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For The Laurel of Asheville

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In the dark of the mountain forest, flashes of red and gold fire streak through new foliage. Strange fluting and warbling echo in the shadows. A leaf stirs; a ripple creases flat water. Anyone quiet and attentive enough might see something remarkable, something magical. They might see something that would change the music of their life.

Now, on the mountains themselves these streaks and flashes in high spring are cardinals and tanagers, the warm blue fire of bluebirds and indigo buntings, the gold splash of goldfinches, the raucous-voiced intrusion of the black-and-scarlet pileated woodpecker. But down in the wide valley between the greening hills, down in Asheville, the red and the gold, the bird with the big voice and gleaming pecks, is the *The Firebird*, the epoch-making Stravinsky ballet being staged this month by Ann Dunn's Asheville Ballet.

The Firebird derives from a Russian folk tale of a magical bird whose feathers turn away evil, and though I think the shed feathers of the birds of the forest might do the same, the ballet has the music of Igor Stravinsky and the choreography of Michael Folkiné to give its claims credibility. The music is an unquestionable modern classic. The choreography, brilliant but not quite ageless, is updated a little by Ann Dunn for this version.

Amy Kohler, perhaps Asheville's most versatile dancer, is the Firebird. Asheville Ballet's resident stud Lyle Laney is Prince Ivan. Allison Hertzberg plays the Tsarevna, and Sarah McGinnis is Katschei, the sorceress. For the bloodthirsty-of-heart there is a marvelous monster duet performed by Daniel McGinnis and Shannon Sollars.

Monsters, sorceresses, magic birds-- what a perfect selection for the turbulent mountain spring, and what a good idea to pair it with *Anna*, a very contemporary piece choreographed by Dunn to the music of Stephanie's Id. I have seen *Anna* or portions of it twice now, and I think it is one of the finest works of art in any genre to be born in Asheville, elegant, sexy, thoughtful, impeccably danced by Dunn's increasingly flawless company. *Anna* is a meditation on the relationship of bodies in space and of souls in relationship, and I would see it again for its own sake, with *The Firebird* thrown in as an almost unbelievably lucky garnish.

Isn't it great to live in Asheville? Where you can hike among the real birds of the morning and by night watch the winged beings of the human imagination take their astonishing flight.

This spectacular evening of dance and music, appropriate for the whole family, will be performed May 11-13 at 7:30 at Diana Wortham Theatre. Tickets range from \$25-40 for adults, \$20-35 for students, and \$15 for all children. For reservations call the Box office at 252-4761. As a special incentive, the company is offering half-price tickets on Thursday night for anyone with a LEAF ticket. Call Dunn at (828) 258-1028 for information on other group rates.