

Designing Woman

The life and art of Barbara Karinska, ruler of the mysterious land where ballet costumes are made.

COSTUMES BY KARINSKA

By Tomi Bentley.
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By Lynn Garafola

COSTUMERS are ballet's undervalued heroes. They can do wonders for a production, yet they seldom receive more than a token credit. With the spotlight trained on the choreographer, designers and costume makers labor in the shadows, as invisible to the public as the craft that makes their metamorphoses possible.

Toni Bentley's "Costumes by Karinska" goes a long way toward redressing this. Her subject, Barbara Karinska (1896-1983), was one of this century's master costumers, a miracle maker who dressed operas, dramas, films, Broadway musicals and even ice shows; with elegance and glamour. But it was in the "mysterious land where ballet costumes are made," as Ms. Bentley puts it, that Karinska "ruled without peer." In a career that spanned nearly five decades, Karinska costumed some of this century's most notable ballets, from Leonide Massine's "Préfiges" and Michel Fokine's "Sylphides" to Antony Tudor's "Pillar of Fire" and Agnes de Mille's "Rodeo."

However, it was Karinska's collaboration with George Balanchine, a relationship that began in 1932 and endured for more than 40 years, that sealed her reputation as the century's outstanding ballet couturière. She created the costumes for more than 75 Balanchine works and designed the costumes for 30 of them. So highly did he esteem her contribution to his ballets that he once attributed "50 percent of the success" to her artistry.

Born in the Ukrainian city of Khar'kov, Karinska belonged to the great Russian diaspora that came west in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution. As a child she had a passion for embroidery, but it was not until after the death of her first husband, the editor of a socialist newspaper, that she set up the Moscow studio where it became her livelihood.

Her second husband, a lawyer and government official, fled Russia when the Bolsheviks came to power. Karinska chose not to follow him, and instead opened a successful embroidery school. This led to the offer of a museum post and, in 1923, an exit visa to study in Germany. With her daughter and nephew in tow and the family jewels stashed into the lining of a museum post, she joined the thousands of Russian émigrés eking out a living in Paris.

She went to work with her needle, cat-in-the-hat-in-shops. She also made wool flowers for Max Wiedely, who ran one of the city's biggest costume houses. But her future lay with the émigré community. She made her first direct contact in 1927 with Casanova, a film directed by Alexander Volkov (not Nabokov).

Lynn Garafola is the author of "Disheveled Ballet Russes" and the editor of the monograph series "Studies in Dance History."



Margot Fonteyn in a costume designed by Cecil Beaton and executed by Karinska for Frederick Ashton's ballet "Apparitions" (1936).

Block, as stated in the book's chronology) and designed by Boris Blinnik. Four years later, when Col. Wassily de Basil, co-director of the Opéra Russe à Paris, teamed up with René Blum to form the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, she was invited to do the costumes. At 45, Karinska had found her calling.

— Until then, she had never made a tutu. Now, as she snipped and cut with her Russian seamstresses, she came up with the first of the innovations that transformed the craft. Using anywhere from 6 to 15 panels of fabric, Karinska applied the technique of cutting on the bias — that is, on the diagonal of the fabric, rather than straight up and down or across — to the snug, fitted bodice of the tutu. The result was a garment that "breathed" in the rib cage, allowing the dancer to move with freedom.

Throughout the 1930's, Karinska worked alongside many of the great visual artists of the day. It was an education in style, taste and sophistication, and these collaborations brought out her

genius for translating the atmosphere and style of a design into a wearable garment. Nowhere is this gift more evident than in her costumes for "Bacchante" (1930), molded sculptures that rendered Salvador Dali's surrealist skeletons with an eerie faithfulness. And in her interpretation of Christian Bérard's designs for "Cottillon" (1932) and Cecil Beaton's for "Apparitions" (1936), she evoked not only the romantic atmosphere of those ballets but also the bitter, sweet mood of a generation living on borrowed time.

In 1928, just before the outbreak of World War II, Karinska moved to the United States. She arrived with little more than her shears, but the moment was propitious. Both Hollywood and Broadway were booming, and ballet was on an upswing. Teaming with Balanchine, she did the costumes for "Cabin in the Sky" in the fall of 1940. The musical, which had an all-black cast including Ethel Waters and Katherine Dunham, was composed, choreographed and de-

signed by Russian émigrés. In Hollywood, she made her name as a specialist in period re-creation and won the first Oscar awarded for costume design in 1948 for "Joan of Arc."

"It's Balanchine's full-time return to ballet in the mid-1940's, the most creative era of Karinska's life began. "Not only would she be involved in some of the most elaborate and beautiful productions of her life," Ms. Bentley writes, "but also the consistency of her presence, the vigilance of her standards and the immaculate execution of her creations she would profoundly influence the way ballet appeared to its new American audience."

IN collaboration with Balanchine, Karinska now abandoned the wide, hooped skirt of the traditional "pancake" tutu. In 1950, with "Symphony in C," they developed the prototype of the "powder puff" tutu familiar to New York City Ballet audiences. The new tutu did away with the traditional and seven layers of gathered net that fell in a natural slope to the tops of the thighs, revealing the full line of the leg. Waists were dropped or cut on a diagonal and further enhanced with yokes. The result was softer, lighter and more flattering.

Karinska's costumes were functional and durable, but they were also all works of art. In the tutus for "Bugaku" (1963) she used hundreds of overlapping silk petals to suggest Japanese chrysantheums. She was a master of layering, mixing colors in a way that was both subtle and dramatic. She had a passion, as the author nicely puts it, for "the unnecessary detail — the back twist of braid, the inset brocade flower, the hand-embroidered cuff closure, the beaded design in four shades of red." This luxury of detail was not always obvious to the audience. In the "Emeralds" section of "Jewels" (1967) a flap of concealing silk tucked a bejeweled hair bug out of sight; in "The Nutcracker" (1954) a Victorian-style pendant hid a tiny photograph of Balanchine. Karinska built in mysterious into every very concealment of her costumes.

In the final chapters of her book, Ms. Bentley, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet, writes with a passion and an authority that are sometimes missing from the early part. Karinska's gifts were certainly unique, but she was not the only gifted costumer in Paris: Ida Rubinstein, for instance, ordered most of her costumes in the 1930's from the firm of Mathis & Soligak. Although we are told in the opening chapter that Karinska reinvented the book in 1933, it is only when the author discusses the "powder puff" tutu that we learn that that earlier innovation, entitled Here, as in the provision of photographs of New York City Ballet stars, only some of which do justice to the costumes, one discerns a theological impulse — the idea that 20th-century ballet is a linear progression culminating in Balanchine — that does not necessarily make for good history. Still, "Costumes by Karinska" is more than a tribute to a ballet designer; it is a history and her quest for the perfect tutu, this 16th-century is a sumptuous archive of 20th-century theatrical costume. □