

# STYLE



Photos by KATY RADDATZ / The Chronicle

During a first fitting, dancer Danielle Santos (left) carefully checked the measurements of the gown she designed for Yurie Pascarella (right).

## Dancer takes a turn at design

Danielle Santos creates gown for New Works Festival gala co-chair

By Sylvia Rubin  
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Anyone familiar with the San Francisco social scene knows to expect the utmost sophistication from Yurie Pascarella, one of the city's best-dressed women.

Like Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue*, Pascarella is tall and very slim, and, also like Wintour, she adopted a classic look a long time ago. Her geometrically cut, sleek black bob is a signature, as is her parade of elegant, form-fitting designer gowns from Oscar de la Renta, Nina Ricci, Christian Dior and other top fashion houses.

On Tuesday Pascarella will glide into the patrons tent for the San Francisco Ballet's New Works Festival gala dinner — the highlight of the ballet's 75th anniversary — in a dove-gray Grecian-inspired gown by Danielle Santos. Pascarella, the dinner co-chair, will be in the audience while Santos, a member of the ballet corps, will be onstage.

Santos, a full-time dancer, sews for fun but has never taken a fashion class, nor is she pursuing a fashion career. She's made about 10 dresses, total, for herself and some friends.

It was another dancer in the corps who suggested to Pascarella that Santos make her a gown, and, intrigued, Pascarella decided to give it a whirl.

"I thought, how sweet!" Pascarella said. "It'll be a good sport about it; if it doesn't work out, I have a backup," she says. (It's a black and white de la Renta.)

Santos is a bubbly personality who hops around a room instead of walking; she has all the optimism and energy that comes with being 22. Instead of partying with friends, she's been staying home, sewing and pinning and hemming.

Enter two mentors: Her mother, an experienced seamstress (who has made costumes for



By the second fitting, held at the San Francisco Ballet Building, Pascarella found that adjustments made the gown move more freely.

the Ballet), and New York designer Isaac Mizrahi, who has a long-standing connection with the Ballet and is doing the costumes for the festival's Mark Morris piece. "I'm familiar with his clothes at Target," Santos says, "and a few of his upscale things. He also does shoes, right?"

Right. Mizrahi, a Seventh Avenue veteran, started his own fashion company in 1987. Currently, he designs a made-to-measure line for Bergdorf Goodman in New York, and for five years he has designed collections for Target, pioneering the designers-do-discount phenomenon. In January, Mizrahi was named the creative director of the giant Liz Claiborne label, and he will leave Target.

Santos got an earful the first time they spoke. "He talked and talked and talked!" Santos said. "I told him I was worried that the dress might not look like the sketch at the end. He said, 'Get over it!' He said 90 percent of this is making your customer look great. And that fabric is everything."

"I like that she wasn't caught up in glitz and that she was thinking about design," said Mizrahi, via e-mail. "I love someone who does more than one thing. She obviously thinks a lot about anatomy, which is a good place for a clothing designer to start. It's an interesting experiment. If I say one tiny thing that gets her to think something new, then I feel it's good. One tiny little thing leads to another."

Santos and Pascarella decided to meet weekly at the Ballet building on Franklin Street for a month for brainstorming and fittings. The first meeting proves that knowing your client is key.

Santos shows Pascarella a series of sketches that include a dress with a full-ish skirt and another gown with a V-neck, both very un-Pascarella.

But there's also a sketch of a slim, one-shoulder gown with side ruching, braiding around the top and a fluttery arm swag.

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In her role as designer, Santos (left) used muslin as a kind of rehearsal fabric when fitting the gown for Pascarella.

## Mizrahi in wings as dancer's mentor

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"Hmm, this one caught my eye," Pascarella says, pointing to the latter. "It's slim and soft."

Santos shows her swatches of deep blues and deep purples, in heavy, wintry fabrics. "Hmm, it's an April event. Maybe we can lighten up a bit?" Pascarella suggests. "Maybe ice blue? Or coral? My husband really likes me in coral. As long as I don't look like the mother of the bride."

Santos nods, taking notes. In the end, they settle on an icy gray silk georgette. Will she make a muslin first, and create a prototype? Oh, no, Santos says, innocently.

It doesn't take her long to realize that a muslin is the only way to go, and by the second fitting, she had one in hand, made from measurements taken a week earlier.

The muslin fits well, but seems a little tight on one side. "Maybe if we open it up, it might flow better, don't you think?" Pascarella suggests. Santos doesn't seem too crazy about this idea, but she goes ahead and takes out her careful stitching and suddenly the gown flows beautifully.

"Much prettier," Pascarella decides.

There are two more fittings to go. Santos works hard on the gown between rehearsals and performances. "This is keep-

ing me healthy. I'm not going out on my nights off!"

And then the final fitting, Monday, a week before the event.

"Doing the muslin was such a good idea," Santos says, as Pascarella slips on the gown. It fits beautifully, the braiding around the shoulder gives the wispy gown some substance, and the arm swag sets it apart from the crowd.

"I'm having a little bit of anxiety about the drape," Santos says, taking pins out of the dress, which still needed hemming.

"Is it going to be finished on time?" Pascarella says, suddenly sounding a bit anxious herself.

Santos assures her it will be ready. She steps back and smiles proudly, unconsciously getting up on her toes. She's never made anything like this before. "Putting the pattern together was hard. There were no instructions. Like, which part do I sew first? This has definitely been a learning experience for me," she says.

The only way to learn is by doing, says Mizrahi, who advised Santos to look at all the clothes around her for inspiration and technique. "If she's patient and focused, she will do this."

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