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THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2017

SECTION D

Buzzworthy

A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

Eugene visual artist Wesley Hurd and composer **Eliot Grasso** have collaboratively produced a multidisciplinary exhibition of art and music — “The Odyssey of These Days” — that intimately explores the depths of loss, grief and hope in the wake of the Umpqua Community College shooting. The project, which premieres at 6 p.m. Friday with a second performance at 6 p.m. Saturday at the Hult Center, was influenced by the shooting, which occurred while Hurd was creating his paintings. The music, performed by the Dréos ensemble, was composed by Grasso in direct response to Hurd’s painting and is designed to reflect inner experiences. Tickets for Friday’s show are \$55. Saturday’s show is \$15, \$10 for students and seniors. Tickets are available at hultcenter.org. Information: odysseyofthese days.com



DANCING ORIGINALS

The Lane Community College Dance program will present the work of faculty, alumni and local guest artists in a performance series called Collaborations 2017. The performers will display original choreography and will be joined by the Eugene Youth Ballet and DanceAbility International at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday in LCC’s Ragozzino Performance Hall, 4000 E. 30th Ave. Tickets are \$10, \$5 for college students and seniors, and free for high school students (lanec.edu/tickets). Bonnie Simoa at 541-463-5645 or simoab@lanec.edu

DANCE



Amanda Coleman portrays Jade Fox in Ballet Fantastique’s “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.”

THE SPIRIT OF THE SWORD

Ballet Fantastique to perform “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” in world premiere

By **ALEX V. CIPOLLE**
For The Register-Guard

Ballet Fantastique and Oregon Mozart Players bring the romance, repression and risk of 18th-century China to the stage this weekend with the world premiere of “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” the ballet.

The origin story of the world premiere of “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” begins with a few glasses of wine.

In the winter of 2013, Kelly Kuo, creative director for Oregon Mozart Players, and Donna and Hannah Bontrager, producer-choreographers for Ballet Fantastique, were chatting over some vino at Oregon Wine Lab.

“When we first met, we were looking for some way of collaborating,” Kuo said on the phone from the University of Texas-Austin, where he spends a good chunk of the year teaching and conducting. “I tossed the idea out of ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.’”

Kuo recalls that, at the time, a colleague of his recently had performed the concerto — written by Chinese composer Tan Dun, who also wrote the 2000 kung fu blockbuster’s score — and that he was keen on

its potential for flair and imagination, as well as exciting, unconventional movement for ballet dancers.

Dun, who came of age as a musician during Chairman Mao’s brutal and repressive Cultural Revolution, is known for bridging classical music of the East and West.

BALLET PREVIEW

Ballet Fantastique’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Soreng Theater, Hult Center, Seventh Avenue and Willamette Street

Tickets: \$28 to \$53, and \$18 to \$43 for full-time college students with ID and high school students (hultcenter.org)

the Oregon Mozart Players chamber orchestra to play the score live, nor could they have acquired the \$3,000 music rights to use the score in the first place.

And the ballet is as short as it is ambitious. The concerto’s six movements span

Turn to **CROUCHING**, Page D2

THEATER

A bigger stage for a new set of voices

Two student-created plays will be featured at UO’s Hope Theatre

By **ALEX V. CIPOLLE**
For The Register-Guard

For the first time at the University of Oregon, two original productions by university students will be featured at the Hope Theatre during the 2016-17 season.

Joining the likes of James Joyce and 17th-century playwright Aphra Behn on the Miller Theatre Complex’s marquis are the winners of New Voices, the theater department’s annual playwright competition open to all students on campus.

Traditionally, New Voices’ productions have been performed in the smaller Pocket Playhouse.

Those new voices belong to Sravya Tadepalli with her 30-minute, one-act play, “The Fruit Stand,” and Cora Mills’ seven-scene, 90-minute production, “On the Street Where We Used to Live.”

After a year of rewrites, development, rehearsals and mentorship from retired UO theater professor and New Voices director Joseph Silg, the productions will run back to back with a 10-minute intermission starting March 9.

And while these plays are wildly different — one is a contemporary political exploration while the other is a nostalgic ghost story — they share the quality of being highly personal productions written by first-time playwrights.

PLAY PREVIEW

UO’s New Voices

When: 8 p.m. March 9-11 and March 16-18, and 2 p.m. March 19

Where: Hope Theatre in UO’s Miller Theatre Complex, 1231 University St.

Tickets: \$10; \$8 for 65 or older, UO faculty and staff and non-UO students; and free for UO students (UO ticket office, 541-346-4363, tickets.uoregon.edu)

Tadepalli, a second-year student studying political science and journalism, began writing “The Fruit Stand” in the aftermath of the Charleston church shooting in June 2015.

“It’s basically about (then-South Carolina Gov.) Nikki Haley’s decision to take down the Confederate flag in South Carolina,” Tadepalli said. “What do you do when, say, the politically expedient decision isn’t the right decision to make? How, as a person of color, do you straddle the line of trying basically to succeed” and “also trying to help your community of color?”

Tadepalli was partly inspired to write about this because she and now-U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley are both Indian-Americans, but on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Tadepalli said she was surprised by the decision Haley, a tea party conservative, made to remove the Confederate flag from the statehouse grounds.

“The play gave me a place to explore that idea of what made her make the decision that she did,” she said.

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Stephanie Urso

Crouching: Ballet only 30 minutes

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only 30 minutes, which is a fraction of the runtime of a traditional ballet. As Blaise Pascall famously wrote, "If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter" — distilling a sweeping narrative from a two-hour film (based on a series by Chinese novelist Wang Dulu) is no easy feat.

"It's a very complex, nuanced story," Hannah Bontrager said.

To keep what is, in essence, an epic love story from becoming too unwieldy, the Bontragers decided to focus on the relationships between characters and the story's dualistic themes — master and student, war and peace, tradition and rebellion, restraint and desire, woman and man.

For the uninitiated, the narrative unfurls across the backdrop of the Qing Dynasty (circa 1778), following five main characters whose lives are entwined with China's warrior tradition. There's Li Mu Bai, a legendary swordsman seeking a peaceful retirement — looking to give up his highly special sword "Green Destiny" — and his longtime friend (and forbidden love), Yu Shu Lien, a respected warrior in her own right.

Then there's Jen Yu, the daughter of a wealthy governor, whose own warrior spirit is initially disguised

by aristocratic garbs, and her governess Jade Fox, who may or may not be an assassin in hiding. Last but not least is the Bandit, Lo, who Jen Yu spars with before falling deeply in love, increasing her distaste for the arranged marriage her parents have planned for her near future.

"The story really explores the tension between passion and oppression in 18th-century China," Hannah Bontrager explained.

Condensing the tale, and each character's narrative arc, wasn't the only major challenge for the ballet company. The dancers had to learn a composite of ballet, Asian classical dance and martial arts, dancing with parallel feet and running across the stage heel-toe (rather than the toe-heel motion of classical ballet).

"So literally changing the way we walk and run," Hannah Bontrager said with a laugh.

Along with the other dancers, Hannah Bontrager, who dances the role of Jen Yu, had to learn how to dance with a heavy tai chi sword, which looks uncannily similar to Green Destiny from the film.

The Bontragers say the choreography is filled with magnetic tension, e.g. two characters both clinging to the sword, while fearing each other's touch, whether because of danger

or lust. Hannah Bontrager describes it as "almost touching someone's negative space."

Hannah Bontrager is particularly excited about the pas de deux between Jen Yu and Lo the Bandit, marked by a liberating release and "total whimsy."

The ballet's final challenge was matching the choreography to the concerto.

"We have six scenes, and it correlates to the six pieces of music that go together in the orchestral piece," Hannah Bontrager said.

The rub? There is no official recording of Dun's concerto.

"One thing dancers need is continuity and consistency in tempo," Kuo explains. In other words, the choreography needs to synchronize with what Oregon Mozart Players perform. "Matching tempos is one of the hardest things to do for a musician," he adds.

So Kuo cobbled together what he could. "We basically had to Frankenstein a version so they could work with those tempos to choreograph."

The silvery score is hauntingly beautiful, marked by robust, repetitive percussion and, in this production, cello (rather than the erhu, a Chinese fiddle), performed by Kuo's friend and renowned Chinese double bass and cello player

DaXun Zhang, in his Eugene debut.

The Bontragers were so taken with the score that Zhang will perform a two-minute cello solo with no dancing.

"I really feel like the cello line also represents the spirit of the sword," Hannah Bontrager says.

The world premiere of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" will actually be the second act, with excerpts of another Ballet Fantastique original production, "Tales from the Floating World" — a ballet about Asian folklore — as Act I with koto player Mitsuki Dazai.

It should be noted that, unlike in the film, characters don't fly from tree-tops, float up buildings or jump from mountains.

"We were taking on a huge challenge, maybe even a risk, to do something like this because people could very easily be expecting something somewhat different than what we ended up doing," Donna Bontrager said. "It's the music score itself that inspired us, and the story itself, and not just the special effects and martial arts in the movie."

But like any art that transcends, it cannot be achieved by playing it safe.

Alex V. Cipolle is an arts and culture journalist living in Eugene. Email avcipolle@gmail.com

Voices: Highlight politics, relationships

Continued from Page D1

And for the Corvallis native, the political is even more personal.

"My great-grandfather was a freedom fighter in India during India's independence movement," Tadepalli said. "He was a playwright and poet; he was put in jail for four years by the British for writing literature against the British rule."

She continued: "My family is really happy that I'm doing this because (my great-grandfather) wrote a play for political purposes, and he got into a lot more trouble than I'm going to get into, for sure."

Before "The Fruit Stand" even comes to the university stage, it was read in late February at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Region Festival in Denver, one of just a handful of original college-level plays chosen from across the country.

Cora Mills' seven scenes

Meanwhile, Mills, a former UO master of fine arts student in creative writing who has since gone on to pursue a doctorate in English from Georgia State University, will fly back to Eugene for the opening weekend of "On the Street Where We Used to Live."

Mills found out about New Voices while taking a UO playwrighting course with theater arts professor Michael Malek Najjar. "I finished the one-act for class and then just decided to really continue it," Mills said. One act stretched to seven scenes, clocking in at 90 minutes, the typical industry limit for a full-length production.

"Much of my fictional work focuses on the relationships between women," Mills said of her usual milieu — short stories. Her somewhat autobiographical play follows three women who were childhood best friends returning home to a small town in Indiana (Mills' home state) for a reunion sleeper.

"I was just very interested in the longevity of friendships and how childhood friendships change as we age and what happens when you've been away for a long time and then you

come back together," Mills explained.

But it's also a ghost story.

"When you're an adult, you have different kinds of ghosts," she says. "The point, really, is trying to explore the different ways in which we can be haunted."

Silg, who retired in 2015 after more than 20 years in the theater arts program, said he was excited to come out of retirement to direct what he calls "incredibly compelling" plays, which this year are under a higher level of scrutiny with the move to the larger Hope Theatre.

"It puts more pressure on the plays and playwrights for sure because the product is expected to be complete and polished, so the idea of a work in progress is not necessarily an option."

And while the last performance is March 19, Silg said both productions have legs, and he will work with both Mills and Sravya to get them on stages beyond campus.

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