



# SAYING YES TO THE DRESS

HOW RANDALL LANOUE IS ELEVATING SHOW CHOIR LOOKS TO A NEW LEVEL

by Rosalind Fournier

**Randall Lanoue achieved near-celebrity status in the world of show choir during his 13-year tenure with Twinsburg City Schools, in Twinsburg, Ohio, where he directed the nationally acclaimed show choir Great Expectations.**



Today, after having stepped down from directing in 2020, Lanoue is at the top of his game again—now as a costume designer for show choirs. He started consulting on costumes while still at Twinsburg, starting with another award-winning show choir, Swingers Unlimited, from Marysville, Ohio. Their director, Jeremy Alfera, was a Twinsburg alumnus and asked for Lanoue's help.

"I said sure, and some other groups started to ask, until I was working with five or six schools...not really

accepting any payment but doing it to help out friends," Lanoue says. "After I left teaching, that doubled, and then that doubled again."

He'd fallen in love with the work, and an unplanned role became Lanoue's passion.

#### **Your Kids Are Not Mine**

His company, Haus of Lanoue, has since expanded exponentially into a year-round, never-a-dull-moment endeavor. After Haus of Lanoue and Gail McInnis Productions





became one company last year, Haus of Lanoue has now taken the reigns of the 24-year-old show choir costume company to continue serving even more customers across the country.

Lanoue is enjoying the flip side of his prior role in the limelight—working behind the scenes to bring each customer's idea to life, which he says represents a big shift in how he approaches the job. In his own time as a director, he was known for choosing costumes that were often “big and over the top,” he says. An unabashed “Sesame Street” fan as a child who once put on a “Sesame Street” stage performance at Twinsburg, he doesn't hesitate when asked about his favorite character. “Big Bird, of course. Look at all those feathers!”

As a designer, however, he's clear that his role is to stay true to the vision customers bring to him. “When I started working with other directors,” he says, “I made a promise to them: ‘I will never dress your kids the way that I dressed mine, because your kids are not mine. Your kids need to reflect who you are as a director, who your choreographer is, where your program is, where your program has been, and where your program is going.’”

Still, when Lanoue describes his process, it's clear the director in him is still alive and well. He's always thinking beyond a great look to consider functionality and practicality, all the unseen factors that go into producing a show. He knows it's not enough for costumes to add style, cohesion and narrative texture; they need to function for the choreography. They need to be designed for fast wardrobe changes and be able to withstand the rigors of the road. Silk and wool, for instance, can be problematic; synthetics can be a lifesaver.

Lanoue says the design process is different for each client. Some will pick designs exactly as presented on his website, while some like what they see but want to customize the color or fabric. Still others come in with little more than an idea, and it's Lanoue's job to bring it to fruition.

Lanoue starts by working to understand where the director is coming from, including watching videos of past shows. It's a process that grows easier over time, as many directors have become repeat customers over several years and trust Lanoue implicitly. “It's about knowing the customer and helping them get to the best decision for them,” he says. “I appreciate that people trust me, that my opinion matters to them. Even if they don't go with it, they want to hear it, because I have been around this for so long.”

### From Circle Skirts to a California Invasion

Lanoue has a unique perspective as a student of show choir history, beginning long before he was old enough to join show choir himself. “In the early '80s, there were some very plain dresses below the knee, and the boys would maybe be in a suit that was the same color or a darker version of what the girls were wearing,” he says. “When the girls started wearing sequins, boys when to tuxedos, and then we got into sequined vests in the '90s.”

In the late '90s, designs started to evolve beyond the classic circle skirts and vests, “and you started to see shiny shirts,” Lanoue says. “Anybody who was in show choir at that time will laugh about the shiny shirts.” In the 2000s, “Californians became a major presence in the show choir world, and they brought the theatrical side with them, which was mind blowing for a lot of people in the Midwest and South who hadn't seen this.”

He adds: “What we're seeing now is a lot of very detailed theatrical costumes but also the emergence of fashion. Don't get me wrong—the classic show choir dress will always be there. But we're seeing more of the theatrical and fashion-forward looks every day. It's exciting.”

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Lanoue—an impeccably dressed man who won his share of “best-dressed director” awards while at Twinsburg—enjoys following fashion trends himself but cautions that few things come straight from the runway into real life. Nor do they come into show choir without a lot of adaptation to be sure a garment can function according to the demands required of it.

“Once in a while,” Lanoue says, “if a director brings an example of something that's from a runway, it's good to ask, ‘What speaks to you most about this? The color, the shape, the detail work?’ Then we can work with what they love most from that to turn it into something that's going to function for what they need the garment to do.”

Other directors come to Lanoue with period-based shows, which create similar opportunities to translate the clothes of a different era to costumes



that work well on stage. If a show is set in the Victorian era, for instance, he knows that requires certain considerations. “Victorian sleeves and corsets do not lend themselves to show choir,” says Lanoue. “So you make adaptations—how can we construct this for movement versus how it was actually constructed in the time period? Is there a way we can inject a texture or a color that might not have been found back then to create more pop and interest onstage? Thinking through all those things while designing really matters.”

Lanoue is careful to add that many of his customers are more traditional, and he takes the same pleasure in meeting their needs. “I have customers I’ve worked with for several years where it’s much more subtle and nuanced,” he says. “I do try to encourage the directors we work with to take a risk, even if it’s something like a new bold color instead of a red or a royal blue—maybe that’s the risk that they take. I think there’s room for everybody to go someplace where they haven’t been before and not repeat something that they’ve done or someone else has done.”

He describes it as a gentle push-and-pull, and in the end, all he cares about is a successful show. “My best moments are when that dress goes onstage

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and there is an audience reaction. That’s the recognition I want,” Lanoue says. I don’t need my name attached to it. I am so happy being in the background and being the guy anybody can call at any point, and I’ll help them problem solve or whatever they need. That’s what I love about where I am in the industry at this point.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rosalind Fournier is copyeditor for Productions and a freelance writer for a number of publications. She lives in Homewood, Ala. with her husband, three kids, a goldendoodle and Siamese cat.

## Lanoue’s Top 5 Tips for Successful Costume Selection

1. Order early. This gives you more time for fittings and problem solving.
2. Make sure your measurements are accurate. Follow the guidelines for the company from which you’re ordering.
3. Know your style; know your show. Are you looking for traditional or groundbreaking?
4. Consider your choreographer’s style and the functionality you’ll need.
5. Be clear about your budget. A good designer will make sure you get what you need for the money you have if they know your budget upfront.

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SETTING TRENDS IN THE SHOW CHOIR WORLD

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