Cultural Daily

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How a Dancer Took Fashion Topless Turvy

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, June 19th, 2019

Before he set the fashion world "topless turvy," he was a Jewish refugee, an early gay rights advocate in Los Angeles, and a dancer. Rudi Gernreich wove those experiences first into dance costumes and then into fashions that were contemporary, controversial, injected with gender fluidity, social consciousness, and with a distinctive SoCal sensibility that captured the cultural and political tidal changes of the 1960s.

The current Skirball Center exhibit **Fearless Fashion Rudi Gernreich** surveys his groundbreaking career with several decades of fashions that include bodysuits, gender-neutral clothes, and that topless swimsuit that catapulted him beyond fashion and into the larger public eye. The exhibit also delves into his deep involvement in Los Angeles dance and the influence of dance on his fashion philosophy.

Rudi Gernreich when he danced for Lester Horton. Photo courtesy of Skirball Center.

Gernreich spent much of the 1940s as a dancer, dance teacher, and costume designer with L.A.'s legendary Lester Horton Dance Theater. Horton's inclusive company welcomed Gernreich, along with Carmen de Lavallade, and Alvin Ailey (both of whom later left for New York, but that's another story) and Horton's muse Bella Lewitzky. Gernreich repeatedly credited his time as a dancer with heightening his awareness of how clothes affected how the rest of the body could or could not move, shaping his concept of freedom of movement in fashion. His friendship with Lewitzky forged at the Horton company led to five collaborations with her Lewitzky Dance Company.

The main exhibition room prominently displays two of Gernreich's eye-catching dance costumes for Lewitzky's *Inscape*—a white costume with extended wing-like sleeves known as "The Swan" and the red version of the stretchy "duotard," one costume inhabited and danced in by two dancers. The costumes are displayed on specially designed mannequins positioned to match the dancers' positions in nearby photos from Inscape.

Duotard costume for "Inscape". Photo courtesy of Skirball Center.

On June 23, three duotard costumes will come to life for one day only. In two special events, dancers from LA-based **Luminario Ballet** will don the duotards to perform sections from *Inscape*

along with *Turf*, another Lewitzky/Gernreich collaboration.

The evening performance includes a panel of Lewitzky dancers who worked with Gernreich. LA Dance Chronicle founder Jeff Slayton will moderate the panel of Sean Greene, Diana MacNeill who recreated the duotards, and John Pennington who coached the Luminario dancers. The afternoon family-friendly show will involve children and parents working with stretchy fabric and experiencing movement in such fabric when shared with another person.

MacNeil, Pennington and Luminario artistic director Judith FLEX Helle shared their thoughts about the performance, the costumes, and the influence of dance on Gernreich's designs for dance and fashion.


The Swan costume. Photo courtesy of Skirball Center.

MacNeill has had hands on experience with the Gernreich's *Inscape* costumes having recreated the "duotards" twice before Lewitzky's death in 2004 and now for this exhibit.

Inscape in 1976 was the first of five Lewitzky/Gernreich collaborations. "The Gernreich costumes are old and treasured friends," MacNeil said. "Having worked with both Bella and Rudi for many years, they were a terrific pair to watch in action—consulting and laughing and creating wardrobe for Bella's choreography. The result was always stimulating and spot-on," she added.

Pennington, who now heads his own Pennington Dance Group, recalled the impact of the duotard in 1976. "Two-way stretch fabric had just been made available in 1976 and Rudi was the first to use it in dance design. The costumes revealed the body line and shape, as well as worked towards a unisex visual. Skull caps were worn by performers to eliminate gender markers by hair style. Female breasts were less accentuated by costuming—but in the ending section male dancers were topless and female dancers were in leotards and tights, all wearing masks that were neutral gender."


Duotard for "Inscape". Photo courtesy of Skirball Center.

Three sections from *Inscape* were selected for this performance. Pennington admitted that in any other instance, he would never extract the three duets from the whole of *Inscape* because the integrity of the dance is contained by viewing it from beginning to end.

"But in this case, we are looking at these short duets as an example of how Rudi's design work intersected with dance, and how two brilliant artists found a space to collaborate, for highlighting the use of the fabric with Bella's ingenious choreographic approach and Rudi's clever iconic designs", Pennington explained.


Luminario Ballet in "Inscape". Photo by Ted Soqui.

"Two of the duets have a duotard that shares one pant leg which eliminates large motion but increases possibilities of other movements. And the other duotard is joined at the head of both dancers," Pennington described.

Luminario Ballet's relationship with Lewitzky's choreography dates back to the 1980s even before

there was a Luminario Ballet when MacNeil was in Berlin one summer and wanted to dance. Mutual friends introduced her to Helle, a dancer at the Deutsche Opera Berlin who also had her own contemporary dance company FLEX. Helle included MacNeil in a FLEX dance company performance in Berlin and they came to know each other.

After Helle came to Los Angeles and in 2008 started Luminario Ballet, she approached MacNeil about helping to launch the company and discussed accessing the Lewitzky repertoire. MacNeil introduced Heller to Lewitzky's daughter who managed the repertory rights after Lewitzky's death in 2004.

The first Lewitzy piece Luminario performed with MacNeil's oversight was *Recuerdo*, in which MacNeil previously had performed the principal role. Later Pennington set Lewitzky's *Turf* on Luminario and he returned to oversee the *Inscape* selections and *Turf* for this event.

"John remembers everything!" Helle enthused, "And it is so valuable to have him give our dancers the inside scoop of how some of the movement inside those costumes is achieved."

Luminario Ballet in "Inscape". Photo by Ted Soqui.

Dancers scheduled to perform Inscape include Kelly Vittetoe, Andie Bartol, Audrey Hewko, Daniel Wagner, AJ Abrams, and Louis Williams. Turf dancers are Windu Sayles, Louis Williams, Cory Goei, AJ Abrams, and David Tai Kim.

While this performance and the displayed costumes focus on Gernreich's collaboration with Lewitzky, a corner annex includes material devoted to Gernreich' time with the Lester Horton Dance Company as a dancer from 1942-48 and designing costumes until 1952. In a video, Horton alum Don Martin talks about Gernreich teaching Horton technique, performing in Horton's company, and his imaginative costume designs. Martin describes Gernreich in *Salome*, entering down a set of stairs with tiny bells glued around his face as part of the costume. With each step, the tiny bells tinkled, providing a rhythmic accompaniment to the music and the dance. Photos of a belled Gernreich are in the nearby display case and also in the video.

Rudi Gernreich dancing in Lester Horton's "Salome".

In MacNeill's opinion, the impact of Gernreich's time with Lester Horton reaches beyond the dance elements in his fashion creations.

"The broad impact of the The Horton Dance Group was how it represented the American Dream in many ways, MacNeil explained. "Politically, expressively and emotionally it fostered inclusion, freedom of expression and vivacity of thought through the art forms of dance, design and music. People of all beliefs and ethnicities were accepted and encouraged to participate at their very best and it seems that few subjects were taboo. Lester Horton certainly provided a role model of a homosexual man in a position of creative leadership," she said.

The exhibit and performance already have generated renewed interest in both Lester Horton and Bella Lewtzky's work. Luminario has received inquiries from New York about bringing the Lewitzky works to the Big Apple. An upcoming Bridget Murnane film *Bella, Citizen Artist* may add fuel to the resurgent interest in the Lewitzky legacy.

“Bella’s work has been drawing attention in the dance world of late. in a really positive way,” MacNeil said, “Lester’s work was less documented and much of it it lost but there are good, solid records of Bella’s dances and, most importantly, dancers who are still working and able to teach and share the work with a new generation of artists,” MacNeil said. She praised Luminario Ballet’s being committed from its inception to presenting Bella’s work, one of the first companies to do so.”


Rudi Gernreich dancing. Photo courtesy of Skirball Center.

Having grown up and danced in LA, but now living in New Mexico, MacNeil finds the view from a distance has brought the distinctive nature of the LA dance world into sharper focus.

“In Los Angeles we accept freedom of expression and limitless innovation as a matter of course. Traveling away, only makes it clearer how rich an environment for culture LA offers from the weather to the ethnic melting pot, it makes for a sense of being alive and full of potential.” MacNeil said.

Just as some of New York’s fashion world dismissed Gernreich as a “California designer”, and not using that term as a compliment, Horton and Lewitzky’s significance to modern dance has been dogged by the “if they were any good, why didn’t they go to New York” syndrome. Ironically, the renewed interest in these “California choreographers” comes at a time that L.A.’s significance in dance is again on the ascent, fueled in part by a continuing migration here of New York dancers and choreographers.



As he segued from dance and costume design to fashion, Gernreich credited his time dancing with many of his fashion concepts. Coming of age in Southern California, his creations captured a perspective that looked less to New York or Paris, but instead welcomed the emerging influence of youth culture from SoCal beaches to San Francisco’s hippies to the Beatles’ fueled British invasion. Gernreich’s fashion surfed the cultural and political tidal changes of the era. And in 1964 his topless swimsuit catapaulted Rudi Gernreich beyond the fashion world and into the forefront of the cultural sea change. The exhibit explores his ride on the fashion tide and the performance demonstrates his impact on the swirling currents in dance.

Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Brentwood; Fearless Fashion Rudi Gernreich runs through Sun., Sept. 1, Inscape (family friendly excerpts) Sun., June 23, 3 p.m., free with admission, 6 p.m., $15. https://www.skirball.org/programs/dance/selections-inscape#.

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