

New Wave Tutus

By Jocelyn Anderson

Tradition makes way for out-there designs by some of ballet's top tutu designers.

Australian Ballet's Justine Summers in *Divergence*, designed by Leyonhjelm

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— Stephen Galloway

Plywood. Steel frames. Nylon-rod. Air conditioning filter mesh. Wire. The list sounds more like the contents of a contractor's workroom than a tutu maker's studio. But these days, the tutu aesthetic is changing to include many modern elements. In some cases, designers have moved away from the tulle and ruffles that traditionalists love in favor of atypical—and even abstract—images, showing off an artistic daring not realized with the standard ballet uniform. But rather than veer completely from the tutu shape, designers have adopted it, molding it into something new and never seen before.

That was Stephen Galloway's mission when he designed the disk-like tutus for Ballett Frankfurt's *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*. "I wanted the circular tutu, but didn't want the traditional shape. I wanted it to stand straight out," says Galloway, a

principal dancer with Ballett Frankfurt who has been

designing costumes—including wooden and paper suits—for about six years. To effect the shape, tulle is stapled to four circular wires and covered with stretch velvet. The result was startling to audiences when the ballet premiered in 1996. "The audience literally burst into laughter. They were not used to seeing it," Galloway says.

They're not laughing anymore now that the Paris Opéra Ballet, Dutch National Ballet and San Francisco Ballet have all danced William Forsythe's *Vertiginous*, using versions of the detachable, low-fitting tutus for each production. The out-there designs have actually proved vital to the piece. "We tried it without the tutus on the third or fourth time, but it didn't work,"

Boston Ballet's Pollyana Ribeiro in *The Four Seasons*, designed by Loquasto

Jim McFarlane

Farnsworth/Ballock Photography

The Anatomical Theatre's Robynne Gravenhorst in her tutu for 2081

Galloway says. "It ended up being more like a Balanchine piece."

Ironically for a ballet classic, *Cinderella* has also inspired modern costuming among different companies. Lyon Opéra Ballet's production, complete with an unusual wardrobe created by Spanish designer Monserrat Casanova in 1984, is still going strong with its doll-like masks and unadorned tutus. The company will bring the ballet, choreographed by Maguy Martin, to the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, in 2002. Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo unveiled Jean-

SFB's Katita Waldo in *The Vertiginous Thrill Of Exactitude*, designed by Galloway

Christophe Maillot's *Cinderella* in 1999. "The shape of the *Cinderella* costumes relates to an imaginary society of the past," says designer Jérôme Kaplan. "It had to look somehow very

unreal so the story would not be stuck with the specific codes of a particular country or century." Kaplan deviated from regular conventions by utilizing see-through materials and exaggerated tutus, often worn without tights, to illustrate characters' personalities. For example, transparent tutus appear artificial and help contrast with the genuine Cinderella, who wears light colors for her purity.

Appropriately, Australian Ballet also deviated from the norm with tutus made of nylon air conditioning filter mesh that was spray painted black for *Divergence*, which premiered in 1994. The costumes were made to give the dancers a strong, arrogant and tall look. With a two-page list of adjectives and mandates from choreographer Stanton Welch, designer Vanessa Leyonhjelm used her background in art to fashion the self-supporting tutus.

Robynne Gravenhorst, director of Chicago's The Anatomical Theatre, choreographed *2081*, based on the Kurt Vonnegut short story *Harrison Bergeron* about a society where everyone is equalized by restrictive attire. She came up with the concept behind its costuming—a wooden tutu—with the help of sculptor Matthew Daly. "The idea was to use materials that were as incongruous to the traditional qualities of the ballerina as possible," says Gravenhorst, who attached 16 plywood "petals" to steel frames to create the octagonal tutu. "Rigidity, weight and noisiness are properties of the materials we have chosen. Grace, lightness, suppleness and silent landings are qualities that are completely compromised by these garments!"

Choreographer Christopher Wheeldon and designer Santo Loquasto discovered the same thing when attempting to assemble a cage-like tutu made from nylon-rod and Rigeline for Boston Ballet's performance of *The Four Seasons* last year. "While the materials are flexible, it became obvious to Chris that this somewhat rigid tutu was not compatible with the partnering in his choreography," reports Charles Heightchew, director of costumes and wardrobe for Boston Ballet. "Chris and Santo decided to go with a more traditional fabric skirt with an overlay of trim, which turned out beautifully." Proving that edgy costumes don't always have to look like they belong in a sci-fi movie—slight variations in design can make a dramatic difference. ■

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