

Shy Girl Todd costume,  
front view (2014.08.041)  
Drawing by Teresa Adamo.



# ELITE SYNCOPTIONS LEOTARDS

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## PART ONE: THE SHY GIRL COSTUMES

Part One provides a detailed observations of two seemingly identical dresses with their accompanying tights.

Within the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research collection, there is a group of quirky outfits that stand apart from the other classical and romantic ballet costumes. The Elite Syncopation costumes donated by the [National Ballet of Canada](#) are colourful, spunky, and appealing. These garments have a completely different visual language than the costumes from *Symphony in C* and *Sleeping Beauty* that I have previously studied, and so sparked my interest in this energetic 'leotard ballet'. I have carefully observed two identical dresses and their coordinating tights, as well as a corps men's costume in various stages of the construction process. **While each of these artifacts are compelling on their own, it is only when viewed together that the artistry and labour behind the *Elite Syncopations* costumes can be fully appreciated.** Part One recounts observations and comparisons of two Shy Girl costumes.



The ballet costumes are based on the original designs by Australian designer Ian Spurling (1937-1996) who created them for the Royal Ballet's premiere of *Elite Syncopations* in 1974. The FRC received two of these Shy Girl costumes, and taking a close look at the similarities and subtle differences reveals another layer of their story. I have confirmed that this design was referred to as the "Shy Girl" costume due to the handwritten label found sewn to the seam allowance on the center back inside the costume. Furthermore, the dancers' names found written in permanent marker on off white twill tape sewn on the inside next to the National Ballet label prompted me to refer to 2014.08.040 as the "Salas" costume and 2014.08.041 as the "Todd" costume. Je-an Salas was a soloist with the company and as of 2014 is the resident dancer with the ballet from (Note 1). I suspect that the "Todd" being referred to is dancer Deborah "Todd" Thompson, as she was with the company from 1978-1988 and so would fit in the timeline of this costume's use (Note 2).

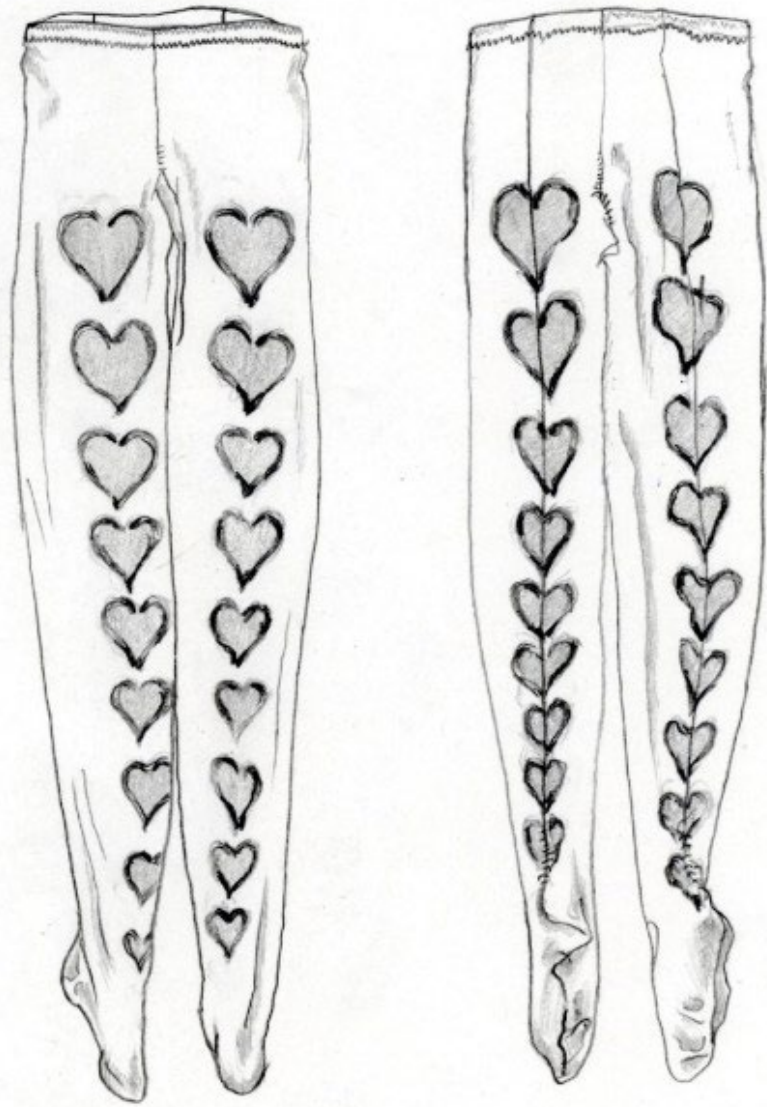
Shy Girl Salas costume,  
back view (2014.08.041)  
Drawing by Teresa  
Adamo.

**This design features a long sleeved leotard with a high collar, and short circle skirt with panties underneath.** The silhouette is reminiscent silhouette of a figure skating costume. The skirt allows for lots of swinging flirtatious movement. After the silhouette, the next most noticeable aspect of the costumes is the graphic quality of the lines and colors decorating the fabric. Spurling used vivid magenta, purple, ocean blue, emerald, and even bright scarlet. There is a beautiful ombre starting as off white at the shoulder and gradually darkening to pink, magenta and finally plum at the wrists. The Salas costume has much brighter colours when compared to the Todd costume, and the shapes and lines are more crisp.

**Another striking feature of the *Elite Syncopations* costumes is that they are painted in a trompe l'oeil style. Black outlines give the impression of the dancer wearing a dress with thin straps over a the long sleeved shirt.** To further the illusion, the "dress" was painted slightly more pink than the "shirt" which was left white. The sharp graphic quality to the design is also seen in the repeating motif of circles and waves on the body and along the skirt. The circles on the skirt are consistent and perfectly round, suggesting they may have been applied with a stamp. The repetition of waves and circles create a rhythm around the body contributing to a sense of movement.

As for the construction of these garments, they are machine stitched with either small zig zag or small overlock stitch about ¼" wide for all seams with the exception of the National Ballet and name tag labels which were sewn by hand. While on the Todd skirt, zig zag stitching attaching the skirt to the leotard is clearly visible on the outside, the Salas skirt has been set in the seam giving it a cleaner appearance. **The leotards are made with center front, center back, and side seams. Having multiple seam lines means that the costume will contour to the body better. They could also potentially be used for adjustability of fit, as each of the original designs were fit specifically for each dancer (Note 3 article).** The hem of the skirts is left unfinished on both dresses, as the knit will not unravel and avoid having a slightly bulkier seam which would weigh the skirt down and change its movement. On both costumes there is a zipper at center back with a hook and eye set above it. Salas uses a plastic zipper, whereas Todd has a metal one. One interesting detail on the Todd costume is the appearance of a slit 3" into the skirt, possibly for a longer zipper to be installed but which was then closed at some point.

**As with many of the National Ballet costumes, these costume endured years of wear and tear during performances. In general, there are minor tears and small fabric pulls on the costumes but both are in fair condition which suggests that the wardrobe team were knowledgeable and skilled at constructing the leotards.** Signs of wear on both of them are in similar places which is to be expected, as the dancers would be performing the same choreography. There is pilling on the inside of the arms, and the underarm seams are pulling.



Shy Girl Tights Front and Back,  
'Salas' Pair (2014.08.040)  
Drawing by Teresa Adamo.

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While doing intermediate research about the costumes, I came across a video of the Royal Ballet performing *Elite Syncopations* recorded in 2010. I immediately noticed that the Shy Girl costume would have been worn with green tights decorated with hearts. (Note 4) Luckily, the FRC had both pairs of tights corresponding to the dresses. Once again, the tights can be differentiated by their name tags. The name Mawson appears beside Todd but has been crossed off.

The tights are decorated by rows of painted hearts down the center front and back. There is a slight stylistic change between the costumes since the Salas tights have 8 hearts while the Todd tights have 9. The colour and crispness is again different on each of the tights which is consistent with the corresponding leotard. Though both are turquoise green with bright yellow-green hearts, the Todd tights have faded. You can clearly see the brushstrokes outlining the faded and blotchy hearts. They are both constructed with a crotch seam as well as seams along the back of each leg and ending under the toes. The feet are fully enclosed meaning that they are worn inside the pointe shoes. They both have elastic waistbands though Todd's waistband is completely enclosed with a self fabric casing while Salas is simply attached with a zigzag stitch.





Shy Girl Todd costume,  
front view (2014.08.041)  
Drawing by Teresa Adamo.

**As one would expect, it is easy to see how the tights have worn particularly on the feet and ankles.** The soles are quite dirty and discoloured and appear brown rather than green. The center back seam on the ankle area appears to have been repaired at some point as one can clearly see this area was reinforced with white thread. Additionally, the Todd tights have some curious orange streaks all over them, which could have transferred from another costume during use or storage. The elastic on the Salas waistband has lost its elasticity and seems quite loose, while the Todd costume seems quite taut.

**In conclusion, having two sets of dresses and their accompanying tights to study allowed for a more complete understanding of the *Elite Syncopations* costumes.** Being able to study two duplicate costumes was an exercise in spotting small differences. **Even though they appear to be “the same” artifact, they are still individual, which speaks to the nature not just of hand painted costumes such as these, but of all hand made objects.** In turn, the differences between them also raises more questions about the objects. Given the subtle changes in design and finishing, I speculate that wardrobe department looks critically at their work and adjusts accordingly to make better costumes when they were remade around the year 1998 (Note 6). Perhaps they were not given complete details from Sperling and the Royal ballet about construction and had to come to their own conclusions, or they simply adapted them to their own particular methods.

**Part two focuses on two unfinished costumes which reveal more about the painting and construction methods of the *Elite Syncopations* outfits.**

## Notes

**Note 1:** "Alumni: Where are They Now?," The National Ballet of Canada, accessed 17 July 2017, <https://national.ballet.ca/Meet/Alumni/WATN>.

**Note 2:** Ibid.

**Note 3:** Karen Bell, "The Art of the Costumes (for the National Ballet's Elite Syncopations)". *Performing Arts & Entertainment in Canada* 28, no.1 (1993): 19, accessed July 17, 2017, <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/224893640?accountid=13631>.

**Note 4:** *Elite Syncopations ; the Judas Tree ; Concerto*. Film, Directed by Acosta, Carlos, Leanne Benjamin, Yuhui Choe, et al. Opus Arte, 2010.

**Note 5:** Note 3

**Note 6:** Ibid.

## Bibliography

Bell, K. (1993). "The Art of the Costumes (for the National Ballet's Elite Syncopations)". *Performing Arts & Entertainment in Canada* 28, no.1 (1993): 19. Accessed July 17, 2017. <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/224893640?accountid=13631>.

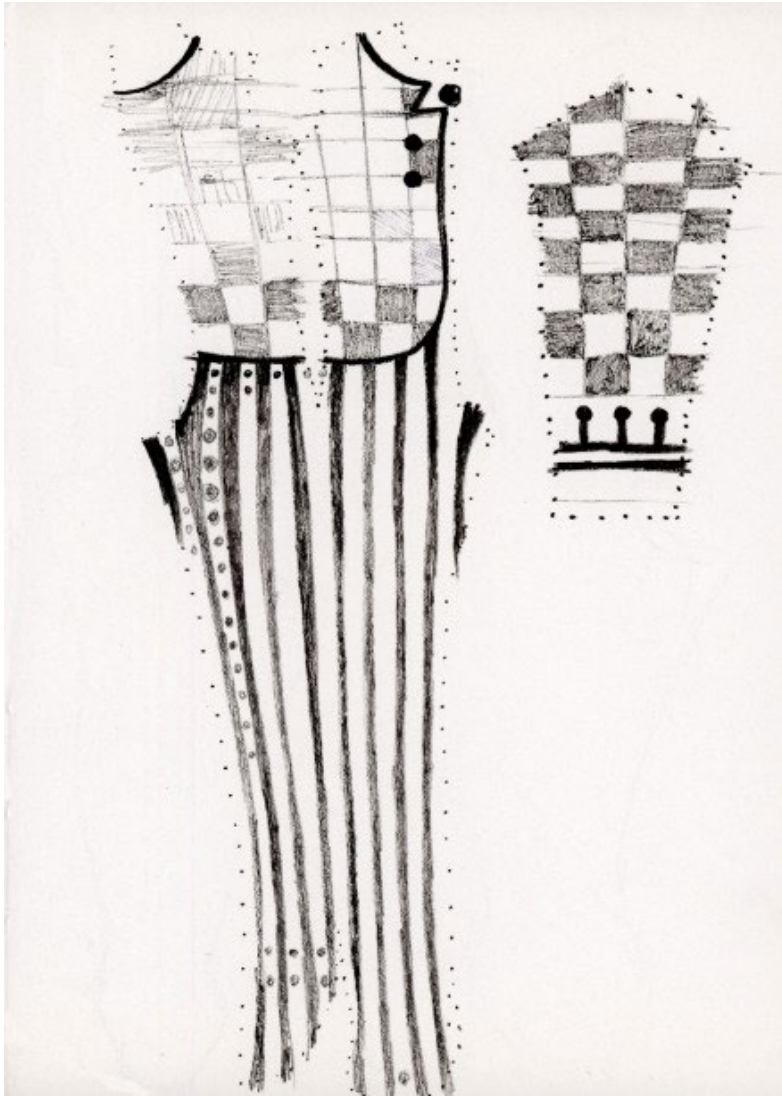
"Alumni Where are They Now?," The National Ballet of Canada. Accessed July 17 2017, <https://national.ballet.ca/Meet/Alumni/WATN>

"Ian Spurling; Obituary." *Times* (London, England), Apr. 15, 1996, p. 21. Accessed 17 July 2017.

"Elite Syncopations & Song of a Wayfarer & Chroma Ballet Note" (2012) The National Ballet of Canada. Accessed July 17 2017, [https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Archives/Ballet-Notes/elite-syncopations-ballet-notes-\(2012\).aspx](https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Archives/Ballet-Notes/elite-syncopations-ballet-notes-(2012).aspx)

*Elite Syncopations ; the Judas Tree ; Concerto*. Film. Opus Arte.

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



Uncut yardage for corps man (2014.08.052).  
Drawings by Teresa Adamo.

## PART TWO: THE MENS CORPS COSTUME

Part two focuses on two unfinished costumes which reveal more about the painting and construction methods of the Elite Syncopations outfits.

Initially I was going to focus only on the Shy Girl costume, however when dress historian and curator Ingrid Mida turned my attention to some other artifacts in the research collection, I found there was more to explore about these costumes. **The National Ballet** also donated yardage of uncut fabric which had been prepared for the an *Elite Syncopation Corps Man* leotard, as well as the same leotard which appears to have been partially sewn. These two artifacts allow us to see steps of the construction process, giving us a glimpse of behind-the-scenes methods used by the wardrobe department.

Beginning with the uncut yardage, faint pencil markings can be seen denoting the outline of the costume and around the checkered pattern. There is a dotted line around its perimeter which is presumably the cut line. Seam allowance is not marked, but would likely be  $\frac{1}{4}$ " as it was with the Shy Girl costumes. As Bell states in her article *The Art of the Costumes (for the National Ballet's Elite Syncopations)*, "The designs are hand - painted onto the tights using pigment mixed with a glue binder" (Note 1). **The brushstrokes can clearly be seen occasionally going outside the lines in several places. Seeing these individual markings, there is a strong impression left from the painter and reinforces the hand made aspect of costumes.**

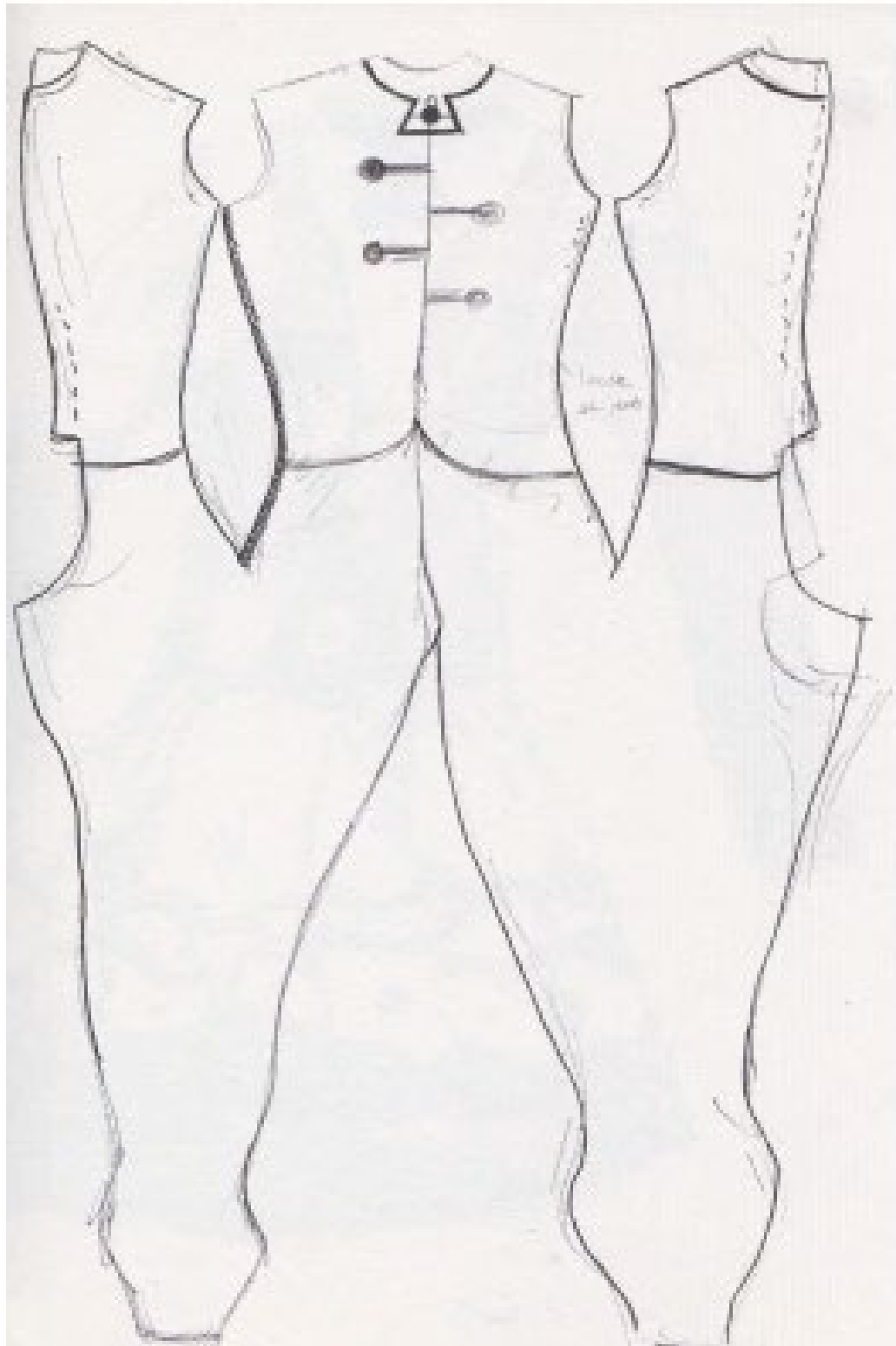
Bell summarizes how the garments are finished after the paint has been applied.

The painted tights are then carefully removed from the stretcher, wrapped in tissue and carefully folded so that no colour touches the unpainted portions, or no design touches another. The tights are put into a special basket and steamed in a huge steamer for several hours to set the paint. This process may have to be repeated several times when one colour goes over another. The costumes are gently washed in cold water to clean and set the dyes. Finally, the buttons and bows are sewn on as necessary. Each costume takes about 18 hours to complete. (Note 2)

**Compared to making a tutu, which takes at least 120 hours of skilled labour to complete, leotards are a much smaller time commitment for the wardrobe department (Note 3). However, I think that to regard this number in isolation belittles the skill and confidence it would take to paint the designs considering the permanency of the paint magnified by the number of colours on each costume.** Similarly to the Shy Girl costumes, these incomplete artifacts present some questions of their own. Could they have possibly just been test samples for the wardrobe department? Or was there a mistake with the paint that simply could not be approved? On the uncut yardage, some colour is bleeding out from around each coloured square, and the green checks also have a splotchy, uneven look to them, so it could be assumed that the colour fastness of the paint may have been a problem.

As for the pattern layout, the garment retains its center front and center back seams, but like the Shy Girl tights, the seams on the legs have been moved to the center back of the leg. A zipper would have presumably been installed in the center back seam. The front and back torso is attached as one piece from approximately the about the hip to the ankle, but has a side seam from under the arm to the hip area to account for some shaping around the torso. **It is also important to note that the pattern appears relatively small, but the material's degree of stretch would have been taken into account when drafting the pattern.**





Cut leotard for corps man  
(2014.08.053). Drawings  
by Teresa Adamo

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At this point, we have a strong idea of what the *Elite Syncopations* costumes look like and how they were made. Through the Shy Girl dresses and tights, we have discovered how we can get much more information about an artifact by looking at similar or even “identical” artifacts and comparing their minute differences. By looking at the Corps Man costumes, we gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of hand craftsmanship. **When viewed together, these six artifacts reveal much more about the artistry and labour behind the *Elite Syncopations* costumes than we could hope to gain by looking at one in isolation.**

## Notes

**Note 1:** Karen Bell, "The Art of the Costumes (for the National Ballet's Elite Syncopations)". *Performing Arts & Entertainment in Canada* 28, no.1 (1993): 19, accessed July 17, 2017, <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/224893640?accountid=13631>.

**Note 2:** Ibid.

**Note 3:** 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>

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Bell, K. (1993). "The Art of the Costumes (for the National Ballet's Elite Syncopations)". *Performing Arts & Entertainment in Canada* 28, no.1 (1993): 19. Accessed July 17, 2017. <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/224893640?accountid=13631>.

"Alumni Where are They Now?," The National Ballet of Canada. Accessed July 17 2017, <https://national.ballet.ca/Meet/Alumni/WATN>

"Ian Spurling; Obituary." *Times* (London, England), Apr. 15, 1996, p. 21. Accessed 17 July 2017.

"Elite Syncopations & Song of a Wayfarer & Chroma Ballet Note" (2012) The National Ballet of Canada. Accessed July 17 2017, [https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Archives/Ballet-Notes/elite-syncopations-ballet-notes-\(2012\).aspx](https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Archives/Ballet-Notes/elite-syncopations-ballet-notes-(2012).aspx)

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### **PART THREE: CONTEXTUALIZING THE BALLET**

Part Three will explore the context of *Elite Syncopations* and its role as part of the National Ballet's repertoire. I also analyse footage of a performance by the Royal Ballet in order to see the costumes as they were used onstage.

*Elite Syncopations* was first premiered by the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden, October 7, 1974 and was choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan. The ballet has come to be known for its jaunty rag-time music and demanding virtuosic performances, but it had an uncertain debut. As Crisp states though "widely thought, at its premiere, to be a lightweight novelty, the ballet has, in fact, been often revived at Covent Garden and mounted for Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet, the National Ballet of Canada, the Bavarian State Ballet and the Houston Ballet" (Note 1).

The National Ballet premiered *Elite Syncopations* on November 10th, 1978. It is usually performed grouped with other short ballet pieces such as *Song of a Wayfarer* and *Chroma* such as in the 2012 season (Note 2). The ballet is non-narrative and focuses on a series of characters showing off their dancing to each other as a live band performs the rag-time tunes. The National Ballet describes it in their 2012 Ballet Note as "free-form fantasy on situations and social dances of the dance-halls in the early years of the 20th century; the dance contest, the cakewalk, the slow drag and the stop time" (Note 3). **By including this ballet in its repertoire, the National Ballet can show off the athleticism of their dancers with a crowd-pleasing ballet. The bright colourful costumes and shorter run time along with cheerful subject matter may seem less intimidating to those unfamiliar with dance, and encourages new viewers to attend.**

As mentioned in Part One, I watched recordings from the Royal Ballet as a visual aid to better understand the costumes within the context of the ballet. Since they were made in order to replicate Ian Sperling's designs, the video could give me a close approximation to how they would look in the National Ballet's productions. I am choosing to focus on the *Shy Girl* costume for this analysis because I am most familiar with the design. It is important to remember that each company would inherently have slightly different interpretations of the choreography and costuming. It should also be noted that the recording was at a fair to low quality, so some details may have been missed. **While a good resource, a recording is not a perfect substitute for a live performance of the National Ballet performing *Elite Syncopations*.**

As seen in the video, the female dancers wear either leotards with long sleeves and full tights, or a variation on the *Shy Girl* costume silhouette. Many of them are outfitted with various hats. Like the *Shy Girl*, many of the corps dancers are wearing tights of different colours. One thing that all the female dancers have in common is that their pointe shoes have been dyed to match their tights. Having dyed-to-match pointe shoes makes the dancer's legs even longer and lengthens their lines so that they are more visually appealing. One new detail I noticed in the recording were the dark purple gloves that the *Shy Girl* was wearing. They had been dyed to match the dark purple of the sleeves, and caused her hands to seemingly disappear into the black backdrop. (Note 4)

Shy Girl Todd costume,  
front view (2014.08.041)  
Drawing by Teresa Adamo.



**The Shy Girl can be seen in various dances with the corps and features in a pas de deux with her partner the Shy Boy.** As this part of the recording was focused on these two dancers, it was much easier to pick out small details on her costume. The “shy girl” and “shy boy” enter stage right, swinging hands and gazing at each other. Their dance features some comedic awkward partnering and eventually the culminates in a series of lifts. In this version she is wearing a four pointed tiara-like hat, as well as dangling chandelier earrings. **By seeing the dancer dressed in her costume, we are now able to see how the personality of the dancer is enhanced and shown through her clothing.** The two dancers seem quite smitten with each other, therefore hearts are an appropriate adornment for her tights. She has a shy but flirtatious and fun personality, so the short circle skirt suits her perfectly. To emphasize this warm personality even further, Spurling used circles and other curvilinear forms to decorate her costume. **Spurling’s costume design ultimately gives the audience an idea of who the Shy Girl is, even before she starts to dance.**

Spurling’s designs for Elite Syncopations were not always favoured by critics, as they were deemed overly decorated and colourful, even likened to licorice allsorts candy (Note 5). However, I argue that these costumes demonstrate a combination of function and pleasing aesthetics. The costumes do not impede the dancer’s movements, and also convey personalities of each character immediately. A leotard is a paradoxical garment, as it conceals the dancer’s skin, but reveals the dancer’s body. **By choosing to paint the leotards as if they were clothing, Spurling subverts expectations and delivers quirky, playful costumes.**

## Notes

**Note 1:** Clement Crisp, "Into the Labyrinth: Kenneth MacMillan and his Ballets," *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 25, no. 2 (2017): 188, accessed August 2, 2017, [http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/stable/40004138?pq-origsite=summon&seq=2#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/stable/40004138?pq-origsite=summon&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents)

**Note 2:** "Elite Syncopations & Song of a Wayfarer & Chroma Ballet Note" (2012) The National Ballet of Canada. Accessed July 17 2017, [https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Archives/Ballet-Notes/elite-syncopations-ballet-notes-\(2012\).aspx](https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Archives/Ballet-Notes/elite-syncopations-ballet-notes-(2012).aspx)

**Note 3:** llbd.

**Note 4:** Elite Syncopations ; the Judas Tree ; Concerto. Film, Directed by Acosta, Carlos, Leanne Benjamin, Yuhui Choe, et al. Opus Arte, 2010.

**Note 5:** "Ian Spurling; Obituary." *Times* (London, England), Apr. 15, 1996, p. 21.

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