

# BALLET

*ballet like you've never seen it before.*

# FANTASTIQUE

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+ HANNAH BONTRAGER**  
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## QUICK FACTS:

- **WHAT:** Ballet Fantastique's contemporary ballet, *The Book of Esther: A Rock Gospel Ballet*
- with LIVE MUSIC: Multi-year, national award-winning UO Gospel Singers
- **CONCEPT + CHOREOGRAPHY:** All-original, by choreographer-producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager
- **EUGENE PERFORMANCES:** Fri. May. 9, 7:30pm; Sat. May 10, 7:30pm; Sun. May 11, 2:30pm, Soreng Theater, Hult Center; tickets \$28-48 (students/youth \$16-22), with \$5 off regularly priced tickets for groups of five or more. On sale now through the Hult Center Box Office: 541-682-5000 or [www.hultcenter.org](http://www.hultcenter.org)
- **FLORENCE PERFORMANCE:** Fri. May 16 at 7pm, Florence Events Center; tickets \$24 regular reserved seating (youth \$16). On sale now at the Florence Events Center Box Office: 541-997-1994 or [www.eventcenter.org](http://www.eventcenter.org); box office hours Monday-Friday, 9:30am-4:30pm)
- Please note: Advance ticket purchase highly recommended (Ballet Fantastique sells out)

## **A spellbinding biblical story comes alive in Ballet Fantastique's collaboration with the award-winning UO Gospel Singers**

*"And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters...and it was written in the book." Esther 9:32*

Ballet Fantastique premieres the final new contemporary ballet of their 13-14 Season: NEW LEGENDS this May 9-11 at the Hult Center with *The Book of Esther: A Rock Gospel Ballet*. The original work is a collaboration between Ballet Fantastique choreographer-producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager and the multi-year national award-winning UO Gospel Singers, under the artistic direction of Andiel Brown.

"In many ways, this project is a dream finally realized," says Ballet Fantastique Artistic Director Donna Marisa Bontrager. "I've always been drawn to this story and wanted to tell it through dance...and I love this music!"

And of this music that will set the backdrop for the Bontragers' new choreography, UO Gospel Singers Artistic Director Andiel Brown says, "The best way to describe the music we'll be singing in *The Book of Esther* is eclectic, uplifting, and inspirational." In addition to leading the choir on stage, Brown will also represent the character of Mordecai, Esther's guardian and a bold, principled leader of the Hebrew people, God-fearing and resolute in the face of impending disaster. Says Brown, "I love the creative process. Just seeing the dancers work out the choreography to the song we will be singing is so inspiring. People should be excited to see this marriage of gospel music, story, and ballet as it has never been done before."

Together with Brown, the Bontragers have chosen 11 gospel songs spanning two centuries. From traditional to contemporary, pieces like "Lean on Me," "When You Believe," "I Don't Mind Waiting," and "Now Let Me Fly to Zion, Lord" (a traditional African American slave spiritual) will set the stage for the rich historical drama of a Jewish girl named Hadassah/Esther who becomes queen of Persia and uses her beauty, wisdom, faith, and cunning to thwart a planned genocide against her people. Esther's spellbinding story is documented in both the third section of the Jewish *Tanakh* and the Christian Old Testament.

To supplement the choir pieces, the Bontragers have also commissioned Eugene-based composer and jazz/rock guitarist Gerry Rempel to create two original contemporary Persian “rock” instrumental pieces for the ballet premiere. These instrumental pieces will set the scene for the ballet’s court scenes in counterbalance to ballet’s gospel songs, wherein the singers on stage represent the perspective of the Hebrew people.

Of the project, Rempel says, “What I find intriguing is the strength and courage of Esther to do what she believes is right even though she is afraid. This is one of the few times in the Bible that a woman is the central subject throughout. It is a wonderful opportunity working with Ballet Fantastique. The cultural dynamism of the ballet working with the live music of diverse music ensembles is definitely catalyzing and energizing for the arts in our area. I love the risks entailed working with live music. The presentation seems more alive because of it. I also love the challenge of composing for different settings and this was a great opportunity.” Rempel has previously composed two works for Ballet Fantastique’s *Pride & Prejudice: A Parisian Jazz Ballet* (2013), and another for *String Theory* (2011).

Ballet Fantastique’s *Book of Esther: A Rock Gospel Ballet* will open with the banishment of Queen Vashti, set to one of Rempel’s Persian rock instrumental pieces. Audiences will next meet Mordecai (Brown), and his ward, young Hadassah, in “Take a Trip.” When Hadassah is selected to join the young women who report to the King’s harem, Mordecai and her people rename her and encourage her bravery (“I Believe”). She learns to trust Hagai, keeper of the women (“Lean on Me”), and earns the king’s favor (“Presence of Royalty”). Meanwhile, Haman, villainous vizier of Persia and advisor to the King, dances his plots for control and vengeance against the Jewish people to another of Rempel’s originals, a brooding guitar solo. Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman (“Fly to Zion”), and Esther asks her people to fast and pray with her before she approaches the king with her request for salvation (“I Don’t Mind Waiting” and “When You Believe”). The ballet concludes with the downfall of Haman and a raucous celebration of courage, faith, and final victory (the choir’s new medley of “I Smile/Today’s a New Day” and “Joy in my Soul”). Brown promises to have the audience singing along by the ballet’s finale.

Choreographically, Donna and Hannah are fusing and abstracting diverse dance styles as a springboard for the story’s dramatic themes, showcasing the artistry, versatility, and dramatic range of their company’s critically acclaimed artists. Specifically, they are drawing inspiration from Donna’s work with the Feast of the Tabernacles in Jerusalem. The well-versed dance theatergoer may also see a movemental homage or two to Alvin Ailey’s seminal *Revelations*.

Ballet Fantastique principal dancer Leanne Mizzoni will dance Hadassah/Esther; Justin Feimster is King Xerxes; Hannah Bontrager is the Spirit; Caitlin Christopher, Ashley Bontrager, and Krislyn Wessel are Queen Vashti and her ladies, Amitis and Cassandane (real historical Persian princesses); Lydia Rakov is Zeresh. Argentinian guest dancer Ernesto Lea Place, a Ballet Fantastique audience favorite, will dance the part of Haman. Guest actor Jim Ballard is Hagai, keeper of the Harem, and Brown himself will play the part of Mordecai as he leads the choir in the story’s song and inspires Esther’s faith and bravery.

“The story of Esther is very powerful and as a female and a Jew, I feel her story is very important,” says Lydia Rakov, Ballet Fantastique company dancer. “The holiday of Purim is the telling of the Esther story and I have always loved it. The story of her wisdom, bravery, and courage is one to be admired. We’re telling audiences not to miss this ballet!”

Tickets are available in-person at the Hult Center or online at [balletfantastique.org](http://balletfantastique.org).

**Also coming up:** Open Barre, Ballet Fantastique’s unique Wednesday night open rehearsal series at the Oregon Wine LAB (488 Lincoln St, downtown) is back on April 24, 2014 at 6:30-8pm. Guests can enjoy a tasting of local wine from William Rose Wines, light hors d’oeuvres inspired by the concept courtesy of Party Downtown and Vanilla Jill’s Frozen Yogurt, and an open rehearsal with Donna and Hannah and the dancers. Admission includes a suggested donation of \$10—free for season subscribers.

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For high-resolution images of the production, please email [bfan.media@gmail.com](mailto:bfan.media@gmail.com).