

Behind the Scenes with the Costume Mistress

There are many components to the Costume Department of a ballet company. First, there are the Costume Designers, who work closely with the choreographer and Artistic Director to design the costumes according to style of historical period and characters to be portrayed in the ballet. This may require the study of books, pictures, and examples of costumes to determine styles worn during specified period in history. These designs are passed on to the Costume Mistress, who is responsible for overseeing the construction of the costumes. She is in charge of purchasing all fabrics and decorative trims, alternate materials and paints, if needed. She also supervises a crew of seamstresses who do the actual sewing, fits the costumes on each dancer and brings them to the Artistic Director for final approval before making the final alterations and adjustments.

Construction of costumes begins months before an actual production. An average story ballet may use more than 200 costumes, many of which are classical and romantic tutus. Since each costume is made and embellished by hand, it is both time consuming and tedious. An average tutu can cost anywhere from \$250.00 to thousands, as in some major companies.

The Costume Mistress is also responsible for the organizing, packing and unloading of the costumes both to and from the theater. During the performance run at the theater, the costume mistress sets up a temporary “shop,” with seamstresses, to work the shows. Costumes need to be steamed, hung and delivered to the dressing rooms with headpieces and accessories intact. Last minute “fixes” are done before dancers walk on stage. During the performance run, minor repairs and alterations are done on site. Once back at the studio, the costume mistress is responsible for the cleaning and packing of all costumes and accessories.

Classical Tutu

Dancers' skirts or costumes were shortened to show intricate legwork. This occurred during the Classical era; thus the costume was called a Classical Tutu. A classical tutu is one complete garment. The tutu's “skirt” is rather like a large disk made from layer upon layer of netting called tulle. The bodice is stiff and tight around the hips and waist. Hooks and eyes are normally used to fasten costumes because they are less likely to come undone during a performance.



