CLEVELAND BALLET

MERCHANDISE MAGIC: A CONVERSATION WITH EMMA SUHAJ, MERCHANDISE ASSOCIATE



CAN YOU PLEASE DESCRIBE WHAT YOU DO FOR CLEVELAND BALLET AS MERCHANDISE ASSOCIATE?

While I am responsible for the planning and procurement of all of the merchandise we sell at our performances, I also view my role as contributing to our patron's overall experience. A gift or memento from a performance is a lasting memory of a ballet.

As Cleveland Ballet grows and is more visible in the community, I also order customized branded merchandise for our patrons, company artists, and Academy of Cleveland Ballet students who are excited to wear our logo.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH CURATING MERCHANDISE FOR EACH BALLET PRODUCTION FOR THE BOUTIQUE? WHAT INSPIRES YOUR SELECTIONS?

I start by trying to visualize the types of items I would like to purchase if i was attending a performance and wanted to take home a memento - what would my daughter, family, or friends love? I also consider each performance as its own story. What are the moments in the ballet that might correspond to a trinket? Who is attending? Who is the target demographic for this production? These factors are all part of the planning process.

Comparing previous seasons and performances, along with patron feedback, are equally important considerations when curating an assortment of merchandise. My main inspiration comes from our patrons and the looks on their faces when they approach our merchandise displays with awe and excitement. I still have items from seeing productions when I was young that hold special memories, so I try to recreate that feeling for our patrons.

I also danced as a student for 12 years and am a lifelong lover of the arts and theatre. Combining my two loves of merchandising and dance is a dream come true.

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HOW FAR IN ADVANCE DO YOU START PLANNING MERCHANDISE FOR A NEW SEASON OR PRODUCTION?

It depends on the production, but usually I will start the initial visualizing and planning process 6 months in advance. *The Nutcracker* is the exception to this timeline, as I usually start that process almost an entire year in advance. The sheer number of items we need and the number of performances we hold make for a lengthy timeline. My wheels are always turning, so sometimes I will start planning assortments as soon as our next season is announced.

Currently, in this case, our 2025-2026 season was just announced and I am so excited to start conceptualizing our assortment for our two brand new productions of Handel's *Messiah* and *Cinderella* in 2026! Choosing products and targeting demographics is my happy place, and I truly love it. (So, make sure to stop by the boutique when you see the shows!)

WHAT KINDS OF ITEMS ARE MOST POPULAR WITH OUR PATRONS? HAS ANYTHING EVER SUPRISED YOU?

Without a doubt, Nutcrackers are our most popular holiday item! During our run of *The Nutcracker* in 2024, we sold more than 700 nutcrackers throughout the 11 performances!! Other popular items are ornaments, key chains, and coffee mugs for various shows. We also get a lot of requests for magnets - car magnets, refrigerator magnets, you name it! I believe that small items people can take home to remember their time with us at the ballet will always be popular.

Our 2024 premiere of *Dracula* surprised me with how busy the merchandise boutique table was! I think it was due to the Halloween spirit and the fun vibe that particular production produced. Our guests were dressed up to the nines, some in costumes, and purchased masks and faux vampire teeth to really got into the spooky spirit.