

Husband, wife team bring Finnish tale to life with dance, music

By Jeff Cummings

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There's a thick white leather book on the kitchen table of Scott Darsse and Johanna Hongell-Darsse's Northeast Heights home. The two are anxious to open it and show off a collection of photographs and newspaper clippings from their 20-plus years dancing and strumming around the world.

"It started as a keepsake book," says Hongell-Darsse in her strong Scandinavian accent, slowly flipping the pages while her husband looks on. "But then we decided to put everything in there."

The first pages detail their newest show, called "The Theft of Fire and Light." The story is one of three myths in the Finnish tale of Kalevala that detail the creation of Earth.

A native of Finland, Hongell-Darsse says she remembers the Kalevala tales from her youth. Such a longtime bond is important when creating a music-and-dance show to interpret words that were written almost 200 years ago, she says.

"To do a story from a particular place," Hongell-Darsse says, "you have to be there a long time and have a strong connection with the place. If we're just taking it and doing it, it's very disrespectful."

Which is one reason why the couple says that after two years of living in New Mexico they are still hesitant to conceive a show based on American Indian stories.

"We would need to get permission to do those," Darsse says, noting that many American Indian tribes do not allow their oral-based tales to be translated by outsiders. "But so far, we've been very well received by the story-telling community here."

At the forefront of "The Theft

of Fire and Light" is Hongell-Darsse, who has studied and performed dance in Sweden, France and India. As she tells the ancient stories of such characters as the Gop-cooked Hag and an elderly musician, her body gestures and flows with the magical soundscapes, played by Darsse, a self-taught musician, on his guitar.

Masks are a vital part of every show, and this one features a white mask Hongell-Darsse wears when she plays Hag, whose sole purpose is to steal the natural elements — earth, water, fire and air — from mankind.

Sure, Hongell-Darsse says, she could simply sit in a chair and tell the stories. But all great story-tellers are dancers at heart, she says. And music is a natural complement to dancing — and mine, which Hongell-Darsse also performs.

"Like the thought of keeping all these things as one art form," says Hongell-Darsse, 42. "It's stage art, because if someone's telling a story, they're not exactly sitting still."

The pages continue to flutter by in the scrapbook. Perhaps there is a separate album detail-

ing their offstage life after they met in Europe in 1999 — thanks to a mutual friend — but, for now, the pages in front of them evoke fond memories of performing for audiences of every age and background.

Suddenly, words in foreign languages appear — French and Swedish — as newspaper articles describe shows she did years ago telling other stories from mythological origins.

More masks dominate the photographs (Hongell-Darsse is dressed as a seal in one of them). Her body presents more curves and slumps. The stages are lit in bold primary colors. And Hongell-Darsse seems to be in her natural element.

But each show has to start with the story.

"She has the ideas for the shows," says Darsse, 48. "I try to create music that would portray the themes toward the period. Each character has a theme."

Then comes the dance. Hongell-Darsse says her instinct when she first hears her husband's music is to dance like the character she would portray.

"It's just the first thing I do," she says. "When I hear music, I just start to dance."

If the scrapbook had a dedication, it would be to Hongell-Darsse's grandmother, who spotted her granddaughter's desire to be an artist when she was 5.

"My grandmother was a famous puppeteer in Europe," she says, "so it seeped in at an early age. When I was a kid, I wanted to be one of those puppets."

But she turned to dance school instead, which led to a fabled stint in India, where many of the dance moves in her shows originate.

"They have an unbroken tradition there of dancing, unlike western Europe," she says. "It was never seen as a sin to dance. It was part of their religion."

Darsse's interest in the guitar started at age 16, and despite a few years of setbacks, has been a constant source of inspiration for him while practicing physical therapy. His reputation as a physical therapist for the Oakland Ballet in California earned him a job working with the Dance Company of Harlem on their European tour.

'THE THEFT OF FIRE AND LIGHT'

9:30 p.m. Saturday, Blue Dragon Coffee House, 1517 Grand Blvd. N.E. Free. 268-6159.

That led to work at the English National Ballet, the Royal Danish Ballet and Hamburg Ballet.

Darsse, a native of Iowa, also has an affinity for painting, and many of the shows the couple perform feature some of his work, but Saturday's show will not, as the Blue Dragon's space is too small to fit canvases on the stage.

Since the couple's arrival in Albuquerque, they say they have enjoyed a warm reception.

"What's great about New Mexico is it's so multicultural," Darsse says. "That's a real plus for us."

"There's a lot of interest in story-telling here," Hongell-Darsse says. "If you come with a story from somewhere else, people are interested."



Scott Darsse (left) provides the musical soundscapes on his guitar while his wife, Johanna Hongell-Darsse, performs interpretive dances of "The Theft of Fire and Light," an ancient Finnish mythology.

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