

Firebird Fever

Marla Bingham lets her new Firebird fly—complete with Native American themes and emotionally driven choreography.

By Cari Cunningham

Classical ballet is getting a make-over from the Marla Bingham Contemporary Ballet. "It's really about doing something that's on the edge and that can reach all people," Bingham says of her Southern California-based group. Their most recent offering, a completely restructured Firebird, which premiered in 1999, is just one of some 20 ballets in the company's eclectic repertory. The choreography, while typically performed on pointe, borrows as much from modern, lyrical and Native American dance as it does from the classical ballet vocabulary, proving that a ballet company can have many different faces.



Marla Bingham Contemporary Ballet Company in Sanctuary

"Ballet can be intimidating," Bingham admits, adding that attending a performance of MBCB can be an empowering experience. "I don't want the audience to struggle." Contemporary without being complex, Bingham's ballets paint beautiful images with costumes and lighting. Her dancers range in age from 16 to 52 and represent a variety of cultures from Asian to Armenian to African. Bingham is confident her work is "so impactful emotionally, that you understand what's going on."



Marla Bingham as the Firebird

When she initially encountered Firebird as an audience member, she found it cold. "The ballerinas were beautiful," Bingham recalls, "but they weren't really telling a story that touched me emotionally." Comfortable with Stravinsky's score and with a different story to tell, she set to work—morphing the original Russian folk tale that Michel Fokine and the Ballets Russes turned into a ballet in 1910.

The Bingham version is a Native American parable featuring Firebird as a symbol of land, which is sacred to native people. "In every native culture, there is a strong connection with birds," she says. "It's about power and being majestic and being free. I really make it a story about the Firebird as opposed to a trapped princess and a young prince who frees her with the assistance of the Firebird." Bingham's story is also about taking nothing for granted: She notes that nothing is "happily ever after."

The retelling of this story has proven her biggest challenge to date. To understand the music, Bingham relied on lyrical skills she developed early in her career, as a member of the modern company Jennifer Muller/THE WORKS (see DS February 2000). Muller's style, which Bingham describes as "sensual, breathy and extremely connected," taught her the depth of connection a dancer or choreographer must have with music. "You have to feel it emotionally," she says. Though a bit different than teaching dancers to interpret a Stravinsky score, previous experience in the music industry gave Bingham lots of practice, as she taught pop singers "how to interpret their music."



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Firebird required Bingham to dig deep into her own cultural heritage as part of the Wampanoag tribe from Massachusetts and to draw from her observations during travel in Turkey and Asia. But the concept of creating movement with an ethnic essence is one she was first exposed to as a dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.



Marla Bingham in *The Passage*

An acting background helps Bingham when coaching dancers. "Sometimes I make them have a conversation with themselves when they're dancing," she explains. This helps them focus on communicating their message. "I truly believe that you can train people to be aware of the way they are projecting," Bingham asserts.

With four successful years performing in the Los Angeles area, Bingham hopes MBCB will soon be ready to hit the road. The success of Firebird has given her the confidence to think about putting her stamp on other classic works. Two ballets that top her list are Romeo And Juliet and Cinderella. In the meantime, she's working on a ballet set to Vivaldi's Four Seasons that will premiere in March.