

# Tutus Today

## Men At Work

By Jocelyn Anderson



Courtesy of Zurich Ballet

**Dirk Segers**  
in Zurich Ballet's  
production of Heinz  
Spoerli's . . . *Der  
Sonne Leuchten ist  
ihr Kleid*

A beautiful tutu can accentuate the most traditional of classical choreography and the edgiest contemporary of work. But from the male standpoint, tutus also represent a seldom-discussed danger.

Male dancers have been grappling with partnering issues from the early days of the tutu, when their sole job was to provide support to the ballerinas. Romantic tutus gave way to shorter versions around the end of the 19th century, but as men have become stars in their own right, they have continued to face the problem of the tutu when working with

their female partners.

"The tutu is a trick," says Viktor Plotnikov, principal dancer with Boston Ballet. "You don't see her legs. So basically you have to feel with your hands where the center is going to be, whether she is on her leg or not."

This skill is something boys learn young. Exercises in partnering class allow them to identify what it feels like when they place the girl on and off her center. "I still remember my first class when I was standing behind the girl," says Plotnikov, who studied at the Kiev-Ukraine School and the St. Petersburg

Ballet Academy in Russia. "Then, with experience, you find that it's very easy controlling a dancer."

One important tip—other than practice, practice, practice—is to hold the girl lightly. Let the natural movement take over; never "hug" your fellow dancer. "You want to free her as much as possible," Plotnikov says, "so that everybody sees her, but they don't really see the trick of partnering."

Tutu training doesn't always alleviate the terror male dancers can experience when they see a costume for the first time. Even the simplest tulle tutu can scratch skin. So imagine what Dirk Segers, a soloist with the Zurich Ballet in Switzerland, thought when he first saw drawings of the tutu for Heinz Spoerli's . . . *Der Sonne Leuchten ist ihr Kleid*. They depicted a tutu made of barbed wire. "In the beginning, I thought, 'Oh, my God, this is going to hurt,'" Segers says. "But it's made of iron, and the spikes are actually rubber, so in the end it's really heavy, but there's no real danger." Except for a few scratches, Segers' only other complaint was that the costume messed up his hair each night.

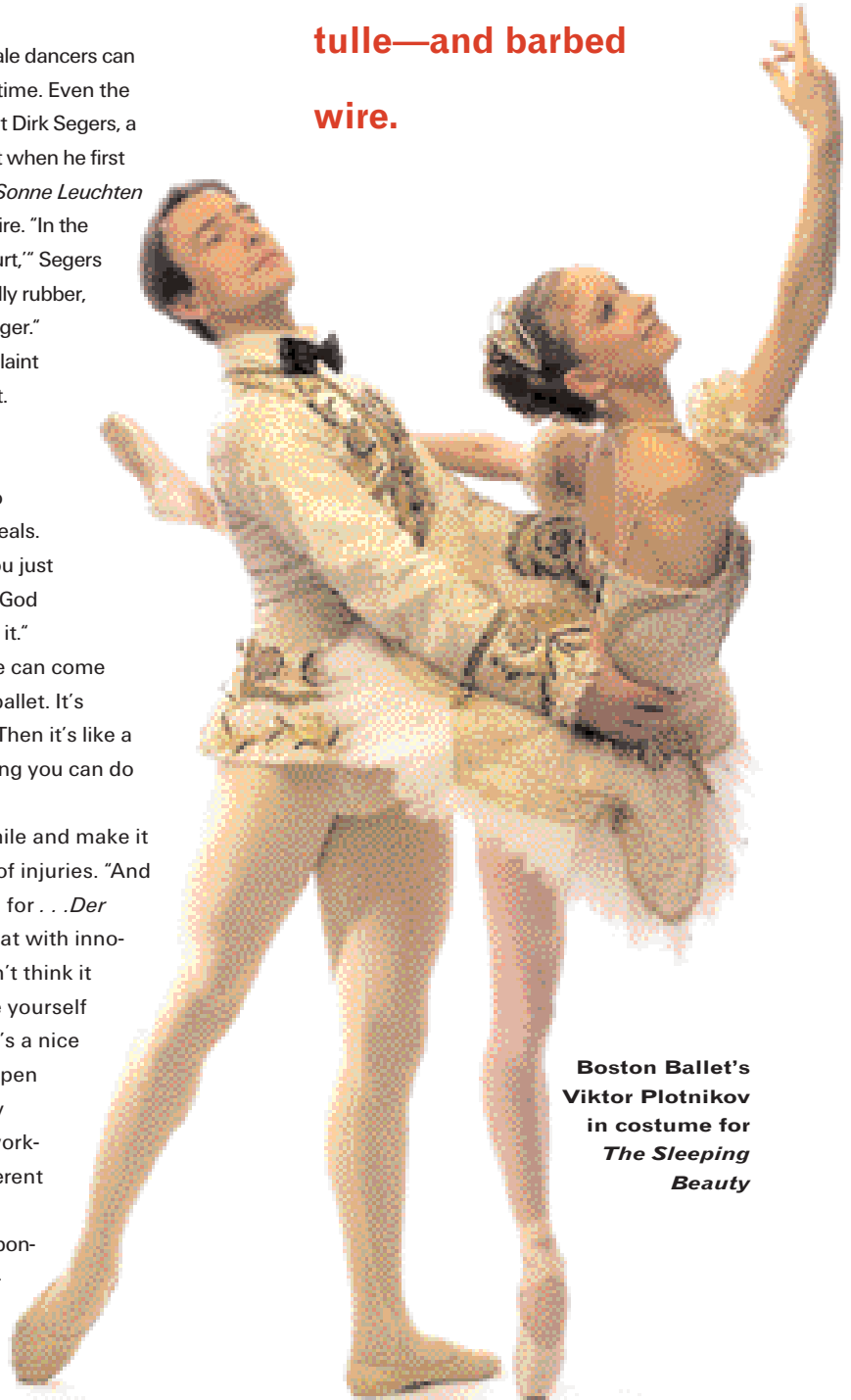
In fact, classical tutus sometimes prove more dangerous. "Some of the costumes are so heavily loaded with stones, you will scratch your hands to blood sometimes because of them," Plotnikov reveals. "It happened to me a couple of times. Onstage, you just go on with it. If you really get cut, you just pray to God that the tutu is not white and that nobody will see it."

Sometimes the ring that keeps the tutu's shape can come out and get in the way during the course of the ballet. It's especially painful during supported pirouettes. "Then it's like a whip!" Plotnikov says. "That hurts. There is nothing you can do until you go backstage."

No matter what happens, the dancer must smile and make it look easy. "It's just part of dance," Segers says of injuries. "And it's the achievement in the end that counts." As for . . . *Der Sonne Leuchten ist ihr Kleid*, Segers learned that with innovative choreography, anything can work. "I didn't think it would have been possible," he says. "You prove yourself wrong, somehow, so it's nice. When it works, it's a nice feeling. And it gives a great effect." Now, he's open to anything, costume-wise. "I'm not afraid to try something new, definitely not," he says. "And working with someone who is wearing something different makes it interesting."

Partnering someone in a tutu takes openness, spontaneity and practice. And as any dancer will recommend, take any jewelry off before going onstage to prevent getting caught on hooks—and always present the ballerina up front. "It's all about the tutu," Plotnikov says. "The tutu is a big celebration." **P**

## Men behind the tutus speak about the hazards of tulle—and barbed wire.



**Boston Ballet's Viktor Plotnikov in costume for *The Sleeping Beauty***