



Madeleine Eastoe as the Sylph in 'La Sylphide', 2004

Photo: Justin Smith

Courtesy: The Australian Ballet

Soft, gauzy ballet dresses

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... bare slender shoulders, a tight fitting bodice and a long soft, bell shaped skirt became the ideal for the Romantic look.¹

There is no doubting the pervasiveness and the power of the image of a female ballet dancer in a soft, gauzy dress, even in the twenty-first century. Early nineteenth-century lithographs, and occasionally twenty-first century photographs attempting to capture a similar mood, reveal elusive and fragile figures hovering in mid-air, or floating in woods and other gentle landscapes. They smile, or almost smile, enigmatically out of the picture space: enigmatically because there is something of a dual personality lurking behind these fragile figures, a personality that reflects the Romantic predisposition to juxtapose the material with the supernatural, the spiritual with the physical. This nineteenth-century vision of the female, seen through the eyes of the male of course, is epitomised and immortalised by the character of the Sylph in *La Sylphide*, that iconic ballet of the Romantic era first performed in Paris in 1832. The Sylph represents what Erik Aschengreen has called 'the beautiful danger'.² And over the years her long, soft tutu with its bell-shaped skirt has become the representative ballet costume of the era.

A few decades after the premiere of *La Sylphide*, the ballet paintings, drawings and sculptures of the French artist Edgar Degas reveal the development of this soft, gauzy costume. Degas' dancers are captured in more realistic poses than those of their Romantic counterparts. We see them in the studio, in the wings, backstage, on stage. They rest, practise, take class, perform. They are shown from many angles: from the orchestra pit, from boxes, as long shots, as close-ups. But they still wear a dress that is soft and gauzy, although it has become a little shorter. It reaches just below the knee. It has layers of fabric pushing it out into the familiar bell shape and often there is a sash at the waist, which is tied in a bow at the back. Most of Degas' dancers also wear a signature band of ribbon at the neck. The dress that Degas captured in his paintings and drawings also has a low cut, tight-fitting bodice with, occasionally, a short, frilled sleeve. And more often than not the costume is white, as indeed was the longer, Romantic costume.

The image of the ballet dancer in a soft, gauzy dress probably has its origins at least a century before the Romantic lithograph and about 150 years before Degas took out his pastels, charcoal and oils to record the life of a Parisian dancer in the 1870s. We may never be sure of the exact moment when a soft, gauzy white dress became the familiar costume of the ballet dancer, but we do know that in 1734 the French dancer Marie Sallé appeared in *Pigmalion*, a work she choreographed and in which she took the role of a statue that comes to life and dances with the sculptor who created it. Sallé caused a stir because of the outrageous costume she wore, outrageous for the times that is. She shortened

her skirt so that her ankles could be seen and removed parts of the restrictive ballet costume she was used to wearing so that she had more freedom to move. The French newspaper, *Le Mercure*, reported:

She dared to appear, without panniers, without skirt, without foundation, without a single ornament on her head; she was dressed, with corset and underskirt, only in a simple skirt of muslin swathed in folds in the style of a Greek statue.³

The arrival in the West of the fabric called muslin, of which Sallé's revolutionary costume was made, was a defining moment in the development of ballet costuming. Muslin, a fine, woven white cotton, was probably first made in Mosul, a city in present day Iraq. In fact the derivation of the word 'muslin' appears to come through the French 'mousseline' from the Italian 'nussolino', a diminutive form of Mussolo — the town Mosul. But the fabric was also widely made on the Indian subcontinent and was imported to England in the late seventeenth century. The popularity of the fabric increased following excavations associated with the ancient city of Pompeii. These excavations, which began in 1748, had a lasting influence on patterns of taste in Europe, from fashion and interior design to art and architecture. For the fashion conscious European woman, muslin fell gracefully around the body like the folds of the costumes on the Greek statues that were unearthed at Pompeii and gradually white muslin became her fabric of choice.

White clothing also indicated status.⁴ Although muslin was washable, a white garment was still hard to keep clean so the well-dressed woman in a pristine white outfit was clearly rich enough to have many dresses in her wardrobe, and no doubt someone to wash them for her. Since ballet costuming at the time followed fashion trends, muslin was used in the new costuming and white became the colour of the new, free-flowing ballet dresses.

How then did the transformation from Greek-inspired dress to the bell-shaped Romantic tutu take place? The design of the long white, bell-shaped dress made of layers of muslin, or a variety of muslin called tarlatan, has often been attributed to Eugene Lami, designer of costumes for *La Sylphide*. Even into the twenty-first century the notion that the so-called Romantic tutu was designed especially for *La Sylphide* continues to be perpetuated.⁵ Ivor Guest, however, suggests that the sylph costumes may never have been designed at all. No-one has been able to find the design drawings for the sylphs from this ballet, although costume designs for the rest of the characters are in the archives of the Paris Opera. Guest and others speculate that instructions for making what was simply an unremarkable style of costume for the day may well have been just written on a piece of paper and then thrown out.⁶ We know too that this kind of costume was part of the normal classroom wear for dancers even before the premiere of *La Sylphide*. In 1820, twelve years before *La Sylphide* took the stage, the acclaimed teacher, Carlo Blasis, wrote in his technical manual: 'The dress worn by the pupils at their lessons ... is composed of bodice and skirt of white muslin, a black sash being worn around the waist'.⁷ In fact, the long white Romantic dress that eventually became an iconic part of ballet costuming probably just evolved over many years.

But if the dresses for *La Sylphide* just evolved rather than being consciously designed, the influence these costumes had on the future of ballet was immense. 'This new style brought an excess of white gauze, tulle and tarlatan', wrote Théophile Gautier in *La Presse* in 1844. 'White was just about the only colour used.'⁸ The widespread use of the long, white Romantic costume in the years after *La Sylphide* gave the ballet world that the now familiar term 'ballet blanc' or 'white ballet'. In the Romantic 'ballet blanc', of which the second acts of *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* are the best known examples in current repertoire, rows or groupings of dancers in long white dresses embodied the spirit of the Romantic period, showing the era's interest in the ethereal and in the ideal of female beauty. We can see a twentieth-century reincarnation of the form in George Balanchine's *Serenade* (1934).

The heyday of the soft, gauzy dress, however, was also a period when female dancers, especially those in the corps de ballet, were faced with social attitudes and problems that were anything but romantic. Female dancers occupied a lowly position on the social scale and more often than not lived in poor conditions. One young English dancer wrote to *The Era* in 1877, signing herself with the anonymous 'A ballet girl', saying:

Tights, shoes and muslin dresses take over one pound to pay for out of our money. We have to do all this for nothing. We have to rehearse from ten in the morning until five, then sometimes in the evening; and then you have your own dresses to make. What time have you except when you ought to be asleep? If you are five minutes late in the morning, you are fined, and at the same time you are starving, and you have to depend on your landlord to let you run on a bit, or pawn all you have got, or do something else, and that is our lot in life.⁹

If we look again at Degas' paintings we notice that his dancers are without exception female. In fact, so great was the Romantic emphasis on the female dancer that the male as performer almost slipped out of view and many male roles were danced by women dressed as men. Some critics, such as Gautier's colleague Jules Janin, even went so far as to write in 1832: 'In no circumstances do I recognise a man's right to dance in public'.¹⁰ The men in Degas' ballet paintings are musicians, teachers and admirers and those ethereal creatures hovering and darting through forests and glades in their long white tutus were often at the mercy of men off stage and certainly subjected to the male gaze while on stage. Some female dancers accepted gifts and propositions from men as a way of escaping their poverty but, as Hatcher has remarked, those who did so 'ruined the reputations of the others for some time to come'.¹¹

In addition, the new muslin fabric brought with it safety concerns for female dancers. Muslin, which was so influential in the rise of the 'ballet blanc' and the growth of the tutu as we know it today, was highly combustible. There are a number of documented cases of dancers dying from burns received when their costumes caught fire from the newly-invented gas lighting that illuminated the stage. The case of Emma Livry, rising young star of the Paris Opera, is perhaps the best known, but certainly not the only case. In 1863 Livry died of burns after her costume caught fire from a side light while she was standing in the wings during a rehearsal. She was twenty and, committed as she was to her dancing, had refused to have her costume coated with a new fire retardant because she



*Reutlinger (Paris),
Unidentified dancer,
postcard, after 1903*

disliked the heaviness the coating brought to her soft, gauzy dress. She had, in fact, written to the management of the Paris Opera taking responsibility for any accident that might befall her as a result of her decision.¹²

By the early twentieth century, visual records such as postcards and early photographs reveal yet more changes to the soft, gauzy dress. In the new century, the skirt of the female dancer's costume was still bell-shaped but its hemline had crept above the knee. The bodice was even more tightly fitted and accentuated to an even greater extent a nipped-in waistline. The dress had begun to lose something of its soft, gauzy quality. Nevertheless, as the skirt of the Romantic ballet's most famous costume was progressively shortened, the term 'ballet blanc' was simply absorbed into contemporary vocabulary and its meaning accommodated the changes. Now the term refers to any ballet or part of a ballet

in which the major form of costuming is a white tutu: the Kingdom of the Shades scene from Marius Petipa's *La Bayadère* (1877), for example, most of the many versions of *Swan Lake* (Acts II and IV) from the late nineteenth century onwards, Serge Lifar's *Suite en blanc* (1943), George Balanchine's *Symphony in C* (1947), Harald Lander's *Etudes* (1948) and Stanton Welch's *Velocity* (2003) fall into this category.

The soft, gauzy ballet dress, and the period which it most famously represented, paved the way for untold developments in ballet technique as dancers' bodies became less restricted by weighty costuming that disguised the body and hampered its movement. The dress also gave the art form one of its most cherished genres — the 'ballet blanc'. One wonders whether it may also have acted as an early catalyst for improved conditions for female dancers? Or perhaps not?

Author's note: This article is an adaptation of a program note, 'White, women and the world of ballet', written for the Australian Ballet's 2005 season of *White*, a program of three ballets that celebrated the 'ballet blanc'. The current article is also inspired by Justin Smith's photographic study of Madeleine Eastoe as the Sylph, reproduced on page 6. Eastoe, currently an Australian Ballet senior artist, made her debut in this role in 2004 and fulfilled every expectation that she is an artist to be reckoned with. Smith's portrait captures indeed that 'beautiful danger' that Eastoe, in a truly sublime first performance, brought to the role.

NOTES

- 1 Patricia Linton 'Romanticism in ballet' in *Dancing Times*, May 2004, p. 94.
- 2 Erik Aschengreen, 'The beautiful danger: facets of the Romantic ballet', trans. Patricia N. McAndrew in *Dance Perspectives*, 58 (1974).
- 3 Quoted in Madeleine Inglehearn, 'Sallé, Marie' in *The International Dictionary of Ballet*, Volume II (Detroit: St James Press, 1993), p. 1239.
- 4 Pauline Weston Thomas, *Regency Fashion History* on 'Fashion-Era.com' accessed 24 November 2005.
- 5 Philippe Noiset, *Couturiers de la danse* (Paris: Éditions de La Martinière, 2003), p. 7.
- 6 Ivor Guest, 'Costume and the nineteenth century dancer', in Roy Strong et al., *Designing for the Dancer* (London: Elron Press, 1981), p. 47.
- 7 Carlo Blasis, *Traité élémentaire, théorique et pratique de l'art de la danse*, quoted in 'Dancewear through the ages', saksmovingwear.com, accessed 24 November 2005.
- 8 Théophile Gautier, *Écrits sur la danse* (Paris: Actes sud, 1995), p. 163. 'Ce nouveau genre amena un grand abus de gaze blanche, de tulle et de tarlatane ... Le blanc fut presque la seule couleur adoptée.'
- 9 Quoted in Judith Hatcher, 'Victorian ballet girls: trials, troubles and tribulations in a dangerous era' in *Dance Magazine*, January 1999, p. 84.
- 10 Quoted in John V. Chapman, 'Jules Janin: Romantic critic' in Lynne Garafola (ed.), *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press), p. 204.
- 11 Hatcher, p. 86.
- 12 Ibid.