How do different designers respond to productions involving fantasy and dreams?

Translating a fantastical story or fairy-tale to the theatre stage may seem like an impossible task. It requires the theatre designer to build a world around a live performance using innovation, technology and creative skills. This exhibition explores how this was achieved through the work of three accomplished designers: Julia Trevelyan Oman, Yolanda Sonnabend and Ralph Adron.

This exhibition features images from each designer’s archive, held at the University of Bristol Theatre Collection. It will delve into the world of fantasy and see how each designer responded to the particular challenges that arose when creating these weird and wondrous scenes.

Ultimately, this exhibition provides a behind the scenes look into the creativity, craft and collaboration required to bring dreams to life.
Born in London, Trevelyan Oman trained at the Royal College of Art and graduated in 1955. She was a television, theatre, ballet and opera designer who worked on several notable productions including The Nutcracker, La Bohème and Othello.

Originally from Zimbabwe, Sonnabend settled in England in 1954 where she would go on to study at the Slade School of Fine Art. She primarily designed costumes and sets for ballets, working closely with chorographer Kenneth MacMillan for over thirty years. Sonnabend was also an accomplished portrait artist.

Adron first studied theatre design at Croydon College of Art but would later go on to study at the Slade. Adron designed sets and costumes for ballets, musical theatre and children's theatre. Throughout his career he also held several art teaching positions.
Ralph Adron designed *Lizzie Dripping and the Witch* and *The Blue Monster* for the Unicorn Theatre for Children, in London. The following section delves into Adron's enchanting set and costume designs for these productions.

*Lizzie Dripping and the Witch* was his first production for the company, and he still reflects on the joy he felt from its success. The projection slide designs illustrate the colourful world of Lizzie Dripping, while the use of watercolour particularly enhances the dreamlike state of the scenes.

*The Blue Monster* included lots of magic that required great technical consideration to make the transformations a reality on stage. The costume for the monster itself included many structural elements to create a more realistic movement across the stage.
A challenge for Ralph Adron and the director, Ursula Jones, of this stage adaptation of a television programme, was, firstly, that there were many short scenes requiring multiple, rapid scene changes. Secondly, the narrative of the play centres on the imagined thoughts and memories of the titular character.

The first issue was dealt with by a clever yet simple solution, with the set being devised like a book, so that with the set opened the audience saw a domestic scene and, when closed, the outside spaces were depicted. Scene changes could thus be made with no delay in the action.

On television, thoughts and dreams were easy to incorporate as simple cut scenes. In a stage production a way needed to be found to allow the audience to see the same thoughts, memories and daydreams. The solution was to use a screen that lowered onto the stage, which then allowed watercolour scenes depicting a map of the village alternating with imagined life to be projected onto it. The images that follow are some of the projection slides from the stage production.
'The children had no preconception of what theatre should be and just accepted it. I would receive wonderful drawings of the shows which demonstrated a practical awareness. If there was any trick (like an apple having to fall from a tree) the 'invisible' wire was sure to be drawn in. Every nail and screw was recorded, as were the lights.

I was thrilled by this.'

The Blue Monster is a play adapted by British playwright Ray Kift, and based on the 1764 play entitled Il Mostro Turchino by Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi.

The Creature is depicted in a costume of dirty, tattered fabric. Adron also illustrates some of the Creature’s physical characteristics, including long, pointed fingers. Adron further respects the Turkish location of the play though the addition of Zereh’s headscarf and waistcoat. These extra details serve to showcase these pieces as both designs and conceptual illustrations. Adron’s attention to historic detail, constructs the world of ‘oriental’ magic.

'The Blue Monster was set in a totally artificial world of make-believe orientalism.'
Costume design for *The Blue Monster*. The design also features a fine lined sketch of the skeletal composition of the monster, including an illustrated joint. This reflects the body of hoops that made up the monster, as Adron states in a 'concertina fashion'. These would allow the monster to expand and contract, to move across the stage more freely and naturally. The large structure made this a lot harder to achieve in reality.

*The Blue Monster* was full of ambitious transformations that were accomplished using traditional distraction techniques, such as flashing lights, noises and unexpected movements.
Yolanda Sonnabend’s nephew, Thomas Burstyn, described her home and studio as a ‘magical house of chaos’. In many ways the sheer quantity of painting materials, reference books and curios that Sonnabend chose to surround herself with play to a common myth of the slightly distracted and chaotic creative.

The items selected here are representative of the materials from Sonnabend’s studio; kept for reference, inspiration and sentimentality. They are often undated with the production unspecified. Yet within the seeming disorder there is detailed drafting, reworking and correspondence with colleagues.

Sonnabend pronounced, I 'like the fact of arranging rubbish to be coherent', which emphasises the logic and coherence that underpinned her processes. Her work as a theatrical portraitist showed her exceptional capability to look past surface presentation to reveal something deeper.

This begs the question: how much is the disorderly designer a fantasy?
Yolanda Sonnabend

Postcards
Ink on card
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
Emerging in Ancient Greece, masks were intended as a means of impersonation or tribute to deities. With the development of theatre design, they became an integral part of some productions; a final step in turning an actor into a character. In the case of Yolanda Sonnabend, they served as an inspiration and symbol of her creative process.

Sonnabend immersed herself in art and design in preparation for the creation of her many fantastical costumes and sets. She enjoyed being surrounded by various objects as her creative process featured an intense study of materials such as masks. We can see this influence in the images on the postcards she collected, which would have served to feed her imagination.
These drawings are taken from a set of nine that show the gradual build-up of ideas for a costume. The starting point is not a concept, but rather a dancer that will have to move in the costume. The design of the shoulders and arm decoration is modified over the drawings. Sonnabend talked about 'solving the practical and structural problems of producing sets and costumes.' This was radically different to her work as a portraitist. She also recognised that her creative role was made more demanding 'in that the artist has to submit to the vision of Mozart or Chekhov and the director's concept.' This production utilised Duke Ellington’s jazz reworking of Tchaikovsky’s score, reflected in the Art Deco-inspired costumes.

Four sketches for a costume: possibly *The Nutcracker*, 1993
Yolanda Sonnabend
Pencil on paper
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
These photographs show a different aspect of Sonnabend’s design repertoire. Where her repeated sketches were often worked on with rapidity, these miniature models show a slower way of working and precise engagement with fabrics, threads and embellishments.

Sonnabend insisted costume-makers should follow her designs exactly ‘as a map’. Placement and intensity of colour should be replicated in cutting and dyeing. According to her collaborator on The Nutcracker, Peter Farley, Sonnabend had a loyal following of makers who enjoyed the challenge of realising her designs. This could include having to create the back for a garment where only a front design was provided.

The positioning of fabric on these models was a technique she also practised on the performers themselves, which allowed her to consider the response of the fabric to a dynamic body.
These photographs, possibly taken by Sonnabend, are probably from the 2005 K Ballet production of \textit{The Nutcracker} in Tokyo.

K Ballet’s founder, Tetsuya Kumakawa had been a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet in London, performing in productions where Sonnabend had been the costume designer. Thus he had both an established working relationship with Sonnabend as well as confidence that her designs would deliver for a dancer on stage. Sonnabend designed for several of his productions.

Interestingly, photographs of both the original and revival productions of K Ballet’s \textit{The Nutcracker} are scarce. These two photographs are invaluable both as a record of the production and as the realisation of Sonnabend’s designs in this exhibition. They allow for a direct comparison between design and completed garment. That Sonnabend photographed them indicates that she was pleased with the completed costumes.

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Performers in costume backstage, \textit{The Nutcracker}, 2005  
Yolanda Sonnabend (possibly)  
Photographs  
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
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The Nutcracker is one of the world’s most beloved ballets. Originally choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov and featuring music composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, The Nutcracker was first performed in 1892. The plot of the two-act narrative was adapted from an 1816 story by E.T.A Hoffman, entitled The Nutcracker and the Mouse King.

Our chosen designers have been involved in multiple productions of The Nutcracker over the course of their careers; each of them has a distinct design style and visual aesthetic. We are interested in how each designer approaches the process of design, and how that process is visually translated.

Julia Trevelyan Oman’s process is more meticulous; her designs are intricate, detailed and clearly labelled. Her designs are also consistently realistic.

Ralph Adron’s designs appear significantly more whimsical, though some may see them as more chaotic. They are more abstract, less reliant on realism.

Yolanda Sonnabend’s designs are a clear representation of her desire to translate emotion. Sonnabend’s painterly background is apparent in all her designs.

Hear The Nutcracker suite, by Tchaikovsky, using this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mis0O8CZk90&t=137s
The Mouse King is the main villain in *The Nutcracker*, leading his army of mice in an attack against Clara, the main character, at the end of act one.

Trevelyan Oman's design is based on the uniform of a Polish Winged Hussar, a branch of the Polish-Lithuanian cavalry that strapped wings to their armour as a way of making themselves appear more intimidating to their enemies.

The design also features a beautifully detailed headpiece, consisting of a large mouse head and ornate crown, plus several smaller, similarly crowned mouse heads. The intricacy of the illustration is a clear example of Trevelyan Oman's keen eye for detail. The design also features some subtle colouring.
Costume design for a Mouse, 1984
Julia Trevelyan Oman
Pencil and ink on tracing paper
JTO/58/36/51
'There was no attempt to create real-looking rats, although they did have tails and whiskers. In the final act the rats got dressed up for the gala in bits of newspaper, rags, flowers and leaves and carried enormous spoons, scissors and over-large flowers.'

Shoe Buggy Prop Design for The Nutcracker, 1966
Ralph Adron
Pencil and marker on paper with fabric swatches
TC/D/C/432
The mice in *The Nutcracker* have been portrayed in many different ways. Some costumes, including those worn in the first production, are simple and distinctly mouse-like. Other designers have gone for a more military aesthetic, while others have leaned towards a more sinister, skeletal figure. In these designs, Sonnabend has chosen a very different style: a 1920s gangster, or in other words, a mob rat. Hear the unique jazz-inspired interpretation of Tchaikovsky's original suite for this production with the link below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONknTGUckKc&list=PLEE9A9CF50F4E1576&index=4

Costume design for a mouse, 1993
Yolanda Sonnabend
Ink on card
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
Why so many heads?
This multi-headed mouse template comes from E.T.A Hoffmann's original story, in which the Mouse King has seven equally sized crowned heads.

Sonnabend said that design should be an 'expression of emotion', and that sense of emotion is evident in these designs. Contrary to Trevelyan Oman's designs, which feature more realistic detail, Sonnabend's designs are notably expressive – her painterly background shines through. Her hand can be clearly seen in the sweeping whiskers and piercing eyes.
Costume designs for two mice, 1993
Yolanda Sonnabend
Ink on card
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive
(uncatalogued)
Costume design for a mouse and remote-controlled mouse, 2005
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
Photographs of finished costumes for *The Nutcracker*, 2005. From the Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
Designing for *The Nutcracker* was a dream come true for Trevelyan Oman who had long been dismayed by other productions’ constant childlike portrayal of what was originally a dark folk tale.

Instead, Trevelyan Oman drew her inspiration from the early 19th century Biedermeier period in Germany which gives her designs a historic feel. This is seen in this design for the Sugar Plum Fairy which, through its simplicity, muted colour accents and a lack of excessive ornamentation depicts a more mature and refined Sugar Plum Fairy character.

First staged in 1984, Oman’s designs are still revived on an almost yearly basis at the Royal Opera House. However, the first production received some criticism for the design’s apparent dullness, and the failure of the costumes to stand out against the similarly coloured set design. One critic wrote, ‘Oman’s designs are cluttered and dowdy. She has turned the ballet’s poetry into very plodding prose’.

See this design come to life on stage in 2017 with the link below: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV1qLYukTH8
Here we have one of Adron’s initial, roughly sketched designs for the Sugar Plum Fairy.

This sketch provides an insight into Adron’s sense of humour. He has drawn, and subsequently crossed out, a speech bubble coming from the mouth of one of his models with the phrase ‘I hate tutus’, perhaps an expression of Adron’s own frustration with designing conventional tutus, notoriously difficult garments to construct.
Adron's initial concept becomes fully realised in this second image as a highly ornate costume emerges. Adron uses paint to give the impression of the different fabrics, creating tulle for the skirt through short quick brushstrokes in varying shades of pink and white. We also see lace trim running along the top of the bodice created using a fine tipped brush. There is reference to the physical costume in the fabric swatch pinned to the top of the design, reminding us that these artistic drawings go on to become fully realised garments.
As the Yolanda Sonnabend Archive is currently uncatalogued, it is difficult to ascertain which, if any, of these designs are for the Sugar Plum Fairy. Here are a few of the most likely designs.
Costume Designs for *The Nutcracker*, 2005
Yolanda Sonnabend
Mixed media on paper
Yolanda Sonnabend Archive (uncatalogued)
Curated by University of Bristol MA History of Art Class of 2020:
Rebecca Corcoran
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Annie Lilygreen
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Quote Sources:

• *Some Kind of Love*, dir. by Thomas Burstyn (Union Pictures, 2015), online film recording, Vimeo.

All images from the University of Bristol Theatre Collection.