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DESTRESSING YOUR COSTUMING PROCESS

by Rachel Clevenger

Choosing or designing costuming can be one of the most exciting parts of putting together your show each year; of course, the entire costuming process can also be one of the most stressful parts of your job. Deborah Nelson of Satin Stitches and Diana Coffield of Coffield Collection took time from their hectic schedules to offer advice that may prove helpful in your planning.

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CONNECTED BY COMPASSION: ABILITIES IN HARMONY

by Cassidy Clevenger

So often, we are expected to learn certain things in specific ways, and those who are different are left to their own devices to figure problems out. Then, on the other side of the spectrum, there are people like Sierra Lyon who are there to ensure nobody feels left out. In her camp, Abilities in Harmony, she and her team strive for an all-inclusive experience for anyone who loves to sing and dance, and provide them a platform to shine upon.

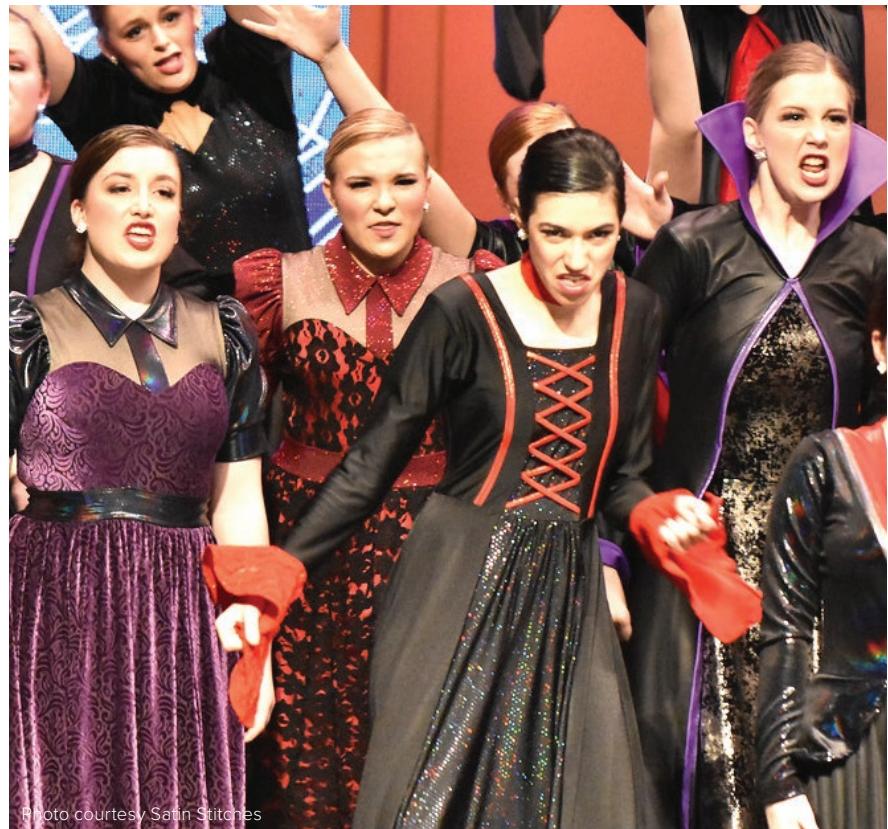


Photo courtesy Satin Stitches



Nicole
Morgan

Jesse
Erdman

CONNECTED BY COMPASSION

Abilities in Harmony
Helps Campers Flourish

by Cassidy Clevenger





We have all been in situations where we feel like we do not quite fit in. I know for me, when I started college, I had my heart set on becoming a physicist. And despite all of my advisor's recommendations, I registered for a myriad of math and sciences courses I was ill-equipped to take in my freshman year. About a month later, I was texting my mom from a bathroom stall, sobbing, because I received my first (and only) "F" on an exam. I ended up changing my major and getting a medley of various awards and academic honors by the time I graduated with my psychology degree. The point being, I did not do poorly in chemistry because of any sort of personal failing; I was simply trying to learn and think in ways that my brain was not designed to do.

So often, we are expected to learn certain things in specific ways, and those who are different are left to their own devices to figure problems out. Then, on the other side of the spectrum, there are people like Sierra Lyon who are there to ensure nobody feels left out. In her camp, Abilities in Harmony, she and her team strive for an all-inclusive experience for anyone who loves to sing and dance, and provide them a platform to shine upon.

The Early Days of the Camp

Abilities in Harmony is an adaptive, progressive show choir camp aimed at promoting community, diversity, and connections among students with varied ability levels. The camp was started in Onalaska, WI, by Sierra Lyon in 2017. Lyon was inspired to create this opportunity for middle and high school students after a life-changing experience abroad.

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As a freshman in college, Lyon lived with an American family in Haiti while they were on a mission trip, and she spent a lot of time with the family's six children. Among the children, one daughter has Down syndrome, and one of the sons has Down syndrome, autism, and sleep disorders. During her time with them, Lyon saw how much they loved music, singing, and dancing, and was inspired to share this joy with other, similar students back home in Wisconsin.

The Camp Experience

Abilities in Harmony is a week-long show choir camp ending with a stage performance. Every year, the camp has a different theme, with the most recent one being an 80s theme. These students learned a fifteen-minute showcase including three delightfully retro hits. All the campers are paired with either a show choir alum or college student studying either music or education. The campers all have some form of special needs, with the most common ones being Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, or other general developmental delays. All the campers have appropriate accommodations met so they can highlight their inner starlet and perform with confidence.

The Power of Support

When Lyon returned home, she reached out to her former high school show choir director, Richard Moses, and he fully supported her endeavors. Onalaska High School, Lyon's alma mater, was the first school to host Abilities in

A photograph of a modern theater stage. The stage is defined by large, blue, angular acoustic panels that curve upwards. Bright stage lights are mounted on the ceiling and sides, creating a dramatic lighting effect. In the foreground, rows of brown theater seats are visible, facing the stage. On the right side of the stage, there is a logo and text for "STAGING CONCEPTS".

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According to Lyon, Balsamo taught her that anyone, at any level of talent and ability, can dance and deserves a solo. Now, if any student wishes to have a solo performance during the recital, they are encouraged to step into the spotlight and bust out their best moves.

Harmony, and they showed their support for the project by giving them a free space to practice and perform during camp.

In addition to the support Lyon received from Moses, Nikki Balsamo, Lyon's former dance teacher, has been pivotal in helping Abilities in Harmony grow. For instance, Balsamo has been one of the key figures in helping Lyon set up camps at different schools. Along with providing tangible support, Balsamo also helped shape Lyon's worldview on performing. According to Lyon, Balsamo taught her that anyone, at

any level of talent and ability, can dance and deserves a solo. Now, if any student wishes to have a solo performance during the recital, they are encouraged to step into the spotlight and bust out their best moves.

The camp has also been met with incredible dedication and assistance from the campers' parents—these parents were critical for fundraising in the camp's early days. Now, the camp is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and runs largely on donor support, grants, and sponsorships.

Growth

When Lyon started Abilities in Harmony, she originally planned for the camp to be a one-time event. The first winter camp was originally comprised of eight students, and due to its success and positive feedback, the camp had doubled in size by the following February. The camp is continuing to grow in size, popularity, and locations, which has led to the camp expanding to multiple cities in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

There have been four camps held at Onalaska High School thus far. Other communities have taken notice of this joyful event, and therefore Lyon and her team are working with the schools to bring a camp into their area. Lyon and her team are currently hosting five different camps between the two states, and she and the team travel to all of them. Lyon hopes that one day other schools will be driven to host similar events, and students across the country can partake in their own Abilities in Harmony camps.

Lyon is currently only twenty-one years old, and is still attending college at Viterbo University. Not surprisingly, running a nonprofit while in school comes with a special set of challenges. For example,

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Lyon noted that all these camps consistently happen simultaneous to her semester finals. However, as Lyon looks back on previous camps and plans for the next round, she is adamant that the stress is well worth the outcomes.

She has been met with steadfast support, encouragement, and love from the campers and their families. In working with the campers, she has learned a lot about herself; she has a newfound understanding of what it means to be appreciative and patient. Lyon believes that her experience with Abilities in Harmony has inspired her to take life one step at a time and has ultimately helped her grow as a person.

Challenges and Advice

Lyon explained that working with students with such a wide variety of abilities and preferences can prove to be tricky at times, which is why practicing patience is such an invaluable skill. Her main point of advice to anyone who is interested in starting their own performance-based nonprofit is to be brave and ask for help.

Lyon spoke proudly and openly about the support she had along the way from her



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former teachers and other friends. Those involved in helping the camp grow have assisted in everything from funds, to resources, to website logistics. It's okay to not know how to do something or to need help in executing a task.

Abilities in Harmony serves as a reminder to all of us that it is okay to ask for help and accept our limitations at times. For example, a camper may have difficulty with a certain dance move, so their friends and support team may try and help them with accommodations; if the move is still undoable, that is okay—how about a solo move so they can blow the audience members' socks off in a different way?

Facing challenges head-on is how we grow and discover our talents, preferences, and values. Through this camp experience, not only has she helped campers build their confidence and take pride in their abilities, she has also refined her values and discovered traits in herself. It's not about being the best; it's about being your best.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cassidy Clevenger is a Samford University alum. She is currently in graduate school at Samford in the MSW program, while working as a staff writer.

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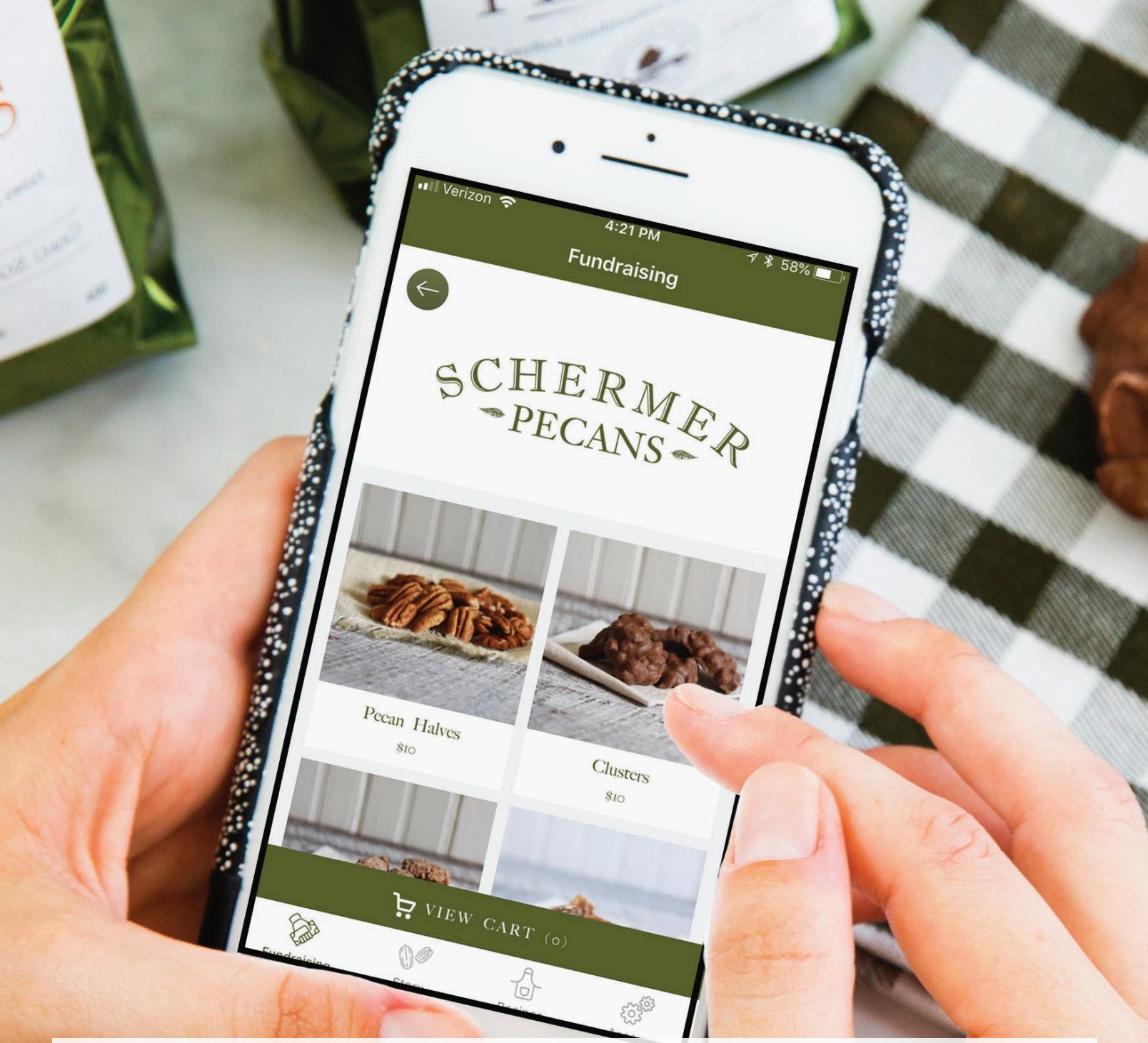
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DESTRESSING YOUR COSTUMING PROCESS

by Rachel Clevenger

Choosing or designing costuming can be one of the most exciting parts of putting together your show each year; of course, the entire costuming process can also be one of the most stressful parts of your job. Deborah Nelson of Satin Stitches and Diana Coffield of Coffield Collection took time from their hectic schedules to offer advice that may prove helpful in your planning.



Photo courtesy/Satin Stitches

Getting the Most for Your Money

Deborah Nelson of Satin Stitches explains that no matter how tight or open the budget for costuming may be, you want the most "bang for your buck" for any costume. In working toward those ends, there are many choices directors and boosters can make that will come into play.

First is timeliness; if you order early, you often can earn discounts from your preferred company simply by knowing your order date well ahead of delivery deadline and not paying rush fees. Secondly, you want to consider a costume from "performance distance," ensuring the extras you pay for are actually going to pay off—visually speaking—from the appropriate viewing distance.

You want to be aware of the limitations of specialty trims or fabrics that might not survive the rigors of intense competition or multiple performances; also, consider if the fabrics have the appropriate stretch to ensure the choreography won't be compromised. Finally, you don't want the cost of cleaning and maintaining fragile fabrics to become an issue.

Diana Coffield, of Coffield Collection, notes that directors should consider the Designer's Holy Triangle, with the three points representing three criteria: good, fast, and cheap. In short, good plus fast means expensive, good and cheap means slow delivery, and fast plus cheap means inferior—which is obviously the least favorable option.

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Don't Overdesign

As to the more creative aspects of design, Nelson discourages over-designing; instead, listen to the advice of costume professionals about how to edit design concepts to eliminate superfluous details that "muddy up" design.

Nelson notes, "A pleasing combination of textures and colors on a design is attractive, but watch out for too many of these details that simply drive up the materials costs or labor costs." She suggests the most important detail is to imagine the design from twenty feet away. She adds, "If you don't notice a detail 'from performance distance' then you are spending money on a detail that is not visually necessary on the stage."

Costumes that Transform and Scoring

Nelson notes that innovative costumes, those that "transform" before your eyes, are a popular concept, which does not necessarily make them a good choice for all groups. No matter what, the costumes should not detract from the choreography. She adds, "There are no scoring marks for 'oh my, that tricky costume transformed wonderfully' on the judges' sheets."

The question Nelson encourages directors to ask themselves, when considering transforming features of innovative costuming, is "Will it be worth it?" Will those features bring in higher scores? Will the show choir be able to consistently hit these transitions and perfect these transformations? Is the added cost to create these transforming creations likely to create an equivalent benefit to the show choir?



Photo courtesy Satin Stitches

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Coffield argues that while wonderful costumes cost a lot and take a great deal of time to manufacture and deliver, they usually make no difference in points during a competition—unless it's to lose points because a costume is awkward or ill-fitting. She also urges directors to be careful about becoming too swept up in a choreographer's vision for how costumes could elevate numbers and, while considering the input of a choreographer about potential visual impact, the directors must “have feet anchored on the ground.”

Because costume decisions often come at the end of choosing staging elements, lighting, music, sets, props, and other visual elements, Coffield notes the costumes are fit into the “amazing kaleidoscope” of the overall picture of the show. If the visual elements are already outstanding, the costumes—while they must be well-fitting and not cheaply made—are likely not the place to spend a huge piece of your overall budget. Conversely, if the other design elements are quite simplistic, then you certainly don’t want to “skimp on the costumes,” because they are the primary visual element you are adding to your performance.

The Show Choir Body Has Changed

Coffield notes that having a costume that fits well and has the proper “coloring, spin, and sparkle” is important. Cheaper options that fit poorly—or aren’t altered properly—affect the overall performance but also put some performers at a disadvantage.

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When Coffield began, she explains, the average size for girls' groups was a size 6, with a couple of 10s or 12s; an outlier would be a size 14. Now, in girls' groups, she says about half of the group wears a size 12 or larger. She notes you need "perfect proportions for any body shape."

Show choir has changed over the last few decades, and in 2019, show choir members include people of every body type, every shape, and every size. Talent has no set size, and the inclusivity is wonderful, of course.

The only downside is that many people want to order a dress or shirt that's nothing more than a larger version of what was really designed for a size four or six. Cheaper costumes are just that—larger versions of a costume that was not designed for their proportions. While carefully chosen undergarments are part of the solution, Coffield notes, people should be wearing costumes designed to their proportions, with a proper chest-to-waist ratio that creates costumes that fit well and that performers feel good wearing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Rachel James Clevenger earned her B.A. and M.Ed. degrees from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham. Most recently, she taught Business Communications at Samford University.

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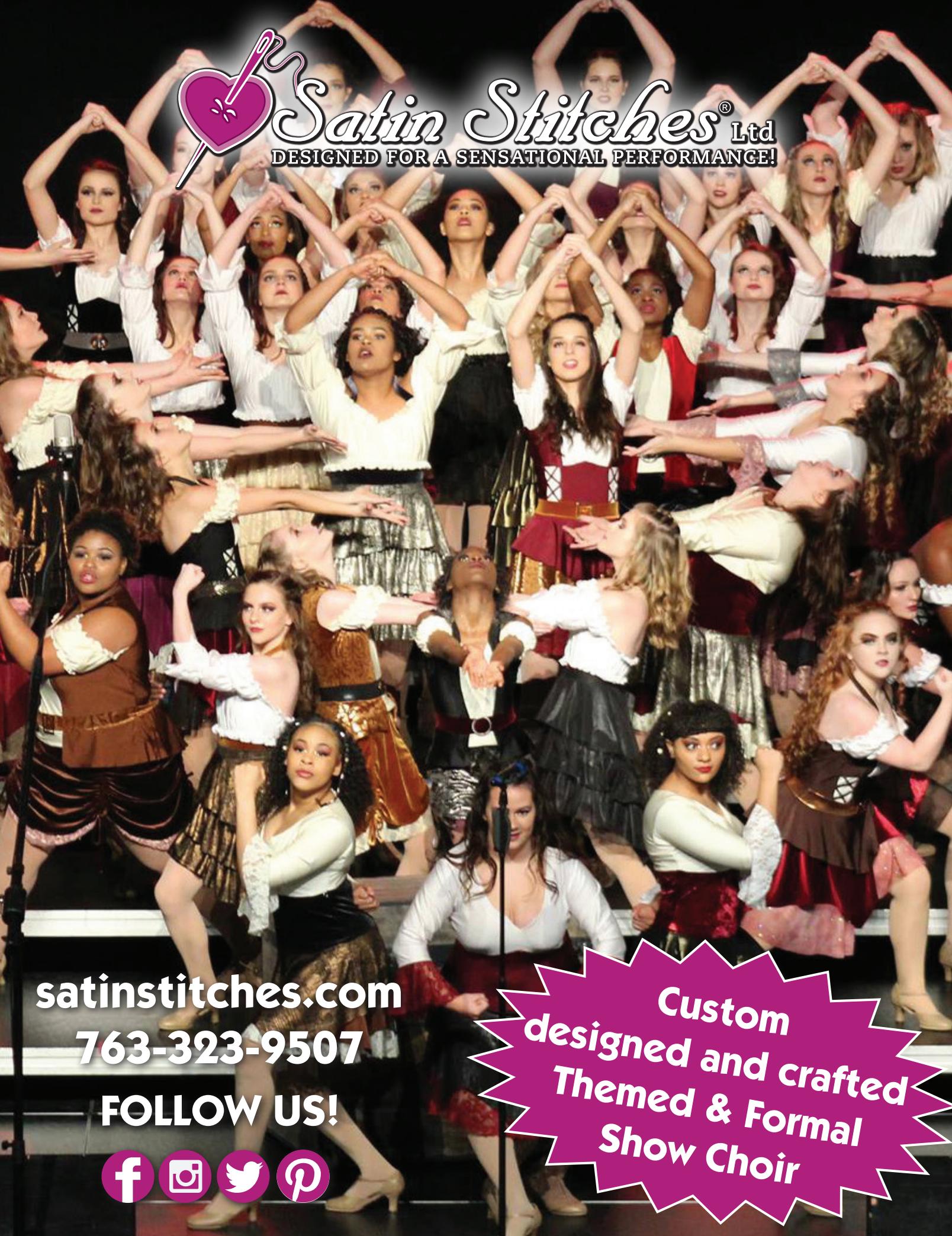
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