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One Golden Night

Eugene Ballet's Schéhérazade

With a voluptuous score by Rimsky-Korsakov and prismatic choreography by the inimitable Dennis Spaight, Eugene Ballet's *Schéhérazade* promises a stunning theatrical experience.

Based on the 1,001 tales of the *Arabian Nights*, Rimsky-Korsakov's 1888 score wasn't written as a ballet, but the story is on the order of high drama. In the original, a nasty king is angered by rumors of his wife's infidelity, and to express his ire, he confines a new virgin to his bed each night, only to order her beheaded in the morning. Hundreds of virgins later, he still isn't sated.

But smart-cookie Schéhérazade is brought to him one evening and manages to escape the chopping block by telling him a story, one he can't wait to hear the end of. She forces him wait for the next night, and the next. Finally, after 1,001 nights, the king is freed from his murderous madness, and they fall in love. Or so the story goes.

But can we really root for the redemption of this bloodthirsty monarch? Is this truly a satisfying moral? Spaight's choreographic version and its libretto depart from the fable, to get rid of its sexism and violence. In this new telling, Spaight re-imagines Schéhérazade in a secret love affair with one of the cruel sultan's slaves, and once this clandestine tryst is discovered, it becomes the perfect foil for genius fight scenes — old-fashioned throw-downs between good and evil — and lovely, languid romance. At the battle's climax, Schéhérazade's fellow harem-women rise up against the king's warriors in a moment of fiercely feminine pride and strength.

Spaight's treatment of the score focuses on the dynamic, colorful Rimsky-Korsakov

orchestration. The choreography is subtle and assured. Spaight sought out collaborations in his all-too short life, here with sets by renowned Oregon painter Henk Pander (who has a current show at Portland's Laura Russo Gallery) and lavish costumes by Ric Young. Sets and costumes not only add visual interest but also provide decadent, hypnotic imagery in themselves.

**Genius fight scenes —
old-fashioned throw-downs
between good and evil —
and lovely, languid romance.**

Dance critic Martha Ullman-West recently attended three back-to-back performances of this work performed by the Nashville Ballet. "With the rich texture of the piece — musically, visually, choreographically — it's always new," she said from her Portland home. "There is always something you haven't seen before."

Ullman-West observed Spaight's star on the rise resident choreographer and Associate Artistic Director of the Oregon Ballet Theater. Like many who saw Spaight work, she still mourns his premature death at age 38 in 1993. "*Schéhérazade* is arguably a masterpiece," she said.

The UO orchestra will perform the music under the direction of Wayne Bennett. The performance opens with EBC Artistic Director Toni Pimble's new work, *Divertimento*, and the exquisite love triangle, *Two's Company*. Performances are at 8 pm on Saturday, April 16 and 2:30 pm on April 17 in the Silva Hall, Hult Center.

EW

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