

The Fashion System and the Ephemeral: Ballet and Costume

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the theory that dress is synonymous with the identity of the ballerina. Rooted in the seventeenth century French court, classical ballet is perhaps our last vestige of aristocratic manners and civility. The early court dances were encumbered by dress of the day, arguably identifiable in its silhouette and material composition. In 1832 Marie Taglioni made a landmark contribution to the ballet, the combination of the romantic tutu and the satin slippers that allowed her to elevate onto her toes. The ballerina evolved over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an iconic symbol of feminine virtue, permitting an earthbound mortal with a gift for movement to transcend her corporeal bonds and hover over the earth. The religion of the ballerina might be described as an art of high ideals and self-control in which a public aristocratic bearing and grace symbolize private virtue and an elevated state of being. The classical tutu is an esoteric garment, an evolution of theatrical pragmatism and ephemeral fashion, but in its lightness, sparkle and elegance, in the craft and dedication that go into its making, the tutu embodies everything that ballet is about.

This paper considers the ways the tutu constructs and articulates an appropriate ballerina femininity, demonstrating that this iconic functional artefact of the ballet is beautiful in its own right. Expressive of the dichotomy inherent to the life of the ballerina, the pristine surface exists in sharp contrast to the stains of sweat and makeup combined with the tang of anxiety embedded in the layers, illuminating the signs of a ballerina's work. The trained and honed contours of the ballerina body become transformed in the adoption of the carapace that is the bodice bordered with a wide froth of pleated netting. The garment offers a fragile, protective space that defines a boundary between the unfinished, vulnerable, leaky-at-the-margins body and the pristine and glittering seamless surface.

The geometric and architectural shapes performed by the ballerina present an infinitely recognizable silhouette on the stage. The ballet costume sustains and is sustained by

the aristocratic codes of manners and behaviour, and has continued to transform itself innumerable times during its history. If classical ballet is about movement, theatrical presentation and storytelling, the tutu becomes the only material evidence of the performance while the dance itself remains an ephemeral art form, leaving no record.

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We are shaped and fashioned by what we love (Goethe).

There is a long held fascination with the ballerina and much of it revolves around the ways in which she dresses and the unique nature of the garments she wears: layers of frothy tulle and tightly corseted bodices are rarely seen in contemporary fashion and yet, the ballerina silhouette is often imitated, popular among brides, drag queens and little girls who pirouette around the living room. This article discusses the theory that dress is synonymous with the identity of the ballerina. I will look at the body of the ballerina and the forms achieved through training, in order to assess the ways that dress creates her identity. The world of classical ballet is a world layered in hierarchies, traditions and codifications. Training is associated with a specific set of garments and tools from an early age so that the body learns to conform to the way garments need to be worn. In the transnational world of the ballet, the rites and rituals found evident in the costume shop run as deep as those evidenced in the dance studio. This article considers the question, what can be learned about the relationships between ballet and costume?

Fashion vs. Costume for the Ballet

The fashion system has been directed by industrialism since the middle of the eighteenth century, producing great wealth and raising the standard of living for a large proportion of the Western population. In the twenty-first century, fashion moves very quickly, driven by the pace of change and the attention span of consumers. Consumers are key to the success of modes of fashion production; the fact that items of clothing are mass produced at minimal cost and become obsolete almost before they are placed in

shops means that the cycle becomes self-perpetuating. In his book titled *Fashion-able: Hacktivism and Engaged Fashion Design*, Otto von Busch asserts that fashion is “indeed like a sudden burst of energy, a firing of ephemeral intensity.” (von Busch, 2009, p.

38). It relies on quick responses, impulsive purchases and an endless cycle of fads and fleeting novelties.

Theatrical costume on the other hand, while influenced by fashion for generations, relies on the suspension of disbelief for its success. Costume is a response to a director’s vision; it communicates signs about a character such as gender, class and historical time periods, and relies on audience recognition – how the clothes look and what they signify about the action on stage – as some of the most important features. Theatrical costuming is unique in the world of clothing production and manufacture and, even more so, costume for the ballet is unique within the realms of the theatre. It is not usually outsourced overseas, it is not often part of an assembly line, and it is not always profit driven, as is the case with much contemporary clothing. Ballet costume is part of a “slow” movement; each garment is completely and handsomely individualized in terms of colour, fabric, fashion, cut, fit and headdress; it is custom-made for each individual or is adjusted to fit, if it is being revived from existing stock; and it is built, restored and maintained on site by skilled personnel in a costume shop, paying homage to a tradition while creating something new with each new work. Every member of the wardrobe staff will make a significant contribution to the spectacle that appears on stage.

In *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, Thomas Hecht describes ballet costume as “a visual record of a performance, the only survival of a production, representing a living imaginary picture of a scene” (Steele, 2010, p. 47). I would propose then, that if dance is an ephemeral art form of the past just as it appears, and costume is a visual record of the performance, then a study of the costume process for ballet might bring forth a narrative that articulates the distinction between fashion and ballet costume even though both illustrate aspects of ephemerality.

In theatrical costuming, the language of clothes must resonate and become one with the unique attributes of the body that wears it, for the body is at the centre of our understanding of the performance. In the ballet this is even more true because costume is rooted in the history of the art form and pays direct reference to the evolution of the gesture; ballet garments are manipulated according to an age-old tradition and hierarchy. There is legitimate pleasure taken in the selection of fine materials and the execution of elegant designs through exquisite workmanship and extravagant decoration.

The wardrobe artist becomes the sculptor, manifesting the sculpted form that overlays the body, a play on concealment and revealment, important attributes of dress. The tradition of making is passed down through an informal system of apprenticeship; in order to get a job, one must have some knowledge and training, although specific skill is often acquired through working in a costume shop where much of the knowledge is implied and one is mentored by cutters who teach techniques of creating garments that will enhance the confidence of the dancers.

The Romantic Ballerina

Rooted in the seventeenth-century French court, classical ballet is one of our last vestiges of aristocratic manners and civility. The early court dances were often encumbered by the dress of the day, its silhouettes and material compositions. In 1832 Marie Taglioni premiered at the Paris Opera in her leading role for *La Sylphide*, crystallizing the archetypal image of a ballerina. She danced in a romantic tutu, a costume composed of a diaphanous tulle skirt topped with a décolleté bodice, the fashionable garment of the time. The ballerina then evolved from the nineteenth to the twentieth century as an iconic stereotype of feminine virtue, a symbol of the mystery and sensuality of femininity, permitting an earth bound mortal, endowed with a graceful gesture, to transcend her corporeal bounds and hover over the earth. The primary artefacts of the ballet, the billowing tulle skirt, the décolleté bodice and the satin pointe shoes, permit the mortal weight of the body to disappear into thin air. Since Taglioni,

there has been a tight relationship between ballet scenery and costume, presented within the black box of the theatre, the whole picture framed by the proscenium arch.

In *The Lure Of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1780-1830*, Judith Chazin-Bennahum (2005) discusses social, artistic and political influences of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on ballet costume, in order to situate it within the realms of the fashions of the day, establishing it as fancy dress, an independent art form:

In France the word costume, or *la mode*, also means fashion, dress, or suit, and in one way or another all clothing in France was connected to fashion, whether one was a milkmaid, a queen, or a sylph. For centuries, forces of fashion and the reigning taste of the time determined how people were dressed on stage at the Opéra or at the King's Theatre. When the aristocracy ruled, stage costumes mirrored court fashions in their opulence. (p. 4)

Chazin-Bennahum identifies an early codification of the ballet costume found in the combination of the Romantic tutu, pointe shoes and tights, both within and without the world of the ballet. She determines dichotomies of the Romantic ballerina as being delicate and powerful, ethereal and earthly, and both fecund and chaste. The classical tutu becomes a "standard artifact for beauty, vigour, suppleness, vivacity and harmony in its own right" (Chazin-Bennahum, 2005, p. 224). Ballet, then, conjoins the body and its accoutrements; the tutu, the satin pointe shoes and the tiara. The ballerina's silhouette is an amplification of these objects.

The Classical Tutu

The classical tutu is unique in the world; unique among other articles of clothing and in the ways it affects people's understanding of both dress and the way ballet functions. The fact that the tutu is designed and constructed by experienced and specialized experts, often within the confines of ballet companies, signifies its uniqueness in the realm of the fashion industry. The choice of materials and the assemblage of

component parts have distinguished it from other garments since the early days of the Romantic ballet. The fact that it is imitated but never actually copied sets it apart. It has often been stated that dress is a second skin, a layer that protects human beings from the world around them just as it projects them out into that same world. My claim is that, based on its construction, the tutu is not a second skin but rather a type of skeletal structure that both constrains the body inside of its historic truth and at the same time liberates it to move according to a choreographic gesture. The supple and sinuous body of the dancer sits inside this protective armour, whereby the two “bodies” perform in perfect symbiosis. The garment is architectonic, a geometric shape that wraps and spirals round her, in constant movement, reaching out both vertically and horizontally to draw in the surrounding space while simultaneously reaching out to expand her world. Costume for the ballet is distinct from other forms of theatrical costume; it inspires the makers, wearers and audience members to lift themselves out of an ordinary day in order to enter the ballet’s fantastical world.

Discipline and Habit

A ballerina begins professional training as early as seven or eight years old. At this young age she enters the studio dressed in the requisite leotard, pink tights, and soft canvas slippers and a soft chignon rolled at the nape of her neck. She lines up at the barre and begins a series of exercises that will continue for the duration of her professional career. By the age of fifteen she will be usually be assigned another tool of her trade, a practice tutu, which will be used during pointe classes and rehearsals as she strives to perfect the timeless gesture of her art form. Hers is a body in process, not a body as a singular fixed entity. Changes will occur throughout her training, in regard to her posture, breathing, musculature and body language. In the studio, the mirror is used as both a tool of surveillance and a corrective medium. Lined up each morning, dancers are faced not only with their own reflections, but also those of their colleagues, reinforcing repetition and inscribed ways of training that bring to fruition a collective of dance gestures. These typical practices and patterns are imposed by

companies but also adopted by the individual and become shared behaviours by, and throughout the ranks of, all dancers.

When the ballerina's body is joined with the tutu, a non-human entity, it is again transformed in posture: The pelvis is thrust forward, the shoulders are held back, the neck is elongated: Everything is adjusted in relation to the fact that her dress carves a four foot space around her; she has nowhere to rest her arms and she cannot see her feet and must therefore shift her centre of gravity. The aesthetic of the body drives the understanding of dress. In her article "Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice", Joanne Entwistle (2000) straddles the gap between theoretical discourses about the body and analyses of dress and culture to demonstrate that they are inextricably linked to each other and to the societies they are oriented towards. Dress and the body are socially constructed entities, which shape each other. Dancers' bodies are lithe, strong and supple as they are sculpted each day through repetition of exercise and practice. The ballet's formal rules of dress also enforce rigid codes of gesture and gender, conveying information about ballet culture. Designers, cutters and makers become attuned to the mechanics of the body so that the steps become inscribed in the garments: The scissors and the needle become the sculptor's tools, shaping the outer material covering, giving further form and meaning to the body.

Habit and Dress; Habit and the Body

There is social reproduction inherent in the ballerina's practice. Beliefs, traditions and training are reproduced in such a way that they become part of the social fabric. How can we think through the body to unite physical, biological and social entities? Are they separate? Or through her gesture, does the ballerina embody the unity of her physicality through a social and cultural process within the dance company? The body needs to be monitored, managed, maintained and disciplined. How are bodies managed? In *Ballet Across Borders: Career and Culture in the World of Dancers*, Helena Wulff (1998) describes culture as so inscribed within a ballet company that practices and behaviours are dictated by strict regimes, for example, how to stand at the barre, what to wear in

the rehearsal studio, and the rigour of exercises undertaken each day. She depicts the ballet world as a “highly specialized community that has reached across borders since its inception in the fourteenth century at the Italian courts” (p. 18). Like the dancers’ environment, costume for ballet operates as part of this, representing an exclusive group of designers and producers who participate in a transnational web of ideas, encounters and communications.

Materiality

As already discussed, ballet is an ephemeral art form, respectful of its history, replete with a codified set of rules of behaviour and deportment. The classical tutu is an explicit tool that is synonymous with the ballerina, woven into the fabric of a dance company, evident in its rehearsal halls, dressing rooms and wardrobe departments. It is created by experienced and specialized experts, usually within the closed society of a ballet company in contradiction to a wider world whereby garments are rarely made-to-measure in this way anymore, most often due to prohibitive costs. The tutu remains a staple part of a ballet costume inventory.

The form of the corseted tutu bodice requires a certain assemblage of materials and these materials require a certain form; which is supporting which? The ingenuity of cut, the perfection of detail, the beauties of stitch and seam can be savoured from an intimate vantage point and seen and appreciated from the seats in the theatre. The tutu maps the terrain of the body: The solar plexus is shored up inside the body armour, the outer clothes of the tutu. The stomacher protects a symbolic site of weakness that can be and has to be converted into strength.

The tutu changes the ballerina’s experience of her surroundings, extending her bodily influence while also constraining it. The tutu dictates how she moves, how much space she needs, how other dancers relate to her space and how viewers perceive her. Costume for the ballet becomes an approved set of combinations, what is codified and what is allowed, offering a unique social system of its own.

Story and the Ballet

The tutu is a key ingredient in the classical canon, fully realized at the Imperial Ballet in St Petersburg through the collaborative efforts of Marius Petipa and Piotr Tchaikovsky, and utilized towards the end of the nineteenth century in ballets such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*, all inspired by fairy tales that most easily lend themselves to translation upon the proscenium stage. As highlighted by Marina Warner (1994), “we are nourished on stories; storytelling makes women thrive.” According to Warner’s investigations, in eighteenth century Europe, Charles Perrault was writing some of these tales while ballet was becoming an established art form:

The older generations were being eased into taking pleasure in make- believe, in pretending they had become childlike again and had returned to the pleasure of their youth through tales of magic and enchantment and the homespun wisdom of the hearth... Fairy tales offered gratifications that were ... considered feminine ... (Warner, 1994, p. xvii)

We approach the ballerina in a state of excitement and anticipation. Through the fairy tale she offers us hopeful awareness. In the ephemerality of the performance she provides for us the living expression of her art form, a way of understanding that would otherwise remain unknowable. In her gesture and in her dress she captures a bygone era, a time when people lived by another rhythm and worked with a different sense of dignity. She allows us to escape into another world where manners and gestures meant something different.

In her article “Tulle as Tool: Embracing the Conflict of the Ballerina”, Jennifer Fisher:

... embraces the conflict of the ballerina and interrogates her dichotomy made material in the pointe shoe, in the pristine satin exterior and the layers of worn canvas and cardboard found upon inspection of the interior, and the telltale signs of a ballerina’s work, translating to unseen blisters, calluses, bunions and ingrown toenails transferred to the feet in the performance of the dance. (Fisher, 2007, p. 9)

The ballerina is among the most stereotypically dressed female figures, aligned with ideals of femininity in the twenty-first century. In her most positive incarnations, the ballerina is an admired female, a public figure who has achieved artistic merit and technical perfection, a woman of great accomplishment and agency. The ballet dancer has to comply with the rigorous demands of the system to control and mould the body to its ideal image, achieving proportions that are not like those of pedestrian bodies. In her more feminine aspects, ballet lends vigour to the female persona; the ballerina has a beautiful athletic, yet feminine stance. However, there is also great sacrifice involved in her creation reflected by her damaged feet and diminutive body, defying a narrow definition of femininity. Yet, in her costume, she creates a new skin, new and old at the same time, a new identity. The body is built into the garment, creating a new space, a new self. Slipping into a garment means slipping into a role in the ballet whereby the ballerina evokes strength, autonomy, authority and independence.

Materiality/Dress and its Fashioning

The garment is fashioned and refashioned; repaired, restored, and stitches or fabric or trims replaced and, while the dress is at once fashioned by sure and certain hands and then refashioned, the dress also fashions. When the ballerina adopts the fashioned matter of the dress to her form she adopts the posture, radiance and beauty that support our contemporary ideals of feminine beauty, even though, or perhaps because, they are out of reach for most of us.

An inspection of the inside of the tutu offers a startling revelation of the engineering that at once fragments the body into segments and then reconstructs it to fuse an indivisible whole. The dress reconstitutes the disassembled body, the fusion is facilitated by two tools of the maker. The needle is used to create, mend, patch, join and darn; it is restorative and reparative. The thread, more explicitly, is the binder. In a text, if we lose the thread, we cease to follow or understand; the thread holds us together. When combined, the needle and thread are used to build a garment that sustains a ballet

company for years or generations. We can build a narrative around the thread that binds a garment.

The needle is almost as old as mankind. Needles are found in archaeological excavations dating to the beginnings of civilization. Therefore, I would argue, they represent a phenomenological urge to join things together. Not just layers of fabric, which are in evidence here, but materials that have a joint purpose to create meaning when combined together. When used with a thread, a needle joins pieces together, not just randomly, but in ways that construct the outer layer that invests our ballerina with life. But the needle lends meaning to the maker as well. The needle, when put to use by an expert, becomes virtuosic; it reinforces the history evident in the art form, both of ballet and the construction of the costume. The needle is devoted to the process of making things, and is dedicated to the meaning of each action – the appropriate selection of thread, stitch length and rhythm of stitching demonstrates an intrinsic will that becomes a testament to the memory embedded in the seams, as signposts in a search for the past. Together, the needle and thread perform their work diligently, piecing together a narrative that reinforces historical accuracy while at the same time rendering a theatrical truth. This sculpting world and living world become one; the garment serves to signify the passage of time in which hopes, triumphs and fears reside. The culture in the costume shop is as inscribed as the culture in the dance studio. There are inherent rites and rituals; an acquired expertise in fitting a dancer and dealing with one another; accepted ways of behaving and repeating/completing tasks.

In its visceral and material existence, the costume becomes the only tangible record of the performance, as it constructs and articulates appropriate ballerina femininity, demonstrating that this iconic functional artefact is beautiful in its own right. Expressive of the dichotomy inherent in the life of the ballet dancer, the pristine surface of the garment exists in sharp contrast to the remains of sweat and makeup combined with a tang of anxiety embedded in the layers, illuminating the signs of a ballerina's work.

An inspection of the tutu might reveal the materiality of the bodice as a construct reliant on the nature of the materials used and on the logic governing the end use. The materials' finished forms are mutually dependent, serving the successful transformation of the ballerina. The tutu is a framework composed of stiff fabrics, a multitude of seams and a layering of stitches. This shell is rigid and strong, allowing a space where the creature can fill up the inside with a breath of an extension and then relax into a more restful gesture. The makers serve to create the exoskeleton that we call the bodice, wrapping up the ballerina, encasing her, forming the structure around her taut frame. When she applies the constructed/fashioned matter of the dress to her form, fastened into a resplendent and glittering surface, she becomes impenetrable. She emerges from within it and she becomes transformed. She adopts the posture and radiance that support our contemporary ideals of feminine beauty.

Existing Garments and their Evolution

The ballerina toils each day at the barre, stretching and flexing, shaping the form of her body. The tutu is then an outer layer, placed over the honed form, creating a dialogue. In fashioning her form, through the combination of training in the studio each day and putting on the cloth of the costume, she is part of the social and cultural imagination, a figure who is recognized by her clothes, a symbol of virtue and youthful beauty: She epitomises an ideal of aristocratic manners with the ability to transport her audience beyond time and imagination.

I would argue that the classical tutu allows the ballerina to safeguard a space of her own in order to present her more public persona. With the tulle ruffle that extends horizontally from the hipbone, no one can come inside a space of fifteen inches from her body. The pleated formation of tulle emphasizes the space carved around the supple body and the circular movement frames the space around the ballerina. It is the costume that supplies the mediation between her and her public. The garment offers a fragile, protective space that defines a boundary between the unfinished, vulnerable, leaky-at-the-margins body and the pristine and glittering seamless surface.

In 1986, Arlene Croce, dance critic for *The New Yorker*, declared that each of the Tchaikovsky ballets has transcendent power:

Duma means something between daydream and meditation: It allows fantasy to penetrate reality; it dissolves rational distinctions between what is real and what the imagination feels is true. Listening, we see, we touch, until we hardly know whether it is the timpani we hear or the hammering of our own hearts. (Croce, 1987)

Stanton Welsh, artistic director of the Houston Ballet, said of his now classic *Divergence*, after its premiere, that, “Even though the dance is classical ... I changed the costume in each movement. How radically it makes you think it’s a different ballet ... but it’s all very much the same. And it’s the decoration that changes it” (Welsh, 2011). If ballet is necessarily a collaboration of dance steps, music and costume, then removing the costume changes how we see ballet: The tutu becomes indispensable to the fairytale performed onstage. The ballerina blossoms in gestures of pleasure mediated by the tutu, constructing the quintessential flower through dress.

What can be accomplished in putting on the dress?

The purpose of the ballerina’s gesture is to allow her body to pass from reality into a transformative sentient being, to blur the lines between the imagination and reality, rendering the classical tutu a vehicle of transformation. When she stands in front of her mirror and steps into the tutu there is a process she must follow. She needs a dresser to secure the stiff waistband as she settles the lower edge of the basque around her hips. She draws a breath as the long line of hooks is secured down her spine, ensuring that none of her flesh will be displaced as she moves through the rigour of her role. The ephemerality of her appearance on stage implies an element of risk, but wardrobe has done everything to minimize the chance of costume failure. As her body unites with the tutu, filling the contours and merging with the alignment of seams, together, the dress and the dancer unite to form a perfect symbiotic amplification of form.

When asked about her favourite tutu among the entire repertoire she performs, The National Ballet of Canada's principal dancer Heather Ogden responded (about her role as Odette in Swan Lake):

I don't like this tutu fitted too tight—when you're doing Odette, you want more range in your upper body, so you can fully open your chest and extend your arms to become a swan. I love that the skirt is a little fuller in the back than the front, so it feels like a wing.

In other words, Ogden becomes the swan when she puts on the dress. She articulates a becoming through the composition of dress and body, in the union of her hard-won trained form with the classical tutu.

Conclusion

The world of the ballet is an ephemeral art form, respectful of its history, replete with a codified set of rules of behaviour and deportment. Ballet costume comes with its own set of rules and limitations – elements that can be put together and others that are not allowed, establishing stratification across the company of dancers who wear the garments. The costume lives in tight symbiosis with the historical context of the art form, a context that is steeped in traditions from places such as Paris and St. Petersburg. More specifically, the classical tutu is an explicit tool that is synonymous with the ballerina, woven into the fabric of a dance company, evident in its rehearsal halls, dressing rooms and wardrobe departments. The classical tutu changes the ballerina's experience of her surroundings, extending her bodily influence while also constraining it. The tutu dictates how she moves, how much space she needs and how others see her.

The classical tutu is an esoteric garment, an evolution of theatrical pragmatism and ephemeral fashion, but in its lightness, sparkle and elegance, in the craft and dedication that go into its making, the tutu embodies everything that ballet is about. If classical ballet is about movement, theatrical presentation and storytelling, the tutu becomes the only material evidence of the performance while the dance itself remains an ephemeral

art form, leaving no discernible record. In the cultural world of the ballet, dress articulates the body, emphasizing physical discipline and dedication, making it social and identifiable – who would the ballerina be without costume as a cultural commodity?

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