

Congratulations, your dancer has worked hard and her dancing has advanced. Now you are interested in rewarding her efforts by investing in a new solo dress.

Finding a new Irish dancing dress, whether custom created specifically for you dancer or purchased "off the rack", is an expensive and probably and unfamiliar experience. We hope the information contained in this document will help you be more knowledgeable and confident in the decisions you are about to make.

The following outline of the dressmaking process is not rigid; you may already know you want a blue dress. That color decision will likely influence your choice of a design. For instance, you may be pulled to a design that somehow looks like the sea to you. Or you may begin by meeting with your dressmaker to be measured and make all your design choices at that time.

You may decide to wait until after you meet with your dressmaker to begin looking at design options. It is suggested that you ask what "homework" you need to do before your initial meeting.

You will find working with any dressmaker is much more relaxed, productive and pleasant for all concerned if you come prepared to articulate what you want.

General Outline of the Custom ID Dress Purchasing Process

- 1) **Teacher Approval and Recommendations** - A few TCRGs control the dressmaking/ordering process; they will tell you who will make the dress and make all color design decisions for you. Basically, all you will need to do is write the check. The dressmaker of choice understands what style and fabrics your teacher wants representing his/her school. It is very unlikely your teacher will be disappointed with your new dress.

Most other TCRGs are much less involved, some even declining to make suggestions of any kind. You will probably find your teacher somewhere in the middle. Ask for assistance and advice.

It is important for you to know if your teacher requires that your dress be "approved" before it may be worn in competition. Find out at which points the teacher needs to give his/her OK. Most dressmakers are happy to cooperate with the teacher's rules as long as it is clarified ahead of time what will be required. Be sure you come prepared with this information.

- 2) Select a Dressmaker - "Popular" dressmakers may be booked out more than a year in advance. Base your choice on dresses you have seen and admired along with recommendations from other dancers, parents, and teachers. Other factors you should consider are location (especially if you foresee fitting problems) and price.

Dressmaker Interview Questions:

- 1) What embellishment designs do you have available? Are any Exclusive designs? Do you draw your own? What third-party designers have you used/who would you recommend? Would you be willing to make a dress using a design my dancer drew herself?
- 2) What fabrics do you prefer? What fabrics do you avoid? Do you use sequins for the body of the dress or appliqués? Can you make a dress that is washable or dry cleanable? Do you buy the fabrics or can I provide them myself?
- 3) Who do you want to take the dancer's measurements? How many fittings do you usually need? How do you accommodate "long distance" customer you never actually meet in person?
- 4) How firm are your dates? Is there anything you foresee in your personal life that could delay delivery?
- 5) What determines how much you charge for the embroidery/appliqué part of the dress? How are your charges broken down?
- 6) What seam allowances do you use? How do you allow room for growth?

- 2) Select an Embellishment Design - Usually, this comes before selecting the dress fabric/color. The design you choose will influence color and texture decisions. Things to keep in mind:
- If you want sequined fabrics, you need a design with fewer, but larger appliqué pieces
 - Small girls/short skirt lengths need simpler designs to be effective from a stage
 - Some designs are more slenderizing than others. If this is a factor, look for a design that has an overall triangular shape coming to a point at the waistline. Color lines that flow from the shoulders to hemline tend to elongate the wearer.
 - Is your dancer going to grow and are you planning to alter this dress? If so, do not select a design that flows across the waistline - for instance, an appliqué that runs on the edge of the princess seam and continues along the outside edge of the center panel. If you need to drop the skirt it won't ever line up correctly again. Instead, look for a design that comes right to the waistline on the bodice and skirt, but will still look good later with a 1"-2" gap.

Custom, One-Off and repeatable/reusable designs

Most dressmakers offer all three-design options. A custom design is one drawn to your specific requirements (for instance, you might want a Celtic cat or particular kind of knot). You will need to arrange the commissioning of the design through your dressmaker or a third-party design specialist. Expect to pay \$50-\$150 for a commissioned design. You should be the only person allowed to use this design because you own it. Check with the design artist about his/her policies.

A "one-off" (or "one-of") design also an exclusive-to-your-dress design. The difference is you a purchasing an already-drawn design so you had not input into its style or contents. If you find an available design you like, sometimes the artist is willing to make small changes to better suit your needs. You may find this options slightly less expensive than custom designs - \$45-\$135.

A repeatable or reusable design is a commercially available non-exclusive design. You (or your dressmaker) purchase the right to reproduce it one time on a single dress. Other dancers (maybe on

another continent or maybe next door) can also use the same design on their dresses. This does not mean that these dresses will all be identical. Color and fabric choices strongly affect how a design is perceived. Two dresses with different fabrics and color combinations but using the same design are less likely to be seen as "the same" than two dresses with different designs but the same colors. Repeatable designs are the least expensive, usually \$30-\$40.

Only you can decide if the price of an exclusive design is worth the extra. At some point, your dancer may achieve a level of competition that your TCRG will "strongly suggest" that you purchase an exclusive design. If you decide on a reusable design, it doesn't have to be a carbon copy - your dressmaker can work with you to make a few changes that will personalize the design for your dancer.

A final option is drawing your own design. Many dressmakers hesitate to use a customer-drawn design unless they are absolutely sure that it was not copied from another dress or designer. If this is important to you, ask your dressmaker about how to proceed.

- 3) Select dress fabric/color - If you are an experienced sewer and a "fabric person" or have access to a top-quality fabric store with knowledgeable sales personnel, you may consider purchasing your dress fabric yourself. Before you spend a lot of money, ask your dressmaker about her policy. Most fabric stores will cut swatches for you to send ahead for dressmaker approval.

Some dressmakers will work with just about any fabric; others are more selective, especially about sequins. If you do purchase your fabric, be sure to get more than you need. Accidents happen, growth happens, mis-measurement happens, fabric flaws turn up. An extra yard is cheap compared to weeks of frustration trying to find someplace that still has the fabric in stock.

Your dress fabric will determine what colors are used in the appliqués and embroidery. When selecting the fabric for the body of your dress, here are some things to consider:

- Paler and/or shiny fabrics visually add weight to the dancer

- Shiny/metallic fabrics need larger and simpler designs to be appreciated.
- Pale fabrics need darker/stronger colors in the design to be seen from the stage. (Dresses that use all pale or all very shiny fabrics in the design "gray out" from a distance - everything blends together)
- Elaborate fabrics need strong colors and designs for contrast.
- Appliqué on darker, more neutral colors "pop" more than on bright, strong colors.
- If your dancer is still growing and you plan on alterations, it may be wise to sacrifice "glitz" and go for a better-wearing, more durable and forgiving fabric such as a woven wool or polyester (gabardine, smooth crepe, poplin etc.).
- **Silk** - light weight, breathes, strong. It wears away when rubbed. Be diligent about checking your dress bag - if the inside is rubbing the dress during transport, you will find holes starting to appear on the hemline and the edges of the pleats. Silk may be dry cleaned and spot cleaned. Good color choices
- **Metallic Silk** - Cleaning not recommended. Hard to find, it usually must be ordered. Nice shine and good but very limited colors
- **Tissue Lame** - Weak fabric. Very poor choice for dress body. Some dressmakers will not even use it for appliqués. Good shine and many colors. Needs special handling by the dressmaker to achieve good results.
- **Rocky Lame or Roche Lame** - Good colors and interesting texture. Difficult to find a good selection locally. Some people love it and say it wears well. Others find it difficult to work with.
- **Satin Lame** - Not Good for anything. Avoid. Horrible stuff.
- **"Dot" Sequin fabrics** - Wide variety in colors and flavors - large, small, round, square, diamonds, metallics, colors, rainbows, and holographics. The sequins are glued/fused to the base fabric (usually some sort of metallic knit). Quality varies. Some are dry clean only, others hand wash only. Some sequins rub off easily, others wear well. This is a "trust your vendor" fabric. Even experienced dressmakers can be fooled, but most folks have a fairly positive experience.

- **Sparkle Organza (or some other sheer fabric) fused to a heavier, opaque fabric** - Your dressmaker can create some unique and lovely dress fabrics using this method, but it can easily double the cost of the fabric - you're buying it twice, plus the fusing material plus the dressmaker's time. It wears fairly well, but think very carefully if any sequins or other sharp/rough fabrics will be coming into regular contact with it.
- **Gabardines and other woven fabrics** - Wool or Polyester. Wears well, cleans easily, can be altered. Not Glitzy but a good choice for a dress you know will be getting lots of use or rough treatment.

Measurement is THE factor that will determine whether or not you get a well-fitting dress. Too big/loose and your dress will look sloppy or ungainly. Too long detracts from the dancing. Too short may result in disqualification. Too tight and it will be uncomfortable and make dancing stilted. **BE SURE TO WEAR THE SAME UNDERGARMENTS YOU WEAR WHEN YOU DANCE.** Bras and leotards or bathing suits do not fit the same. Measuring is not the time to practice excessive modesty.

- 4) Measuring your Dancer - If you physically meet with the dressmaker and she/he measures your dancer - you are off the hook, golden. As long as your dancer does not grow or change weight, the fault for any fitting problems falls completely on the dressmaker.

However, if you cannot meet with the dressmaker in person, the situation muddies. Your dressmaker will be agreeing to make a dress according to the measurements you provide. She is not contracting to make a dress that absolutely fits your dancer. **If you screw up the measurements (or your dancer significantly changes size or shape) and the dress doesn't fit, it is your fault - you will have to pay somebody (either the original dressmaker or another tailor) to make alterations and adjust the fit.**

If you have a growing, changing dancer, the unanswerable question is "what day do you want this dress to fit?" ID dresses are by necessity, very close fitting. If it is loose, especially in the waist, the skirt will collapse and hang funny. If you need "growing room" that is the price - until she grows, the dress will not look it's best. Discuss your daughter's age and stage of development with your dressmaker. Together you can make intelligent decisions that will give you the best chance for long use.

It is of utmost importance that the measurements you provide are accurate. Dressmakers really do feel awful when they've made a beautiful "dream dress" and the dancer can't wear it. This is heartbreaking for everyone.

If you do not feel comfortable and confident of your measuring skills, find a local tailor shop. Pay to have the measurements taken. And make sure your dancer "Stands like she's in front of a judge" while being measured - head and shoulders back, back straight. This is an "unnatural" posture, and the tailor will not know to tell her to do this. Explain it if for a dancing competition costume. Better, yet, ask the tailor if she will make up a "bodice fitting sloper" for your dancer. She can actually try it on and have the fit tweaked. Then you can send it to the dressmaker who will use it as the basis for her pattern. Depending upon your personality, you may find this method cheaper than not sleeping because you are worried about fit.

A good skirt length is critical and can be difficult to measure. The stiffening in the skirts makes them hang differently from normal clothing, so the lengths don't compare. If you can borrow a stiffened ID dress that fits your dancer's waistline at the correct point, have her try it on and use it as the basis for your length decision. Measure the center front length of the skirt from the waist to hem and add or subtract inches from it for your perfect length.

However you acquire the dress measurement, be sure you keep a copy. Don't send the only set of measurements to the dressmaker.

Everybody has "figure flaws", and a good dressmaker does her best to make sure your dancer looks her best. Some challenges are easier to overcome than others.

- **Short waisted** - It seems like everyone these days feels her natural waistline is "too high". This is probably due to current clothing styles; hip huggers for girls and long tops for mom disguise the waistline. We are so accustomed to seeing the longer lines, when confronted with a real waist, it looks out of proportion.

It is usually possible to drop the waistline. Look at your dancer's rear. If the buttocks are pear-shaped ("low slung"), dropping the waist is easy. If the buttocks are high and rounder or apple-shaped (starting very close to the natural waist), then dropping the waist may not be possible without some unattractive and unwanted results.

- **Large bust in relation to waist** - Multiple fittings may be required to achieve a smooth yet comfortable fit.
- **Wide neck/shoulders/upper back** - May also take multiple fittings to determine the best look/comfortable fit.

Be aware that fitting problems take more time and effort from your dressmaker. This will add to the overall cost of the your dress, but it is very necessary.

- 7) Fittings - Most dressmakers will sew a fitting garment (some call it a sloper) out of muslin or some other expendable fabric. Some recreate the entire dress, skirt and all, while others are comfortable with just the bodice by itself. Your dancer will need to try it on, **wearing the same undergarments she will wear when she dances**, and have the corrections marked. Be sure you are satisfied with the fit of this garment, because this is exactly how your final dress will fit.

If you are doing this "long distance", please get help. Perhaps your teacher or another parent is experienced enough to assist your. Or go see that tailor who took the measurements.

If the fit is extremely poor, do to inaccurate measuring or because your dancer grew, a second fitting may be required. If so, this will add to the time and cost of your final dress.

- 8) Making the Dress - Your dressmaker generally will notify you when work actually begins on your dress. She can then tell you about when she expects it to be completed. It is acceptable for you to ask when she expects to begin at the final fitting, but not every dressmaker will provide exact dates.

Speaking of dates - if this dress is needed for a major, once-in-a-lifetime competition, be sure to have a backup plan. Your dressmaker is honored that you chose him/her to make this crucial dress and wants to provide the dress you want when you need it. But life happens. Dressmakers break arms, have car accidents, their parents die, their children get ill, their spouses leave them. The iron malfunctions and gets too hot, the scissors slip, or they slice open their thumb and bleed on your skirt. These unforeseen events can cause a delivery delay. Your dressmaker is obligated to inform you immediately, but there may be no adequate solution. Be prepared.