

Dance

Pirou-what?

Ballet Fantastique rekindles dance appreciation off stage

BY ARIEL OLSON

In late April, Eugene's own Ballet Fantastique earned official recognition as the area's first nonprofit ballet academy. In its enthusiasm, the organization has already initiated a variety of programs to foster dance education, training and networking at all levels, many of which organizers hope to expand in the coming year.

Since October 2000, children and youth ages 4 and up have enrolled in small, focused ballet classes where they have studied the world-renowned Vaganova technique from two trained professionals: Artistic Director Donna-Marisa Bontrager and her daughter, Executive Director Hannah Joy Bontrager.

More experienced dancers and choreographers have increased their performance repertoire and bolstered their choreographic portfolios by auditioning for the academy's chamber performance ensemble, which puts on roughly 20 performances annually. Shows range from portrayals of classic ballet fairytales to new and innovative collaborations with emerging choreographers and musicians.

"Classical choreography is obviously very important to us," said the younger Bontrager, "but we really strive to make it relevant to modern audiences."

As a newly-formed nonprofit, Ballet Fantastique is pushing the artistic envelope to engage more of the community in local dance initiatives. Last weekend the company put on its first show at the Shedd Institute — traditionally a venue for musical performance — in an effort to attract new and unsuspecting audiences.

"The networking of dance audiences is also important," Hannah said, especially because in Eugene, dance audiences are somewhat divided by venue. Ballet viewers go to the Hult Center; modern dance viewers go to the UO, LCC or other venues. "And they don't mix," she said.

The same can be said of local dancers and choreographers who often struggle to find an adequate venue for collaboration. "Eugene doesn't have a chamber ballet company," Hannah said. "The Eugene Ballet Company puts on great performances a couple of times a year, but it's based in Idaho. It doesn't create enough performance or choreographic opportunities here, which are so important for a dancer's resumé."



KEITH MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

So Ballet Fantastique has initiated the area's first professional dancer development program, which offers collaborative workshops, sliding-scale weekly master classes, and choreographic and performance opportunities to aspiring local artists.

But the real question is, can Ballet Fantastique generate a diverse and devoted audience? Currently, the majority of the organization's nonprofit work takes place off-stage and outside the studio. Last summer the company was awarded a grant from the Lane Arts Council to launch the EXPERIENCE DANCE! Project. Dancers from the academy and the chamber performance ensemble presented a series of interactive school assemblies to nearly 1,000 children at six Eugene-Springfield elementary and middle schools.

The free, in-house performances were accompanied by engaging and child-friendly lectures and interactive workshops where they held real pointe shoes and tutus, had jumping competitions and experimented with the imitation and creation of new movement. Ballet Fantastique also gave out 500 complimentary tickets to interested students to see a full performance.

"We're just responding to what we felt was an acute need for dance education in the area," said Hannah. "Arts funding has been so drastically cut in recent years."

In its latest review of the artistic competency of students in academic programs across the country, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that "comprehensive dance programs are rare in our nation's schools." Most dance programs that do exist are limited in scope, offering exposure to a limited number of dance forms and little or no historical or cultural context or aesthetic analysis.

This mother-daughter duo hopes that, with opportunities for supplemental dance education, children will be inspired to develop their own artistic sensibilities, both as performers and as lifetime viewers of the arts.

"We can see from their faces that we're giving the students a new kind of ownership of dance," Hannah said, "the kind that will make them want to come to the theater again and again as adults."

Spring Loft (UO Dance Dept. with Ballet Fantastique dancers). 8 pm • Sat. 6/9. Dougherty Dance Theater, UO \$3 • 346-3386.