

# Native Ballet: The Spirit Dances



*In the Land of Spirits* — a vibrant combination of native mythology and contemporary ballet.

*In the Land of Spirits* is North America's first full-scale native contemporary ballet. Its blend of the traditional with the modern strikes a responsive chord in its audiences. At its gala première in Ottawa's National Arts Centre, it received a 10-minute standing ovation.

The ballet features native dancers, artists, designers and musicians in a collaborative effort to bring native history, mythology, music and dance into the cultural mainstream. The ballet was choreographed by Jacques Lemay of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in collaboration with Raoul Trujillo, a Genízaro Indian from New Mexico and one of the three principal dancers in *Spirits*. The result is a balanced combination of authentic native dance, classical ballet, and modern dance movements.

The ballet's music is derived from traditional native music which has been woven into a full symphonic score, highlighting the rich sounds of the pan flute and the native drums. The score was written by Canadian composer Miklos Massey with the assistance of John Kim Bell. Bell, the first North American native conductor, produced the show in conjunction with the Canadian Native Arts Foundation (CNAF), an organization dedicated to promoting and developing native artists.

The real showstoppers are the dazzling sets and costumes by award-winning designer Mary Kerr and native visual artist Maxine Noël. They perfectly interweave traditional native elements and modern design.

*Spirits* begins with the descent to Earth of the first woman, Winona (played by Suzanne Brown, a dancer with both Cree and Cherokee roots). The union of Winona

and the Creator produces an idyllic Indian society. But inevitably the elements of modern life intrude and take over the stage.

The Alcoholic, played by Antonio Lopez (who has both Apache and Navajo roots), enters the scene and falls in love with Winona. Then, suddenly, she is kidnapped by the Lord of the Underworld (Raoul Trujillo) and taken to the evil Land of Spirits. The Alcoholic gathers his courage to fight off the Lord of the Underworld. Through his struggle the Alcoholic is transformed into a hero and cured of his addiction.

The message, says Bell, is, "We have to go forward with courage and pride."

Born on the Mohawk Kahnawake reserve near Montreal, John Kim Bell studied both piano and violin. He began his professional career at 17 in New York as assistant conductor for a Broadway musical. The following year, he became conductor for the

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Broadway hit, *No, No, Nanette*; at 18, he was the youngest professional conductor in the United States.

Bell has conducted more than 30 national tours and Broadway musicals. For the 1980-81 season, Bell was apprentice conductor for the Toronto Symphony. After a year with the symphony, Bell studied in Italy and then returned to New York to become the music director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Eglevsky Ballet companies.

For the moment, Bell has put aside his flourishing career to focus on the CNAF. *Spirits* is the organization's newest big project, and the gala performance alone raised more than \$70 000. Plans are already under way to put the production on a 1989-90 tour of Canada and Europe. If the première performance is any indication, then international success for *In the Land of Spirits* lies just ahead.