

rock 'n' roll version of Cinderella

Original show sets the story in 1964 with dancing to tunes such as 'Big Girls Don't Cry'

BY BOB KEEFER

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This weekend at the ballet won't exactly be your grandmother's "Swan Lake."

Ballet Fantastique is doing an original "Cinderella" at the Hult Center on Saturday and Sunday to close out its season, billing the show as a "rock opera ballet."

That means don't show up expecting violins and tutus.

Instead, the small company's mother-and-daughter artistic team, Donna and Hannah Bontrager, have set "Cinderella" in a rock 'n' roll version of 1964. Cinderella, danced by company member Alanna Fisher, is "Cindy" in this show. Prince Charming, who courts her, is performed by Frederick Davis, a dancer imported specially for the show from New York's Dance Theatre of Harlem.

The entire second act takes place not at the ball, but the prom.

Fred Crafts of Radio Redux will narrate.

The music for "Cinderella" consists of more than a dozen early '60s pop tunes – think "Big Girls Don't Cry," "You Can't Hurry Love," and "The Boy I'm Going to Marry" – arranged and performed by Shelley and Cal James with Joe Weber and Rica Wright Weber. The four all play in Eugene's Agents of Unity, as well as with the popular local disco band Satin Love Orchestra. They are backed by Tom Teutsch, Jim Reinking and Jennifer Scurlock.

Creating a rock opera from a playlist was a challenge, admits singer and primary arranger Shelley James. First off, she wasn't even born until two years after the time in which the work is set, so she recognized only a few of the titles.

"If you can believe this, after Donna and Hannah approached me about this, I tried to talk them out of the idea," James said. "These are such huge hits of the 1960s – and I'm an MTV kid. I thought I didn't relate enough to that music to really sell it on stage. When I saw 'Mashed Potato' on the playlist I was starting to sweat."

But then James began listening closely to those old tunes, marveling at the brisk energy in songs such as “Tell Him,” a 1962 hit for the Exciters.

She said yes anyway.

Thus began a marathon of music arranging for her and her husband, Cal, moving the key signature down to fit her husky contralto and lengthening the songs’ playtime – early 1960s pop songs often clocked in at a minute and a half – up to five minutes long to fit the Bontragers’ choreography.

She and some of the musicians recorded a rehearsal set for the dancers to work with but didn’t perform live in rehearsals until midway through last week.

None of the dancers in the show is old enough to have heard the show’s music when it was first being played on the radio.

“I’ve done ‘Cinderella’ before, but never like this,” said Davis, who got drafted to play Prince Charming through a friend in Ballet Fantastique. “This is a huge variety of music.”