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ROYAL SATIRE

TRIUMPH OF THE TUTU

WHEELING WESTERN AUSTRALIA

AN EARLY WALKER–ADVENTURER

THE UNOFFICIAL ANTHEM OF THE AIF

AND MUCH MORE ...

Walter Stringer (1907–2001)
Australian Ballet Performance of Swan Lake, 1977
colour photograph; 20 x 25 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn542969

TUTU

MICHELLE POTTER CHARTS THE EVOLUTION OF THE ICONIC DANCE COSTUME.

The image of a female ballet dancer in a soft, white gauzy dress—a tutu—is a pervasive one. The French artist, Edgar Degas, captured this vision of the ballet dancer in his drawings, paintings and sculptures of Parisian performers of the late 1800s. His dancers are shown in the studio, in the wings, backstage, on stage. We see them resting, practising, taking class, performing. They are shown from many angles: from the orchestra pit, from the auditorium, as long shots, as close-ups. They wear a soft skirt reaching just below the knee. It has layers of fabric pushing it out into a bell shape, and often there is a sash at the waist, tied in a bow at the back. Most of his dancers also wear a signature band of ribbon at the neck. The dress has a low-cut bodice with, occasionally, a short, frilled sleeve. More often than not the costume is white, the iconic colour of a dancer's tutu.

The history of the tutu begins with the emancipation of female dancers from restrictive garments of various kinds. In 1734, the French dancer Marie Sallé appeared in *Pigmalion*, a dance she choreographed in which she took the role of a statue that comes to life. 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. Sadly 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 where *Pigmalion* was performed, in the French newspaper of the day, *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*

ABOVE
Talma
Signorina D'Argo c. 1893
sepia photograph
16.5 x 10.8 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3167099

BELOW RIGHT
Spencer Shier (1884–1950)
Anna Pavlova as the Dying Swan, Melbourne, 1926
b&w photograph
19.6 x 14.4 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6294369

OPPOSITE
Paula Hinton in Theme and Variations, National Theatre Ballet, Melbourne, 1952
b&w photograph
20.3 x 15.5 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1051917

dress draped to represent a Greek statue.

The arrival in the West of the fabric called muslin, of which Sallé's revolutionary costume was made, was an important development. Most literature on the history of muslin, a fine, woven white cotton, suggests that it had its origin on the Indian subcontinent, although other literature suggests that it was first made in Mosul, a city in present day Iraq. 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. White muslin became the fabric of choice for the fashionable woman. Muslin was washable and it fell gracefully like the folds of the costumes on statues unearthed from the ruins of Pompeii in the early to mid-nineteenth century. White clothing also indicated status. A white garment was hard to keep clean so a well-dressed woman in a pristine white outfit was clearly wealthy enough to have many dresses in her wardrobe. Since ballet costuming at the time followed fashion trends, white also became the colour of the new, free-flowing ballet dresses.

Soon the white, Greek-inspired dress gave way to the long, white tutu as worn in many ballets created in the Romantic era, ballets like *La Sylphide*, for example, first performed in Paris in 1832. This costume was a little shorter than the one worn by Sallé, but not yet as short as that worn by a Degas dancer. The influence that these costumes had on the future of ballet was immense. 'This new style brought an excess of white gauze, tulle and tarlatan,' wrote the French commentator, Théophile Gautier, in *La Presse* in 1844. As the National Library's extensive collection of dance images demonstrates, the long, white, Romantic tutu continues to be part of ballet costuming to this day and represents the image of an elusive and fragile female dancer.

As costuming became less restrictive, however, ballet technique began to develop. The removal of weighty costuming, and accessories that disguised the body and hampered its movement, allowed dancers to move faster, jump higher, turn unhindered. And from there, the tutu was progressively shortened to make these newly acquired and sophisticated skills more visible. At first, the tutu usually retained its bell shape, although the bodice became more tightly fitted, emphasising the dancer's nipped-in waistline. Shortened tutus were worn in Australia in 1893 by Catherine Bartho, a dancer from Moscow, and Enrichetta d'Argo from Italy. These two dancers performed in *Turquoisette*, a ballet thought to be the first classical work danced in Australia, which was presented by J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd in Melbourne as an adjunct to their Grand Italian Opera season. The costume crossed into the Australian circus arena around the same time. It was worn by Miss May Martin, a contortionist and horsewoman with Wirth's Circus, whose success as a performer was constantly praised in press reports during the first years of the twentieth century. Promotional postcards and commercial photographs of Anna Pavlova, who visited Australia in the 1920s, show that she too was wearing the newly shortened tutu for many of her dances.

Slowly the tutu started to lose some of its soft shape and its skirt began to extend, sometimes quite stiffly, outwards from the hip. By the middle of the twentieth century, the tutu had become even shorter. At times the skirt seemed little more than a frill of tulle, but since then designers have approached the tutu from many different directions. Some

IN A PREVIOUS ISSUE
Undercover Designs
Michelle Potter looks at the drawings of costume designer Kristian Fredrikson.
✲ March 2015
http://goo.gl/jVM7DK

BELOW
Jim McFarlane (b. 1955)
Justine Summers in Divergence, the Australian Ballet, 1994
b&w photograph; 25.4 x 20.2 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2953169
courtesy Jim McFarlane

have chosen a traditional approach and have done so with a conscious look back at the history of the costume. In an oral history interview recorded for the National Library in 2012, designer Hugh Colman spoke of his approach to designing tutus for a new Australian Ballet production of *Swan Lake*. He said:

> *To me [tutus] are 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.*

Tom Lingwood's tutus for an earlier Australian Ballet production of *Swan Lake*, one produced in 1977 by the company's artistic director Anne Woolliams, also looked back to tradition for their design. Lingwood opted for a skirt approaching the length of tutus of the late nineteenth century. He also gave his costumes something of the soft, gauzy look of the Romantic tutu.

Other designers have kept a recognisable shape to the costume but have looked towards contemporary materials for inspiration. Vanessa Leyonhjelm, for example, designed tutus for Stanton Welch's 1994 ballet *Divergence*, a work in which Welch was seeking 'a grunge effect'. The materials Leyonhjelm used moved away from anything that might be thought of as even remotely traditional. The *Divergence* tutus and their accompanying headdresses were made from nylon, cotton, vacuum formed polyurethane foam (similar to the foam used for divers' wetsuits), 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 translucent and needed to be dark.

Angus Strathie, on the other hand, turned the shape of the skirt upside down when he designed tutus for the Glow Worm scene in Meryl Tankard's 2003 production, *Wild Swans*. The tulle skirt was attached to briefs and constructed in gores with a thin metal strip inserted into seam 'pockets' between each gore. The tutu skirt fanned upwards from the hip and its inverted position was held in place by those metal strips.

The first-known use of the word 'tutu' to describe this iconic item of ballet costuming is recorded in the late nineteenth century. The word derives from a French slang word for backside and reflects the era when ballet moved into the music hall and became a somewhat salacious form of entertainment. But, whether worn in a moonlit forest glade by sylphs or swans, as an item of grunge clothing or as a revealing item in the music hall, the history of the tutu offers a fascinating glimpse into the interrelationship of society, fashion and theatrical costuming.

DR MICHELLE POTTER is a writer, historian and former curator of dance at the National Library of Australia. Her most recent book is *Dame Maggie Scott: A Life in Dance* (2014).

ON THE COVER

Jim McFarlane (b. 1955)
Justine Summers in Divergence, the Australian Ballet, 1994
b&w photograph; 25.4 x 20.2 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2953169
courtesy Jim McFarlane

Stanton Welch's 1994 ballet *Divergence* was a provocative and progressive work with costumes to match. Aiming for a high fashion feel with a grunge edge, designer Vanessa Leyonhjelm kept the recognisable shape of the tutu but moved away from traditional materials. Here we see the Australian Ballet's former principal dancer Justine Summers in Leyonhjelm's stiff mesh tutu and leather bra 'that Madonna would envy', according to *The New York Times*.

Costumes and headdresses made from foam, lycra, metal and raffia are a long way from the soft bell-shaped skirts of Degas' dancers or the restrictive panniers and bodices of the early eighteenth century. Discover how the iconic dancer's costume evolved on page 2.

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