

the
REALIZATION
of the
skeleton
dancer

by E. Shura Pollatsek

For Santa Fe Opera's 2014 production of *Carmen*, the costume designer Jorge Jara created an unusual metaphorical image with his design for the Skeleton Dancer: a beautiful woman who is half flamenco dancer and half Day of the Dead skeleton. This figure of death, performed by Jasmine Quinsier, foreshadows Carmen's fate. Following the build process for this one costume gives a microcosm of the collaboration that happens routinely in the costume shop. In the end, the costume contains something of each contributor.



PHOTO BY KEN HOWARD



Costume sketch of Skeleton Dancer costume by Jorge Jara.

COSTUME DESIGNER: Jorge Jara

Jorge Jara originally trained in architecture in his native Chile, but when he moved to Berlin in the early 1970s to flee the dictatorship at home, he thought he might find employment more readily in the cinema. After some training, he began designing scenery and then broadened to include costumes. However, he didn't like the pacing in film work. "You have no creative control," he said. "The director is a god." As his career progressed, he gravitated to stage work. Costumes became his favorite design medium, and his costume work also drew more critical acclaim, and so he shifted away from scenic design. He is drawn to opera because "the music gives rhythm to the design." He prefers to work on opera premieres because with



Dancer Jasmine Quinsier and Jorge Jara.

revivals he feels that too much of the discussion necessarily centers on “how to do it differently. There are no big questions [to answer].” However, he has designed numerous revivals; the important thing for him is the designer’s rapport with the director and finding a strong vision for the production. “For me the best thing is to do a great production with an interesting director.” Surprisingly, given the large percentage of his career that has been in opera, this production is Jara’s first time designing *Carmen*.

Director Stephen Lawless decided to transpose the classic opera to a context more relevant to the local audience—the United States-Mexican border. Jara and the other members of the design team—scenic designer Benoit Dugardyn, lighting designer Pat Collins, and projection designer Jon Driscoll—developed an updated mid-twentieth-century take on the world of bullfighting and smugglers, bringing in human trafficking and other contemporary references. Jara used the 1950s as his basic silhouette because it gave the right feeling for the production, but he did not limit himself to a specific period look. He utilized strong colors for emphasis—blue uniforms for the tobacco workers, splashes of yellow in the chorus, and a spectacular green, fringed leather jacket for Escamillo. And of course red—it is Carmen, after all. Although, in fact, the look

Jara created for Carmen’s slinky nightclub dress is yards upon yards of ruffles in a startling shade of fuchsia.

To create his retro border aesthetic, Jara created his own mélange from an eclectic collection of research. Rockabilly’s mixture of modern and vintage provided a helpful starting point and a guide to the integration of western wear like boots, hats, and bolo ties. He also drew influence from films of the 1950s and ’60s, as well as from screen sirens of the period like Sophia Lauren. While no one particular film inspired the look, he gravitated to cinema as inspiration for the realistic yet larger than life visuals. But the production team didn’t limit their research to that era. The director thought the life of Amy Winehouse provided insight into Carmen’s story, and both the costume designer and the singer drew inspiration from her persona.

The idea for the Skeleton Dancer grew from Jara’s love of Mexican culture. The skeleton half of the costume references the Day of the Dead tradition. “It’s a poetic way to show all the confusion of the heart visually,” Jara said. “We see her from one side as a Spanish dancer, then she turns.” He explained that half-and-half costumes come from a vaudeville tradition, although it is typically a half-male, half-female character. He thought this dual idea would work well for a figure of death, and as the multi-lingual designer pointed out, the word for death is feminine in Spanish, French, and German. When asked why he chose yellow for this design, he shrugged and replied, “I think of the colors as a whole.” Certainly the Skeleton Dancer becomes a striking figure, and the yellow draws attention as she parades in profile before a projection on the scenery of the bullfighters’ procession. She then turns, revealing the figure of death that had been facing upstage.

DRAPER: Bineke Fokkens Kiernan

The Sante Fe Opera draper, Bineke Fokkens Kiernan, felt that Jara’s sketch was quite clear, and she was able to start on a mock-up with minimal input from the designer. She had already draped ruffled dresses for the characters of Frasquita and Mércèdes, and her prior discussions with Jara gave her a good frame of reference for the flamenco half of the Skeleton



PHOTOS BY MITCH WILSON

Bineke Kiernan making adjustments to the waspy.



Closeup of the skeleton side of the costume.



Adding in yellow skirt panel during the fitting with Kiernan and Jara.

Dancer. She already understood how much leeway she had in relation to the period research, the fit and proportion the designer liked for this vision of *Carmen*, and what he wanted for the ruffle style.

For a flamenco dress, the ruffles tend to dominate the conversation. Kiernan originally interpreted Jara's designs as standard, gathered rectangles, with just a little bit of circular flare added. But after their meetings about the principal dresses, she realized he preferred the sleeker look of very circular ruffles, which avoided heavy gathering at the top edge. The showgirl costumes for Mércèdes and Frasquita wound up with what Kiernan described as more "classical" ruffles, but for the Skeleton Dancer she followed the designer's directive to be irregular. Her team made samples of different styles of ruffles and tried different finishes for the hem. The designer had chosen a flocked, polka-dotted chiffon to be backed with yellow taffeta for color and stiffness. In addition to following the original plan to fully attach the two layers, she also made some samples where each layer remained free in order to create more movement in the costume. Jara agreed with her suggestion. He also selected the technicians' favorite hem finish: a contrasting red edging.

The patterning for the skeleton half of the costume was straight forward—a basic unitard. The challenge lay in the fact that Jara had found pre-existing artwork of a skeleton at a textile printing business in Europe. The height of the skeleton was perfect for the performer, and Kiernan was able to use most of the fabric as it was. However, the white-on-black skeleton was printed with its arms down by its sides, which was not quite suitable for patterning a three-dimensional body. To have the amount of fabric needed to circle the performer's torso, all of the negative space between hip and arm was needed for the body itself. Luckily Jara bought two fronts and two backs. Kiernan's team cut a sleeve out of an all-black section with the fabric grain aligned as needed for correct sleeve function and then applied on the arm bones. The only evidence of the cut-and-paste was half a hand on the unitard's thigh. Adding a black patch would have drawn more attention to it, so they colored it black and it's unnoticeable unless you are very close. "So that actually went together fairly easily," Kiernan said, smiling. "Surprisingly, because it could have been a real jam!"

The draper's biggest challenge was engineering these two halves together. Kiernan loves a challenge, however, and she often seems to wind up with oddball costumes that play to her strong suit. Alongside the dresses for *Carmen*, her summer's projects included patterning a costume for the Mechanical Bird in *Le Rossignol*, a robotic showgirl made of gold lamé velvet. She has relished the engineering process since childhood when her fascination with being on stage led her to make ballet shoes out of paper. More recent achievements include finessing the layers of an asymmetrical waterfall ruffle to lie smoothly as they S-curve down the edge of a dress and getting platter tutus to sit properly on each ballerina's hips. When recounting the difficulty of

a past project where she made a large structured collar out of an unsuitable slippery charmeuse fabric, she paused, wanting to make clear that she was not complaining. She understood that the designer chose the fabric for its color and print; making it sculptural merely gave her another construction challenge. Variety is one of the draws of this profession for Kiernan. When asked what type of costumes were her favorite to work on, she said, "I love ballet, I love . . . nice big principal costumes, and I really like variety." Then gesturing to a sketch of a simple top and leggings, she said, "Because I also like doing this prostitute that we just put together in a day."

To solve the Skeleton Dancer, Kiernan had to balance the weight of the dress half so that it hung properly; she also had to keep everything supported so that the centerlines were not pulled towards the heavier half. The unitard is a whole unitard, not a half—one part is made of the opaque black-and-white skeleton Milliskin and the other is made of nude-colored mesh. To support the dress, she created a stretch corset she refers to as a "waspy." Underneath the corset is an inner waistband that goes all the way around the dancer. The skirt has only half a waistband, but it attaches to this inner band. The bodice lies on top but does not actually support the weight of the skirt, so that it is not pulled off its alignment. Instead, the bodice attaches to the unitard and



PHOTOS BY MITCH WILSON

Above, Joanna Koefoed applying latex to the mesh head mold; below, a close-up of the half wig being ventilated.



through to the waspy, keeping everything even with the vertical center. A panel that passes between the dancer's legs connects the edges of the skirt from front to back. The designer had been very clear that he did not want the half-a-skirt to feel like a pant leg, so figuring out the best size and color for the panel became another challenge.

MILLINER: Joanna Koefoed

The Skeleton Dancer performer, Jasmine Quinsier, played multiple characters in this production of *Carmen*, so she needed to be able to get into the costume fairly quickly. The team knew that most of the skull needed to be a pre-made and pre-painted surface, and only a small part of the dressing time could involve applying makeup. Joanna Koefoed, the assistant milliner at Santa Fe Opera, suggested combining stretch fabric and latex into what she describes as "kind of like a head prosthetic." A feathered edge of latex extends beyond the fabric to blend more subtly with the performer's face. "I had done a hood before with stretch fabric and latex, but it didn't turn out as well as I wanted. I talked to David [Zimmerman, head of the Wig and Makeup Department] about whether we could do a head wrap so it's really her head shape." He and Koefoed have not only worked as colleagues in adjoining workrooms in Santa Fe, but Koefoed also worked in the wig de-

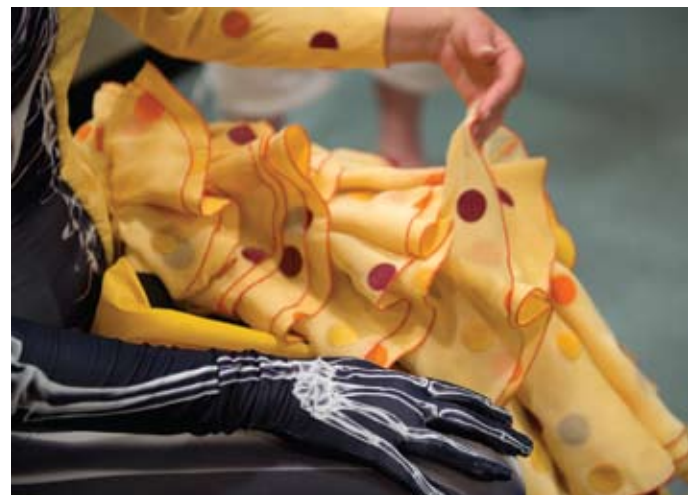
partment at the Dallas Opera this past year under Zimmerman's supervision, so theirs was a particularly easy collaboration. Together they prepped and measured the performer's head with her hair pin-curled and wrapped under a wig cap so the fit could be as accurate as possible.

When Koefoed began her costume training, she planned to pursue more traditional sewing and draping but found herself drawn towards crafts because of its problem-solving aspects. She particularly likes millinery, she said, because it is "a perfect middle ground for me between crafts and technology. It has a lot of the finesse and the history of apprentice work and things like that, like costume technology does" but also the innovation of crafts. She tends to gravitate towards the crossover projects between crafts and millinery. In her job this summer at the Opera, she worked on not only the stretch hood for the Skeleton Dancer, but also an elaborate headpiece for the Mechanical Bird in *Le Rossignol* incorporating sculpted hair and a metallic showgirl's crown of fabric feathers. While she appreciates a clear costume rendering, she said, "If it's just some lovely brush strokes that's the fun part! When it's craftspeople's choice." One of Koefoed's favorite aspects of the development process is experimenting. "I love using seven different mediums in one piece because they all function differently." She takes pride in being able to develop a range of samples and say to a designer, "I can do any of these. Which would you like?"

For the Skeleton Dancer, the milliners made numerous samples with different kinds of stretch fabric and one, two, and three layers of latex, looking for the best combination of appearance and durability. Even though they were happy with the technique they picked for the finished hood, they made spare heads just in case. The human side matched the performer's skin tone. For the skull side, the artisans painted white and black over the flesh-toned latex, matching the style of the print on the unitard. Of course, no Spanish lady is complete without her mantilla, and so the millinery department's other contribution was to create a long black veil. A traditional tall decorative comb supports



Above, Jara and Zimmerman evaluate the angle of the wig and headpiece; below, Koefoed marking on the hood.



Detail of the yellow and black sides of the Skeleton Dancer costume..

the long, trailing netting. However, its fastening had to be a little unorthodox. Half of the comb retained its teeth, which nestled securely into the wig. The other side snapped to the fabric of the latex and mesh skull.

WIG/MAKEUP DEPARTMENT HEAD:
David Zimmerman

To start out the wig and makeup design process for *Carmen*, David Zimmerman began where the rest of the team began, with Jorge Jara's sketches. The designer's watercolor technique gave a clear sense of the proportion he envisioned for the hairstyles, and his research collages filled in the details. "Jorge had a lot of ideas, and they are all mapped out," Zimmerman said. "He had it all broken down by character, but then we'd talk about it and we'd work through the thing together. It's a process you know. Some of it has come from me; some of it has come from him. Some of it has come from just watching as the costumes develop [on the performers in the fittings]." For Zimmerman such a process is the ideal mode of collaboration: when the designer gives very clear starting information but also wants input from the resident hair expert. Jara gave him free rein to come up with specifics, but Zimmerman also checked in periodically with the designer to ensure they were on the same page. He found the fitting photos at least as useful as the sketches. "From sketches things change . . . from practicality, so what they have done is taken full-body shots and made a layout of all the chorus and all the performers so when you look at that person actually in the costume, then you realize, 'Oh, well, they're a little seedier than we thought; maybe they should have some greasy, stringy long hair.'" As fittings progressed, he picked a few performers to represent the range of looks and had them called in for longer appointments so that they could model the wig when they were also in their costume and show Jara the full effect.

The original wig for the Skeleton Dancer was quite straightforward: a brunette shade compatible with the performer's own hair, styled in a bun to help support her mantilla. Except of course it took only half the time to ventilate, compared with a conventional wig! Zimmerman made sure that the stretch hood was left meshy in the spots where he needed to be able to pass pins through to secure it to the pin curls underneath the wig cap.

Jara's sketches gave a clear idea of what he wanted in terms of makeup, but Zimmerman stressed that it was just that—an idea—and they had to refine it from there. Zimmerman had seen a two-sided makeup done previously and knew that the trick was to not divide the face exactly in half, but to instead keep the skeleton a little bit hidden from view to preserve the surprise. Although they had many planning conversations, the first time the makeup was actually applied to the performer was at the first dress rehearsal. The team of two dressers and one hair/makeup staff person had eighteen minutes to complete the full-body change, which

PHOTO BY KEN HOWARD



Jasmine Quinsier as the Skeleton Dancer in *Carmen*, Santa Fe Opera, 2014.

was not quite enough time during the first try. In addition to working on speeding up the process, they had to make some tweaks to the look. Zimmerman's notes included instructions such as "making the live woman stronger—redder lips, bolder eye shadow," adjusting the position of the wig, and switching to a fuller, curlier style to help hide joins in the costume.

Zimmerman is always interested in exploring new methods and materials. He recalled a recent project when a tenor needed to look younger, but due to the modernized look of the production he just didn't look right in any wig. After sampling a number of products, he discovered hair coloring sticks at a small local wig shop that worked perfectly to color the singer's hair convincingly, but temporarily. Zimmerman is one of many artists drawn to his field because of the variety. "The thing about opera is that even though you are always going to do a *Bobème* and you are always going to do a *Figaro* and a *Tosca*, they are different productions, they are different people." He prefers to work in opera rather than theatre because of the varied schedule. "The same thing eight times a week is really difficult for me." He was working as an accountant but also singing in a choir when a chance favor changed his path. A fellow choir member asked him to help out backstage at the Dallas Opera with some body painting, and this led to further makeup work on other productions. While he had spent part of his college years as a vocal major, he had never explored any other aspects of production. His supervisor at the opera recognized both his interest and his talent and suggested he pursue some training. He became an apprentice at Santa Fe Opera and two years after, "not really knowing it could be a career," he began working in the Metropolitan Opera's wig and makeup department, supervised by Tom Watson.

ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER: Sarah Bahr

Sarah Bahr had not worked with Jara before, but she had experience working as a design assistant at the Guthrie Theatre and the Minnesota Opera. Bahr began college at the University of Minnesota Duluth planning to study fashion, but the theatre department drew her in. Directly after graduation she worked for several shops in New York making costumes. However, she switched over to studio art and only recently came back to theatre after a hiatus. "I did a lot of fiber art in New York and got away from designing theatre and really missed this collaborative art form," she said. The timeline for the design process for *Carmen* differed from other projects Bahr had worked on. Although by chance Bahr was able to meet Jara for a day in January and help with choosing fabrics, her contract was just for the summer. When she arrived in Santa Fe, the designs were set and the main clothing items decided. Jara put his assistant in charge of accessorizing. And for this opera with an aesthetic of eclectic mixes, accessorizing was a big job. She began by going through the Opera's stock, pulling out hats, belts, and jewelry. To fill out the collection, she also went on lots of shopping excursions. For the Santa Fe influence on the production's aesthetic, she said, "We went to the Tesuque market to purchase those details that make it a little Southwest, mixed with vintage. We bought a lot of jewelry and turquoise pendants that we made into bolo ties and cowboy

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hats and boots that are vintage and used so they look really great. And some woven scarves for the scene where they are smuggling people over the border. This way, it doesn't just feel like a generalized opera with scarves and stuff, it has some flair."

Bahr and Jara found their stride soon after the chorus fittings began. "We put a costume on and then started adding the accessories," she said. "My job was quickly finding a belt or earrings that would match, or not match, in a perfect way to create the look." Once Bahr picked up the aesthetic, she assembled the looks herself and the designer just weighed in on the finished product. This came in handy since they sometimes had chorus members simultaneously in all four of Santa Fe Opera's fitting rooms. An assistant designer needs to feel comfortable striking a balance between procuring the items requested and inserting her own suggestions. Bahr explained she had to "learn to trust your gut; this is what they are asking for but maybe this could work too." When Jara added a necklace for the Skeleton Dancer, Bahr felt she knew instinctively just what he would want. She picked out several necklaces from stock to combine into one, knowing the designer liked costume pieces to be customized. The crafts department did alterations to create a suitably dramatic choker in the exact width specified, complete with swags of beading and stones in the center.

In addition to accessorizing the production, Bahr coordinated the collaboration between departments who were juggling

five shows during the busy opera season. She kept up the communication between the draper, designer, millinery, crafts, and wig departments to be sure that everyone was updated on changes. After the mock-up fitting, she suggested the draper make the muslin wearable for rehearsal. The dancer needed to learn to move gracefully in half a dress, and they wanted to be sure that the blocking for the procession would work with the costume.

THE FITTING

A large group of people gathers in Santa Fe Opera's surprisingly small fitting room, each there to assess his or her part of the process. The mirrors on the two opposite sides reflect an endless chain of yellow dresses and black unitards, along with the draper Bineke Kiernan and the first hand Lynne Kesilis, who busily check the fit of the bodice and the hang of the skirt. Jorge Jara and the assistant designer Sarah Bahr discuss accessories. David Zimmerman pins the half-wig through the mesh of the hood into the dancer's pin curls below, while Joanna Koefoed marks the latex hood with pins at the ear and darts out some excess fullness. The head milliner Deborah Nash evaluates the drape and sweep of the mantilla. Wilberth Gonzales from the crafts department, who painted the skull on the latex, pops in to discuss the shading with the designer. Stitchers peek through the curtains, excited to see their handiwork on the performer. And skirting around all of it is the photographer Mitch Wilson,

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weaving gracefully out of the way while capturing it all.

As soon as Jara sees the costume on the dancer, he realizes that the black panel on the interior of the skirt is not going to work. While it does read as neutral, the skeleton leg disappears too much into it, and he is afraid it will not be visible on stage. He fetches a bolt of yellow fabric from the barrel in the shop, and Kiernan and Kesilis pin a make-shift panel in place. Next the designer turns his attention to the dancer's neck. He decides that a necklace would help to transition the join between head and dress. He and Bahr confer briefly about the shape and style he'd prefer. He also sends the assistant designer to pull a selection of fabric roses, so they can evaluate the full effect of the headpiece and the dress, complete with red accents at bosom and temple. None of the roses are quite the right shape, so they plan to refashion one to lie flatter to the dress. And, despite preliminary discussions with the crafts department about balancing out a high-heeled sandal on the living side with an elevated skeleton foot on the other, Jara decides the elegant gold sandals are fine as they are. The costume has a whole veil and a whole choker, so why not a whole pair of shoes?

In *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (2010), author Steven Johnson notes that “legendary innovators like Franklin, Snow, and Darwin all possess some common intellectual qualities—a certain quickness of mind, unbounded curiosity—but they also share one other defining attribute. They have a lot of hobbies.” While many of us become too busy to devote much time to hobbies, interviewing theatre artisans reveals a group of people who are interested in exploring diverse methods. Many started out in other fields, whether accounting, anthropology, or architecture. Most were drawn to theatre design and technology because of the group collaboration and the ever-changing set of circumstances. Creative curiosity comes so naturally to a group like this that they rarely stop to think of it as a special skill. Johnson also notes, “The trick to having good ideas is not to sit around in glorious isolation and try to think big thoughts. The trick is to get more parts on the table.” While it is hard to say definitively whether this type of mindset develops from work in a theatre shop, or whether the field draws those who like to work collaboratively and think on the fly, the value of a talented, creative, and above all, diverse team is indisputable. ❖

E. Shura Pollatsek worked as an assistant costume designer at the Metropolitan Opera and on Broadway. Costume design credits include the Pearl Theatre and Storm Theatre in New York and CityDance Ensemble at the Kennedy Center. She also designed several nationally broadcast PBS television programs. She is an associate professor of costume design and technology at Western Kentucky University. She and photographer Mitch Wilson are currently working on a book about creative collaboration in the costume shop.

Mitch Wilson, a National Press Photographer of the Year recipient, is known for his cinematography and still photography, and is a DGA director. He has been recognized with many awards including the Primetime Emmy, the duPont Columbia Award, the Peabody, and two International Documentary Association Awards. He began his career as a combat cameraman and underwater photographer in the U.S. Navy's elite Combat Camera Group.

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