

Dynamic Duos



Photos by Liz Lopez/ATM

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An Enchanted World

Folkloric performance artists Johanna Hongell-Darsee and Scott Darsee have one foot in modern-day Albuquerque and another in the mythic past, where supernatural beings populate ancient fables of love, betrayal, and transformation. The husband-and-wife team brings these tales alive for today's audiences through a combination of dance, mime, storytelling, and music, drawing on techniques they've spent decades mastering. They've presented tales from *The Kalevala*, Finland's poetic epic based on stories that go back to the Bronze Age. Most recently, they've been exploring medieval ballads, which have traveled from one culture to another over the centuries, accreting hundreds of verses and attaching to local melodies along the way.

"We come at it trying to create as big a picture as we can with the skills that we have," says Iowa native Darsee.

"They're quite cryptic," says Hongell-Darsee, referring to the ballads. "We try to present them to an audience here and now, to interpret them so it's a little easier to digest."

With minimal props, on a bare stage, the two manage to conjure an enchanted world. "What fascinates me with the ballads is that they go back very far in time, and you get a feeling for what people a long time ago were thinking, their dreams and hopes. The other thing I find extremely fascinating is that you find the same lyrics, the same narration, in many many different geographical places [as far apart as Scandinavia and Pakistan]."

The two met in Copenhagen, where Darsee worked as a therapist for top-flight ballet companies and also taught at the Danish State School of Modern Dance. He plays a supporting role in performances as bassist and guitarist. Behind the scenes, he composes original music for their projects and arranges the traditional melodies with an ear to respecting their time and place while setting them to best advantage for modern audiences.

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Hongell-Darsee fronts the duo, singing, playing the flute, masking, dancing, and storytelling. Born into a Swedish-speaking minority on an island off the coast of Finland, she studied mime and theater in Paris, led a dance and theater company in Malmo, Sweden, and performed across Europe and in the United States. Fascinated with Indian classical dance, she traveled to India in 1987 and landed, unannounced and "wearing a sari very badly," on the doorstep of Guru Kalanidhi Narayanan, hoping to study with her. That was the start of an annual pilgrimage that Hongell-Darsee continued for 13 years. She now teaches Indian classical dance at UNM.

Since settling in Albuquerque in 2001, attracted by New Mexico's multiculturalism and the presence of the wild so close to the city, they've performed hundreds of times. Their annual concert at the Elena Gallegos Open Space, where they are joined by multiinstrumentalists Sharon Berman and Juan Wijngaard, has become a must-see event. They've also included fiddler Chris Carlson and guitarists Michael Duncan and Larry Otis in their performances.

The duo is now recording their second album, working with John Wall at Wall of Sound Studio. Their first album, *The Island Farthest Away*, focused on Finnish ballads, while the new recording will feature ballads from a wider geography.

You can see them at Apple Mountain Music (www.applemtnmusic.com) on March 30, and you can enter their magic world at www.johanna.igo.com and on Facebook.