

Graeme Murphy (right) rehearsing Kevin Jackson and Lana Jones in his new *Firebird*

Australian Graeme Murphy has joined an elite group of choreographers, including Mikhail Fokine, George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, by reinventing Igor Stravinsky's Ballets Russes icon *The Firebird*. He tells MALCOLM ROCK about the most challenging 32 minutes of his career to date.

Why choose to revisit *Firebird* instead of other Ballets Russes classics?

Why choose to revisit *Firebird* instead of other Ballets Russes classics? It was specifically commissioned by The Australian Ballet. I was excited because it would allow me to create my own little homage to the Ballets Russes. For me *Firebird* conjures up images of Byzantine mosaic, tapestries, Fabergé eggs and the most ornate details of Russian culture.

How much research into past productions did you do and at what point do you dissociate yourself from history?

I have seen productions in years gone by that are now blurred in my memory. There was the Béjart version and the Garth Welch production, both in the 1970s. I have seen Margot Fonteyn dance the title role on video, which is probably the closest record we



have of the original. I love her performance, but apparently she was selfish about passing it on and kept her cards very close to her chest. I have also seen photographs from the Ballets Russes tours of Australia in 1936 and 1939. These bites and grabs create an atmosphere in the mind that merges with the music, which is the best guide.

Stravinsky's music contains some of the most potent moments in the classical canon. How have you faced this choreographically?

It is an incredibly challenging piece of music to choreograph, and one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I'm a quick choreographer usually and am surprised at how long it took to create just 32 minutes of dance. Several times I asked myself why I couldn't

reach the end of the work. I was layering and texturing the choreography too densely; every note had three or four layers of movement. For me and the principal dancers it became as demanding as creating a full-length ballet.

Previous interpretations of the title role have ranged from "ferocious" (Tamara Karsavina) to "more of a delicate hummingbird than a flaming phoenix" (Lydia Lopokova). How would you describe your Firebird?

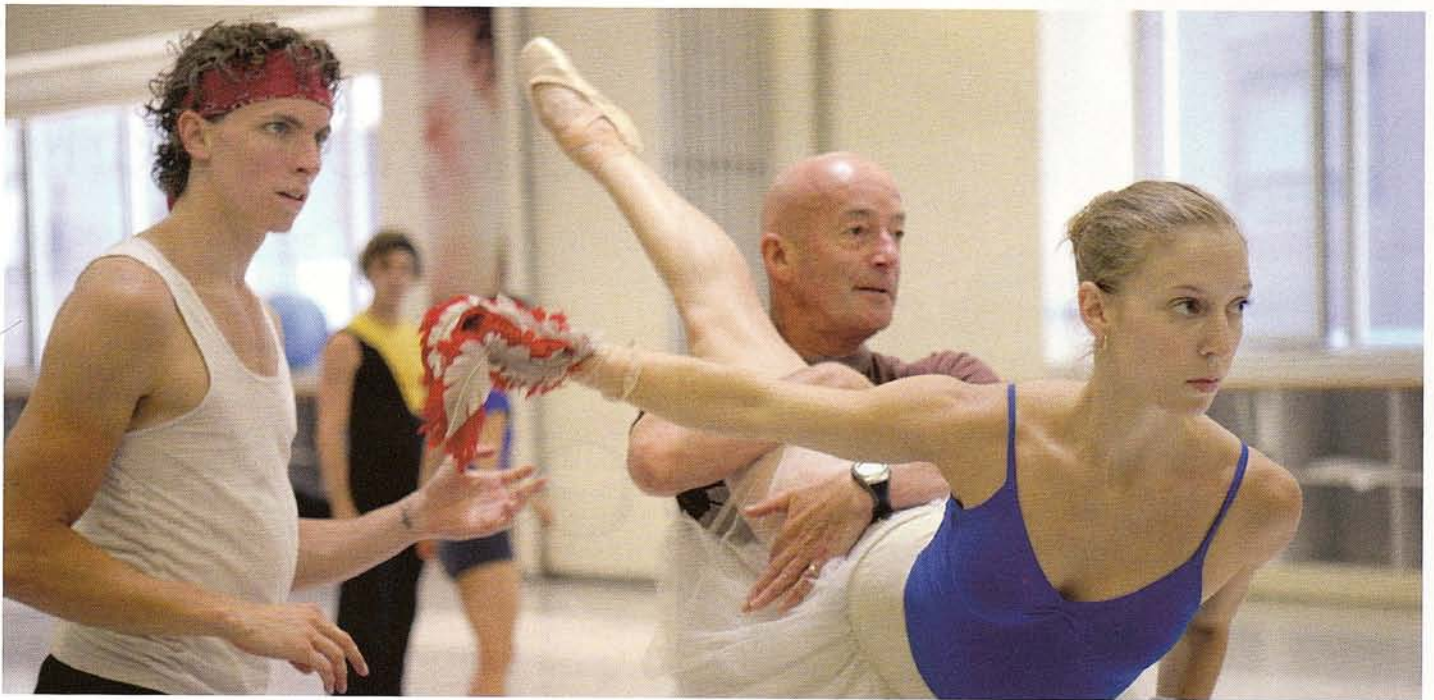
The role of the Firebird counterbalances that of Kostchei, which is an athletic dancing part in my version. She is as good and as strong as he is evil. The Firebird has to carry the weight of expectation of the audience; she has to have the meat and substance, and it can become a choreographic nightmare for the women who undertake it. The Australian Ballet has a wealth of powerful women at the moment. I kept pushing Lana Jones and she kept telling me to bring it on!

Mikhail Fokine danced Prince Ivan in his original production. Do you ever wish you could dance in your Firebird?

I would be a good Kostchei to Janet's Firebird. [Janet Vernon is Murphy's personal and professional partner who danced the role in Welch's production.] She and I are like good and evil. We each have our own explosions of emotion and it is up to the other to be the calming force. We have developed a shorthand because we've known each other since we were teenagers. We danced together back when I was skinny and she was a much more advanced technical performer.

The designs of Alexander Golovin and Leon Bakst are remembered hand-in-hand with Stravinsky's score and Fokine's original choreography. The painter Marc Chagall also designed a Firebird for New York City Ballet in 1945. What conversations did you have with your designer given this history of set and costume design?

People come to *Firebird* with huge expectations. They have seen photographs and sketches from other productions and I don't want to dash their hopes and risk being lynched. The first production



Graeme Murphy rehearsing Kevin Jackson and Lana Jones in his new *Firebird* for The Australian Ballet. Photo: Jessica Blalek

had a very Russian aesthetic and I wanted my designer, Leon Krasenstein, to recall that tradition. I wanted a melodramatic style of gesture and the set and costumes had to match that style. At the same time I wanted to make people feel like this *Firebird* was as new as the original in its heyday. Leon has taken the dancers out of leotards – which is a very difficult thing – and into tulle skirts and tunics. I wanted to challenge my cast into thinking about character and building a world that has already been set up by *Petrushka* and *Les Sylphides*, which precede *Firebird* in the nightly programme.

What do you think it would have been like answering to Diaghilev?

I think he would have been a bit of a bully and a control freak. But he seemed to get the right people together. He had that ability to manage artists and keep them on the same journey. I am not averse to locking my collaborators up in a cottage on the river in

the north of Tasmania. There's something about nature that helps people focus.

***Firebird* was the first Stravinsky work to be heard outside Russia and was an important part of establishing a new Ballets Russes identity during its 1910 season in Paris. Why is your work important to the identity of The Australian Ballet?**

The various manifestations of the Ballets Russes owed a lot to the company's original history. My ballets are part of the history of The Australian Ballet. They resonate with dancers and the Australian public. My early work for the company, *Beyond Twelve* [a ballet about football and growing up as a dancer that premiered in 1980], found a place in people's imaginations and it seems that newer generations of dancers still enjoy performing my choreography. We are therefore connected.

FIREBIRD BALLETS

"Fokine was again in a fever of anxiety; but Diaghilev comforted by promising that in the evening he would operate the electrician's switchboard himself. This he did in fact, thereby depriving himself of a view of the first performance from the front".

S. L. Grigoriev in *The Diaghilev Ballet 1909 - 1929*, describing the opening night of *The Firebird* in 1910.

1910 Diaghilev's Ballets Russes ch: Fokine; des: Golovin sets and costumes/Bakst costumes.

1926 Diaghilev's Ballets Russes revived its production with new designs by Natalia Goncharova for performances in London.

1954 Sadler's Wells Ballet

1962 Maly Theatre Ballet

1964 Bolshoi Ballet

1993 Mariinsky Ballet

1945 Ballet Theatre ch: Bolm; des: Chagall

1949 New York City Ballet ch: Balanchine; des: Chagall

1970 New York City Ballet ch: Jerome Robbins; des: Chagall

1954 Paris Opéra ch: Lifar



Bakst - costume design for *The Firebird* in 1910

1964 Stuttgart Ballet ch: John Cranko

1964 Ballets of the 20th Century ch: Béjart

1970 Frankfurt Ballet ch: John Neumeier

1981 Royal Danish Ballet ch: Glen Tetley

1982 Dance Theatre of Harlem ch: John Taras

1998 Stuttgart Ballet ch: Uwe Scholz

1999 Boston Ballet ch: Christopher Wheeldon; des: Ian Falconer

2000 National Ballet of Canada ch: James Kudelka

2003 Oregon Ballet Theatre ch: Yuri Possokhov

2007 San Francisco Ballet ch: Yuri Possokhov (new version)

2009 The Australian Ballet ch: Graeme Murphy des: Leon Krasenstein.