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Ballet B.C. explores the challenging mindset of William Forsythe

A complex new program brings Ballet B.C.'s Emily Molnar back to the big questions posed by an iconic choreographer

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Emily Molnar says she needed the right dancers.

MICHAEL SLOBODIAN

Being able to perform the brilliantly intricate work of William Forsythe is a bit of a milestone for a ballet company. The prolific choreographer is one of the leading dance artists on the planet, with pieces in the repertoire of all the major companies in the world.

For Ballet B.C., performing Forsythe's detailed *en pointe* creation *workwithinwork*, which the company debuts in its upcoming Trace program, is a sign that it is operating at a high level.

"I'm proud that we have a group of dancers that can really eat up the work. This is like a test, almost like a barometer," says Ballet B.C. artistic director Emily Molnar with obvious enthusiasm, taking a brief break at her offices at the Scotiabank Dance Centre, where she's successfully been rebuilding the troupe since taking the job in 2009. "I don't want us to be just

a repertory company that just does everybody's work, but be able to be as close to what that person would want in his own company.

"The closer and closer we get to having the right dancers, the better they are at not just adapting but diving into other people's work....I wouldn't want to do Bill's work unless I actually had a group that could do it justice."

But adding a new Forsythe to the repertoire (the company has had *Herman Schmerman* as a cornerstone since 2010) has special meaning for Molnar. She danced as a soloist for the visionary artistic director at the Frankfurt Ballet in the 1990s, having been discovered by the icon when she was a young dancer at the National Ballet of Canada and he was commissioned to create a piece. He brought her to his German company in 1994, and so she knows firsthand how Forsythe crafts his complicated works.

"I try to respect every choreographer, but with him it's in my heart because, as a dancer, it was so much what I wanted," she explains. "I get in it so quickly because it's something I spent a lot of time studying. I love that I can get closer to the dancers through this work."

Molnar remembers her time at Frankfurt with Forsythe (who has moved on to run his Dresden-based Forsythe Company since 2005) as inspiring, challenging, and stressful, because the choreographer put so much responsibility on the dancer to create, improvise within the works, and bring his pieces to life.

"There were big questions about presence and what it means to be authentic, so there were always these big life conversations," she recalls. "You are asked to think at such a quick speed and such an intricate way. It sounds simple, but you get smarter every time you do the piece: that's what great work does each time you do run-throughs and rehearsals."

Molnar adds that Forsythe stresses individuality. "That's why so many people out of the company are directing or choreographing: he asks you the questions and he creates a freedom for a performer."

Forsythe is an artist of great range, but what audiences will see in *workwithinwork* is his interest in elaborately deconstructing classical ballet. The piece is episodic, with an array of solos and duets driven by the speeding, angular strings of Luciano Berio's *Duo for Two Violins*. You can recognize the classical virtuosity in the moves, but dancers also squat, flex feet, and cut the air with straight arms in ways that are much more contemporary. It's just fascinating to watch Forsythe sculpt and resculpt space.

Kirsten Wicklund dives into the complicated and challenging mindset of William Forsythe.

MICHAEL SLOBODIAN

"Part of what's so compelling about his work is he can have three or four conversations at once on-stage," says Molnar, who's mixed the piece on the Trace program with a comparatively earthbound premiere by Italy's Walter Matteini and a remount of Medhi Walerski's whimsical, theatrical *Petite Cérémonie*. "He's able to challenge you on so many levels: there's the intellect of the body, the way you see space, the musicality and the timing, and the theatricality. It's such an enriching experience to be in his world."

Molnar points out it's an apt work to see right on the heels of the recent performance of Miami City Ballet's Balanchine (which Ballet B.C. presented). Legendary choreographer George Balanchine took classical ballet into the contemporary realm; Forsythe, a former Joffrey Ballet and Stuttgart Ballet dancer, took it even further along that path, fearlessly taking risks and reimagining the form through his scores of works.

And those other pieces offer Molnar a rich resource for future productions. "There are many works of Bill's to bring in," she says. "I'd love to see more."

Ballet B.C. presents Trace at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre from March 26 to 28.

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