

Queensland **Ballet**

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR LI CUNXIN



The
Firebird

PRODUCTION NOTES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Contextual Information

Choreographer Liam Scarlett
Composer Igor Stravinsky
Conductor Nigel Gaynor
Music Arrangement Jonathan McPhee
Music performed by Queensland Symphony Orchestra
Stager Kaloyan Boyadjiev
Set & Costume Designer Jon Bausor
Lighting James Farncombe

Overview

— Born from the merge of two Russian folklores (the mythical Firebird and the tale of Köschei the Deathless), *The Firebird* originally is a dark story of magic and love. It tells of Prince Ivan finding love and rescuing a captured princess from the clutches of the evil magician, Köschei. Prince Ivan calls upon the magical Firebird (a powerful, good spirit whose feathers convey beauty and protection upon the earth) to help him in battle with the immortal Köschei. In this mythical, dark tale, a mighty battle of wills and a burning love ignite the drama.

A most notable piece of choreography in the 1910 work is the bold and dazzling dance of the Firebird, beginning with the flashing appearance of the Firebird, continuing with light and quick movement laden with complexity and challenge.

The Original Production

— *The Firebird* ballet was composed by Igor Stravinsky, choreographed by Michel Fokine and performed by Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in Paris on June 25, 1910. Originally choreographed for Principal Ballerina Anna Pavlova, the role of the Firebird was quickly given to Tamara Karsavina due to Pavlova's intense dislike for Stravinsky's musical composition. Despite Pavlova's opinion however, Stravinsky achieved international success due to his artistry in composing the music that unequivocally enhanced the innovative movement. This included the fluttering dance of the Firebird, the enchanting wedding march and his subtle reference to the story origin through use of folk melodies.

Other Productions

— Due to its invigorating musical scores, innovative choreography and dramatic story, ballet companies from around the world continue to restage and reinvent Fokine's early 20th century *The Firebird*. In Australia, *The Firebird* premiered in Melbourne's His Majesty's Theatre on 28 November 1936 when The Monte Carlo Russian Ballet began its Australian tour. Renditions also include: New York City Ballet in 1949 and 1970; San Francisco Ballet in 2007; and the American Ballet Theatre in 2012. Liam Scarlett's production of *The Firebird* (2013) for the Norwegian National Ballet is nothing short of being brilliant, showing precision in his musicality and attention to detail within his dramatic choreography.



Scarlett's Production

Liam Scarlett's production

— Renowned choreographer Liam Scarlett brings his version of *The Firebird* to Queensland Ballet, by re-mounting his work commissioned by the Norwegian National Ballet for their 2013 Fokine Festival. Scarlett's *The Firebird* pays homage to its ground-breaking original whilst asserting a modern distortion on the formidable narrative. In 2018, Queensland Ballet will perform the Australian Premiere of this production at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane.

Inspired by Stravinsky's 1910 musical score, Scarlett utilises the entire 50 minutes, with its inventiveness and magnitude, to succinctly convey the conflict between Köschei and the Firebird in their struggle for power and domination. Juxtaposed against this conflict is the unqualified love of Prince Ivan and the Princess Vasilisa. Throughout the work, Scarlett draws a focus to Köschei and the Firebird as being highly manipulative, conniving and dominant characters who abominably use the prince and princess as pawns in their skirmish for supremacy.



Liam Scarlett

— English choreographer Liam Scarlett trained at The Royal Ballet School and danced with The Royal Ballet, retiring as a dancer in 2012 to focus on his choreographic career. That year he was appointed The Royal Ballet's first Artist in Residence. His works for The Royal Ballet include *Despite* and *Vayamos al Diablo* (2006), *Consolations and Liebestraum* (2009 — nominated for a Critics' Circle Award), *Asphodel Meadows* (2010 — nominated for a South Bank Award and an Olivier Award, and winner of a Critics' Circle Award), *Sweet Violets*, 'Diana and Actaeon' from *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012* (2012), *Hansel and Gretel* (2013), the *Jubilee pas de deux* in celebration of HM The Queen's Diamond Jubilee, *The Age of Anxiety* and *Summertime*.

Works for other companies include *Viscera* (2012) and *Euphotic* (2013) for Miami City Ballet (also designed by Liam), *The Firebird* for the Norwegian National Ballet (2013), *Hummingbird* for the San Francisco Ballet (2014), *No Man's Land* for English National Ballet (2014), *With a Chance of Rain* for ABT (2014), *Carmen* for Norwegian National Ballet (2015), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* co-produced for Royal New Zealand Ballet and Queensland Ballet (2015), *Fearful Symmetries* for the San Francisco Ballet (2016) and *Frankenstein* co-produced for The Royal Ballet and San Francisco Ballet (2016).

In 2015 Scarlett accepted the role of Artistic Associate with Queensland Ballet, providing an avenue for him to create new works on the company as well as restaging some of his earlier works such as *The Firebird*. Li Cunxin, Artistic Director of Queensland Ballet believes Scarlett to be ...an original thinker, a wonderful collaborator, an innovator and a storyteller who creates incredible ballets that transport the audience to other worlds. He's in such demand throughout the world for his ballet creations so it's a huge coup for us to have Liam as an Artistic Associate.



Scarlett's Production

Synopsis

— Under a moonlit sky the Firebird appears before the immortal Köschei in his enchanted garden, both creatures exuding dark, magical powers. Their taunting of one another is suspended with the appearance of two arrows, heralding the arrival of an unknown guest.

Prince Ivan, lost at nightfall while out hunting, finds himself in the enchanted garden. The Firebird, curious of the intruder, stalks him and on seeing his fascination with her drops one of her feathers for the prince to claim. The magical feather will allow him to summon her when he needs aid or protection. She disappears into the night sky watched by the prince.

Prince Ivan finds himself interrupted by Köschei who appears with his new captive, a beautiful princess. Soon more of Köschei's captured maidens enter the garden and wait for their enslaver to finally leave them alone in peace. Once gone, the maidens play with a golden apple growing from a gnarled tree in the garden belonging to Köschei. Prince Ivan appears suddenly, startling the princess, and in turn learns that the garden is the domain of the immortal Köschei, who has captured them all under a powerful enchantment. The prince has never seen such beauty as that of the princess and they seal their vow to one another with a kiss. Daybreak heralds, and the princess and her companions are swept away, leaving the prince once again alone.

He searches the garden but in vain and picks a golden apple from the tree and triggers an alarm that sets Köschei's entourage of creatures to emerge from the darkness, and finally the immortal ruler himself confronts Prince Ivan.

Köschei challenges the prince showing him that he exerts control over the princess and that she belongs to him. However, Prince Ivan waves the feather given to him by the Firebird and true to her word she arrives to protect him.

The Firebird and Köschei vie for dominance resulting in the Firebird casting a spell over Köschei and his entourage, causing them to enter a deep sleep. She then leads Prince Ivan to the gnarled tree-stump and reveals to him an egg containing Köschei's soul, and the key to his undoing. Awakening from his magical slumber, Köschei begs for his soul to be saved only for the princess to smash the egg and finally destroy Köschei forever.

Released from her enchantment, the princess and Prince Ivan are finally together. The Firebird appears, blazing brightly and flying high above the world she can now claim as her own.



Scarlett's Production

Movement

— Michel Fokine has been credited with having led ballet into a more theatrical domain where all elements (music, movement, sets, lighting and costumes) support and substantiate a ballet's story. To assert the psychological depth of this dark but enthralling tale, Scarlett continues Fokine's philosophical process by adopting a strong use of narrative within the movement of *The Firebird*. Scarlett reveals the nuances of the four main characters' traits through deliberate choreography to develop and enhance both the characters and story.

Scarlett makes use of the exceptional versatility of the dancers. He exemplifies their strong classical ballet training through his contemporary based choreography. For instance, the two key pas de deux between Köschei and the Firebird, and Prince Ivan and Princess Vasilisa, both illustrate the seamless fusion of classical ballet and contemporary ballet technique.

The first pas de deux between Köschei and the Firebird shows them duelling, but disguised underneath this sparring is evidence of their desire for each other. This pas de deux is full of contradictions, notably when the Firebird nuzzles her head on the shoulder of Köschei before turning her back on him in a sharp and distinctive arabesque. Scarlett retains a moment from the original Fokine version when the Firebird imitates a pose very reminiscent of the original ballerina, Tamara Karsavina, where her head is inclined toward Köschei, her hands are delicately positioned to frame her jawline and her eye line is looking coyly toward him.

Scarlett strategically utilises call and response variations, as well as groupings and formations with oppositional focus, to cleverly show the conversations occurring between the princesses when Vasilisa is introduced. The fluid yet precise, on and off-balance locomotor movements lend themselves to further demonstrate Scarlett's classical ballet choreography fused with a more contemporary style.

Music

— Accepting Sergei Diaghilev's commission to create a musical score for *The Firebird* in 1908 proved instrumental to Igor Stravinsky's fame. After several well-known Russian composers had declined, Diaghilev offered the commission to Stravinsky. Stravinsky composed three different length scores for *The Firebird*, purposefully reducing the orchestra and eliminating some of the material to make the more favoured sections from the ballet more accessible. Scarlett unequivocally chose to use the longer score for *The Firebird* in order to remain close in musical and narrative structure to the traditional ballet, also allowing him the time to further develop two longer pas de deux between the key characters, Köschei and the Firebird, and Prince Ivan and Princess Vasilisa.

The clear structure in Stravinsky's score provides direction to the narrative and the distinct thematic melodies layer meaning on top of the movement, allowing audiences to more easily understand the interactions they see on stage. The music and movements work together to emphasise the conversations between the characters, as if they were spoken word, for example Stravinsky's representation of the two different kinds of magic — the evil in Köschei, and the powerful, manipulative magic of the Firebird.

Equally important in alluding to the specifically Russian folklore roots within Fokine's *The Firebird* is Stravinsky's incorporation of genuine folk melodies.

Scarlett's Production

Costume

— The different characters' personalities and their interpersonal relationships are important to Set and Costume Designer, Jon Bausor. Finding the interaction between the characters interesting to explore, he shares motifs amongst the costumes in order to show the symbolism of connection between certain characters.

Bausor distinguishes the characters through the use of colour, fabrics, design, shape or decorative detailing. Sometimes his delineation is subtle and at other times, very evident. In *The Firebird*, Bausor creates a distinction between the human and the mythical characters whilst simultaneously portraying any common traits that they may share.

The costumes for Queensland Ballet's *The Firebird* are from the Norwegian National Ballet's original production and differ significantly to the original Fokine costumes. Noelene Hill, Queensland Ballet's Head of Wardrobe and Resident Designer, explains that to a new production every designer brings their own unique vision. Notably, in this production, the Firebird tutu is not a traditional classical tutu — it has an uneven shape by being shorter at the front and slightly longer at the back. The costumes for Köschei and his creatures also differ from the original colourful designs by Leon Bakst to contribute to the dark mythical world Scarlett has created.

Set

— The set design for Scarlett's production developed by recognising three facets from the original tale that needed to be included in order to clearly communicate the narrative – the fragile egg to hold Köschei's soul; a tree with golden apples; and a portal between the human and mythical world.

Whilst using dark shades and lighting to create a dark and twisted mythical world ruled by an undead dictator, Bausor created an impressive claw-like tree, embroidered with a tracery of filigree leaves and an overarching canopy. The gnarled roots at the base of this tree created a place for the fragile egg to nestle in. Bausor also created an imperfect, dilapidated and splintered mirror for the Prince to access, representing the portal between the human and mythical world.

In considering the different characters and necessary features required to portray the narrative effectively, Bausor drew inspiration from folklore, traditional ballet, Russia, Fabergé, and architecture from famous landmarks around Oslo, such as the Oslo Opera House. All of these helped to represent the location where the choreography takes place.



Q & A with Liam Scarlett

Choreographer of *The Firebird*, Queensland Ballet Artistic Associate

— How did you conceive of the idea to recreate *The Firebird*?

I was commissioned by the Norwegian National Ballet to create a piece to celebrate the work of Michel Fokine in the company's Fokine Festival. I suggested to the director that I rework *The Firebird* as it has one of the most magnificent scores created. The music outdoes contemporary music due to its relevance, inventiveness and sheer magnitude in being able to tell a story. It is really the music which inspired me to do it.

— Did you have any challenges in choreographing the work?

I needed to present this piece of music and story in a fresh and relevant way but still pay homage to Fokine's work. I needed to work out who the four lead characters were in essence, before delving into their story.

— What is your choreographic process?

I believe that it is rude to impose foreign dance choreography onto a dancer whom I have never met before. It is like entering a conversation and making it all about me. I try to create a connection with the dancers first and then work with the dancer on the movement.

When recasting for one of my previous ballets, I'll alter the way a movement might have previously been performed in order to accommodate the nuances of the new dancer. I also might change any sequences that I was not completely happy with when it was originally performed. For example, in restaging it for Queensland Ballet, I took the opportunity to alter the two major pas de deux: Prince Ivan and the Firebird; and Prince Ivan and the Princess.

— Can you describe the collaborative process between yourself and designers who do sets, costume and lighting?

The creative team who worked with me was John Bausor (set and costuming) and James Farncombe (lighting). It was fantastic to choose a team and to then create a world that was not in existence.

Farncombe created wonderful ways to shift light. As Kóschei rules a dark and oppressive world and needs to be seen as arrogant and controlling, the lighting needed to reflect that. The lighting for the Firebird needed to be the exact opposite — brilliant and almost too bright to look at because the character is a blazing, femme fatale who lights up the stage in a very dangerous way. I wanted the audience to view the Firebird not as evil, but being on par with Kóschei in terms of the power she wanted. She is not this vulnerable creature and the good heroine that people may perceive.

— What deeper insight into the story are you hoping to present to audiences?

Most folklore are based on a life's lesson that children should learn from. The lesson here is that greed, arrogance, power and vanity will result in failure and dissatisfaction.

— What is the timeline of a production of this scale?

Because the scenery and props take a long time to build and paint, we begin with set designs, then the creation of a small scale model, followed by the creation of the real setting.

When I am choreographing, I am then very aware of: when big scene changes occur; how much music do I have to fill in with choreography; and, do I need to defer attention away from the changes?

Next is choreography and costuming. In the studio I will start working with the principal characters first, then with the corps de ballet in order to build out the ballet. Costumes will be developed at the same time because they are time intensive, but can also dictate how I use them in my choreography. For example, if there is an expanse of material in the costume, I might choreograph more fluid and swinging movement to sway it around. Conversely, I might be more restricted in what I can ask the dancers to do if the costumes are placing parameters on them.

Queensland Ballet

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This Production Notes for the Classroom was developed in collaboration with Queensland Ballet's Education Ambassadors Nicole Galea and Charley Millmore.

