



Phoebe Zaranski

First laying eyes on it I fell in love, but dear god, was I worried my father would never let me out of the house in it.

I was a dancer for eight years. And I mean like a full-time job. My schedule went from catching the bus at 6:30 am, long days at public school until 2:30, a quick hour at home to get changed into a leotard and tights, dancing sometimes until 10:00 at night, and barely fitting in homework before crashing to sleep, only start it all over again the next day. Even Saturdays were all-day rehearsals. And don't forget twice a week I rehearsed for two hours in my school's dance team before heading off to studio classes. It may sound like a chore; it truly was my passion. It made the confining prison-like schooldays manageable, as I knew I could channel and present my true self through dance afterwards. If it weren't for the pandemic, I'd be in the 2024 graduating class of dance majors.

In my 8th grade year, about 5 years in, was when I should've recognized my true passion.

My company and I entered the studio one faithful Saturday morning to be greeted by a row of cardboard boxes. Which could only mean one thing: we were getting costumes today. Just the first glance of these bland boxes would send an adrenaline shock throughout my body. Well, guess I won't be able to sit still until those are open. Keep in mind, we were rarely showed photos of our costumes before they came in, so this was essentially our Christmas day.

We get through a few sets, a few hits and misses, but then comes out a black set of a haltered sports bra and a sheer paneled skirt. Decent enough, appears it won't hinder our movement like some of our other outfits. I went to try it on and a wave washed over me.

Putting on that skirt felt like no other.

Simply walking through the hallways from the bathroom to the classroom felt like I had a magnetic aura coming off me. Ever wear an outfit that makes you feel so confident that you can physically feel your own presence? The elastic waistband contoured my waist perfectly, which was a rarity since I have a long torso.

The slits in the front felt natural for my legs to move through, and feeling the sheer fabric flow and whip around my legs gave me a sense of pride and stature. Something about the fitted yet flowy nature of the garment made me want to dance forever. Nothing ever meant me feel so feminine and willing to be seen by the world.

But a crop-top paired with a see-through skirt and swimsuit briefs? No WAY would my conservative father let me go to competitions wearing it. Maybe I was just an anxious middle schooler, because he was literally fine with it. Even complimented how well it fit me. It wasn't scandalous, but since this was the first outfit I ever wore that bore about 2" of belly skin, I wasn't ready to take any chances. Looking back, maybe I was ready to take some chances. With a skirt that made me feel THAT good about myself, I would've found a way to keep it in my life.

Now this black set was meant to be worn in a specific routine, one by my favorite dance teacher, Jen Graham. She was extremely honest and down to earth. She truly pushed us to questions whatever

predispositions we walked into class with. Dance to Jen Graham was expression, art, therapy, and sport all wrapped into one. As someone who always felt a little different than others, and felt my experience with dance felt different, she always managed to make my experiences heard. Me going on rants on how I could feel the music running through my veins and compelling me to dance, however odd that must've been coming from a young high schooler, she always took it as a prompt for discussion and wanted to deeply learn about how we all experienced the world.

There was one performance, not in relation to the skirt routine, where she gave me a pep talk backstage. She would often come into class with some wild thing that has been on her mind, whether a piece of scientific research or something philosophical to ponder with. Think "Good Will Hunting" kind of teacher. This instance, she recalled this fairytale she once heard about a curvy, crooked tree. One that always felt so different than others, was never loved through use of tire swings or tree houses like all the others. After watching the other trees used and bear fruit their whole life, it watched as every other tree was cut down,

killed, to be made into paper. Not them, though. They were too curvy to be made of good use for paper and was left standing as a unique, surviving landmark. There was a good chunk of time I wanted to get a tattoo of a curvy tree in memory of that moment.

Just for the sake of being associated with her, I feel it proper to refer to that skirt as my "Jen Graham skirt" to those of my friends and family that know where it comes from. I cannot look at that skirt without thinking of her. The feeling of confidence from wearing it, and the memories of feeling empowered by her support are closely intertwined when wearing the Jen Graham skirt.

A few years pass and the pandemic rolls around. Jen Graham's impact stays with me, but there are no more dance classes, and no more costume fitting days. The Jen Graham skirt still sits in a section of my closet that has been consumed by other dance costumes, barely getting to see the light of day again. But I didn't miss dance too much. If anything, glad to finally get a break! Online dance classes weren't worth the hassle, and I started to recall how much I loved those costume days.

Once lockdown started to get lifted, I was so incredibly excited to put together daily outfits now that I could go in public again. Maybe it wasn't the act of dancing I missed, but instead I missed how costumes could transform me into completely different characters. Outfits were styled, days were going by, and I started to feel remorse for all those clothes sitting in my closet collecting dust. I thought some of the leotards could pass for bodysuits in everyday outfits, but what about all the others? Definitely not my tutus, definitely not my sequined musical theater dresses. But some of the pants and skirts maybe!!

I test ran the Jen Graham skirt a few days my freshman year of college, always nervous someone was going to look at me in disgust and go "what in the world are you wearing??" or call me out for wearing a costume in everyday attire. I mean really, who wears a costume to class? But the more I wore it, the more I felt like me. Even all these years later, nothing has captured myself or made me feel present as that skirt does.

To my surprise, wearing it ALWAYS prompted compliments. Of course, if someone is bringing it up,

I would feel inclined to tell them it came from an old dance costume. Not as much to rave about Jen, but it was always nice for those memories with her to pop up when recalling my stories. Still, no harsh comments or picking fun of me for wearing it.

At the end of my freshman year, I was asked to dance in one of the film capstones. Although it had been about two years since I quit dancing, I was quickly wrapped back into weekly rehearsals. It became a necessity to wear the Jen Graham skirt to bring out the confidence and inspiration for movement. Maybe it's my associated memories I have with it, but it ALWAYS put me in the right mindset. Quite literally bringing it full circle, I wore the skirt to the capstone showcase that May, tying up the front panel as a cowl neck and wearing the rest of the sheer fabric over a bright orange maxi skirt.

Not only had this skirt become ingrained in my memories but had truly traveled through life with me and came full circle.

It stood for many different things in my life. It was the

first time I ever felt powerful and elegant in my clothes. It reminds me of Jen Graham and how she pushed us to think critically and make the most of our lives. It was the pioneer for my love for costumes and transforming myself into something different, hence my current career path in costuming. My love for this costume was so strong that I was able to build more confidence in my style and learn to style things separate from their original intention. Looking back, I think in the moment of first trying it on, I could immediately feel its importance. If I could go back in time, however, I would never tell little eighth grade me how important it would become. The career shift from dance to fashion may through her for a loop, but that is something she needed to discover through her love of that garment.

- AS TOLD TO EMILY SPIVACK

Phoebe Zaranski is a senior Fashion Design and Business Communication major wishing to persue costuming. She has designed three plays, one ballet, two feature films, and at least 8 short films.