

## **Every part of his soul on stage**

*Valerie Lawson*

Kristian Fredrikson Designer 1940-2005

He lived alone in a dark capsule of a Darlinghurst flat, but his real home was the theatre. For Kristian Fredrikson, "the theatre contained the meaning of life", in the words of his great friend, the director George Ogilvie.

Ogilvie was an anchor in Fredrikson's life, as were the Australian Ballet's founding artistic director, Peggy van Praagh, and the choreographer Graeme Murphy.

A fourth guide was Tchaikovsky. To the end of his life, Fredrikson believed the great Russian composer was a presence looking over his shoulder.

Fredrikson's funeral, at Eastern Suburbs Crematorium this week, was accompanied by a howling southerly buster, interspersed with the limpid and melancholic Act 2 pas de deux music from Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake.

Fredrikson's body lay in a coffin draped with the painted kimono he designed for Clara the ballerina, the leading character in the ballet Nutcracker, conceived by Murphy and Fredrikson in 1992.

Fredrikson fell for Tchaikovsky like a lovesick adolescent when he first heard his music at the age of 12. In his music, Fredrikson said, Tchaikovsky "wrote his diary for the whole world to hear".

In the year of his death, Fredrikson had designed new productions of Tchaikovsky's three ballets, Nutcracker for Royal New Zealand Ballet, The Sleeping Beauty for the Australian Ballet, and Swan Lake, to be staged by the Houston Ballet next year.

Fredrikson was a conceptual artist and designer for theatre, opera, film and television, but ballet was his grand passion. His sumptuous, multilayered and jewel-coloured designs reflected that passion, and at the same time his work became a substitute for human touch and affection.

He was a social hermit who said he did not miss having long-term relationships. Fredrikson believed artists and writers should shun many pleasures of existence. Such self-control would help feed their creativity. His art work had "grown out of my most private sexual being. Translated, I suppose that means that's how I ran into Tchaikovsky."

Fredrikson's knowledge of his art was immense, ranging from ballet history to the history of costume and fashion. He once said: "I can pretty much draw you [the dress for] any decade from the Roman empire onwards."

Ogilvie believed Fredrikson looked at the world with "haunted eyes ... and a slightly terrified look". But he did not seek approval from others, and he did not need it.

Kristian Adrian Sams - he changed his surname to Fredrikson - was born in Wellington, New Zealand, the son of Fredrick Sams, a Danish merchant seaman, and his wife, Iris Pointon, born in Britain.

Fredrikson was 4 1/2 when he first met his father, when Fredrick returned from World War II, in which he served in the ambulance corps in north Africa.

Fredrikson remembered his mother throwing herself into the arms of "this man in khaki and sitting on his big haversack in the back of a car". His father had seen some terrible things in the war and been "savagely brutalised" by it.

Fredrikson was educated at Redcliffs Convent, Christchurch. When he was a child, he and his mother were physically attacked because they were Catholics in a Protestant area of Christchurch. His mother was kicked and had stones thrown at her.

That experience made him feel like an alien, he later said. "I didn't relate to the world as a human being. They made my mother different, they pushed us into the hole, this sanctuary we had, so we sat there for the rest of our lives and read books and went to art films and went to the ballet."

He found comfort at school through the care of two nuns, one a beautiful young Irishwoman who taught him to play the piano, and the mother superior, who, in the hour set aside for reading by the students gave him a "sexy, sensual, erotic, decadent book about the pleasure of the flesh, the pleasure of colour, of jewels, of life. She gave it all to me and said 'You can read that, but don't tell anyone.'"

While still at primary school, he saw his first ballet performance - Nutcracker, danced by the visiting Borovansky Ballet. To him, "it was pure magic ... I just saw them with all the fabulous incredulity of a child, there was snow, ballerinas and lovely music."

When his parents returned to Wellington, he attended St Patricks College, where he considered going into the priesthood.

Fredrikson bought his first long- playing record, the Nutcracker Suite, in his mid-teens. At 17, he bought Tchaikovsky scores from New York. He read Tchaikovsky's diaries, which were "censored, but I got the message. That's when I connected Tchaikovsky, his compassion and emotion, to his music. He was his music, more than practically any composer I knew."

In his teenage years, Fredrikson visited the cinema, alone, to see every new Cinemascope movie, and by the time he was 16 he had read all Zola's novels, learning a lot about the tragedy of existence in Paris. He believed he was a gothic child before goths were in fashion. He wore black turtlenecks and drank coffee in the Red Tulip, a cafe he later discovered was a brothel.

Fredrikson won a school prize which led to a job offer from The Evening Post. Changing his surname to Fredrikson, he became a critic and journalist before attending art classes at Wellington Polytechnic College. Apprenticed to a designer who had trained at the Old Vic, his first theatre design was A Night in Venice, for the Wellington Opera Company, and his first ballet design, Winter Garden, for the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

During the Australian Ballet's first tour to New Zealand in 1964, he approached Peggy van Praagh who told him his work had possibilities. Within months she asked him to Australia to design a production of Aurora's Wedding.

Van Praagh told him he must spend a weekend with an older male designer who lived in the mountains. She explained: "The first thing is, he'll throw you on the carpet and rape you." He did.

Fredrikson told me he believed this was "all part of the deal. It seemed to be like part of the Mephistophelean code. That's what you do. She never referred to it again."

A few years after moving to Sydney, Fredrikson sought work with George Ogilvie at the Melbourne Theatre Company.

In his eulogy for Fredrikson, Ogilvie recalled the moment "40 years ago when I was sitting in my new office in Richmond, Melbourne, having arrived the previous day from London to start work with John Sumner ... a timid knock on the door revealed a slim dark-headed young boy with haunted eyes clutching a large portfolio."

It contained detailed designs for War and Peace and "by studying the designs, I discovered how to direct the play".

As resident designer for the Melbourne Theatre Company for eight years, Fredrikson was a vital part of the theatrical renaissance of Melbourne in the 1960s.

He met Murphy in 1975, when Fredrikson was designing The Revenger's Tragedy for the company and Murphy was choreographing a piece for the the play.

Their long-lasting and fruitful collaboration began with Sheherazade for the Sydney Dance Company in 1979, then Daphnis and Chloe, The Selfish Giant, After Venice, Late Afternoon of a Faun, King Roger, Beauty and the Beast, Tivoli and Body of Work.

In the late 1970s, Fredrikson was thrilled to be brought back into the fold of the Australian Ballet when van

Praagh asked him to design Coppelia. His beautiful set and costume designs for that ballet reveal his concept that the story revolves around a reconciliation between the pagan world and Christianity.

Fredrikson continued to work for the Royal New Zealand Ballet and, for Opera Australia, designed Norma, Turandot, The Merry Widow, Don Giovanni, Falstaff, Otello, Salome, Lucrezia Borgia, and The Trojans. He also worked for the Western Australian Opera, the South Australian Opera, and for the Sydney Theatre Company, with designs for Macbeth, The School for Scandal, A Doll's House and, most recently, Hedda Gabler, starring Cate Blanchett.

In a tribute to Fredrikson, Blanchett said last week: "From the very first fitting, he made me feel that the journey we were all about to undertake was the most important and potentially life-changing one of our careers. His passion was infectious. His detail was inspiring."

Fredrikson adored detail. For the musical Annie, he studied the needlework done in New York orphanages, where clothes were patched and seams endlessly repaired. For Nutcracker, he dressed the royal court women in black gloves, a symbol of the assassinations to come of the Czar and his family.

In the early 1990s, the artistic director of the Australian Ballet, Maina Gielgud, asked Murphy and Fredrikson to work on a new Nutcracker.

At their first meeting to discuss the production, the two men listened to the music. Murphy fretted: "What are we going to do? We've got to make this work."

"Then," said Fredrikson, "it just occurred to me ... I was thinking suddenly about Clara. Everybody grows up. Where would she be today? She would be dead. I said 'what if ... we began at the end of her life?'"

So Clara, the young girl of the traditional Nutcracker, became old Clara, dreaming of her past life as a ballerina in Russia and Australia. Despite the huge success of Nutcracker, Fredrikson would not be satisfied until he had conceived a new Swan Lake with Murphy.

Fredrikson saw it as "the last barricade to leap over" and felt "God will be wise enough not to give it to me, because I want it too much. We don't always do the best thing with the things we want. I know I will be putting myself on my final judgement line, in a sense."

While he was waiting for a go-ahead from the Australian Ballet, Fredrikson designed a segment for the Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony, and started work on the "Artistically Speaking" segment of the 2001 Centenary of Federation parade. He pulled out of the latter, not wanting to compromise his vision due to the demands of committees.

In 2002, Swan Lake, commissioned by the Australian Ballet's artistic director, David McAllister, designed by Fredrikson and choreographed by Murphy, was a triumph. The production earned him a 2003 Green Room Award for concept and realisation and a 2003 Helpmann Award for the best scenic design.

Under the pressure of work last year, Fredrikson temporarily lost his voice. He was in New Zealand at the end of last month for the opening of the Royal New Zealand Ballet's Nutcracker, and was due to fly to Houston to work on Stanton Welch's new Swan Lake when he was admitted to St Vincent's Hospital. Having been a heavy smoker in the past, his lungs were weakened by emphysema. Despite heroic efforts by the staff of the hospital, he died of pneumonia on November 10.

He is survived by his brother, James.

**Correction:**

**The obituary of Kristian Fredrikson "Every part of his soul on stage" (This Life, November 19-20) should have recorded that photographs of his costume designs appeared courtesy of his art dealer, Theatre Designs Gallery, Sydney....**