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**Ballet Fantastique presents *Arabian Nights* on Jan. 28 at the Hult Center:
Stories profile six powerful women**

Ballet Fantastique continues its 2011-2012 season with another all-new ballet, *Arabian Nights*, performed on Jan. 28 at 7:30 p.m. at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater.

"Our theme throughout the 2011–2012 season is 'DARING,'" says Artistic Director Donna Marisa Bontrager. "With *Arabian Nights*, we're bringing our dancers and our audience into dramatic new territory."

Inspired by the ancient literary treasury *1001 Arabian Nights*, Ballet Fantastique will tell its *Arabian Nights* tales through all-original choreography by Ballet Fantastique co-directors Donna and Hannah Bontrager. The production will feature dramatic dancing, lavish new costumes, and sets designed especially for the performance.

1,001 Arabian Nights is a collection of Middle Eastern and South Asian stories and folk tales that was compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age. The work was collected over many centuries by various authors, translators and scholars across the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. Of course, this ancient piece of world literature presented hundreds of tales for the Bontragers to consider exploring through dance. Where to begin? Donna and Hannah carefully chose six stories to tell in the ballet production—and at the center of each is a powerful, complex *female* protagonist.

"We were so surprised to discover how compelling and nuanced these female characters are when we started to do our research in the *Tales*," says Hannah, who holds a BA in literature from the University of Oregon. "There are powerful female genies, a slave girl who becomes the sultan of an entire city, women who succeed on quests when multiple men before them have failed. With our company roster of six intelligent, strong female performers, it seemed like a natural endeavor to choose these stories as our narrative inspiration."

Act I of Ballet Fantastique's *Arabian Nights* will tell the tale of Scheharazade, the framework narrative for *1,001 Arabian Nights*. A courageous woman and the daughter of the royal vizier, Scheharazade offers herself as the next bride to the Persian king Shahryar, a bitter and angry man who has decided to marry a succession of girls and execute each the morning after the wedding as a sign of his deep distrust of all women. To save her life, Scheharazade begins to tell the king a tale that night, but leaves him in suspense, promising to continue the tale the next night. She continues in her tales—each containing an important lesson about faith, forgiveness, or courage—until 1,001 nights of storytelling have passed, and the king discovers that she has earned his trust, respect, and love. Scheharazade will be danced by

Hannah Bontrager, and King Shahryar by regular Ballet Fantastique guest artist Elijah Labay.

In Act II of the production, Donna and Hannah dramatize five of the stories that Scheharazade tells Shahrayar through dance. First, Justin Feimster dances the part of Zeyn Alasnam and Leanne Mizzoni as the woman who changes him in the Story of the Diamond Statue. Next, Krislyn Wessel dances as the title character in The Tale of Zumurud.

“This is shaping up to be my favorite role that I’ve danced with Ballet Fantastique,” says company member Krislyn Wessel on the role of Zumurud.

Alanna Fisher is the title character in The Tale of Princess Parizade, and Amelia Unsicker is the wise female dhervish who helps her on her quest to find the Golden Water, the Talking Bird, and the Singing Tree. Ashley Bontrager dances as the genie and Adam Haaga as the merchant she chooses as her husband in The Story of the 7th Night. Finally, the ballet is rounded out when Hannah Bontrager dances as Princess Badroulbador, and Elijah Labay as Aladdin in a scene from the Tale of Aladdin.

In their choreography, Donna and Hannah have been inspired by the great classical works *La Bayadere* and *Le Corsaire*, but are creating movements that bend the classical vocabulary of these ballets, with complex rhythms, evocative shapes, and unusual patterns of steps.

“The goal is always that the choreography is sophisticated and challenging, but that it doesn’t *look* challenging,” says Donna. “Our dancers must make the choreography look absolutely effortless in service of the stories they are weaving to life.”

“*Nights* is very exciting and also very challenging for us. The music and the choreography are completely new and different than anything we’ve done before. It’s definitely out of our comfort zone, but BFan thrives on that, and nothing inspires us more than a new project,” says dancer Ashley Bontrager.

The Bontragers have selected a range of dramatic musical compositions to complement their choreography. Both traditional and new arrangements of music from Persia, India, and China, represent a palate as diverse as the stories they complement. They have drafted the narration for the ballet in partnership with Genevieve Speer, and UO Arab-American Theater professor Michael Najjar is also lending his expertise to the project. Throughout the ballet, Deepti Khedekar will read the narrative voice of Scheharazade.

Ticket sales are at an all-time high this season for Ballet Fantastique, and *Arabian Nights* is no exception—the production is already 85% sold out. Advance ticket purchases are highly recommended. *Arabian Nights* also includes a youth education outreach matinee at the Hult Center on Thurs. Jan. 26 for area middle and high schoolers, and limited space is still available. Teachers can contact Ballet Fantastique for \$5 student tickets by emailing info@balletfantastique.org or calling 541-342-4611.

QUICK FACTS

- ❑ **Sat. Jan. 28 at 7:30 p.m.**, Hult Center for the Performing Arts, Soreng Theater
- ❑ **Tickets** \$27-33, general admission; Significant youth, student, and senior discounts available.
- ❑ **Tickets** available at the Hult Center Box Office, by calling 541-682-5000, or online at www.hultcenter.org.

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