

A GRACEFUL TRANSITION

Where others have stumbled, **Eugene Ballet** takes a lighter approach to the challenge of succession **BY BOB KEEFER / PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER**



Four decades ago, Toni Pimble came to Eugene with her then-husband, Riley Grannan, to start a ballet company. It was the 1970s, a time when Eugene was full of hope and aspiration. *Life* magazine had named the city one of the most livable in the country, and arts and culture organizations were sprouting like dandelions.

Founded in 1978, Eugene Ballet Company (EBC) has toured in 32 U.S. states as well as making trips abroad to Japan, Taiwan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Syria, Jordan and Tunisia. It's one of the best-known small professional ballet companies in the country.

Now Pimble, 65, is looking to retire.

That means the ballet faces one of the most difficult challenges of any organization: How do you replace the founder?

Here and elsewhere, arts groups have struggled with that problem. Among the least successful locally is the Oregon Bach Festival, which has been plagued with succession problems for more than a decade as it's tried to replace its two founders [See story on page 14].

Pimble is taking a completely different approach. Instead of doing a national search for a new artistic director who would replace her when she walks out the door, Pimble has planned a slow-motion retirement that will see her backing away from the demands of her job and handing control over to two long-time company members over the next five years.

And — significantly, for her — the two people she has chosen to succeed her are both women.

Sitting in a backstage hallway at the Hult Center one recent morning while company dancers warmed up for a rehearsal, Pimble ticked off examples of major dance companies that were founded by women — and then taken over by men when their founders retired.

“You know, the Royal Ballet was founded by Dame Ninette de Valois, Marie Rambert founded Ballet Rambert, Australian Ballet was founded by Nellie Potts. And the list just goes on and on and on, they were all founded — Lucia Chase, ABT, American Ballet Theatre, right? — the list goes on and on and on, and the next person in? Not a woman. A man. The next person in? Not a woman, a man. It's just man, man, man!”

She shakes her head.

“And I'm just going, ‘No! The next people taking over from me are going to be women.’ I feel strongly about that.”

Pimble divides her job into two major roles: As artistic director, she makes broad decisions about what works the ballet will perform, shaping the company's overall vision. Meanwhile, as a choreographer, she creates new ballets for the dancers to perform.

In Pimble's slow-motion retirement plan, longtime EBC dancer Jennifer Martin, who is now associate artistic director, will gradually take over Pimble's role as artistic director.

“She's been with me since 1995,” Pimble says. “If that isn't commitment I don't know what it is.”

Martin says she never aspired to running a company.

“In reality, it is a very small group of dancers that move on to this particular position of leadership,” she says. “The greatest challenge will be moving Toni's vision forward, while maintaining the integrity she so beautifully and gracefully has created. The Eugene Ballet has a lasting legacy of her choreographic works, but she wears so many hats; these are very awesome shoes to fill.”

Stepping into Pimble's role as choreographer will be Suzanne Haag, a long-time EBC dancer who has also worked with Pimble for years. Her current title is resident choreographer.

Haag says Pimble broached the idea to her of taking over as choreographer about four years ago.

“That was just the initial, ‘Are you interested?’” Haag says. “I was still dancing.”