

BALLET FANTASTIQUE

CONTEMPORARY CHAMBER BALLET COMPANY

Ballet like you've never seen it before.

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QUICK FACTS:

- **WHAT:** Ballet Fantastique's new contemporary ballet, *Pride & Prejudice: A Parisian Jazz Ballet* ...Jane Austen's classic romantic comedy set in 1920s Paris, with live jazz by Gerry Rempel and the Jazz Cats (Gerry Rempel Jazz Syndicate)
- **WHEN:** Sat. May 4, 7:30pm; Sun. May 5, 2:30pm
- **WHERE:** Soreng Theater, Hult Center
- **CHOREOGRAPHY:** All-original, from choreographer-producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager
- **TICKETS:** \$27, \$33 (discounts for students, youth, seniors, and groups of six or more). On sale now through the Hult Center Box Office: 541-682-5000 or www.hultcenter.org Advance ticket purchase highly recommended

Love in the jazz age—Ballet Fantastique dances Jane Austen with a little “joie de vivre”

Take your seat for ballet—and literature—like you've never seen it before. Ballet Fantastique's VENTURE season closes with a playful foray into Jane Austen's classic romance from choreographer-producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager. And true to Ballet Fantastique form, there's a twist: *Pride & Prejudice: A Parisian Jazz Ballet* brings Austen's spirited women, nosy neighbors, embarrassing relatives, determined bachelors, and smarmy cads to life—in 1920's Paris. Live jazz by Gerry Rempel Jazz Syndicate—including both iconic music from the era and original new works by Rempel—sets the score. (The band good-naturedly dons tuxes and the name “Gerry Rempel & the Jazz Cats” for the premiere.)

“We're big Jane Austen fans,” confesses Hannah, “...and we always have been.” Donna adds that this *nouveau* setting concept for Ballet Fantastique's first Austen ballet wasn't such a stretch: “This is a story many love, and we're setting it to music that we love, in an era we love to choreograph for. This ballet really moves!”

Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* was first published in 1813 and has consistently been deemed her most popular novel. It portrays life in the genteel rural society of the day, and tells of the initial misunderstandings and later mutual enlightenment

between Elizabeth Bennet and the haughty Mr. Darcy. But rather than Austen's original setting in rural 19th century England, Ballet Fantastique's *Pride & Prejudice: A Parisian Jazz Ballet* moves the story to urban 1920's Paris—to the years French speakers called the *années folles* ("crazy years")—an era of dynamic social, artistic, and cultural change.

"When we first started asking ourselves if we could move *Pride & Prejudice* to Roaring 20's Paris, I actually emailed two of my favorite former UO English Literature professors to talk it through with them," says Hannah. "We wanted to make sure that we could pull this ambitious idea off—while still maintaining the integrity of Austen's themes."

The move is ambitious indeed, but University of Oregon professors Liz Bohls and Diane Dugaw agreed—it could work. After all, Austen's novel expresses a search for self in the midst of shifting societal expectations, and the 20's were a particularly fascinating time, especially for women: as jazz music roared, the flapper redefined modern womanhood. Women were given the right to vote for the first time. Though marriage was still an important social construct, attitudes toward the convention were changing, viewing it as more of an equal partnership. Women cut their hair and shortened their skirts. Conflict between the modern and the traditional abounded.

Ballet Fantastique's telling: Three traditional, upper-class Brits stumble into the Bennette girls' *avant-garde* Parisian jazz cabaret in a smoky back alley in Montmartre—Darcy, Bingley, and Bingley's haughty sister, Caroline. There, at the "Moulin Bleu" jazz cabaret, Austen's story unfolds to rollicking retro live French jazz, as the fiery (now-French) Elizabeth Bennette ("Bennet," in Austen's original, of course) and her four sisters meet and mingle with the single, rich, and proud tourists.

"This is my dream role," says Ashley Bontrager, who dances the role of Lizzie Bennette. "Lizzie is one of my favorite heroines because she embodies it all—the perfect balance of wit, charm, and beauty to captivate almost everyone she encounters. While following her heart and going against society and her mother's wishes, it all turns out well in the end, and her story is about a woman who always follows her heart, and ultimately earns the respect and love of a handsome, intelligent man with a very rich inheritance! It's a fairy tale, really." On the choreographic aesthetic, Donna remarks, "I'm emphasizing rhythms and asking the dancers to move with fiercely detailed, quick musicality and detailed arm and hand movements to evoke the style of the period. We're using irregular and asymmetrical formations and patterns to show how the era was challenging the traditional. The dancers are telling me that they're loving moving so fast."

Gerry Rempel Jazz Syndicate's (Jazz Cats) band members include: Rempel (guitars), John Polese (trumpet, accordion), Gus Russell (piano), Bruce Cole (Drums), Byron Case (Bass), Scott Mitchel (alto sax), and Merlin Showalter (congas).

French vocalist Susanna Meyer and vocalist Amy Hackenschmidt join the group singing a range of period pieces, including Cole Porter, Sydney Bechet, Josephine Baker—and two saucy contemporary tunes by the French group Paris Combo. Rempel also composed two pieces for the ballet: the wild and risqué “Le Moulin Blue,” and “Les Etoiles,” a reflective and atmospheric piece reflecting the gypsy jazz nuances of the era.

Rempel, director of the Jazz Syndicate, performs with and composes for contemporary jazz and blues ensembles throughout the Northwest, and recently toured China playing with the University of Oregon Gospel Choir. On creating and arranging music for the ballet premiere, he says, “Much of the material has been worked up from scratch, and yes, that has been a lot of work,” says Rempel. “But it’s a wonderful opportunity to collaborate with Ballet Fantastique. The dynamism of the ballet working with the live music ensembles is energizing for the arts in our area and a different animal for us. It’s fun.”

Singer Meyer adds: “I admire Ballet Fantastique's bold choices of themes and choreography, and relish the opportunity to collaborate with such a forward-thinking ballet company. Having grown up in a French culture, it is especially thrilling to be able to share my love of French music with Ballet Fantastique and its audience,” says Meyer.

Be prepared for a playful battle between pride and passion in what Ballet Fantastique does best: all-original choreography, live music, and a daring twist on a classic story in *Pride & Prejudice: A Parisian Jazz Ballet*.

Cast artists include Ashley Bontrager as Lizzie, Alanna Fisher as Jane; Hannah Bontrager as Lydia; Leanne Mizzoni as Kitty; Krislyn Wessel as Caroline Bingley; Caitlin Christopher as Charlotte Lucas; and Justin Feimster as Charles Bingley. Guest artists include Elijah Labay (Northwest Dance Project) as Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy; Ernesto Leaplace (international guest dancer) as George Wickham; and Portland-based actor Adam Goldthwaite as William Collins, who narrates the action.

Quick facts

Pride & Prejudice: A Parisian Jazz Ballet premieres at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts May 4, with performances Sat. May 4 at 7:30 pm and Sun. May 5 at 2:30 pm, and an educational outreach performance for several hundred area youth on Fri. May 3. Following *Pride & Prejudice*, Ballet Fantastique becomes the first American dance company to perform in San Benedetto del Tronto, where they have been invited to present the Italian premiere of their original production of *You Like It: A Wild West Ballet* in July 2013. Ballet Fantastique’s 2012-2013 season is the last of their three-year Hult Center Resident Company application process, and has included all-original repertoire for each production.

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