



AN IRREGULAR PEARL

Peacocks, roses, unicorn horns: Gabriela Tylesova has created a lavish Baroque-inspired design for *The Sleeping Beauty*. By Valerie Lawson

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“Tylesova’s costumes for The Sleeping Beauty are as intricate and detailed as haute couture. The tutus for the fairies who bestow gifts on the baby Princess Aurora are scattered with crystals, with cut-out lace adorned with beads, and with fabric petals stitched one by one onto the top layers of the tulle skirts.”

With its cobbled streets, an ancient castle, and a moat inhabited by bears, Český Krumlov, a picture-perfect town not far from Prague, has all the ingredients of a fairytale setting. The old town and its castle, dating back to the 13th century, are so perfectly preserved that Český Krumlov has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The gem within the gem of the castle grounds is a 17th-century Baroque theatre, restored to its original beauty and complete with ornate spiral columns and a ceiling painted with celestial figures. Also in the castle grounds is a small lake with a fantastical history. Naiads are said to dance there in the moonlight, but no one has seen them – yet.

Tourists flock to the town to wallow in its charm. But few people know it as well as Gabriela Tylesova, the Sydney-based designer of David McAllister’s *The Sleeping Beauty*. Born in the Czech Republic, Tylesova lived and studied in Český Krumlov, and remembers it as “one of my favourite towns in the world”.

When McAllister asked her to design the ballet, the theatre at Český Krumlov was one of her first inspirations, not just for its opulence, but for the way its Baroque origins connected with the history of *The Sleeping Beauty*, traditionally set in the 17th-century reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. When Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the Francophile director of the Russian Imperial Theatres, wrote the libretto for *The Sleeping Beauty* (first performed in St Petersburg in 1890), he acknowledged the importance of two monarchies: the 19th-century Russian court of Czar Alexander III and the French court of Louis XIV. The ballet score ends with a hymn to the French monarchy, “Vive Henri IV”.

McAllister and Tylesova’s *Beauty* is not a reconstruction of that original production, but one that twists and turns with a 21st-century playfulness.

“It’s not good enough creating a period piece,” says Tylesova. “I think it should be pushed a bit. I started more naturalistic, then I thought it wasn’t fun enough or interesting enough. I thought, it’s a fairytale. We need to stylise it a bit more.”

Tylesova’s concept began with the big picture then focused on the finer detail. Central to her richly coloured design is the Baroque in all its forms – so much so that almost all its elements reflect the meaning of the word Baroque, said to derive from the Spanish word *barrueco*, an irregularly shaped pearl. “I feel that the word captures our production. It’s a beautiful irregular pearl, a gem.”

Her rows of three-dimensional stage columns, designed to look like cracked porcelain, are inspired by the dramatic intensity and the exploration of form, light and shadow seen in the work of the 17th-century Italian sculptors and architects, among them Bernini, whose spiral columns adorn St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

But historic references merge with a fairytale realm in the way Tylesova’s columns for *The Sleeping Beauty* curve from a wide top to a pointed tip, rather like a dancer’s pointed foot or an upended unicorn’s horn. After all, she says, “we are going into this magical world”, a theatrical place that she knows so well, from the Český Krumlov Castle theatre, to trompe l’oeil ceiling paintings of angels that appear to be floating in the sky, to the deep colours and intense light and dark in the paintings of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Rubens, Poussin, and Jacob van Ruisdael. Tylesova’s colour palette starts with reds and cream, then as the story progresses, moves into green, blue and dusty pink, then deeper green, and finally cream and gold for the last act, depicting the celebration of Aurora’s wedding to her prince.

We enter the story in the same way we might open the beautiful cover of an old fairytale book. When the curtain rises on this *Sleeping Beauty* the audience sees a distant castle through a gap in painted gauze, on which a silver peacock extends his elegant neck for a better view of the castle and what might unfold within its walls. But why the peacock? “I don’t know,” Tylesova laughs. “He is looking into the big hole, looking at the story.”

Tylesova’s costumes for *The Sleeping Beauty* are as intricate and detailed as haute couture. The tutus for the fairies who bestow gifts on the baby Princess Aurora are scattered with crystals, with cut-out lace adorned with beads, and with fabric petals stitched one by one onto the top layers of the tulle skirts. Each costume represents the gift that the fairy gives to Aurora. The tutu for the Fairy of Generosity, for example, is embellished with poppies, cornflowers and stylised plaits of wheat, representing the bounty of harvest time and the way a field might look at the end of the northern summer.

The Sleeping Beauty is a tale of Good (the Lilac Fairy) and Evil (the bitter Carabosse, who has not been invited to Aurora’s christening). But in this production, Carabosse is not so much a wicked witch as she is a wise woman, the oldest sister of the fairy realm, known as the Fairy of Wisdom. Her costume is as elegant as it is menacing, with black embroidery and black lace threaded with twinkling jet stones. She is accompanied by a pack of white rats – more interesting than dark rodents – dressed in chunky jabots and high-collared military jackets that end in long tails. Underneath, the dancers wear layers of black tulle and organza so they can move their tails and kick them around. Tylesova has imagined their previous life as palace guards.

When she talks of the *Beauty* designs, Tylesova’s recurring world is “fun”. She had fun with the rats, fun with the nicknames she and the costumiers gave to the Princes who woo Aurora (the Swedish Prince is known as Bjorn and the British prince is Charles) and even more fun exploring the workshop of a family business that has designed custom-made silk flowers in the garment district of New York for close to a century. “I was obsessed there,” she says. Dusty-pink silk roses, made in that workshop, enhance the women’s costumes for the Garland Dance in Act I. The roses spill down the front of the chiffon and organza ruffles of the dresses; the bigger blooms sway as the women dance.

If that seems the ultimate in costuming fantasy, the last act surpasses everything that’s gone before. Tylesova’s designs for the fancy-dress ball are reminiscent of Louis XIV’s *fete champêtres*. There are sculpted masks of both human and animal faces and chandeliers that rise from the floor to the ceiling at the beginning of the act. “It’s going to be over the top,” says Tylesova. For the apotheosis, Aurora and the Prince wear cloaks with six-metre trains in gold organza. “It was a massive project just to do those cloaks.”

We spoke some weeks before the premiere, when Tylesova was still working on the ballet and juggling other assignments as well. She recalled the day she agreed to design the new *Beauty*: it was McAllister’s 50th birthday, in 2013. It turned out to be a gift for both of them. “I hadn’t done much ballet in the past and I didn’t realise how much work there is in doing a show with four acts.” But she has been exhilarated by the challenge. “I was excited. It’s been fun.”

Valerie Lawson is an author and dance historian