Peter Farley

Yolanda Sonnabend

Making Her Mark

Yolanda Sonnabend, fine artist, theatre and film designer, died in November 2015 at the age of 80. In her obituary for the Guardian newspaper, the art historian, writer and curator, Nick Wadley wrote:

All her drawings for the stage demonstrate precocious gifts, a facility of touch and a palette of singing colours. This is paralleled in her career as portrait painter by a sensitive gift for likeness. Her striking depictions of MacMillan, Stephen Hawking and Patrick Wall hover in the memory from public collections, but perhaps the strongest are those – like the image of Steven Berkoff, 1983, in the National Portrait Gallery collection – in which likeness is edged by characterisation. She spoke entertainingly of her sitters – “dancers do exactly what you want … actors want to be like something … captains of industry always sit the same way, glancing sideways”. She contrasted design for ballet (“about the body in movement, no voice”) and for theatre (“all character, and about what a director wants to do”).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the catalogue for her 1975 retrospective exhibition at London’s Whitechapel Gallery she said of her theatre work,‘I’d like to show how a lapel or cuff can sum up a character.’[[2]](#footnote-2) This obsession to ‘get it right’ is masked by an exquisite delicacy of touch as can be seen in the images accompanying this article. When drawing costumes, she worked quickly and energetically sitting at a large Victorian partners’ desk crammed with inks, watercolours, pastels and any other mark-making pigment or tool available, in the upstairs front room of her house in Hamilton Terrace, London, where most of her theatre work took place. She often drew many versions of the same costume, very quickly, one after another, refining and defining the character as she went, using the act of drawing as a journey of thinking, reflection and exploration. Sometimes she offered the director or choreographer a selection to choose from. When designing settings, she worked in the scale model box as though she was composing a three-dimensional drawing, often collaging papers and textured surfaces that she had pre-prepared, working instinctively but always backed-up by fully-assimilated, precise and thorough research.

Faced with a blank sheet of watercolour paper she would often begin by making a ‘ground’ on which to draw. In the case of the drawing for *Rituals* (fig.1), a one-act ballet by Sir Kenneth Macmillan with music by Bartok and based on his trip to Japan, she used the collaged shape of a Japanese kimono as a base and proceeded to draw on top of it with pencil and coloured crayon. For the Bayadère design (fig.2), the basic shape of the dancer’s body was first laid down in pale, flesh-coloured watercolour paint before any other marks were made. When embarking on a series of character designs, she would often prepare twenty or more pieces of paper in this way and stack them in a pile ready to begin.

Set in India, with nineteenth century music by Minkus, La Bayadère, (The Temple Dancer) is a romantic narrative ballet originally choreographed by Petipa in 1897. In 1989, the renowned Russian ballerina, Natalia Makarova, decided to restage this ballet and commissioned Sonnabend to re-design the costumes. Sonnabend had plenty of experience of designing ballets of an unconventional kind but this was a ballet conceived in a very classical and traditional style and presented, for the second time in her career (the first being Swan Lake for the Royal Ballet in 1986) the challenge of working with classical tutus and more conventionally decorated ballet costumes – an enormous task with over a hundred costumes. Needless to say, after a period of intensive research, Sonnabend became an expert on the classical tutu in all its forms and even invented some of her own. Her drawings for La Bayadère show how she was able to assimilate and visually combine the notion of mythological India with Minka’s nineteenth century music and make it her own through her use of colour and carefully applied mark-making ending up with a completely believable and appropriate interpretation of time, place and music.

Writing in the catalogue for Sonnabend’s second retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1986, the eminent curator and art director, Bryan Robertson was struck by the amount of work that went into her designs.

Working for many weeks through the theatrical studies with Sonnabend, we selected material from virtually thousands of sheets. There are, in addition, always notebooks and details and coincidental studies – referring to wigs make-up, masks button holes and braces belts and shoes, for example – experiments with fabrics and synthetic substances, in addition to the definitive designs.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Her character drawings at first, though very beautiful, could seem impressionistic and rather vague and she was often faced with baffled costume makers wondering how on earth they should be interpreted. She was very clear on this point. She always said her drawings must be followed accurately “like a map”. Every mark and blob of colour must be precisely accounted for. This is where her drawings bestride the worlds of both fine art and theatre. Although she was very clear in her mind about the shape and style of the final costume she was depicting, she also made sure that interpreters took into account the actual physical quality of the drawing as well as the marks it contained. For example, if she used watercolour paints in the drawing then she expected the fabrics to be dyed or painted to give the impression of a watercolour. Moreover, the energy and quality of the lines in the actual drawing would often be included in the final costume using appliqué or fabric paint.

In the drawing of a rat for *The Nutcracker and the Hard Nut* (fig.3), Sonnabend’s use of a wide-nibbed pen, brush and Indian ink to make thick black quickly-drawn lines, somehow emphasises the energy and speed of the rat whilst imbuing it with a sense of hostility. In this production, which she and I co-designed for the Ballet du Rhin, Strasbourg in 1993, the story was transported to 1930s New York with gangster rats replacing the mice of the original story and New York cops instead of the toy soldiers. The music was a mixture of Tchaikovsky’s score and Duke Ellington’s jazz suite which was based on Tchaikovsky’s original. The choreography by Philiobolus emphasised the dark side of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s original narrative whilst retaining the inherent black humour and Sonnabend managed to capture the spirit and the sinister wit of the production in this drawing.

As she explained:

When designing I am less aware of seeing as a painter, though painting must have an effect on my work. Increasingly I have found myself drawn by the practical and structural problems of making sets and costumes. This engineering process is essential to the poetic. The discipline of the artist is demanding in that the artist has to submit to the vision of Mozart or Chekhov and the director’s concept. After the arduousness of solving a set, designing costumes follows fluently.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During costume fittings she was very much a hands-on designer, adjusting the materials directly on the performer’s body almost as though she was drawing or painting with fabric. This activity, which happened between the completed drawing on the page and the design’s final realisation on the body was, in Sonnabend’s case, a continuation of the act of drawing – making marks and arranging lines on, and in relation to, the physique of the performer– the final ‘drawing’ in three-dimensional space. The etymology of scenography is *skēnē-grafika* – two ancient Greek words meaning the drawing or writing of the stage space or scene. Developing this, I would suggest that the way in which Sonnabend extends her drawings beyond past the paper on which they are drawn and onto the body could be called *sôma-grafika*, drawing in three dimensions in relation to the particular space occupied by the body, – a blank figure waiting to be marked, extended or enhanced – *somography*.

Her designs both inspired and challenged most costume supervisors and makers - a laborious and meticulous process and she could be difficult and demanding in her desire to achieve her vision. Nevertheless, over the years she built up an extremely loyal following of highly skilled makers, painters, supervisors and assistants who enjoyed the challenge of interpreting her designs and she was very aware and appreciative of the creative abilities that these collaborators brought to the production. Her drawings, whether used as final designs for a production or not, are also prized and collected for their artistic merit and are held in many private and public collections and archives including those of the Royal Opera House, the Theatre Collection at Bristol University and The Victoria and Albert Museum

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1. Guardian Newspaper, 15 November 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yolanda Sonnabend, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Catalogue, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robertson, B (et al), Yolanda Sonnabend – Stage designs and Paintings, Serpentine Gallery Catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shouvaloff, A, *Theatre on Paper*, Southeby’s Publications - Philip Wilson Publishers, 1990, taken from Robertson, B (et al), *Yolanda Sonnabend – Stage designs and Paintings*, Serpentine Gallery Catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)