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MARGINS · AUSTRALIAN BALLET

# Reawakening the Sleeping Beauties of the Ballet

*VAULT* speaks with the Australian Ballet's Head of Costume  
Musette Molyneaux ahead of the return of *The Sleeping Beauty* –  
and its beloved costumes – in 2025.

WRITTEN by GRACE SANDLES





**Can you tell us a bit about the Australian Ballet's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* and the role the costumes designed by Gabriela Tylesova play in this ballet and in general?**

*The Sleeping Beauty* is what would be considered a period production. It's a more traditional type of production and so the costumes are quite key in the storytelling, and in being able to identify the different characters. Often the characters continue their same thematic colourway throughout a production, which is a traditional way of being able to identify the character, even if they have costume changes.

It also really goes a long way to create the world. Often these ballets are escapist worlds – worlds that we're not that familiar with – and so the costume designer, whether they're doing set and costume or just costume, for a production like *The Sleeping Beauty*, they go a long way to creating that world, helping you to escape from the everyday and be fully immersed in it. And while I can't speak for a dancer, I'm sure it helps them to also get in character; you know, 'I'm a fairy and then I put on my wings,' which I'm sure also helps in their storytelling and performance as well.

**What are some of the materials and techniques used to create the enchanting costumes of this ballet?**

Costume designer Gabriela Tylesova loves texture and hand painting. Beautiful silk fabrics serve as a base for applied decoration – allowing for depth without added weight – ideal for dance.

We used hand-beaded laces and had embroidery and beading done based on her hand-drawn designs of decorative elements for the costumes. Many of the costumes are airbrushed and painted, and she even hand-painted some of them herself.

We did a lot of digital printing, where we asked her to do artworks on paper that we could then get printed onto her choice of fabric to help to add as much texture into the look as possible. Some of the costumes have handmade silk flowers on them. There's lots of printing. There's a set of costumes that have

metal elements – like filigree metal shapes – that are sewn onto the costume as well. There's a lot of different textures in each costume and that creates a deep and rich look. It's got everything other than laser cutting, I think. Every type of technique that is possible.

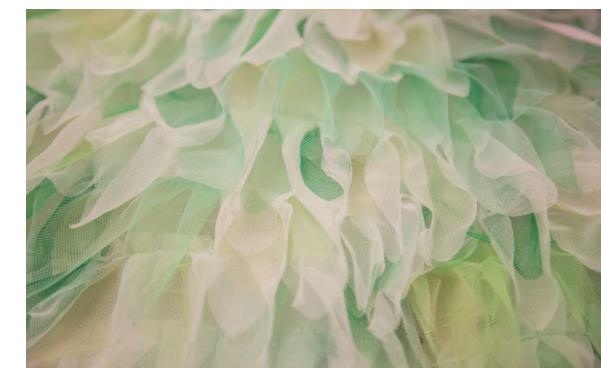
**Can you describe your role with the company as Head of Costume?**

My role is to look after the planning and implementation of each production. So, I will work with the designer in the initial phase, when they first come on board, to talk about timelines and give them a bit of a brief of how we're going to work, when we'll need them to be involved and what we'll need from them, how present they'll need to be in the room – all that kind of stuff.

I also look after hiring the team of makers. We have a full-time team, but for a production like *The Sleeping Beauty* we have to double the size of the team working on it. My job is to hire the right people who have an understanding of costume making and have the practical know-how, but also have a good eye for design themselves so that they can really see when a costume is coming together, when they might need to involve the costume designer to really sign off on things or make sure the costume's heading in a direction that the designer's happy with. I look after budgets and make sure that we can afford to do the production that we want to do; basically, the long-term planning, making sure that the information that the team needs is to hand when they need it.

**There are over 300 bespoke costumes, wigs and fairy wings in *The Sleeping Beauty*, designed by the award-winning Gabriela Tylesova. What does the costume department do to prepare for a production like this, which premiered 10 years ago and the costumes still exist?**

What we do is we pull out all the existing costumes and we look at the condition they're in. During our first season of a production, we will take photographs







of each of the dancers in costume at one of the shows backstage so that we have a clear reference of exactly what that costume should look like for the future. It'll feature the hair and the makeup and everything so that we know exactly the look that was signed off on by Gabriela that we need to replicate each subsequent season. We pull that out and look at the existing costume, and we'll see what it needs to bring it back to that original look.

Sometimes with tutus, they need a fresh layer to perk up a bit again. Sometimes the painting will need to be updated if the colour has faded a little bit. There's just a lot of investigative work done to try and decide what we need to do. It's a bit like renovating a house. You could always do more. So, there's also a bit of decision-making involved in how far to go in repairing the costumes.

So, we do that for all the existing costumes. Then we'll examine the sizes and the new cast list and determine if there are any additional costumes we need to create to complement the sets we have for the current casting. For this particular upcoming season, we have costumes that we need to make as additions. For this process, we have what we call a 'Costume Bible', which contains not only the photographs I mentioned earlier but also fabric samples and trim samples from each of the costumes. Our Costume Coordinator will pull out those pages for the new costumes and source all the fabrics. Sometimes we'll have it in stock – if we bought extra when we first created it, we will have that fabric available. Other times, as is happening now, we need additional embroidery, beading or fabric dyeing. They will organise that and provide an original piece of fabric to the dyer to ensure it exactly matches the existing set. We retain all our patterns from previous seasons so the cutters can use them as a reference to ensure that the cut and the line are identical to the existing costumes. We go through the process of fitting all the new and existing costumes, finishing them, and preparing them for the opening.

We also have a digital archive, which we have Chanel on board for as the Heritage Partner.

We reference our archives frequently, whether it's for a show we're working on or to demonstrate past designs to a new designer, offering them insight into our production of different shapes and costumes. Being able to do this in a digital format provides much greater flexibility. You have more photos available and it's all at your fingertips.

**Having had many dancers wearing each costume through the years, are there any special stories from the costume department?**

Each dancer has their name on the costume they wear. We like to keep the names from previous seasons' costumes. We simply put a new label over the top but leave the old ones inside, ensuring we always have a record of who has worn that costume. We obviously now have that in digital form as well, but there is something really nice and tangible about seeing it on the original costume and for the dancer to know who wore it previously.

**Do you have a favourite costume from *The Sleeping Beauty*? Can you tell us a bit about it?**

It's obviously very hard because Gabriela's designs and world are so special and working with her was a dream. It was a great experience and truly an adventure.

I absolutely loved working on the nymph costumes. They're a group, a set of little nymph fairies. I thought the design Gabriela gave us had so much life and expression in it. Working out how to bring what was a beautiful artwork to life in a 3D costume was really challenging but so creative, really rewarding, and satisfying. It looks great on everyone who wears it. It has a beautiful wig, fantastic makeup and gorgeous wings. It's the kind of costume that makes you smile when you see a dancer wearing it. It's beautiful. **V**

*The Sleeping Beauty* is in Tarndanya/Adelaide from 22 – 29 July, 2025, Meanjin/Brisbane from 16 – 23 August, 2025 and Warrang/Sydney from 21 November – 17 December, 2025, with a livestream on 16 December, 2025. [australianballet.com.au](http://australianballet.com.au)