

Reid Bartelme talks about his new career in costume design

The former Lar Lubovitch dancer Reid Bartelme talks about his transition into costume design

By **Gia Kourlas** Mon Nov 12 201



Reid Bartelme costumes *Photo courtesy of Liz Liz Santoro*

Reid Bartelme talks about this decision to trade dancing for designing. His latest venture into costume design is for [Lar Lubovitch](#)'s latest work based on a [Picasso](#) painting. Reid Bartelme, who studied at the [Fashion Institute of Technology](#), has danced for Lar Lubovitch, BalletMet and Shen Wei Dance Arts and has designed costumes for Jack Ferver and [Liz Santoro](#).

In *We Do Our Best*, Liz Santoro's crystalline exploration of structure, three women did little more than walk within Danspace Project's vast sanctuary space. Just as enchanting were the exquisitely cut skirts that they wore. The designer? Reid Bartelme, a dancer who trained at the Fashion Institute of Technology and is now establishing his voice as a costume designer in dance. Raised in Soho, Bartelme spent time at BalletMet and Alberta Ballet, before returning to New York to perform with

choreographers including Shen Wei, Douglas Dunn, Jack Ferver and Lar Lubovitch. His latest foray into costume design involves the latter: Lubovitch's newest work, which will be performed at Florence Gould Hall this week, takes inspiration from Picasso's 1905 painting *Family of Saltimbanques*. Recently, Bartelme spoke about his transition from dance to design.

Time Out New York: How did you discover dance?

Reid Bartelme: I grew up in Soho, and I was a music kid. I went away to boarding school when I was nine to study music; then, I went to Interlochen Arts Academy, which is in Michigan. I was a voice major there, and it was the first place I really saw dance. I was immediately drawn to it, and I started taking a class called General Dance. That was the class I had with Jack Ferver. In the middle of my junior year, I decided that I wanted to take real dance classes to become properly educated, so I became a double major in dance and music. I chose to go to SUNY Purchase for college because I could dance there, and I had a voice teacher who I would meet with in the city on the weekends. I was keeping my options open in case I ended up hating dance. But shortly into my time at Purchase College, I realized that I wanted to make a career of dance. At Purchase, they were pushing me in a ballet direction, and I decided that staying there wasn't my best bet if I wanted to be a ballet dancer. I ended up going to be a trainee at the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. I was there for a couple of years and got to dance with the company, which was a great opportunity—and to just see how company life works. Then, I got a corps de ballet contract at BalletMet in Columbus, Ohio.

Time Out New York: I'm from Columbus, and I grew up seeing that company. Who was the director?

Reid Bartelme: David Nixon hired me, and he had come from National Ballet of Canada. Then really shortly into that time, Gerard Charles took over the company; I worked there for three years, and it was great for me actually because David Nixon's wife, Yoko Ichino, was in charge of the training, and it was the first time I was forced to understand my body and to really recognize my skeleton in a way; I was being taught to dance correctly, from a more holistic place. So it was a blessing that I danced there: I think it saved my body. After three years at BalletMet, I moved to Calgary to dance with the Alberta Ballet. I guess I was 23. It was very good because I had so much opportunity to dance and the director really trusted me; at BalletMet, I still sort of felt like a student.

Time Out New York: Going back to PNB, were you at the actual school?

Reid Bartelme: I was in a program that they call professional division: It is still a part of the school, but they bring in students from all over the country who are just about done or done with high school and are about to get a job. They use you to supplement the corps de ballet in the company—you do *Nutcracker* and all the big ballets, but you have class as a group, and then in the second half of each school year, they bring in directors from all over the country to look at the class to get everybody jobs. They do their best to get everybody a job in a company. That's how I got my job at BalletMet. David Nixon came and watched class.

Time Out New York: How long were you in Calgary, and what was the rep like?

Reid Bartelme: I was there for three years. We did a lot of the director's ballets—his name is Jean Grand-Maître, and then in my second and third years there we did Balanchine rep, which was good. We did *Divertimento No. 15*, *Rubies*, *Who Cares?* and *Serenade*. It felt very familiar for me coming from a Balanchine school. We also performed dances from some other Canadian choreographers. The rep wasn't great, but I danced a lot. And it was a very young company, so all of a sudden I went from being one of the baby dancers at BalletMet to being one of the more mature dancers overnight.

Time Out New York: You must have started ballet late. How old were you?

Reid Bartelme: I was 16 when I really started. I was lucky just physically. My joints were sort of tailor-made for it, but it just took me some time to figure out coordination stuff. And I was always a good partner for some reason, so that really helped me in my career.

Time Out New York: What happened after Calgary?

Reid Bartelme: I knew I wanted to move back to New York, and I kind of realized I was done being in a ballet company. I knew I loved ballet, but I loved watching great ballet more than I loved the pressure of doing ballet, so I decided to move back to New York to figure it out. In years past, I had taken a lot of classes at the Cunningham school, and thought, Well, I'll go back to class at Cunningham and try to get into the company. That whole plan got derailed because an opportunity came up with Shen Wei. I knew some dancers there, and while I was still in Canada, they called and said, "We're looking for a tall man, and we hear you're moving back to New York, so if you're interested in auditioning for Shen Wei, there's an opportunity." I auditioned, and Shen Wei invited me to join the company on a trial basis. I stayed for two years and the whole Cunningham idea went out the window. But also, before I left Calgary, I made a backup plan, which was that if I don't get into the Shen Wei company, I should have something to do immediately after just to have some income, so I got a job with the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. I had to turn down the contract when the Shen Wei thing worked out.

Time Out New York: That's too bad—it would have been neat.

Reid Bartelme: It would have been—but taking Suzanne's class to audition for the company was kind of terrifying, so I was a little bit relieved that I didn't have to do that. It was literally the hardest ballet class I've ever taken. I couldn't even mentally wrap my mind around the exercises she was giving. They were so complicated. I'm sure it's very good for your brain-body connection, but I was not ready for it. [*Laughs*]

Time Out New York: So you danced with Shen Wei for a couple of years. You also did freelance work, right?

Reid Bartelme: I did. I did Douglas Dunn's revival of *Pulcinella*. I did *The Golden Legend* with Christopher Williams, and I did some work for Kyle Abraham with his company. I did a lot of stuff for Jack Ferver. We rediscovered each other as adults. We were at a photo shoot that Jonah Bokaer had put together for the New York dance community; I saw Jack, and he almost walked right past because he didn't recognize me. From then on, he became interested and asked me to be in *I Am Trying to Hear Myself*. I had no idea what Jack's work was like, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into—I just knew that I liked him from high school and that I would be peeing my pants and hysterical during rehearsals with him. His text was so funny. From then on, I was happy to do anything for him. I danced for Catherine Miller. It was really good for me to dance for other people while I was still dancing for Shen Wei, because it's hard to feel like you have anything personal to say when you work for him. You have to really be a part of the group in that company. And to be anonymous in a way. Everybody gets painted white so you blend together.

Time Out New York: In the work, it's as if you're all objects in a way.

Reid Bartelme: Yeah, it is a lot like that. For me, it was very empowering to work with other people and feel like they thought I had a personality as a dancer. I was coming from the ballet world into very much the modern dance world of New York—not even the *classical* modern dance world, I felt there was this idea of me as a dancer: I'm the very technical ballet dancer-modern dancer. [*Laughs*] I felt like I was in an important position—a connector between these two worlds of dance that are sometimes so disconnected. I feel like ballet dancers don't know what's going on in the modern dance world, and what they think is the modern dance world is Alvin Ailey or Paul Taylor. And also, people in the New York modern dance community don't get what's happening in the ballet world. I became friends with David Hallberg several years ago. He was interested in seeing what was happening in the rest of the world of dance, and I was a good conduit for him because I was involved with these people and knew a little bit about what was going on. I could bring him with me and consequently, it's given me the opportunity to introduce him to all those people, and now he's trying to involve himself a little more in the world of downtown dance in New York. It's good.

Time Out New York: I know what you mean about the two worlds being disconnected: It's frustrating.

Reid Bartelme: And I really love both. I love the New York City Ballet, and I love so many people in other worlds of dance, and it's the middle ground where I lose interest.

Time Out New York: I can relate. How did you end up joining the Lubovitch company?

Reid Bartelme: I had been dancing for Shen Wei for about a year and a half, and I heard there was going to be an audition for Lar Lubovitch. But you have to be invited; I didn't really know anybody to invite me, so I contacted the company manager and said, "If you have auditions in the future I'd love to be invited. She got in touch with me, and I went to this audition with men from all different walks of dance life in New York. Lar, after a series of three days, wanted to offer me the job, but I still had coming work with Shen Wei and he was like, "I don't want to cause a problem with you and Shen Wei, and I don't want to disrupt whatever you're doing with him, but if you have time in the future I'd love for you to let me know." I went back to Shen Wei, and right away into the process of what we were working on, I thought, I really don't want to be here. I gave my notice, and they asked me to continue touring for eight months. I called Lar and he said, "That's great—we're going to start a new project in April, and we'd love to have you then." The timing really worked out, because that was when I would finish with Shen Wei. In the meantime, I got this idea to apply to design school. In the time that I was finishing up with Shen Wei, I applied to FIT and I got in. After my first summer of working for Lar, I began school. Lar was really accommodating for me in terms of school, so I could be in school and work for him, and if we happened to be on tour, he would sometimes allow me to leave for a couple of days and then I would go back again. Pretty much the entire time I worked for Lar Lubovitch, which was three years, I was completing my fashion design program at FIT.

Time Out New York: What is your history with sewing and design? Were you educated?

Reid Bartelme: No. I didn't really know that I was so interested in it until I was having this kind of crisis with my dance identity—feeling like I didn't necessarily want to be a performer. I could watch other dancers onstage and really felt like they were having some cathartic experience, and I rarely felt that. So I thought, What am I supposed to do? I did that book called *The Artist's Way*—Julia Cameron's instructional guide to finding efficiency as an artist. It got me writing down all this stuff that I was interested in, and I thought, Wow, I should apply to design school. I was also a really accomplished Halloween costume maker. That was essentially the bulk of my portfolio material for my FIT application. I showed them all these photographs of Halloween costumes.

Time Out New York: Like what?

Reid Bartelme: One year, I had been a giant orchid. Another year, I had been a firefly, and another year I had been a photo strip, like the kind you take in a photo booth. I'd been a jellyfish. That's what got me in, because my drawings weren't especially great; when they looked at the photographs, they were like, "Oh my God—where did you ever find the time to do stuff like this?" And the truth is I found the time being in ballet companies in the middle of nowhere. As soon as I started school at FIT, I felt like I had really found the thing that could take me into the next phase of my life and give me more time, because as a dancer I had this limited amount of time. I didn't have to be physically capable to do fashion design.

Time Out New York: When did you start designing costumes for dance?

Reid Bartelme: The very first thing I did were these little jumpsuits for Jack Ferver and Liz Santoro for *A Movie Star Needs a Movie*. Thinking back on how I made those costumes, I had no idea what I was doing. I was in my first semester at FIT, so I had a very remedial knowledge of clothing construction. And thank God I was friends with them because they basically let me make them on their bodies. I was really happy with the result. I think they served that piece well. After that, I didn't do anything until Matt Prescott, who was making a dance for Ballet X in Philadelphia, asked, "Do you want to make eight costumes for this dance I'm making?" I didn't really know what I was

getting myself into; I ended up recruiting help from some other designer friends who helped me with the construction. I didn't love how those costumes turned out, but I was really proud to have produced a set of costumes that functioned for a ballet company. It was after that that I realized I could accept work from people when they needed it. And that was the beginning for me. I did a piece for Jennie MaryTai Liu, *Lands and Peoples*. It was, again, a very positive experience with a choreographer.

Time Out New York: Is it because you know how to make clothes that people can dance in?

Reid Bartelme: Well, I had an idea because I'd worn a lot of clothes as a dancer. And there are still many pieces of clothing that I don't know how to make for a dancer, but I learn as I go. A couple of days ago, I spent some time at the costume shop at the Royal Swedish Ballet with the woman in charge of the men's costumes, and she was showing me how they construct tunics and shirts for men, which was really interesting. As much as I wore them, at that time I wasn't as attuned to the construction of what I was wearing. I would just sort of put it on and be like, Whatever. Now it's so fascinating; I can put something on a dancer and think, Oh, it's so cute—and then they move and I'm like, Oh *no*. Because they can't lift their arm or the neckline buckles.

Time Out New York: What are you doing in Sweden?

Reid Bartelme: I have been working as the rehearsal director for Pontus Lidberg. I am his choreographic assistant, so I tour with him and watch shows and give corrections. I will be working with Pontus in the future as a designer, for a piece he's making on Oregon Ballet Theatre and for a piece he's making in Dresden, and I will probably assist him in a dance capacity on his next creation. I'm the two-in-one helper for Pontus Lidberg. [*Laughs*]

Time Out New York: What is the story behind your new costumes for Lar Lubovitch?

Reid Bartelme: Lar was inspired by a painting that Picasso did early in his career called *Family of Saltimbanques*. It's of a group of circus performers standing in a very desolate-looking place; each one is very different. One is a harlequin; one looks like an acrobat or a tightrope walker; one looks like a clown. So they all have these specific characters, but they all look very casual at the same time. They're in a very nonperformative state, and everything looks sort of dirty and washed out. The painting has six characters, and the dance has six characters. We've taken each look and abstracted them somewhat so that they're not identical, but reflective of the painting. And certainly the palette—the colors are so beautiful, so I've done my best to find fabrics to indicate what Picasso was trying to do.

Time Out New York: Did you mind having something so direct as your inspiration?

Reid Bartelme: It really depends. I was really excited by this project because I thought the painting was so beautiful, and it's given me the opportunity to make clothes that aren't dance clothes. I mean, they will function as dance clothes, but I'm really not super interested in making leotards and tights and unitards. I'm actually much more interested in clothes that people wear. There is a whole school of clothes specifically designed for dance and that doesn't often inspire me. I do like real clothes. I loved the work I got to do for Liz Santoro for her [*We Do Our Best*] at Danspace Project. It was so nice to get to make clothes that people were going to walk around in.

Time Out New York: I loved that too. What was the background of those costumes?

Reid Bartelme: Liz is so clear about what she wants, so from the very beginning of talking about that piece, I remember her describing the feeling of what she wanted, and I drew these three women and they all had this silhouette: a classic pencil skirt—suit secretary look. Liz likes to fabric shop with me and can spend hours and hours trying to make decisions in a fabric store, but eventually I was able to direct her toward fabrics that I was really excited about. I was so happy that she wanted to explore this bold palette, and so the first things that were made were the red-and-white skirt, which looks sort of pink, and the green skirt. Eventually, I made the blue skirt. Because I was making the skirts for very specific bodies, I could make them fit perfectly. The tops are sourced, so they have

some room in their blouses, but the skirts I knew they just had to be right, and I was able to tailor them exactly to the women, which worked out really beautifully. I made sure that they had enough of a kick pleat or a slit so they could actually walk.

Time Out New York: Whom do you admire in terms of design in dance or in fashion?

Reid Bartelme: When I first started, I thought, What are the dance costumes that have been the most influential? My mind immediately went to *Serenade* and then to *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude* by William Forsythe—those saucer tutus. A lot of Isaac Mizrahi's costumes for Mark Morris and other people have been really good. He's a color genius. I love so much of what Karinska did for George Balanchine. But I'm much more inspired and influenced by fashion designers. A big moment happened a couple of years ago when Raf Simons did that spring-summer collection for Jil Sander; it had all these amazing colors and beautiful shapes and skirts with T-shirts. It made me feel like what I loved was relevant. I'd been thinking: What is my point of view? What do I want to say as a designer? While I was at FIT, there was a push to design *design*, and everybody was designing all of this really involved, complicated stuff that I didn't relate to. That Raf Simons collection made me feel like you really can do something new and totally modern, but it doesn't have to be complicated. It made me confident in simplicity and the power of minimalism.

Time Out New York: Do you design clothes for nondance or nontheater as well?

Reid Bartelme: I have, yes. It's been much less. I've had quite a lot of work now in dance, but I have had a couple of opportunities to make proper clothing for people, and it is definitely the direction I want to move it. I would like to make real clothes for real people. When I have time and feel more settled in what I'm doing—I have all these amazing people to dress. I feel really excited about that.

Time Out New York: Have you stopped dancing completely?

Reid Bartelme: Kind of. I do stuff for Jack Ferver when he asks me. I did some dances for Burr Johnson this summer. I think my career in dance-company life is over. [*Laughs*] But you never know.

Time Out New York: Why do you want to design real clothes for real people as opposed to the stage?

Reid Bartelme: I love the idea that design for dance and theater gives you an opportunity to really create a fantasy and to do something which maybe isn't for real life. But I love real clothes that can be worn everyday or worn to an event. I love making clothes that sit beautifully on the body and are comfortable and spacious. The thing I hate the most in making dance costumes is when the choreographer or the dancer says to me, "But you can't see the body." I realized that as a dance designer you should be okay with that. You should really want to see the dancer's body, but I want to see the clothes.

Time Out New York: What do you think has worked in the contemporary dance world?

Reid Bartelme: I liked the shorts and shirts that the dancers wore in DD Dorvillier's piece. Last year I made a dress for an Andrea Miller solo at Fall for Dance, and on the same program was an Israeli company called Vertigo Dance Company, and they had these amazing knit costumes made of all different jerseys—there were amazing wrapped pants, and I thought those were great. Ratmansky made a dance at City Ballet a few years ago called *Namouna*. I liked those.

Time Out New York: I did too. What do you think of Ratmansky's use of hairpieces and wigs? Do you like them?

Reid Bartelme: I did. They were peculiar but I think it made a special world—it was a really confusing little world, but I loved it. And again, they were costumes with space. He's done that before. In *Russian Seasons* the girls are wearing circular kind of A-line dresses, and I loved them.

Time Out New York: Why are costumes in dance so problematic? Or maybe you don't think they are, but I do.

Reid Bartelme: I do too. I think costumes in dance are problematic because it's either choreographers doing the design, which more often than not tends to not work out because they have so much on their plate. I think they'll often put dancers in clothes onstage that they just feel the dancers will be comfortable in, and that can often not work out. But dancer comfort onstage is hugely important or else the performance is affected. Also, it's now trending in very expensive dance to use fashion designers like Francisco Costa or Narciso Rodriguez or the Rodarte sisters or J. Mendel to design the costumes. That can work to an extent, but they don't understand the dance aspect of it, so a lot of their work ends up getting lost because we're seeing it from a great distance. What else did I love? I loved the costumes for *Einstein on the Beach*, and I know it's an old design, but I thought that those dolman T-shirts were so beautiful with the high-waist pleated trousers. I thought it was really smart. It was like a classic silhouette, and the only complaint that I had for the overall costume was the Converse [sneakers]. That took me to the wrong place. I thought it was weird.

Time Out New York: Agree. I don't like the new *Symphony in C* costumes.

Reid Bartelme: I don't either. I just love the old ones. It was hard for me to deal with the new ones. The palettes on the tutus look like Chinese throwing stars to me.

Time Out New York: It's so princessy, too. They look like Disney costumes. Would you ever want to be in charge of a costume shop at a ballet company?

Reid Bartelme: I don't know. I don't necessarily want to run a shop where I'm dealing with other people's designs. I actually want to be the person who draws up the pictures—there is a satisfaction that I get from being very hands on with the construction, but in reality it's much more work than I can really deal with if I want to make this a lucrative career for myself. So I want to be the person who does the drawings and oversees the construction. I want to work for many companies. I want to travel and work for choreographers and work with great shops that I can trust and that are going to do a beautiful job executing my thoughts.

Time Out New York: What are you working on next?

Reid Bartelme: Following the Lar Lubovitch piece, hopefully I can get together Jillian Peña's piece for the Chocolate Factory. I've been working with her a little on that, but it seems like it's going to be a rushed job. Then I have Gwen Welliver's piece for her NYLA season in the winter and also Juliana May's piece for NYLA. And then I go to Portland to do Pontus's piece. That takes me to the spring.

Time Out New York: How did you like being a dancer in Lar's company?

Reid Bartelme: I could not have had a more ideal last dance company experience. He was everything I wanted from a director and choreographer. He gave us so much space as dancers. He didn't ask us for time that we didn't need to work for him. He was so calm and patient and trusting. I love Lar Lubovitch. And the physicality of his work made a lot of sense for me. It didn't hurt: I could take what I'd learned as a modern dancer and take what I'd learned as a ballet dancer. It kind of ran all together.

Lar Lubovitch Dance Company performs at French Institute Alliance Française, Florence Gould Hall Nov 14–18.