

Lesley Telford wields paper houses at the Chutzpah Festival

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•Brittle Failure (with Iratxe Ansa) hits Chutzpah fest.SOLEDAD SANCHEZ MERLO

It comes as little surprise that dance artist Lesley Telford is so drawn to the image of the home. When the Vancouver-born choreographer-performer brings her Brittle Failure here for the Chutzpah Festival, it will feature hundreds of small, white paper houses on-stage. For Telford, who has spent most of the past two decades pursuing her art form in places from Montreal to the Netherlands, the structures reveal a lot about what she yearns for when she's out in the world.

"Maybe it's because we are constantly travelling—we're trying to figure out where our house really is," the affable artist admits to the Straight from The Hague. She's been splitting time between there and Madrid, where her four-year-old daughter goes to school. "But what also seemed to fit was this idea of a paper house: that these things that we think are solid can so easily evaporate in front of us."

Telford, who still has family in Vancouver, is eager to debut her choreographic work here, as well as to perform a duet with Miguel Olivera during the opening-night show of Chutzpah.

"I'm so excited to bring a little piece of my life to Vancouver," says Telford. "Now I'm bringing dancers I work with in my second, or I guess third home," she says, referring to the three performers in Brittle Failure, who are all former colleagues at Madrid's renowned Compañía Nacional de Danza. At Chutzpah, Telford will also take to the stage in the duet *When You See God...Tell Him*, by acclaimed Batsheva Dance Company alumnus Itzik Galili.

It's been a long and adventurous road that's led Telford back to Vancouver for this appearance. She studied dance here before heading off to Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal. A stint working with Compañía director Nacho Duato there led to the striking, dark-haired dancer's six-year gig in Madrid, a life-changing opportunity in a country that she still (sort of) calls home. "My daughter speaks Spanish now, and it's hard to believe she's mine sometimes when I hear her!" she says.

But it was during her decade at the cutting-edge Nederlands Dans Theater, from 2001 to 2010, that Telford found her choreographic voice. "It was a feeling of being in a close-knit family, with a certain amount of support

that you felt free enough to risk things or try things you hadn't before," she says.

Since then, she's been spending more and more time in choreography. Brittle Failure had its roots in a project piece she created in Europe with her sister, dance artist Heather Telford. The piece has evolved to invite audience members to help construct the mini houses, which have now been made into easily foldable kits for the road by Japanese scenographer Yoko Seyama.

As for the choreography, the dancers move in and around the houses and sometimes manipulate them, expressing ideas about the way stability can so easily fall apart. "It's also linked to the relationships: sometimes you trust they're there forever; you're looking for that rock to lean on, and it slips away," Telford explains. She admits that, in this unusual case, the frail structures came first and the choreography was created around them.

"I've always been a wannabe architect," she says, then adds with a laugh before heading off into the Dutch evening: "In terms of working with the scenographic elements, it does feel a bit more like city planning than in other pieces."

Brittle Failure and When You See God...Tell Him are at the Norman and Annette Rothstein Theatre next Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday (February 7, 9, and 10) as part of the Chutzpah Festival.