



Te Manu Ahi - The Firebird  
Photo: Adrian Malloch Photography

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## THE AUCKLAND DANCE PROJECT

By Jenny Stevenson

This article explores the philosophy underlying the collaboration between Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra's latest collaboration with Atamira Dance Company.

It is tempting to speculate what Russian Composer, Igor Stravinsky would have made of *Te Manu Ahi*, the latest manifestation of his first-ever ballet commission, *The Firebird*. Stravinsky originally created the work for Sergei Diaghilev's company Ballets Russes, 104 years ago in Paris, when he was an unknown 27 year old composer. It featured neo-classical choreography by Mikhail Fokine who regarded the ballet as the "materialisation of my artistic ideas of the unity of creative choreography and creative music" (Fokine, p163, Constable and Company Ltd, London 1961).

*Te Manu Ahi - The Firebird* as created by Moss Patterson, Artistic Director of Atamira Dance Company in Auckland in October 2014, has morphed from Russian folk-lore into a mythical Māori tale and features a cast of one 150 mostly school-aged dancers, who perform mass-movement contemporary dance sequences, accompanied by the Auckland Philharmonia

Orchestra (APO) under the baton of Carlos Miguel Prieto.

It is almost certain that Stravinsky would approve of this aspect of *Te Manu Ahi*. In an article in *The*

*Observer* (1961) he is quoted as saying: "My music is best understood by children and animals," so the large ensembles of school children make perfect sense in this context.

The students are drawn from several schools including: James Cook High School, New Lynn Primary, Northcote Intermediate, Saint Kentigern College and Freemans Bay Primary and they perform alongside Atamira Dance Company members and tertiary dance students from Unitec.

The Philharmonia's admirable initiative is entitled the *Auckland Dance Project* and is now in its fourth year. It is part of the APO's commitment to connect with "all sections of the community" in what they describe as a "high-impact long-term programme".

Moss Patterson has been involved as a choreographer with the *Auckland Dance Project* from the outset. In creating *Te Manu Ahi* he has been



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assisted by Atamira dancer and choreographer Gaby Thomas and APO Education Coordinator Catherine Blomfield describes them as a great team. “Moss has a considered approach,” she says, which she believes the students respond to well and Gaby “finds different words to explain the choreography”, so that the students can grasp it. Catherine believes that “both are striving for excellence” and she “loves to see how the kids take ownership of the work”.

In working on the project, Moss has established a strong guiding principle: it is “a desire for people to be empowered” he says and of “leading people through a process of change”. He believes that the pursuit of excellence through discipline leads dancers “to find out about themselves”. He describes his task as being “to find a meeting point between what they think they are capable of and where they could push themselves to go”.

Although he has already achieved a great deal in his own career as a choreographer, dancer and director, Moss is very quick to acknowledge the mentors who have guided him in his rise to prominence. His initial mentor on the first *Auckland Dance Project, Sacre*, was

British choreographer Royston Maldoom, OBE, with whom he still keeps in touch and who appears to have had a profound influence on him.

The CEO of the Philharmonia, Barbara Glaser, first saw the prototype of Auckland Dance Project, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, in Europe. Royston had created the work to Stravinsky’s score and it featured 250 children and young people performing with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Ms Glaser invited Royston to recreate the work here and it was one of the featured events of the *REAL NZ Festival* during the *2011 Rugby World Cup*.

Moss, along with Ann Dewey and Taiaroa Royal, worked with Royston to create *Sacre* on 190 school-aged dancers and the late Sally Markham, who Moss cites as another mentor, was the Project Coordinator. According to Moss, Royston aims primarily “to create great art and to empower dancers”. But he also espouses a “connection with the spirit” and it is this aspect of the work that Catherine Blomfield describes as being “transformative” and “a special spiritual experience” for all participants.

It was Sally Markham who first “paired me with Royston” says Moss and “I remained under her wing” until her untimely death last year. As a mentor, he says that Sally “gave me all her time” and would constantly “ask me questions” which helped him to clarify his thinking.

Following on from *Sacre*, Moss created two other works (besides *Te Manu Ahi*) for APO. These were: *Poutama* to Handel’s *Music for the Royal Fireworks* in 2012; and *Takarangi* in 2013, to a selection of music collated by Music Director Eric Renick.

Catherine Blomfield says, “I am prepared to stick my neck out and say that *Te Manu Ahi – The Firebird* will be even better than *Sacre*”. Certainly dance reviewer Dr Linda Ashley was impressed with the performance, which was presented at the Aotea Centre in Auckland on 22 October, describing it as “an absolute treat”. She went on to say “The movement whirls around in endless spirals covering every part of the stage, dancing the orchestral score note for note” (Theatreview 22/10/14). This is a considerable achievement, given that Moss and Gaby were only able to work with the dancers “piecemeal for seven weeks” and the groups had just three days with the Philharmonia to achieve the fusion of dance and music. ■