

BALLET *ballet like you've never seen it before.* FANTASTIQUE

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For Immediate Release: February 15, 2016

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For high-resolution images of the production, please email events@balletfantastique.org

QUICK FACTS:

- **WHAT:** The premiere of Ballet Fantastique's NEW original contemporary ballet, *Dragon and the Night Queen: Celtic Stories*, with LIVE music from internationally renowned Irish musician Eliot Grasso and the Gerry Rempel Ensemble
- **CONCEPT + CHOREOGRAPHY:** All-original, by choreographer-producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager
- **PERFORMANCES:** Sat., Feb. 20, 7:00 pm, (Florence Events Center); Fri., Feb. 26, 7:30 pm, Sat., Feb. 27, 7:30 pm, Sun., Feb. 28, 2:30 pm (Soreng Theater, Hult Center). Tickets \$29-49 (students/youth \$18-24), with \$5 off regularly priced tickets for groups of 6+. On sale now through the FEC and Hult Box Office. **NOTE: Opening night at the Hult is nearly sold out and this is the fastest-selling production in Ballet Fantastique's history; please get tickets early!**

Celtic myths come to life in Ballet Fantastique's *Dragon and the Night Queen*

Choreographer-producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager bring their new contemporary ballet, *Dragon and the Night Queen: Celtic Stories* to the Hult Center Feb. 26-27-28 and Florence Events Center Feb. 20. The all-original, 75-minute work is a collaboration between Ballet Fantastique and internationally renowned Irish musician Eliot Grasso and the Gerry Rempel Ensemble, and is the latest in Ballet Fantastique's genre-defying hybrid dance-theater works, pairing theater and storytelling with original dance choreography set to live original arrangements of music that one doesn't traditionally associate with classical ballet.

Live Music: Eliot Grasso and the Gerry Rempel Ensemble: Eliot Grasso is an award-winning, internationally recognized performer and recording artist. Grasso has performed extensively at venues including Constitution Hall, the Library of Congress, the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, National Geographic, and the Kennedy Center. He has collaborated with actor Russell Crowe, Grammy-winning conductor David Sabee, and Garrison Keillor. Contemporaries claim that Grasso's "intuitive sense of melodic and technical variation make him one of the most creative and dynamic musicians in the contemporary world of Irish traditional music," and call him "one of the finest uilleann pipers in the history of Irish music in America."

"I have actively collaborated on this innovative project. The neo-Celtic flavor is particularly exciting when merged with the fairytale narrative that will emerge in the form of dramatic dance," says Grasso. (Grasso will also play flute, whistle, and fiddle in the production.)

Gerry Rempel Ensemble joins Grasso for *Dragon & the Night Queen*, with Gerry Rempel (Music Director, electric/acoustic guitars, bouzouki), John Polese (keyboards, accordion, recorder), Merlin Showalter (acoustic/electric percussion), Rick Carter (acoustic/electric bass), and Cindy Kenny and Alyse Jamieson (vocalists). All are well-known musicians with diverse professional performance portfolios.

The Bontragers worked with Rempel and Grasso to create a score for the ballet that is, as Rempel describes it, "enchanting, atmospheric, medieval, mystical, and mythical." The ballet is comprised of varied combinations of material, both contemporary and

ancient, that draw from Celtic and other “world” music, including an infiltration of rock elements. Vocalists Kenny and Jamieson employ five languages in the score, including Scottish Gaelic, English, Latin, Icelandic, and Turkish. The score also includes Rempel’s new original compositions for the *Dragon* project, including “Serena and the Dragon.”

“Donna and Hannah asked me to write ‘Serena and the Dragon’ to evoke a tribal, dark, and dramatic setting...I loved the challenge of writing with the characters, story, and mood in mind,” says Rempel on his original composition, which premieres with the ballet.

Score and Scenes: “*Dragon & the Night Queen* is basically part King Arthur, part Riverdance, part Zelda—the video game,” laughs Ballet Fantastique Choreographer-Producer Hannah Bontrager. “Donna and I started by delving into some of the most fascinating characters in Celtic tradition—especially the women. We worked with our creative team to imagine how each could propel the story, and to imagine what might happen when they encountered each other.” Ballet Fantastique’s all-female creative team includes Choreographer-Producers Donna Marisa and Hannah Bontrager, and resident librettist/historians Genevieve and Deborah Speer.

Donna and Hannah’s characters include Morgan le Fay, Rhiannon, and the Morrigan—all drawn from Celtic, Arthurian, and Irish legend dating from the late 5th and early 6th centuries AD. “I liked these characters because they are strong women and we have a lot of women in our ballet company that are very strong dancers,” says Ballet Fantastique Artistic Director and Choreographer-Producer Donna Marisa Bontrager. “While we’ve taken these real characters from ancient legend, this is an entirely new story.”

Act I of Ballet Fantastique’s “new story” opens with a jovial folk scene (Irish traditionals “Farewell to Nigg,” “Rokatanc,” and “An Innis Aigh”), in which our hunter-hero, Cian (Anthony Rosario), professes his love to his sweetheart, Annora (Ashley Bontrager). Annora tells Cian that if he wants to impress her, he should bring her Morgan le Fay’s famed Golden Apple. The lovestruck Cian wanders into Avalon, where he meets Saoirse, a magical bird (Leanne Mizzoni), messenger of Morgan le Fay (“Golden Apple”). Morgan le Fay (guest artist Jordyn Richter from Suzanne Farrell Ballet), brilliant and powerful priestess of Avalon, tells Cian that she will give him a Golden Apple—but only if he first saves the kingdom from Dragon Stoorwyr (Richard Nebel), who has imprisoned Princess Serena (Ashley Bontrager), and with her, the peace and serenity of the land (“Ghostwood”).

Act II begins in The Endless Forest, where The Morrigan, Phantom Queen (Amanda Coleman) and her Ravens sound the battle cry and battle Stoorwyr (“Iduna/Unda”). While not powerful enough to take The Morrigan captive, Stoorwyr wounds her badly. In Scene 2, The Night Queen Rhiannon (Hannah Bontrager) and King Consort Myrddin (Jim Ballard), reign over her Sídhe, a realm visible only by moonlight (“King of the Fairies”). Saoirse brings Cian to meet the royals, who greet him warmly. They prepare for the prodigious fray to come, and Rhiannon gifts Cian with the powerful Sword of the Cláíomh Solais to aid him (“Oyneng Yar”). Cian successfully defeats Stoorwyr and Weylin (“Lupercalia,” the title of which references an ancient, pre-Roman pastoral festival, observed in February to avert evil and purify the city, releasing health and fertility). Cian unbinds Princess Serena from her chains (“Satyros”; here, the Latin lyrics reference love, revelation, rebirth, and coming into the light, as the land is once again restored to harmony and released from Stoorwyr’s chaotic destruction). Cian receives his Golden Apple, a symbol of healing and rebirth. All join in celebration and triumph.

Characters: In addition to the familiar characters of Myrddin (often called Merlin in Arthurian legend) and Morgan le Fay, a character that will likely be new to most audience members is that of The Morrigan (goddess of war, often associated with fate and sometimes considered a harbinger of doom). Her form varies from legend to legend, but in *Dragon & the Night Queen*, she appears as Queen of the Ravens. “I find it’s a very feminist character,” says Amanda Coleman, who will be dancing the role. “The choreography is powerful, yet there is an element of tenderness behind it too. She’s good, even though she’s dark.” A large amount of raven-lore exists in Celtic mythology: Other than actually prophesies, the future could be divined from the actions, the flight, or the calls of ravens. The Morrigan is sometimes seen as the convergence of three Celtic female deities, which we symbolize in the three Ravens who dance at her side.

The Night Queen, Rhiannon is a potent symbol of fertility, yet she is also an Otherworld and death Goddess, a bringer of dreams, and a moon deity. She possesses deep magic and can manifest her dreams and desires for the good of all. She is a good witch, a healer. Rhiannon is a goddess, the princess submerged in cultural darkness who lies like a shadow in the realms of our dreams, waiting to come to life with vigour and passion again.

And, then there's the Dragon. "Dragons are powerful and ever-present in Celtic and Irish mythology," says Genevieve Speer, Ballet Fantastique Librettist/Historian. "They are often represented as gatekeepers to other worlds and guardians of universal treasures. Yet while they are commonly thought of as fire-breathing marauders, to the ancient Celts, dragons were not necessarily evil. In fact, dragons are more likely to symbolize chaos, and rampaging dragons were often seen to have caused natural disasters. Our story has taken some creative liberties with this personification of a natural force, and feature a man who has killed so many dragons that he has become one himself—and has thus thrown off the natural balance of the land. We're inspired by the idea that the Celts believed magical agencies to pervade every aspect of their surroundings and were concerned primarily, therefore, with the work of constraining the powers of this magic to beneficent ends."

Costumes: The *Dragon* project features original costume, headpiece, and armor designs by Donna Marisa Bontrager, Jonna Hayden/J. Hayden Creative, and Etain Wilday. Original set designs by Donna Marisa Bontrager with Mike Ricker.

Forging ancient songs with contemporary choreography and medieval characters with a modern mindset, *Dragon & the Night Queen* promises a bonny, defiant new ballet—a vivid exploration of new borders, filled with riotous spirit.

Run time: 95 minutes, including a 20-minute intermission.

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