





Soul MYSTIQUE

Australia's quick-change dance sensation

Combining the glamour of ballroom dancing with the mesmerising power of magic, Australia's Soul Mystique – Gavin Skinner and Lydia Lim – has enthralled audiences around the world and in the process revived a lost art.

The quick-change part of their act – “the transformation” they call it – happens so fast it leaves audiences wondering how they did it. The screen goes up in a flash, then it's down again just as quickly, and the transformation is complete – one sparkling costume replaced with another.

“We've met people who've seen the show 10 times,” says Gavin. “They're still trying to work it out, they still have no idea, which annoys them a little bit. But they can see what fun we're having out there.”

Soul Mystique didn't invent quick-change, but they were the first in the world to combine the routine with dance. The transformations take seconds, but were years in the making. Gavin, 40, and Lydia, 35, met in 1996 in Brisbane, Queensland – Gavin's home city; Lydia's adopted one (she was born in Singapore) – when both were taking lessons at a local dance studio. Gavin was already a competitive dancer, placing in the state's top finals; Lydia, though dancing for years, was a beginner in competition. Their teacher suggested they pair up, but Lydia thought Gavin “too good”. They did, however, start to dance together, beginning a partnership now in its 16th year.

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Paul Stone

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“I don’t know why he agreed,” says Lydia. “I think he felt sorry for me.”

“I wasn’t given much of an option,” Gavin cheekily interjects. “My teacher said, ‘You’re dancing with Lydia and that’s the end of it.’”

The couple advanced to open competitive dancing – Dancesport, more properly – and trained for eight months before winning their first state competition. They specialised in Latin American dance, a style that remains one of their signatures to the present day.

“We were pretty late starters,” says Lydia. “Most people actually start dancing in juvenile, below 12. We both started competition quite late at 18.”

The duo decided to move to London, the unofficial capital of Dancesport. “You’re wasting your time,” Lydia’s father told them, but they were determined to explore competitive dancing in the British capital because that’s where the serious competitors from around Europe went.





After a couple of years, the pair were talent-spotted by agents for impresario David King and offered the lead Latin dance act in his worldwide smash hit *Spirit of the Dance* – their first theatrical role.

When that contract finished, the pair decided to go out on their own. They had heard that the cruise liners, especially the old time English ships like the *Queen Mary 2*, hired dance couples for shows. What started as short 10-minute shows – “openers and closers basically,” says Gavin – grew to half an hour. It was then that the pair decided to introduce something that has come to define their act – costume changes; several per act.

“With every Latin dance there’s a story behind it,” explains Lydia. “For instance, *pasodoble* is a bullfight; the man is the matador and the girl is the cape. So we tried to communicate that with the costume.”

Given how slick their act is these days, the pair recalls humorously how they fared back then.

“We’d go behind this wall and change,” says Gavin. “It would take 45–50 seconds, which we thought was quite quick in those days!”

“And I would come out with my arms all twisted and things not zipped up properly and just, you know, carry on,” adds Lydia.

They mustn’t have been that bad; the cruise director asked them to put together a headline act. This brought them into contact with other entertainers, including a magician who suggested they introduce the lost European art of “quick-change” into their act.

“And we said, ‘We do!’” recalls Lydia. “And he said, ‘It’s faster than what you’re doing. It’s done in two to three seconds.’”

Intrigued, the pair tried to research quick-change, but back then there was nothing. “No literature, no YouTube, nothing at all,” says Gavin.

“Quick change was a lost art,” explains Lydia. “An Italian actor from the late 1800s was the only one who knew how to do it and he didn’t leave any secrets behind.”



That Italian was Luigi Fregoli, a contemporary of legendary escape artist Houdini, whose quick-change routine was so fast it spurred rumours that he must be working with one or more people.

Gavin and Lydia persisted through a trail of dead ends in their search for Fregoli's secret. Three years later their search had led them to Paris where they had found someone who knew the concepts of how quick-change worked. They spent a small fortune getting costumes made and having them shipped back to Australia. But disaster struck once they arrived home.

"None of the costumes worked," says Gavin. "They were made purely for magicians who didn't move."

The couple considered tossing it all in at this point. "We were kind of thinking of just quitting the whole entertainment industry, putting some money towards a house and just being normal people," says Lydia, who in between dancing graduated with honours in a BA Business (Communication) from the

Queensland University of Technology. "But no, we thought, we need to try this because we'd poured everything into it."

"When you've dived in so far, you've just got to make it work," adds Gavin. "So much time, so much money..."

"... so much energy," chimes in Lydia, before Gavin finishes off the word "energy" for her. One often finishes the other's sentences like this. Not terribly different from other happy couples perhaps, but the pair come across as umbilical. Their act requires them to be, but theirs is both a professional and personal relationship – they got engaged last September.

"Because we've been dancing for some time we have that communication and connection together," says Lydia. "It makes it much easier to cover up mistakes, too!"

"We've had some disasters where I've gone to lift the bag up and Lydia's not changed or she's in the middle of something," admits Gavin.

With Lydia herself now in charge of the cos-

Main: Soul
Mystique at
the London
Palladium.



tume design, the pair worked with seamstresses in both Brisbane and Singapore to make the costumes function as they needed them to.

Lydia: “We had a fair idea of what we wanted to do, but by this point we were exploring our own methods because those we got in Europe didn’t work for us.”

They worked for the next year putting together their routine; 12-months’ work for a 10-minute show. Using their contacts on the cruise liners, they were given four months to prove themselves. But the ship’s entertainment bookers didn’t need so long. They loved the act so much that they immediately offered the pair a 12-month contract after their first show.

Now with the crucible of a live audience, the pair spent the next year perfecting their act. Offers from US and European cruisers poured in, and the two were eventually offered the prime closing slot at a tribute show for Las Vegas’ veterans Siegfried & Roy at the London Palladium on Drury Lane in the West End.

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Lydia Lim

But their big break came when they successfully auditioned for the first season of *Australia’s Got Talent* in 2007.

Gravin: “It was the best thing we ever did because it opened a whole new market for us. The corporate market in Australia was dying for something different, something new, and they embraced us, and still are embracing us. And in Asia, too. I don’t know how people find us sometimes. But it comes down to they saw us on TV.”







Though the pair lost the final (to 12-year-old singer Bonnie Anderson) their appearance on the show boosted their profile. What's more, their continued popularity in the ensuing years led to them being invited back this year to compete in the sixth season of *Australia's Got Talent*.

How do they explain their success?

"I think what people love most is the enjoyment we have on stage ourselves," says Gavin. "We love being on stage; we love performing; it's not a job. I think people can see that. And that's what they love about the show. Plus our show... it's not just dancing, it's not just magic, it's how it makes you feel at the end of the show. And that's what we love about performing... the "oohs" and the "aahs"... people just have no idea of how it [the transformation] happens."

A typical costume change by the couple these days takes "one to two seconds" says Gavin. A 10-minute show – for a corporate booking, say – involves around 12–15 costume changes; their longer theatrical productions involve about 30–35 changes per show.

Perhaps the pair's biggest concern was how their act would be received by the Dancesport world.

"Most people in the dance world industry, the coaches and the dancers themselves, can be quite narrow minded," says Lydia. "It's all about technique. When we first put the act together we thought these people were going to hate it, so we kept it away from the dance industry. We didn't want to get judged by them."

But when the couple did *Australia's Got Talent*, a couple of key people in the dancing industry saw it and asked them to perform a show in Melbourne for the Australian Dancesport Championships, the sport's premier event.

"It was one of the most nerve-wracking thing we've ever done," Lydia says.

And how was it received?

"Amazingly," says Gavin. "They just loved the show because it was so different. We were accepted by the dancing industry, by all these couples we used to compete against, for doing something different."

So what's their secret? What are those magic costumes made of?

"Fabric!" replies Lydia.

"They just look like normal dresses," adds Gavin. "And that's one of the biggest compliments... when people see our costumes and say they look like normal dresses."

While the pair is giving away no secrets, they do admit that the costumes always present a challenge.

"It has to be a certain material and there are certain things we always need to look out for in our travels," says Gavin. "We're always after very different or 'way out' materials and colours."

"They're very tedious, actually," adds Lydia.

Soul Mystique's original dressmakers remain part of the act's small behind-the-scenes team, which also now includes Gavin's brother and Lydia's mother.

At present, the pair is working on three brand new shows for *Australia's Got Talent*. They say they rehearse every day when putting together a new show. In between practice, they stay in shape through a combination of gym, bike riding and swimming.

Once the duo is finished with the current season of *Australia's Got Talent* they will move to a more regular routine of a show every second or third day. After that, there's the wedding to attend to.

"That's next on the agenda," says Lydia, as Gavin finishes the sentence for her. **TR**

