

ONE THOUSAND AND ONE STEPS

Dancers take on the tales of Scheherazade

BY BOB KEEFER

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The exotic stories of the sprawling collection known as “One Thousand and One Nights” have been popular around the world for centuries.

Drawn from folk tales and literary sources dating back to the eighth century and beyond in Asia and Africa, the collection includes such now-popular fare as Sinbad the sailor, Ali Baba and the 40 thieves, Aladdin and his lamp and, of course, the beautiful and exotic storyteller Scheherazade.

A handful of tales from “One Thousand and One Nights” will be brought to life this weekend, when the dancers of Eugene’s Ballet Fantastique perform their interpretation of the tales in “Arabian Nights.”

“This has been something we’ve been wanting to undertake for a while,” says Ballet Fantastique dancer and Executive Director Hannah Bontrager, who will perform as Scheherazade in Saturday’s show at the Hult Center. “This has been definitely an ambitious and challenging project.”

One of the challenges, Bontrager explained, is the sheer volume of material from which to choose.

Let’s cut in here and explain a bit more about “One Thousand and One Nights.”

In the original stories, a Persian king, Shahryar, who has been betrayed by his bride, sets out on the extraordinary course of marrying one virgin after another and then executing each one after the wedding night to ensure she can never stray from fidelity.

Scheherazade is the daughter of the king’s vizier, whose duty it is to come up with all those eligible virgins. When he runs out of eligible young women, Scheherazade – to her father’s horror – offers herself as the next royal bride.

But Scheherazade has a wily trick in mind. She is a great storyteller and can tell hundreds of fascinating tales. On their wedding night, she tells the king a particularly fascinating story, but at dawn begs off giving him its conclusion, saying she’ll finish the tale tomorrow night. She then repeats this process 1,001 times, keeping herself alive and the king interested long enough for the couple to have a succession of sons. Over the passage of time the king falls in love with his wife and pardons her from

execution.

This literary device – Scheherazade’s nightly story hour – was used to frame hundreds of folk tales, historical accounts, poems and even erotica that came into the collection from different cultures, including those of Persia, India and China.

“One of the things that makes this project the most challenging is that there was so much great material to choose from,” Bontrager says. “There are over 1,000 stories! We didn’t read them all. But we have been working with people who are familiar with details and we started exploring some of them.”

Bontrager and her mother, Donna Marisa Bontrager, the company’s artistic director, consulted Michael Malek Najjar, a University of Oregon theater professor specializing in Arab-American theater, in putting together the show. In the end, Bontrager says, the company chose tales that highlight strong women.

“One of the things that was really exciting for us as we were choosing the stories we wanted to tell is how many interesting, intriguing and nuanced female characters there are in that literature.”

The company will dance to recorded versions of various songs from the region that inspired the tales, such as European/Lebanese oud player and composer Rabih Abou Khalil’s “Bushman in the Desert.”

Other music will include “Whirling,” as in those dervishes, and a piece called “Istanbul.”

“We’re using music that is appropriate to the different geographical areas that the stories are told about,” Bontrager says. “It’s not like there’s a precedent, where we can look at another ballet company and say, oh, we should use that idea. We’re exploring new territory.”

Another bit of new territory the company is exploring this weekend will be the use of recorded narration, telling those Arabian tales, overlaid onto the music.

The voice of the narrator – the voice, that is, of Scheherazade – will be that of Deepti Khedekar.

The show will be presented in two acts. The first half will be the story of Scheherazade herself, while the second will portray her tales.

In part because much of the contemporary public so strongly associates the stories of “One Thousand and One Nights” with Disneyfied versions, Ballet Fantastique has cleaned up the story a bit to make it more family-friendly.

In this telling, the king isn't betrayed by his adulterous first wife, but by his ambitious younger brother who is plotting to bump him off. And, to keep things utterly PG, the king doesn't kill his first thousand wives before Scheherazade signs up for her own wedding night. "She steps forward right away," Bontrager says with a laugh.

Even though Ballet Fantastique, with its mix of traditional ballet and popular and contemporary culture, has been steadily drawing audiences, the company was nervous about this show's drawing power and planned only one performance.

That might have been unduly pessimistic; "Arabian Nights" was all but sold out by late last week.

Next up for the company: "Cinderella," a rock-opera ballet version of the tale set in 1964, with local singers Shelley and Cal James. That's coming May 12-13.