

Costumes ~ A key element of Ballet

Yasuko Yeung

Every element of theatre looks dramatic. One of the reasons why we want to go to the theatre is to experience something extraordinary, spend some time out of everyday life. Once we step into the theatre, the red carpet welcomes us. The orchestra and dancers are ready to entertain us. The stage is decorated with a magnificent set and the dancers are in beautiful costumes, which play such an important role in the art of dance.

“The original concept of classical ballet was to experience the extraordinary”, explains Janek Schergen, the Artistic Director of Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT). Ballet as an art form was significantly developed in the time of Louis XIV who possessed a passion for dance and fashion. At that time, classic ballet told a story and showcased beauty. As the Sun King pushed forward with establishing ballet as a form of art, costume design also benefitted from his reign. Ballet costumes originated in the French court and reflected the style of elaborate gowns for women and military dress for men. Today we can see the beauty of classic ballet in hand sewn gorgeous costumes.

In the 20th century, ballet costume design entered a new era as George Balanchine, the most famous choreographer of the century, made the radical step of introducing “practice-wear” on stage so that the perfection and grace of the dancers bodies would be shown. Ballet started to reflect modern fashion.

When you look into the history of costume design, the first generation of costume designers were artists experimenting with designs as artwork and fashion. Different designers had different approaches. Some designed based on concepts, some were more practical and hands-on who could construct costumes as well as design. Designs are created and drawn for each individual dancer’s role and then fabric swatches are attached to show the desired end result. Afterwards, completed designs are often framed and hung as artwork (because they are so gorgeous!) Some well-known designers include fashion designers such as Coco Chanel and Christian Lacroix. Costumes from the legendary Ballet Russes have become artwork and exhibited in museum. You may have been lucky enough to see their costumes when National Art Centre in Tokyo had a special exhibition of Ballet Russes costumes several years ago.



Costume sketches of the Lilac Fairy and Cavalier (Sleeping Beauty)

Janek explains that if dancers feel good wearing a costume, one that fits well and looks good, it will help them perform at their best. Each costume is hand-made and goes through two to five individual fittings until it fits perfectly. Costumes are costly and each dancer’s costume can cost from \$400 to \$3,000 each. For example, in *Sleeping Beauty*, there are over 140 different costumes and you can imagine how much passion and labour is put into the production. Each costume is created with enough room in the seams so that they can be re-fitted for new casts in future performances. Costumes are handed down over the course of a company’s history and sometimes it is a great honor and inspiration to wear a costume created for a dancer you have admired.



Finale of *Sleeping Beauty* (SDT 2018)



SDT's beloved monthly studio event, One @the Ballet (2020)

A major requirement for a costume is to express the dancer's movement and shape in a costume. Men must be able to lift their arms freely, yet keep the line of the costumes. Women's costumes must fit well enough to allow them to dance without restriction and be partnered without difficulty. Classical bodices are created in at least eight or nine panels and are never decorated or jeweled at the waistline to allow partnering lifts and pirouettes with the male dancers. In a tutu, there are between 9-14 layers or fully attached in graduated layers to lift the tutu upwards. Did you know Tutus began at ankle length and then gradually shortened? The longer length is referred to as a romantic tutu and a bell-shaped tutu is considered to be classical in structure. In Dega's famous "Le Class de Danse (1874)", bell shaped tutus are worn by the dancers.



Ma Ni being fitted into the brand new Paquita costume



SDT's hardworking wardrobe team. The costumes are getting ready for the production.

Trained staff are the foundation of any ballet company's costuming department. They put in numerous hours in the creation of a production's costumes. As any new work approaches premiere, their involvement intensifies greatly and costumes are worked on right up until the performance itself. The longer any ballet stays in the active repertoire, the more wear and tear happens to costumes and certain individual pieces can be re-built and reworked numerous times.

One of the most magical places in a dance company may be their wardrobe room. I was once invited to SDT's costume room. It was indeed a fascinating and overwhelming sight with colourful and gorgeous costumes hanging on rack from floor to ceiling. Once a fitting is done, professional staff starts to work on the costume. Usually, it is a quiet room but this is the room which excites students when they visit the dance company's studios for a school tour.

At SDT, the costume room accommodates hundreds of costumes. In the centre of the room is a cutting table full of fabric, decorative trim, embellishments and crystals. It is a testament to the possibilities of what is about to be created. Detail and decoration are all hand-done and considered artwork. Crystals, beads, pearls, and sequins are all a part of each design. Tiaras, headpieces, earrings, millinery, gloves, and the headwear are also specifically designed and created. Wigs, hairpieces and millinery are a part of costuming in period pieces. During dress rehearsal, such pieces are also checked to make sure they won't disturb the dancer's movements.

In Romeo and Juliet by Choo San Goh, the character Fate plays an important role. While the cast are dressed in 17th century style, Fate is dressed in a very tight-fitting silver costume. Even her face is painted in silver! When the production made a debut in 1984, it must have caused quite a sensation. Even now Fate looks very much avant-garde, yet mysteriously harmonious with the rest of the cast. It was like she breathes fresh air into this classic love story. Of course, the popularity of Choo San's Romeo and Juliet is largely due to the stunning choreography, but it is also due to the magnificent and avant-garde costumes.

Photos/Information: Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) One @ the Ballet

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Ambassadors Council of Singapore Dance Theatre
One @ the Ballet has resumed at SDT's studio

A monthly event, you can get a unique insight into Singapore's ballet scene. And next to the reception desk, a display of some costumes greets you. Please take a look - they are beautifully sewn and you can see the pride and love of the costume staff.

https://www.instagram.com/p/B5KhM5_gKJe/

Short video of costumes of Swan Lake by students of Lasalle College of Arts

<http://www.singaporedancetheatre.com/one/>

One @ the Ballet Schedule 2021