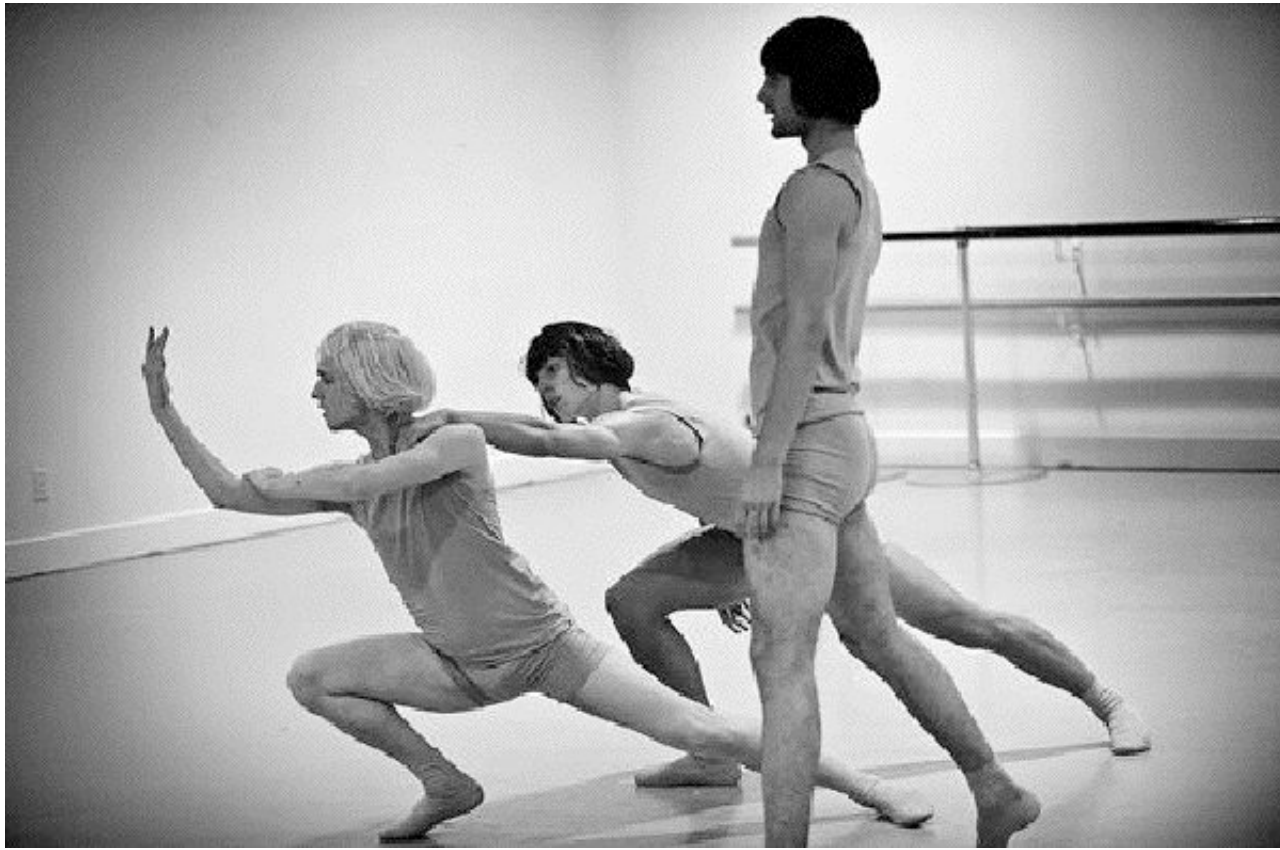


# Surfacing keeps Ballet BC above water

BY DEBORAH MEYERS, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 12, 2009 10:10 AM



Doppeling by Simon Orlando is one of the four works by four different choreographers that make up Ballet BC's series Surfacing.

**Photograph by:** Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun, Special to The Sun

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## Surfacing: Ballet British Columbias Inaugural choreographic series

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VANCOUVER — The fates have not always been kind to Ballet British Columbia. Over the past 23 years, Vancouver's only ballet company has had its share of down-turns, losing directors to other, grander companies, to illness, to choreographic stagnation.

Repeatedly, it seemed on the verge of forging a true artistic identity that would bind it to the community and distinguish it nationally.

But the stars were never aligned. It looked like the lights were going to go out altogether last year, when all the company's dancers and staff were laid off and financial ruin appeared just about certain.

Forget fate: A few wise decisions over the past few months are turning the company's luck around

fast. The board contracted brilliant Canadian dancer/choreographer Emily Molnar as interim artistic director and lured Jay Rankin from Toronto Dance Theatre to take over as executive director. Fifteen dancers were re-hired and a slow, purposeful re-building process began.

A small-scale but festive gala this fall, in concert with the National Ballet of Canada, was one measure of how the company is re-imagining itself. Another is its first choreographic series, *Surfacing*, which will feature commissioned work by four local choreographers performed by company members and 15 dancers from the Arts Umbrella Graduate Program.

The process was quick -- four weeks of creation and one week of rehearsal -- and deliberate. Molnar assigned each of the choreographers (Rob Kitsos, Joe Laughlin, Simone Orlando and Donald Sales) about 15 dancers to work with, a combination of professionals and students. She mixed things up in unexpected ways.

"I looked at choreographic styles", she says. "What kind of dancer would this choreographer be stylistically comfortable with? Sometimes I gave them that person, and sometimes I gave them the opposite kind of dancer."

She was just as deliberate in her choice of choreographers. "I chose choreographers who could deliver work of a certain standard, who have follow-through", she says. "But I was also fundamentally interested in how they could create a nurturing environment, how they would work with the dancers in the studio. The way choreographers work with dancers is the way they demonstrate leadership, and the kind of choreographers we choose is the way we as companies demonstrate leadership."

The four works on view in *Surfacing* are "completely different, and not at all what you would expect," Molnar says. For example, Joe Laughlin, a contemporary and community-based choreographer, was interested in exploring partnering, and has created a neo-classical work on pointe to Scriabin. "You'll see a side of Joe you've never seen before," Molnar says.

*Surfacing* is just one marker in Molnar's emerging but specific vision for Ballet BC. "I would like to see Ballet BC become a company where choreographers think: this is where I get to experiment," she says. "I also really believe in the dancers in a company taking ownership. When I was younger, I kept giving my power away. My attitude was: I'm a blank canvas. But I learned that dancers create the forward momentum of a company. They are not just pieces in a puzzle. This is how it worked with Ballet Frankfurt under Bill Forsythe. This kind of approach nets a different result, and I believe my work as an artistic director is to build an environment in which this can happen here."

Bringing like-minded organizations together towards this end is central to Molnar's plans for the company. There is a special fit with Arts Umbrella, the training institution at which Molnar was artist-in-residence for the past few years.

Arts Umbrella dance director Artemis Gordon could not be more thrilled to be collaborating with Molnar on *Surfacing*.

"This kind of true collaboration with a company has always been my goal," says Gordon. "Nothing can replace students being in the studio with professional dancers. I always say you really learn how to be a dancer when you get a job. You learn what it is to be a professional, to work. You discover how

broad and deep and profound your commitment has to be. "In Ballet BC under Emily, they also see that here is a company with a fit. We share the same values."

"So often, the focus of dance training is technique: getting ballet into your body. Dance training tends to get split into people who do ballet, and people who know how to move. What Emily wants is both: ballet-line, technical strength, the ability to do virtuosic work, but also the ability to move, with intelligence and authenticity. She is interested in using ballet principles to produce contemporary movement."

"I'm not from Vancouver, and neither is Emily," Gordon says, "but what is happening now in this city is my life's dream. There is nothing I would rather be doing than developing the kind of dancer that Emily Molnar wants to use."

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