

Man of the cloth

Valerie Lawson

He lives a life of solitary refinement, consumed by his art and his work. Self-confessed "alien" Kristian Fredrikson talks to Valerie Lawson about the agony and the ecstasy of costume design and his hopes for a stunning Swan song.

Kristian Fredrikson lives alone in a tiny, dark flat in Kings Cross. Books line the walls and costume sketches lie stacked on every surface. He wears black. His angular face reveals little. Instead, the designer discloses his inner life in his work - fabulous creations, dense with layers of velvet, silk and tulle, rich with colour, shine and shimmer. Over more than 35 years, he has designed costumes for almost 90 productions, for opera, theatre, film, television and ballet.

His art, he says, grows out of his "most private sexual being", a source of creativity he recognises in Renoir's paintings and Tchaikovsky's music.

"We belong to a certain breed," he believes. "Tchaikovsky revealed his soul in his music. He wrote his diary for the whole world to hear."

In a long interview one day late last month, Fredrikson, too, revealed his soul. He has the ability to stand outside himself, to paint an unusually honest portrait of himself as both an artist and a mature man. "I am a hermit," he says. "I am quite happy to be by myself."

Still, he is far from being a misanthrope. Theatre is a collaborative business and Fredrikson enjoys the company of others, especially his friend Graeme Murphy, for whom he's designing *A Body of Work*, the choreographer's retrospective, premiering in May. Fredrikson has also been asked to design a 10-minute segment directed by Ignatius Jones for the Olympic Games opening ceremony.

Talking of his work, he says, "I know that this sounds overwrought, but somehow you feel you have ecstasy, like an orgasm, when you actually do the thing. You know what you're striving for. I know when I've done it and when I haven't. It's like sex. You know when it didn't quite work. I know when I cheated. That feeling of, 'Thank God they never tumbled to that. I just faked that orgasm.'"

Now 59, he says that he channels all his sexual energy into his work. "Artists have got to take a vow of celibacy from all other pleasure except this." As for the touch of another person, "I don't miss it. Which is not to say I haven't been through a whole part of my existence where I was desperate, and that desperation I then put back into my work."

It was neither men nor women he desired, Fredrikson says, simply "human beings. I also wanted to know - what is a human being, what are we? Because, as a child, I grew up thinking I was from outer space, I didn't relate to the world as a human being. I thought I was alien. As a small child I was beaten for my religion, therefore I got close to my mother. And she was kicked and had stones thrown at her because she was

a Catholic. That's what made me feel I didn't relate, what made me different."

Fredrikson was born in Wellington, at the beginning of World War II, when New Zealand was "a wonderfully eccentric place, with a Salem quality. It might have pulled the blinds at 6 o'clock, but what went on behind the blinds was nobody's business."

His young, English-born mother had been a novice in a convent. Told by the nuns to see the world, she sailed for New Zealand, where she married a Danish merchant seaman. More gregarious than her husband, she "tailored her life to his, which was a tragedy. She had a vitality which she didn't get a chance to express." Fredrikson can remember, when he was five or six, his mother "throwing herself into the arms of this man in khaki". His father had returned from the ambulance corps in North Africa, "something he never discussed. He saw some terrible things. He was a very quiet and private person. I became like my father, but I've learned to cope better."

The Fredriksons moved to Christchurch, where Kristian attended the Protestant school next to their home. When his mother enrolled him in a convent school, "all the trouble began". "Not good enough for our school?" came the taunt from the Protestants. He withdrew into books and music.

"My family read voraciously and didn't have any sense of censorship. So by the time I was 16, I had read practically all the novels of Emile Zola. I knew a lot about the tragedy of existence in Paris. And I loved [E.T.A.] Hoffmann as a boy.

I was a Gothic child. I used to wear black turtlenecks. You can imagine that, in New Zealand, Gothic wasn't particularly understood."

In his mid-teens, and back in Wellington at St Patrick's College, he saw his first ballet: the Borovansky Ballet had come to town. "It was pure magic. I just sat there with all the fabulous incredulity of a child - there was snow and ballerinas and wonderful music and I responded.

"I bought this 12-inch Decca LP, not just The Nutcracker Suite but a lot of music from Act One. I played it to my mother. I had just taken her a cup of tea. She had the flu and was lying in bed. I ran back into the room saying, 'Isn't this the most fabulous thing?' It was the Arabian music. It had sent her into this lovely calm sleep."

The ballet sent him on a search for Tchaikovsky. He wrote to Moscow's Tchaikovsky Institute, obtained Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake pianoforte scores, and read "all the diaries, which in those days were heavily censored, but I got the message". That's when Fredrikson connected the music Tchaikovsky wrote to the passions he felt.

When Fredrikson won the school English prize, he was offered a job as a reporter at The Evening Post. His father urged him to accept. "You'll never get an offer like that again." But Fredrikson declines art, enrolling for night classes at the Wellington School of Design.

"I'd been there three months when the Australian Ballet visited Wellington." Fredrikson wrote a letter to the artistic director, Peggy van Praagh, at her hotel and "she rang my mother, who was over the moon to have this famous lady having a chat with her". When van Praagh saw his work, "she said, 'Well, there are possibilities here. I'll be in touch.'" Within months, she invited him to Melbourne, to design Aurora's Wedding in 1964.

"I was Peggy's protégé, therefore I was her son, but I was also a naughty son who wouldn't always do what

she wanted," he says. After a few weeks, "she put me in touch with this older male designer who lived in the mountains and she sent me there for the weekend. She said, 'Well, the first thing he'll do, he will throw you on the floor and rape you.' I said, 'Oh, all right!'"

And did he?

"Yes, he did. But I thought that was part of the deal, it seemed to be part of the mephistophelian code: that's what you do. She never referred to it again."

With van Praagh at the helm of the Australian Ballet, Fredrikson went on to design Act Two of Swan Lake for Margot Fonteyn, Cinderella and Coppelia. Then, after eight years as resident designer for the Melbourne Theatre Company, and increasing commissions from the Australian Opera, Fredrikson moved to Sydney in the late 1970s to begin his collaboration with Graeme Murphy at the Sydney Dance Company.

The two men made a perfect creative team from the beginning.

Murphy says Fredrikson always looks full of angst - though he's not - while Fredrikson sees Murphy as "an imp". "Not a pixie, an imp. Puck. He would make the milkmaids shriek because he would spill their milk, tug at their hair and laugh. I marvel at his energy. He wants to know everything about you, every secret you have. He calls me and says, 'Tell me all about your sex life.'

"There is nothing intellectual about Graeme," he continues, "although he understands all the great philosophers without necessarily knowing who they are half the time. He has this extraordinary ability to touch deep inside - that's why I call him a genius. He has heart, romanticism and passion."

In 1992, they conceived their greatest work, an Australian version of the Christmas favourite, The Nutcracker, about Clara, the little girl who is transported to the land of sweets when she is given a nutcracker for a present. Commissioned by former Australian Ballet artistic director Maina Gielgud, it has been restaged with substantial changes for a revival season that opened in Melbourne last night and will move to Sydney next month.

The Murphy-Fredrikson concept was born at Murphy's Coogee home. "Graeme said we've got to make this work. We were looking into space and then it just occurred to me.

I had just seen this film about Alice Liddell, who had to suffer all her life because she had been the model for Alice in Wonderland. I said, 'Clara is a little girl. We all get old. Where would she be today? She'd be dead.' At that moment I said, 'What if we began at the end of her life, then take it back?' Graeme said, 'A dancer', and I said, 'Yes!' and we were machine-gunning one another with words."

The ballet, an instant critical success, was licensed to the Australian Ballet for seven years. Last year, Murphy renewed the licence with the company for Australia, but retained overseas rights. However, Fredrikson's designs are licensed to the AB in perpetuity, so while Murphy can produce the ballet elsewhere, he cannot use any element of Fredrikson's designs.

There is one further step Fredrikson wants to take. He sits, "like someone at the spinning wheel", waiting for the Australian Ballet to commission a Murphy-Fredrikson Swan Lake. "It's the last wall to leap over. It's all I want. Perhaps God will be wise enough not to give it to me, because I want it too much."