



One Skirt Truly Stands Out

ARTICLE

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FRENCH designer Christian Lacroix's latest made-to-measure gowns are airy as souffles, whipped up to perfection in feather-light fabrics and cotton candy colors. With their ostrich-trimmed hems and sparkly puffball skirts, these balletic frocks of organza and tulle might well be dubbed tutu chic.

Indeed, the tutu – the archetypal ballerina costume – has much in common with high-end couture. Not only are fine tutus beautiful garments, but, like elaborately conceived dresses, they can take long hours to construct and can cost thousands of dollars.

Mostly, though, the tutu is an aesthetic signifier. It sets off a dancer's long legs as she executes the iconic poses and combinations of steps that define her art form.

On June 20, millions of TV viewers will see 21st century versions of the costume when PBS' "Great Performances" broadcasts the latest American Ballet Theatre "Swan Lake," designed in 2000 by Zack Brown. "I love dancing in a tutu," says ABT principal Gillian Murphy, the production's Swan Queen. "If it's light and beautiful, it creates part of the magic." That spell-weaving has been going on for nearly two centuries. With a name probably derived from the French children's word tu-tu – meaning "bottom" – the tutu is a product of evolution that dates from 1832. That was the year that Marie Taglioni, dancing the title role of Paris Opera's production of "La Sylphide," wowed audiences by performing on pointe (also a novel development then) wearing a costume credited to Eugene Lami.

Dubbed a "romantic" tutu, that costume consisted of a tight-fitting bodice, which left the neck and upper shoulders bare, and a bell-shaped skirt made of layers of stiffened tarlatan, or highly starched sheer cotton muslin that gave the illusion of fullness without being weighty. The skirt fell halfway between Taglioni's knees and ankles.

By 1870, other Italian ballerinas, bent on perfecting pointe work, had begun wearing tutus cut above the knee. Known as "classical" tutus and made famous by such ballets as "Swan Lake," these garments allowed more freedom for leg and footwork. Then, when ballet entered the 20th century, the tutu became even shorter, with more layers of tarlatan added for support. By the 1940s, the insertion of wire hoops enabled the skirt to stand out from the hips, although tulle, a stiffened silk, nylon or rayon fabric, soon replaced tarlatan, making the addition of a hoop more a creative decision than a necessity.

Still, there's a lot more to the tutu than, well, tulle. The exterior splendor is made possible by an interior that not only supports the dancer (the upper portion, or bodice, which allows "give" and enables the ballerina to move

freely) but absorbs perspiration, while the voluptuousness of the skirt ingeniously conceals the panties.

Living history

Who are today's tutu makers, the behind-the-scenes artisans plying their craft without benefit of much modern technology? Sixtysomething Jeanne Nolden is one – a native Southern Californian and retired medical secretary whose fingertips constantly crack from hours spent pulling needles through tulle. She came to tutu-making because of her love of ballet.

“People of my generation learned to sew,” explains Nolden amid bolts of fabric at Montclair's Inland Pacific Ballet studio, where she's been making that company's costumes since 1995 under the auspices of artistic director Victoria Koenig. “I learned by doing. My first tutu was for my daughters' recitals.”

Nolden says it takes her about 60 hours to make a basic tutu, with 25 to 30 yards of fabric required per garment. Working from her own patterns, she begins with the bodice, cutting out 16 panels (half are for the lining) before inserting boning. Like that in a corset, the latter can be either bendable metal or flexible polyester. Nolden uses polyester, encasing it first or sewing it directly into the bodice.

But let's face it: If it doesn't fit, the ballerina can't acquit herself properly. Says San Francisco Ballet principal dancer Tina LeBlanc: “If the material doesn't give, in combination with the boning, the bodice can restrict your movements, making it very difficult to get the feeling of freedom that you're used to.”

Thus, before constructing a skirt, Nolden painstakingly bastes the bodice panels together by machine and, with fishing line, sews as many as 20 double hooks and eyes onto the back of the garment. At that point, she's ready to fashion the basque, the piece connecting the bodice and the panty and to which the tutu is attached. Cut on the bias and generally made of Lycra, it too is lined.

Beading and ornamentation, if needed, are then attached to the bodice (jeweled overlays can be removed) before work commences on the skirt. For a romantic tutu, five layers of tulle is the norm, with each layer cut to about a 36-inch width and about 25 yards of fabric required in total. The classical tutu is even fuller, calling for nine to 12 supporting layers (each cut progressively wider), with a final top layer serving as the decorative one.

LeBlanc quips: “It must have been a man who thought up the tutu, which is such a funny concept when you break it down – especially making a skirt stand straight out.”

Nolden says the reason a tutu skirt sticks out from the waist is the way the layers are cut, with the stiffness depending on the amount of tulle used. And though this portion of the tutu can be taken to a pleater, Nolden, whose precision, arm strength and dexterity are formidable, generally sews in the many layers of net herself, albeit by machine.

“It can be very tedious, time-consuming, frustrating and difficult,” she acknowledges, “and you vow, ‘Never again’ – until the next time. It is truly a labor of love.”

The gold standard of tutu design is Barbara Karinska, a Russian-born emigre to the United States who died in 1983 at 96, having executed spectacular costumes for dance, film, theater and opera. Karinska brought grace and imagination to all she did, whether outfitting Gypsy Rose Lee with a flower-crocheted G-string or dressing Laurence Olivier for Broadway.

A formidable legacy

Karinska’s Hollywood career flourished, earning her an Oscar in 1949 for the costumes of “Joan of Arc,” but her heart belonged to dance, especially to the New York City Ballet and its founding choreographer, George Balanchine. In the course of dressing more than 75 of Balanchine’s productions, Karinska originated the “powder puff” tutu in 1950, its soft skirt distinguishing it from the flat, horizontal “pancake” tutu, whose skirt was shaped by a hoop.

Now housed in the basement of Lincoln Center in the wardrobe department of City Ballet, her surviving handiwork – about 9,000 costumes – is presided over by Holly Hynes, herself a designer and the company’s director of costumes.

Hynes says a heavily ornamented tutu costume that Karinska designed in 1967 for Balanchine’s “Jewels” cost about \$5,600 to reconstruct for a 1997 revival. But Koenig of Inland Pacific Ballet notes that “the great thing about a tutu, depending on the fabric and the way it’s constructed, is it can be used for many years.”

Special handling, however, is definitely required.

“When they’re not being worn, to help them stay stiff, short tutus are hung upside down,” Hynes explains.

Millinery spray starch can also be used to help a tutu retain its shape, while layers of tulle are often replaced when a skirt loses its stiffness. To keep the garments fresh, many are dry-cleaned after every three or four wearings; hand-washable costumes are typically laundered after each performance.

Two-time Tony Award winner Willa Kim has designed costumes for opera, television, theater and more than 125 ballets. In 1944, she was hired to assist Karinska in Hollywood for the film “Lady in the Dark.”

“She was an enormous influence on me,” recalls Kim. “What was wonderful about working with her was that she had worked with visual artists, like Salvador Dali, in addition to great choreographers and directors.”

Though Kim’s dance costumes are not traditional tutus, she appreciates the garment.

“The tutu is an invention that belongs to and represents ballet, and though it has been copied and has influenced designers and ready-to-wear, it is still an invention for the ballet and a remnant of the Romantic age,” she says. “There are a lot of us who yearn for that kind of romanticism. It appeals to something in our nature.”

The downside of beauty

Romance, however, can occasionally take a wrong turn. The first known tutu tragedy occurred in 1863, when 21-year-old Emma Livry, rehearsing for the Paris Opera Ballet, brushed her romantic tutu against a gaslight, setting it afire and causing her death.

Happily, there have been no such calamities for ABT’s Murphy, 26, whose mother began making tutus for her when she was 11.

“Tutus are more of a problem for men,” she says. “The guys who partner us have to get used to the distance a stiff tutu creates between two people. A man also needs to know where the ballerina needs to be by the feel of it, because the tutu limits his vision as far as where her supporting leg is.”

Los Angeles-based danseur Arsen Serobian, 26, who trained in Moscow with the Bolshoi Ballet Academy, says improperly made tutus can be especially problematic. “If there is a gap in the fabrics,” explains Serobian, who has also endured scratches and face burns from tutus, “your fingers can get stuck. It happened when I was holding a partner who began doing pirouettes. My fingers got stuck, and I sprained them.”

The term “hooking up,” in fact, acquired new meaning when international star Vladimir Malakhov once partnered Amanda McKerrow in a performance of ABT’s “Coppelia.”

“At the end of the adagio, a hook from my sleeve stuck in her dress,” recalls Malakhov. “I twisted my arm lifting her behind my back, and when I put her down, I couldn’t lift my arm because I was stuck to her costume. We were like a figure eight, and it didn’t matter what position I took – we were stuck to each other. So I ripped open my sleeve and we did the variation.”

Oscar Wilde insisted that fashion is “a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.” But it seems unlikely that the tutu, with its storied history and beautiful complexities, will go that route any time soon.

“It has persisted as a beloved silhouette for more than 100 years and retained its shape,” says Kim. “In the torso of the costume, you can insinuate modern or stretch fabrics and things, but the silhouette has been set, is appreciated and happens to serve dance wonderfully.”

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