

Debutante: Looking for The Dress



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"The answer we look for is politics, religion and sex," he says.

Couples may apply for the ball together, but they are warned that they may not be assigned to dance together (the three boyfriend-girlfriend pairs this year are), because Ms. Krulick arranges them according to height and colouring, in order to get a uniform look. Things can get sticky if a relationship dissolves before the night of the ball, but Ms. Krulick enjoys watching the romances that develop while teenagers learn to waltz.

"They get together to be partners and the next thing you know, a relationship is formed," she says, adding, "I haven't seen that happen this year so far."

The ball organizers estimate that for the guys, a tuxedo, black shoes, white wrist-length gloves and a fresh haircut will cost \$350. For the girls, a white wedding-type gown, long white satin gloves, white shoes, hairstyle and make-up are ballparked at \$400 to \$800, although some spend vastly more than that on custom-made bridal gowns.

Mr. Zachar admits that \$400 is the "super-optimistic deal scenario," but says he has never heard of anyone who was unable to participate in the ball for financial reasons.

I accompany three of the girls on a shopping expedition to

Anyone between 16 and 18 is welcome, but the reality is that they (or their parents) must be able to pay for the evening's finery, and only a select group is even aware of the event.

Justina McCaffrey Haute Couture Bridal Boutique on Sussex Drive. When I arrive, Emily Armstrong, Verena Schleich and Rosemary Lazier, all 17, are looking somewhat dazed as they stand before the mirrors, mired in drifts of creamy-white silk.

"Wow, I didn't realize how big it was," Ms. Armstrong marvels as she emerges from a dressing room in a white pouf. She sways back and forth, testing the dress's suitability for dancing.

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"I love how they make us look skinny," Ms. Schleich laughs, peering into the mirror. (Actually, none of the debutantes needs a dress to make her look as lithe as a

Disney princess.)

Eventually, Ms. Armstrong tries on a gorgeous Grecian-looking gown. It fits the budget her grandparents gave her, it looks like it was made for her, and when the saleswoman tells her the dress is called Amelie, it seals the deal.

"Wow, that's kind of scary," she says, making plans to return the following day to pick it up.

I begin hunting for my dress at the Cedar Closet, a bridal and consignment boutique that has hundreds of dresses in such pristine condition that it's impossible to tell which ones were previously worn. Glennis Aris, who runs the store with her daughter,

Danah, is exactly the sort of help you want when shopping for a princess dress on a budget: funny, honest and totally without snobbery.

I initially had my heart set on a tulle skirt, probably as a result of thwarted childhood ballerina dreams. However, the store has only one such dress at the moment, and it somehow makes me look like a chunky, disgruntled fairy godmother. (Ms. Lazier — a diminutive Irish dancer — later purchased the dress, and it looks gorgeous on her tiny frame.)

Finally, I try on a strapless satiny dress that has subtle flowers stitched into it and elegant,

flowing lines. It is nothing like I imagined The Dress to be, but it looks great, and the longer I preen in front of the mirror, the more I like it.

Of course, I then try on seven more dresses and go to two more stores, neither of which have anything remotely suitable, before returning to the Cedar Closet, five minutes before closing, to buy that dress before someone else did.

On the night of the Viennese Ball, it is up to the debutantes and cavaliers to get the party going. After we dance the Polonaise, we go to pre-assigned tables, where we are to ask guests to dance. The year Jean Chrétien and his wife, Aline, attended the ball, Mr. Zachar was assigned to the head table and went straight for the prime minister's wife when it was time to dance.

"She was really nice — and a good dancer," he says.

In one of our last rehearsals, Ms. Krulick gives us a primer on dance floor etiquette, and teaches us a simplified version of the Viennese Waltz, which we will dance with the guests. She demonstrates a guest smiling manically at us as someone who probably wants to dance, and someone shrinking away in horror as a guest better left to their own devices.

"The idea is, you don't want to do this," she says, miming dragging someone like a sack of potatoes to the dance floor. "That's not very nice."

Ms. Krulick shows the debutantes how to "back lead" a partner who isn't so sure on his feet, and cautions that we will have to dance with guests of all skill levels.

"The ladies might get a guy who really knows how to dance, so just hold on for the ride. Close your eyes if starts to get too dizzy," she says.

We swap partners and role-play making dance floor conversation, which we will have to sustain for

songs up to eight minutes long. After what feels like an eternity of awkward small talk, Ms. Krulick tells us we have just succeeded in entertaining our guests for exactly 60 seconds.

"What do you do if you ask someone if they're enjoying themselves and they say no?" Ms. Schleich asks, sounding genuinely worried. Ms. Krulick tells her to switch topics and carry on as best she can.

We run through the Polonaise and Ländler over and over. The hardest task is performing the dances in elegant silence, stifling the giggles, muffled curses and groans that accompany the inevitable missteps. No one talks about anxiety over the dancing, but there are a lot of nervous questions about practical details.

"How are we supposed to go to the bathroom?" Caroline Boulos, 16, asks suddenly. By the nervous laughter that follows, it is clear that this problem just occurred to a lot of debutantes, and no one knows how to solve it.

Mr. Zachar offers the cavaliers tips on how to fix a baggy tuxedo shirt by pulling it down through the fly, but reminds them not to do this in front of a table of inevitably horrified guests. From the back, one of the guys asks if they can wear tuxedo T-shirts instead.

Mr. Zachar offers an extremely fake guffaw and then deadpans, "No."

Ms. Krulick runs through the plans for the morning of the ball, when we will have just one chance to rehearse with the orchestra, instead of the CD we've been following for six weeks.

From somewhere deep in the crowd of debutantes and cavaliers, a small voice asks "OK, but they're playing the same song, right?"

A NIGHT AT THE BALL: SHANNON PUTS HER NEW WALTZING SKILLS TO THE TEST — IN FRONT OF HUNDREDS OF GUESTS AT THE SOCIAL EVENT OF THE YEAR. FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS IN TOMORROW'S CITIZEN.



PHOTOS BY WAYNE CUDDINGTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

With a beautiful white satin gown, elbow-length gloves, strappy high heels, elegant hair and perfect makeup, Shannon is ready for tonight's Viennese Ball at the National Gallery. The question is, will those dance lessons pay off?