Peter Farmer, ballet set designer – obituary

Peter Farmer

PETER FARMER, who died on New Year's Day aged 80, was perhaps the world's most popular designer of classical ballet.

A master of floriferous fairytale settings, he created dozens of designs for The Sleeping Beauty, Giselle and The Nutcracker for most of the world's leading companies. He was also a significant designer of experimental British contemporary dance in its formative years.

Farmer always robustly took the audience's side. He would disguise bad legs

in romantic skirts, rather than exposing them in tutus, and took a dim view of political correctness in contemporary dance. In a 2008 interview he told The Daily Telegraph: "During my London Contemporary Dance Theatre time the girls wouldn't even wear make-up and had big bottoms. They said it was all about expression of the soul and all that. Well, of course it did matter."

Tall and immensely genial, with thick white dishevelled hair and casual, often paint-spattered, clothes, Farmer resembled an eternal art student. His Sunday afternoon tea parties were renowned.

He was one of an outstandingly talented and influential generation of designers such as Nicholas Georgiadis, Yolanda Sonnabend and Philip Prowse. All of them were painters as well as theatrical designers, and their scenic confidence contributed significantly to the rapid international recognition of new British choreography.

Farmer's signature look in classical ballets, with romantic gauzes and illusory veils, was sometimes criticised as saccharine but it had worldwide appeal. When in 2008 he went to Moscow to design the Bolshoi Ballet's new production of La Sylphide, he claimed all too believably that he had made the sylphides' floaty white dresses out of air.

Aided by his preternaturally youthful looks, for years Farmer got away with lying about his age, as he later gleefully admitted. Though most records put his birth in 1941, he was born on November 3 1936, the younger son of

Phyllis and Kenneth Farmer, one of Luton's many straw-hat makers.

Farmer's designs for the Royal Ballet's Sleeping Beauty Credit: Bill Cooper

He made his first dance designs in 1964 for Jack Carter's murder drama Agrionia. He was soon commissioned by London Festival Ballet and Ballet Rambert. At the experimental new London Contemporary Dance Theatre, he designed some key creations by its longtime director, Robert Cohan, such as the spectacular Stages (1971), a myth about gods and monsters dressed in disco-style costumes ("whammy", commented the critic Richard Buckle).

He created eye-catchingly skimpy designs for the male dancers in Robert North's parodically macho 1974 Troy Game – briefs, leg-warmers and wristlets – that much contributed to the work's international success.

By contrast, he was also showing natural flair in the art of beautifying ballerinas. His first ballet designs in 1965 and 1966, for separate Giselle productions at Ballet Rambert and Stuttgart Ballet, showed him to be intuitively romantic, and launched a 50-year collaboration with Sir Peter Wright, director of Sadler's Wells (later Birmingham Royal) Ballet.

The Sleeping Beauty designed by Farmer Credit: Bill Cooper

Wright's luscious productions of classics for the Royal Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet, mainly designed by Farmer, caught world attention and the duo were besieged with requests.

Though Farmer told the Telegraph that he "dreaded" doing a Sleeping Beauty, he designed more than 10 versions, as well as at least a dozen Giselles and many Swan Lakes. He preferred The Nutcracker – shorter, and with more playful scene-setting possibilities, such as his Victorian ice-skating scene in English National Ballet's 2010 production.

At the Birmingham Royal Ballet he created a richly floral Bavaria for Coppélia and an exotic India for La Bayadère, and costumed Ashton and Balanchine neoclassical one-acters. He also designed Derek Deane's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Matthew Hart's debut, Street. For the Australian Ballet he rustled up romantic Russia for a new Anna Karenina, Japan for Madame Butterfly, and France for The Three Musketeers.

A significant new Royal Ballet work for which Farmer designed the setting was MacMillan's Chekhovian Winter Dreams (1991), starring Darcey Bussell in untypically modest long black, but he returned to his characteristic opulence when redesigning MacMillan's Covent Garden blockbuster Manon for its later stagings at the Mariinsky and Australian Ballets.

In the 2000s he was entrusted with new settings for Royal Ballet history, including Ashton's goddess romp Sylvia, Homage to the Queen, and the 50th anniversary production of The Sleeping Beauty based around Oliver Messel's regal 1946 designs.

Peter Farmer had a ferocious work ethic – during the 1970s he also illustrated children's books such as Alexandre Dumas's When Pierrot was Young, and designed for theatre, including Alan Badel's celebrated Kean, Edith Evans and Friends, and Sian Phillips' A Woman of No Importance at Chichester. He also had many one-man exhibitions. One of his paintings was stolen from a 1983 show in the South Bank Centre. Seeing blood stains on the frame from which it had been torn, he was touched by the thief's desperation.

In 2010 in Moscow Farmer was awarded the Prix Benois de la Danse for Lifetime Achievement, the first designer to win the honour. After retiring to

Littlehampton he suffered the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

He was unmarried.

Peter Farmer, born November 3 1936, died January 1 2017

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