



Miranda Coney 1993 - Photography - Anthony Crickmay

SILK, LACE, TULLE AND TAFFETA

Restoring Kristian Fredrikson's decades-old Coppélia costumes is an enormous task for The Australian Ballet's milliners, cutters, sewers and masterminds in the dyeing room. Head of the Wardrobe Department Michael Williams took Annie Carroll on a tour of the steps that go into reviving a classic.

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Gene Kelly is standing in The Australian Ballet's wardrobe department. So are Isadora, Juliet and Princess Buttercup. They're all mannequin dummies named by the chortling group of seamstresses. Each is adorned with one of the exquisite costumes Kristian Fredrikson designed for George Ogilvie's 1979 production of *Coppélia*. It is an important historical production for The Australian Ballet; Ogilvie's insights combined with Dame Peggy van Praagh's choreography and Kristian's genius result in a superlative production of the ballet. This year, The Australian Ballet will try *Coppélia* on for size once again.

The stuffy air outside the Arts Centre one January morning is thick with the smell of approaching rain, and Melbourne is a swamp of sweaty businessmen and clammy café workers. But inside The Primrose Potter Australian Ballet Centre, a cool and collected Michael Williams, head of the Wardrobe Department, takes me through the hundreds of *Coppélia* costumes being picked, tucked and stitched. There is barely a moment to waste as the department works frantically on preparing not only *Coppélia*, but also the equally mammoth *The Silver Rose*. It quickly becomes apparent that Gene Kelly and Princess Buttercup are here to keep the smiles coming and frowns at bay.

Kristian's *Coppélia* costumes were created over 30 years ago in a canvas goods factory off Racecourse Road, Flemington. Today they are undergoing an extensive restoration process. Layers of silk, lace, tulle and taffeta are flopped over chairs and big worktables. It's a scene with all the flurry and adornment of a Parisian atelier. Many of the costumes are being remade or restored. Rotting silk on jackets must be replaced then dyed to match the older, harder-wearing silks. Saggy tutu skirts need a lift, and Swanilda receives a new act three wedding tutu that looks like

it's been plucked straight from a Christian Lacroix runway show. The Reaper Boys' trousers require a total remake. With the original fabric no longer stocked, wardrobe has found a remarkable look-alike solution: cotton waffle-weave blankets. There is no waste as each unused costume is pillaged for its healthy trimmings, which are then used on new costumes. The wardrobe department looks like a beautiful and fantastical hospital. Costumes on the brink of death are brought back to life with a lot of care and a lot of thread.

It's not just decaying and torn fabrics that need a touch up. In 2010, dancers' physiques have evolved from their 1979 coequals vastly enough to warrant, in some cases, total remakes. This is time-consuming work, especially when replicating Kristian's designs. The simplest-looking garment can have up to four layers, each with its own detail and specificity. Sitting in a room next to Michael's office is a model set of act three, which Kristian created and painted. It is extremely intricate – painted with a two-hair squirrel artist's brush. It is a testament to Kristian's eye for detail. For *Coppélia*, Kristian turned to close friend and milliner Marjorie Head to create a number of the headdresses. Michael shows me two of particular beauty. The School Mistress' hat, covered in dozens of handmade orange and brown pom-poms, and the Dawn headdress, a tiara adorned in fine wiring and feathers that, from afar, resembles a tropical sunrise and perfectly mirrors the delicate backdrop.

Lynn Munro, in charge of the restoration of the *Coppélia* costumes, is busy in the dyeing room. Among the big cauldrons of dye are piles of unfinished tutus, twelve of which will soon dress the female dancers who perform the tranquil and celestial 'Dance Of The Hours' in act three. Fabrics of voluptuous aquamarine and husky midnight blues are strewn over the

table as she fingers through the recipe book for each dye formula. For the wardrobe staff, the legacy of this ballet elicits tender care and respect for every fold of fabric. Within the pages of the *Coppélia* design book, Kristian's delicate drawings are in shades of ripe apricot and mellow olive green – a palette of autumnal and tawny hues. The most impressive thing about Kristian's distinctive drawings is the way each is traced with theatricality. Not only are the costumes rendered with enchanting detail, each character is drawn with personality and movement. Michael tells me that this was typical of the astute Kristian. His vision of the complete character was always very clear in his mind.

As Michael walks me through the many racks of costumes, my eye is drawn to Dr Coppélius's cloak, which he dons when practising the occult in act two. The cloak is covered in painted eyes that seem to follow you, each one bleeding deep crimson, trickling blood down the folds of the cape. It is fitting as The Original Ballet Russe's 1940 version *Coppélia* was subtitled *The Girl with the Enamel Eyes*. Close by are the equally harrowing dolls. Aside from the mandatory Spanish, Chinese and Scottish dolls, Kristian designed dolls he might have desired as a young boy: a headless monster, an unfinished ragdoll, a disembodied clown which assists Dr Coppélius in creating his deadly concoctions. Act two, the dark chocolate centre of the ballet, raises moral and spiritual issues that are often overlooked amid the mayhem and mischief of act one and the harvest and wedding dances of act three.

Kristian Fredrikson, Michael tells me smiling, was 'The Sara-Lee Designer', a reference to the iconic Australian layered ice cream cake. Peel back the top and one finds layer upon layer of unassuming brilliance.

Annie Carroll is a former dancer of The Australian Ballet