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Ballet BC dances from darkness into light in Cayetano Soto's Program 1

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Choreographer Cayetano Soto works with Ballet BC dancers Emily Chessa and Gilbert Small.

MICHAEL SLOBODIAN

It's 11:15 a.m. in the Scotiabank Dance Centre's Earl Kraul Studio, and **Cayetano Soto** is sculpting his dancers' leg-kicking, torso-twisting, body-arcing pas de deux. He is so hands-on that he jokes he feels like a chiropractor.

Wearing a black Ballet BC hoodie and baggy sweatpants, the company's resident choreographer is moulding his intricate, speed-of-sound pairings in the weeks before his season-launching, full-evening Program 1. It's intense—but fun, too. Kirsten Wicklund and Peter Smida are trying to nail a gruelling sequence where he dips her and she rolls 180 degrees under one of his arms, opening her legs into a spectacular side split behind him.

"When you roll, it's almost like a Spanish omelette but with a little bit of taste!" the Barcelonian quips.

Every riveting flash of movement takes a long, intricate stretch of rehearsal time to shape. And that's one key factor in what makes the Spaniard's work so thrilling to watch.

Later, at 1 p.m. in the studio, the dancers have slipped into their new costumes—tight black-leather-look bodysuits that have high necks and long sleeves, and appear as if they've been pierced by a thousand needles. The performers can't help watching themselves in the wall of mirrors as they get used to their new skins. They love the way the fabric creates shadows when they suck in their diaphragm or curl a shoulder.

Just as he's hands-on in his choreography, Soto is hands-on in his costumes and design. Soto creates entire, cinematic worlds on-stage, many of them pulled out of his innermost moods and struggles. And here, for his new work, *Beginning After*, Soto has conjured costumes with a dark, hard look that typifies his style. In the run-through that follows, the movement takes on a more mysterious edge.

At moments, the dancers seem like they're caught between life and death. Alexis Fletcher is on the floor, gazing at her foot as she moves it up and down, as if she no longer feels attached to it—or, maybe, as if she's no longer of this world. Another key factor in Soto's work: it's gorgeous to watch, but often explores difficult questions of mortality. Audiences here got their first taste of that with the haunting exploration of death and rebirth in his company debut, 2015's *Twenty Eight Thousand Waves*.

In the Scotiabank Dance Centre Lounge on a break, it becomes clear that as dark and enigmatic as some of Soto's work might be, in person he's upbeat and enthusiastic. He's drinking an iced coffee and talking at a rate that comes close to the speed of his dance. Ideas for the rehearsal ruined his sleep, as they so often do, and he jokes that he's trying to wake himself up.

More than anything, Soto is just glad to be here. The Catalan is in demand around the world, from São Paulo to Munich, and he's headed to Ballett Zurich right after the Ballet BC gig. But he is proud to call Vancouver his "second home"—after Barcelona, where he goes "just to sleep, eat, and enjoy".

"Don't ask me why right now, but Vancouver is the place to be for contemporary dance," he states, listing off the accomplishments of Ballet BC, Crystal Pite, and the prep work of Artemis Gordon at Arts Umbrella as proof. "I am an outsider, so I can say this: I am not sure people here know what they have with Ballet BC. There are not so many companies doing this in the world. [Artistic director] Emily Molnar's question on the table is 'How can we make art relevant to the world today?'"

Soto clearly loves working with the dancers, and he loves pushing them. He's challenged them, in the weeks here preparing this mixed program, to find different aspects of themselves to show in each work. "I asked them to be chameleons," he says. They'll fly from 2007's *Fugaz*, a meditation on his father's death set to a score of haunting Armenian sacred songs, to the unleashed exuberance of a new work that riffs on his own *Conrazoncorazon* (created in 2015 for Gauthier Dance/Dance Company Theaterhaus Stuttgart). His moods have changed in his work over the years, and Ballet BC's dancers will change with them.

"I couldn't wait to be back in the studio with the dancers," Soto says. "They kept me up at night, thinking about 'How can we do it better and better?' It's not good to be good. I said to them, 'Should we create a piece that I can just create here? Should we make it special?' With another company, you would have to start from zero. Here we passed that a long time ago."

On the program, *Beginning After* takes Soto to some of the darkest territory he's ever explored, he admits. It is about how truth differs from memory. He says that blackouts will make you wonder if you just saw something in the piece, and there is a moment that will make you confront the truth. "You will ask if what you're seeing is really happening," he adds, getting visibly excited about the concept.

Soto will only allow that *Beginning After* was inspired by "a deeply spiritual experience" that came to him in the midst of a recent serious illness.

"I'm not very religious, but I lost all my hope and my religion when my father died," he says, thinking back to the tragedy that spawned *Fugaz*. "When I see my work, it's 90 percent related to death or layers of death. It's intriguing for me that in the moment you're born, you're counting out your days to death."

But in the strangely alluring, shadowy *Beginning After*, there is hope. "Even in the blackest night you have to turn the shadows into light," making it clear that his own words always sum up his dance the best.

Ballet BC presents Program 1 at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre from Thursday to Saturday (November 3 to 5).

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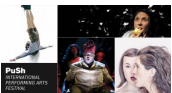
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