

Karinska and Balanchine

In 1949, at the age of sixty-three, Barbara Karinska embarked on a new phase of her career. George Balanchine asked her to not only make but design the costumes for a new ballet entitled *Bourrée Fantasque*, set to music by Emmanuel Chabrier. She produced lovely, jaunty black tutus flecked with bright colors and accessorized – in keeping with the lighthearted spirit of the ballet – with fans, gloves, and headpieces. While the honor and freedom of designing costumes herself were important to her, Karinska really had been “designing” throughout her career, each time she translated a sketch into fabric. “I think anything you designed became Karinska’s. Otherwise, it just didn’t happen,” explained the designer Kermit Love. Karinska slipped into this new role easily and enthusiastically, and over the next several decades she designed over thirty ballets. In them, one can detect not only her characteristic brilliance of style and detail, but something more of her personal taste.

Karinska’s conception of feminine beauty echoed Balanchine’s, and it was here, with the female dancers, that they created what were perhaps their most inspired and influential images. The Balanchine ballerina that Karinska dressed was a woman on a pedestal, untouchable yet soft and vibrant – not an imposing goddess or empress with hard edges and uplifted bosom, but a real woman inhabiting her own body, draped in silk chiffon or cotton tulle that conformed to her true shape. In Balanchine’s hands her movements became metaphors for her character – recognizably American, but classic, too. She

was long, lean, young, athletic, energetic, and powerful, but she was dressed for some mythical court life, not for the gym. She was the Young Girl at the ball dressed in white in *La Valse*, the spiky, sexy insect in *Metamorphoses*, the tightly bodiced Dewdrop in *The Nutcracker*, the hip-swinging saloon girl in *Western Symphony*, the cheerful cheerleader in *Stars and Stripes*, the peach-and-pearl-veiled fairy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the shy, sheerly clad geisha in *Bugaku*.

But, whatever her role, the ballerina’s own physique was visible and available for adventure, and this freedom was one of Karinska’s greatest contributions. The dancer was never merely a mannequin for Karinska’s virtuosic display, but remained, as for Balanchine, the focus of the whole endeavor. This celebration of female form reached a new peak in 1950 when Karinska recostumed Balanchine’s *Symphony in C*. Here, in the forty identical white tutus, the aptly named “Balanchine/Karinska tutu” or “power-puff tutu,” was born, forever changing the way a ballet dancer could look.

One of the great inventions of theatrical costuming of all time, the tutu – probably derived from the French child’s word “tu-tu” or “cul-cul” meaning “bottom,” and thus seeming to relate to the panties onto which the layers of tulle are attached – first appeared in Paris, in a long version, in 1832, on Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide*. As dancing became more virtuosic and modesty less prevalent, the skirt was gradually shortened to show more leg – first the ankle, then the knee, then the thigh. Before Balanchine and Karinska put their minds to it, the standard existing tutu, and still the most common around the world except at the New York City Ballet,

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Bourrée Fantasque: Tanaquil Le Clercq and Jerome Robbins. (Photo: George Platt Lynes, Estate of GPL)

was the British or Russian “pancake,” so-called because of its deep, wide, and very flat skirt, supported by a wire hoop at the outer edges. Karinska had been making this type of tutu herself until she met Balanchine, although she preferred not to use a hoop but rather spokes that radiated out from the waist like an umbrella.

This type of tutu, however, had many qualities unsuited to Balanchine’s vision of the way his dancers should move. The hoop or umbrella skirt often takes on movement of its own, echoing that of the dancer several beats later, in a way that is not always musically appropriate. And if dancers move quickly and close together, as they do in Balanchine ballets, their hoops can collide and tip, adding unchoreographed elements to the proceedings. Finally, because the skirts are wide and weighty they often reach to the knees, whereas Balanchine wanted to see more, see the legs, their arabesques and penchés moving easily, naturally, and freely, not fighting to get out from under a hoop. He did not like the sudden revelations of posterior that an extended leg would sometimes produce under a tipped pancake tutu. In short, Balanchine wanted a smaller, shorter, softer, lighter, more natural and flattering tutu, and Karinska gave it to him.

Strictly speaking, this was not the first appearance of a short, fluffy tutu on the stage. Harriet Hctor, the American toe dancer who performed on the vaudeville circuit during the 1930s, wore a similarly short tutu, with the obvious purpose of showing off her sensational legs.

Curiously enough, though any direct influence is difficult to document, Balanchine may well have seen Hctor dance when he arrived in America in 1933, and in 1936 he actually choreographed pieces for her to perform in the Ziegfeld Follies. Once again, as with *Star and Garter*, the vernacular, the popular, even the so-called vulgar may be seen to merge in Balanchine and Karinska’s work. After all, Hctor and Balanchine had the same motive in their costuming—to maximize the visual effect of the body.

The *Symphony in C* tutu, the prototype for the powder-puff tutu, had no hoop and only six or seven layers of gathered net (as opposed to the twelve or more used for the hoop tutu). The

layers, each a half-inch longer than the previous one, were short, never precisely aligned, and tacked together loosely to give the skirt an unprecedented softness and fullness. The skirt fell in a natural, slightly downward slope over the hips to the tops of the thighs. But the skirt was only the most obvious of the changes and details that Karinska instituted. It was in her experiments with the bodice that Karinska really revolutionized the tutu.

Made before the panties or skirt are attached, the bodice is the foundation of the costume. Karinska’s experiments with the cut, shape, seaming, and decoration of the bodice had begun in 1932, when she made her first one for members of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Using anywhere from six to fifteen panels of fabric, Karinska was a pioneer in the practice of cutting on the bias (the diagonal of the fabric, as opposed to straight up and down or across), for a highly fitted garment.

The bias cut was a much-admired technique in the couture world of Paris in the 1930s, where Karinska no doubt came across the idea. But there it was usually found in loose-fitting garments, where the diagonal created its own kind of shape and sexy cling. Karinska’s tremendous innovation was in using the bias cut for a tightly fitted bodice, where the give and take of the cut could be used to accommodate the aerobic requirements of a dancer’s—or opera singer’s—rib cage. “No one else knew how to do a bodice like that or even knew why you should do a bodice like that,” says Broadway and ballet designer Patricia Zipprodt. “Most of them were so clumsy, straight-up-and-down bodices with seams, seams, seams, but never any alteration in the fabric, until Karinska. Her costumes were danceable things, singable things.”

A typical Karinska bodice would be a mixture of panels, the back and center front usually cut the normal way, with various bias-cut panels in between, under, and around the ribs and diaphragm. Out of this extremely smooth and elegant-looking composition came another, less practical quality that epitomizes the sensual magic of Karinska’s invention. She used only “living” fibers—ones made by plants or animals. These fabrics, unlike inert synthetics, give off



Symphony in C: Darci Kistler, Robert Lyons, and corps girls. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

an energy all their own, and, when complemented by stage lights, their various hidden qualities rise and shine. Thus, the ballerina's torso, wrapped in its straight and biased panels, would gleam as it moved around the stage, giving off alternately light and shadow, matte and sheen, like the facets of a precious stone. When ballerinas are described as glowing, or appearing chiseled like jewels, there is, therefore, real science behind the illusion.

Other Karinska touches can best be viewed by looking at examples – and there are many; Karinska made over nine thousand costumes for the New York City Ballet alone. In 1951 she designed the long tulle dresses for Balanchine's *La Valse*, and these mysterious, elongated, haunting ball gowns so perfectly complemented the eerie, pendulous tone of the ballet and Maurice Ravel's music that the ballet is unimaginable without them.

Zipprodt attributes her own career decision to having once viewed these costumes:

"I had just come to New York and I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. I was painting and waitressing at Schrafft's – the whole routine of starving young people with dreams. I used to spend a great deal of time with Gjon Mili who was doing a big color story for *Life* and he dragged me to the ballet. It was *La Valse* and in comes Tanaquil Le Clercq in this white dress. Bang. I went down to [the Fashion Institute of Technology] and beat on their doors and got a scholarship and went to school. I wanted to design for this company, for Balanchine. What Karinska had said with this dress changed my life."

The white satin and tulle gown Zipprodt saw was, interestingly, not really white but rather a luscious cream color. Karinska knew that a true white has an empty, flat appearance onstage.

Later in *La Valse*, during her courtship with Death, this bride of youth dons a cape of sheer, black gauze and a beaded, black choker and carries a bouquet of dried black roses, thereby

succinctly transforming her innocence into a poignant image of impending doom. The layering of dark over light gave an intangible sensa-

tion of the sinister that accentuated the essence of the music itself.

Layering of colors, often very disparate ones,



La Valse: Tanaquil Le Clercq. (Photo: George Platt Lynes, Estate of GPL)

was one of Karinska's specialties, and it was never more apparent or used to better dramatic advantage than in the other women's costumes in *La Valse*. Attached to heavy, silver-gray halter-cut bodices with low-slung backs, the long skirts were composed of up to six layers of color — red, orange, purple, and pink — all topped by a single layer of translucent gray. Balanchine took advantage of this unusual depth of color in his choreography when he had the women lift the edges of their skirts and fling them in the air to release a cascade of colors, each not quite looking like itself because of its neighbor's omnipresent glow. For the headpieces Karinska employed contradiction to perfection, sewing large, black-rimmed rhinestones into the wire weave of black horsehair. They, like the costumes and the ballet, were sprightly and elegant but tinged with death. It was truly haunting elegance.

The subtle effect of layering similar colors can be found throughout Karinska's work, be-

ginning with *Cotillon* in 1932. For the Snowflake costumes for Balanchine's *Nutcracker*, in 1954, she juxtaposed beige, pink, and blue tulle for an airy, pale, not-quite-there feel — the feel of snow. For the "Emeralds" section of *Jewels*, in 1967, she covered three layers of yellow-beige tulle with one of dark green and one of light green. For *Raymonda Variations* in 1961, the overwhelming color of the tutus is bright pink, although the top layer is, in fact, of a pale blue. According to Karinska's canon, a single solid color is a dead event under the lights, inside a proscenium, and it is only by juxtaposing and combining that one can suggest the real blue-white of snow, the green of an emerald, or even the pink of a pastel ballet.

A different type of layering effect is apparent in Karinska's costumes for Balanchine's *Serenade*. First choreographed in 1934, this ballet set to Tchaikovsky's yearning score was Balanchine's first in America, and it had withstood various costuming styles for almost twenty



Serenade: New York City Ballet. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

years. There were leotards and skirts, then short tunics, then decorated ones, but when Karinska designed the pale blue gowns in 1952 for the New York City Ballet's production it was as if this great ballet had been through a long genesis and was only now in full bloom. So simple as to seem inevitable, the long-waisted, plain blue bodices ended in low-slung, diagonally placed (a very flattering line on a woman's hips that Karinska used frequently), ankle-length skirts of finely woven tulle. Each skirt was made of just one, much-gathered layer—twenty yards of fabric in all. Otherwise blue all around, in front of each leg, from hip to ankle, Karinska placed a sheer panel of beige tulle through which the dancer's legs would appear. The effect of this small detail is, like the ballet itself, subtle, yet exaggerated; sexy, yet demure. The overall effect of seventeen of these windswept costumes on a moonlit stage, moving with Balanchine to Tschaikovsky, is one of the single most romantic atmospheres on any theatrical stage in this century.

Karinska's designs became so inseparable from the ballet as a whole that the Balanchine Trust requires their reproduction for any new staging of *Serenade*. The costumes for *Liebeslieder Walzer*, *Stars and Stripes*, and *La Valse*, despite the inevitable cost to a ballet company, are required for the same reason.

Unlike many designers, who see a certain shade of color in their mind's eye and then proceed to stir the dye vats to reproduce it, Karinska disliked dyed colors. She knew that they were unstable and under the heat of the stage lights would inevitably change color and preferred to work within the "limitations" of what was available and what she could find on her numerous shopping trips to Paris. She would often buy hundreds of yards of a material she liked and put it on the shelf for a future ballet, and, with uncanny frequency, Balanchine would sooner or later come up with a ballet where she could indeed use it to perfection. To this day there remain drawers of new and antique lace, gold braid, silver roses, strings of bugle beads, and bolts of fabric that Karinska bought and never used. These treasures are kept in one of her old bureaus in the New York City Ballet costume

shop, and sometimes, for a very special costume, a length of lace or a strand of beads will be carefully extracted from the stash. But mostly the bureau is kept under lock and key; what is in it is irreplaceable in today's manufacturing world. Ironically, the result of Karinska's insistence on using ready-made colors is a legacy of dyed ones. The browns and beiges and blues and pinks she used are no longer made and cannot be found at any price, so when the *Serenade* costumes need replacing, the vats of dye are filled and hundreds and hundreds of yards of tulle are plunged into the boiling liquid. Karinska would be horrified.

Dropped or diagonal waists were not the only figure-enhancing techniques Karinska used. While her famous *Symphony in C* tutu had a faceted bodice that reached to the hip, where the skirt began, many of her costumes—such as the beautifully tailored and somewhat more complex tutus for Balanchine's *Divertimento No. 15*—featured a yoke, an extra section of costume that reached from the skirt to the waist. The upper bodice section was shaped to meet the yoke at the waist on the sides and in a flattering V in the front. At the waistline, behind the joining of bodice and yoke, lies a series of invisible vertical elastics that together allow the dancer full movement from the waist and hips in all directions. The dancer does not feel them, and the audience does not see them; their presence is just one more detail that contributes to the overall fluid effect. Breaking a costume-making custom, Karinska often made the yoke in a different shade from the upper bodice, as in the 1966 ballet *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*, thereby recasting the appearance of the figure. The contrast, however subtle, creates depth, texture, and richness, qualities that correspond to and enhance the grandeur of Balanchine's ballet.

For Balanchine's 1956 *Allegro Brillante*, a concise, extended exercise in the speed, clarity, and possibility of the classical ballet vocabulary, Karinska devised some very simple—so simple that they were uncredited in the program—revolutionary costumes for the women. When the curtain rose on a whirling circle of dancers dressed in soft, slim, knee-length blue and pink chiffon dresses, it was probably the first time au-



Divertimento No. 15: Allegra Kent. (Photo: NYCB)

diences had seen a style of dress that has since become as standard a style of classical ballet costume as the tutu.

This dress, with its thin, blouse-like chiffon top, radiates femininity, allows a total freedom of movement (it is far less restricting to both

back and legs than the much more highly constructed tutu), and punctuates that movement with a barely perceptible flair of flying silk. Karinska's chiffon costume has enjoyed more reincarnations in more ballets than could ever be traced. *Allegro Brillante* remains the landmark production for having used this costume from its premiere until today.

While the invention itself was not Karinska's, her development of a two-piece vest for male ballet dancers released their arms and chest to move articulately and independently. Originally a tailoring stunt from the mid-eighteenth century – in which the sleeves of a jacket were attached to an underlining over which was fitted the sleeveless body of the jacket – and later used by Chanel and Dior in their fashion collections, it was Karinska who first put it on the ballet stage. By allowing a dancer to raise his arms above his head without his entire jacket drifting up his chest and bunching, the technique gave male dancers a previously impossible elegance.

Kermit Love first remembers seeing such a costume on Igor Youskevitch in Balanchine's *Theme and Variations* in 1947. "I remember Youskevitch commenting on how free he felt, how liberating it was. But it wasn't only that he was free, it had the look of freedom." This example illustrates one of the basic differences between Karinska and her competitors. Her work was haute couture for the stage, whereas the large costume shops – including Brooks, originally a military tailor, and Eaves Costume Company – would deliver a costume made with only a minimum of time and effort. "You would say, 'This is the costume,'" says Love,

"but you were not moved. It had an A-B-A look. They all invested money in the shows, so they wanted to keep their charges down on costs and labor. But with a costume from Karinska you would say, 'Ah! This is Raymonda, this is Prince Desirée, this is Princess Aurora.'"

It was in the exploration of decoration – on a neckline, a waistline, a sleeve, a headpiece, or a skirt – that Karinska's work went beyond the relative simplicity of couture dressmaking to the theatrical, where exaggeration is imperative to elicit the maximum visual effect from a great distance. She was the kind of woman who made long-term investments – not in stocks and bonds, but in seam allowances. Karinska felt about antique lace the way most women feel about diamonds. She was a master of the unnec-



Allegro Brillante: Kyra Nichols. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

essary detail – the back twist of braid, the inset brocade flower, the hand-embroidered cuff closure, the beaded design in four shades of red. “She loved concealing things, which I thought was an elegance of hers,” says Stanley Simmons, a designer who worked with Karinska. “There were ribbons under chiffon, or ribbons under the net, or rhinestones on the second layer of the net and not necessarily on the top. She would put an orange satin ribbon under a piece of gray and put mirrors on the satin ribbons for no reason at all – it was mystery.”

“She never stopped inventing,” said Love, “whether it was with a crochet hook and a bit of ribbon, tacking it and twisting it and manipulating it. If she did it on one side she’d turn it over and look at the other side, ‘Well maybe there’s a possibility here.’” Zipprodt notes that Karinska would “build up. Like Rembrandt used glazes. It’s the same mentality. People didn’t know how to think this way before she thought this way.”

The result of Karinska’s indefatigable energy in this area is awesome to behold – up close. Yet, ironically, the vast majority of any audience viewing the costumes on a stage from their distant vantage point would never see the bejeweled green version of a ladybug hidden under a flap of silk on the waistline of the “Emeralds” costumes, or the exquisite variety of bodices and skirt backs on the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* fairy dresses, every one folded differently and woven with gold and pearl braids.

But while it is the rare audience member who might note the luxury of detail, every viewer receives the sensation of texture, depth, and richness. But Karinska made costumes not only to be



Vienna Waltzes: Stephanie Saland. (Photo: Steven Caras, NYCB)

seen but to be worn, and much of her care and detail was for the performers themselves, who, despite their preoccupying nerves, would certainly feel the security of being beautifully presented – from the smooth seams of the lining to the velvet black-tipped roses at their breasts.

Perhaps the ultimate example of a Karinska detail is to be found in the five Spanish girls’ costumes in the second act of *The Nutcracker*. At the center of each of their low décolletages Karinska placed a small Victorian-style pendant. Inside the pendants belonging to the four corps de ballet girls was a tiny photograph of Balanchine, and inside the one belonging to the principal dancer was one of Lincoln Kirstein. Quite invisible to the audience, this affectionate and personal gesture pleased everyone backstage and provided the dancers with a special secret to carry onstage.

In the vast, barely seen underworld of petticoats and other ruffled undergarments, Karinska ruled supreme. For the *Liebeslieder Walzer* costumes there were different shades of beige,

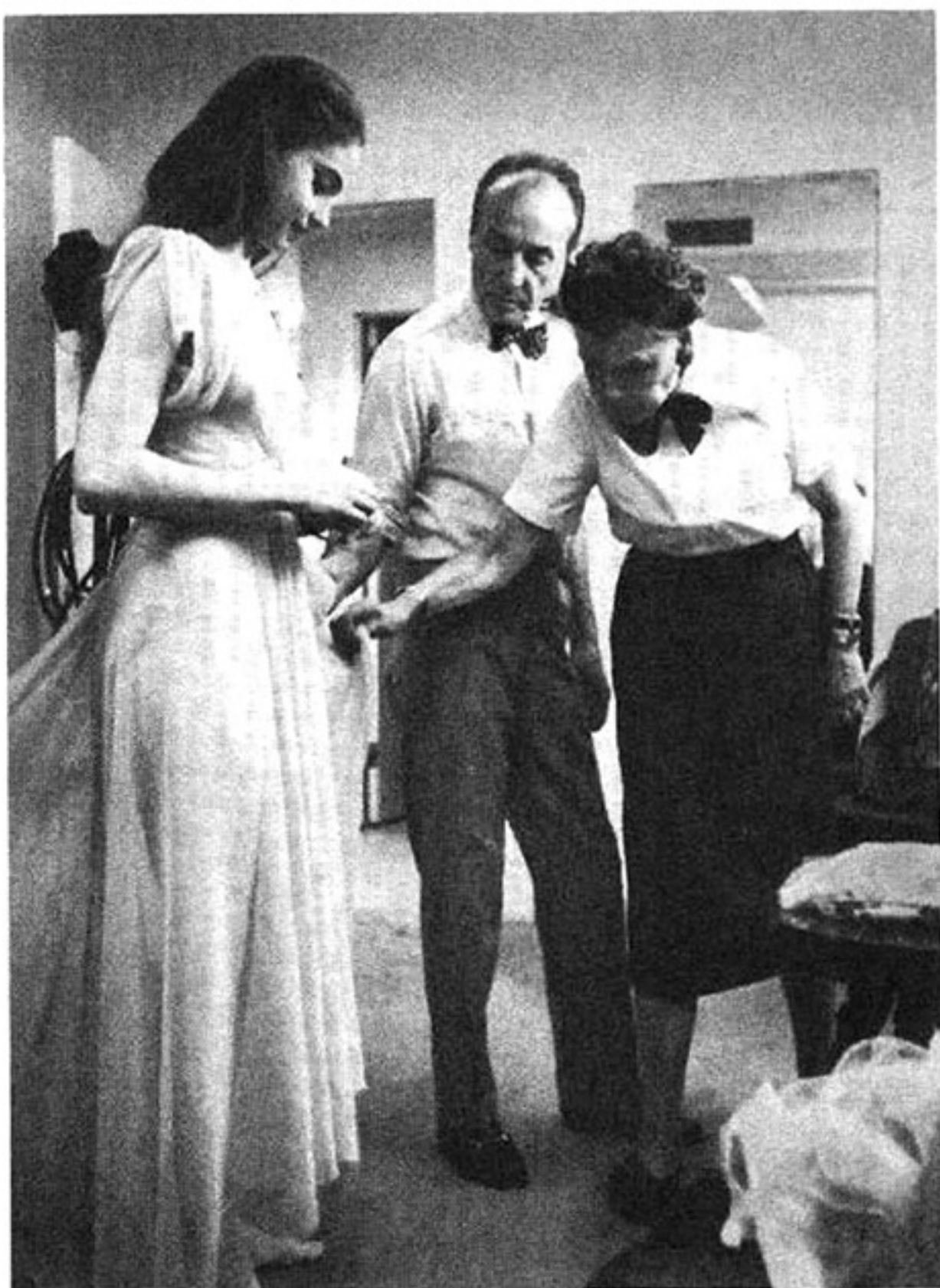


Roma: Tanaquil Le Clercq and André Eglevsky. (Photo: Radford Bascome, NYCB)

each with a differently decorated ruffle, one with a pale pink ribbons woven through the edge, one with a special piece of antique lace Karinska had found in Paris, and another with ruffles both over and under the petticoat. Others, like the Eugene Berman costumes for a ballet called *Roma* (reused for Balanchine's version of *Le Baiser de la Fée* in 1972), have short, soft, silk overskirts with a lining of ribbon-strung ruffles that continue right up to the waistline. These underlayers are almost entirely concealed during the performance, except when the dancer moves a certain way, lifts her leg in a certain direction, or falls into her partner's arms a certain way. Then, and only then, will a hint of the gorgeousness that lies hidden be revealed, and then, just as in Balanchine's choreography, there will be a moment of magic.

To peer inside one of Karinska's costumes is to view the matte side of luxury and the very loving dedication of this woman to the dancers she dressed. Made of cotton drill – a heavy, tightly woven fabric that gives shape and support to the satin it backs, and absorbency to the sweat and perfume of the human being it lies against – the bias-cut panels on the inside of a bodice are as beautifully cut, stitched, and finished as those on the outside. Seeing this, one can readily understand why a Karinska costume lasts three or four times longer than most others. With its delicate weaves, intricate seaming, and hand-stitched edges, each costume is made with the precision, quality, and strength of a military uniform.

Karinska's fittings were conducted for multiple purposes, of which physical fit and aesthetic beauty were only the most obvious. Fittings were tests of her laboratory results, and Karinska was interested not only in the static visual aspect of her work – and here most other designers cease their interest – but in the physical performance of her creations. "She understood the velocity of fabric," says Suzanne Farrell, a ballerina she clothed for almost twenty years. "Are you comfortable? Can you move?" she would ask, and if there was any hindrance, seen or felt, Karinska was known to tear out the entire gar-



Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine, and Karinska.
(Photo: Martha Swope)

ment on the spot and begin again. Her work attitude was notable for its extraordinary lack of ego, considering what a strong personality she did have. But her work was about the work, not about herself, and she would never insist on any feature or aspect of a costume just because she had designed it, or labored for days over it – especially if the dancer was restricted in any way or if Balanchine was not pleased.

It might seem like an enormous expenditure of labor, time, and expense for such a small, intangible reward, but that is precisely why Karinska was a true artist in her trade and not simply an efficient costume maker. Nothing about her costumes was skimmed on – financially or materially – and no amount of human labor was too much, even for something concealed. Karinska put it best herself in an interview about her magnificent costumes for the Metropolitan Opera's *La Traviata*. Here, even the hoops under the gowns were encircled in lace. "They ask me why when the lace doesn't show. It is for the soul, I say."