

BEST PRACTICES – BODY INCLUSIVE COSTUMING

Balancing artistic integrity with performer comfort and equity requires thoughtful, proactive decision-making. One of the most critical considerations, however, is ensuring that costumes reflect body inclusivity, so all performers feel seen, respected, and empowered to deliver their best on stage. Costumes should never be a source of shame, restriction, or marginalization. Instead, they can be tools to celebrate the diverse body types that make up any ensemble.

The following considerations offer a framework for making costume decisions that prioritize inclusivity while still honoring the visual goals of a production. These recommendations aim to help creative teams promote dignity, safety, and belonging for every performer, regardless of their size, shape, or physical ability.

DESIGN AESTHETICS

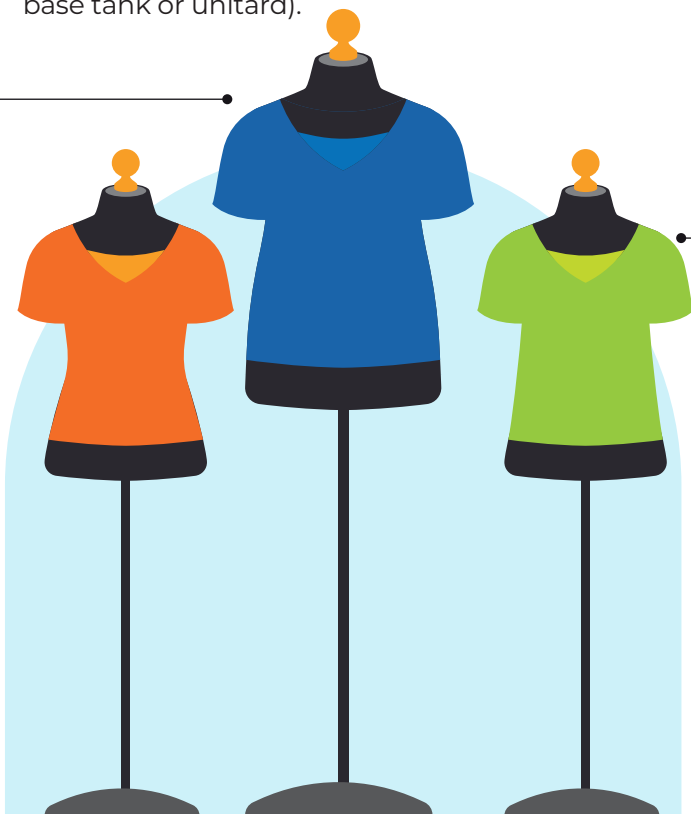
- Avoid body-specific silhouettes: Refrain from using cuts or styles that favor only thin or athletic body types (e.g., overly tight leotards, low-rise bottoms).
- Build optionality: Allow for variations in necklines, sleeve lengths, or torso coverage so performers can feel confident and comfortable.
- Use layered or mix-and-match pieces: Enable visual uniformity while giving performers control over how much skin is shown (e.g., crop top over a base tank or unitard).

MATERIAL CHOICES

- Select breathable, forgiving fabrics: Choose materials that stretch, move with the body, and don't cling uncomfortably or become see-through under stage lights.
- Minimize restrictive elements: Avoid stiff boning, tight elastic bands, or binding closures that restrict movement or highlight specific body features unnecessarily.
- Ensure nude fabrics match skin tones: Avoid defaulting to one "nude" shade. Instead, offer a range of skin-tone-matching base fabrics and underlayers so all performers feel represented and dignified. This consideration should be made for gloves, as well.

BUDGETING & PLANNING

- Build inclusivity into the budget: Cost-effective doesn't mean exclusive. Factor in costs for larger sizes, optional base layers, and tailoring from the outset, which should not be passed onto the performers.
- Include tailoring and alterations in all estimates: Customization may be necessary for bodies of all sizes. Allocate funds for tailoring (not just for "outliers") to ensure every performer receives a costume that fits well and supports performance.
- Choose vendors who support inclusivity: Work with suppliers and costumers who specialize in extended sizing and flexible fits.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Avoid “one-size-fits-all” language: This erases the diversity of bodies and may create shame for those who don’t fit the mold.
- Prohibit body shaming: Make it clear that no commentary by staff, peers, or directors about weight, size, or fit is acceptable.
- Train staff and designers: Ensure costume designers and directors understand size inclusivity and how unconscious bias may influence design decisions.

SIZING AND FIT

- Offer a broad size range: Ensure costume pieces are available in an inclusive range (e.g., XXS–5X or higher) and allow for customization beyond standard sizing.
- Tailoring options: Budget for alterations so performers of all sizes can have costumes adjusted for comfort, proportion, and movement.
- Flexible designs: Use stretchable, adjustable, or modular pieces (e.g., elastic waistbands, adjustable straps) that accommodate body fluctuations and diverse shapes.

PROCESS & PERFORMER INVOLVEMENT

- Inclusive fittings: Provide private, respectful fitting opportunities. Avoid public commentary on body size or shape. See the guide above on fitting best practices.
- Involve performers in choices: Allow input during costume planning phases, including comfort levels, movement needs, and body coverage.
- Normalize accommodations: Make it standard to ask performers what support they need (e.g., compression wear, modesty options) without singling anyone out.

PERFORMANCE EQUITY

- Ensure all performers look like part of the ensemble: Avoid using separate costumes for larger bodies unless all performers have equivalent design variety.
- Balance visibility and comfort: Don’t assign more “revealing” costumes only to certain bodies, especially based on societal beauty standards.
- Allow for adaptive costuming when needed: Be inclusive of performers with physical disabilities, chronic conditions, or sensory sensitivities that require costume modifications. These should be handled with discretion and integrated respectfully into the overall design.

