

ENTERTAINMENT

Abts brings young dancers to EMU Ballroom

By Kathy Proffit
Emerald Contributor

For the last seven years Elizabeth Abts has been teaching and training her young dancers, shaping the 28-member Portland-based company into a professional, one-of-a-kind ensemble. Using a contemporary style that combines elements of ballet, modern and Graham technique in a kind of athletic "dance play," Abts has created a challenging and impressive repertoire that she said is now ready to tour.

A dancer since the age of five and choreographer since age 15, with training in contemporary jazz, ballet and modern dance, Abts said that she started the company for young people because there were no opportunities for young professional dancers in Portland. She decided she would create her own company, and opened a dance training school with her partner, Chisao Hata.

Hata teaches the "babies," while Abts is responsible for the older dancers and for teaching contemporary technique.

The dedication it takes to be a dancer is truly evident at the school, with youngsters as young as age two brought in to begin their training. Abts said this is part of what makes the company unique. "Other dance companies buy their dancers already trained," she said.

The average age of dancers in Abts' company is 14, with her male dancers in the range of 21 to 25 years old.

"But we don't cram in ballet and Graham technique," she said. "That is a common story and it's a crime when it happens to young dancers. We give them the gift of dance, music they can relate to, movement, life and challenge."

From there, Abts said a natural process occurs in which the young dancers become hungry for more. Ballet and Graham style become a part of their life, and their training becomes more directed, she said.

"There is this natural phenomenon of dancers needing and wanting to be everything they desire — to be perfect, to have perfect bodies," she said. "Much of their perseverance can be deemed masochistic."



Courtesy photo

Members of the Elizabeth Abts Dance Company perform a scene from "Down to the Moon," one of the pieces to be performed this Saturday at the EMU Ballroom.

It is this disciplined, athletic training that has produced professional dancers capable of dancing difficult, lengthy pieces such as the magical, hour-long, "Down to the Moon," to be performed Saturday evening in the EMU Ballroom. Inspired by the music of Andreas Vollenweider and the impulse to create dance pieces from illusion, Abts said "Moon" provides an opportunity to lose one's self and be drawn into a mystical journey through a bizarre forest of elves, ogres and fire-fairies.

A highly technical piece with approximately 50 light cues, as opposed to the average five in a traditional ballet, this two-year endeavor is almost as complex backstage as onstage, Abts said.

Other pieces to be performed during Saturday's concert will be the five-part "Separate Lives," a discovery and exploration of relationships; "Mannequin," or what Abts terms "Mannequin Madness," a

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