

POWER AND PROWESS

Ballet Fantastique's new *Sleepy Hollow*

How do you present an antiquated, strictly traditional art form like ballet to an audience whose musical oldies are only 30 years old? Answer: fusion. That's the M.O. at Ballet Fantastique.

Donna and Hannah Bontrager, a dynamic mother-daughter team, founded Ballet Fantastique and began to choreograph entirely original ballets in the early 2000s. Since then, they have produced more than 65 new performances.

This is unusual in an industry focused on performing 150-year-old works like *The Nutcracker*. But BFan, as the company is affectionately known, aims to stand out.

The Bontragers' newest project is an adaptation of Washington Irving's short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," concerning Ichabod Crane, the superstitious schoolmaster.

Ichabod falls in love with the coquettish Katrina, but Brom Bones — a rival suitor — determines to scare him off. Shortly thereafter, Ichabod encounters the terrifying Headless Horseman of supposedly unknown origin, and disappears.

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow ballet recasts the tale as a spooky rom-com, balancing eerily tinged humor with dreamlike sequences that leave the audience wondering what's real.

"Art is subjective," Hannah Bontrager says. "I love, as a creator, leaving plenty — not all, but plenty — open to interpretation for the audience."

Perhaps that's what keeps people coming back. BFan has sold out nine successive shows, and the Bontragers say they never expected such success when they first realized their dream of owning and operating a dance company.

"We just wanted to create great art, ballets people would enjoy, something different that suited our interests and talent," Donna

Bontrager says. "We did not want to stage *Swan Lake*."

"As we started creating stories, audiences really responded to them," Hannah Bontrager adds. "They found them really accessible. Our model is telling stories. At the end of the day, we love it."

Of course, it's not all fun and games. "We've become pretty efficient at creating new works, but it feels like you're working 24/7," Hannah Bontrager says. "It takes a lot of worrying and wondering."

Of necessity, the mother and daughter fill many more roles than most choreographers do. Everything from fundraising and costume design to lighting and brainstorming new ballets falls to them.

As a result, BFan is a fundamentally collaborative organization. Performances feature sets and props custom-made by Eugene's artists and live music played by local bands. Two groups, The Gerry Remple Ensemble and the Celtic trio Dréos, will accompany *Sleepy Hollow* with electric violin and rock guitar.

Choreographing classical ballet to rock music is a tricky process. The Bontragers develop their ballets organically by taking suggestions from their dancers, leaving room for individual artistic expression.

BFan's repertoire demands exceptional technical prowess of its dancers, especially given its unconventional musical mashups — in 2013 BFan staged *Pride and Prejudice* as a Parisian jazz ballet!

"We are a classical company that works like a contemporary company," Hannah Bontrager says. "Our dancers have to be the fiercest classical dancers, but also dance the Charleston in pointe shoes. It's 21st century ballet."

BFan delivers powerful, energetic performances that you won't want to miss.

Ballet Fantastique's The Legend of Sleepy Hollow premieres 7:30 pm Oct. 27-28 and 4 pm Oct. 29 at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater; \$35-\$73.75, tickets at hultcenter.org.



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