

Et Tu, Tutu?

Having a ball with gender bending

Here we are at that crazy time of year when hordes of consumer-maniacs clog the roads and malls and their arteries in the name of the Prince of Peace. Otherwise sane people act as if they can afford to compound their already mounting debt, splurge on expensive gifts and buy tickets to *The Nutcracker*.



You won't find me in the holiday ballet crowd, and not just because my budget is limited or because I don't do red and green. I have to stay away for other reasons, reasons having to do with tutus and tights and my family of origin.

When I was a kid, my parents competed in an annual costume contest. They rarely left my brother and me with a babysitter and not just because of that time we locked her out and nearly burned down the house. But once a year they hired our teenaged next-door neighbor – whom, I have to imagine, they paid very well – so they could dress up and go out. I mean really dress up and go all out.

For the downtown holiday masquerade party, our normally normal, unflashy parents camped it up big time. They say they were just in it for the cash prize, but it was more than that. Those two did themselves up in High Drag decades before anyone had even heard of RuPaul.

Mom and Dad, both more than 6 feet tall, were a striking and somewhat serious couple, but they surrendered all dignity on their dress-up night. My brother and I would tear our TV-addict selves away from the Mouseketeers to sit on our parents' bed and watch the magical transformation. Our workaday mother and father would help each other into their costumes and inevitably succumb to the giggles, especially if the costume involved getting Dad into a pair of tights, which it almost always did. No TV program could top our folks cracking each other up till they cried.

Who can forget the year they cross-dressed as Raggedy Ann and Andy? Products of the Great Depression, our parents were very innovative, making do with whatever we had on hand. They striped their red tights with masking tape for candy-cane stockings and painted eyelashes and smiles on their faces with my watercolors. Mom strutted her stuff in homemade button-waisted blue pants while Dad minced around in his white-aproned frock. I doubt they were intentionally advocating freedom of gender expression, but I got the message that it was not merely OK, but way FUN, to step outside the norm.

Their pièce de résistance was the wigs.

Mom had Rit-dyed two cotton mop heads until the strands turned good and red. Not only did Raggedy Ann and Andy win Best Costume that year, but those wigs topped off their ballerina outfits the next year, too.

That was the all-time best. My big, tall, usually serious parents decked out in pink tights and leotards topped off with bright red mop hair and acting like total goof-balls – you can't beat a show like that.

Mom and Dad kissed us kids goodbye and wished the babysitter luck. They struck a pose in the doorway so I could snap their picture with my Brownie camera. Dad dipped into a demi-plié holding the edges of his stiff, pink, froufy tutu while Mom raised her arms high in a gallant fifth position. She wore more or less the same outfit as Dad, but, instead of a tutu, had wedged a couple pairs of Dad's socks down the front of her tights. Who knew from codpieces?

My parents' delight in flouting strictly enforced gender stereotypes had a profound effect on me, resulting in both my advocacy for gender expression self-determination and an utter inability to watch ballet with a straight face. My cultural growth was stunted, never to appreciate Nureyev or Baryshnikov. I definitely can't watch the Nutcracker Prince's number without cracking up – you know that guy has somebody's socks in there.

Award-winning writer Sally Sheklow stays away from the ballet in Eugene.

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