

Ballet B.C.'s season opener No. 29 impresses with challenging works and new dancers

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- Ballet B.C.'s Alexis Fletcher appears in Lesley Telford's *An Instant*. Michael Slobodian

A Ballet B.C. production. At the Queen Elizabeth Theatre on Thursday, November 6. Continues to November 8

It's a rare occasion when you see an actual tutu on a Ballet B.C. stage; a few years ago, as a way to promote its cutting-edge bent, the company even ran a tongue-in-cheek "Take our Tutus" campaign that left dozens of the gauzy skirts hanging around downtown.

But there it was, front and centre at the season opener, No. 29, albeit in the most dreamily contemporary way possible. Spanish-born choreographer Fernando Hernando Magadan's *White Act* was the theatrical centrepiece of the night, an ode to the traditional second part of old, romantic ballets like *Swan Lake*, when the action moves into a spiritual or supernatural realm. Using a lushly treed video backdrop that refers to 19th-century ballet-set paintings, Magadan turns it all into a surreal delirium of unattainable love set to Franz Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* and Estonian Urmas Sisask's hymnlike *Oremus XXII*. Ghostlike ballerinas in white tippy-toe en pointe across the stage, arms held tightly in at their sides or up covering their faces—romanticism's ideal, frail, untoouchable ornaments. The men, by

contrast, are dressed in dark charcoal, earthbound as they roll or slide around the floor and stop.

Passionate pas de deux unfold, replaying and recasting the central love story of one of romanticism's oldest ballets, *La Sylphide*: Christoph von Riedemann reaches for Alexis Fletcher, only for her to drop lifeless and roll away into the dark—like the supernatural creature who loses her wings at a man's touch in the original. We also see an idealized, dream pairing of true love that can never happen, the perfection in a separate spotlight of a dancer in a longer white tutu dancing with her man. At another haunting moment, von Riedemann's silhouette appears to enter into Harmen Straatman's video scenography, his figure seeming to walk down its road to “the other side”. Eerily beautiful.

Newcomers like Kirsten Wicklund and Tara Williamson stood out opening night, as did von Riedemann and Andrew Bartee in male roles that were as emotionally dramatic as they were physical.

The new faces in the troupe also made an impression in a starkly different piece: recently returned Vancouver choreographer Lesley Telford's tumultuous *An Instant*. Set to the speeding strings of Michael Gordon's whirling *Weather One*, it was as laudable for the new physical terrain it pushed into as it was for its abstract intellectual ideas. Inspired by “Could Have”, a poem by Wislawa Szymborska that we hear at different moments throughout the piece, it's about the way your fate can change in an instant, the way being in the right place at the right time can either avert misfortune or plunge you into an accident or mishap.

The magic that Telford achieves with her 11 dancers is something akin to suspended time, like we enter “an instant”, then rewind, then freeze, then enter it again from a different perspective. Dancers hurtle backwards like they're being pushed by some unseen force, then fall on the floor and lie still. New corps member Emily Chessa, in one intense scene, rushes toward something unseen then runs backward, again and again, drawn and repelled by powers we can't fully understand. Telford pushes the dancers off axis, bends them over backwards, and sends them leaping in reverse. Amid them all wanders the always magnetic Rachel Meyer, sometimes stepping through their frozen, fallen bodies, as if she is somehow looking at what could happen or what could have happened. Heady stuff, yes, but strange, haunting, and thought-provoking, the mood helped, as ever, by James Proudfoot's atmospheric lighting and shadows.

The evening opens with a remount of Jacopo Godani's *A.U.R.A. (Anarchist Unit Related to Art)*, a dark, aggressive blast of the Euro avant-garde, complete with cold racks of fluorescent lights that raise and lower, dramatic blackouts, and skin-coloured body suits ribbed in blue. A score by electro-sound experimentalists 48nord pours on the rumbling percussion and screeching strings. The movement follows the music in a frenetic flurry of twisting bodies and flicking, elastic arms. It's at its best when all 15 dancers are on stage, moving in counterpoint, like the brush strokes and scribbles of some gigantic, abstract painting.

That Ballet B.C. can tackle its pummelling physicality, the precariousness of *An Instant*, and the pointe work of *White Act* shows it can handle just about anything, even with so many new members. Not to mention tutus.