

Bravo! 2009-2010

Visions of Loving the Dance

Behind the curtain at Ballet Fantastique

by Suzi Steffen

Under the span of concrete that crosses 10th Ave., toe shoes and hoodies sprawl near the edges of a black dance floor. Mirrors, fans, chairs and a Van Gogh-colored Parisian café canvas also push out to the rim of the practice space. But at the center, looking under the barre and into the mirror, ballet dancers stretch and prepare.

One dancer just got in from D.C.; one returned from a summer of dancing with the Oregon Ballet Theatre; and one had a terrible cough for a while and can't practice on point just yet. The women of Ballet Fantastique, Eugene's chamber ballet company, have work to do.

Those who have spent any time taking ballet lessons might think they know a little about what feeds into productions like Ballet Fantastique's Oct. 9-10 show. But watching even an hour of practice in this company, where collaboration among the dancers and choreographers (often the same people) couldn't be of higher importance, a casual former reader of *A Very Young Ballerina* realizes that good performance demands sweat, hours of time, kinetic understanding and an intelligence about space – the space of the body and the space of the theater.

Visions d'Amour: 10 Ballets in Paris requires a lot from the small company, which is comprised of four women and one man. Artistic Director Donna Marisa Bontrager, who trained in the Russian Vaganova Syllabus and in turn trains young Eugene dancers, watches the practice with careful consideration. In one dance, new company dancer Leanne Mizsoni, Amelia Unsicker and Ashley Blake Bontrager join forces as they fall in love with company dancer Alonzo Moore to the strains of Edith Piaf singing "Milord." The three women must dance in concert much of the time, but suddenly they'll have steps that show off their skills (Mizsoni, as Hannah Bontrager points out a few times, gains fabulous leg heights, for instance), and as they mime getting ready to go out for the evening, they dance around and with chairs.



Visions d'Amour dancers and musicians. Photo by Woden Photo.

The world of ballet, Hannah says, is much more relaxed in Eugene than on the East Coast. Hannah joins her mother in choreographing many of the dances, under what she calls "Donna's overarching vision." Both Hannah and Leanne Mizsoni danced with the Manassas Ballet Theatre in northern Virginia. Eugene, surprisingly and perhaps because of the UO's School of Music and Dance, supports the large Hult Center resident Eugene Ballet Company and the smaller Ballet Fantastique (both rely to a certain extent on the classes they offer). Still, Hannah says that on that other coast, "People line up to buy tickets the first day they go on sale!" Day-of-

performance purchasing fills the tales of any Eugene performing arts company; in February, Eugene experienced a mini-craze the night that Ballet Fantastique's *Danse en Rouge: Variations in Red* opened at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater at the same time that the Eugene Opera's semi-staged *Il Trovatore* began on the Silva stage. Patrons of both shows packed the lobby, overtaxing the ticket windows and causing late starts. "It's a testament our community has for the arts," Hannah says, that the town can support so many different theatrical and dance companies, not to mention music. "We'll never be doing the big story ballets like *Sleeping Beauty*," Hannah says, but she adds that she's proud to be part of a community in which "the Eugene Ballet is doing such great, exciting things too!"

Donna started Ballet Fantastique as an academy in 2000. "I wanted to build the kind of academy for my daughters that I would have wanted to attend as a young dancer," she says in an email. The young dancers, ages 9 and up, work with ballet instructors up to five times a week, in semi-private classes. "We work closely with each of our dancers and his or her personal goals and challenges," Donna says.

In 2006, Hannah and Donna, the mother-daughter duo, began the Ballet Fantastique chamber company. "We're about creating a more intimate experience for the audience: There are six of us instead of 30 or 40," Hannah says. Despite the intimacy – the dancers perform in the



Ashley Bontrager. Costume by Ellen Urratia. Photo by Todd Cooper.

smaller Soreng and out in various spaces around the state – they still have to practice reaching the person in the last row. They must act the part, feel the music – and dance perfectly.

Ashley Bontrager laughs at herself when she misses a step or two in their Piaf rehearsal, but she's deadly serious when she says to herself and the other women, "I have to practice this dance every day before the performance."

Hannah says, "Our dancers have all of the passion and precision of the soloist-level artists that they are." Unsicker, a biology major at the UO (Hannah majored in dance and English; Ashley's a journalism major), spent many years studying at the (Portland) Oregon Ballet Theatre school, and Mizzoni's training and performance history include the Joffrey and American Ballet Theatre.

One of the keys to Ballet Fantastique's run in Eugene has been collaboration. "We are a company that tries to showcase Eugene's artistic voices," Donna says, including the Eugene Symphony, Traduza Dance Company, the Mozart Players, Karin Clarke Gallery and many more. This year's first performance is no

different: It began with the music of local composer Jeremy Schropp. He wrote a tribute to Van Gogh called “Night at the Café Terrasse,” after the painting of the same name. The third portion of *Visions d’Amour* consists of ballets set to his music, using a live orchestra (the chamber group is holding several fundraisers to pay for the live music, which obviously enhances any dance performance but is expensive).

Back at the studio, Donna Bontrager suggests to Leanne Mizzoni, who’s working on a solo set to a Chopin work, a slightly different turn, a way of moving across the floor that incorporates the diagonal. Hannah tells Mizzoni to engage her upper arms as she dances with a candle. Soon, the male dancers (Moore and guest artists) will join practices, but for now, it’s about the strength of the women, collaborating, thinking – and dancing.

A season-opening gala at Café 440 on Coburg Road starts at 5 pm Sunday, Sept. 27, and ranges from \$40 per person to \$250 per VIP couple. See more info on this and the rest of Ballet Fantastique’s season (and classes) at www.balletfantastique.org or call 342-4611.

Visions d’Amour: 10 Ballets in Paris. 7:30 pm • Friday, Oct. 9 and Saturday, Oct. 10, Hult Center. www.hultcenter.org. 682-5000

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