

By Rebecca Howden

Richard Nylon has always been fascinated by feathers. "Birds are the closest thing to dinosaurs that we have," he says. "So the idea is that feathers are modified scales. They're made of protein like our hair and our fingernails, and they're really wonderful to work with."

Recognised as one of Australia's most talented and innovative milliners, Nylon's extraordinary creations blur the lines

RICHARD NYLON

SPREADS HIS WINGS WITH AVIARY - A SUITE FOR THE BIRD

between fashion and art. Playing with both vintage and cutting-edge styles, he uses a variety of materials to create headpieces that make a real statement - but feathers always seem to bring something special to the piece.

"They're so lightweight and dramatic and beautiful," Nylon says. "From a distance they're lovely, and up close they're amazing as well. I appreciate them as wonderful objects."

Elegant, witty, and guaranteed to capture attention, Nylon's headpieces are coveted amongst fashionistas for the Spring Racing Carnival, and some of his more extravagant one-off creations are on display in the permanent collections of cultural institutions like the National Gallery of Victoria.

Now, his iconic headpieces are taking centre stage in *Aviary*, a ballet performance unlike any other soon to premier during the Melbourne Festival 2011. Developed by BalletLab in association with The Australian Ballet, *Aviary* is a flamboyant explosion of dance, music, costumes and light.

Starting with the inspiration of French composer Olivier Messiaen's celebration of birdsong in the 1958 *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, *Aviary* takes the idea of the caged bird and infuses it with dazzling new layers of meaning.

"It's a world of myriad of ideas all smashed together," Nylon says. "It's about dandies, men's dressing, loyalty, 80s nightclubs. It all finds expression through the dance medium, and the costumes that have been designed,

and the headpieces and the lighting. It's a complete conception when the show actually goes on."

Aviary is the vision of BalletLab artistic director Phillip Adams, brought to life with the help of some of Australia's most extraordinary creatives. With costumes by Toni Maticovski, lighting design by Benjamin Cisterne, sound and music by David Franzke, and contributions from many other prominent artists, the evolution of *Aviary* has been a vibrant and explosively creative process.

Fusing the ideas and talents of so many brilliant minds was something like creating "a layer cake", as Nylon describes it. "It was all about putting together ingredients," he says. "It was an evolving artistic process. It's not a ballet that's designed first up and stays the same - it's something that actually evolves."

The result is something that needs to be seen to be comprehended. "It's hard to describe what it's actually like!" Nylon says. "It's theatre, it's dance, its passion, it's nightclubs - it's all these things."

The show is made up of three acts, each exploring a different aspect of the theme of the caged- or uncaged- bird. The opening act takes inspiration from the world of birds themselves and how they behave in nature, including how they grow and display and take pride in their feathers. "The headpieces in this act are all very symmetrical, all in black and white and silver," Nylon says. "It's more classic-looking, where the other acts are a bit mad."

This madness starts to emerge in the second act, which centres on the figure of the English dandy. "At the moment there's this great trend in fashion of young men wearing beards and moustaches and doing all sorts of interesting things with them," Nylon notes. In response, he has created beards, moustaches and eyebrows all made out of feathers to bring out the delightfully whimsical, flamboyant feel of the performance.

The third act is inspired by the tribes of Papua New Guinea - something else that fascinates Nylon. "Papua New Guinea tribesmen wear these incredible headpieces made of feathers," he explains. "The Act 3 headpieces are based on what these tribesmen might wear, so they're truly extravagant. All the feathers are natural colours - I haven't dyed any of them, they're just as how they're found in nature, and they're quite extraordinary."

After about three years of working on *Aviary*, seeing it all come together as a complete performance is somewhat surreal.

"It's going to be extraordinary. It's just been so long in the making," Nylon says. "It is a show, it's not one of those modern dance pieces where everyone just wears coloured lycra and sways around a bit. This is a thing. I much appreciate the fact that I've been able to be involved in it."

With the Spring Racing Carnival around the corner, there's not much downtime for Nylon - but that's the way he likes it.

"I'm a bit of a hermit in a way," he says. "I like to be in my studio and I like to work, and if nobody came and poked me with a stick and said, 'Hey, would you like to do this?' I'd probably be quite happy just mucking around in my studio."



"I make things for my own pleasure, and if someone else likes it it's a bonus, and if I get paid for it even better. I just really love just making things, it just brings me so much fun."

Phillip Adams' BalletLab and Melbourne Festival present the World Premiere

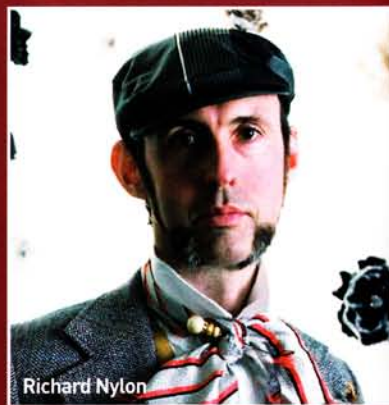
AVIARY - A Suite for the Bird

Part 1: The Cage / Part 2: The Dandy / Part 3: The Nest

When: Wed 19 - Sat 22 October 2011 at 8pm
Sat 22 & Sun 23 October 2011 at 3pm

Where: Arts House - North Melbourne Town Hall

Bookings: www.melbournefestival.com.au
or Ticketmaster 1300 723 038



Richard Nylon