, and then wear your garment again.

A critical eye can help you determine if an off-the-rack garment can be turned into a show choir costume. Keep these tips in mind when you are shopping those clearance racks!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Deborah J. Nelson is the Founder/Head Designer for Satin Stitches Ltd., a custom performance costume manufacturer located in Minneapolis, MN, since 1978. Ms. Nelson has a BFA degree in Fashion Design and worked in the garment manufacturing industry for 4+ years before starting Satin Stitches. Call 763-323-9507 or 1-800-48SATIN or email customerservice@satinstitches.com for more information.

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