





FEATHERS AND FLAMES

Tamara Karsavina, the original Firebird (above and left), with the ballet's choreographer, Michel Fokine (left), who also danced the role of Ivan Tsarevich at the premiere in 1910

There have been many, varying iterations of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* over the years, but only one remains true to the original vision. Claire Wrathall traces the history of this ballet's spectacular choreography

In the words of the South African-born ballerina Dame Monica Mason, formerly director of The Royal Ballet in London, the difference between dancing an established role and having one created for you compares with the contrast between prêt-à-porter and couture.

For, like fashion, ballet is an art form made on the body, a hands-on process during which the choreographer works in a studio with the dancers, not simply talking them through the steps, the shapes, the vision that he (choreographers are mostly male) has in mind but manipulating them manually when necessary, in order to make real his imaginings.

This is essentially how dance passes down through the generations too: by word of mouth and copied gesture, senior dancer to junior dancer, teacher to student, maintaining a thread of connection with the original. But to exploit the tailoring analogy, multiple “fittings” on myriad dancers may cause it to alter over time, and at some point the thread may fray, unravel, or even snap.

The Royal Ballet revival of Stravinsky’s *The Firebird*, however, stands apart from the rest of the repertoire. It may be more than a century old, but the cord that anchors it to its creator, the Russian choreographer and dancer Michel Fokine, remains taut.

Created for the Ballets Russes, it premiered in Paris in 1910, Fokine having devised the title role for the legendary Russian ballerina Tamara Karsavina. It was she who then coached the British star Dame Margot Fonteyn in the principal role when the ballet was revived in the UK in 1954. Fonteyn in turn coached Monica Mason when she was first cast in the role a couple of decades later. And it is Mason who continues



to give the current generation of Royal Ballet dancers privileged insight into how Fokine intended the work to be danced. The ballet has a provenance, a purity of line that few other dance works of its age can claim.

Thanks to this, we know, for example, that the principal character in *The Firebird* is no meek princess trapped in avian form. (*Swan Lake* it emphatically is not.) Rather she is a formidable, if beautiful and bewitching raptor. (“I want the beat of mighty wings!” Fokine would say to the diminutive Karsavina, as they rehearsed prior to the premiere. She in turn recommended to Fonteyn that she bare her teeth to demonstrate her fury.) But for all the Firebird’s power, one day she is captured by a passing prince, Ivan Tsarevich. She fights for her freedom, then pleads, eventually securing it in exchange for a magic tail feather.

Later, however, she changes from adversary to savior. Ivan has strayed into an enchanted garden where he encounters 12 maidens playing an elaborate game of catch with golden apples. (An instance of radically inventive and treacherous choreography.) He falls in love with one, the beautiful Tsarevna. But suddenly the girls are confronted by the sorcerer Kashchei, one of the eternal demons in Russian folk culture, along with his monstrous henchmen. There follows an “infernal dance,” an exhilarating and pulsating set piece for a huge company of dancers. Fearing for his life, Ivan summons the Firebird, who helps him to kill Kashchei, so freeing the Tsarevna to marry Ivan Tsarevich. The ballet ends, almost mystically, with the disappearance of Kashchei’s palace, the return to life of all the captives, and what the libretto terms “general rejoicing.”

As a role, the Firebird is undeniably challenging. “It’s incredibly difficult technically,” says the Italian-born ballerina Mara Galeazzi, one of the great Firebirds of the current generation, “and very tiring because there are a lot of jumps, and you also have to use your arms at the same time, which causes so much pain in your back.” (In many classical roles requiring elaborate fast or intricate footwork, the dancer is allowed to maintain a

Right: Margot Fonteyn as the Firebird in 1956. **Left:** Tamara Karsavina, then 69, coaching Fonteyn in the role for a 1954 performance. **Above:** Karsavina in Jacques-Emile Blanche’s 1909 portrait of her as the Firebird in a costume designed by the Russian artist Léon Bakst







Left: a current keeper of the flame, Mara Galeazzi. Right: Margot Fonteyn's pupil Monica Mason, the great Firebird of the 1970s

poised *port de bras*, the term used to describe the positions of a dancer's arms.) "It doesn't matter how fit you are," adds Galeazzi. "By the end of the first section, you're exhausted."

No surprise then that the role is very tricky to learn. First there are the intricate steps. Over the years, these have been recorded on paper, thanks to various systems of dots, dashes, curves, and crosses that represent each pose, gesture, and movement on a staff. (The notation of steps has existed at least since the seventeenth century, when Louis XIV asked his dancing master, Pierre Beauchamps, to come up with "a way of making dance intelligible on paper." Today, there are many written "languages" of choreography in existence; one of the most widely used, Benesh Movement Notation, was introduced in the mid-1950s.)

But notation and video – ballet's other key training aid – can teach a dancer only so much. The real challenges come in overcoming the cramp the ballerina will get in her fingers as she strives to make her beating arms seem wing-like. How to combat the moment of dizziness she will almost certainly suffer in the *pas de deux*. How to bring the bird she is playing to life and soar in choreography the critic Judith Mackrell has described as "a flare of jumps and white-hot stillness [requiring] a technique light and powerful enough to suggest a bird in flight; musicality precise enough to articulate Stravinsky's serrated rhythms; and acting expressive enough to dramatize wildness." Not to mention an undercurrent of exotic, almost sexual tension. As the Russian critic Gennady Smakov wrote of the original Ballets Russes production, Karsavina's interpretation had "resonated in the erotic twilight that enveloped Paris in the 1910s."

Who better, then, to have as a teacher someone who had been immersed in and, more crucially, experienced the role herself? "Monica taught me everything!" laughs Galeazzi, recalling what it was like to work with Mason. "I've tried to take on all she'd learned from Margot [Fonteyn]. I remember her telling me to watch little birds; to look at the way they move their heads really fast as well as their wings; to think about how they'd behave if they were caught."

When Mason first danced the role in 1978, she felt the need "to have a link with the past, [to have] somebody come and show us how it felt." She begged Fonteyn, by then The Royal Ballet's prima ballerina, to tutor her, but even at 59, Fonteyn had still not retired from the stage and did not, as a rule, teach. Eventually she relented and gave Mason an hour, during which she explained that in

"YOU'VE NEVER FELT A HUMAN HAND ON YOUR BODY BEFORE, YOU'VE NEVER BEEN CAUGHT, AND IT'S TERRIBLE"

Russian folklore, firebirds were said to be so vicious they ate men and that from the moment the prince catches her, she hates him for daring to touch her.

She went on, Mason remembered, to use some of the actual words Karsavina had used in coaching her, talking of the feral Firebird's dignity despite the visceral hatred she feels for the prince and the humiliation she feels in having to plead for her freedom. "Even a sparrow notices if another...comes to perch on his tree, his branch," Fonteyn said. "So imagine what it must be like for the Firebird to have a man invade her territory and actually capture her." As Karsavina had told the ballerina, "You are a wild bird. You've never felt a human hand on your body before, you've never been caught, and it's terrible."

Authentic this version may be, but ballet remains a protean art form, and other international dance companies take a less guarded view of *The Firebird*. Indeed numerous versions, still inspired by the same fantastical folk tale and set to the same shimmering, percussive, radically inventive score, have been created since the original production.

George Balanchine made a new version with Jerome Robbins for the New York City Ballet (with designs by Marc Chagall), and recently, Alexei Ratmansky – formerly director of the Bolshoi Ballet in Russia. Indeed almost every major classical choreographer of the second half of the twentieth century has created his own version: Serge Lifar, Glen Tetley, Maurice Béjart (who made an all-male one for the Paris Opera Ballet), John Neumeier (a sci-fi one for the Hamburg Ballet), John Taras (a Caribbean version for New York's Dance Theatre of Harlem)... But it's The Royal Ballet revival – with its sumptuous, innately Russian designs by Natalia Goncharova – that retains the true essence, the DNA as it were, of Fokine's first fabulous vision, just four generations of dancer, or three degrees of separation, from the original. ♦

For more on this subject see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at patek.com/owners

