

Bra Tenders 101

WHAT WE DO

My pledge to the wardrobe and costume community across every facet of entertainment has always been, “my job is to make your job easier”

Let me ask a question- do you know how much effort goes into figuring out which tights work best on which actor for a major Broadway or Hollywood musical production, with dozens of cast members, and twice as many pairs of legs? What you see on stage is the final product, and the result of hundreds of people’s work, “pre-production,” which may be ongoing for years as tours evolve, runs open and close, actors come and go, gain or lose weight...Costumes are never *done*.

The average retail price of a pair of tights is between 8 and 35 bucks a pair for decent quality, fit, finish, look, durability.

Do you know how much work goes into a 25,000 order? PLENTY!

It takes hundreds of transactions, dozens of phone calls and emails, and hours of B2B browsing. It’s networking, and detective work, all of which demands ferocious tenacity. Which, if I am anything at all, is tenacious.

When “tech” is happening, any show, on any day can call us 7 times an hour. Tech is the frenetic period when all aspects of the production appear and flow on and off stage for the first time. Copious notes will help the various departments streamline the way everything works together. How’s the timing, blocking, cues, lines, quick changes, scene and props changes, lighting, all the staging elements that determine the look, feel and energy of the show are worked out in tech.

Sometimes, the designer hates the color of the tights under the lights, next to the leading man’s trousers, so let’s start from scratch for this actor for that track. Everything we had sampled and sourced for the past 8 months doesn't work, they are going in a new direction.

We worked for many months on the show Boop when they were refining and testing it in Chicago in 2023, ahead of a Broadway opening in 2025. We sourced as many skintone

shades of hosiery as we could find in 4 deniers, from very sheer with minimal coverage, a semi sheer, semi opaque, and dense opaque, and we needed them in 8 sizes, including Plus or Queen size, and super tall sizes to fit 6'7 actors. One would think that would not pose much of a problem in the 21st century, but it did.

Women had ditched their pantyhose for bare legs in the 1990s, so the hosiery market had dramatically changed since the days when I started. Over the years, because of that, manufacturers reduced the number of shades from 15 to 4, with it being virtually impossible to find a pretty shade for brown skin that was semi- sheer, had some support to eliminate loose skin jiggles (before that became known as compression wear) which met all the other specifications previously mentioned.

At the beginning of a Broadway production, we meet with the costume design team to get an overview of the show, and hear what they will use in terms of our products, and what they will need me to source. Then, we help them wade through the miasma of underwear, which, like legwear, is tricky, because we need to skin match as close as possible, several different skin tones in any given cast. We can get close with tights. With underwear it's a whole other ball of wax. Part of what has turned into my life work, is finding underwear in more than one shade of "nude".

First, we assemble samples for each actor, usually 2-4 options of each style of hose, so everyone gets a base layer, then their "look" - be it fishnets, sparkles, prints, or some such thing. If there's a cast of 20, and each pair of legs needs 3 kinds of hose, and 3 options of each, well, that takes a whole lotta work by me, and the entire staff. It takes hours to source those samples, and I usually have to buy 3 pair to get 1 sample. If that sample isn't the best of three, I'm stuck with 2 odd pair of money sitting on the shelf. And this pertains to every pair of legs, on almost every stage in NY., tours. Vegas. Disney. Dance. TV, HBO, Netflix, Tyler Perry Studios, Western Costume, yada yada.

Fishnets- Mini, Whale net or maxi net? Professional weight or street wear weight? Spider web or crochet? With seams or without? Striped tights, sure, horizontal or vertical? And dozens of different types of hosiery, in 5 skin shades, in 8 sizes, from petite to 7X. Control top, sheer up support, no support, shiny, matte finish, in deniers from 8 to 100. Stockings and thigh highs, lace tops, no lace, with silicone grippers, no grip, plus size, seams, Cuban heels, no heels.

The trick for me is to find products that meet all the specs, and is a core staple in the line of the manufacturer. Continuity, as they say in the industry. Unlike department stores, who stock a few basics, and many seasonal trend styles, once a show decides

on something, it's in The Bible. The Bible contains the sum total details of everything used in the show, for every character, every act, scene, etc. Heaven help the poor intern who tells a costume designer that a product has been discontinued once it's in The Bible. We keep stock of it for on-demand needs, and don't much like hearing *it's discontinued* either. This is very costly for us, with very fickle customers, who often decide that a "new look is required for the new lead, so we're not using those anymore." And that's how we wound up with a stockroom full of pantyhose that nobody needs.

Then there's the underwear, all the skin pieces, skintimates. Bras, bottoms, shapewear, legwear, whatever period items may be required, whatever else will be worn beneath the clothes, or become part of the costume, whether seen or not.

I get a cast list, with every woman wearing the wrong bra size. Three style options for each actor, in the size they say they are, and the size you think they are. I win. Let's say there's 6 of them who have been cast, more to come. We ask if the actors can come to the shop so they can be properly fit, but they usually can't, so we ask for pictures. Instead we get incomplete and incorrect, and outdated measurements. Every 34B, is actually a 32DD. Once they find a bra that fits, they're shocked. They're titillated.

Before we arrive at the correct size, of course, there is much back and forth, many, many exchanges of goods, a lot of busy-ness, often with very small payoff. Sometimes a production will "memo", or borrow a great deal of goods, and end up with only 1 item. My hope is that Virtual Fittings will allow me to be that proverbial fly on the wall, be able to pull bras that are the right size, the first time. I only need an eyeball on a body to "breastimate" with uncanny accuracy, the correct size, and the bra, that will create the shape the designer desires, for each actor. We carry 86 bra sizes, from around 12 companies, 3-5 styles per, 2 or 3 colors each style. If I buy one bra style, in one color, in a complete 86 size range, it's a minimum of \$4000 wholesale order. If I get 2 colors, black and nude, just one unit each... Big Inventory. Big bucks to maintain levels.

Each actor gets their choice of bottoms, as part of the initial round of fittings. Thongs or g strings, Boy shorts, or girl shorts? brief, bikini, brazilian bikini, cheeky bikini, retro brief, French cut brief? Maternity panties? Yep, we have strapless panties, but better get that Brazilian wax first, they are adhesive.

There is Shapewear, oy, so much shapewear. Same scenario. Hi waist, low rise, long leg, no leg, thong, and all the permutations that exist. Seamless, with bones, no bones, laser cut. Modern or vintage?

When Tyne Daly came for her bra fitting, she used a certain expression about her body shape, I cannot remember it, but she stated that Marty Pakledinaz “told me I was shaped like a fire plug” and wanted her to wear a waist cincher to create a little more definition, and more sass in the ass.

We individually pack each actor’s items in a bag labeled with their name, for all the aforementioned goods. 2 sheer hose, g string or thong, actor choice, one black fishnet, one skin tone fishnet for each, their bra, and any other thing a particular person needs for the first round of fittings. They arrive at the fittings, and everything is there waiting for them. The fittings go as smoothly as a 3-pair-of-support hose pair of legs.

These are services we have never charged for, and are expected to provide, but this type of service is way beyond, oh, they sell bras.

Then there’s the men’s stuff, socks, crew length, over the calf, no seam in the toe, no pressure bands. Nope, that gold toe won’t work. Not the green stripe either. Don’t you have Sea isle cotton, it’s what he prefers. What, no purple sheer tuxedo socks?

Sock garters, suspenders, shirt garters, roll garters. t shirts, boxers, boxer briefs, tighty whities, wife beaters, v neck, crew neck, big and tall. Compression vests and compression shorts. Yep, men are wearing shapewear. Union Suits, not red. Goodman’s busting out of 4X t shirts, what’s the biggest size you have?

We carry 7 styles of dance belts in 7 sizes and 2 colors. We sourced, and also made, Hamilsox, bike shorts for flying monkeys, Tabi socks for those same monkeys. Velvet jazz pants, and French cut dance briefs for Chicago. Ruffle bloomers in just the right shade of dusty pink for all the Glindas, and those cool printed tights in Wicked? We print them.

It’s A lot of goods coming and going, a lot of goods to process, maintain, and keep track of, 8000 different products, from garter clips, to g strings with pearls, to 42 M bras.

all done by 5 women.

We Save the Day

When Sandy Powell calls and says I need 1950’s period garments, I’m doing *The Irishman*, and we don’t have a fitting room free because she didn’t make an appointment, she was amenable to working in a makeshift fitting room, basically a large

closet. Not what she was used to, and we did ask her to make an appointment, but when Chris- her #1- called back to question when we could see them, he failed to make the appointment, so we booked the room for another fitting. We were all surprised by the “impromptu” visit, and we all had a good laugh about being in the closet, ha ha.

The fitting with the actor went well, and after we had finished, while Chris took care of the stuff they wanted to bring to the next fitting, Sandy asked if I could fit her, and I did, into a perfectly sized, perfectly fitting, petite little bra. She accepted our gift graciously, and still calls for bras every once in a while.

We carried a particular bustier for our brides, that the *Stepford Wives* remake loved, back in the early 2000s. The garment created a nipped in waist, and bust shape that was perfect for the 50's style clothes the women wore. We kept some stock, but not nearly as many as needed for the film. The factory had the bustiers assembled, however, the US military had requisitioned every hook and eye, from every source possible, for parachutes, and military equipment. It was the first war after 9/11. Every bra factory couldn't get hooks and eyes. Our vendor had no closures for the bustiers. Huh.

I asked him to call all the stores in the states who carried the line, and to see how many he could round up. I gave him the sizes, and within 5 hours he called with Good News! I have everything. 4 will come from Texas. 12 from here, 6 from there, etc. And I won't charge you shipping because I like what you do.

Jimmy Smits came to meet me because he was impressed that I'd been kind to the wardrobe supervisor at *Anna in The Tropics*, and did something very thoughtful. He kissed my hand and called me “familia”. Swoon.

I helped turn John Glover into an aging drag queen. Hips and butt, waist cincher, boobs, slip, stockings. the designer brought the wig, so they could see the whole ensemble. He sashayed around the shop in his school marm pumps. honestly, how often does one have the chance to prance around in their lingerie in the middle of a shop, in the middle of NYC, in the middle of a day? I came into the shop specifically to work with them because that's the only day they were available. As they were leaving, he quipped, “Lori honey, you've unleashed my inner beast”

Gotta make a 34 A look like 34DD, or gotta make an actor look like he's got Reggie Jackson's butt. Gotta make an actor look 3, 6, or 9 months pregnant.

My mom just had breast surgery, can you help me find a mastectomy bra?

How many Broadway brides have been gifted their wedding dress undies by Bra Tenders?

Got a thong to fit Gandolfini?

We got a call at 7:00 a.m from someone on set: "Hi, I need 43 men's thongs in various nude shades. They're wearing unitards and jumping into the Hudson River in an hour." *I am Legend*. I rushed to the shop, we had all the pieces, and they had them by 8:00. Imagine if I could move at hyperspeed.

How many company managers have we gifted opening night undies to?

Marty Pakledinaz once whisked a curtain into a confection while he was working with an actor in our shop.

"I sat at my desk, scratching my head, up to my boobs in catalogues, swatches, and line sheets, trying to source the perfect pair of casual blue socks with the following specifications from an actor, and the costume designer, for "the magic foot" number of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* running at the Circle in the Square theater on West 50th Street: not too thick, but not too thin; not a dress sock, and not an athletic sock; not wool, 100% cotton; more Midnight Blue than Admiral Blue, but not Oxford blue; no seams in the toes; non binding elastic top, cheap; fast; good quality." - *excerpt from my mammoir, My Life Behind Bras*

What does NO LONGER MANUFACTURED mean when the show is still running?

But what happens when that perfect Wicked green, pantone color, 2421C, was a seasonal fashion color, available in-store, only from August to October for Fall/Winter of that year, what was it, 2001, 2002? And we ordered them in February, for delivery in August, just to have a few on hand for seasonal fashion that would require it..

Happenstance - That one-off, odd shade of not quite lime, not quite emerald, nor acid, was absolutely perfect upon which to print the green snake, and several other Emerald City tights, and then, it's spring/summer 1 of the next year, and all the leftover, unsold green tights have gone off to close-out carriers and discounters, and are unavailable forever more..

And for Wicked, then what?

When they were first costuming, I sat with Alyce Gilbert in my little shop on the 2nd floor of 400 w 42 St and went through a notebook of printed paper, looking at which styles would reflect a main character, or the cast, and secondary characters. Then we looked at colors available, and ordered samples, and ran the prints on the colors. Susan Hilferty made the choices, and 20 years later, a lot has changed in the world of hosiery, but Wicked Worldwide still wants what it wants.

Now, we have to be super creative, so we dye the green from white, or better, greige goods, which are unbleached, and undyed knitted goods, virgin fibers. They are almost impossible to get from a mill, but once in a while, for a large enough order... White tights in general are disappearing from the fashion market because real girls no longer wear white tights.

Every year I cringe when we have to place the annual order. Several small vendors, who catered to specialty markets, and have been our go-to for the last 20 years, have also fallen victim to declining demand. As specialty stores become defunct, the factories and knitting mills that still survive have to make products that mass market uses in order to remain in business. Now they make private label for Target, Walmart, Macy's, etc. Little guys like Bra Tenders can't keep them afloat, so they turn to discounters that can. And that paradigm cuts us out of the loop altogether, because our needs are so niche.

When we do find white tights, we have to test a couple of deniers, usually 30 or 40, to see which takes the dye best, with the truest color. Then, once Alyce approves the color, we have to run a test of the print on the newly dyed green tights. There's many tests and tweaks before we perfect the finished product. It takes months of back and forth, So we keep at it until we find the best combination of fiber, color, print. I have dozens of odd shades of green tights, all the rejects, none quite alike, sitting in my stockroom. They are not quite Shrek, not quite Kermit, and not quite Elphaba.

Because of a seasonal fashion color purchased at a discount store, and loved by the designer even though it was unavailable, we dyed a particular shade of burgundy sheer pantyhose for The Producers for Usherettes. So much drama over the color. All for 2 characters in one short scene. I found 2 boxes of them as we are cleaning out old stock. We called that William's red.

I discovered and perfected, and now will resurrect the Broadway tight, formerly known as Blue Heaven, a Broadway staple for 40 years!. That has been my life work. As hosiery goes obsolete, mills turn their machines to socks and compression wear to remain viable. In 2019, our hosiery knitting mill that we worked with for 20 years, and for 20 years prior when I was an employee at S&S, and which produced legendary style 5830, of which we kept hundreds of dozen in stock, with and without 2 choices of seam colors, went out of business without so much as a bye. OUCH.

I spent most of 2019 working on a replacement for that, and had shown some promising samples to wardrobe supes along the way. It took 7 months of testing different features before we hit the winner. The supes had 6'2 dancers test them, they raved, yes, when can we have it? I had orders on my desk for 80 dozen, accounted for by Wicked, Moulin, Betelgeuse, Mean Girls, and we were waiting to hear from Munchkinland, and Lincoln Center. If LCT and Munchkins wanted in, the order would be 140 dozen. Each color dye lot had to consist of 60 dozen, we were starting with 3 shades. I had called the rep I'd worked with over the year to create these to Broadway standards, 2 days before we shut down because of Covid, to place the order. OUCH

I developed our ever popular line of modesty wear for men in 3 skin colors, and 6 styles when Rick Kelly asked for a Nude cock sock the same day as another wardrobian wanted a nude boxer brief to cover a certain British actor's somewhat flabby butt. 20 years ago! Our Houdini is still one of most popular products, and now we have Houdini No Strings as well. Now you see it, now you don't.

We provided 50 rubber waist cinchers for the men in the movie The Aviator, right after 9/11. We had a tight deadline, and it was coming from South America... and it was right after 9/11. Can you say closed air space boys and girls? Nonetheless, we did what we do, and because someone knew someone, who knew someone, we were granted special paperwork, the goods were released from customs, and sent by FedEx, and the production got their goods within the deadline.

I can't find it anywhere! I need it yesterday!

If I can't find it, it doesn't exist. I have 40 years of contacts and connections in US and elsewhere.

I once got a call for 6 canary yellow unitards with hoods, fingers, and feet. When I said we can special order them, ready in about 10 days, the customer said, oh no, I need them now.

What about finding the 20 year discontinued style of whatever for a female actor of a certain age?

Need a pair of socks for Ricky Roma, just one scene where you'll actually see it, but somehow this sock will explore the psyche of the character as portrayed by Liev Schreiber.

Can you get kilt socks in brown?

I'm working with La Reve and we need a men's bikini, in nude, that holds up in water, and dries quickly. We need 48. By Friday. (On Wednesday)

Do you know how many times I've bailed out a frantic wardrobe supe who ordered the khaki socks online 2 weeks ago, and tonight's the opening, and the socks ain't here. Help.

While we are in service to our clients, sometimes we're mistaken for servants

Nobody wanted to pay for the 6 hours I wasted sourcing samples of 3 shades of burgundy, wine and maroon ribbed sweater tights, which they couldn't find anywhere, (because they haven't been in style for at least 15 years), but which I found, hehe, and then, they ordered nothing.

How about memos of borrowed goods that are gone for 3 weeks with 18 items, and nothing is bought. And the customer wants another 18 piece memo.

We fired The Met Opera.

Twice

2 years in a row they took memos totalling 20,000 a year, and purchased less than 200. That is a damn poor ROI.

Nobody compensates me when whomever ordered the 16 pieces of 44D longline bra, (or any other item we don't carry) a special order, returns it, even though we are very, very clear that all special orders are final sale. There's always a very big But....

6 Saudi princesses came to us for undergarments before going to spend a ton at Mark Ingram Atelier, on gowns for formals. The salon called and asked us to give their clients the special treatment. After a gaggle of bodyguards secured the place, 2 fitters and

myself worked with 2 at a time, and they mistook us for their servants, just dropping garments into a growing mountain on the floor, for an entire day from noon to 7. They all talked at the same time, across rooms, through the walls. They physically pushed me out of the way, instead of saying excuse me and asking me to move out of the way. That's 21 labor hours, not including the items we had to still order and ship, and the massive cleanup from the branado.

"Hi, can you tell me what Rosie O'Donnell wears? I'm at Bloomingdales and want to pick something up for her event tonight."

"Hi, I'm doing a photoshoot with Rhianna. We'd like to memo some panties." (I'm sorry, Rihanna can buy her own fucking panties)

"Hi, I need black opera gloves for Chita. Tomorrow. (It's Saturday night at 11:00 p.m)

"Yeah, we just get 'em from Amazon, it's easier. (If we deliver the same day for the same price, why is Amazon first choice?)

Here come the brides.

(All the costume tricks, work under this costume too)

All with their preconceived notions of having a mythical undergarment that is strapless, backless to the butt crack, that will hoist their 34H cups, all while slimming their waist, butt, thighs. This would be akin to telling an architect, "just build the front of the building"

- The cast and crew members who need those special somethin-somethins for the Oscars. Or Tony's. Or Kennedy Center.
- We finally found a strapless bra for Liliias White, after 20 years of searching.
- Mothers of the brides, maids, 90 year old granny who hates bras, but whom the bride insists wear one for the occasion or "the pictures will be ruined."
- Or the actor who brought her 87 year old mother for a bra fitting for her birthday because she'd never had one. Then, took her skydiving the next day.
- Teen girls who need their first bra, with poor self esteem issues over having big breasts at an early age. I empathize. I was that girl. Marlo Thomas is our customer too.
- Trans women and men like the privacy of our space, and welcoming, discreet, inclusive environment

- Drag queens require less discreet, but also appreciate being able to transform in our space.
- Jane Krakowski!

This is what I do. If you know someone else who does this, I would very much like to meet them.

It's a matter of keeping my word.

I will provide the solution, and bend over backwards to find a thing, until I know for sure it's a fools errand. It's a matter of honor for me, this is my work.

I like coming to the rescue, and being an everyday hero.

Costume makers can't do what they do, until I do what I do, first.

We start with a design team, so by the time it gets to a costume shop, the tough work has been done. I make the clothes look how the crafters want them to, and the designer expects them to, on a perfectly normal, imperfect body.

I am a Creator, a Generator, and I created Bra Tenders to uplift and empower people to look, feel, and be their best. Including people on stage, backstage, or in the pit. Bra Tenders, and the way we take care of our entire community, is MY intangible creation.

Bra Tenders has outlasted Barney's, Lord and Taylor, and Neiman Marcus.

And the big fucker, Amazon. It's easy to point and click, sure, but we have always delivered on time, at comparable prices. I can't say it didn't hurt that "support your vendors" had become the whine, "but Amazon..."

We contribute our love and lingerie to BCEFA.

We support Free The Girls, Dress for Success, Women In Need

We Uplift, support and empower women to look, feel and be their best.

Home of the Bra Mitzvah

