

DANCE REVIEWS »

Ballet BC's Program 1 travels to movingly dark places and ends on a note of Fosse-style fun

by [Janet Smith](#) on November 4th, 2016 at 4:19 PM



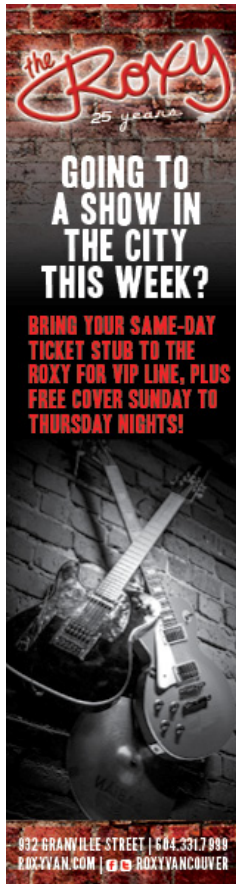
Christoph von Riedemann in Schachmatt.

CINDI WICKLUND

A Ballet BC production. At the Queen Elizabeth Theatre on Thursday, November 3. Continues until November 5

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



Ballet BC's buzzed-about resident choreographer [Cayetano Soto](#) has long been on record saying Bob Fosse is his biggest inspiration. But we've never seen direct proof of the Broadway icon's influence in the Spaniard's dark, edgy work. Until now.

Topping off his full evening of stunning contemporary ballet was a big surprise: *Schachmatt*, a nonstop parade of fun in which Soto put his own maniacal, ironic twist on retro musical styles and social-dance idioms. The corps tipped their riding-hat-style, chin-strapped black headwear, sporting ties, shirts, shorts, and knee socks. There were flashes of *Cabaret* and *Sweet Charity*, offset by a soundtrack that spanned French postwar ballads, cheesy mambos, groovy '60s dance beats, and even *Peter Gunn*.

Fingers flutter, hips gyrate, and chorus lines strike stylized rake poses, always warped into Soto's own clever, surreal vision. At one point, Andrew Bartee and Livona Ellis even get handsy. Rather than using derivative chorus-line stuff, though, the choreography maintains Soto's sculptural quality. Everything is so polished and high-calibre, it feels like the most sophisticated balletic play. And the crowd went wild for it, granting the troupe a standing ovation. Not a bad way to kick off a season.

We had journeyed through some dark places to get there. The evening's strongest piece, its opening premiere, *Beginning After*, created some of the most haunting imagery that Soto has ever conjured. And it showcases Soto's driving, complex choreography like never before. The movement is paradoxical—supple yet hard, with dancers who strike a mood that's automatonlike yet emotionally devastating. Brutal, angular pas de deux dissolve into something liquid and beautiful, always at breathtaking speed.

Livona Ellis and Brandon Alley in Ballet BC's *Beginning After*.

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The dancers are dressed in black, mesh-leather body suits, with high necks that hint at the baroque period of the score's sacred music. They perform tormented duets in front of a black void, the men turning the women upside-down and pulling their legs into surreal splits and diamond shapes. Some of the most spectacular are between two men, as when Brandon Alley and Scott Fowler twist and kick as they intertwine.

The mood is unsettling, like so much of Soto's work; one recurring motif is a hand holding back an invisible heart from thumping out of the chest. Frequent film-style blackouts further disorient you, and make you question reality.

The work's theme is memory and truth, and the way one obscures the other. In many of the scenes you feel that you're caught not only between those two realms, but also between life and death, in some uneasy purgatory populated by these flinching, broken, yet beautiful souls in their black, perforated skins.

Mortality always seems to weigh on Soto's mind. The shorter, older piece *Fugaz* speaks more directly to death. In it, two men in black (Christoph von Reidemann and Peter Smida) repeatedly climb up the front of the stage and disappear into the void at its back. In between their entrances and exits, they manipulate the women's bodies, laying them out on the ground, moving their limbs, and holding them as they struggle.

In one disturbing sequence, Smida clamps a hand over Ellis's face and she flounders, smothering and collapsing, then he rolls her up backward into a lift. Are they harbingers of death or givers of life? Either way, it's a spellbinding piece with a deeply disquieting perspective on our existence.

Andrew Bartee and Racheal Prince in Ballet BC's *Beginning After*.

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Sortijas, a mesmerizing pas de deux with Alexis Fletcher and Fowler against turbulent fog, forms a similarly dark vision, this time of love. Set to a soulful Lhasa de Sela ballad, it features a recurring image of him clasping his fingers over her eyes. It's a complex study of a simple idea: love is truly blind.

The first three pieces, in fact, had a similar haunting tone and shadowy setting. But what they did well, as did the closer *Schachmatt*, was showcase the Ballet BC troupe as individuals—probably better than any other program to date. Soto is getting to know these dancers, and he is identifying their strengths, pushing them, and helping them find their fire.

Ellis has never looked so fierce, kicking high and swerving her torso in *Beginning After* and embracing the genre play in *Schachmatt*. Fletcher, too, finds a new power here, riveting as Gilbert tumbles her over and through him in *Beginning After*. Bartee conveys an unearthly new elasticity, and Fowler is allowed to own the spotlight in ways that we've never seen him do before—musclebound and hard, but vulnerable; watch him flinch and roil in the opening solo of *Beginning After*. I could go on.

Suffice it to say that Ballet BC has served up almost everything a demanding audience member could want in a season opener: bold, world-class dance, challenge, fun, sophistication, and thought-provoking themes that stick with you—maybe even get under your skin.

Soto is a cutting-edge choreographer who could go anywhere in the world to work, and it's telling that he's chosen to stay here to see what he can do. It's great that we have an audience daring enough to go with him.

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