



Ballet B.C's Emily Molnar choreographing a new identity

By Gail Johnson

Publish Date: September 24, 2009

On the eve of Ballet B.C.'s big gala, Emily Molnar's vision of the future is a mix of artistic ambition and financial realism

Ballet British Columbia hasn't had an easy go lately. After narrowly escaping bankruptcy at the start of the year, the organization went on to announce the departure of long-time artistic director John Alleyne and, shortly thereafter, interim executive director Andrew Wilhelm-Boyles. The company also revealed it would neither mount a full subscription season this year nor participate in the Cultural Olympiad. Throw in the way it was hit, along with every other arts organization, by the provincial-government cuts, and it was all enough to make you wonder whether the company would survive at all.

But interim artistic director Emily Molnar refuses to see Ballet B.C.'s recent struggles in anything other than a positive light.

"I've always believed that some of the most trying times provide very special opportunities," Molnar says in her sparsely appointed office, which she's occupied since July, at the Scotiabank Dance Centre. "With all of the major transitions in my life where something was not going to work out, opportunities arose that I may not have seen before. I apply that with the company. Whenever something challenging comes up, it's an opportunity to reevaluate and look at what you're doing....That's the beauty of this situation: we can ask 'What do we do well, what do we need to work on, where are we going, and how do we do it?' It's the beginning of something new.

"It isn't about saving the company anymore," she adds, explaining Ballet B.C. is now officially debt-free. "It's about confidently talking about the future and asking people to be a part of that."

With an expansive résumé and experience working at home and abroad, Molnar can speak with some authority.

After performing with the National Ballet of Canada, she joined Frankfurt Ballet in her early 20s, gaining invaluable experience with visionary choreographer William Forsythe. She spent five years with Ballet B.C. and began performing and choreographing independently in 1998, making works for such diverse companies as Alberta Ballet and New York City's Cedar Lake Ballet. Prior to taking on her current role, she was artist in residence at the Arts Umbrella.

Besides having such a highly respected artist at the helm, there are other reasons to be optimistic about Ballet B.C. The company has just appointed Jay Rankin, former managing director of the contemporary troupe Toronto Dance Theatre, to the position of executive director.

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Ballet B.C.'s books are balanced, says new executive director Jay Rankin

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And despite the organization's past budget woes—along with the loss of a \$50,000 gaming grant and \$54,000 from the B.C. Arts Council it would have received before the Liberals made cuts—the company's finances, if not robust, are at least in order.

“We have a very good team of people who understand what we can do financially,” Molnar says. “It's about looking at how to create high artistic standards while being very realistic about what we can afford.”

Molnar makes it clear that the future involves building on the company's contemporary take on ballet and not reverting to conservative classics.

“The question is, ‘How can we create dance that is not only exciting to our audiences but that pushes the art form further? How can we take dance to the next step?’”

With her new position, Molnar admits she's not certain what will become of her own dance career.

“I'm not sure yet. I still throw myself around the room as I'm choreographing,” she says with a laugh, noting that she's been interested in directing ever since she was a child. “I don't need to be on-stage every day. But I do need to be in the studio every day.”

She says she doesn't feel any pressure—from others or herself—to live up to the extravagant and prolific term of Alleyne, who created several new pieces for the company, including a number of story ballets.

“He did a fantastic job, and I really respect him. I have a close connection with him, and there will always be a part of him at this company as long as I'm here. I want to honour what he did,” she says.

However, Molnar concedes that she'd like to see the troupe have a handful of resident choreographers. “This will not be a one-choreographer company,” she says. “I'd like to see mixed repertoire and creations. We'll do some existing work, but we are really re-creating our identity.”

The public can get a glimpse into what Molnar has in store for Ballet B.C. when it performs at IGNITE, a fundraising gala at the Vancouver Playhouse on Wednesday (September 30).

“The priority is to highlight the beauty of each performance, to celebrate the past and the future,” Molnar says of the mixed bill, which will feature five dancers from the National Ballet joining Ballet B.C.'s 15 on-stage. She describes her own *Dedica* as “celebratory”; expect her sculpted, architectural forms to blend seamlessly with nuanced emotional gestures in the ensemble piece set to Antonio Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico*.

Also on offer are George Balanchine's *Apollo* and pas de deux from both *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Lady of the Camellias*.

In addition, the company will present a choreographic series on November 13 and 14 at the Scotiabank Dance Centre, featuring the work of emerging local dancemakers, including graduates from the Arts Umbrella.

But it's the spring show that Molnar is heralding as the "launch of the new company", revealing only that the April 15 to 17 triple bill will feature work by three national choreographers. The 2010-11 subscription series will also be announced then.

In the meantime, Molnar has a long wish list for the company, including the formation of a school. She also hopes to bring in such luminaries as Margie Gillis—her mentor—to lead workshops.

"I see how hungry the dancers are, how much they want to learn and want to dance and want to keep going," Molnar says.

"There's a vibrancy when the performers can not only move but can express," she adds. "When you see great dance, it doesn't matter if an audience member knows everything about dance or knows nothing about dance....Great performances connect with the audience."

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