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## *The Firebird*

A Stunning New Production  
for Miami City Ballet

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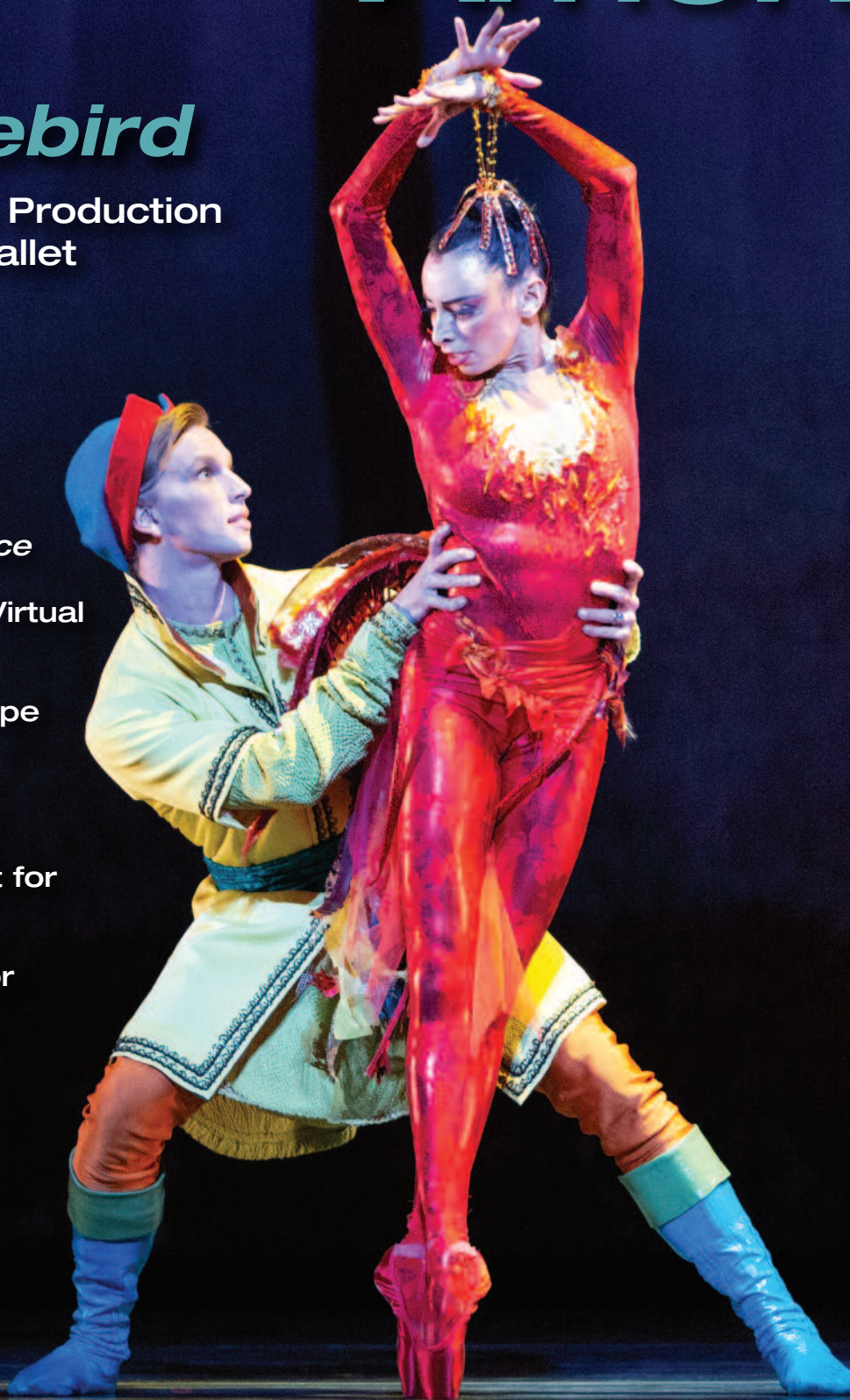
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# RARA AVIS



Never before  
seen outside of  
New York,  
George  
Balanchine's  
*The Firebird*  
lands in Miami

By: David Barbour





For the first time, the George Balanchine classic *The Firebird* has flown the coop of New York City Ballet, alighting in Miami with an entirely new production profile.

Created in 1910 for the Ballets Russes—at the time, the toast of Paris—*The Firebird* features a scenario, based on Slavic mythology, by Michel Fokine (the original choreographer) and the scenic designer Alexandre Benois: The hero, Prince Ivan, a hunter, is befriended by the title creature. Wandering through an eerie forest, Ivan comes across 13 princesses trapped in a semi-somnolent state by the sinister, wizard-like Koschei. Ivan, who falls for one of the abject young ladies, faces off with Koschei, who threatens him with a small army of monsters. In response, Ivan destroys the magical egg that holds Koschei's soul, guaranteeing his immortality; through the intervention of the Firebird, the monsters are dispersed, and the princesses are awakened and joined by a banner of knights. The score, by Igor Stravinsky, is suffused with late-Romantic longing, alternating with a driving fury, arriving at a majestic, triumphal finale.

Balanchine's version of *The Firebird*, which premiered in 1949, was an early work for New York City Ballet. (It originally starred Maria Tallchief, one of the company's greatest stars and, at the time, the choreographer's wife.) The production is deeply rooted in Russian folklore: The scenery and costumes were designed by the Russian-French artist Marc Chagall; later productions, in 1970, '72, and '80—many of which starred Gelsey Kirkland as the Firebird—featured, along with additional choreography by Jerome Robbins, new costumes by Karinska and a revised scenic design by Chagall. The scenery for the ballet, which remains in the company's repertory, is unmistakably Chagall's, done in his delicately colorful style with fancifully imagined figures.

Although New York City Ballet tours regularly, the Balanchine—Chagall *Firebird* has remained in New York, the scenery having been deemed too delicate to travel. As Lourdes Lopez, the company's artistic director and a former principal at City Ballet, explains, "When New York City Ballet moved from City Center to the Koch Theatre [at the time, the New York State Theatre at Lincoln Center], Chagall himself painted most of the sets, including the tapestry that was put on the floor. As a dancer, when you step on to it, you think, Oh, wow, I'm stepping on something truly priceless."

Lopez adds, "*Firebird* is a ballet that I have grown up around, and I have always loved it. At 14, I was one of the supers, later I was a lead monster, then a princess, and finally the Firebird." Indeed, she had a stunning success in the role, earning unqualified praise from Arlene Croce in *The New Yorker*. "I've had my eye on bringing it to Miami City Ballet for some time but wasn't quite sure how to do



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this,” Lopez says. “Then it occurred to me: Maybe there’s a way to pay homage to Chagall through projections. I approached the Robbins and Balanchine Trusts. They said, ‘Instead of that, why don’t you just redesign it?’”

To realize this project, Lourdes tapped projection designer Wendall K. Harrington as the production’s overall creative director. Harrington, who, some years ago, designed another *Firebird*, choreographed by Alexei Ratmansky, for American Ballet Theatre, says that Stravinsky’s music has had a hold on her since she first heard it as a girl: “It sits right in the place where my musical heart lives.”

By way of explaining her rather unusual job title, Harrington says, “I did *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for Lourdes. When I got to know her, we developed an excellent level of trust. I didn’t know that you could take a dance of Balanchine’s and put a new production around it. I knew you could do that in opera, but I didn’t know it could happen with dance.”

This presented a creative opportunity, she adds. “Balanchine remade [*The Firebird*] several times, enlisting Jerry Robbins to work on it, too. But there are big gaps in the storytelling. That was my reason for wanting to do it; I thought I could improve that aspect of it.” It was also, she notes, an irresistible opportunity for this previously home-bound ballet “to get out into the world.”

However, Harrington says, “First, we had to get permission.” The Robbins Trust holds the rights to the piece, a fact that was a stroke of luck, as, some years ago, Harrington did preproduction work with Robbins on a revival of *West Side Story* that was ultimately scuttled. “Jerry and I had some really exhilarating conversations,” she recalls of the famously difficult director-choreographer; because of lingering goodwill from that aborted collaboration, permission was expeditiously obtained.

The next step was to find a scenic and costume designer. “The caveat from Lourdes was that it should be very Russian,” Harrington says. “So, Anya was a no-brainer.” She is referring to Anya Klepikov, her former student at Yale School of Drama, whose resume includes the Taylor Mac spectacle *The Lily’s Revenge; Rose*, an Off Broadway solo show about Rose Kennedy, starring Kathleen Chalfant; and Tobias Picker’s opera *An American Tragedy* at Glimmerglass Opera. She has also done freshly imagined productions of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *A Doll House* for Triad Stage in North Carolina.

Speaking of Klepikov, who is relatively new to the dance world, Harrington says. “I’ve collaborated with her on a number of occasions. I’ve always felt that she would be brilliant at ballet. I had an instinct. I said to Lourdes, ‘If you give us the go-ahead, we’ll cook up an idea and you can







Opposite: Harrington's cloud projections signal a storm in the offing. Above: Klepikov also designed the stunningly colorful costumes. (A side note: The Miami City Ballet uses Harlequin Studio marleys, both onstage and in its studios.)

decide if it's what you want'."

With permission granted, Harrington says, "I wrote an outline clarifying the story. Anya, being Russian—she was born in Sevastopol; her mother is a musicologist and her father a flute maker—comes to this with a great deal of musical and imagery knowledge. We did a storyboard of what we thought it could look like, and Lourdes okayed it."

Indeed, Klepikov says, "When I was a child growing up on the Crimean Peninsula, my mother's friend, who was a painter, had this tiny business, decorating kitchen cutting boards with the image of the Firebird. I still have one of those cutting boards in my kitchen; when this show came up, it was a very intimate connection for me. I had never seen *The Firebird* live, but I grew up in Russia until the age of 11—it was Ukraine—watching ballet and admiring the dancers."

Klepikov's design is dominated by two features, each of which makes a striking impression. The stunning show curtain offers a gorgeously colored tableau depicting the title character surrounded by others—including Ivan, three princesses, and a line of knights—backed by typically spired Russian buildings, the entire image set against a black background bordered in gold. "The show drop is

inspired by the craft known as palekh," Klepikov says. It is described by Wikipedia as a technique used for "miniature painting, which is done with tempera paints on varnished articles made of papier-mâché (small boxes, cigarette and powder cases)." Klepikov says the technique is seen on "black lacquered jewelry boxes decorated with colorful figures, often from fairy tales." The images on the show curtain are painted on a black serge fabric, "to really punch the contrast between the black background and the saturated colors."

"The idea," Klepikov says, "was to create medallions with prequel narrative moments from our fairy tale in the palekh style—the parts of the story that happened before the ballet starts, to tease the imagination of the audience as they wait while staring at that show curtain. And when the show drop goes out, we try to make the palekh come alive," a reference to the costumes, which employ a dazzlingly colored palette. "Wendall's projections also speak in the stylistic vocabulary of palekh," she adds.

When the show curtain flies out, the audience sees what Klepikov calls "the Bony Portal," which, as per the name, frames the action in a display of human bones. "We wanted to establish the kingdom of Koschei, our villain," she



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Projections are used to suggest the knights magically escaping from the trees in which they have been imprisoned.

says. “His name translates as ‘Bony the Deathless,’ and there’s the impression that he feeds off human life. He is the force of evil that Ivan has to conquer with the help of the Firebird.

“I was excited by images I came across of the Sedlec Ossuary,” Klepikov continues. Located in Kutná Hora, the Czech Republic, the underground chapel in the Roman Catholic Saint Barbara’s Church contains tens of thousands of skeletons. It is known popularly as “the bone church; on display are, among other things, chalices, candelabrum, monstrances, and a family crest made of bone.” It proved to be the perfectly macabre source of inspiration

for the designer: “It has a fascinating history that goes back to the 13th century. The last person to contribute to it was a woodcarver who was hired to organize the bones at the end of the 19th century—not too far from the Ballet Russes and the Art Nouveau and Decadent aesthetics.”

Indeed, the designer says she drew inspiration from the work of the Russian illustrator and scenic designer Ivan Bilibin (1866 – 1942), well-known for his interest in Russian folk tales and Slavic folklore, (Interestingly, according to Wikipedia, “Old Russian art had a great influence on his works. Another influence on his art was traditional Japanese prints and Renaissance woodcuts.”) “I was attracted by the frames he puts around each illustration,” Klepikov says. “They’re not only beautiful but they also comment on what is happening in the picture.” Showing off a Bilibin image, she says, pointing out the border, “To any Russian, these are obviously poisonous mushrooms that help to create the atmosphere of the scary forest in the picture.”

In another sense, the artist provided a vital link to the roots of *The Firebird*. Bilibin, Klepikov says, “collaborated with the Ballets Russes. Having performed ethnographic research in the Russian north, his illustrations are indebted to Russian wooden architecture and the old Russian folk art he studied. My sense of what a fairy tale looks like is probably formed by his illustrations.”

The rest of Klepikov’s design draws on trapunto, a





method of quilting that involves the use of stuffing to create a raised surface; the designer describes it as being evocative of Russian woodcarving. “We decided to make the Bony Portal out of fabric, to match other quilted pieces of scenery,” Klepikov continues. “Our artisans worked for weeks to stitch together these fabric sandwiches filled with batting. I even specified the color of the stitching to help with the three-dimensional quality of these padded-out bones. Then the artisans glued them to fabric stretched on a giant frame; we used a black glue that doesn’t show on the fabric background.” The bones, she adds, “are all a tiny bit different, to give a quality of folk art; also, real bones are not all identical. When side light hits the bone appliquéés, they get even more depth.” She adds, “We started with white material but decided that off-white was truer to the color of bone. I looked at many real human bones, to make informed decisions about the shapes to be used. Overall, the Bony Portal is a romanticized idea of what bones look like.”

Other aspects of the scenic design include a set of legs depicting tree trunks with the figures of knights embedded in them. This combination of trapunto pieces with the palekh effect of the show curtain and projections and the exotic frame of the Bony Portal effectively combine to evoke the world of Russian folk art from which the legend of the Firebird springs. “We wanted it not to feel canned,”

Klepikov says. “With the quilting, everything feels a little bit off, not stamped but handmade. We discussed using a vacuform technique but went with fabric.” The latter item was supplied by Rose Brand and scenic fabrication was done by Hudson Scenic Studio. “Under the leadership of [project manager] Janene Husband,” the designer says, “Hudson really rock-starred through the complicated R&D of quilted scenery on a giant scale—a super challenge to squeeze into a rigorous time line of a commercial shop.”

Harrington says the projections exist only to assist with the storytelling. For example, at one point, she notes, “The princess gestures up to the sky as if to say that a storm is coming. In the original Stravinsky music [not *The Firebird Suite*, a shorter version used by Balanchine], the storm music comes. I hadn’t prepared anything for this moment, but Lourdes said, ‘She’s pointing up there because there’s a storm coming.’ So, in the moment, I made storm clouds that were programmed to move around and create an atmosphere of darkness for the monsters to appear.”

Often, Harrington chose imagery to fill out a stage picture with added detail. One example is a dark, sinister forest seen behind the trapunto trees. “My original idea was to copy the fabric trees,” Harrington says. “But given their linearity and the trapunto effect, there was no way to do it; it didn’t look real enough. So, the forest was invented on the spot.” A vivid image of the sun, its rays radiating in



The ballet’s gorgeous show curtain was created in the style of the Russian folk craft known as palekh.





Klepikov's portal frames the ballet in human bones, adding a distinctively macabre touch; it was inspired by the illustrations of Ivan Bilbin, himself a designer for the Ballet Russes.

every direction, is part of the moment when the knights appear—which, the designer says, “doesn’t make sense in the Balanchine version.”

Explaining further, Harrington says, “I told Lourdes, I’m always confused about the knights who come in just before the finale. The princesses come in one side and the knights on the other, and they’re down in one, and they’re marching toward each other and we’ve never seen these guys before. For me, as a storytelling nudge, I need to connect the dots. I realized, oh, right, they had been captured—but in the Balanchine production, you can’t really see where they are.”

Indeed, she notes, the whole knights-captured-on-trees concept was a challenge to realize: “You know, it’s not so easy to take dancers and have them glued to the wall for 25 minutes. It seemed that the best thing to do would be to indicate that these knights have been captured in trees—which is why we have the image of them stitched into the scenic legs. Anya did a lot of research into what

this would look like in Russian fairy tales. There’s a genre of sculpture of people carving people into a tree so that they look like they’re emerging from it.”

Thus, the dancers cast as the knights are seen behind a scrim on which is projected a grove of trees, creating the impression that they are embedded in the trunks, as seen in the scenery. As the scrim flies out, they are “freed.” The designer notes, “We took a photo of a dancer in a knight costume, trying to create an effect that was subtle and not full-on Disney animation, which I find to be a distraction and in conflict with live dancers.”

Other key images include the aforementioned storm clouds and sun, as well as a large-scale drawing of the Firebird seen in the finale. Imagery is delivered using a Watchout media server linked to two projectors.

Speaking about her title as creative director, Harrington notes that she functioned as a producer—“not financially, but in every other way. I put the team together. I worked with the publicity department on the synopsis. My vision



was bigger than the projection design. It always is and most of the time I don't get permission. In ballet, I do get permission, because there are fewer moving parts and there's no time—and I'm quick and can change my mind easily. After all these years, I think I'm a good storyteller."

## Lighting

Lighting designer James F. Ingalls, says, "The first thing I responded to were the bold colors of the production design. They are wildly vibrant. Going into the first meetings, I hadn't seen *The Firebird* at New York City Ballet; I had seen the archival tape, but you can't tell much of anything from that." In any case, Klepikov's vibrant designs gave him plenty to work with.

He notes, "The show drop is in place during the overture, and I responded to it with colors I hadn't used before, including a light green and a medium yellow; I wanted to enhance the painted colors, to boost them a little bit more without burying them."

*The Firebird* is but one piece in the company's repertory, making up one-third of a program; Ingalls says that the company's rep plot relies heavily on lavender and blues. "I enhanced the plot with some warmer colors, especially for the end of the ballet. The lavender in the rep plot, fortunately, worked well with the costumes."

At the same time, the designer took the company's resources into consideration, making minimal changes to the plot: "The company tours, playing three venues in Florida. The home base is in Miami, but it also goes to West Palm Beach and Broward County." For this reason, he says, "My charge was to rely on the plot as much as I could. I did add some lights, which I call 'cutters,' to cut off the drops." These are useful to keep the dancers lit as they are near a drop, without adding extra light on it.

The company's lighting inventory contains some automated units, but they aren't part of the basic rep plot, so Ingalls opted for an all-conventional rig consisting of ETC Source Fours and PARs, plus some 5K Fresnels, the latter creating a diagonal light to hit the upstage trees, which proved less useful than originally planned when the mid-stage drop was added to the opening during the tech. Lighting is controlled by an ETC Congo console.

Describing his approach, Ingalls says, "We start with a hazy forest look as Ivan is wandering through the trees, with multiple layers of scrim and projections. The mid-stage scrim goes out just before the Firebird enters. When the princesses enter, the scene warms up and we respond to the lavender and yellow in the costumes. The lighting pulls down as a princess signals that the weather is changing and Wendall brings in a projection of clouds coming in. As the monsters arrive, we go into a more abstract look.

"Our biggest challenge," he continues, "was to make the monsters' scene look dark and scary—we realized in the first tech rehearsal that it was too dark—while still seeing enough of the wonderful sculptural costumes and their colors. Anya asked, 'Can we have more side light?' But I was already using side light. Going back to the run-through video, I realized that the section's choreography is largely about contraction and expansion; the monsters, for example, go into a clump and out of it comes two separate lines, like a tape measure. As Koschei and the princesses enter, they are in an undulating line, responding to the pulse of the music. I realized that the lighting could also respond in a similar way, with a series of subtly moving cues; the various side lights from left and right at different heights and in different colors—amber, lavender, green, and blue—brighten and recede slowly—for roughly 30 counts—with the music. This way, we reveal the range of the costumes without being stuck in one unhelpfully big look. Each costume gets its little star moment.

"The Firebird returns and hands Ivan the sword; Koschei is killed and the world stops. As everyone falls to the floor, we bump down to an almost silhouette look with the floor toned in red, recalling the red theme of the Firebird's world from the beginning. Ivan, the Firebird, and the princess are seen in tight specials. The monsters crawl off, and the princess and Ivan leave while the Firebird's solo stays in her world, with projections of warm clouds from Wendall. Then we fade to black (and bring in the mid-stage scrim to set the upstage final look). The new music begins, the princesses and knights enter in one and the world becomes very warm, a dawn look, with Wendall responding with a rising sun on the scrim. The scrim flies out and the lighting keeps building to the warm sunrise of the new day."

Ingalls describes the creative team's collaboration as "great. One of the ballet's administrators came over to the tech table and summed it up, saying, 'Gosh, it's been so calm in here all week.' Wendall and I have worked together a lot and we adore the company. Anya, the new kid on the block, is a giant talent and a terrific collaborator. We were working on this for about a year. She is indefatigable. She keeps refining."

The production was received with acclaim. Writing in *MiamiArtZine*, Cameron Basden called it "spectacularly original," additionally describing it as "a lovely marriage of decor, costumes, choreography, and music." In the *Fjord Review*, Oksana Khadarina praised it for "boldly reimagining the ballet for the 21st-century while still maintaining its traditional fantasy-like atmosphere." When the company returns to regular performances, it will do so in possession of a new repertory favorite that should keep audiences happy for seasons to come. 📶