

Esther the Lionhearted and Twinkle-Toed

Ballet Fantastique's rock gospel ballet goes biblical

ARTICLE | MAY 8, 2014 - 1:00AM | BY [LAUREN MESSMAN](#)



A local mother-daughter team is pushing the limits of ballet by finding inspiration in the most unlikely of places.

For *The Book of Esther*, Ballet Fantastique's Donna Bontrager and her daughter Hannah Bontrager go way, way back — to approximately 486 BC — for the finale of their 2013-2014 season. What better way to end the company's "New Legends" series than with a story from one of the oldest existing works of literature: *The Old Testament*? Mother's Day weekend, Ballet Fantastique, along with the award-winning UO Gospel Singers, will bring Esther's story to life as a rock

gospel ballet May 9-11 at the Hult Center.

Esther, one of the few biblical stories with a strong female protagonist, is a timeless tale of courage and integrity. The plot is simple: Esther is crowned queen of Persia, and she keeps her Jewish faith a secret from the kingdom. But when Haman, the King's viceroy, plots genocide against the persecuted Hebrew people, Esther struggles with her newfound position of power and her loyalty to the Jewish faith.

"Esther is an inspiring, nuanced story about a lionhearted woman whose faith cuts through a world of danger and political intrigue to save her people," Hannah Bontrager says.

Donna Bontrager adds, "Yes, it's a religious story, but we didn't have any reservations as choreographer-producers in tackling it through dance because this story of good overcoming evil truly is, we believe, powerful and resonant for all audiences."

While staying close to the original biblical telling, the Bontragers are most excited to portray this classic through a visual lens. They've created a role for the Spirit of God, a female dancer that guides Esther through her personal struggle, as well as placed the UO Gospel Singers in the role of the Hebrew people. Joining the dancers on stage will be the Gospel Singers' Artistic Director Andiel Brown in the part of Mordecai, Esther's cousin and voice of reason.

"This helps us to bring the choir into a much more dynamic relationship with the storytelling," Hannah Bontrager says. "They're not just a background musical support but actually serve as a type of Greek chorus, almost."

These visual twists, set against simple backdrops and enhanced with local designer Allison Ditson's signature costuming, help translate Esther's story in a visually powerful and contemporary context. But regardless of the story's chosen medium, Ballet Fantastique hopes to place *The Book of Esther's* valuable themes at the forefront.

"This is really a story about people and how they choose to live their life," Donna Bontrager says. "We can either rise to the challenge or we can just give up. This is

a story about courage, seizing opportunities to help and the faith that's going to have some kind of result.”

The Book of Esther: A Rock Gospel Ballet runs 7:30 pm Friday, May 9, Saturday, May 10, and 2:30 pm Sunday, May 11, at the Hult Center; \$28-\$48, college and youth discounts available.

Leanne Mizzoni as Esther