

Ballet's 'Arabian Nights' takes us on mystical trip

BY GWEN CURRAN

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The name Scheherazade conjures up magical mystical visions of harems, treasure caves, sensuous women, dangerous men, glittering palaces and genies. Ballet Fantastique included all of these in "Arabian Nights," an all-new ballet that premiered to a sold-out Soreng Theatre on Saturday night.

Scheherazade was first produced by Diaghilev's Ballet Russe in 1910 with choreography by Mikel Fokine. Fokine's famous passionate adagio may be the most erotic duet in 20th century classical ballet.

The ancient Persian tales of 1,001 nights have been told and retold by writers from Sir Richard Burton to Naguib Mahfouz, Goethe and Salman Rushdie, among others. Scheherazade has been played in films by Maria Montez and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

King Shahzyar has his wife beheaded after discovering that she has betrayed him. In anger, he decides to marry each day and have each wife beheaded. Clever Scheherazade, knowing the king's intentions, volunteers to spend one night with the king. The king is in awe as Scheherazade tells her first story, but then she stops. The king asks her to finish, but Scheherazade says there is not time, as dawn is breaking.

On the second night, she finishes the first story and then starts a more exciting tale. Again she stops at dawn. Again the king spares her life. And so the king keeps Scheherazade alive day by day, as he eagerly anticipates the finish of the previous night's story. At the end of 1,001 nights and 1,001 tales, the king has fallen in love with Scheherazade. He spares her life and makes her his queen.

Donna and Hannah Bontrager are the producers and choreographers of Ballet Fantastique's "Arabian Nights." They also wrote the narration with Genevieve Speer. It was read and recorded by Deepti Khedekar.

Dancers included Ashley Bontrager, Hannah Bontrager, Alanna Fisher, Leanne Mizzoni, Amelia Unsicker and Krislyn Wessel. Elijah Labay, Justin Feimster, Adam Haaga and Stefanus Gunawan appeared as guest dancers. Labay is a company member with Northwest Dance Project in Portland.

Ballet Fantastique did not use the famous Rimsky-Korsakov music. They chose a Turkish composer, Omar Faruk Tekbilek, and a Lebanese oud master, whose work has

been adapted by Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Emmy-award winning composer Jeff Beal's work also was used.

Act I introduced us to Scheherazade (Hannah Bontrager) and King Shahryr (Labay) and others important to the tales.

Act II tells "The Tale of Zeyn Alasnam and the Sultan of the Genie." This was my favorite of the evening. Mizzoni displayed passion as well as superb dancing skill. She and Feimster moved well together.

Next came the "Tale of Zumurrud," followed by "The Tale of Princess Parizade" and "The Tale of the Seventh Night," with the evening ending with "The Tale of Alladin."

The set and costumes were exquisite.

Perhaps it would be better to have the narrator, Khedekar, live on stage.

This is a ballet that holds challenges for all concerned. Ballet Fantastique likes to take chances and I applaud its daring.