

A New Spin on Good & Evil

EUGENE BALLET REIMAGINES HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S *THE SNOW QUEEN*

BY BOB KEEFER

Next spring, Eugene Ballet Company will stage the biggest project the outfit has undertaken in its 38-year history — a brand new, quarter-million-dollar envisioning of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, with all original music, choreography, sets and costumes.

The new production, which will premiere with two performances at Eugene's Hult Center for the Performing Arts in April, came about thanks to the generosity of a long-time supporter of Eugene Ballet (EBC), Richard Haugland.

Through his foundation, Haugland also funded the ballet's 2013 production of *Mowgli: The Jungle Book Story*. Right after seeing the opening night of *Mowgli*, Haugland told EBC artistic director Toni Pimble he wanted to pay for another new ballet. Thus *The Snow Queen* was born, with a grant of \$200,000 from the Richard P. Haugland Foundation and another \$40,000 — for the original score — from the Hult Endowment.

Pimble, who founded EBC with Riley Grannan in 1978, has created nine previous full-length ballets for the company as well as about 50 shorter pieces. She chose the Hans Christian Andersen tale for a simple reason: It's a classic Joseph Campbell hero's quest, with a gender twist: The hero is a heroine, and she rescues a boy.

"And the two main characters are women," Pimble said. "That's very different."

Andersen's dark original tale bears little resemblance to the 2013 Disney animated movie *Frozen*, which *The Snow Queen* also inspired. Andersen's *Snow Queen* actually represents a Christian allegory of the battle of good and evil, Pimble says.

In that original, childhood friends Gerda, a girl, and Kay, a boy, are separated when Kay is blinded to the good of the world by shards of a frozen mirror made by Satan. Kay ends up being taken to the Snow

Queen's Ice Palace; with help from various other characters, Gerda rescues him there.

An atheist, Pimble has stripped out the overt Christianity from the story, retaining its robust core about how love and friendship can ultimately conquer evil.

One of the biggest elements of the whole show will be a new score, commissioned from Portland composer Kenji Bunch.

An Oregon native who moved to New York to make his mark — and then came back two decades later — Bunch was selected, in part, because of his long friendship with Brian McWhorter, a founder and conductor of OrchestraNext, the student-professional orchestra that performs for the ballet's productions here.

McWhorter, a professor of trumpet at the University of Oregon, is a brilliant crazy man in the music world. (Check out YouTube for the video he made depicting a trumpeter's stress dream, in which he shows up for a performance at the UO's Beall Concert Hall sans trumpet and sans trousers.)

As fellow graduate students at the Juilliard School in New York in the 1990s, the two musicians played aggressively experimental music around town. One of those performances got panned by the *Village Voice*, which complained that their live improvisation together "didn't seem to have anything to do with anything."

Bunch's music isn't quite as experimental today as it was in his youth. In fact, compositions such as his 2011 "Supermaximum for orchestra," easily available online, are very accessible — sweet, melodic and lyrical. McWhorter praises Bunch's "playful sensibility with his music" in explaining his selection to create the new ballet score.

DANIELLE TOLMIE PLAYS THE SNOW QUEEN IN EUGENE OPERA'S UPCOMING PRODUCTION

***THE SNOW QUEEN* COSTUME DESIGNER JONNA HAYDEN**
PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

