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Ballet Fantastique presents *Tales of Beatrix Potter*, a new literary ballet for family audiences

On Saturday, May 1 at 2pm, the Ballet Fantastique Chamber Company closes the 2009-2010 season at the Hult Center with *Tales of Beatrix Potter*, a unique, energetic ballet premiere set in the English countryside and telling the charming stories of Peter Rabbit, Squirrel Nutkin, and Jemima Puddle-Duck.

Tales of Beatrix Potter is inspired by the whimsical literary tales of Helen Beatrix Potter, written over a hundred years ago (the first animal story was published in 1902). Ballet Fantastique directors and mother-daughter team Donna and Hannah Bontrager bring Ms. Potter's characters alive with playful new choreography set to hauntingly sweet music by English composer John Lanchbery.

Just as Lanchbery adapted his music from obscure 19th century British folk composers, Donna and Hannah have been inspired by Ms. Potter's faraway world in their creation of the choreography. The Bontragers' *Tales of Beatrix Potter* juxtaposes the formal elements of English country dance with creative plays on balletic movements to evoke the nature of each of Ms. Potter's belovedly roguish animal characters.

Whom to expect to meet on stage? Of course, there is mischievous Peter Rabbit, stealing cabbages and leaping through the garden rows. Then there is determined Jemima Puddle-Duck and the Fox who wants to make her into soup; Jeremy Fisher, an elegant but excitable frog who immensely dislikes getting his galoshes wet while fishing for minnows; and silly Squirrel Nutkin, who regrets not treating Old Brown the Owl with more respect when his tail is taken hostage. A *pas de six* of couples in the Mouse Waltz weave in and out of classical formations with their to-scale tails (2 yards each!), and Piglet brothers venture off to Market, where they have to be creative to avoid the sausage-farmer.

In all, *Tales of Beatrix Potter* (Act II of the matinee) is comprised of short suites, linked together with the appearance of a young Ms. Potter, who visits her created world for inspiration as she writes and paints throughout. Rest assured, Hannah says—audiences familiar with the tales will be able to easily recognize favorites.

Dancing these vibrant characters has been an exciting but challenging endeavor for Ballet Fantastique's classically-trained professional dancers. On the role of the Fox, Ashley Bontrager says, "I find myself thinking, ok so I have to get myself into this character. He's trying to be calm and sophisticated, but he's so excited about snatching up Jemima's egg... Then I just have to step back and laugh! We're taking the process seriously but we're also trying to have lots of fun with it. We think that's important and that the audience will feel the playfulness and fun from us as performers."

To familiarize themselves with the characters, the dancers read the stories and studied both Beatrix Potter's expressive illustrations and the English Royal Ballet's famous danced version of the tales. Amelia Unsicker, who dances Jemima Puddleduck, says "This ballet really does express Beatrix Potter's quirky humor—we know that it will bring smiles to the faces of both children and children at heart. We love it!"

Costumes, sets and masks are also playing an important role in the ambitious undertaking. "The ballet takes full advantage of Ballet Fantastique's network of talented local collaborators," says Hannah. "We have brought together an incredible team of artists, costumers, and maskmakers from across the community."

The process of bringing the characters to life is multi-faceted, and it begins with the custom construction of a costume modeled after Ms. Potter's original illustrations. Costumes, designed by Donna Marisa Bontrager and Ellen Jorde Urrutia and then constructed by a team of area seamstresses, are custom-tailored to the dancers and draw upon designs from authentic period dress.

Next come headpieces, accessories, and masks. There are 22 masks in the ballet, and like the costumes, each has been hand-crafted. Each mask takes an average of 18 hours to construct. Much thought and some trial-and-error has gone into each component. "I started the masks in paper-mache, which is a more traditional material for mask-making," says Ballet Fantastique costume designer Ellen Jorde Urrutia. "But there was something wrong—there wasn't enough life in [the masks]. So we switched to textiles to give the animal characters more life and a sense of softness, and because I feel that I can work much more creatively and expressively with the textiles." Jorde Urrutia trained herself in the use of felting specifically to create the masks for *Beatrix*.

At each turn, there's another challenge: The choreography and the costumes have to work together. "It may look very playful, but this is truly difficult choreography," says company principal dancer Leanne Mizzoni. "It doesn't stop! Add to that the task of dancing with a complex costume, a tail, *and* a mask. It's definitely compelling us to step up to a different level as dancers." It helps that Artistic Director Donna Marisa Bontrager is also overseeing the costume design and construction. "I go to the drawing board with our seamstresses," she says, "and I know what will work in motion. There might be a great idea, but it has to work for the dancers in motion and on *pointe* in the partnering and *allegro*. We take it to the studio and then we take it back to the costume room."

Sets are also being especially designed and constructed for the ballet, and a backdrop is being brought in from California.

Why this story? Both generations of Bontrager women grew up with Ms. Potter's tales. "After we finished *Carnival of the Animals* (commissioned by Eugene Symphony's Youth Concert Series in 2008)," says Donna Marisa, "we wanted to create another wonderful, playful youth program. I've *always* wanted to do something with Beatrix Potter's stories. My daughters loved these stories as children, and I loved them as

a child. It's been so much fun to work on this project with them. It's our gift to the community and to each other."

In keeping with the kid-friendly theme of the afternoon, Act I of the performance is a shortened program comprised of four children's folk tales from around the world. The company women will each perform one of the Seasons variations (from the *Cinderella* ballet), which are part of the original French fairy tale. Another French fairy tale is featured in the Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf *pas de deux*, danced by Ashley Bontrager and Alonzo Moore. The Little Humpbacked Horse tells a Russian children's folk tale, and new choreography by Hannah Bontrager for "Calamity Jane" brings an American female folk hero into the mix. The whole performance with intermission will run under two hours.

Tickets, on sale now at the Hult Center Box Office, are \$14 for students and youth and \$25-30 for reserved seating. Each ticket stub may be brought in to the Academy of Ballet Fantastique and exchanged for a free trial class. Generous discounts for groups of six or more are available.

Ballet Fantastique will also present *Tales of Beatrix Potter* for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland on June 18.

Tales of Beatrix Potter (A Ballet) is sponsored in part by a grant from the Lane Arts Council, with support from the City of Eugene Cultural Services Division as part of Ballet Fantastique's Project DanceREACH.

OTHER COMMUNITY EVENTS FOR *BEATRIX*

- **Meet the dancers at the Peter Rabbit's Tea Party: Sunday, April 18 from 1-3 pm at the Secret Garden Bed & Breakfast.** Meet the dancers, hear the stories, engage in interactive activities and enjoy a formal picnic tea. An additional ticket (kids \$30, adults \$15) is required for this event and may be obtained at www.balletfantastique.org or by calling (541) 342-4611. Space is limited.
- **Book Fair: Saturday, April 10 from 2-4 pm at the Eugene Barnes & Noble.** Hear the tales and enjoy a free mini-performance and dance lesson.
- **Educational Matinee for Schoolchildren: Friday, April 30 from 10-11 am in the Soreng Theater, Hult Center.** A free educational matinee for schoolchildren; select number of tickets still available. Teachers or school administrators may reserve them for students by emailing Laura Modjeski at bfan.tours@gmail.com or by calling (971) 506-9001.

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BACKGROUNDER

Ballet Fantastique Brings Professional Dance Training, Performance Opportunities, and Artistic Events to Eugene

Ballet Fantastique is a nonprofit organization that keeps classical ballet vibrantly alive through unique, community-centered, world-class training, educational, and performance experiences for artists, audiences, and professionals. This organization was established in 2000 and earned nonprofit status in 2004.

Ballet Fantastique has three components: A Professional Chamber Ballet Company, a Pre-Professional Training Academy, and an outreach wing, which all join together to bring dance to diverse audiences both in school and in theater. Ballet Fantastique was created by a mother-daughter team comprised of Donna Marisa, Hannah, and Ashley Bontrager.

The Academy Introduces the Vaganova Syllabus to Students

Donna Marisa began her ballet career at the age of 18 when she enrolled in her first dance class at the University of Oregon. According to a *Register Guard DASH Magazine* feature published in 2009, Donna felt an immediate connection with dance. She says, "I fell in love with ballet. I just knew that was what I was supposed to do. It was what was in my heart." Graduating with a degree in Architecture, Donna danced with various professional ballet companies for many years in New York state, including Empire State Ballet, Buffalo City Ballet, Royale Dance Theatre New York, and Festival Choir Ballet. After performing in New York, Donna realized that teaching ballet was her true calling, so she moved back to Eugene with her daughters. Donna knew that her daughters were destined to be ballerinas. Hannah says, "Before we were born, she knew she wanted us to be dancers...She just wanted us to have this beautiful art form as part of our lives."

While the girls were still in high school, the family opened a dance school in a studio in the heart of downtown Eugene. They began getting people involved by inquiring door-to-door, asking residents if they were interested in ballet classes. The Academy now attracts international attention for its limited class sizes and professional training.

Ballet Fantastique's Academy follows the Vaganova Syllabus, which consists of eight levels of training. The Vaganova Syllabus requires dancers to understand the concepts they are learning and to study these concepts according to a notated progression, which makes for injury-free training. Donna Bontrager developed the curriculum for the Academy and is the Artistic Director for the program. She works closely with every student in their training, choreography, and performance.

Hannah Bontrager is a dancer and Executive Director of Ballet Fantastique. She has experience as a professional dancer, teacher, choreographer, and arts administrator. She graduated from the UO's Robert D. Clark Honors College in 2007 with honors and concurrent degrees in Dance and English literature, with a minor in Community Arts. In addition to her performance with the Ballet Fantastique Chamber Company, she has performed professionally as a dancer with Colorado Ballet and the Manassas Ballet Theatre.

Ballet Fantastique Develops the Only Professional Chamber Company in Eugene

Hannah and Ashley's dance skills became more advanced and they wanted to perform at a professional level. The family brainstormed the idea of starting their own chamber company to create world-class performances for audiences in Eugene and beyond.

Hannah assumed the role as the Public Relations administrator for Ballet Fantastique in this endeavor, while Donna oversaw the artistic direction, including making costumes, and Ashley filled in wherever she was needed. They had to collaborate with musicians, create and distribute posters, write press releases, solicit donations, and recruit dancers, interns, and volunteers.

Hannah is now the Executive Director of Ballet Fantastique's Academy and Chamber Company. Ballet Fantastique has the only professional chamber ballet company in Eugene with a roster of 5 to 7 professional dancers (most from the Northwest). The company has been invited to perform across Oregon in various festivals. They have collaborated with the Eugene Symphony, the Oregon Mozart Players, the Trio Voronezh, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and many other artists, musicians, and renowned organizations. Ballet Fantastique's performances and events reach more than 10,000 audience members annually. Long-term plans are being made for tours to Mexico and Russia in coming years.

Ballet Fantastique Performances Receive Outstanding Reviews

Ballet Fantastique's 2008-2009 season premiere performance, *Visions d'Amour: 10 Ballets in Paris*, received multiple standing ovations and was sold out on the second night. According to the *Oregon Daily Emerald* feature story ("Parisian Drama, Eugene Dancers"), writer Maria Baum says "the performance showcases passionate Eugene talent, including University music and dance students, while engaging into the romance and elegance of French culture." Hannah describes the show as a crowd-pleasing program with an original score by Oregon-based composer Jeremy Schropp and orchestra that encompasses everything Parisian.

Ballet Fantastique continues to impress audience members. Ballet Fantastique is preparing for its spring performance of *Tales of Beatrix Potter* to inspire youth audiences. The ballet will feature the company's young professional dancers, plus student dancers in a danced tour through Beatrix Potter's beloved stories.

Ballet Fantastique and its extraordinary talent continue to bring audience members back year after year. More information about Ballet Fantastique is available at www.balletfantastique.org. Ballet Fantastique's 2010-2011 Hult Center performance season will be announced this spring.

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