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Eugene's *Ballet Fantastique* becomes city's first non-profit ballet academy

MONDAY, MAY 1—After an anticipatory wait, Eugene's own Ballet Fantastique received word of their official non-profit status last week.

The news has been cause for celebration, but it hasn't distracted this ambitious group from a formidable profile of outreach and performance projects already underway. Directed by mother-daughter team Donna and Hannah Bontrager, the organization has been dreaming—and dancing—up a refreshing whirlwind in the ballet community for the past five years. From a free monthly demonstration series in their studio, to choreographing ballet to opera music and awarding "Rising Star" scholarships to aspiring and underprivileged young dancers, Ballet Fantastique isn't afraid to fuse their fierce classical vocabulary with a rainbow of new ideas.

Currently underway is the EXPERIENCE DANCE! PROJECT, funded by a grant from Lane Arts Council. As part of this project, dancers from the academy and chamber performance ensemble will present a series of interactive school assemblies for just under a thousand kids at Eugene-Springfield elementary and middle schools.

Ms. Bontrager's dancers will present classical ballet variations and teach a mini ballet class. Children will actually handle real pointe shoes and tutus and learn what to look for in a dance performance.

"We can see from their faces that we're giving the students a new kind of ownership of dance—the kind that will make them want to come to the theater again and again as adults—and it's so rewarding," says Hannah, the younger Bontrager, herself a graduate of the Ballet

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Fantastique training program and now Executive Director of the organization.

A parent who was present at a recent performance is similarly effusive: “Ballet Fantastique brings a glowing atmosphere of discovery to even an elementary school cafeteria. The opportunity to experience interactive, high-caliber art such as is brought by the EXPERIENCE DANCE! PROJECT is invaluable to these children's educations—and it’s so exciting to know that there’s an academy in town that knows it and is doing something about it,” said Margie Van Dorn, parent of a second-grader at Springfield’s Mount Vernon Elementary.

The newest wing of Ballet Fantastique is another first for the city: the area’s only professional dancer development program is dedicated to giving local talent incentives to remain active artists in the area through free or sliding-fee weekly master classes and performance and choreographic opportunities.

Says the senior Bontrager: “As educators, we’ve become so distracted with training our dancers so that they’ll be good enough to go away to perform in New York or San Francisco, that we’ve lost sight of how important it is to create valuable, viable chances for them to share their dedication and talent with our community.”

But the academy isn’t only passionate about educating the city—Ballet Fantastique also passionate about educating its students. And accordingly, from its youngest students (age 4) to these professional dancers, Ballet Fantastique has chosen to limit their classes to as few as five dancers each to ensure a semi-private atmosphere conducive to the professional coaching that is so integral to their mission. Dancers ages nine through professional are guided through every detail of the internationally recognized Vaganova training method, the same syllabus that has trained such ballet legends as Mikhail Baryshnikov and Anna Pavlova.

All of this top-notch training is paying off: the company turned the heads of critics and arts appreciators last October, when they produced a near sold-out Hult Center concert with collaborators Traduza Dance Company and Project Tango.

The performance, an innovative “mosaic” of Spanish-inspired ballet and Brazilian modern dance, earned reviews of “impressive and spectacular.” All such praise aside, Bontrager notes that dance critic Rachael Carnes’s (*Eugene Weekly*) likening of young Ballet Fantastique performers to the legendary Kirov Ballet Company was her proudest moment.

The academy is located in downtown Eugene, just blocks from local arts hotspots such as the Shedd, Hult Center, and MacDonald Theater.

Says Bontrager: “We chose to open our training academy downtown because it’s very

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important to us to be part of creating something unique and happening in our city center. It's been fulfilling and exhilarating to see new theaters and arts centers opening around us—and we want to continue to find new ways to forge partnerships with these groups, as our city continues to grow its strong arts presence around us.”

True to this vision, the academy and performance ensemble will be the first dance group to break in the Shedd when they present a spring concert there in early June.

Please visit www.balletfantastique.org for more information and press materials.

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