

Skating world mourns loss of 'visionary' Billings

Hamilton, Buttle among those who treasured time working with designer

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Jef Billings, seen here posing with one of his Emmy Award-winning designs, left an indelible mark on the world of figure skating. -Getty Images

Designer Jef Billings, who created costumes for skating stars for decades, died Tuesday at the age of 70.

Billings was widely regarded as one of the most important designers in figure skating, creating opulent pieces drawn from his experience creating fashion in Hollywood.

"His knack was to dive into the character that you were portraying on the ice and really bring out the flavor of that in the costume," said Kristi Yamaguchi, a frequent client of Billings. "Whether it was something comedic and fun, or elegant and glamorous, you put a Jef Billings on and it made you feel special on the ice."

Scott Hamilton met Billings in 1984, when Billings showed him some sketches backstage at a tour stop. Hamilton liked his energy and enthusiasm, and the two started working together, forming a partnership that lasted decades.

"There was no one like him," Hamilton said. "There are a lot of really talented people out there, but when you look at his technical ability of understanding fabric -- how to cut, how to sew, how to build and create something to make a perfect picture -- he just got it. He wanted women to look gorgeous; he wanted men to look like men. He wanted the skaters to represent whatever the character of the piece was, and he was just brilliant."

Billings, who died at his home in Los Angeles on Sept. 27, designed for *Stars on Ice* in some capacity for all of its 30 years. He was the designer and director of the tour for 13 years, up to and including 2016. Billings also worked on the *Scott Hamilton and Friends* shows many times over the past 17 years. (In a sad coincidence, Billings was preceded as costume designer for *Stars on Ice* by Frances

Dafoe, who died four days before Billings.)

The notable skaters Billings costumed are far too many to list. He made the dress in which Sarah Hughes won her 2002 Olympic gold medal, and the costumes Jeffrey Buttle wore in 2006 when he won Olympic bronze. Lately, Buttle had been working closely with Billings, who brought him on board as choreographer for *Stars on Ice*.

"He has the ability to make you feel like a million bucks when you're standing alone on the ice in one of his designs," Buttle wrote in an email. "Over the next decade, I had been lucky to witness him share his gifts as a designer and director for *Stars on Ice*. His passion for the tour was undeniable, and he truly wanted to create a spectacular show every year. He lived and breathed his craft, and his dedication to the work was so incredibly obvious. He will be greatly missed, but his impact and work will be remembered."

Billings was known for his artistic temperament; many skaters mentioned that his passion sometimes made him difficult to work with.

All agreed, though, that the results were worth the drama.

"It was a roller coaster; he wasn't the easiest guy at times," Hamilton said. "His heart was pure. When he was upset about something, he would back it up. He created these moments, and his eyes would fill with tears. He loved the skaters; he loved the emotion. He would create this beautiful picture on the ice, and it really meant something to him."

"He was a unique character within the skating world," *Stars on Ice* producer Byron Allen said by phone. "He had his diva moments, as most geniuses do, but underneath it, he had a heart of gold. He would have done anything for anyone. In the end, he was so selfless. He was a great man."

Billings also designed costumes for many TV specials, including *The Snowden*, *Raggedy Ann and Andy Holiday Show* (1999) and *An Evening with Scott Hamilton and Friends* (2004), for which he won Emmy awards. He was nominated for nine other Emmys between 1993 and 2004.

Billings was from New Hartford, in upstate New York. He graduated from SUNY Oswego in 1971 with a degree in speech and theater and then got an MFA from New York University. He was a protégé of designer Bob Mackie, with whom he worked on *The Carol Burnett Show*. He designed extensively for Burnett as well as Sandy Duncan and Lily Tomlin.

According to his *Stars on Ice* biography, Billings first entered the world of figure skating design when he worked with Peggy Fleming for her *Evening on Ice* show at Harrah's Lake Tahoe. He went on to design for numerous shows with Willy Bietak Productions in the 1980s. Billings designed Dorothy Hamill's costumes for the first *Stars on Ice* tour in 1986 and worked with various skaters and ensembles in every show after that before becoming the designer for the entire tour in 1994-95.

"He had such a creative mind, and he loved everything that had to do with the arts," Yamaguchi said. "He had a fun, incredible energy about him, but he was so brilliant, and in another league for what he did that he also had an incredible vulnerability. The skaters would say, 'Jef, I love my costumes,' and that lit up his life. He lived to please the skaters and make them feel as good as they looked."

As news of the designer's death made its way across social media, a river of tributes flowed from the many skaters he had worked with over the years.

"I'm so thankful I had the chance to let him know how grateful I was to be performing for him. What a dream it was to be wearing a 'Jef Billings' costume every night, and how much his kind words meant to me," Adam Rippon wrote on Instagram. "I hope you are somewhere where the quick changes are effortless, the costumes fit perfectly, and the audience is always on their feet. You will be dearly missed."

"A visionary that made us feel beautiful inside [and] out," Kaitlyn Weaver and Andrew Poje wrote on Twitter. "Angels, get ready for some new robes!"

Among the other skaters posting tributes to Billings on social media were Christopher Dean, Ashley Wagner, Javier Fernández, Maia Shibutani and Alex Shibutani, Yuka Sato, Madison Chock, Jeremy Abbott, Michael Weiss, Ryan Bradley, Polina Edmunds and Miki Ando.

As Hamilton remembered his friend and colleague, his voice choked with tears.

"I adored him," Hamilton said. "I saw him through a lot of tough times, and he saw me through a lot of tough times. For the rest of my life, when I think of Jef, all those bumpy roads that made life more interesting... I'd go to him with an idea, and he'd take it five or 10 levels above. He just got it. He laid himself bare all the time. He was one of a kind."

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