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Ballet row over bodyline

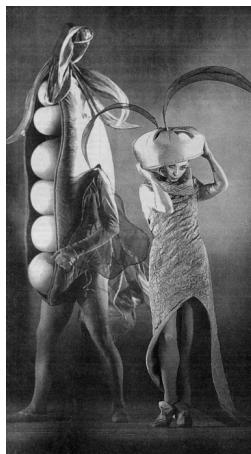


Photo Laurie Lewis

In opera costumes need to look good, but in ballet their vital role is to show off movement. Ismene Brown airs a simmering controversy

IT IS a strange coincidence that the Diaghilev exhibition arrives in London just as the Royal Ballet opens one of its most controversial productions of recent memory, the distractingly designed *Sleeping Beauty*. An overambitious production of this very ballet nearly did for Sergei Diaghilev himself.

Showing London its first ever *Beauty* in 1922, with the fragile, legendary Olga Spessivtseva as Aurora and boldly coloured sets by the equally legendary Leon Bakst, he expected to unveil a classical triumph; when the sets malfunctioned, the evening was trumpeted as 'the suicide of the Russian Ballet', and Diaghilev went home convinced that his career in the West was dead.

Fussing over the designs is a time-honoured preoccupation for dance-lovers. An alien visitor would think, from the outraged outbursts with which we greet a misconceived opera or dance production, that there is a harmonious consensus from which these are rare deviations. The truth is that dance design is a can of worms, in which personal taste, philosophical arguments about authenticity and the cut of dancers' tights slither inextricably round together.

Nicholas Georgiadis is probably the most illustrious ballet designer in the world today, whose costumes have been worn by Fonteyn, Nureyev, Makarova, Guillem, in ballets such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manon*, *Mayerling* and indeed *Sleeping Beauty*. He points out that the costumes are infinitely more important than the scenery, because 'whatever you do with the set, the eye is always drawn to the human figure.'

The rows that he remembers vividly have been not about sets but about seams. The diagonal seams that Nureyev insisted upon having over his ribs so his jerkin clung like a second skin, the vertical bust seams that Guillem demands to give her a little more than nature did - in these the designer irritatedly surrendered his authority. None of us would notice it, but to Georgiadis the wrong seam sticks out like a sore thumb.

"In any costume you can detect the body-line of the era in which it was made. The bust is always a giveaway. The vertical seam curving around the breast is a 1950s seam. The

mono-bosom, the bosom on a shelf, is Edwardian. In the 18th century, which was Manon's time, the corset was like armour-plating; the breasts were pushed up practically under the chin. This is where I have my great rows with Sylvie Guillem, when she did *Manon*. Because she wants to have the seam so that her breast is shaped naturally, and I was telling her this is quite wrong. I don't care if no one else sees - it worried me."

Most people, I suspect, are pleased to see Guillem's bust in almost any kind of seam, but it is true that in dance design plays a disproportionate part in the audience's enjoyment. The latest Royal Ballet row may be about overdone sets, but its *Swan Lake* and *Beatrix Potter* earlier this winter were so clogged by excessive costumes that watching the dancers was like listening to music with cotton wool in one's ears.

Above all, good dance design is practical: whether elaborate or simple, the set must allow the performers room to dance, and the costumes must both allow them to move freely and, crucially, make their movements clear.

Oddly, even though we have stretch fabrics that were never dreamed about in 1920, today costumes prove the more difficult challenge to our designers.

Georgiadis mourns that art students, brought up in the flat 20th-century painting tradition, draw figures so badly that they cannot understand the architecture of the body, and thus cannot cope with problems such as the extra material needed below the armpit to allow smooth overhead arm-lines. Diaghilev's designers included Picasso and Matisse, the founders of flat art, but they were master draughtsmen too. They understood, and enjoyed, the difference between costumes needed to dance in, and the moving scenery formed by courtiers and sidekicks. Some of Bakst's most inventive designs are for peripheral characters, fantasies of stiffly encrusted opulence or barely-there drapes.

IN FACT the ballerina is not the biggest challenge. The tutu is a staple ingredient: it needs smooth sides, so it will not cut the hands of the ballerina's partner, and the only argument is whether to go for the longer "soft lampshade" favoured in Imperial Russia and by Nureyev, or the short crisp "plate" preferred by the Royal Ballet. A longer skirt needs clever lighting not to put the feet and legs in shadow - but clever lighting is not easily found today, now that footlights are out of fashion.

The leading man is more interesting. How do you dress a prince? Must he always look like an operetta hussar? Georgiadis points out that in classical ballets the Prince's ceremonial military status - plus the fact that military costumes were about the only ones then designed to be physically active in - lead you inevitably in one direction.

He remembers Nureyev's fury when he put the men in a waltz in *The Nutcracker* into cut-down tails. "I couldn't think what was wrong, until he told me that in Communist Russia only waiters wore tails. Cecil Beaton had the same problem with him in *Marguerite and Armand*, Ashton's ballet for him and Fonteyn. He gave Nureyev tails, and Rudolf was absolutely beside himself with fury."

Rigid ideas and cloying sweetness have dogged ballet design for many a long year, and it can be a relief to see a newcomer to the game. But where *haute couture Così fan tutte à la Armani* at the Royal Opera was fine, *haute couture Swan Lake à la Jasper Conran* at Scottish Ballet was not. The clothes wore the dancers, rather than the dancers wearing them.

A ballet's identity is an elusive thing - choreography is an inaccessible language, and what most people take home with them is an atmosphere, an impression of a familiar story. Paramount for the ballet designer must be capturing that atmosphere, enhancing the dancers' grace in the costumes, and - more difficult - conveying the ballet's musical and emotional essence in the set.

Some designers have virtually defined certain ballets - Martha Graham's dances

incorporating the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi, David Bintley's *The Planets* at Covent Garden a few years ago inextricable from Ralph Kolai's glorious galactic set, as is Glen Tetley's *Pierrot Lunaire* from Rouben Ter-Arutunian's silver climbing frame.

David Roger, coming from opera to ballet for the first time to design Twyla Tharp's *Mr Worldly Wise* at the Royal Ballet last autumn, says he was glad he was in on a new creation, rather than a classic. "I think the ballet audience is more conservative: it's hard to redesign a classical ballet, whereas with opera if you don't turn it inside out people are shocked."

One day someone will do to *The Sleeping Beauty* what Richard Jones and Nigel Lowery did to Wagner's *Ring* recently - boldly giving a classic a totally invented visual realm of its own. But our gratitude for it will not primarily hang on arguments about clever taste or symbolic aptness. What will matter above all is that the dancers don't fall over, and that we can see their legs.

'Diaghilev: Creator of the Ballets Russes', exhibition at the Barbican (until April 14). 'The Invitation', designed by Nicholas Georgiadis, opens at the Royal Ballet on Wed Feb 7. 'The Sleeping Beauty', designed by Maria Bjornson, continues at the Royal Ballet until Feb 22.