

THEATRE | DANCE

A whole new pointe of view

Ballet BC celebrates 29 years with new works, new dancers in 2014-15

No. 29 by Ballet BC

Tonight to Saturday, 8 p.m. | Queen Elizabeth Theatre
 Tickets and info: \$30-\$80 at ticketmaster.ca or 1-855-985-2787

DEBORAH MEYERS

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Picture a brooding moonlit glade. Women in milky tulle. A man out of his mind. That's the white act, usually the second act of a 19th-century ballet, in which the unattainable takes physical form in a danced encounter between the real and the surreal.

Swan Lake, La Bayadere, Giselle are all ballets with celebrated white acts. But the oldest of them all is La Sylphide, which premiered in Paris in 1832. That version of the ballet, made for the ballerina who has come to define the period, Marie Taglioni, has vanished. Just four years later, in 1836, the Danish choreographer August Bournonville made his own edition of La Sylphide for the Royal Danish Ballet. It has remained in the active repertoire of that company, and many others, ever since.

That enduring expression of desire and longing is what caught the attention of Spanish choreographer Fernando Magadan, whose White Act is one of three works on Ballet BC's season-opening program, No. 29. Magadan, who makes his Canadian choreographic debut with White Act, is not at first glance an obvious choice to take on the subject. A dancer with the resolutely contemporary Netherlands Dance Theatre, and a young choreographer with some important work on his resume, he has never made a dance on pointe.

But pointe shoes, those exquisitely contradictory pink satin tools of the ballet trade, were central to Romantic ballet, with its quivering expression of female identity, fragility and power. It was Ballet BC's artistic director, Emily Molnar, who first approached Magadan with the idea of making a work on pointe.

"I was — not afraid — but this was definitely a whole new world to explore," says Magadan when we sit down to chat after a run through of White Act. "I started to look back in history, researching how pointe work came along in the first place. This led me to the Romantic ballet period. I became fascinated with what the female figure represented at that time. So I made a ballet inspired by La Sylphide."

Magadan trained in ballet, and like all dancers, takes class every day. For him, "classical ballet is a state of mind. It's not only about the steps, and I don't use the steps from



Fernando Magadan, kneeling, works with dancers on his latest performance for Ballet BC.

WAYNE LEIDENFROST/PNG

the period in White Act. That style was so specific: the use of the arms, the torso tilted forward. My goal was to grasp the essence of the ballet, which is all about impossible love, women who challenge the laws of physics. I would say I was primarily inspired by the narrative. There is lots of reaching in this ballet."

The story of La Sylphide is of a Scotsman, James, who betrays his fiancée, Effie, for a wood spirit, or sylph. In attempting to claim her, he wraps her in a scarf that has been bewitched. Trying to own her, he loses her forever: her wings fall off, and she dies in his arms.

In Magadan's White Act, there is not one James, but rather a "multiplication of Jameses." There is also no

literal enactment of the pivotal action with the scarf, but rather a pas de deux in which Magadan aims "to portray the drama of that moment, and his realization of what he has done."

The first part of the ballet is set to music from Schubert's Death and the Maiden, which the composer wrote while ill and grappling with his own mortality. The second section is danced to contemporary choral selections from the album Baltic Voices. The ballet's visuals are as important to Magadan as the music and choreography. He is, he says, "a bit obsessed with linking the world of installation and design with the world of dance."

So while you will not see a stageful of dancers in white calf-length tutus in White Act,

the archetypal costume figures prominently in the ballet's set design, which features Romantic tutus lit from within to glow like chandeliers. The set also includes back projections of a gateway in a forest. Magadan explains that the video version of La Sylphide he most watched was one by the Royal Danish Ballet, "which is danced against a beautiful painted fortification backdrop. The film picks up on this. So you have tutus, the film, and of course, dry ice. These are the scenic elements we are playing with."

Magadan is effusive when speaking of his work with Ballet BC, and with Emily Molnar, whom he first met while making a piece for the professional dance division of Arts Umbrella. "I tell everyone I

meet about my experience here," he says.

"The dancers are so focused. There are no ego battles. When you ask them to play around with material, they come back with results. They are so professional, and not just the dancers: the whole team, from the technical department to the administrative staff."

White Act is the 29th new creation under Molnar's five-year leadership at Ballet BC, and one of the reasons for the title of this year's opening program, No. 29. (It is also the company's 29th season.) White Act shares the evening with Lesley Telford's An Instant, new to Ballet BC audiences, and a reprisal of a work the company first presented in 2012, A.U.R.A., by Italy's Jacopo Godani.

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FERNANDO HERNANDO MAGADAN
 SPANISH CHOREOGRAPHER

Telford's work is lamentably under-exposed here (although born in Vancouver, she has spent much of her career to date in Europe). She made a 12-minute version of An Instant for Arts Umbrella, where Molnar says: "I fell in love with it. It's about chance, circumstance, the idea of a critical moment when everything shifts. The choreography is on the precipice, beautifully urgent."

Molnar describes Telford as "an enormously talented Canadian female choreographer whose work hasn't been seen much in this country. She was a phenomenal dancer and has built a sophisticated choreographic vocabulary. Lesley's world is chance oriented, emotionally driven and dynamic."

Godani recently took over direction of The Forsythe Company in Frankfurt/Dresden. His A.U.R.A. was well received when Ballet BC originally danced it, and will form part of the company's tour repertoire this season. Molnar says A.U.R.A. "describes a fight or flight impulse, and really pushes the bodies and minds of our dancers."

Molnar is committed to bringing significant pieces from the repertoire back to the stage, for the benefit of audiences and dancers.

"It's a chance," she says, "to reflect on a work again and develop it further. Part of our job is to build longer-term relationships with choreographers, to be a hub for choreographic ideas. We also have audience members who tell us they come twice, or even three times, to each program because it allows them to see things you can't catch the first time out."

No. 29 is, then, a special program for Ballet BC. While it was not planned, Molnar reflects that "in some ways, all three works are about the unattainable."

"They all have a sense of investigation and urgency. But the program is really a reflection on and celebration of the last five years. The company has a beautiful fresh energy, including many new dancers who fought to be here. In group dynamics, new blood sometimes allows everyone to take the next step."

What it means to be a company dancer

DEBORAH MEYERS

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Ballet BC is a chamber-size company of 18, comprising 14 dancers and four apprentices. The annual rotation of apprentices, plus core departures and arrivals, mean the ensemble recomposes itself every year.

This season, the roster features eight dancers new to the organization, four apprentices and four company members.

It is notable that the company, under Emily Molnar's direction, has become a destination of choice for dancers seeking a fully engaged and authentic artistic experience. Last year, 200 dancers auditioned for Ballet BC in New York, as well as large numbers in Toronto and Montreal.

Molnar recently instituted a new audition process.

"I ask people to come to Vancouver for up to a week," she explains. "They spend time with us in the studio, trying things out, building vocabulary, generating ideas. I ask them to present something to me that they are working on. I watch them in class. And I do

an interview: Why Ballet BC? What are you looking for?"

She is looking, she says, "for artists who are willing to give themselves over to the creative process. There is no star system in this company, for dancers or dance makers. There are lots and lots of beautiful dancers out there, but it takes a special kind of person to succeed at Ballet BC."

Four such people are new company members Kirsten Wicklund, Tara Williamson, Andrew Bartee and Christoph von Riedemann. Three of the four are locally trained (Wicklund at Goh Ballet, Williamson at Richmond Academy of Dance and von Riedemann at Arts Umbrella). Though this was not planned — Molnar says "the talent has to speak to me first" — it is striking, and speaks to the level and depth of dance training in this city.

Of the quartet of new artists, only von Riedemann joins Ballet BC directly from school, without being bridged as an apprentice. Molnar says that "Christoph was just super ready to be in a company. I would not want to stifle him. I worked with him when I was



Ballet BC dancers Tara Williamson and Christoph von Riedemann.

running the junior company at Arts Umbrella and he also worked with us when we did Giselle. I knew he was emotionally and physically ready for the demands. He was ready to be pushed, and I am so happy that he chose Ballet BC."

Von Riedemann describes Ballet BC as "an amazing place to be." He was on tour in Italy with Arts Umbrella when he learned he was being invited to join the company. "In the middle of breakfast in Pisa, I got an email from Emily," he recalls.

"That was really a star-studded day." He had what he describes as "a very nice cappuccino" to celebrate.

Being in school is one thing; the life of a professional dancer is another. Von Riedemann admits he was shocked at the difference.

"Everyone told me it was going to be hard," he says. "I thought that what I was doing before was hard and couldn't really imagine it being any harder. At Arts Umbrella, we had very full days, but that

still didn't prepare me for the speed and amount they ask of you here. Every minute in the studio I am on their dollar, the whole six hours, so I need to give my best all the time. I couldn't believe how fast I needed to learn choreography. I was totally in a whirlwind in the beginning."

Among the surprises was not just how much work there is in the studio, but how extensive the demands are outside it.

"Taking notes, watching videos, staying healthy," says von Riedemann. "I'm surprised by how fast it all is, and how much it entails. I am figuring out how to build my dancerly lifestyle."

Tara Williamson is already a veteran. She comes to Ballet BC from Les Ballets Jazz in Montreal, and before that eight years with Alberta Ballet, where she was a principal dancer. Molnar has had her eye on Williamson for some time.

"I always hoped," she says, "that Tara would come here. She is such an accomplished dancer, with a huge amount of experience."

Williamson first worked with Molnar at Alberta Ballet. "Emily set Songs of a

Wayfarer on us," says Williamson.

"It was an amazing experience for me. I was intrigued by her work and valued everything she was giving us. She is so great at pulling the best out of dancers and I realized that I needed and wanted that."

There is also the fact the Vancouver is home, a responsibility Williamson takes seriously.

"I feel like there are expectations to uphold," she says.

"Ballet BC is a small company, so everyone is very involved, united and unique. I'm used to a full day's work and a tough schedule, but what I love here is that each and every dancer works so hard. We know that there is a quality that Emily sees in each of us and wants us to achieve."

For Molnar, the through line in all the dancers she chooses is maturity, which "has nothing to do with age. I am very grateful for the group I now have and their dedication to continuing and building the culture of the company. We are in a position where we don't have to re-start. We have dancers who can pick up right where we left off."