

## **Asheville Ballet: *Firebird & ANNA!***

by Roger A. Cope

**Asheville, NC, May 12, 2006:** Around this region there are only a few people who can get away with programming classical and popular art on the same bill. Equally few are the venues willing to host the concept while having the vision and means to define success. If the media is dance, well! Asheville is the only option. But then we have this whole other problem of the company name: [Asheville Ballet](#). Jeeze, how to you sell that? Enter Ann Dunn and her merry and sensual band of rogue artists who seem intent on violating conventional expectation, reinforcing stereotype while at the same time destroying it, brandishing a good time while filling the hall, and making big art and rock 'n' roll. Just barge right in, deliver the goods, and carry on!

Wait? Can rock 'n' roll be big art?

Never mind. Ann Dunn is on the loose again.

At the Diana Wortham Theatre in Pack Place, Dunn's group produced a provocative double bill of old and new. In the first half they danced *The Firebird*, an historic 1910 Russian ballet with music by Igor Stravinsky. In the second half they delivered an encore performance of *ANNA! – A Rock Ballet* with original choreography by Dunn and live music by Stephanie's' Id, first performed here last September. It was a riveting night, mostly because there is no earthly expectation of finding such a hugely talented group skillfully painting such a broad swath using classical and modern dance as media.

We'll need to blame someone for that.

Dunn has stated that her choreography is heavily influenced by Balanchine, yet in *Firebird* she stayed close to the original by Michael Fokine. However, trouble maker that she is, there is original material included, notably during the monster dance and love scene. The principals, wearing costumes created by the Ukraine National Ballet, were Amy Kohler (*Firebird*), Lyle Laney (*Prince Ivan*), Allison Hertzberg (*the Tsarevna*), and Sarah McGinnis (*Katschei – the sorceress*). Daniel McGinnis and Shannon Sollars danced the monster duet. In the opening scene a lower-level group of "chicklets" adorned in capes bearing strips of cloth in red, yellow, green, brown, and gold, were vibrating at various rates in contrast with an upper-level ensemble of maidens in long skirts and slow motion framed by a frosted panel screen of light. Stravinsky's score for *Firebird (Zhar'-ptitsa)* was written during the 1909-10 period when he was just 28 years old. He wasn't breaking too many rules yet. On this night a Sony Classical recording from 1989 of Carlo Maria Giulini conducting the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra was used.

The principal dancers carry a certain elasticity in their bearing, a kind of ensemble

flex that accommodates all variants out to the margins. Laney in particular has a way of releasing his partner, after a lift or series of tangled shapes, that is similar to a male ice dancer releasing the woman after a lift or spiral; there is a smooth re-integration with terra firma and he stays in touch – even if lightly – until he is certain the partner is well grounded on her own. This is quite impressive given the velocity of some moves and angles coming from/going to! And this group is quiet; there are no worries about shoe sounds coming from the stage. There are times during ensemble movements when groups get separated a little too far and symmetry is off from what was planned, but that elasticity pulls it back together. Dunn's choreography for the final love duet, the monster dance, and the opening sequence was consistent, enticing, elegant and provocative. The work ended one scene early by abbreviating both score and choreography just before the final non-dance related scene.

After intermission came *ANNA! A Rock Ballet*. This is described as "your autobiography, whether you've lived it yet or not...." Dunn has choreographed this original ballet to the Stephanie's Id recording, *Spiral In*. The effort is to capture the journey from infancy to adulthood and beyond as a kind of subjective 21st-century tone poem in modern dance to a twelve-movement rock 'n' roll score with projected still photos by Trip Huxley and original poetry by Dunn. The effect has an undeniably contemporary feel, a mirror of youth's life challenges, the speculative neurosis of wonder, and a heroic sense of confidence as it claims a space on the world's stage. The dancers were Hertzberg (as Anna), Holly Georgalis, Kohler, McGinnis, Laney, Amy Strickland, Angelina Waxman-Faure, and Megan Weaver.

One particularly effective movement is titled "The Bottom" with a single dancer crawling into a shaft of light on the diagonal while half a dozen dancers line the rear of the stage in silhouette-relief lighting with a sequence of movements. Throughout is the clear stamp of Dunn's expressive vision; spatial, sensual, and filled with familiar moves yet somehow fresh.

[Stephanie's Id](#) with Ménage (female vocalists) performed the score live. It is basically a guitarless band of four with tight ensemble, smart rotation of instruments, plenty of percussion including vibes, marimba, and keyboards, and the uninhibited female voice of Stephanie Morgan. The musicians are Chuck Lichtenberger, Matthew Richmond, Cameron Juroff, and a young blond girl on percussion who is Dunn's fourteen-year-old daughter, Victoria Nelson. Ménage is Mary Ellen Bush and Sarah E. McDonald. The sound is unquestionably pop female and quasi salsa, with the depth of musicianship of Toto and the kind of rambunctious enthusiasm usually reserved for eight seconds on a bull named Bubba. Their fans were a noisy addition to the audience.

Earlier I said we need to blame someone for all of this. Certainly we need to credit all the people who did the work, for it was a long and physical night. Everyone including the band presented a demanding production with professional demeanor and alarming stamina. (I must be getting old.) But the whole idea, the energy to get it done, the programming vision, and the guidance skills must come from somewhere. So I think we need to blame Ann Dunn for all this. Take my word for it: the woman is just flat nuts. You have to be completely crazed to pull off all these elements in one production and do it over three nights. But she also does it

several times a year, and has been doing it for many years! See what I mean?

We need more like her. This is the real deal.

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