

July 2009: Studio B is featured in "Dance Retailer News" as the issue's spotlight store

Ticket to Success

How one storeowner created a movie-themed store that quickly became the talk of the town.

By Elizabeth Louise Hatt

From the moment you step through the doors of Studio B in Hamburg, NY, you know it will be a shopping experience like no other. A smiling young girl, dressed in a black button-down shirt, leads you through velvet ropes and down a red carpet to a plush theater style seat. As the usher disappears behind the thick velvet curtains ahead, you sit, munching on a cup of popcorn watching *Sleeping Beauty* on the large screen in front of you. A couple of minutes later, your usher returns with boxes of shoes, ready to find you the perfect fit.

Building a theme into a store has its advantages. A unique shopping experience can help set your business apart from the competition-especially in a creative industry such as dance. According to storeowner Suzanne Mall, it is about finding a way to engage your customers that leaves a lasting impression. This isn't enough to guarantee success, though.

With the two nearest dancewear stores both more than 20 miles away from her dance studio, the Performing Arts Dance Academy in Hamburg, Mall identified a void in the community. And after selling dancewear basics from a room in the studio for almost 15 years, she knew exactly what students were looking for. Capitalizing on her studio expertise, Mall turned Studio B into its own theatrical production that quickly became the talk of the town, attracting shoppers from as far away as Canada-and the attention of almost all passersby.

Mall's inspiration for the vintage movie theater theme stems from weekly family trips to the Hamburg movie theater she took as a child. "I just loved the feeling I got when I walked in-the excitement of the movie, the curtains, the popcorn," she explains. "Later on as a dancer, I got to perform at a well-known theater here in Buffalo, NY, and it's one of the best memories of my life. The whole theater thing is in my heart."

In addition to the theme's personal meaning, Mall felt that it right in with the dance world. "The whole industry is theatrical," she says. The key to choosing a theme, says Mall, is to figure out what you would feel comfortable walking into every day: "Know what you would like to live with, because chances are, if you own a store, you are going to spend most of your time there."

Every aspect of the store represents her theme, with the show area being the most popular among patrons. Its design not only adds to the ambience, but it also helps the flow of traffic. A sign states "please wait for ushers to seat you" at the end of the red carpet. "We call the sales girls ushers, and this directs customers to form a line so we know who's next to be fitted, says Mall, who makes sure there is always a G-rated movie playing and fresh popcorn on hand. "Customers are shocked when they see the setup."

Both the TV and the smell of buttery popcorn are vital to the atmosphere. "Whatever touches the sense is what you need to have in your store," Mall advises, adding that a scent as simple and appealing as vanilla can do the trick. If showing video is not an option, adding classical music is also just as enticing. "You need to consider not just what people can look at, but what they hear and smell," she says. Even the button-down uniforms add to the presentation.

It is the attention to detail that makes the theme so successful. "People say to me, 'This is one of the nicest stores in Hamburg,'" says Mall. "A lot of people come in just to look at it," she adds, knowing that when they are in the market for her products, Studio B will be the first place they will think of.

Many of her best customers are drawn in off the street before discovering the wide array of offerings. "We don't just have dance supplies," says the storeowner. "We carry gymnastics, skating and fitness wear, in addition to jewelry, purses, scarves and other things that any woman might want."

People love it, says Mall. "A lot of mothers will wander around the accessories and jewelry while their daughters shop for leotards." This has helped her to expand her customer base to include students attending prom or bridal parties.

The jewelry is handmade exclusively for the store by Mall's daughter, Kristen. Both Kristen, 29, and her younger sister Kerri, 27, work alongside their mother. While Mall never expected them to be part of the family business, both girls' talents and expertise in dance and theater more than qualify them for the job. "Both of them are super-talented," she says. "I am so thankful they are part of what I do here."

Mall is grateful not only for her family's enthusiasm, but the opportunity to fulfill her dream. "I've been wanting to do this for years and years and years," she says. "I wanted it to be more of an experience than a store."

It's in the Details

Suzanne Mall describes the décor of Studio B that brings the theme to life

-Color Scheme: mall rejected the typical ballet pink in favor of deep brown and red walls, dark flooring and a pressed tin-style reflective ceiling. Spotlights highlight walls of merchandise, and more modern lamps with bendable necks light up new products and displays. Even the bathroom incorporates the theme-known as Marilyn Monroe's powder room, it has a pedestal sink and images of Marilyn and other girly accessories. "I wanted to make it the powder room of a famous star, and I found a large 3-D image of Marilyn Monroe that looks as if she's coming out at you," explains Mall.

-Front Counter: The centerpiece of the shop is the front counter. With four metallic bronze columns standing on top of it, connected by a wooden canopy, it resembles a ticket counter. In the center hangs an antique-style chandelier. With built-in drawers and cabinets to store customer orders, the counter area quickly became Mall's favorite aspect. "Maybe it is because it's the one thing my husband designed," she says.

-Wall Hangings: Before opening the store, Mall began ordering class movie posters. Next to the front counter the comedy and tragedy masks hang; Mall's husband framed and outlined them in light bulbs. The seven-foot-tall stick-on of Glinda from The Wizard of Oz, embellished with Swarovski crystals, is most popular with children. "Kids love it because they recognize her," says Mall

Just the Facts:

Studio B

206 Lake Street

Hamburg, NY 14075

716-649-5000

Performingartz@aol.com

<http://performingartz.com>

Hours: Monday: 4pm-8pm; Tuesday-Thursday: 10am-8pm; Friday: 10am-7pm; Saturday: 10am-4pm; Sunday: closed

Square Footage: 1,800 square feet

Number of employees: Five

Busiest Time of Day: Late afternoon and evening

Average Purchase: About \$50; usually leotards and tights

Featured brands: AMB Designs, Bloch, Bunheads, Danskin, DiMichi International, Gaynor Minden, GK Elite, Heart & Soul Fashion, Mirella, So Danca, Sugar & Bruno, Tia's Dancewear, Watercolour, Wear Moi

Best-selling Items: Danskin leotards. Says Mall: "They are priced right and I have a large variety of different styles and colors."

Customers' Favorite Part of the Store: "The theater-no question about it," says Mall. "They see the theater seats and say, 'Oh my God, I can't believe it. This is amazing.'"

Biggest Design Mistake: "Picking out a floor and carpet that both had a pattern. They did not coordinate well," says Mall. "I hated it, and when my husband walked in, he said, 'Ugh!' So I had the carpet ripped up and replaced the very next day."