





Designing Magic

HOW CREATIVE COSTUMING & DESIGNS TAKES CUSTOM TO A DIFFERENT LEVEL

by Rosalind Fournier

What do show choir, equestrian vaulting, and synchronized skating all have in common? Creative Costuming & Designs makes costumes for all of them. Founded in 1992 as a costume company for color guard, Creative Costuming & Designs (CCD) has expanded over the years to include marching bands, show choirs, aerialists, waterski competitions, the Olympic Games, the World Games, and Sweet Adelines, which are all-female choruses who participate in competitions around the world.

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“People find us because we create designs no one else will have,” says Chad Kohlmier, the company’s director of design, who sat down for an interview recently via video call. “When I’m at an event and see people wearing our costumes, I can tell right away because of the attention to quality, the detail, the fit...you can see it in our product.”

A former professional dancer, Kohlmier joined the team 16 years ago. At the time, there was a staff of seven. Today, CCD boasts a team of 35, including lead senior designer and trainer Ericka Angiuli, who joined Kohlmier for the interview. Angiuli, who previously designed for Disneyland and Cirque du Soleil, has been at CCD for eight years.

Kohlmier and Angiuli say the company’s experience working with a wide variety of clients has prepared the team to design costumes for almost

any performance, sport, or artistic expression. “Each different type of art we make costumes for has its own need,” Kohlmier says. “Whether it’s color guard, marching band, waterski teams, choruses, or show choirs, they all have a twist in their costume needs that’s specific to them.”

Angiuli says she enjoys being able to meet that challenge. “With knowledge from schooling and working at Disney and other performance places, I’m able to see different ways of construction,” she says, adding that every fabric they stock is made to stretchable. “Everything we do is set up for success in any sort of movement or performance.”

Beyond Pretty Dresses

Show choirs are a small but growing niche for CCD. Kohlmier says they tend to attract a certain type of client

with a specific vision in mind. “We can do the cute little dress or the men’s cummerbund look, but that’s not normally what they come to us for,” he says. “They come to us because they want to be princesses or warriors. They want something more themed and specific.”

Angiuli says once a show choir approaches them, the process begins with a conversation with the client about what they’re looking for, the more detailed the better. “The worst thing a client can say is, ‘You have creative freedom to do whatever you want.’” The designers want to know about color preferences, inspirations, and details about the show itself—will they be going up and down a lot of stairs? Doing a lot of lifts? Will one part of the costume be more visible in the show than the rest?”

Taking “Custom” to a New Level

Kohlmier says the company prides itself on transparency when it comes to timelines. They ask clients to place orders at least three months ahead of time, because all the work is custom; even costumes from their catalog are made to order and are often adapted to accommodate requests for different colors or fabrics.

They also put a great deal of care into the sizing. “We want everybody to feel great in their costume,” Kohlmier says. “No matter what size you are, if you’re xxx small all the way up to 8x, we want you to put your costume on and feel, I’m pretty, or I’m handsome. I feel great.”

He adds that some costume companies don’t make sizes larger than 2x, or if they do, they charge extra. “We’ve never had that philosophy,” he says. “We ask them to tell us about their team and what kind of body shapes they have, and we make the costumes accordingly.”

Beyond that are the nearly limitless possibilities to achieve the right effect, from glow-in-the-dark fabrics to what Kohlmier calls “magic costumes.”

“You pull on Velcro or unzip a zipper, and the costume turns into a different color,” he says. “We’ve also sewn mesh

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tubing into a seam, and then the client can put LED lights into it. The performer can turn the lights on and off by flipping a switch in their pocket.”

A Budget Balancing Act

Creative Costuming & Designs strives to be upfront with clients about budgets: while they can create great costumes for smaller budgets, there are limitations. Simply put, the more complicated and detailed the costume, the more it costs. For many clients, it’s worth it.

“A lot of clients tell us, ‘I have a \$200 budget, but if you show me something I love, I can make it work,’” Kohlmier says. “We cater to a specific clientele, and our customers, especially in show choir, are thrilled with what they get because it’s something nobody else at their competition will have. We receive wonderful



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photos from people in their costumes, and they always say, 'Everyone asked where we got these because they're so spectacular.' That's something we're proud of."

The company has also found success in providing more affordable options through digital printing, Angiuli says. Custom designs can be printed directly onto the fabric, creating a one-of-a-kind look without requiring multiple fabric sources or cuts. "Within the past five years or so, digital printing has really become big," she says. "It's particularly popular in gymnastics—you saw it at the

Paris Olympics, where they used digitally printed designs with added rhinestones."

At any price point, Kohlmier and Angiuli say, Creative Costuming prides itself on their promise of exclusivity. "Whatever you're doing, it's your secret between you and your designer until you decide to announce it," Kohlmier says. The client's design will also be off-limits to other clients for the whole season.

"I've had a few orders come across my desk this season that I can't talk about, but they are some cool-looking designs that I'm excited to see develop," Angiuli

says. "I'm excited for the future with the show choir scene just because Chad and I are both big musical fans. It's very rewarding."

Top Tips for a Spectacular Costume Experience:

1. Plan ahead. Creative Costuming & Design advises clients to place orders at least three months before the costumes need to be ready.
2. Come with ideas. Consider the theme of your show, preferred colors, and costumes that inspire you.
3. Know your budget. A good costumer will tell you right away if your dream costume will exceed your spending limit, so try and be flexible. Designers can suggest changes to make it more affordable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rosalind Fournier is a freelance writer/editor in Homewood, Alabama where she lives with her husband and kids. She loves to read and looks forward to March Madness every year, though her bracket is usually a disaster.

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