

In Fashion: Do's and don'ts for black tie nights

by Sharon_Mosley

It's a scene out of anybody's grim nightmare before Christmas. The invitation reads "black tie requested" and you start hyperventilating.

LITTLE BLACK DRESS - The little black dress is always an evening classic. This updated version for the holiday season is by designer Isaac Mizrahi for Target. CNS Photo courtesy of Isaac Mizrahi. "Just exactly what store were you in the other day when you saw that perfect little black dress?" "Why haven't you had those buttons repaired on that tuxedo jacket that's been hanging in your closet for the past year?"

For those of us who don't have dozens of glittering gowns and dapper dinner jackets in your closets, the black tie events are enough to often push the fashion panic button. It can hurl us into the nearest mall at peak holiday time when there's nothing we'd rather do than sit in front of a fire and drink a toast to our wonderful collection of evening clothes we've put together over the years; they are ready to party at a moment's notice.

So how do you keep your style spirits soaring through the next few weeks? Here are some tips from Sherrie Mathieson, author of "Forever Cool: How to Achieve Ageless, Youthful and Modern Style" (Thompson Peak Publishing).

For the Party Girls:

- Do ask yourself some tough questions: How is my neckline, my bust line? How are my shoulders? Can I get away with bare arms? Think about - Will I be chilly? Will I be standing all night or dancing?

- Don't do dowdy. If your evening clothes shout matronly "Mother or Grandmother of the Bride," then it's time for an update. You don't want to look like you're going to the prom either. Ditto for overdone hair and makeup. If he can't run his fingers through your hair, then you need a new do.

- Do go for elegant and practical separates. They can be dressed up or down. A monotone color palette may be your best bet. Minimalist pieces in one color are very slimming and can be easily accessorized.

- Don't go overboard with large accessories when you're dressing for a black tie event. The big glasses and the big purses should stay at home. And the boots if you're wearing a cocktail dress. Ditto the fake gold lame anything.

For the Party Guys:

- Do think Cary Grant. It's OK to go classic with a single-breasted black tuxedo, a peaked lapel in lightweight wool, a black satin bow tie (the kind you tie yourself) and black leather tuxedo shoes.

- Don't do the "Gangsta" look with the harsh black shirt underneath the tuxedo. This hard-edged look will never qualify as a fashionable departure from classic style.

"When men attempt to be innovative," says Mathieson, "they often end up looking like 'The Usual Suspects.'"

- Do get slightly less formal with an understated modern version of the classic tuxedo. Pair a black satin necktie with a white dress shirt and sleek leather shoes.

- Don't be afraid to invest in a classic tuxedo. Owning a tuxedo is always preferable to renting one.

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