

Haag had choreographed in the past for the Eugene Ballet School, but never for the company itself.

“Toni is, obviously, passionate about creating new work, and she appreciates people that are creative and do want to create new work. And she knew that that was an interest of mine,” Haag says. “She approached me first to create a new work for the ballet and then also with this potential plan in mind.”

Marking the transition, in a sense, will be the company’s upcoming production of Igor Stravinsky’s ballet *The Firebird*, which runs April 13 and 14 at the Hult Center.

Eugene Ballet performed Pimble’s version of *The Firebird* as the first ballet ever danced at the Hult Center when the building opened in 1982. She decided the company should take on the Stravinsky once again.

“She wanted it to be revisited, but in a new way,” Haag says. “And then she asked me if I would do that. I think I said ‘Yes’ before she asked! The music is so beautiful.”

Pimble’s version, which Haag has watched on video, “definitely evokes the fairytale feel of the original, yet with her own movement style. It has sort of an enchanted look to it.”

Haag says she can’t change the plot of the ballet, but she can definitely change the setting. “So I decided to go with a dystopic, futuristic way for this. And so that’s what I’ve been kind of playing around with, seeing how this sort of timeless tale can be transported to a different setting.”

Pimble looks back on that first *Firebird* with a combination of nostalgia and awe. She and Grannan were just kids when they came to Eugene, she says. They had been working in Germany, where music and the arts are state-supported, and had little idea of the economic realities of doing professional ballet in the U.S.

“I think what we were doing was way beyond what we could honestly afford,” she says. “You know, we opened the Hult Center in ’82, right after the symphony, with *The Firebird*, with a full orchestra! Um, we couldn’t really afford that right now.”



I ask whether Pimble has ever regretted not living in an arts capital like New York.

“I still like creating on my own company,” she says. “It is the most comfortable place for me artistically to create work on, because you chose the dancers, you know the dancers. They know you.”

And, she says, you have more control in a smaller company.

When Pimble was invited to choreograph a work for the New York City Ballet in 1992, she worked out an eight-minute dance — “Two’s Company” — to music by Antonin Dvřorak with three of the company dancers.

“And then [NYCB Ballet Master] Peter Martins came

along and said, ‘Well, eight minutes is not enough. You need to do a longer piece, and you need to have more dancers in it.’ And I was like, ‘OK, anything you say, Peter.’ And so I did, and I was not happy with it, you know, it was not what I wanted. And so on the opening night, I felt like I was going to my own execution.”

As it happened, the work was saved by a twist of fate: Two of the dancers she added were injured in another performance.

“I got this phone call early in the morning saying, ‘Well, we could shift your ballet to another time, you know, another day and another time. Or Peter said that he knew you kind of wanted it to only be a trio. Do you want to just do the trio?’”

Pimble smiles at the memory. The audience response to the smaller work, she says, was “like night and day.”

Eugene Ballet’s slow-motion leadership change really started in 2016, when Grannan retired as managing director and was replaced, as executive director, by Josh Neckels — Jennifer Martin’s husband.

Their relationship brings up another aspect of Pimble’s management style: She’s not opposed to keeping things in the family. Some businesses frown on office romances. Not this ballet.

“The corporate model is, you can’t have a relationship with somebody,” she says. “That’s ridiculous. It’s absurd. We’re human beings. We’re not automatons. And in dance, my god, are we ever human beings!”

Pimble ticks off a number of couples, married and otherwise, in the company today.

“They connect, you know, they’re together. They’re, in a very personal way, interacting with one another physically, especially in partnering. So why would you stymie that?”

Meanwhile, Pimble admits her retirement plan requires a great deal of trust in the women she’s designated to replace her. She expects it to work.

“It’s a slow transition, working with Suzanne and with Jenn and hoping to be able to step away in five years. I feel confident that they can handle it. I’m going to think they could do it now if they had to. But I have things I want to get done before I step away.” ■



‘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.’ – Jennifer Martin