

## **Designers make a seamless leap; Opening sewing studio was more than a notion Partners met working on the Lion King; [ONT Edition]**

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**Full Text** (845 words)

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The group of girls sitting around a large worktable, needle and thread in hand, collectively sigh when one of their parents enters the brightly lit studio.

It's the last afternoon of a four-day fashion camp at "Sew be it!" studio and no one wants to go home. Each of the campers has designed and made their own skirt and some still have to be hemmed, decorated, tried on and modelled in an impromptu fashion show.

"The girls are so talented," said Dilys Tong, of the eight girls who range in age from 11 to 16. "Some hadn't even sewn before. But look at their skirts! Aren't they pretty?"

"Sew be it!" studio, which opened on June 1 on Yonge St. near Eglinton Ave., is the realization of Tong's lifelong dream to own her own business.

Tong and business partner Lynette Schlichting, who met while producing wardrobe for the Lion King five years ago, offer classes in sewing, knitting, quilting and even in hat and corset design. But their sewing school isn't just for those interested in a professional career in theatre wardrobing.

Tong believes everyone is an artist but our hectic lifestyles leave little room for creativity and little time for imagination.

"It (sewing) is a medium, a way to express yourself," she said. "You're creating a three-dimensional art form. You're sculpting with fabric.

"For the longest time, people have been associating sewing and knitting to a little old lady sitting in a basement. We want to change that mentality. We want to promote self-expression and creativity."

She sees "Sew be it!" as a place where imagination and camaraderie meet, where people will take time out to be creative and spend time with friends.

"Sew be it!" is planning special events for Friday evenings, ranging from clothing swaps to seminars on theatrical design to showcasing the art of sewing in different cultures. Tomorrow, Tong and Schlichting are hosting a Sari Night complete with Indian food and lessons in sari design. While all the events prove to be informative, Tong says they are ways to build a community in the bustling city.

Tong studied theatrical costuming at the International Academy of Design in Toronto and went on to work on costumes for the Mirvish Productions of the Lion King, the Producers and Mamma Mia.

She was laid off last year when theatre attendance fell in Toronto after SARS and took that as a

sign to open her own sewing studio. She hasn't looked back.

"I always wanted my own business," she said. "I like the challenges. The hours are longer now than when I was working for somebody else, but it's a labour of love. When I see people walk out feeling happy, it makes my day. And I'm a big yapper, I love meeting people."

Tong and Schlichting met while working on the Lion King in 2000. Producing costumes for the show was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, said Tong, who worked on the costumes for the hyenas and jungle girls.

"You're almost sculpting the costumes, the designs are so complicated," she said. All the fabrics used in the costuming were dyed and hand painted and Tong said she continually had to use her imagination to solve design problems with the costumes.

Passing on their skills to students comes with its own challenges. "It's a bit like being an actor on stage because you're on for those three hours in front of an audience," said Schlichting, who apprenticed at the Stratford Festival for about eight years before working for most of the Toronto theatre companies, including Livent, the Canadian Opera Company, Canadian Stage and Mirvish Productions. She also teaches men's tailoring at Ryerson University.

Colleges and universities are cutting courses in theatrical costuming and there is a need to train people in the art of real theatrical costume design and so they offer hat and corset design. There's an art to making a corset, said Tong. "A corset should be beautiful on the outside and on the inside," she said as she ran her hands down a corset's seams. "They should be so beautiful that you want to frame it and hang it on your wall."

The "Sew be it!" studio's seven-week corset-making course for beginners started yesterday. Students learn how to fit, sew and bone a corset they can wear and show off to friends.

Along with weekly classes that range from beginner sewing to corset making, to silk painting, Tong and Schlichting offer private lessons to people with all levels of sewing expertise.

The studio is also a place for family to come together to make sentimental gifts such as a quilt for an expectant mother or a handmade gift for a bride, said Tong. A handmade item, she adds, has a value that never fades.

"You can't buy that sentimental value. That handmade piece of art becomes priceless."

### **[Illustration]**

KATE LEBLANC toronto star Theatrical wardrobe designers Dilys Tong, left, and Lynette Schlichting with corsets made at their new sewing studio "Sew be it!" at Yonge St. and Eglinton Ave.

Credit: Toronto Star