

Light and Dark of the Human Heart

*Kristian Fredrikson: Designer, by Michelle Potter.
Published by Melbourne Books.*



Janet Vernon and Graeme Murphy in Sydney Dance Company's "Shéhérazade." Photograph by Branco Gaica

By Madelyn Coupe



We are all waiting—patiently, responsibly, and eagerly—for theatres to reopen. No matter how easily consumable

digital seasons are, they will never replace the experience of seeing a performance live. The craving to hear live music, to see the dancers' sweat trickle down their temples, and to smell the champagne-tinged air of a theatre hasn't gone away; yet, on the other hand, my eagerness to view another digital production has waned. What was once an intimate form of escapism has turned into a constant reminder of something I cannot have—the computer screen now both saviour and tormentor. In a journey to find a non-digital source to satisfy the craving, I came across a new dance book which celebrates life and human connection (and has nothing to do with Covid-19).

Kristian Fredrikson: Designer examines the life and career of Kristian Fredrikson (1940–2005). Written by renowned critic Michelle Potter, the book offers an insight into the mind of one of Australia's and New Zealand's most accomplished designers. What Potter does, in 240 pages, is reveal the practical genius of Fredrikson. She guides you through his life—from his fledgling career in the '60s to his artistic heights in the '80s—and reveals the legacy of an extraordinary man who has worked across theatre, dance, opera, film and television.

Fredrikson's personality is barely contained by these pages. Combined with the sheer reach of his artistic genius, it is hard to miss the passion and dedication that Fredrikson had for his work. His career spanned five decades. He collaborated with an awe-inspiring list of artists and companies including Russell Kerr (former artistic director of Royal New Zealand Ballet), Peggy van Praagh (founder of the Australian

Ballet), Rex Reid (first full-time artistic director of West Australian Ballet), and, most notably, Graeme Murphy (choreographer and former artistic director of Sydney Dance Company). Fredrikson's relationship with Murphy changed the course of his career and a whole chapter of the book is dedicated to this artistic bond.

The level of detail that Fredrikson brought to his designs is well noted. In one instance, to create faux embroidery for Melbourne Theatre Company's production of "All's Well that Ends Well," he "discovered a substance with the consistency of whipped cream, which he put into icing nozzles. He then drew patterns on garments using the filled nozzles and dropped shimmering beads and glitter onto the patterns while the substance was still wet. The patterns remained soft once dry, but the decorations had adhered well and the whole could be pierced with a needle to resemble embroidery."

Potter went to great lengths to produce an in-depth account of Fredrikson's life. She travelled across Australia, visited his friends and colleagues in New Zealand, talked to former dancers in New York, conducted interviews in London, and spent hours upon hours with the staff at Houston Ballet. The profile she creates of Fredrikson is a testament to her research.

The most delightful aspect of this book, however, are the images. Fredrikson's conceptual drawings are pieces of art, in and of themselves, and what this book does, so wonderfully, is give equal value to Fredrikson's history, his costumes, and his art.

Kristian Fredrikson: Designer is a piece of well-crafted escapism. On the surface, it presents the career of Fredrikson—it lists name after name, design after design—and his remarkable impact on the cultural legacy of Australia and New Zealand. Hidden underneath, though, is the story of a man plagued by practicality and detail, whose humour and passion for his work should not go unnoticed in the twenty-first century.