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Ballet B.C. pushes to the breaking point with No. 29

Recently moved back here from the dance hotbed of Europe, Lesley Telford stages a piece about chance on the Queen E. stage

by JANET SMITH on OCT 29, 2014 at 11:47 AM

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STORYPHOTOS



In the studio with Ballet B.C., Lesley Telford pushes dancers to explore close calls from real life. The choreographer is back here after years of working in the Netherlands and Spain.

YVONNE CHEW

WHEN CHOREOGRAPHER LESLEY Telford’s tumultuous, driving new piece, *An Instant*, debuts on the Queen Elizabeth Theatre stage next week, a career that has taken her to the hottest dance companies in Europe and back will have come full circle. But she will also be helping to form a new kind of circle, one that links influential dance-makers from Nederlands Dans Theater and elsewhere with Ballet B.C. and Vancouver itself.

PHOTOS

As a child born in Vancouver, Telford once performed in *The Nutcracker* with the Pacific Northwest Ballet on the same Q.E. stage. She went on to study in Montreal and perform for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, then danced for Spain’s Compañía Nacional de Danza under Nacho Duato for six years in the 1990s and for the acclaimed NDT from 2001 to 2010. For the past several years she shuttled between The Hague and Madrid (she had homes

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in both) and Vancouver, where she has a long relationship as an instructor at Arts Umbrella. But now, finally, she has moved back here.

"This is the first time in probably a decade where I don't have the next airplane ticket to somewhere else, and it's incredibly relaxing!" says the affable artist with the dark cropped hair, sitting in a Granville Island café. She's just biked down to lead a class at Arts Umbrella, and then will don her rain gear again to cycle to rehearsals with Ballet B.C. later in the day. "I felt like this was a place to invest time and develop a future. So it has come completely full circle, and in such a nice way, to put my feet on the ground in Vancouver.

"I'm looking forward to other experiments and getting involved with the dance community here. I think there's space here to explore—and also ways my past in Europe can be a part of that."



It's already happening: sharing the season-opening bill, called *No. 29*, is a premiere by Fernando Hernando Magadan, with whom Telford worked for almost a decade at NDT. In fact, several talents that artistic director Emily Molnar has brought in to create work for Ballet B.C.—including Medhi Walerski, Jorma Elo, and Johan Inger—recently trace back to the same European hotbed that Telford comes from.

So it's small wonder that Molnar, who also has strong links to Arts Umbrella, noticed Telford's work. Telford first staged a shorter version of *An Instant* at the school in 2012. She's now setting *An Instant* on at least two of the students who were in the original—Emily Chessa and Christoph von Riedemann—and have since become Ballet B.C. professionals.

Significantly, the work prods the performers to abandon some of the training they've had drilled into them.

"We spend years developing this extreme control and extreme purpose in what we do, and I'm fascinated with the stripping-down of that control," explains Telford. "So we started to play around with 'How far can you go before hitting a breaking point? Where is that point?' It's this undefined concept of risk and a certain abandonment."

Set to the stormy strings and complex, unpredictable rhythms of Michael Gordon's *Weather* and inspired by Wislawa Szymborska's

poem “Could Have” (which will be heard in voice-over), *An Instant* explores the way life can suddenly be thrown into chaos. “It’s the idea of an accident, or chance, and if you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time, this could have happened,” she explains. “An accident was a good tool for exploring the physicality I’m interested in: it sets you off to be less in control of the form....I feel like it pulls out a level of humanity when you have a situation where you’re not in total control.”

Through rehearsals, Telford encouraged the dancers to dig into real moments in their own lives when they might have had a “close call”. “I enjoyed that,” she says. “It was their own story which they sourced a lot of movement from. But it’s not just movement, because they’re reliving it.”

Gordon’s unpredictable strains, she adds, have helped the feeling of losing control: “It’s impossible to count! It’s always a surprise when the next phrase is coming, so we’re always dealing with the unexpected,” she says.



The result, if a rehearsal later in the day is any indication, is an exhilarating, swirling piece that follows a rhythm all its own. In the studio at the Scotiabank Dance Centre, a dozen dancers are spiralling and falling to the ground like the leaves being tossed around by rainy autumn winds outside the windows. At one point during the process, it takes Telford, Molnar, and rehearsal director Sylvain Senez, working together over several tries, to count down to a cue for dancers amid the speeding strings.

And yet the trick is that everything has to flow like no one’s counting. It has to seem as if an invisible force is pushing the dancers off axis, whipping them around, and thrusting them downward. “Just think ‘Fall down,’ don’t think ‘Up,’ ” encourages Telford, who often throws herself into the movement to demonstrate. “Each step is a trip and a fall. Less dance-y!”

But perhaps the moment that reveals the most about what Telford is bringing to Ballet B.C., and the Vancouver dance scene, is when she’s working quietly with star dancer Rachel Meyer, who’s building movement from her muscular, outstretched arm. “Find the impulse of the arm and follow that,” Telford says to her. “That is taking you into something you didn’t predict.” And that’s exactly where Telford, after years of gathering inspiration abroad, is going to take audiences as well.

Ballet B.C. presents *No. 29* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre next Thursday to Saturday (November 6 to 8).

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