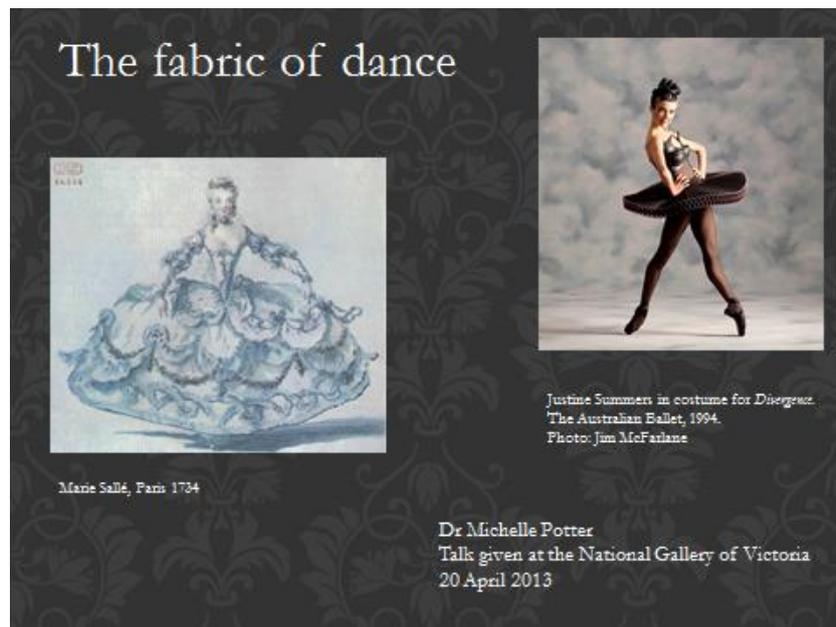


‘The fabric of dance’: Talk given at the National Gallery of Victoria in conjunction with the exhibition *Ballet and Fashion*, 20 April 2013

Michelle Potter

My opening slide sets the scene for what I would like to discuss today, which is basically the history of the tutu, that iconic item of ballet costuming, although I will be digressing into other related areas. I have called the talk ‘The fabric of dance’ as it allows me to discuss not only the materials from which tutus and other ballet costumes are, and have been, made but also how costuming reflects on the one hand the structure or framework of the society in which costumes have developed, and on the other how at times ballet costuming has reflected the fashion of the day.

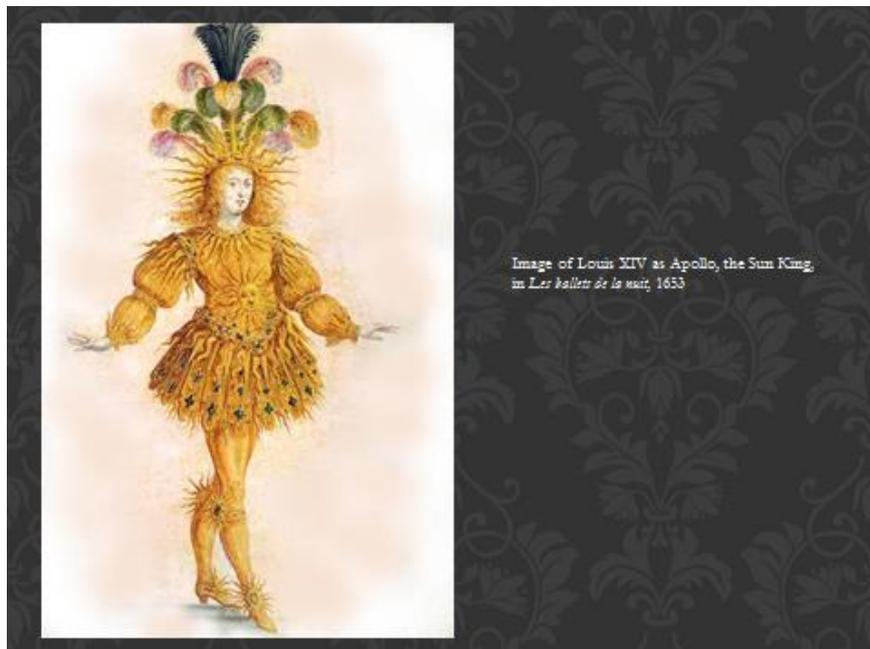


On the left you can see Marie Sallé, a dancer who worked in London and Paris in the early eighteenth century and who has been referred to by historians not only as an outstanding dancer but also as ‘an innovator with a vision that went beyond her times’, as we shall see shortly. On the right is Justine Summers wearing a tutu, which you will recognise from having seen it in the *Ballet and Fashion* exhibition, for Stanton Welch’s ballet *Divergence*. *Divergence* was created for the Australian Ballet in 1994 with costumes designed by Vanessa Leyonhjelm.

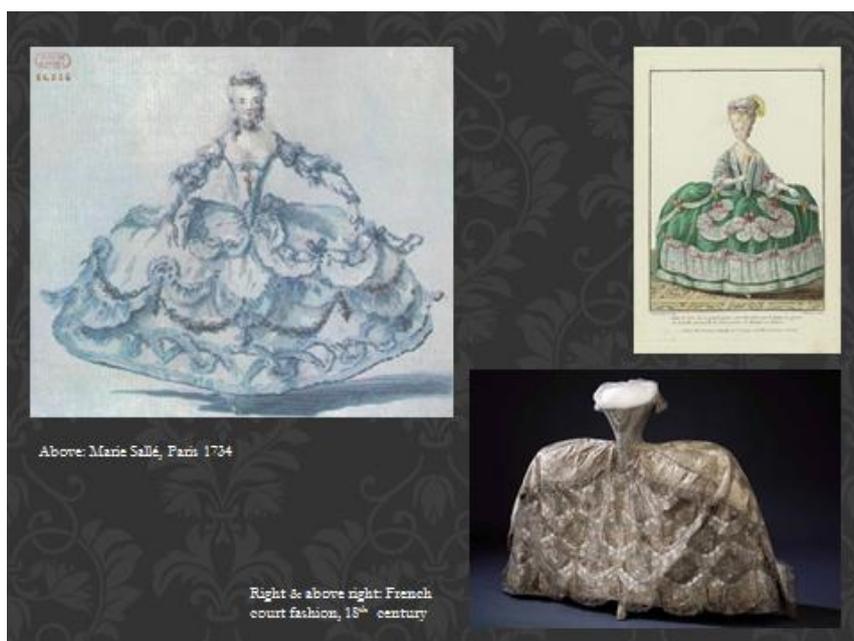
However, I’d like to begin this talk by commenting that ballet dress has not always been the way it is today, that is the dress of an independent art form. Ballet was essentially a court activity in the earliest days of its existence and, until the mid-eighteenth century, stage costuming, at least for dance, largely reflected contemporary court fashions. This was the case particularly in France due to the exceptional patronage of Louis XIV. In fact the Paris Opera Ballet can trace its lineage back to 1661 when Louis XIV established the *Académie royale de danse* (Royal Academy of Dance), which he charged with the responsibility of creating perfection in dance.

Louis XIV was an enthusiastic and accomplished dancer himself. His familiar name, the Sun King, is reputed to date from his appearance as Apollo, god of the sun, in one of the

sequences in *Les Ballets de la nuit* in 1653. He was just fourteen at the time and was dressed in a costume replete with golden rays that fanned out around him as we imagine the rays of the sun spread out from its centre.



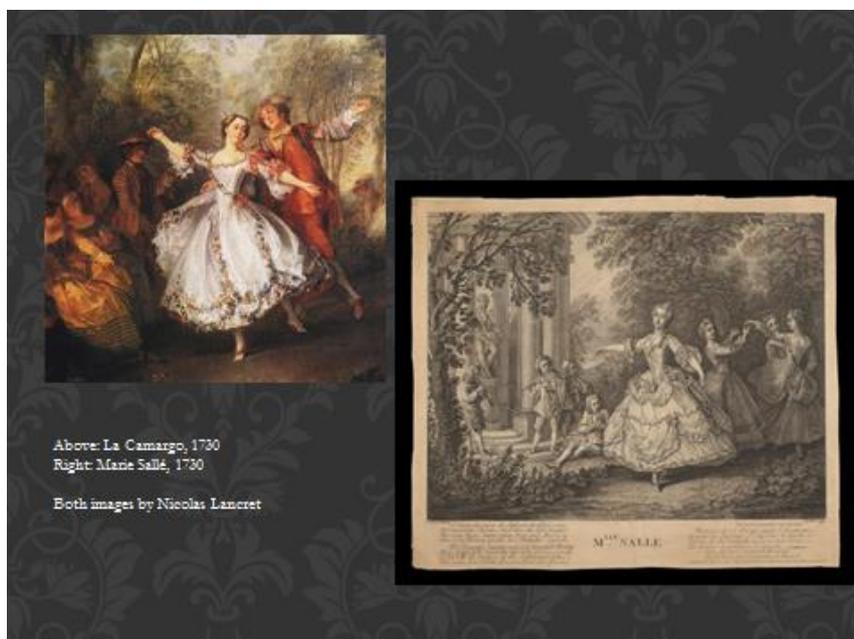
As you can see in the slide on the screen now, the rays are pretty much everywhere on the costume—from the ornamentation of the shoes up to the headdress. Legend also has it that Louis XIV had such slim and elegant ankles that he loved to pose with his heel pushed forward to show the royal ankles in all their glory. Ballet technique, the story goes, has been characterised by a ‘turn out’ of the feet and legs ever since. We can’t really be sure whether this is so or not, but we **do** know that dancers at the Paris Opera aligned themselves with the court and the aristocracy in general, and on this slide you can see the Sallé image again next to court costumes of the same period.



Unlike other characters in Opera productions, female dancers were virtually imprisoned in boned corsets and weighed down by long, heavy dresses that often had become so formulaic in a theatrical situation as to be somewhat comic. In fact it appears that there was a regulation at the Paris Opera, regulation number 23 of 1714 to be exact, which stated that dancers were required to wear costumes as provided whether or not they were appropriate to the character the dancer was meant to be playing. And here is a quote from a study of the dance of the time by a modern day ballet historian:

The taller the coiffures and feather headdresses, the more voluminous the skirts and panniers, the more glittering with sequins and jewels, the better pleased they [the dancers] were. Elaborate costumes had become a matter of prestige, and no-one cared if such regalia was incompatible with the roles [they might be playing, roles] of ancient Greeks, for instance, or Indians or peasants. Nor did anyone mind if freedom of movement was hampered.

However, Marie Sallé and one of her colleagues, Marie Anne de Cupis de Camargo, who has become known simply as La Camargo, did mind. La Camargo was renowned for her ability to perform small beaten steps in which the feet were the centre of attention and she shortened her skirts so her technical prowess could be seen. And on this slide we see images created by the French painter Nicolas Lancret, on the left of La Camargo and on the right of Sallé. Both are wearing a costume which still looks a little like the court fashion but whose length has been shortened slightly to reveal the ankle. And I should add here that it was fine to see the ankle of Louis XIV and other male dancers, but not the dancing ankle of a female performer, until Sallé and La Camargo were bold enough to reveal it.



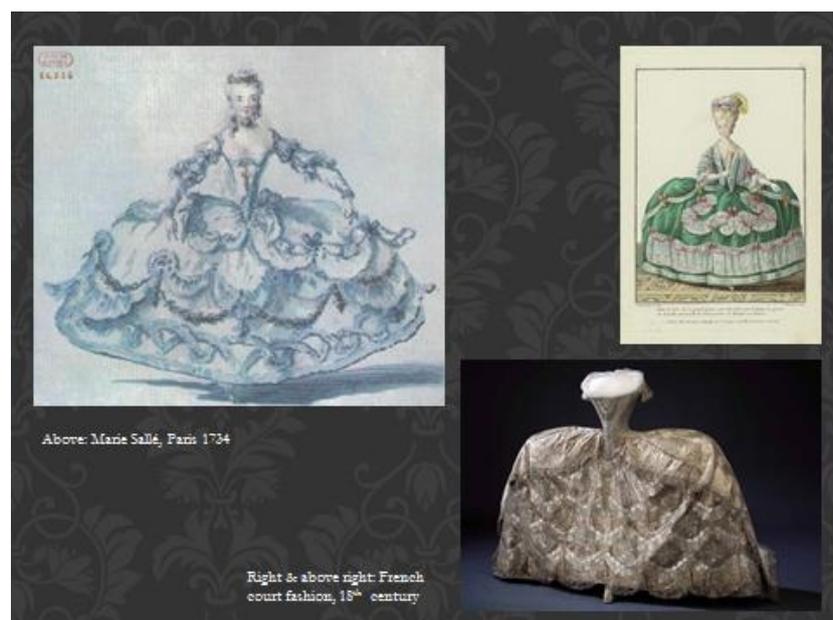
But Sallé went further. She found the kind of dance that was being performed in Paris at the Opera unappealing, incapable of growing with the times and incapable of developing as an art form. Having been born into a family of fairground performers she was brought up in a different world from that of the court ballet and an interest in dramatic expression was

inherent in her approach to dancing. She was an early exponent of the kind of performance that emphasised realism and dramatic quality and in which expression of character and emotion, she thought, should come through the dancers' bodies and faces: dancing she thought should not rely for its effect on elaborate costumes and props. Sallé's career at the Paris Opera was fraught with difficulties as a result and she danced as much in London as she did in Paris. But more importantly, at least from the point of view of today's discussion, she developed a form of costuming that was completely revolutionary. Sallé was not simply a dancer but she ventured into choreography as well. In particular, from the point of view of this talk, she choreographed a ballet called *Pygmalion*, which she performed in London in 1734.

Pygmalion was the story of a sculptor who, seeing a room full of carved figures, falls in love with one, which he in fact had sculpted himself. This was Galatea, played by Sallé, and in the ballet the sculptor pleads with Venus to bring Galatea to life. Venus obliged of course and Marie Sallé stepped from her pedestal and danced. Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be a visual record of the costume Sallé wore but there is a report, by an anonymous author writing from London, in the French newspaper of the day, the *Mercure de France*. The report stated:

She dared to appear without a pannier, without a skirt, without a bodice, her hair dishevelled and with no ornament at all on her head; she was dressed only, in addition to her undergarments, in a simple muslin dress draped to represent a Greek statue.

So it is clear from that description that Sallé's costume in *Pygmalion* was a very different style of costume and, despite the absence of any **visual** reference to it, is not hard to imagine how different Sallé must have looked in *Pygmalion* from her appearances in Paris in those costumes of the royal court, and I'll just take you back to remind you of the court styles.



Note that the image of Sallé in that blue and white costume is dated 1734, the same year as she performed in *Pygmalion* so the difference between how she looked in London in

Pygmalion and how she appeared to Parisian audiences was truly remarkable. And while that image is on the screen again I'll just read once more the report from the *Mercure de France*, just to reinforce the point:

She dared to appear without a pannier, without a skirt, without a bodice, her hair dishevelled and with no ornament at all on her head; she was dressed only, in addition to her undergarments, in a simple muslin dress draped to represent a Greek statue.

It is interesting to note that Sallé was never permitted to produce or perform in *Pygmalion* in Paris.

While Sallé's interest in costumes that bore some relevance to the narrative line of a ballet was something dear to her heart, 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, and indeed in fashion developments as well. Most literature on the history of muslin, a fine, woven white cotton, suggests that it had its origin on the Indian sub-continent, although other literature suggests that it was first made in Mosul, a city in present day Iraq. The derivation of the word appears to come through the French 'mousseline' from the Italian 'mussolino', a diminutive form of Mussolo—the town Mosul. But the fabric was certainly widely made on the Indian subcontinent and was imported to England in the late seventeenth century, most often by the East India Company.

The popularity of the fabric increased following the excavation of the ancient Roman 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 the fashion conscious woman's fabric of choice.

White clothing also indicated status. 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. Ballet costumes slowly began to absorb these changes in taste and white became the colour of the new, free-flowing ballet dresses. As time passed these soft white dresses evolved into what we now know as the Romantic tutu of the nineteenth century, which first came into prominence with the ballet *La Sylphide* created in Paris in 1832.

And here I have two images of that costume, the original romantic tutu for *La Sylphide*. Both show Marie Taglioni, creator of the title role in *La Sylphide* and we can date these images to 1834. Dance historian Judith Chazin-Bennahum in a book called *The Lure of Perfection* has described this form of costuming in the following way:

a relatively short skirt made up of many layers of tarlatan [tarlatan being a kind of stiffened muslin], a décolleté bodice with flowers on [its] low neckline, sleeves that bloom out as was the fashion, a clear silk floating belt, pearl bracelets and a pearl necklace, a subtle crown of wildflowers and two transparent wings.



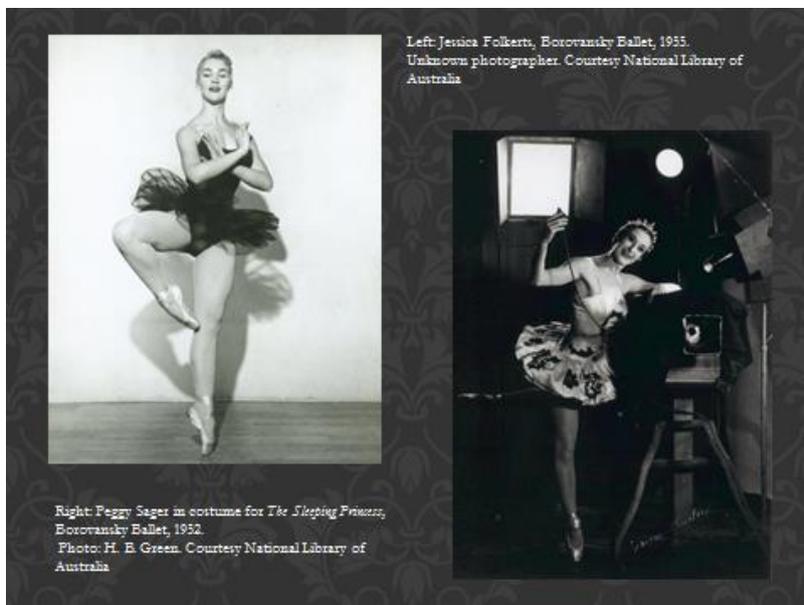
And from there it was just a step to the shorter tutu, especially when it became possible to use the fabric known as gauze. Like muslin, the origins of gauze are shrouded in uncertainty but it was traditionally woven in Palestine and the English word is said to derive from the place name, Gaza. By at least the nineteenth century it was being manufactured in France, in Lyon and in Paris, and its manufacture became intimately connected to the tutu's development. On the screen now are two examples of an early twentieth century gauze tutu and you can observe the change in shape from the Romantic tutu. This tutu is beginning to become stiffer and shorter and developing a bell shape.



And this was happening in all the major ballet centres. On the left on the next slide is a print showing Italian-born ballerina, Carlotta Brianza, who danced with the Mariinsky Ballet in St Petersburg and also on the right a rather demure image of an unidentified dancer from the same period.



The tutu gradually got shorter and shorter and, at least in Australia, probably reached its zenith (or nadir depending on your point of view) in terms of shortness in the 1950s. And here on the left I am showing a photo of Jessica Folkerts, who was one of the Borovansky Ballet's leading dancers in the 1950s, in a publicity shot wearing a very short number, even skimpy if we think of the amount of fabric being used in the skirt. And on the right one of another Borovansky dancer, Peggy Sager, whose tutu probably has more fabric in it than the Folkerts one, but is nevertheless still what one might call short, or perhaps abbreviated is a better word.



So just summarising where we are at the moment, ballet costuming had over two centuries or so been influenced by social factors, by changing fashions and by availability of different kinds of fabric. It had also adjusted to developments in ballet technique. And I'd like now to put before you some images of the contemporary tutu that indicate how fabrics and other contemporary materials are playing a role in the creation of the tutu. First up, *Divergence*.

The materials for the tutu and headdress for *Divergence* include nylon, cotton, vacuum formed polyurethane foam, which is similar to the foam used for divers' wet suits, leather, lycra, elastic, metal, elastane, nylon crin, raffia, air-conditioning filter mesh and metal wire. The tutus were sent to an automotive spray painter to be sprayed black because the mesh used in the skirt was actually translucent and needed to be black. And I found an interesting interview with Stanton Welch, choreographer of *Divergence* and now artistic director of Houston Ballet, in which he explains that he was looking for a grunge effect with the costumes for *Divergence*. His words indicate very clearly that social attitudes and what we might call the Zeitgeist of the 1990s had a definite effect on the look he wanted for *Divergence*. And he also has some interesting remarks about costume and choreography and the reason why the ballet is called *Divergence*.

In addition, if you look at the footage of *Divergence* in the exhibition you will see a section where Welch actually has the dancers run up to the back of the stage, remove their tutus and dance in the sheer and body hugging outfit over which the tutu skirts are worn. So with *Divergence* we have moved not only along the road in terms of the tutu and its materials but we are also a long, long way from the days when Sallé and La Camargo dared to show an ankle, and when Sallé dared to appear draped in muslin.



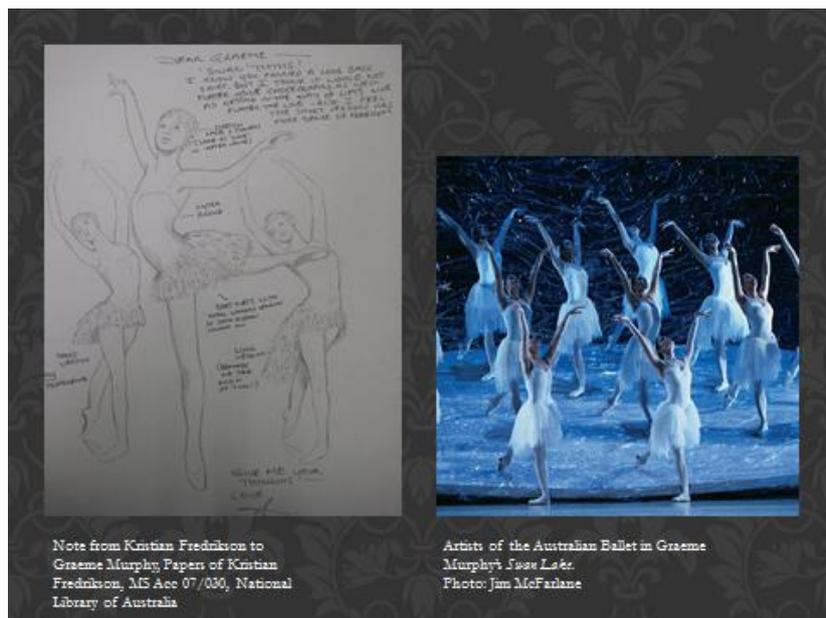
The green tutu designed by Stephen Galloway for William Forsythe's *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*, which isn't on show in *Ballet and Fashion* but which you may have seen when *Vertiginous* was danced by the Australian Ballet in the year 2000, is made of tulle stapled to four circular wires and covered in green stretch velvet. The tutu has been referred to as a flying saucer and it seems to encapsulate the dynamic nature of Forsythe's choreography. And anyone who was lucky enough to see Dorothee Gilbert when the Paris Opera Ballet was in Sydney recently may especially enjoy this brief footage of her in *Vertiginous* wearing the flying saucer tutu.

So, so far I have shown a kind of chronological development of the tutu and of course many more designers have taken bold approaches to tutu design in recent decades. But while some continue to push boundaries with new shapes and new materials others prefer to look

back a little. The beautiful black tutu designed by Giles Deacon to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the English National Ballet, which you **do** see in the *Ballet and Fashion*, show is very much in the style of the older, longer tutu that falls softly rather than extends outwards from the hip. And beside it I have put another image of the late nineteenth century tutu worn by Carlotta Zambelli and the tutus designed by Tom Lingwood for the Anne Woolliams production of *Swan Lake* for the 1977 Australian Ballet production.



And on the screen now is a fascinating note from designer Kristian Fredrikson to Graeme Murphy about the tutus for Murphy's *Swan Lake*. Images of how the designer thought the tutus might eventually look give an idea of the initial design process. And a look at what those tutus eventually did look like suggests that there were many steps in the process to achieve what we eventually saw on stage.



Reading Fredrikson's notes it seems that he preferred a short front and back and he gives this preference from two different angles. Murphy wanted a long back so Fredrikson drew a

potential design that he thought Murphy might like but noted that he thought it would not be suitable. The final choice was somewhat different as you can see.

And now in the time I have left I want to go back to the idea that costumes developed in a certain way in order that the dancers could display their technical accomplishments. And I want to look quickly at a costume designed by Viktor and Rolf for Robert Wilson's work for Netherlands Dance Theatre III, *2 Lips and Dancers in Space*. When I reviewed the *Ballet and Fashion* exhibition on my website I wrote the following of the costume you see on the screen now:

I especially enjoyed a black and gold costume that consisted of various extravagant additions to a basic, long-sleeved, black unitard. Gold metal crowns project from the thigh and hip sections of the unitard, and gold cones (dunce caps?) with gold fabric falling from the peak of the cone sit on the shoulders and project from the genital region. Gold fabric of various kinds—lamé, silk, satin—is wrapped and draped on various parts of the costume. The theatricality of the whole has the look of the Baroque era or perhaps Carnivale in Venice. Or perhaps Dada-esqe is a better word to describe the items.

Since then I have started to see the still image of the dancer wearing the costume on the screen now as not unlike the image of Louis XIV as the Sun King.



And when looking at the footage of the work that is available in the exhibition I started to consider how the costumes had an effect on the choreography. The *2 Lips* costumes, which date to 2004, are a kind of twenty-first century variation on those elaborate eighteenth century costumes. They are of the twenty-first century in a similar way to the way the *Divergence* and *Vertiginous* tutus are latter day versions of the tutu. The *2 Lips* costume you see on the screen now is it is made from today's materials including synthetic stretch satin, synthetic lamé, metal and patent leather. But the costume is also elaborate and **unlike** many of the more minimalist creations we see today. The various additions to the basic unitard do not make it easy for the dancers to move through space, which makes it

somewhat akin to the old court costumes. This costume and the others from the same work hamper the dancers' movements, some more so than others, just as the eighteenth century dance costumes did. If you go back and look at the footage in *Ballet and Fashion* you will see that the choreography is actually quite limited. The dancers take small teetering steps as they weave their way around the stage wearing those impossibly high heels and those costumes with a variety of attached appurtenances. And of course we can read in the exhibition booklet that one sequence in *2 Lips* is meant to be a seventeenth century courtly dance. I don't think that the limited choreography is because the work was made on NDT III, which the NDT company of older dancers, and I am quite convinced that the similarities between the two costumes on the screen now are not accidental.

And furthermore, to my surprise and delight, as I was reading the latest Qantas inflight magazine just recently I discovered that Robert Wilson, who is credited as director of *2 Lips and Dancers in Space*, has very recently been responsible for a fashion show held in the palace of Versailles, which of course is the palace built by Louis XIV. The article, called *Redazzled*, states:

It was a daring juxtaposition: an invitation to see the avant-garde New York opera and theatre designer/director Robert Wilson reign supreme at the palace of Versailles for an evening. The man who defies convention, who dazzles audiences worldwide with his productions, walked in the Sun King's footsteps, to his own stage, the neoclassical Royal chapel. Here in a room considered the masterpiece of Louis XIV's reign, Robert Wilson choreographed a 16-minute performance.

The performance he created I don't think was *2 Lips*, which as I have said dates to 2004, although I can't be sure because the article doesn't give a title or a date for that performance. But that Robert Wilson created a performance piece at Versailles quite recently to me is a clear indication of his interest in the era of Louis XIV and a rationale for my thinking that there are similarities between the two images on the screen now.

Having seen a couple of Wilson's works and having listened to him deliver a two hour keynote address at a conference several years ago, I suspect that the quote I gave you early on in this talk applies to Wilson as well as to performances by dancers in the early days of the Paris Opera Ballet. If you recall, the quote stated: 'no-one cared if such regalia was incompatible with the roles of ancient Greeks, for instance, or Indians or peasants. Nor did anyone mind if freedom of movement was hampered.' *2 Lips* is, I think, Wilson taking us back to that era while at the same time giving it to us in modern form. And not really worrying or caring if we get the allusion or not.

And as for dancing with obstacles and paraphernalia of various kinds, nothing really beats the dancers of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company who performed wearing Rei Kawakubo's costumes in a work called *Scenario*. The dancers have described this experience as being both unsettling and liberating. The costumes radically changed the dancers' sense of their own bodies as well as their balance and spatial relations to each other, and we have to have a huge amount of admiration for them given that the costumes were, in true Cunningham fashion, created separately from the choreography and only came together on opening night.



So, I'd like to conclude by saying that, when ballet meets fashion, the outcomes are many and varied and I hope I've given you some ideas to think about when you go back and look at the exhibition once more.

Thank you and special thanks to those whose names appear on this last slide.

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