

# CINCINNATI *Ballet*

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## ***THE FIREBIRD***

### **INTERVIEWS WITH ADAM HOUGLAND AND MARION WILLIAMS**

***Adam Houglan***, *Choreographer*

**CB: What is *The Firebird* about?**

AH: It's about the power of the earth and nature and all things, and about co-existing. It's a grown-up, slightly scary Zen fairytale.

**CB: Are you discovering new ideas or lines of inquiry in the music?**

AH: After doing (Stravinsky's) *Rite of Spring* in 2009, I find I love Stravinsky for what he forces out of me. The music is intricate, detailed and bizarre in some places, and beautiful but kind of shrill and atonal in others. It pushes you as a choreographer. It's not the kind of music I would just play at home. It's hard work, but the more you work with it, the more you fall in love.

**CB: Tell us about the process of choreographing with Cincinnati Ballet dancers.**

AH: It's like a science project. You give yourself some rules and parameters and then you experiment until something reacts. That's what's exciting about creating the movement *on* the dancers, rather than coming in with something that's already made and super-imposing it onto them. You don't get that sort of spontaneous, by-chance, exciting thing when you hand someone a list of steps and say, "you're going to do this now." But when you're creating on-the-spot, that's when the most interesting, fortunate, serendipitous, wonderful moments occur.

**CB: I don't think any of us were prepared for how much people loved last season's *Mozart's Requiem*. People loved it – they really connected on an emotional level.**

AH: I was shocked. I really wasn't expecting people to get so excited by it. All I'm trying to do is take ballet, this wonderful, beautiful art form that we have, and I'm trying to make ballets that I would want to watch. If there's something an artist is trying to convey, I want to "get it." I wanted people to understand and connect with the work. With the beautiful scenery and props, and Trad's great lighting, it was just the right mix of obvious and not-so-obvious. It was never my intention to place any judgment on the characters or state, "this is what I believe, this is what you all should believe." The whole thing was about *not* knowing. People from different backgrounds could identify with it, because it didn't exclude anyone.

For more information, visit: <http://www.cballet.org/performances/firebird/adamhouglan>

***Marion Williams, Scenic and Costume Designer***

**CB: Define your creative process**

MW: It's different for every project. Adam and I have known each other since he was a dance student at Juilliard and I was a design student. So we created a really collaborative process. We start by looking at images. He likes to determine the environment of the ballet first, and a lot of times that informs the choreography and the steps he uses. So we start by figuring out what that world is, and most of the time, we start by looking at tremendous amounts of images. Sometimes I draw, sometimes we rip things out of newspapers, sometimes we find things online, and we collect a library of images that we think have some interest and are visually compelling. From there, I start to do scenic sketches, we start to work in a model. From there it evolves. We change things and change things, sometimes at the last minute, sometimes a year in advance

**CB: The women's skirts function both as costumes and as sets. How did you make the choice?**

AW: What's exciting about doing the sets and the clothes on the same piece is that you don't actually have to decide which is which. They add a very sculptural element. They are made from 3/8-inch, welded aluminum framing. We wanted to work with the idea of the caged bird. All of the princesses have their own individual cages, and the set itself is yet another, larger cage. So we tried to figure out a way to put them in cages where they could still dance. So we looked at a lot of different kinds of ideas. Historically hoop skirts and corsets have been traditionally seen as women's cages, but we really wanted to abstract it. The ballet is very contemporary, so we started looking at images of contemporary fashion. So we started looking at the cage/skirt kind of idea. And we wanted something that would scenically move around the stage. They're large – the largest one is seven feet. So we built these skirts that are completely rigid and we put them on casters so they really can glide. The women are able to go en pointe and the cages move around inside the larger cage. No one is wearing wings, including the Firebird. They are still really feminine.

**CB: Men's costumes**

AW: The men are monsters. But we didn't want to do green goblins with warts on them. We wanted to keep them human. And part of keeping them human was giving them something that had a lot of weight. And I think this affects the movement tremendously. He wanted something that was responsive to the loud percussive nature of the score and that really have a great sense of gravity to the movement. So we started looking at what people might wear that weren't like Halloween costumes. So we started to look at a lot of pictures of contemporary fashion that were things like tattoos and Mohawks. A lot of it has sort of a British punk-rock-of-the-80s feel. So there are these plaid kilts, and the combat boots give them a real grounded nature. When you jump and land in a plie in a combat boot it's different from landing that way in a ballet shoe. And it was something that had a certain aggressive nature to it, it has something that's overly masculine, but the mohawks. And the lead monster has a giant wing tattoo on his back. So it's something that's really responsive to his body, but also we know what that is, everyone knows what a tattoo is. But without putting him in a set of wings, it kept him both human and not-human at the same time.

For more information, visit: <http://www.cballet.org/performances/firebird/marionwilliams>

## **About Cincinnati Ballet**

Since 1963, Cincinnati Ballet has been the cornerstone professional ballet company of the region, presenting a mix of important classical full-length ballets and an adventurous, vibrant mix of repertory ballets, regularly with live orchestral accompaniment. Cincinnati Ballet's mission is to inspire hope and joy in our community and beyond through the power and passion of dance. Our mantra is "Everybody dances." To that end, Cincinnati Ballet presents exhilarating performances, extensive education outreach programs (including professional lecture-demos, residencies, scholarship programs and student matinees), and offers top level professional ballet training at Cincinnati Ballet Otto M. Budig Academy, which enjoys an enrollment of more than a thousand participants in multi-level programs across two studio campuses. BRAVO! is the Ballet Resource and Volunteer Organization committed to the financial stability and the artistic excellence of Cincinnati Ballet.

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