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## Ballet BC creates a visually striking new Romeo + Juliet

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Brandon Alley and Emily Chessa dance *Romeo + Juliet*.

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For years, dance artist Medhi Walerski purposely avoided story ballet, immersed as he was in the more abstract, cutting-edge works of Nederlands Dans Theater, where he's performed and choreographed for more than a decade.

That's hard to believe when you see him in the Ballet BC studio today, conjuring his own *Romeo + Juliet*. The French-born choreographer walks intently amid a swirl of more than 20 dancers, quietly guiding Emily Chessa's Juliet as she contemplates a glass vial of poison and then descends into emotion as she watches a foreshadowing of her own death unfold. Walerski is telling a story. And he's in his element.

"Funny enough, and I said it this morning, I am so happy that I got the chance—that I got offered a story ballet. Because first of all it challenged me, but also because I realize I enjoy it!" Walerski says on a break, sitting in an empty studio at the Scotiabank Dance Centre. "I feel connected now. Maybe I didn't feel brave enough to enter that before—to talk about love, to talk about death, to talk about conflict. It's so relevant and I just feel connected to it today, more than I could have in the past."

In preparing the piece he's been crafting with the troupe since last summer, Walerski has immersed himself in research. He's watched the seminal 1968 Franco Zeffirelli film, the bombastic '90s Baz Luhrmann movie, and plays and other ballets on video. He's also read Shakespeare—mostly in his more comfortable French. And he's found a way to make the story his own.

"It's almost like opening a door that hasn't been opened with what I've seen done before. This is where I bring my own interpretation," Walerski says of his first full-length narrative work. "I wanted to stay close to the story, but I wanted to develop certain parts that caught my interest."

The tale of the two tragically star-crossed lovers will feel familiar to audiences, and so will the score. In talks with Ballet BC, Walerski, who's staged the shorter pieces *Petite Cérémonie*, *Prelude*, and *Natus* for the company, decided immediately to use the lush, classical-ballet score by Sergei Prokofiev.

"It was like a gene, like the DNA of the piece," he says.

But this ballet will look starkly different from other versions—and that's apparent even from rehearsals, where the performers are moving in, around, and through three giant, black, hollow rectangles that roll around the stage on wheels—almost like dancers themselves. Expect a stage that plays with stark black-and-white and geometric touches.

"I knew that I wanted it to be timeless and not in a specific place," says Walerski, who worked with Dutch set and lighting designer Theun Mosk on *Romeo + Juliet*'s visual world. "I wanted something pure, something universal, so that you could connect with the emotions and feelings and psychology of the characters, more than being in Italy or Renaissance time. I got inspired as well with the Elizabethan aesthetic—I just use it as just a flavour. I designed the costumes, and they are contemporary, but they have just a hint of the Elizabethan—the high collars, and the men have these little doublets.

"The look also relates to Shakespeare: what I connected to with him was this idea of dark and light, and day and night. There's this constant duality in his work that I wanted to use in the aesthetics of this piece. It's very simple—but simplicity is not easy."



Medhi Walerski.

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Perhaps most challenging for Walerski was delving into and developing each of the characters—a task that isn't required in the more conceptual group pieces he regularly stages, from NDT to the Göteborg Ballet. He says Rumble Theatre artistic director Stephen Drover (who has worked extensively in Shakespeare and directed *Romeo and Juliet* for Theatre Newfoundland Labrador) stopped in to give advice. The work goes far beyond the lovelorn, emotion-drenched roles of Chessa's Juliet and fellow standout Brandon Alley's Romeo.

"I've never worked with so many characters!" Walerski says. "Usually, I do group pieces. Here, they all belong to the same story, but they all have a very specific role. So the way I'm going to choreograph and search for movement with someone that feels much more anger is going to be different than someone who is 14 and full of joy and hope and so fresh. So it's so demanding."

But for Walerski, perhaps the most compelling thing personally and professionally is that this ambitious Ballet BC story ballet—its first full-evening one since José Navas's *Giselle* in 2013—so perfectly brings together the disparate elements of his own background. Before becoming one of NDT's bright lights, Walerski danced for the Paris Opera Ballet. And though at one point in his life, he admits, he was focused on blazing his own path, he now welcomes its influence on his contemporary dance.

"I am classically trained, and it is part of my heritage and it is part of my language, even though my movement is contemporary. And it is not something I reject now; it's something I embrace," he emphasizes. "It doesn't mean that it's dated or dusty....I've been a contemporary dancer for so many years as well, so how can I use the two [forms] to help each other, to challenge each other? And all these dancers here have wonderful ballet technique and they're wonderful modern dancers—so let's use *all* that."

**Ballet BC presents *Romeo + Juliet* at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre from next Wednesday to Saturday (February 21 to 24).**



Romeo + Juliet features more than 20 dancers on-stage.

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