

The first theater clothes were undoubtedly dance costumes at a time when theater was indistinguishable from religious ritual and dancing was its core.



*Schmoite Spolia, costume design by  
Linda Jones for Charles I*



*Agua, with Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell;  
photograph, Martha Swope*



*Don Quixote, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo;  
photograph, Gene McDougle*

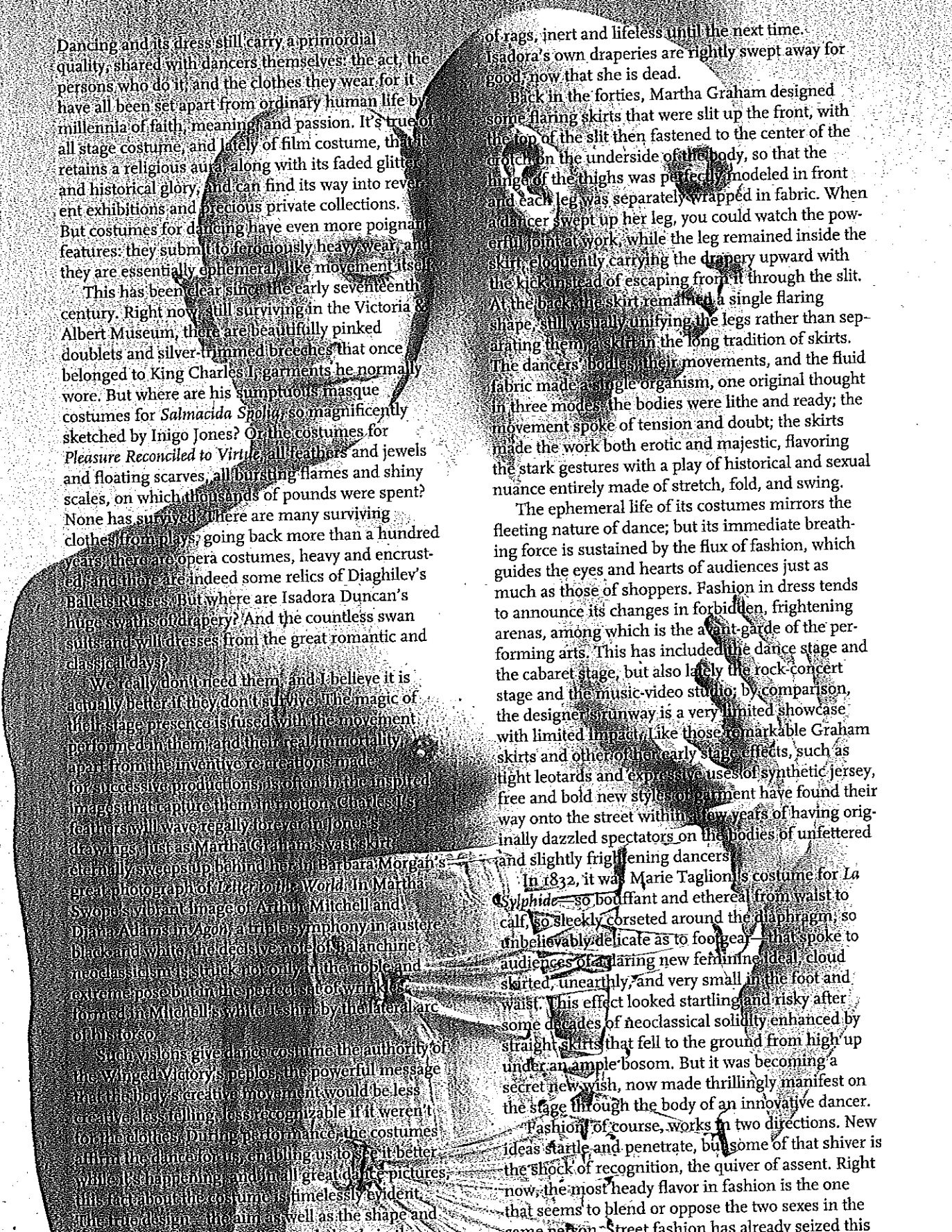


*Gold Parade, with Amy Rose and John Gaudier;  
photograph, Martha Swope*

ANNE HOLLANDER

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Dancing and its dress still carry a primordial quality, shared with dancers themselves: the act, the persons who do it, and the clothes they wear for it have all been set apart from ordinary human life by millennia of faith, meaning, and passion. It's true of all stage costume, and lately of film costume, that it retains a religious aura, along with its faded glitter and historical glory, and can find its way into reverent exhibitions and precious private collections. But costumes for dancing have even more poignant features: they submit to ferociously heavy wear, and they are essentially ephemeral, like movement itself.

This has been clear since the early seventeenth century. Right now, still surviving in the Victoria & Albert Museum, there are beautifully pinked doublets and silver-trimmed breeches that once belonged to King Charles I; garments he normally wore. But where are his sumptuous masque costumes for *Salmacida Spolia*, so magnificently sketched by Inigo Jones? Or the costumes for *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, all feathers and jewels and floating scarves, all bursting flames and shiny scales, on which thousands of pounds were spent? None has survived. There are many surviving clothes from plays, going back more than a hundred years; there are opera costumes, heavy and encrusted; and there are indeed some relics of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. But where are Isadora Duncan's huge swaths of drapery? And the countless swan suits and willow dresses from the great romantic and classical days?

We really don't need them, and I believe it is actually better if they don't survive. The magic of their stage presence is fused with the movement performed in them, and their real immortality, apart from the inventive recreations made for successive productions, is in the inspired images that capture them in motion. Charles I's feathers will wave regally forever in Jones's drawings, just as Martha Graham's vast skirts eternally sweep up behind her in Barbara Morgan's great photograph of *Letter to the World*. In Martha Swann's vibrant image of Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams in *Agon*, a triple symphony in austere black and white, the decisive notes of Balanchine's neoclassicism stand out not only in the noble and extreme pose but in the perfect set of wrinkles formed in Mitchell's white T-shirt by the lateral arc of his torso.

Such visions give dance costume the authority of the Winged Victory's peplos, the powerful message that the body's creative movement would be less creative, less telling, less recognizable if it weren't for the clothes. During performance, the costumes affirm the dance for us, enabling us to see it better while it's happening, and in all great dance pictures, this fact about the costume is timelessly evident. The true design—the aim as well as the shape and detail—of dance clothing is revealed only in the dance itself. Afterward the costume becomes a heap

of rags, inert and lifeless until the next time.

Isadora's own draperies are rightly swept away for good, now that she is dead.

Back in the forties, Martha Graham designed some flaring skirts that were slit up the front, with the top of the slit then fastened to the center of the crotch on the underside of the body, so that the fringe of the thighs was perfectly modeled in front and each leg was separately wrapped in fabric. When a dancer swept up her leg, you could watch the powerful joint at work, while the leg remained inside the skirt, eloquently carrying the drapery upward with the kick instead of escaping from it through the slit. At the back, the skirt remained a single flaring shape, still visually unifying the legs rather than separating them, a skirt in the long tradition of skirts. The dancers' bodies, their movements, and the fluid fabric made a single organism, one original thought in three modes: the bodies were lithe and ready; the movement spoke of tension and doubt; the skirts made the work both erotic and majestic, flavoring the stark gestures with a play of historical and sexual nuance entirely made of stretch, fold, and swing.

The ephemeral life of its costumes mirrors the fleeting nature of dance; but its immediate breathing force is sustained by the flux of fashion, which guides the eyes and hearts of audiences just as much as those of shoppers. Fashion in dress tends to announce its changes in forbidden, frightening arenas, among which is the avant-garde of the performing arts. This has included the dance stage and the cabaret stage, but also lately the rock-concert stage and the music-video studio; by comparison, the designer's runway is a very limited showcase with limited impact. Like those remarkable Graham skirts and other of her early stage effects, such as tight leotards and expressive uses of synthetic jersey, free and bold new styles of garment have found their way onto the street within a few years of having originally dazzled spectators on the bodies of unfettered and slightly frightening dancers.

In 1832, it was Marie Taglioni's costume for *La Sylphide*—so bouffant and ethereal from waist to calf, so sleekly corseted around the diaphragm, so unbelievably delicate as to foolgear—that spoke to audiences of a glaring new feminine ideal, cloud skirted, unearthly, and very small in the foot and waist. This effect looked startling and risky after some decades of neoclassical solidity enhanced by straight skirts that fell to the ground from high up under an ample bosom. But it was becoming a secret new wish, now made thrillingly manifest on the stage through the body of an innovative dancer.

Fashion, of course, works in two directions. New ideas startle and penetrate, but some of that shiver is the shock of recognition, the quiver of assent. Right now, the most heady flavor in fashion is the one that seems to blend or oppose the two sexes in the same person. Street fashion has already seized this theme, but on the dance stage it can go further,

acknowledging the public fascination with gender confusion in extreme examples. Male skirts are not customary on the street, only on dancers; and in general, following the modern condition of fashion, masculine daring is the most unfamiliar, the newest, the most exciting.

Onstage and off, women have long exhaustively helped themselves to the whole male vocabulary, besides making constant use of interesting nudity. But for two centuries men have had very restricted permission to make forays into female territory; so a man wearing a bra, let's say, is a far more startling sight than a woman wearing only tiny briefs. But a male dancer can do it, or cinch his ribs in a corset, or wear a flowered hat, and the mode of the dance will seal the costume's effect. Even with her greater latitude in real life, a woman in combat boots and a shaved head, or a woman in a tuxedo, will create a much more telling effect in a dance designed to match her clothes than if she simply wears them to go out. The dance confirms the costume, as it did when Taglioni danced, the same as the other way around.

When gender-bending first became so publicly interesting, it was the immensely skilled and dignified Tockadero dancers who actually showed how becoming female stage costumes might be on men; and twenty-four years ago it was the dancers in *Oh, Calcutta!*, led by Margo Sappington, who first demonstrated for their generation the perennial impact of stage nudity, which has come more and more into the mainstream ever since. Both nudity and cross-dressing on the dance stage, however, are still relying for their intense effects on their contrast with the mighty force of standard ballet tradition. For a hundred and fifty years this has meant a stiff tutu or floating drapes for her, sleek tights and fitted tunics for him; and it is itself a variant on the white-tie-and-tails-for-him, frills-and-veils-for-her theme sustained in elegant ballrooms during the same historical period and immortalized by Fred and Ginger.

The ballet has distilled and intensified this romantic convention of dress for the sexes, repeatedly ringing changes on the motif in hundreds of inventive ways, of which the black-and-white-practice-costume version inaugurated by Balanchine was an inspired modern example. The great Karinska had an apparently endless fund of imagination to tap for producing perpetually different new examples of it, without losing immediacy or flair. The theme has great strength and great appeal in itself, reinforcing Romantic relations between the sexes in an ambiance of great beauty, further

enhanced by compelling music. The appealing discipline of ballet movement underlies the disciplined design and structure of the clothes and adds further dynamic tension to the sexual situation—a furious passion reigns, but strict rules must be obeyed.

Whatever the convulsions of the modern world, this convention in dress is not dying. The ballet stage will ensure its survival, whatever gear is worn by men and women on the dance floors of the future.

Modern rebelliousness, however, has its own costume tradition. The flowing and clinging drapes of the early modern-dance stage were not confined to women, nor even to the dancers. They dressed both the set and the characters in a rippling wash of freedom from prescribed cut and fit in both

cloth and movement, and from prescribed gear for him and her. When such liberating departures were first suggested on the dance stage, ordinary people were still wearing the ordinary version of romantic costume—cut and sewn dresses for her, tailored suits for him. Dance draperies then helped to raise the general consciousness about bodies and their possibilities and helped to create a considerable bohemianization of middle-class dress: girls took to wearing leotards and tights with big clinging skirts and soft ballet slippers instead of heeled shoes. Later, authentic work clothes and teenage gang clothes appeared on male musical-comedy dancers, romanticizing and eroticizing them, too; and we have seen how much influence they have had on male fashion since. Inventive variations of drapery, deriving ultimately from Duncan and Graham, still

appear on the modern-dance stage, aiming to be deliberately at odds with custom, however liberated that has become.

But rebellion has again changed its flavor, after the early knitted drapes and the later jeans and leather became standard. Very noticeable on the present dance stage is a reflection of the present youthful desire to wear outsize clothing that forms extraneous creases, instead of a second skin or a pattern of draped folds and controlled shapes. Loose and wrinkly pants and shirts are everywhere, even in the gold-tissue versions for Trisha Brown's *Foray/Forêt*. The New York City Ballet wears them for Peter Martins's *The Chairman Dances*. They in fact constitute an echo of Eastern cultures, even of several third-world cultures, demonstrating ways to dress that have never been common in our smooth-fitting Western visions and habits, even in a rebellious vein.



*Ceintures de Chasteté*,  
Folies-Bergères;  
photograph, Valery.  
Courtesy of the Dance  
Collection, New York  
Public Library

Untailored garments that crush easily, and that neither conform to the body nor otherwise enhance its shape, have been thrilling Westerners for centuries since the "pyjama" was first brought back from India by the English around 1660. But pajamas became a staple only of intimate wardrobes; it has taken centuries to get them out onto Western stages and Western streets. Now, with the fragmentation of the world, such effects are neither extremely exotic nor publicly forbidden, and they give Western dancers still another way to relate to their clothing on the stage, to show us possibilities we hadn't suspected. Their randomly uneven surfaces and floppy movements have their own life, making a counterpoint to bodily leap and gesture.

Some ancient stage habits have never ceased to resonate all over the world, with the power of the earliest civilizations. Chief of these is the use of masks. Unlike most of the soiled and withered finery of past ballets, a huge variety of dance masks has survived; except, of course, for the ones made of nothing but paint. The desire that transforms the living dancer into a rare and uncanny being is perfectly fulfilled just by giving him or her another head, or a costume that can be nothing but a hood with holes. Unlike the actor's mask, the dancer's is silent: it gives greater range to the body's eloquence, but nevertheless draws all bodily significance into

itself. The fluid body can't do otherwise than serve the rigid face.

Looking at the animal-headed divinities of ancient Egypt, one can see how normal human bodies are transfigured by such august completion above the shoulders. If the body below such a noble structure were to move, all its movements would be noble; and under a grotesque and fearsome head, every gesture would be terrifying. The rest of the costume can be a neutral version of ordinary dress; ballets like *The Green Table* have made good uses of this antique fact. For dancers in opera who must portray subhuman Nibelungen in Wagner's *Ring* or entranced beasts in *The Magic Flute*, the same brown bodysuits will do very well so long as suitable heads appear above.

Nudity is another universal costume, representing a similar condition of acute meaning in different societies. Since adult persons are not normally undressed or unadorned or unequipped with customary trappings, the denuding of anybody is a special case. Such a case can be entertaining, thrilling, or sacred, but it is never "natural." Stage nakedness thus has a broad and long history and itself constitutes a significant mode of dress.

*West Side Story*;  
photograph,  
Martha Swope



The Folies-Bergères dancer, wearing only fringed and spangled extensions that encircle and set off her naked body, demonstrates impersonal eroticism with the help of the venerable idea that a female nude is always a prime jewel in any decorative scheme. Other stage nudes of either sex can connote sacrifice, poverty, innocence, penitence, and different flavors of supernatural force, along with shades of sexuality; but the tense meaning invested in the naked body keeps nude dancers from ever being pure abstractions.

Fashion designers tend to fail as designers for dance costumes, although not invariably. Modishness often takes over, dressing up the dancers instead of costuming them and somehow swamping the dance. This, lamentably, happened during the period when Halston was designing for Martha Graham, draping her stage with slick and vivid fabrics that had a degrading and disharmonious effect on the choreography. In a different vein, Christian Lacroix's clothes for American Ballet Theatre's *Gaité Parisienne* also tend to take over the stage with an independent bid, so that this delicate and sweetly trivial ballet becomes a coarse parade of gaudy effects—excellent ones, but jarring. Isaac Mizrahi has done better with Twyla Tharp's

*Brief Fling*, also for ABT, using witty variations on the tartan theme but adhering quite closely to established ballet convention. This device puts a suitable frame around the wit, so that it serves the dance and not the designer.

Dance costumes are the oldest costumes, and always the newest. They have had a stronger force than any other stage clothes, since they transcend all texts and speak directly to the following eye. The history of stage dancing is bound up with the endless play of mobile garments that have entranced audiences for centuries, and that continue to enlighten spectators with new visions. Meanwhile, the unique Anna Pavlova will always live and die in her swan costume—poignant, pale, and feathery, floating wordlessly to the music of Saint-Saëns. The dancer and the dress are forever blended into a single immortal memory. ♦

ANNE HOLLANDER is the author of *Seeing Through Clothes*, about the images of dress in art, and of *Moving Pictures*, about sources in art for the power of film. Her next book is about masculine tailoring, sex and modernity.

