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'Murder at Smuttynose' on Stage Feb. 16-20

UNH professor creates original ballet

By [Tracy Manforte](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- An original ballet by C. Laurence Robertson, based on the 19th-century murder on the Isles of Shoals, will be performed Feb. 16 through 20 at the University of New Hampshire.

After extensive research -- reading court transcripts, treatises, and newspapers; consulting with historians; and talking with descendants of those who lived nearby -- Robertson has re-created "Murder on Smuttynose," a ballet to tell the story.

"The language of classical ballet is particularly well-suited to this story," says Robertson, UNH associate professor of theatre and dance. "It can evoke the mystical, romantic, and horrific elements of this story in a highly nuanced and powerful way."

People still debate the outcome of the trial that convicted Louis Wagner of the ax murders of Maren Hontvet's sister, Karen, and her sister-in-law, Anethe, in 1873. For example, Robertson explains, "the newspapers reported Wagner first as dark, then as fair. During the trial itself, three court stenographers often just wrote down the answers, but not the questions. And crowds of women swooned when Wagner came into the courtroom." The story, Robertson concludes, says a lot about the prejudices of those times.

To accompany Robertson's choreography, UNH Associate Professor of Music Christopher Kies has composed an original score for the ballet. His research focused on well-known English folk songs of the era, such as "O Portsmouth" and "Cape Cod Girls," along with Civil War era brass band music. He also researched folk songs indigenous to Larvik, Norway, the native homeland of John and Maren Hontvet. A

historical videotape is being produced by Stuart Williams, UNH videographer, along with a videotape of the ballet. An exhibition of historical photographs that show 19th-century Portsmouth, the Isles of Shoals, and the people featured in the ballet will be on display in the lobby of Johnson Theatre the week of the performance. Show times are as follows: Feb. 16-18, 7 p.m.; Feb. 19, 8 p.m.; and Feb. 20, 2 p.m. Tickets are \$11 and \$8. For more information, call 862-2290.

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