

From bedroom to Kitchen and beyond: women of the ballet

Michelle Potter: talk given at Fairhall, Melbourne, 25 June 2014

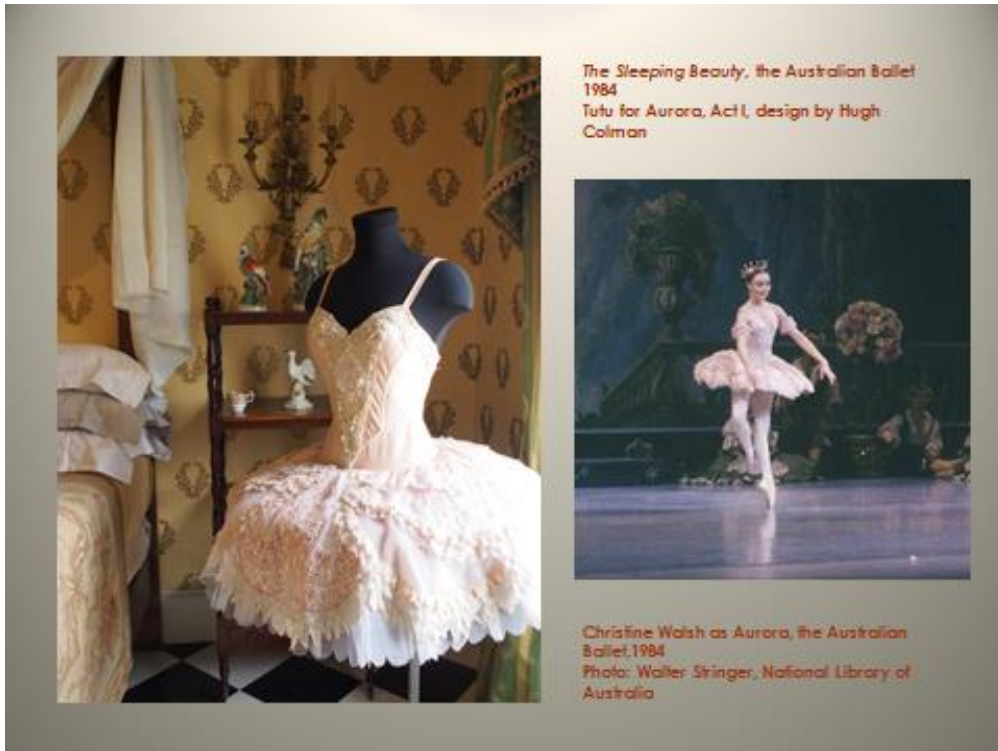
Welcome everyone. Thank you for coming and congratulations to David McAllister for his curatorship of this exhibition. William Johnston, whose collection is housed here at Fairhall, took delight in arranging and rearranging objects in his collection to create different interiors. It is a wonderful initiative that curators at Fairhall perpetuate the activity that gave Mr Johnston so much pleasure, by inviting guest curators to do the same.

I want to begin my talk today with a word of explanation. I chose the subject for my talk some time ago, when the exhibition was still in the planning stages. In the end some of the items that David initially planned to use were in fact not used, for various, very sensible curatorial reasons. But, nevertheless, I had a topic announced in publicity material. So there was no going back even though some of the ideas I wanted to speak about were no longer represented by costumes in the exhibition. My opening image is a case in point.



It shows Madeleine Eastoe as the Sylph in *La Sylphide*, but there are no costumes from *La Sylphide* in the show, although an item that was behind the original idea of using costumes from *La Sylphide* is on display in the study. So I have turned to those items in my discussion and I hope you will bear with me.

So to the bedroom!



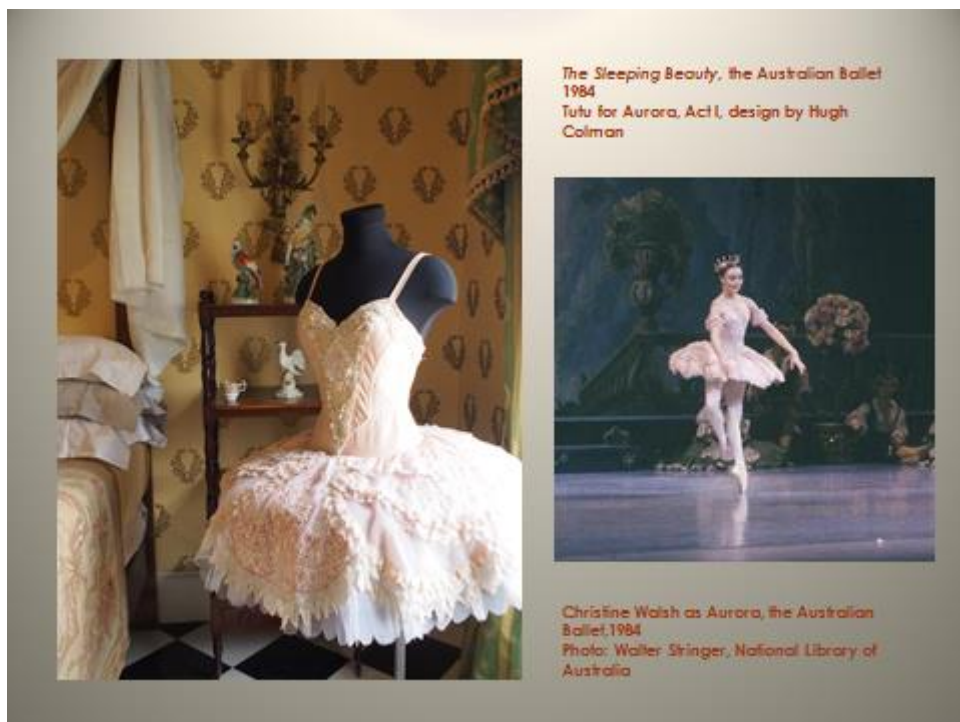
This next slide shows the costume for the Princess Aurora in Act I of Maina Gielgud's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* for the Australian Ballet. The world premiere of this production took place at the State Theatre, Victorian Arts Centre, on 30 October 1984. The image of Christine Walsh, also on this slide, is from that premiere season, and shows her wearing that very costume, so beautifully designed by Hugh Colman.

Maina had joined the company as artistic director in 1983, so it was a major undertaking for her, early in her career as director of the Australian Ballet, to produce a full-length *Sleeping Beauty*. She had of course danced the role of Aurora herself, including in Australia as a guest artist in 1974, and you see her in the next slide in a shot from a performance in Australia in that year. Alongside her is an image of Lucette Aldous and Frank Croese from the world premiere of that Australian Ballet production, which predated Maina's own production. It premiered in 1973 and was produced by Peggy van Praagh and Robert Helpmann.

I am putting these two shots side by side for clarification because, on the one hand, you can see that both Maina and Lucette are wearing the same costume, designed by Kenneth Rowell, and on the other, because it makes it clear that the rather odd headdress Maina appears to be wearing in this action shot by Walter Stringer is actually that of her partner who is supporting her. You can see the costume of Maina's partner more clearly in the right hand image, standing in the background awaiting his turn to present a rose to Aurora.



But let's go back to the Colman tutu.



In *The Sleeping Beauty* ballet, which was performed for the very first time in St Petersburg in 1890, the heroine is Aurora, a princess. In Act I she celebrates her sixteenth birthday. So to reflect her youth and femininity the Colman tutu is pale pink and pretty. And so suited, I think, to a young lady (if of a different era) on the cusp of adulthood. Look at the scalloped edges and the delicate frilled additions to the skirt. But looking more closely, the decoration

recognises too that Aurora is a princess. On the bodice there is a decorative element that is perhaps a stylised crest? And down the front of the skirt we can see another element that perhaps suggests an imperial decoration of some kind. It is a little bit like an eagle I think. In my opinion, Hugh Colman is especially skilled at **suggestion** in the way he handles design and decoration. The allusion to both youth and royalty he achieves in this tutu is a good example of that skill.

It's an interesting comparison to make between the Colman design and the one Maina and Lucette wore. The Rowell tutu is still pink, but seems to me to be emphasising the qualities that we know belong to Aurora in quite a different way—perhaps, with its bows and glittering additions, in a more obvious way?



But just for comparison let's look at some earlier costumes for Aurora. Next is a publicity shot of the original *Sleeping Beauty* cast—the cast that performed in the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg in 1890. Carlotta Brianza was the very first Aurora and you see her in the centre of this image. I'm not exactly sure who the other characters are except I assume that we can see Aurora's parents, the King and Queen, there.



For further comparison here are some other approaches to the Aurora tutu. First, a design by Léon Bakst and a photograph showing the design made up and worn by the legendary ballerina Olga Spessivtseva (top right). Spessivtseva was first-cast Aurora for Diaghilev's 1921 London production of *The Sleeping Princess*, as he called it. And, also, what I have to assume is another interpretation of the Bakst design worn by Lubov Egorova (bottom right), who also performed the role for Diaghilev in London.

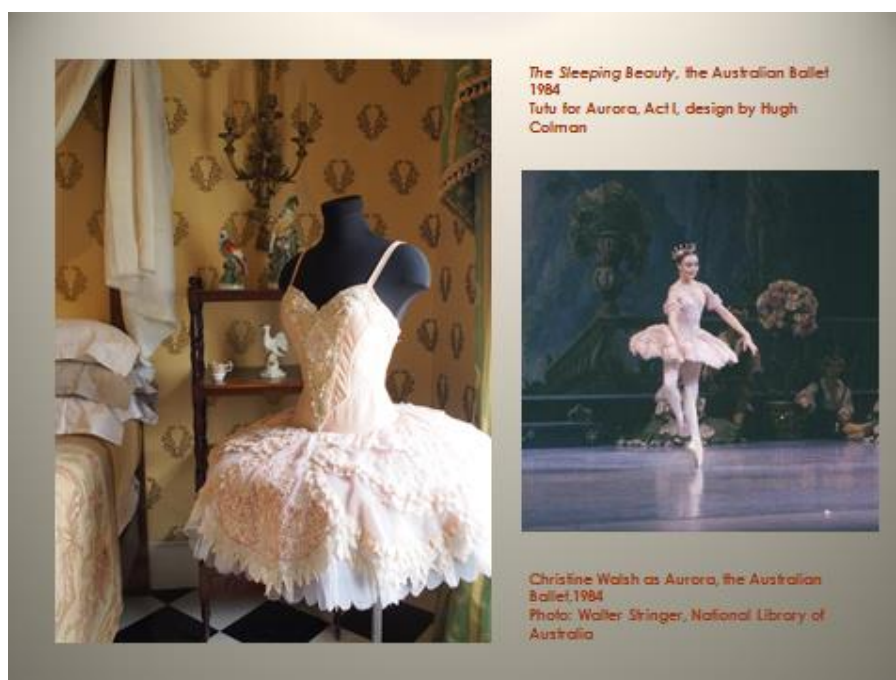


The ballet historian Cyril Beaumont describes Aurora in the early scenes of the Diaghilev production as wearing a 'dress of rose-coloured silk, embroidered with silver' with her hair 'dressed with a short white wig bound with a fillet of flowers'. So, while Spessivtseva's

costume is closest in look to the Bakst design, Beaumont's description fits Egorova most closely. And, because I find it endlessly fascinating to look at different designs for the same role by different artist across the years, here is yet another version of Aurora's tutu, this time designed by Oliver Messel for Margot Fonteyn in the Royal Ballet production of 1960.



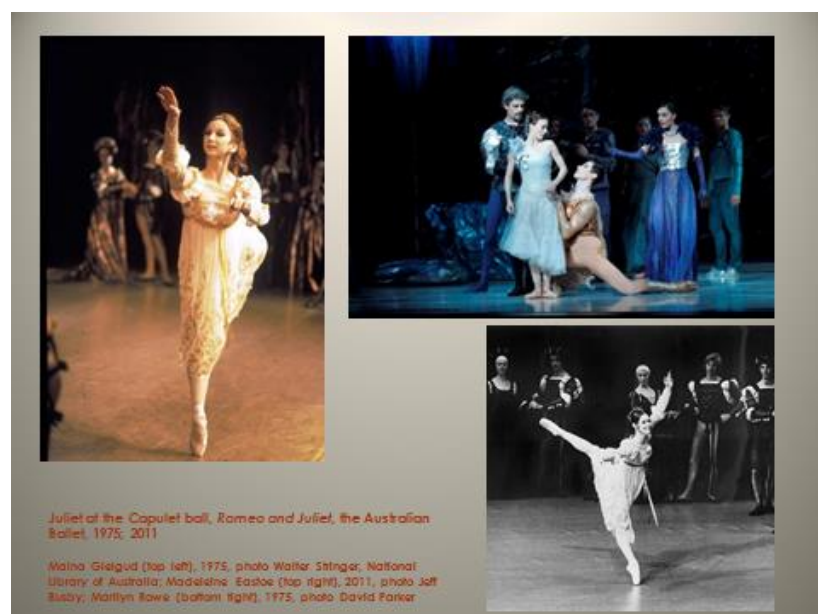
But coming back to Hugh Colman's tutu, I love its softness, and I love the allusions it makes. And what better place to put it than in the bedroom? We know she is a beautiful young woman on the cusp of adulthood and sexual maturity.



But there's another bedroom and another heroine to consider. Nestling in the wardrobe of another Fairhall room is the ball gown for Juliet, which she wears at the ball where she encounters her lover to be, Romeo, for the first time. This costume comes from Graeme Murphy's new production of *Romeo and Juliet* made for the Australian Ballet in 2011. It was designed by Akira Isogawa.

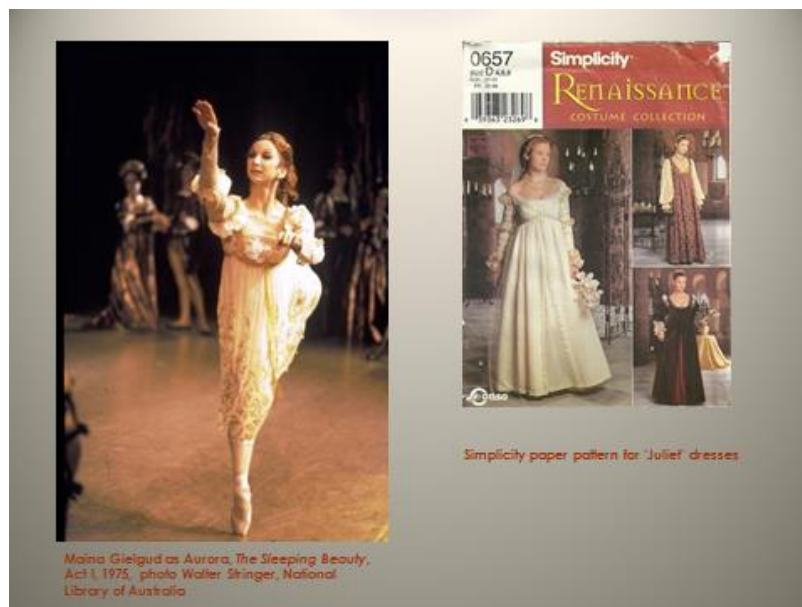


And you can see at the top right of the screen two photos taken by Lynette Wills showing Isogawa adjusting the costume at a fitting for Madeleine Eastoe, who was the leading Juliet in this production. And below Madeleine Estoe in performance. Again it is interesting to look at costumes for earlier productions in this case to see how Isogawa has moved the design quite away from what we are used to.



On the slide above are two images of Juliet at the Capulet ball from an earlier Australian Ballet production, which had choreography by John Cranko and was produced by Anne Woolliams in 1974. This production was designed by German artist Jürgen Rose. The Cranko production remained in the Australia Ballet's repertoire for over thirty years and became very familiar to Australian ballet goers. On the left is Maina Gielgud, again in a guest performance with the Australian Ballet in 1975. And bottom right is Marilyn Rowe wearing the same Jürgen Rose designed dress. For comparison, top right is Madeleine Eastoe wearing the Isogawa gown.

The high-waisted, flowing gown is what we imagine Juliet wore to the ball. In fact the style has become known as a Juliet dress and I was delighted to find an old Simplicity-branded pattern on the internet described as 'Renaissance Juliet Wedding Dress Costume Sewing Pattern'.



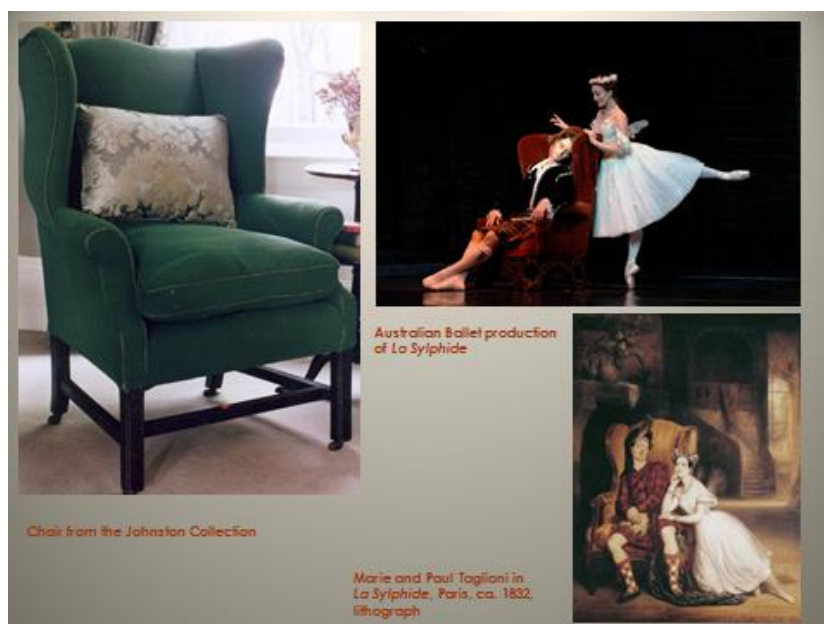
Isogawa brings his own very distinctive approach to designing for ballet. He says he likes to choreograph the fabric and loves to feel the movement of the textile he is using. But he also uses a whole array of processes, including Japanese techniques, to give his costumes their unique textured look. There are also some quite surprising aspects to his costumes, which we don't necessarily notice while watching the ballet. In the next slide we see Kevin Jackson dressed as Romeo, and the jacket he is wearing is also on display in the second Fairhall bedroom. I was surprised when I saw the costume close up, when it was exhibited last year at the National Gallery of Victoria, that it had a kind of built in pistol, which I hadn't noticed previously. That part of the costume isn't on display here but you get a good look at it in the

photo I have just added to the screen. If you look closely his tights are also very delicately patterned, another design aspect I didn't notice when I saw the show on stage.



But to return to this exhibition, what better costumes to hang in a bedroom than those for the star-crossed lovers? And it is an appropriate touch that the covers on the bed in this Fairhall room are quite rumpled. The bed has clearly been used.

But let's pass on to the study. There are no costumes on display in this room but there is a very comfortable chair. It looks very much like the one that James, the hero in the ballet *La Sylphide*, slumbers in as the ballet opens.



La Sylphide was first performed in Paris in 1832 and is set partly in Scotland and partly in a forest, home of the elusive sylph of the title. In addition to the Fairhall chair, the slide above shows a nineteenth-century lithograph with Marie Taglioni, who created the role of the Sylph, with her brother Paul Taglioni as James, the Scottish gentleman who is bewitched by the Sylph and follows her into the forest. As well, we can see the same scene from the Australian Ballet's recent production. And we can notice from these images that not much has changed in terms of dress over the decades. Today, the Sylph still wears a Romantic-style, long tutu and a crown of flowers on her head. And James still wears a kilt similar to that worn almost 200 years ago at the premiere performance.

I can imagine a Sylph inhabiting the Fairhall study waiting for a gentleman in a kilt to fall asleep in that lovely deep and comfortable chair.

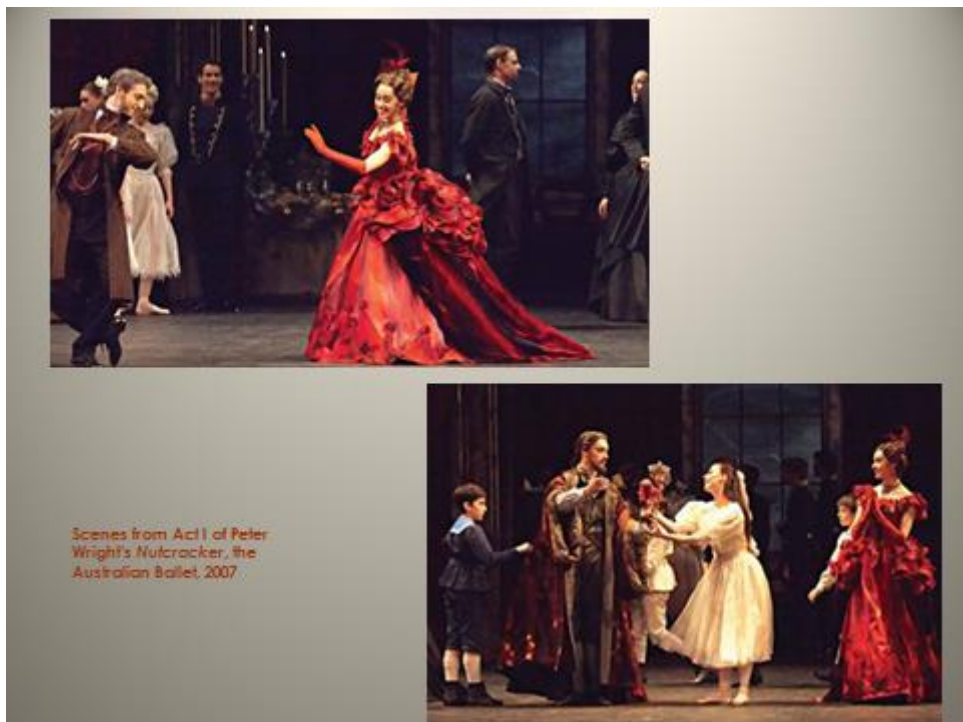


But now I'd like to go downstairs and we'll pass by this amazing red gown designed by John McFarlane for Mrs von Stahlbaum, Clara's mother, in Peter Wright's version of *Nutcracker*.



Dress for Mrs von Stahlbaum, Clara's mother, in *The Nutcracker*. Peter Wright production, design by John McFarlane

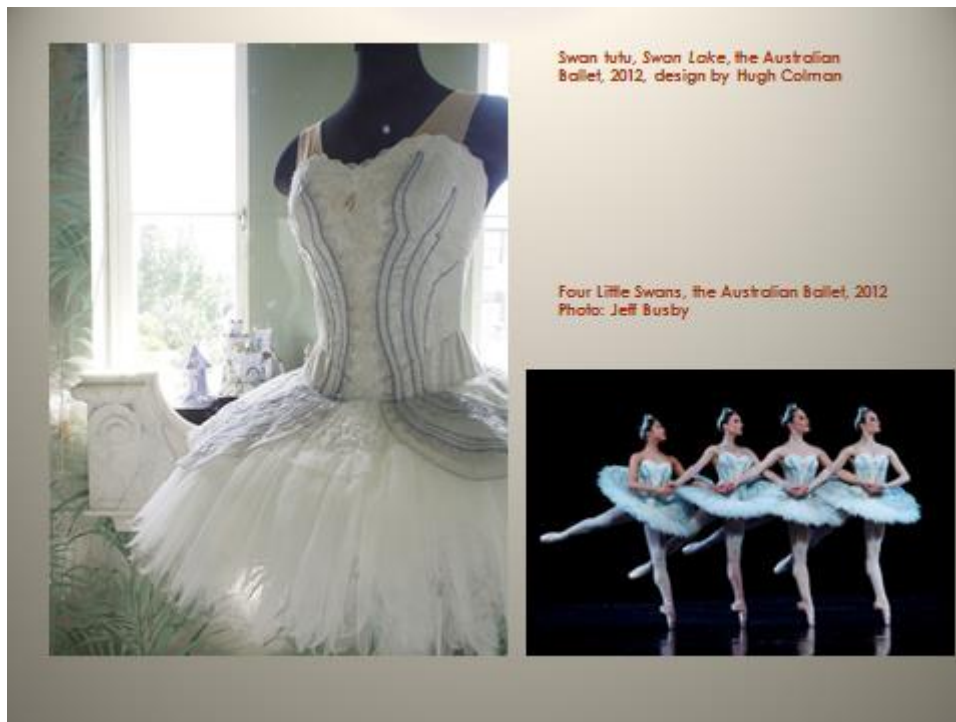
We'll just pause briefly to see how Mrs von Stahlbaum commands the room at the Christmas party in Act I of *Nutcracker*. She is the hostess par excellence. And I always remember my drama teacher, many years ago, said to me if you can choose what colour you would like to wear onstage, choose red. The audience will always look towards a red costume. Here is that red dress in action.



Scenes from Act I of Peter Wright's *Nutcracker*, the Australian Ballet, 2007.

Peter Wright's production of *Nutcracker* will open in Melbourne, performed by the Australian Ballet, in September 2014. It was created by Wright for the Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1990, and was first staged by The Australian Ballet in 2007. If you haven't seen it, it is a traditional production and that red dress is a stunner.

Now I'd like to linger a little on the half-landing where there was once a bathroom. There we have on display a tutu from *Swan Lake*, in a version choreographed by Stephen Baynes for the Australian Ballet. It premiered in 2012.



Designed by Hugh Colman, the tutu has those lovely, allusive qualities we noticed in his Aurora tutu earlier. The fine lines of blue suggest water, and there is a hint of feathers. Also on the slide is a photo of the four Little Swans wearing the tutus in performance.

This time, rather than look at how others have designed *Swan Lake*, I'd like to read you a little extract from the transcript of an oral history interview I did with Hugh Colman while he was in the process of designing the *Swan Lake* costumes. I asked him about his approach to designing a tutu, because he has designed many in his career. And this is what he said:

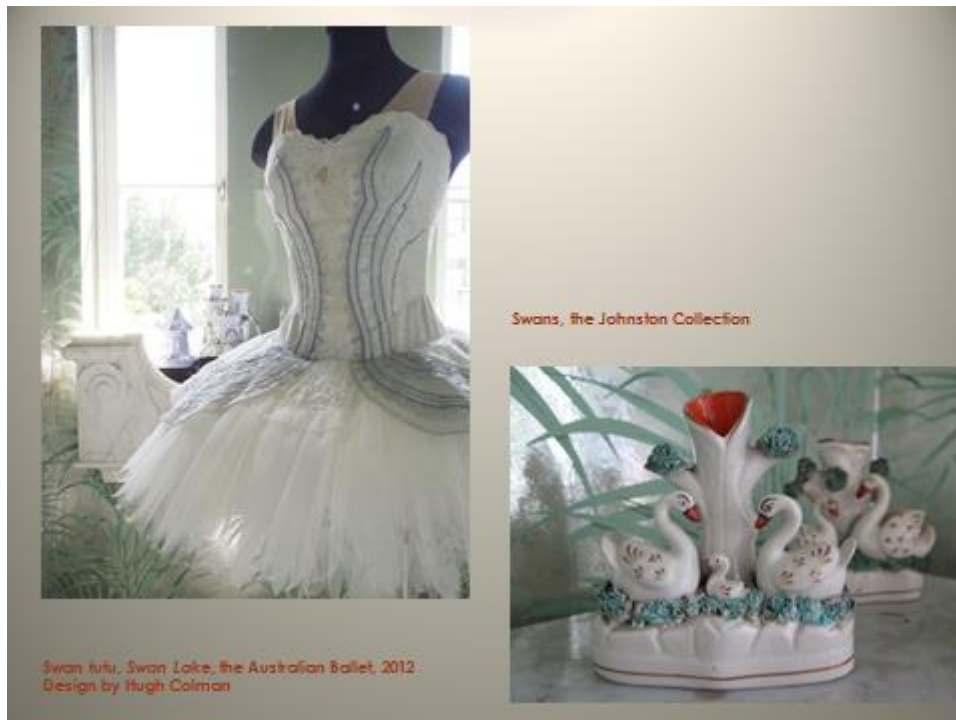
'I love them. To me they're a little bit like the costumes that maybe you see in Japanese Noh theatre, where something has been achieved over a number of years and all you can really hope to do is variations on a theme. There is something about the purity of the way the tutu works that is very hard to move away from.

‘There are obviously different skirt lengths and slightly different shapes to the skirt. But, it seems to me, the brilliance of the design of the tutu is that it's an expression of the weightlessness that is sought, as an effect, in classical dancing: the illusion that the ballerina weighs nothing, despite all the blood, sweat and tears. The shape of the tutu, and the lightness of the gauzy fabrics and tulle, are part of that illusion. They are part of the effect of weightlessness. And I think if I've learnt anything over the years of designing tutus, it is that the more that you can expose the light qualities, whether it's in the fabric, or the fact that light itself can pass through the net, the more successful it is for classical dance. So I'm working within quite strict confines.’*



The *Swan Lake* tutu is displayed perfectly to enhance Hugh's interest in light and lightness. And what I also really love is the way the curator has placed the tutu and those beautiful little Staffordshire castles together. I learnt they were pastille burners, and it was a term I didn't know so I had to look it up. And the definition I got was: 'small metal, ceramic or porcelain objects that were commonly used until the late 1850s to hold pastille, a solid, aromatic substance that was burned like incense'. And the short article went on to say 'Beginning in the nineteenth century, pastille burners began to be made out of ceramics such as porcelain. These porcelain burners were most often crafted in the shape of various buildings, most commonly either a church or a cottage. When heated the pastille burns and the smoke travels out of the windows and/or chimneys to give the tiny home a quaint appearance. And apart from the fact that they would have a function in a bathroom, I guess that they are castles—and David has referred to them as 'enchanted castles'—they seem appropriate to put with the *Swan Lake* costume. The swans were enchanted beings which

had been changed from women into swans by von Rothbart, whose castle dominates the shores of the lake that the swans inhabit during the day. And of course the blues of each burner complement the blue of the tutu.



And I love that there are other swans there in the half-landing bathroom as well.

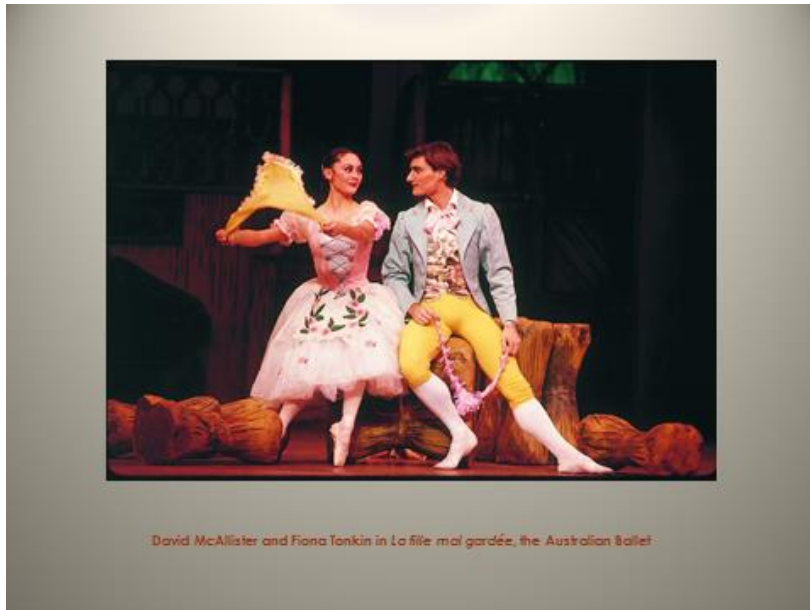
Let's move now into the kitchen. As in the study, there is no costume on display in the kitchen, but David initially planned to have something there from *La fille mal gardée*, or in its English translation, *The wayward daughter*. *Fille* is one of the oldest ballets in the classical repertoire and the first production was in 1789, although the version we see today is probably quite different as the ballet has undergone many, many changes over more than two centuries. But, there is certainly nothing enchanted about *Fille*. Lise, who is the daughter of the title, is a farm girl and the ballet takes place in a French village at harvest time. So it is quite down to earth.

The original idea to use costumes from *Fille* in this Fairhall exhibition was sparked off by a figurine of a shepherdess, which you can see in the next slide. The costume this shepherdess wears is similar to Osbert Lancaster's designs for the female dancers in *Fille*, which is the production choreographed for the Royal Ballet by Frederick Ashton in 1960. Also on the slide is a photo taken from an Australian Ballet production from the 1970s. There is a moment in the show where the corps de ballet dances a maypole dance and the ribbons you see are part of that dance. And, so that you can appreciate that *Fille* is not about enchanted beings, or princesses, or wealthy young women, there is another photo from the same

period. It shows Maina Gielgud, who also guested in with the Australian Ballet as Lise in the 1970s.



David McAllister, curator of this Fairhall exhibition, had singular success dancing in *La Fille mal gardée* as Colas, the young man who wants to marry Lise. You see him in the slide below with Fiona Tonkin in a performance from the 1990s. In 1985 David represented Australia in the Moscow International Ballet Competition. His partner was Elizabeth Toohey. In the first round they danced Walter Bourke's *Grande Tarantella*, an exciting, fiendishly fast virtuoso piece. They reached the second round and then danced the Fanny Elssler pas de deux from Act I of *La Fille mal gardée*, a special pas de deux interpolated into *Fille* by the very well-known nineteenth-century ballerina, Fanny Elssler. In Moscow, half-way through the pas de deux the audience started clapping, and they clapped until the end. And when Liz and David left the theatre they were mobbed. They were stars. Dame Margaret Scott, who taught both David and Liz at the Australian Ballet School, and who was on the jury in Moscow that year, likes to tell the story of going back to the jury room where another member of the panel grabbed her, waltzed her round the room and said, 'Oh Maggie, dancing at last'.



I'd like to finish by moving into an elegant sitting room where we can rest, figuratively speaking that is, surrounded by Desmond Heeley's gorgeous dresses from Act I of *The Merry Widow*.



Today, our ballet heroines have ranged from the ethereal to the earthy, from the enchanting to the enchanted. I hope you have enjoyed hearing about them. And I hope you will take the opportunity to look at them as they are displayed, perhaps with renewed interest. Thank you.

*Hugh Colman interviewed by Michelle Potter, 5–6 March 2012, National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection, TRC 6388 Online: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5813265>