

A STUDY OF A BALLET COSTUME FROM SYMPHONY IN C

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January 13, 2017

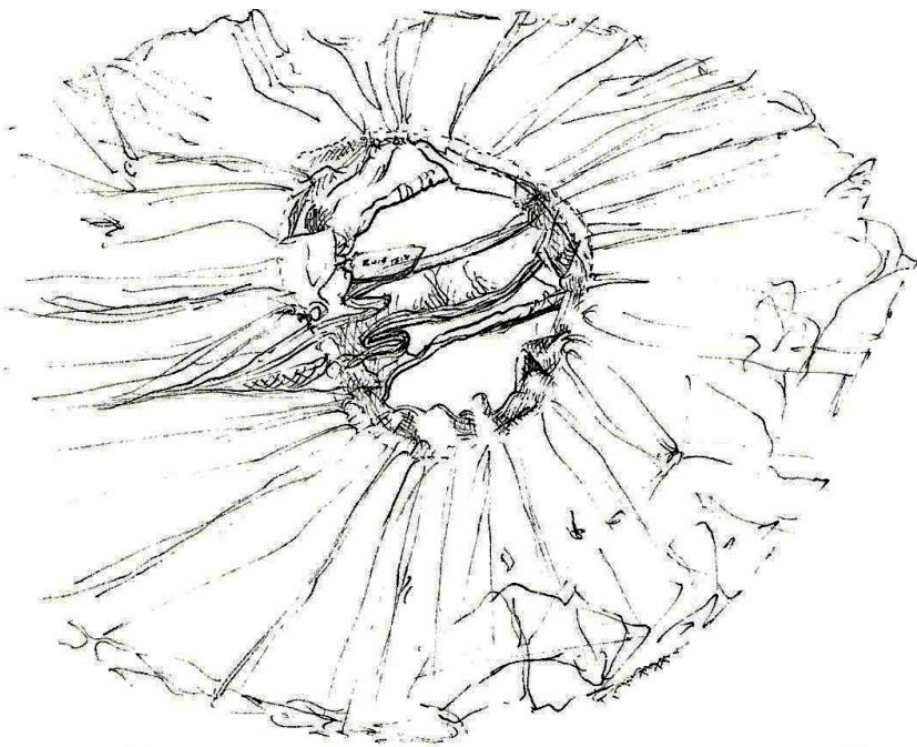
PART ONE

How a plain white tutu donated by the National Ballet of Canada reveals more than meets the eye.

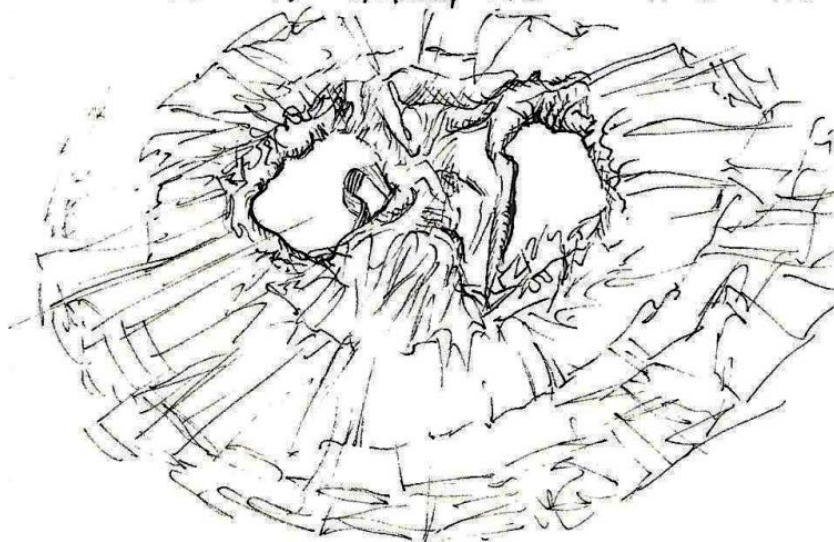
Part one explores the artifact in detail in order to learn how a classical tutu was made by the wardrobe department at the National Ballet of Canada.

At first glance, there does not seem to be anything particularly interesting about the classical white tutu laying on the table in the Fashion Research Collection. It is one of several costumes donated to Toronto Metropolitan University by the National Ballet of Canada in 2014. This tutu was worn by a member of the corps de ballet for a production of the Balanchine ballet *Symphony in C* in 1984. It is of course both delicate and pretty as all tutus are, but nonetheless appears rather plain since the decoration was removed from the skirt for reuse on other costumes by the Wardrobe Department at the [National Ballet](#). Even so, it is compelling to study in order to learn about how classical tutus are made. **My research revealed that there is much more history behind this plain white ballet costume after all. This artifact provided me with a learning experience about construction methods which will be discussed in this blog post.** A subsequent post will discuss the nature of design aesthetics for dancewear, the dance history surrounding two national dance companies, as well as insight into the influential work of costume maven Madame Karinska.

In general, tutus are made of three main parts, the skirt, the basque, and the bodice. The skirt can be separated further into three pieces; the panty, tulle base, and decorative plate (note 1). This particular artifact (FRC2014.08.033) contains the tulle base and panty. The first thing that one notices is obviously the wide, flat skirt. Interestingly, the skirt is not a perfect circle, but slightly oval in shape. At its widest, the skirt is 30 inches in diameter. The skirt has a hip measurement of 28 inches, but since the foundation is made of stretch material it could fit several sizes.

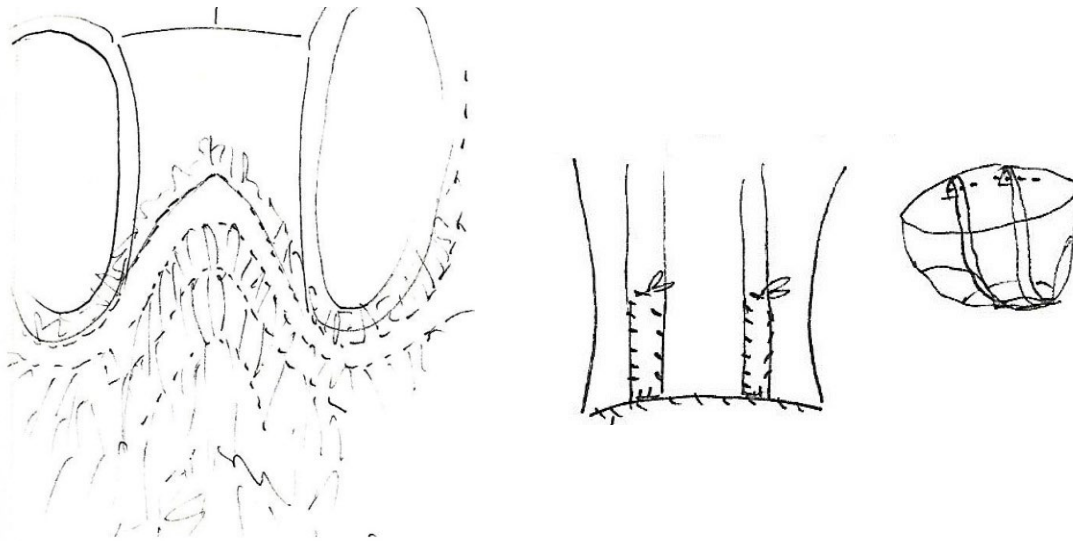


2014 .08.033 Symphony in C 1:00 - 1:15



Top and underside views
of the Symphony in C
tutu. Drawing by Teresa
Adamo, 2016.

The fluffy layers of the tulle skirt are perhaps the most iconic aspect of classical ballet costumes. The tulle base for the Symphony in C costume is made up of 12 total layers of fabric. The layers increase in length from the bottom to the top layer, the shortest being one-inch long, and the longest being approximately 8 inches long. The 5 innermost layers are made of soft flexible netting, the next 5 layers are stiff and the netting is slightly coarser (the second layer from the inside being the stiffest tulle used in this tutu). The final 2 layers on top are once again quite fine and soft. In order to hold the layers together there are basting stitches made vertically through all the layers. These stitches having been made with a doubled length of thread. The tacking is applied in order to help control the volume of the tulle and maintain its shape (Note 2).



Left: Detail of innermost tulle layers next to the leg openings on the underside of the tutu. Drawing by Teresa Adamo, 2016.

Right: Diagram of extra elastic placement in the panty. Drawing by Teresa Adamo, 2016.

The volume in the skirt of the tutu is created with a meticulous process of layering tulle. The layers of tulle have been very finely pleated rather than gathered. Each pleat is only $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide with a $\frac{1}{8}$ inch overlap. These tiny pleats give the impression of gathering or shirring which in actuality would be bulky and difficult to control, and could not give the classical tutu its smooth, flat appearance. The seams connecting the panels of tulle to each other are machine stitched and have a seam allowance only $\frac{1}{8}$ inch wide. In order to hold a plate-like shape while on a dancer, a wire hoop has been inserted into a channel made by stitching 2 layers of tulle together (Note 3).

The layers of the skirt are attached to a panty which serves as a foundation. This costume has a panty made of stretchy open mesh; this has discoloured over time from an off white cream colour to a dull beige hue. There is a 6 inch opening at the back of the tutu where the tulle is not sewn shut along the seam allowance so that the dancer is able to step into the skirt. It can then be fastened with 3 sets of hooks and eyes. Raw edges on the inside of the panty are hand finished using a catch-stitch. There is also extra elastic catch-stitched into the panties which are attached at the front of the crotch seam and extend to the back of the panty. These extra elastics were sewn into the panties when they had stretched out excessively (Note 4). Elastic has also been sewn into channels around the leg openings in order to keep the fit close to the dancer's body.

Clearly, this costume is deceptive in its simplicity. The techniques used to make this skirt and plate show an immense attention to detail. Not only is the costume structurally impressive, but certain design features also show concern for the comfort of the dancer. The softest tulle is closest to the legs so the sharp edges of the netting is less abrasive. The extra elastic around the legs makes wardrobe malfunction less likely and would make the dancer feel more confident. The skirt is easy to slip on and fasten quickly which would cut down pre-performance prep time and make quick changes easier. The opportunity to closely study these artifacts provided me with an incomparable learning experience about the construction methods and reasons behind them.

Notes

Note 1: For more information about tutu construction, visit “The Composition of a Tutu,” The National Ballet of Canada, accessed November 18, 2016, <https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Virtual-Museum/The-Tutu-Project/The-Composition-of-a-Tutux.aspx>

Note 2: Ibid.

Note 3: Ibid.

Note 4: Email correspondence with the National Ballet of Canada

References

Mida, Ingrid and Alexandra Kim. (2015) *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Mida, Ingrid. (2016) “A Gala Performance Tutu,” *Dress* 42.1: 35-47.

“The Composition of a Tutu,” The National Ballet of Canada, accessed November 18, 2016, <https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Virtual-Museum/The-Tutu-Project/The-Composition-of-a-Tutux.aspx>

PART TWO

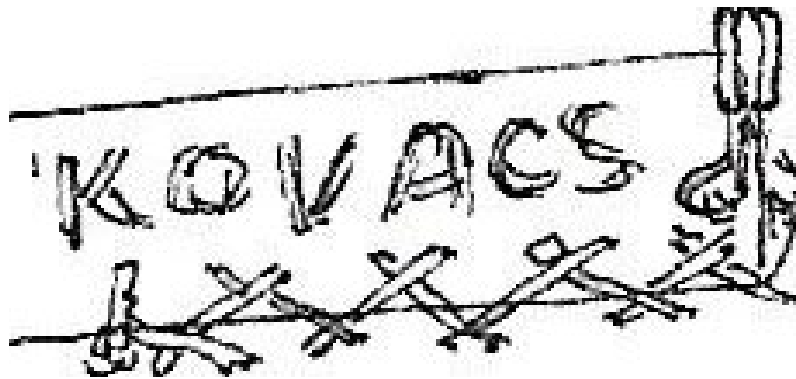
Part two contextualizes the artifact in dance history.

In this post, I will be going beyond the aesthetic and technical aspects of the tutu and exploring the contextual relevance of this artifact. Costumes are ultimately designed to work harmoniously with the choreography and music of a production, so it is important to understand the background behind the production of the *Symphony in C* ballet.

This ballet was created by Russian born choreographer [George Balanchine](#) and was first performed as *Le Palais de Cristal* in 1947, with the name later changing to *Symphony in C* as it is known now (Note 1). George Balanchine is one of the most influential choreographers of modern ballet. He, along with Lincoln Kirsten, opened the School of American Ballet in 1934, the American Ballet in 1936, and finally the Ballet Caravan in 1941. Balanchine was the Artistic Director of the [New York City Ballet](#) for over 35 years and was known for his fast, athletic and precise choreography. He also was said to have demanded perfection and elegance from his dancers. (Note 2). This particular ballet is based on French composer Georges Bizet's *Symphony in C* Major which is often regarded as one of his best works along with the famous opera *Carmen* (Note 3).

The original costumes for the ballet's premiere in 1947 were designed by costume maven Barbara Karinska (1886-1983). Madame Karinska as she was known to her peers, had a long relationship as a designer for Balanchine and worked with him into her late 70s. She was a prolific designer who was known and respected for her technical inventiveness and attention to detail. (Note 5)

The National Ballet performed *Symphony in C* for the first time in 1984 - the year after Karinska died. **Like the costumes worn at the New York City Ballet, these tutus would have been worn by multiple dancers over many years.** As New York City Ballet company dancer Deanna McBrearty states, "costumes like the *Symphony in C* tutus are worn so often, and by so many casts, that they eventually have to be retired...the tutu I originally wore was part of a set that was retired after more than 18 years" (Note 6). Eventually, the National Ballet wardrobe department had to remake a set of these costumes which were debuted in November 2006 (Note 7). **Continuing to wear Karinska's costumes pays homage to a great designer, and allows her work to be worn, seen, and appreciated by even more dancers and audiences.**



Name tag inside tutu waistband. Drawing by Teresa Adamo, 2016

The ballet *Symphony in C* has no plot, so the tutu is non-representative. The original costume also included a bodice and tutu plate which was taken off the skirt for reuse on other costumes by the Wardrobe Department at the National Ballet . It does not have to conform to a character, time period, or symbol, hence the pared down design. Instead, according to the [National Ballet](#) "each movement plays inventively with geometrical shapes—squares, diagonals, sculptural groupings –that illustrate the variety of effects possible using a very active and technically adept corps de ballet" (Note 8). Therefore, Karinska's design compliments Balanchine's architectural choreography by letting the beauty of the dancers movement, and music shine. **One detail that I immediately noticed upon inspecting the inside of the tutu was that the name of the dancer who wore the tutu has been written directly onto the material beside the garment opening.** This type of tagging is normal practice for ballet costumes and also serves as a record of the dedicated ballerinas who performed while wearing it.

For me, the significance of this tutu within the Fashion Research Collection is in its temporal links to Canadian dance history. *Symphony in C* first became part of the National Ballet's repertoire in 1984 - the year after Karinska died - and was performed again in 2006 marking the first mixed program of company's first season in their celebrated new venue at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts (Note 4). It is in this way that the tutu can be seen to represent the beginning of a new era for the National Ballet Company.

Throughout the investigation of this seemingly plain tutu, I was frequently surprised by the tangents that the research took. I learned a great amount about the construction of a tutu, but also much more about dance history than I was expecting. **The tutu has a layered history which is connected to choreographers, dancers, designers, and international ballet companies.**

Notes

Note 1: For more information about the National Ballet's 2006 production of *Symphony in C*, visit "Song of the Earth and Symphony in C Ballet Note," The National Ballet of Canada, Accessed January 13 2017, <https://national.ballet.ca/archives>

Note 2: Barbara Walczak, and Una Kai, *Balanchine the Teacher: Fundamentals That Shaped the First Generation of New York City Ballet Dancers* (University Press of Florida, 2008) 230.

Note 3: "Georges Bizet" in *The Encyclopedia of World Biography*, accessed January 12, 2017, http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/ps/i.do?p=GURL&u=rpu_main&id=GALE|CX3404700688&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon

Note 4: Ibid.

Note 5: Elizabeth McPerson, "Barbara Karinska," *Dance Teacher*, no. 11 (2008): 104-106 accessed January 12, 2017, <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/208476633?accountid=13631>.

Note 6: Deanna McBrearty, "Company Life: Tutu Symphony," *Pointe* 4, no. 3 (2003): Page #, accessed January 12, 2017, <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=http://sEarch.proquest.com/docview/207949163?accountid=13631>.

Note 7: Correspondence with the National Ballet of Canada

Note 8: Ibid.

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- "The Composition of a Tutu," The National Ballet of Canada, accessed November 18, 2016, <https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Virtual-Museum/The-Tutu-Project/The-Composition-of-a-Tutux.aspx>
- Walczak, Barbara and Una Kai. *Balanchine the Teacher: Fundamentals That Shaped the First Generation of New York City Ballet Dancers*. University Press of Florida, 2008.