

Ballet BC returns with new works

Choreographer Emily Molnar steps in as interim artistic director for the struggling company

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 28, 2009



Emily Molnar, leading a rehearsal, prefers to keep the lines of communication open between choreographer and dancers in order to encourage creative juices to flow.

Photograph by: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

When choreographer Emily Molnar creates a ballet, it's not a top-down process; it's a collaboration between her and the dancers she's working with.

"I really want to work with the person that's in front of me and not come in with a preconditioned idea of what something will look like," she said.

"Once I present my ideas to the artists in front of me, it is their interpretation and their expression that I'm interested in."

Traditionally in ballet, choreographers tended to impose their creations on dancers. There was a clear division of labour between choreographers, who create, and dancers, who dance.

But in the contemporary dance world, the lines are a little more blurred. Molnar's methodology stems from her belief that collaboration helps to release the intelligence and individuality inherent in each body. In dancing, that encompasses both the physiological -- such as each body's unique physiology -- and the emotional, which can include everything from a dancer's family relationships to his or her history of professional training.

"If you can build a bridge giving people a sense of freedom so they can interpret it their own way, you're going to get more variations and more variables," she said. "It's up to you as a choreographer to hone those. I'm looking for independence, a certain honesty and humanity in the work."

Molnar is interim artistic director for Ballet BC. She has taken over the creative side of running the company since its meltdown last year, which included the laying off all the dancers and office staff. The company eventually came out of receivership and limped through last season before embarking on a major renewal process, which includes a gala Wednesday at The Playhouse.

Molnar is in a tough position. She has to honour the legacy of the company's former artistic director John Alleyne -- a choreographer she counts as one of her influences -- but still chart a path for a possible future for the company. And she must do all this not knowing whether the board will offer her the job of permanent artistic director.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Traditionally, if a ballet company has to bring in an interim artistic director, they do so when there's already a season planned and scheduled.

But that's not the case with Ballet BC. The company's subscription series has been suspended, so there's no season to present. Instead of executing another artistic director's vision, Molnar finds herself in a much more influential role.

"Right now, the company is at a very exciting point where they're re-evaluating everything that we've done and want to do. What are our strengths and what do we need to work on? That's a moment that doesn't happen very often, like when you're planting new seeds," she said.

"Whether I'm the person or not that will see that through over a long, long period, I have to be looking at the long term with a group of people so I don't really get too caught up in being interim. I just think of what right now are the best decisions for the company."

Asked if she'd like to go from interim to permanent artistic director, Molnar said: "I would. I'm doing all I can to help the company now. If not, something else will be there."

In terms of her credentials, Molnar has all the skills needed to lead a dance company. She's a graduate of the National Ballet School in Toronto and a former dancer with the National. As a 21-year-old, she left North America for Europe and the Frankfurt Ballet where she worked under William Forsythe, one of the world's top contemporary choreographers.

Since then, she has worked with the New York City Ballet and Christopher Wheeldon's company, Morphoses. One of the rising stars in contemporary ballet in Canada, Molnar counts Canadian dance legend Margie Gillis as a mentor. She also has impeccable connections with the local dance scene, which include being artist-in-residence at Arts Umbrella.

Molnar singled out working with Forsythe as especially influential to her development as a choreographer and dancer.

With Forsythe, she said, dance starts with an idea which then creates the form.

Molnar contrasted that approach with classical ballet, where the refined technique leads to a form that's largely predetermined.

She said working for five years with Forsythe was like earning a doctorate in dance.

"It was such a strong pool of creative energy," she said. "Everything was constantly being challenged. He would change pieces as we were doing them on stage. Things could always shift. You always had to be open to re-evaluating in the moment. My learning curve was pretty steep.

"I walked away from that company with a huge amount of tools. Because of that, I don't look at dance the same way."

Local dance fans will see first-hand what a contemporary ballet company led by Molnar might look like when Ballet BC and the National Ballet present Ignite.

Principal dancers from the National performing in the gala include B.C.'s Heather Ogden, who trained at the Richmond Academy of Dance, as well as Guillaume Côté and Sonia Rodriguez. They'll be performing George Balanchine's Apollo and a pas de deux from both The Sleeping Beauty and Lady of the Camellias.

The third part of the gala will feature the premiere of Dedicca, a new work Molnar has created specifically for Ignite.

The music Molnar has chosen are selections from Antonio Vivaldi's L'Estro Armonico, a collection of 12 concertos.

"My biggest goal this year is to nurture the dancers and focus on their artistic development," Molnar said. "The dancers have been incredibly committed to this company over its challenging time as has its staff and patrons and the community."

In addition to Ignite, Molnar is working on several other Ballet BC projects. The company's next performance will be a collaboration on a choreographic series with Arts Umbrella and the Dance Centre. During the course of a month, four different choreographers will work with up to 30 dancers to create new works that will be performed Nov. 13 and 14.

REBRANDED AND RENEWED

Next year, the new Ballet BC will be launched. Molnar said the rebranded and renewed company will take to the Queen Elizabeth Theatre April 15 to 17 with works by three international choreographers. Ballet BC will also announce its renewed subscription series at the relaunch.

Molnar is bringing in Gillis to do workshops with the company's dancers and she wants to create a School of Contemporary Dance associated with Ballet BC.

For years, Ballet BC has presented Nutcracker performances by other ballet companies between Christmas and New Year's. But given the company's recent financial collapse and the work involved

in the renewal process, no Nutcracker will be presented this Christmas season, she said.

Molnar said Ballet BC was involved in negotiations to work with Goh Ballet on its presentation of five performances of a new Nutcracker in December. She said the two sides were "very close" but things didn't work out because Goh faced deadlines and had to make decisions about going ahead.

Molnar is confident that if Ballet BC decides to mount its own version of Nutcracker, the Metro Vancouver market is big enough to accommodate many more performances during Christmas. In Toronto, for example, the National performs James Kudelka's Nutcracker 23 times during the Christmas/New Year's period.

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IGNITE

Ballet BC and the National Ballet

Wednesday, 8 p.m.

The Playhouse

Tickets are available from

604-732-5003, ext 207

Performance only: \$88

Performance and post-show reception with the dancers, Molnar, and the National Ballet's artistic director Karen Kain: \$98

VIP package includes a pre-show dinner at the Metropolitan Hotel, premium house seats, and the post-show reception: \$250

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